

## Spoken Discourse Markers in English Writing of Taiwanese Students

Mei-Ying Chen

(Ming Chuan University, Taiwan)

**Abstract:** The present study explored whether English learners in Taiwan use spoken discourse markers in academic writing or not. Forty Taiwanese university students who enrolled in an undergrad English reading course participated in this study. Without receiving any instructions on writing, they wrote one essay on a specific topic assigned as a written task in class individually each week for five straight weeks. In total, the participants generated 200 pieces of essays on five different topics. The results of the data analysis showed that students tended to initiate a sentence with *I think* while expressing an attitude towards the topic in question, *in my opinion* a commitment to an important idea, and *so* an explanation or a conclusion to the issue under discussion. Two factors may lead to these usages. First, the students lacked knowledge about rhetorical structures and conventions associated with English academic writing. Second, students' L1 influences the choice of these two expressions: *I think* and *So*. Nevertheless, the higher use of these discourse markers could create problems and rendered student's writings an informal style. It is suggested that explicit instruction aimed at the development of rhetorical structures and conventions of academic writing will be beneficial to L2 learners.

**Key words:** *I think*, *in my opinion*, *so*, discourse markers, L2 writing, Taiwanese students

### 1. Introduction

The ability to write an academic essay is of importance for success not only at university but in the global job market. A well-written essay has ideas that are interesting and important; sentences fluency that is smooth and expressive; and conventions that are correct and communicative. Nevertheless, for English as a second language (L2) learners, English writing is difficult due to they are unfamiliar with the expectations of English readers and have little or no knowledge about rhetorical conventions in English essay (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). Research on L2 writing has repeatedly demonstrated not only that L2 writers differ in the ways of constructing ideas from English writers, but that they do not use discourse markers in the same way that native writers do. In fact, L2 learners were found overusing or misusing some spoken markers in their writing and obscured their ideas and meaning intended (Leedham & Cai, 2013; Gilquin & Paquot, 2007; Hinkel, 2003).

As an important element in discourse, discourse markers are a class of grammaticalized items whose pragmatic functions override their semantic meanings (Aijmer, 2002). They usually occur at the beginning of a sentence but can work beyond the sentence level. Schifffrin (1987), for instance, defines discourse markers as sequentially dependent elements which demarcate the boundaries of a discourse. They are words or short phrases that provide contextual clues to the relation between sentences but add minimally or no meaning to the

---

Mei-Ying Chen, Assistant Professor, Ming Chuan University; research areas/interests: discourse analysis, pragmatics, SLA, teaching Chinese as a second language. E-mail: [myjoycechen@gmail.com](mailto:myjoycechen@gmail.com).

proposition of the sentence that hosts them. Fraser (1999), from a grammatical perspective, identifies a group of conjunctions (i.e., *and, so, but*), adverbs (i.e., *firstly, truthfully*), and prepositional phrases (i.e., *on the contrary, in addition, for example*) as discourse markers while they function as signposts to the relations of contrast, implication, or elaboration between two textual units. They reveal clues of a writer's direct communicative intention. In other words, discourse markers are devices that writers employ to organize different parts of an essay in logical order to achieve coherence.

From coherence perspective, Halliday and Hasan (1989) stated that "a text is characterized by coherence; it hangs together" (p. 48). In particular, Lenk (1998) emphasized the important role of discourse markers play in achieving coherence of texts. Similarly, Hyland (1999) pointed out that discourse markers are typically used to serve organizational and rhetorical functions prominent in academic writing, namely, introducing a topic, hypothesizing, exemplifying, explaining, evaluating, and concluding. For English readers, drawing from their past reading experiences, they are expected to be guided by discourse markers while trying to comprehend and predict the texts they read. In other words, it is a writer's responsibility to provide clues, in this case, discourse markers, in the texts to help readers understand and make sense.

In addition, academic writing in university aims at a specific audience such as professionals and instructors. Therefore, the tone of an academic writing needs to be formal and serious (Oshima & Hogue, 1998). In fact, a writing text full of linguistic items typically featured in constructing conversations is considered to be inappropriate and problematic. In English, there are a few discourse markers such as *actually, anyway, I mean, I think, now, yes, and you know* mostly used in managing talk-in-interactions and maintained naturally in the exchanges of online chatting. It is rare to see these linguistic items typically featured in the spoken discourse in writings of native English writers (Biber et al., 1999; Hyland, 1999). In contrast, the transfer of spoken language into written discourse seems to be one of the universal features of EFL writing (Hinkel, 2011). For example, Gilquin and Paguot (2007) pointed out that a few frequently occurred in L2 writing such as *I think, thanks to, look like, maybe, and by the way*, are more common in English speaking than in writing. In addition, when presenting arguments, L2 learners show the tendency of initiating their sentences with discourse markers such as *I think* (Granger, 1998a; Aijmer, 2001), *besides* (Leedham & Cai, 2013), *of course* (Granger & Tyson, 1996), and *because* (Lorenz, 1999).

Similar to L2 writers with different language backgrounds, Chinese-speaking learners have focused prematurely on grammatical and lexical accuracy, and paid less attention to the rhetorical structure and the use of discourse markers. For instance, while Hinkle (2003) reported that Chinese-speaking L2 learners overused the first and second person pronouns, Leedham and Cai (2013) found Chinese students in UK universities misused linking adverbials such as *besides* and *on the other hand* at the sentence-initial position. He (2001) pointed out that L2 learners redundantly used *so* at a sentence-initial position while expressing an opinion, initiating a question or even carrying no grammatical meaning at all. Li (2006) concluded that learners of English in China significantly overused *I think* comparing with native speakers. According to Jalilifar (2008) and Gilquin and Paquqot (2007), *I think* marked the writer's role redundantly, whereas *of course, so, and besides* gave L2 writing a distinct informal tone. It is evident, Chinese-speaking writers of English experienced difficulties on constructing ideas and sequencing information according to English reader expectations since they were unaware of the rhetorical conventions in academic writing.

Prior studies have revealed that the overusing spoken discourse marker is a primary feature of L2 writing. This distinction may be attributed to differences in background knowledge, L2 language proficiency, and their

familiarity with the rhetorical patterns of academic discourse communities (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). In other words, in order to comply with the directives associated with academic writing, learners need to develop not only sufficient L2 language knowledge, but also rhetorical expertise on how and what discourse markers can connect their ideas up smoothly and logically. Conversely, L2 writers with a lack of awareness of the rhetorical conventions of academic writing may experience difficulty and use spoken discourse markers in writing unintentionally and fail to meet the expectations of targeted readers (Hinkel, 2011).

Although much has been learned about discourse markers in L2 writing, few studies have explored Chinese-speaking learners of English in Taiwanese context. To bridge the gap, the present study is trying to investigate English writing patterns of Taiwanese university students. Employing corpus-based approach, the specific objective of this data-driven study is to examine whether and how Taiwanese college students use spoken discourse markers in academic writing. Thereby, two research questions guided this study:

- (1) Do Taiwanese English learners overuse spoken discourse markers in academic writing?
- (2) What spoken discourse markers are used most frequently?

## **2. Methodology**

This corpus-based study explored the use of spoken discourse markers in learner writings collected for the present study.

### **2.1 Participants**

Forty university students of non-English majors enrolling in the researcher's English reading and writing course in the fall semester, 2013 participated in this study. Of the participants, the majority of them reported having learned English for 9 years, some had formal English instructions for over 12 years. Giving that English writing was one tested skill in the University Entrance Examination in Taiwan, which the participants required to take before attending this university, they had substantial exposure to English and achieved relatively pre-intermediate proficiency with the ability to express their ideas.

### **2.2 Data Collection**

The participants, who were blind to the purpose of this research, wrote five argumentative or opinion essays as classroom tasks in a period of five weeks on the following five topics: (1) attending classes should be mandatory for university students, (2) students having part-time jobs, (3) studying abroad, (4) essential qualities of a teacher, and (5) the most important elements in a friendship. These writings were assigned as classroom tasks under the same conditions. In total, the participants yielded 41,792-word (200 essays) written discourse data.

For the comparison, A level, a sub-corpus of LOCNESS (Granger, 1998b) was used. Consisting of 60,209 words, this set of data was gathered from the argumentative essays of native speakers of English from Britain.

### **2.3 Data Coding and Analyzing**

The identification of spoken or written discourse markers is a daunting task since much depends on the context in which the linguistic item occurs. In literature, to tackle this problem, linguists compare learners' data to native speaker's data (Gilquin & Paquot, 2007; Granger, 1998; Hinkel, 2003). A few salient and problematic discourse markers viewed by teachers such as *I think*, *besides*, *so*, and *of course* are often marked as colloquial or informal in academic writing. Thus, in line with prior studies in the literature, in the present study, a spoken discourse marker is a linguistic item that does not add semantic meaning to the sentences that hosts it. Moreover,

they occur more frequently in spoken discourse than written discourse of native speakers.

To investigate whether Taiwanese students overuse spoken discourse markers in academic writing, the researcher identified discourse markers in learner writings and classified them into nine different categories. The nine categories are (1) adding information, (2) comparing and contrasting (3) exemplification (4) expressing cause and effect, (5) expressing personal opinions, (6) expressing possibility and certainty, (7) initiating topics and ideas, and (8) listing item (Table 1).

**Table 1 The Discourse Marker Per Rhetorical Function in Learner's Writing**

Rhetorical functions	Examples
Addition information	Sentence-initial <i>and</i> , adverb <i>besides</i>
Comparison and Contrast	Sentence-initial <i>but</i> , <i>like</i>
Cause and effect	<i>Because</i> , <i>so</i> , <i>that's why</i>
Summary	<i>All in all</i>
Expressing opinion	<i>I think</i> , <i>in my opinion</i> , <i>*in/from my point of view</i>
Expressing uncertainty	<i>Maybe</i>
Expressing possibility	<i>Really</i> , <i>of course</i> , <i>absolutely</i> , <i>definitely</i>
Initiate a topic	Sentence-initial <i>so</i>
Listing items	<i>First of all</i> , <i>above all</i>

AntConc 3.4.3 (Anthony, 2011), a freeware concordance software program, was employed to extract and count the overall number of words in each of the 200 essays and separately for each discourse marker. As shown in Table 1, L2 writings did abound with spoken discourse markers. Of the many discourse markers occurred, five markers — *I think*, *in my opinion*, *like*, *so*, and *maybe* — stood out. Each of them occurred more than 30 times in the data and yielded 342 tokens in total.

To answer the research questions, the individual rate of these five markers was calculated and compared with native writings by British college students. Table 2 presents the comparison. In total, learners produced 81.8 tokens per ten-thousand words, whereas native speakers produced 18.2 per ten-thousand words.

**Table 2 Frequency of Five Markers of Taiwanese Learners and Native Speakers**

DM item	Learners		Native Speakers	
	Token	Frequency	Token	Frequency
<i>I think</i>	138	33.0	29	4.8
<i>So</i>	92	22.0	19	3.1
<i>Like</i>	40	9.6	35	5.8
<i>In my opinion</i>	38	9.1	16	2.6
<i>Maybe</i>	34	8.1	11	1.8
Total	342	81.8	110	18.2

The next section displays some examples of *I think*, *in my opinion*, and *so* of learner production coming closer to spoken English than to academic writing and provides the possible explanations for such usages.

### 3. Results

With regard to the use of discourse markers, some interesting features can be observed from learners'

writings. First, it was evident that learners marked their roles as writers explicitly with expressions such as *I think*, *in my opinion*, *from my point of view* while expressing their personal opinions on an issued discussed. Extracted examples (1) to (2) are cases in point to present this learner tendency. In the parenthesis after each example, S stands for the student. The number after S refers to the thirteen participants, and the number after the dash refers to the particular essay of the participant.

(1) First, ***I think*** that university students are adult, they are old enough to make a choice about attending class or not. (S13-1)

(2) I agree first point, because ***I think*** getting a part-time job can learn many things. (S27-2)

In addition, when expressing an attitude or showing a stance, Zhou and Wei (2010) stated that Chinese EFL learners preferred sentence structure of “I + want/ like/ prefer/ believe, etc.” to overtly express their opinions. The present study provided further evidence to confirm Zhou and Wei’s finding as the participants of the present study showed a similar pattern. Example (3) and (4) are cases in point while the participants reveal their stance explicitly.

(3) *In the point of my view*, ***I think*** that *I prefer* studying abroad to studying in Taiwan, because the benefits of studying abroad. (S3-3)

(4) ***I think***, *I agree* with the second choice. ***I think*** that going to classes should be optional for students. (S8-1)

In comparison with writings by native speakers, learner writing exhibited a significant overuse of the expression of *I think*. The rate of *I think* of learners’ writings is 33.5 per ten thousand words, whereas the rate of *I think* in writings by native speakers is 4.8. Moreover, the rate of *I think* of Taiwanese learners is even higher than the rate of *I think* in speaking by native speakers reported in Gilquin and Paquot’s (2007). The authors found out that in the academic component of the *British National Corpus*, the frequency of *I think* in spoken discourse is 25.0 per ten thousand words, while the rate of *I think* is 0.5 per ten thousand words in written discourse.

L1 pragmatic influence was suggested as a possible cause for the overusing of *I think* of Chinese-speaking learners. For instance, *I think* is frequently used to signal careful deliberation and objectivity (Preisler, 1986). It is equivalent to Chinese equivalents such as 我認為 (wǒrènwéi), 我覺得 (wǒjuéde), or 我想 (wǒxiǎng), which are literal translations of each other. While expressing an opinion, Chinese people commonly used these markers to strengthen the speaker’s commitment to the proposition. In addition, Chinese people tend to unduly involve judgments with personal preference which leads to the overusing *I think* in the academic essay (Li, 2006; Liu, 2013; Wu, Wang & Cai, 2010). This apparent alignment in semantic types and lexical realizations of a stance might contribute to the overusing of *I think* of Chinese learner writing.

Another noticeable feature of learners’ essays was the overuse of the phrase *in my opinion*. Taiwanese learners employed this phrase abundantly in written essays while native speakers rarely used it in writing. As is clear from Table 4, the learner group produced 38 tokens of *in my opinion* in their essays with a frequency of 9.1. The native group, on the other hand, used it only 16 times, which comes with a frequency of 2.6. These figures alone indicate that there is an overuse of the phrase in learner essays.

It seems that learners’ repertoires for initiating argument and point of view were restricted and clung to the expression *in my opinion* as a “prefabricated formulaic stretch” (Granger, 1998, p. 156). In the present study, they occurred at sentence-initial and had the function of emphasizing as shown in the example (5). On the contrary, in native English writing, 8 out of the 16 occurrences occurred in mid-sentence as shown in the example (6). Another interesting point found in the present study was that this phrase *in my opinion* had a tendency to co-occur with the

expression *I think*. There were seven cases where the participants co-selected *in my opinion* and *I think* while expressing personal opinion as shown in the example (7). This overstatement might also be one cause that contributed to the informal tone of learners' essays.

(5) *In my opinion*, students in college should attend classes for two reasons. (S16-2)

(6) In today's society it is an outdated and barbaric "sport" which, *in my opinion*, should be banned. (FH03, A level 3, LOCNESS)

(7) *In my opinion, I think* study abroad is a good choice because it can not only make you more experience than others but also can be a dominance when you apply for a job in the future. (S40-2)

Finally, with regard to the usage of *so*, it is noted that *so* can function as an adverb to mean "in this/that way" or as a conjunction to connect two clauses. It occurs more frequently in writing texts. In contrast, when *so* work as a discourse marker, its position shifts to the sentence-initial which are frequent in spoken language (He, 2001). In the present study, the focus was on these special spoken usages in L2 student's writing. As is clear from Table 4, in the present study, the learner group produced 92 tokens of sentence-initial *so* with a frequency of 22.0, whereas the native group generated 19 tokens of it, which comes with a frequency of 3.1. These figures alone indicate that there is an overuse of sentence-initial *so* in learner essays.

For most L2 learners, the reason that might cause this overuse of sentence-initial *so*, a common usage among L2 writers of English, can be ascribed to a lack of awareness or knowledge regarding the stylistic differences between spoken and written English. For Chinese L2 learners, He (2001), on the other hand, proposed a possible negative interference from learner's mother tongue. According to He, the Chinese equivalent of *so* is 所以 (*suǒyǐ*) which is quite similar to the phonetic realization of *so*. In addition, the spelling of *so* is relatively simple. Chinese EFL learners may find its use comes easily. Chinese-speaking learners showed the tendency of using *so* as an inter-sentence connector to join two clauses. In He's study in 2001, the number of *so* used in English writing by Chinese-speaking learners was seven times more than that of English writers (22.0:3.7). Moreover, in many cases of *so* occurred in learner essays were not necessary or inappropriately used.

In literature, L2 writers make use of *so* for multiple functions; namely, providing an explanation, initiating a question, expressing an opinion, and making a conclusion. Likewise, in the present study, most of the cases of *so* did not introduce a consequential result, but loosely linked to the current sentence to the previous one, hence the frequent occurrence of capitalized *So* (52 tokens of the total 92 tokens in the present study). Example (8) is a case in point.

(8) If you live in another country, you could get to see how people of different cultures' think. *So* you can get expended perspective. (S24-4)

Not unlike He's subjects in China, the present participants used *so* to initiate a question or make a conclusion as shown in the following examples (9) and (10).

(9) You can learn things no matter you choose to study abroad or study in your own country. *So* which one do you prefer? (S31-3)

(10) *So* you want to be a successful teacher you can follow these steps. (S19-4)

Regarding the frequency of *so* in learner's writing, the finding of the present study further confirmed He's finding in 2001 that Chinese-speaking learners exhibited a significantly higher use of discourse marker *so*. The normalized frequency of *so* is 22.0 per ten-thousand words which is identical to the rate of *so* used in ELF learners writing in China in He's (2002). Interestingly, it is also about seven times in that native English writings (22.0:3.1) in LOCNESS (see Table 4).

## 4. Conclusions

The ability to write an academic essay is a skill of importance for university students. Overall, it is evident that L2 writings of Taiwanese students appear to be distinct from and less formal than L1 writing in terms of the use of discourse markers. If use rightfully, discourse markers are devices that help build up coherence of a text. In contrast, the problem of overusing or misusing spoken discourse markers in English academic writing will create serious problems and obscure the meaning intended. The results of the present study reveal two interesting features of English writing by Taiwanese college students. First, the excessive use of I think, in my opinion, and so at the sentence-initial position indicated that these three linguistic items are discourse markers which are considered to be informal in academic writing. Second, the co-selecting I think and In my opinion as in In my opinion, I think and the co-selecting so and I think as in So, I think at the initiating position denoted that learners have accustomed to using these three markers to express important ideas and mark their roles as writers redundantly.

Depending on the subject matter and the audience, the style of academic writing is formal and serious. It is revealed by the choice of words and rhetorical structures and even the use of discourse markers. In particular, discourse markers are devices guiding readers to recognize the coherence relations that hold different parts of a text as a whole. In other words, learners can take immediate and easy steps to improve the way they structure their essays if they learn the basic rhetorical forms of academic writing. Thus, it can be beneficial to learners to receive explicit instructions on rhetorical features typical concern academic writing as well as how these features can be realized by means of discourse markers.

Finally, the trends found in the present study suggest the need to further investigate the effects of instructional intervention on the rhetorical conventions in academic writing and whether the overusing spoken discourse markers in learner writing will diminish in a longitudinal study.

## References

- Aijmer K. (2001). "I think as a marker of discourse style in argumentative Swedish student writing", in: Karin Aijmer (Ed.), *A Wealth of English*, Goteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, pp. 247–257.
- Aijmer K. (2002). *English Discourse Particles: Evidence from a Corpus*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Anthony L. (2011). "AntConc (Version 3.2.1) (Computer Software)", Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan, available online at: <http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp>.
- Biber D., Johansson S., Leech G., Conrad S. and Finegan E. (1999). *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, Harlow, England: Longman.
- Ferris D. and Hedgcock J. (2005). *Teaching ESL Composition: Purpose, Process, and Practice* (2nd ed.), Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associate.
- Fraser B. (1998). "Contrastive discourse markers in English", in: Jucker & Ziv (Eds.), *Discourse Markers*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 301–326.
- Fraser B. (1999). "What are discourse markers?", *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 31, pp. 931–952.
- Granger S. (1998a). "Prefabricated patterns in advanced EFL advanced writing: Collocations and formulae", in: A. P. Cowie (Ed.), *Phraseology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 145–160.
- Granger S. (1998b). *Learner English on Computer*, London and New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Granger S. and Tyson S. (1996). "Connector usage in the English essay writing of native and non-native EFL speakers of English", *World English*, Vol.15, pp. 19–29.
- Halliday M. and Hasan R. (1989). *Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of Language in A Social-Semiotic Perspective* (2nd ed.), Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- He A. (2001). "On the discourse marker so", in: Peters P., P. Collins & A. Smith (Eds.), *Language and Computers: New Frontiers of*

- Corpus Research: Papers from the Twenty First International Conference on English Language Research on Computerized Corpora Sydney 2000*, pp. 41–52.
- Hinkel E. (2003). “Adverbial markers and tone in L1 and L2 students’ writing”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 35, pp. 1049–1068.
- Hinkel E. (2011). “What research on second language writing tells us and what it doesn’t”, in: Eli Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning*, Vol. 2, New York: Routledge, pp. 523–538.
- Hyland K. (1998). “Talking to students: Meta discourse in introductory textbooks”, *English for Specific Purposes*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 3–26.
- Jalilifar A. (2008). “Discourse markers in composition writings: The case of Iranian learners of English as a foreign language”, *English Language Teaching*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 114–122.
- Leedham M. and Cai G. (2013). “Besides ...on the other hand: Using a corpus approach to explore the influence of teaching materials on Chinese students’ use of linking adverbials”, *Journal of Second Language Writing*, Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 374–389.
- Lenk U. (1998). “Discourse markers and global coherence in conversation”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 30, pp. 245–257.
- Li N. (2006). “COLEC 與 LOCNESS 語料庫中 I THINK 用法比較 (A comparison of *I think* in corpora of COLEC and LOCNESS)”, *安陽師範學院學報 (Journal of Aayang teachers college)*, Vol. 3, pp. 99–102.
- Liu B. (2013). “Effect of first language on the use of English discourse markers by L1 Chinese speakers of English”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 45, pp. 149–172.
- Lorenz G. (1999). “Learning to cohere: Causal links in native vs. non-native argumentative writing”, in: W. Bublitz, U. Lenk and E. Ventola (Eds.), *Coherence in Spoken and Written Discourse: How to Create it and How to Describe It*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 55–75.
- Oshima A. and Hough A. (1998). *Writing Academic English*, New York: Longman.
- Preisler B. (1986). *Linguistic Sex Roles in Conversation: Social Variation in the Expression of Tentativeness in English*, Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Schiffrin D. (1986). *Discourse Markers*, Cambridge: Cambridge shire.
- Schourup L. (1999). “Tutorial overview: Discourse markers”, *Lingua*, Vol. 107, pp. 227–265.
- Wu Y., Wang J. and Cai Z. (2010). “The use of I think by Chinese EFL learners: A study revisited”, *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 3–23.
- Zhao X. L. and Wei N. X. (2010). “中國大學生英語書面語中的立場表達 (The use of stance markers in English writing by learners of English in China)”, *外語研究 (Foreign Language Research)*, Vol. 1, pp. 59–63.