Exploring Discourse Marker Use in Thai University Students' Conversations

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Abstract

Using a specialized corpus of English conversations between Thai university students and non-Thai speakers of English, this study examines the distribution of discourse markers employed and how they function in context. Analysis of transcriptions from a conversational perspective, reference to audio recordings and frequency counts revealed thirty-four different discourse markers used, making up 5.6% of the total corpus. The most frequent were *and*, *OK*, *but* and *so* respectively. Results indicate that, for engagement in conversations, discourse markers were employed by participants most commonly for referential purposes, lacking in extensive discourse marker use for interpersonal communication (e.g. marking and confirming shared knowledge, hedging) and cognitive functions (e.g. reformulating, repair). For the management of conversations, structural discourse markers emerged from the data to function mainly as topic shifters and mostly to give turns. The deficiency in overall discourse marker use found in Thai EFL student conversations points to a pedagogical urgency to create learner awareness of how applying these small words can significantly impact the quality of a conversation and the relationship between interlocutors.

Keywords: discourse markers, conversation analysis, EFL

Introduction

Discourse markers play a key role in guiding participants' understanding in an ongoing conversation (Lenk, 1998). They have been said to be the conversational "glue" (Louwerse and Mitchell, 2003) used to hold a dialog together and are often found "peppered" (Lewis, 2006) in spontaneous conversation. More characteristic of speech than of writing (Aijmer, 2004), discourse markers, such as *well, now, so, but, oh, because* to name but a few, have been found to be abundantly employed in naturalistic conversation since they serve a variety of functions. For instance, they assist in turn-taking or expressing the speaker's attitude, thus being useful on the textual and interpersonal levels of discourse rather than merely for style (Brinton, 1996; Piurko, 2015). In fact, discourse markers are features that may even distinguish impromptu speech such as conversation from other types of spoken discourse (Östman, 1982).

For EFL learners to maintain a conversation effectively, not only is grammatical competence, which includes the knowledge of morphology and syntax, fundamental, but discourse knowledge, in particular, the ability to make use of discourse markers also aids in holding the conversation together in a meaningful way and promotes a natural sounding conversation. This makes it challenging for EFL learners when compared to the more formal spoken discourse, such as delivering presentations, which is more structured and can be planned or even recited, while conversation is produced under cognitive and processing constraints (Aijmer, 2004) and mostly unplanned.

Because opportunities for EFL learners to encounter daily situations requiring them to converse are more likely than other non-interactional spoken genres, conversation skills, thus, are high-priority on the list of EFL learners' challenges to be mastered (Hart-Rawung and Li, 2008; Liu et al., 2011; Piamsai, 2018). This is why there is a special interest in how EFL learners employ discourse markers when engaging in conversations. To do so would reveal a particular pattern of discourse marker use characteristic of EFL learners in a Thai context, unveiling a lack or insufficiency of discourse marker usage that needs to be addressed.

Conversational tasks hold important features which allow the use of discourse markers to be utilized in a natural way. Firstly, they are contextualized – being set in social situations that are authentic and do not require imagining how one would perform in hypothetical scenarios such as in imaginary role plays or other forms of tasks, which could include picture description or narration tasks, information gap, and interviews. More obviously, they require interlocutors to engage in meaningful interaction, as conversations are interactive and dynamic in nature. Lastly, conversations allow for learner agency to be exercised. This is when learners are given the opportunity to be in control and take the initiative, making their own moves and decisions. In such a manner, learners can use discourse markers authentically in a conversation for various functions, such as initiating the conversation, changing topic, interrupting, expressing stance, or signaling the end. Therefore, conversation tasks contain contextualization, interaction and agency, which are integral elements (Taguchi, 2018) that can effectively elicit evidence of pragmatic knowledge.

Discourse markers are interactional devices which are units of analysis of interest in L2 pragmatics research. There has been a plenitude of such studies since the 1980s on English spoken discourse marker use in a variety of aspects and contexts. Particularly in the EFL/ESL pedagogical setting, the purpose of many of these studies has been to compare discourse marker use between native speakers and non-native speakers of English (e.g. Fuller, 2003; Aijmer, 2004; Fung and Carter, 2007; Huang, 2011; Aşık and Cephe, 2013; Sitthirak, 2013; Neary-Sundquist, 2014.) Most of the findings reveal that native speakers use discourse markers more frequently and with more variety than non-native speakers. Studies investigating discourse marker use of students at different proficiency levels and in different contexts reveal that proficient students appear to be generally more active with discourse marker use in building interactional coherence (Wei, 2011) and a positive correlation has been found between discourse marker use and proficiency level (Neary-Sundquist, 2014).

Other studies have investigated the effects that different teaching methods have had on learners' production of discourse markers in their speech. Rahimi and Riasati (2012) found that learners receiving explicit instruction on discourse markers used them more frequently in speech than those receiving implicit discourse marker instruction. Jones and Carter (2014) validated the claim that explicit instruction impacts acquiring discourse markers in speech, further demonstrating, in the qualitative results of their study that the Present – Practice – Produce (PPP) method yielded learners with better performances in spoken discourse marker use than the Illustration – Interaction – Induction (III) method; however, the effect was not sustained over time. Alraddadi (2016) later reported that both Task-Based Language Teaching method (TBLT) and Presentation – Practice – Production model (PPP) helped learners increase their use of structural discourse markers, with the TBLT method having a longer lasting effect on the acquisition of target discourse markers.

Several studies looked into different aspects of discourse marker usage of Thai learners. Nookam (2010) investigated the use of discourse markers *and, but, so, oh, well in* 64 business

conversations. Participants were 42 third-year Thai undergraduate Business English students. The conversations were simulated role-plays carried out between learner–learner and instructor–learner in the classroom, using different imaginary scenarios, i.e. business party conversations and telephone conversations where learners had to take and leave messages and solve customer problems. The discourse marker *and* was found to be the most frequently used to preface a turn, followed by *oh, but,* and *so* respectively. The marker *well* was not found used among participants.

A study by Sitthirak (2013) investigated the use of contrastive discourse markers *but, yet, though, although, while, whereas, on the contrary, on the other hand, nevertheless* by 79 Thai first-year university students in comparison with that of 28 English speakers working in various fields. Participants were asked to complete a contrastive discourse marker multiple choice test and a set of questionnaires. Results revealed that Thai participants at the beginner and intermediate levels performed no differently from each other when they had to distinguish between contrastive and non-contrastive discourse markers. When asked to make a distinction between 'contrast and reason', Thai participants sometimes made incorrect interpretations. With various contrastive discourse markers to choose from, Thai students in this study tended to use those more familiar to them and with less of a variety.

Another study explored the use of discourse markers in online chat texts. Thongkampra and Poonpon (2014) looked into online chat texts of 40 fourth-year Thai undergrauate students majoring in English who were required to chat on any topic for at least 30 turns with native speakers of English. Discourse markers found in the chats from most to least frequent were *and, so, OK, yeah, but, well, oh, ah, um, mhm, right*, respectively. According to the researchers, factors which may have caused variation in the frequency and function of discourse marker use were the differences of each chat topic and communicating via online mode.

The present study would add to the current knowledge of discourse marker use, particularly in the area of conversation. Unlike other tasks, the extended nature of conversation allows for opportunities for discourse markers to emerge as speakers engage in spontaneous conversation. As conversation is perhaps the most fundamental type of discourse that EFL learners encounter in the real world, by exploring how learners employ discourse markers in a semi-authentic situation, namely engaging in conversations with foreigners in an out-of-class setting, would reveal natural representations of discourse marker patterns that would be reflective of their conversation skills. Thus, seeking to explore Thai EFL learner discourse marker use in conversations would point to several useful pedagogical implications in the area of conversation. The research study is then guided by two questions: What discourse markers did participants use in the conversations and what was the frequency of each? What functions did the discourse markers perform?

Literature Review

Discourse markers (From now referred to as DMs.) have been the subject of extensive study for the past two decades as evidenced by the large amount of research conducted from a wide variety of perspectives. Although there have been differences in the way DMs have been approached, analyzed and described throughout the years, most researchers seem to be in agreement that what has been called by a plethora of names, such as *connective particles, pragmatic particles, pragmatic markers, discourse connectives, discourse particles*, and in this paper, *discourse markers,* are a type of *insert* (Biber et al., 1999) that basically, in spoken discourse, serve dual pragmatic functions in promoting coherence and conversational continuity. A more recent

definition of DMs offered by Culpeper et al. (2018, p. 204) is "[l]inguistic expressions such as particles, words or phrases that signal speaker attitudes, indicate how hearers might "take" an utterance, and/or contribute to the coherence/flow of the discourse."

Central features of DMs that have been established based on Archer et al., 2012 can be summarized as follows: lexically and phonologically, they are short elements which can be reduced (e.g. *because* to *cos*) and distinguished by the rest of an utterance at times by a short pause. Syntactically, they are optional, and so can be omitted without any change in meaning to the content or message being relayed. When they do occur, they are often placed sentence-initially although they are not restricted to this position. DMs are also distinctive not only in that they are drawn from different grammatical classes which include coordinate conjunctions (e.g. *and, but, or*), subordinate conjunctions (e.g. *because, so*), prepositional phrases (e.g. *by the way*), adverbs (e.g. *now, anyway, obviously, absolutely*), minor clauses (e.g. *you know, I mean*), response words (e.g. *yeah, no*), interjections (e.g. *oh, well, wow*), meta-expressions (e.g. *what I mean is, in other words*) but also because the status of a single DM can function in multiple ways. The word, "well", for example, could be used to signal the start of a speech event, to express a reaction or contradictory response, or to denote that the speaker is thinking (Archer et al., 2012). Semantically, DMs have little or no propositional meaning. In other words, when they do exist, they do not contribute to the descriptive or content meaning of an utterance per se, but indicate how one should understand what follows or what has come before with respect to both the speaker and hearer and to the discourse as a whole (Lee-Goldman, 2011). Functionally, they operate simultaneously on several linguistic levels, having both textual and interpersonal roles. Sociolinguistically, they prevail as features of oral rather than written discourse (Brinton, 1996). Appearing with high frequency particularly in spoken discourse, they are associated with informality and in some cases non-fluency.

Being multifunctional, DMs can perform in a variety of ways depending on the context. Performing textual functions, DMs generally indicate a structural boundary in the discourse, pointing either backwards or forwards in the discourse to signal the relationship between the utterances they connect. In this way, it can be said that DMs are used to manage or organize discourse. Performing interpersonal functions, DMs can be used to express shared knowledge or solidarity, and hedge to express tentativeness or politeness (Archer et al., 2012), but more generally they can be used to express emotions, attitudes or evaluative judgment towards the hearer or the statement.

As previously noted, the same particles that have been identified as DMs can and often do appear in more than one category, such as the word, "so", which can function as either an opening or closing frame marker, as a sequence marker, or even as a turn-taker (Rennie et al., 2016). The possibility of a particular marker taking the role of more than one function would then vary depending on the changes in content/context, co-constructed by the interlocutors, within the negotiation. Another approach to viewing DMs is via a functionally-based framework by Fung and Carter (2007) which adapts Maschler's (1994) categorization of DMs into four functional headings: the interpersonal, referential, structural and cognitive categories, keeping in mind the fluidity of discourse particles that may perform more than one of the four functions and lending a clear picture of how DMs denote cognitive processes. This theoretical framework is also grounded in Schiffrin's (1987) "multi-dimensional model of discourse coherence and Aijmer's (2002) interpersonal perspective" (Fung and Carter, 2007). Table 1 summarizes Fung and Carter's (2007) DM multi-categorical framework (Adapted from Fung and Carter, 2007, p. 415, 418).

Table 1: Fung and Carter's (2007) Discourse Marker Multi-categorical Framework

Category	Discourse functions and markers used
Interpersonal Denoting affective and social functions.	Marking shared knowledge: *see, you see, you know* Showing responses (agreement, confirmation, acknowledgement): *OK/okay, oh, right/alright, yeah, yes, I see, great, oh, great, sure* Indicating attitudes: *well, really, obviously, absolutely, basically, actually, exactly, to be frank, etc.* Indicating a stance towards propositional meanings: *really, exactly, obviously, absolutely*
Referential Marking relationships between verbal activities preceding and following a DM.	Mostly conjunctions, marking cause, consequence, contrast, coordination, disjunction, digression, comparison: *because/cos, so, but, and, yet, however, nevertheless, and, or, anyway, likewise, similarly*
Structural Working in two levels: textual and interactional. Indicating discourse in progress and affecting the subject under discussion, returning to a previous topic or moving ahead to a new topic, or affecting even the distribution of turn-taking.	Opening and closing of topics: *now, OK/okay, right/alright, well, let's start, let's discuss, let me conclude* Sequencing: *first, firstly, second, next, then, finally* Marking topic shifts: *so, now, and what about, how about* Marking continuation of the current topic: *yeah, and, cos, so* Regain control over the talk or to hold the floor: *and, cos* Summarizing opinions: *so*
Cognitive Marking the cognitive state of speakers, particularly in unplanned speech, when there are unsignalled shifts in topics or when inferential procedures are required to understand	Indicating the thinking process: *well, I think, I see, and* Reformulation/self-correction: *I mean, that is, in other words, what I mean is* Elaboration: *like, I mean* Hesitation: *well, sort of* Assessment of the listener's knowledge about the utterances: *you know*

Having established key features of DMs, it can be seen how importantly DMs function, particularly in conversations, and by envisioning how a conversation would turn out without DMs present. Although DMs are considered optional, and by all means grammatically acceptable when omitted in a conversation, the utterance would be judged as "unnatural", "awkward", "disjointed", "impolite", "unfriendly", or "dogmatic" within the communicative context" (Brinton, 1996, p. 35). Furthermore, without DMs present to indicate or clarify the speaker's communicative intention, there is a greater chance for communication breakdown when the hearer interprets the utterance based solely on the context and intonation used (Fraser, 1990). Thus, DMs, perceived to contain a 'symbiotic' relationship with impromptu speech (Östman, 1982), are actively present in dyadic communication or conversation as they are needed for planning and politeness. In fact, DMs, according to Östman (1982), appear in impromptu discourse as a reflection of planning on the part of the speaker. For example, the use

of *well, like,* or *I mean*, signals cognitive activity as well as holding of the floor or ending a conversation. Politeness in face-to-face communication is seen as conversational indirectness performed both to mitigate the effect of an utterance and to display solidarity. For example, the use of DMs to hedge allows a speaker to be indirect and avoid confrontation with the interlocutor. In the same vein, DMs showing empathy or seeking approval, such as *you see* or *you know,* play a salient role in realizing the effect.

Studies have found instances where limited use of DMs in non-native English speakers hindered the effectiveness of communication. Trillo (2002) found limited use of DMs in the corpora of Spanish speakers of English, namely third and fourth year undergraduate students, despite them having an acceptable level of English. An earlier study by Tyler (as cited in Williams, 1992) found that increased and accurate use of DMs in non-native English speakers, who were working as international teaching assistants, correlates with increased comprehensibility scores. The ability to carry out interactions smoothly may then depend on the presence or lack of DM use. This emphasizes the need to explore how Thai EFL students apply DMs in actual conversation. As both textual functions and interpersonal functions of DMs play a salient part in effective communication, this study sets out to quantify DMs that are representative of these functions as well as to explore how they are implemented in context.

Methodology

Establishing criteria for the selection of DMs

This study is interested in exploring the way EFL learners use DMs as they engage in conversation. The criteria used for a linguistic item or expression to qualify as a DM will, therefore, take a functional perspective based on Fung and Carter's (2007) framework. Special attention is given to four main elements: how participants (a) manage the conversation, as reflected through their use of DMs for textual functions, framing the start and end of topics; marking topic shifts; taking and giving turns (Structural); (b) engage in or contribute to the conversation as reflected through their use of DMs, again for textual functions, to provide new information and perhaps refer to old information within the text (Referential); (c) indicate their thinking process and reformulate, using DMs for cognitive functions (Cognitive); and (d) connect with their interlocutors using DMs for interpersonal functions to mark shared knowledge, confirming shared knowledge, checking or expressing understanding, expressing attitude or hedging to be polite (Interpersonal).

A set of criteria used to classify a lexical item or expression as a DM for this study was established as follows: they are single words or formulaic expressions taken from a variety of grammatical classes. They are not limited to the turn-initial position of an utterance, framing the start of a new topic or to end a topic; however, they are also found in the middle of an utterance to keep the turn or mark repair as well. They can also be found in the final position of a turn.

To shortlist DMs for analysis, fillers (e.g. *uh, mm, er*), emotive interjections (e.g. *ah*) and back channeling signals (e.g. *yes, yeah, mm-hm, uh-huh, oh*) overlapping with the main speaker were removed. The insert *like* was also excluded because, according to Andersen (1997), determining whether *like* functions as a DM can be problematic as a high proportion of *like*-occurrences are functionally ambiguous rendering them indeterminable. If DMs were found combined in a series, the head marker would be counted as the main DM used. For example, in the response, "*Oh really*.", only the marker *really* would be counted.

To establish a clear purpose and DM analysis process that is coherent with the conversation task, the analysis will be looking into how DMs are used at the global and local levels. To illustrate, DMs used at the global level are those indicating conversation management, particularly when they are expressed to structure the conversation or direct the flow of the conversation. At the local level, DMs are employed as part of conversation engagement, especially when they are expressed to index a response or follow-up that contributes to the conversation and affiliates with the interlocutor. Moreover, to clearly distinguish DM inserts functioning as textual structural from those functioning as textual referential markers, structural markers are those that function to structure or frame the beginning or ending of sections or topics, to shift the conversation to new topics or even back to previous topics, while referential markers are those that preface elaboration, indexing new information related to the topic being discussed, and even having the effect of taking and giving turns to expand the conversation.

Data Collection

A small specialized corpus made up of 27 elicited conversations was purposively chosen because of the semi-authentic nature of the corpus, which was derived from an elicited conversation task, a required task unique to a speaking elective course offered to undergraduate students. Only one section is offered per semester. The participants enrolled in this course consisted of 27 Thai EFL university students (male = 8 and female = 19). The majority were in their fourth (n = 19) year, the rest in their second (n = 5) and third (n = 3) year of study. They came from both the science and humanities fields, ranging from low intermediate to intermediate level learners, with the majority being at the intermediate level. Participants had passed two of the university's foundational and prerequisite English courses. The majority have not had experience conversing at length with foreigners. On a voluntary basis, participants signed a consent form acknowledging their participation in this research.

As one of the main projects of the course, the 12–15 minute speaking task was a "cultural exchange" whereby students and foreign visitors, previously unknown to each other, engaged in face-to-face conversations exchanging experiences or accounts of their own culture and views on issues of students' choices, e.g., environmental, social, technological issues. Participants were reminded that the task was not an interview. This required them to be prepared to contribute to the conversation by giving explanations, clarifications and expressing their own views. Part of the task, therefore, included preparing proper questions to ask as well as what to say on the selected topics. DMs were not introduced or taught explicitly in class, although part of the class material included example words and phrases that could be used in conversations, such as examples of back channeling, hedging, and phrases for clarification, interruption and changing the topic. Lessons and practice activities carried out as preparation for this task were aimed at using conversation strategies, speaking on cultural topics, and exchanging ideas on different issues. Yet the task itself remained somewhat impromptu since participants have not met their foreign guest prior to the task and did not know what to expect as participants were unable to script the conversation.

To address ethical issues concerning the use of participants' speech, only with permission for the conversation to be audio recorded would participants continue with the task. As the conversations were carried out in public and not concealed from the casual overhearer, they would be considered public talk and non-confidential. Moreover, identities of participants and participating foreigners were anonymous, and pseudonyms were assigned for each individual participant. Audio recordings of the conversations were transcribed and checked for accuracy.

The researcher asked permission to use these conversations after the task was completed. It was made clear to participants that their information would remain confidential and anonymous. Recordings were kept with the researcher and shared with a second rater only for data analysis purposes. The student corpus alone, with foreigners' turns removed, made up a total of 16,550 words.

Data Analysis

Using AntConc 3.5.7, a free online corpus analysis tool for concordancing and text analysis, the researcher made an initial scan for possible DMs functioning structurally, textually, interpersonally and cognitively based on DMs found in Brinton's (1996) Inventory of pragmatic markers in Modern English, Fung and Carter's (2007) Discourse Marker Multi-categorial Framework and Carter et al.'s (2016) *English grammar today: An A–Z of spoken and written grammar* as it provides a wide selection of common DMs found in modern day spoken English. The search tool enabled the researcher to generate a list of occurrences of lexical terms and expressions from the corpora. Each list was checked manually according to the criteria set to screen items that would be identified as DMs, referring to the original conversations to confirm accuracy of the analysis.

Once the designated list of DMs to be analyzed was compiled, a second analysis was again performed manually to observe the possible functions of each DM. This rendered specific subcategories in which each DM could fall into. Using these subcategories under the four functions mentioned above as a basis for analysis, the researcher and an experienced second rater worked systematically using AntConc to identify "hits" possibly functioning as DMs. With the help of AntConc, to locate each of the DMs used in context, the researcher was able to work with even more precision than otherwise. This was the third analysis whereby making use of AntConc, constantly referring to the transcripts, and listening to the audio recordings to better understand the context rendered a more accurate analysis of each DM. Any rater discrepancies were verified a final time with the audio recordings, discussed and settled with a 91% rater agreement.

Results and Discussion

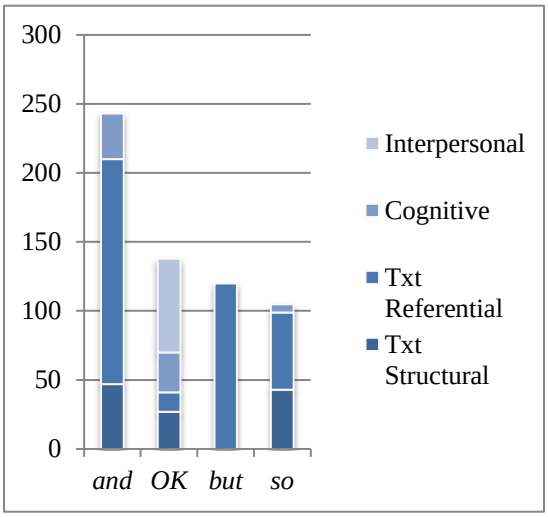
To answer research question 1, Table 2 reports the frequency of DMs identified in the conversations. Of the entire corpus, thirty-four DMs emerged, making up 5.57%. A general analysis reveals that the most commonly used DMs were *and*, *OK*, *but*, and *so* respectively.

Table 2 : Discourse markers identified in student conversation corpus (16,550 words)

Discourse markers	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Student conversation data %
And	243	26.41	1.47
OK	138	15	0.83
But	130	14.13	0.79
So	123	13.37	0.74
Right	44	4.78	0.27
You know.	30	3.26	0.18

Discourse markers	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Student conversation data %
Or	27	2.93	0.16
Wow	19	2.07	0.11
Really	18	1.96	0.11
I see.	18	1.96	0.11
Because	18	1.96	0.11
Just	15	1.63	0.09
Good	11	1.20	0.07
I agree.	11	1.20	0.07
Actually	10	1.09	0.06
I mean	9	0.98	0.05
I think	9	0.98	0.05
or something like that	6	0.65	0.04
or something	5	0.54	0.03
Interesting	5	0.54	0.03
Great	5	0.54	0.03
I think so.	4	0.43	0.02
kind of	4	0.43	0.02
That's right.	3	0.33	0.02
Cool	3	0.33	0.02
Well	2	0.22	0.01
True	2	0.22	0.01
Basically	2	0.22	0.01
Definitely	1	0.11	0.01
Exactly	1	0.11	0.01
You're right.	1	0.11	0.01
No way.	1	0.11	0.01
A little	1	0.11	0.01
Sure	1	0.11	0.01
Total	920	100	5.57

Figure 1 shows the most frequently used DMs. While the DM *so* and *and* were used for structural, referential and cognitive purposes, *but* was used mainly for referential purposes. It was also evident that *OK* was the most versatile DM, functioning across the board structurally, referentially, cognitively and interpersonally. The remaining DMs were not widely prevalent among participants as will be elaborated further in the next section.



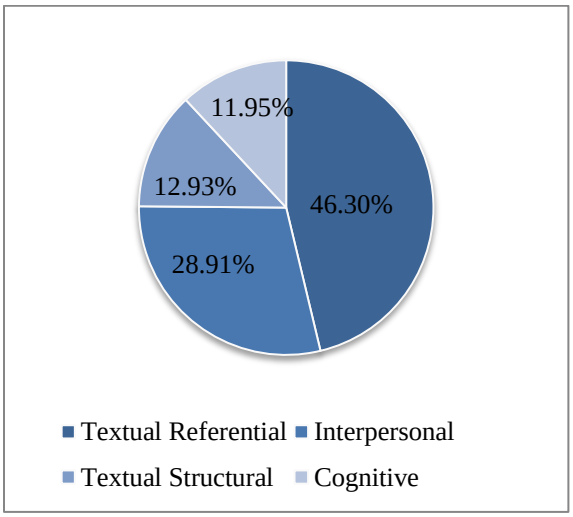
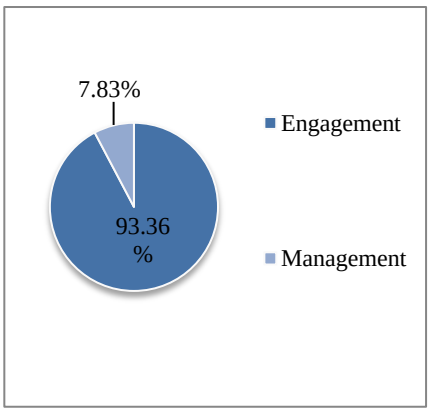


Figure 1 Functions of the most frequently used DMs **Figure 2** Distribution of DM functions

The distribution of DM function, illustrated in Figure 2, reflects the overall use of DMs for different purposes: referential (46.30%), interpersonal (28.91%), structural (12.93%), and cognitive (11.95%) purposes respectively. The analyses of DMs used for each function is discussed below to address the second research question.

Functions of Discourse Markers Identified

With the conversation task taken into account, the analysis examined the thirty-four DMs that emerged from the corpus from the perspective of conversation management and conversation engagement (See Figure 3.).



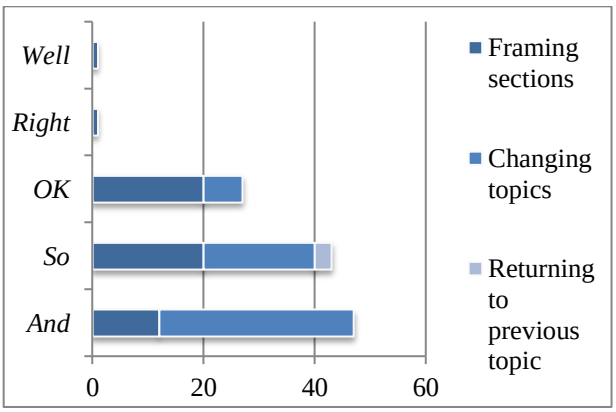


Figure 3 DM Distribution in Conversations **Figure 4** Distribution of Structural DMs

Conversation Management

To manage the conversation, the analysis revealed that DMs *and, so, OK, right, well* (47, 43, 27, 1, 1 occurrences respectively) under the textual structural category were employed. As seen in Figure 4, to frame sections of the conversation, *OK* was employed the most frequently. *Well* and

right occurred once each in this order to index the beginning and the end of the conversation. To change topics, *and* and *so* were employed the most frequently, more often to give rather than take turns.

There were two ways DMs functioned to structure the conversation. First, similar to Fung and Carter (2007), it was found that additional expressions like *let's move on to the next topic, could we move to the next topic, the next topic is…* were used in conjunction with DMs *so, and,* and *OK* (23, 20, 12 occurrences respectively) to clearly indicate new sections within the conversations (5.87%). More prevalent, however, were the DMs *and, so* and *OK* (35, 20 and 7 occurrences respectively) employed to steer the conversation to new areas without such accompanying expressions to clearly index topic changes. These unexpected topic shifts (6.74%) indexed by *and, so* and *OK,* functioned as turn-givers. Changing the topic abruptly, albeit with a DM, points to the issue of 'ritual interchanges' (Goffman, 1967, as cited in Tsui, 1994), usually made up of three parts – a question from a first speaker, an answer from the second speaker and a further response from the first speaker – which has been violated in most instances in the present corpus. As Mishler (1975, cited in Tsui, 1994) contends, in natural conversation a response also requires a further response from the questioner before the next question is asked.

A few participants used the discourse marker *so,* as Buysse (2012: 1772) has called it, to "indicate a shift back to a higher unit of the discourse". This constitutes the third way discourse markers, especially *so,* are used under the textual structural category (0.32%). The following excerpt* illustrates how a shift was made during the course of the conversation to bring the interlocutors back to what was being discussed prior. (*Any grammatical errors occurring in the conversation were transcribed as is.)

1		Student 22:	I don't have - uh -- much - I didn't have much time to travel for another country =
2		Guest 22:	= mm-hm? =
3		Student 22:	= but I just read- uh - some book? it's call India Diary book. it abouts - uh a man he's Thai. he travel to India. in India culture? ah - they ah they have ah - you know แบบ like like ah - head wibble - head wibble. it like? like this. = (Student wobbles her head.)
4		Guest 22:	[mm-hm.
5		Student 22:	[uh-huh? uh-huh?
6		Guest 22:	[yeah? =
7		Student 22:	= it's --- it means yes or okay. =
8		Guest 22:	= AH [okay.]
9	**→**	**Student 22:**	**[ah.] so in in this book [he gives some ah =**
10		Guest 22:	[mm-hm?
11		Student 22:	= ah example? just like when he wants some discount he asks the merchants ah - can you give me a discount? and the merchant ah wubi woobble his head. so he walk away from the shop…

As seen in Line 9, the speaker used *so* to signal a shift in the conversation back to a previous section after a brief turn-internal digression. This function is used to resume her anecdote after digressing to explain the meaning of the Indian head shake. "So in this book..."

clearly marks the shift and facilitates the guest in following the direction of the conversation. Without the discourse marker *so*, the shift would not be as smooth.

As observed from this corpus, most structural DMs were deployed turn-initially and mainly used as topic-framers, giving turns and marking topic shifts. In the way of conversation management to facilitate foreign guests, explicitly indexing a change of topic would have yielded smooth transitions; however, effective use of DMs in this manner was not prevalent. This finding resonates with studies observing L2 learner topic management (Li and Xiao, 2012; Kim, 2017) that also found abrupt topic shifts common among learners who tend to change topics without clear transitions. Such incoherent and abrupt topic shifts may have been due to second language speaking anxiety during the task, the pressure to move ahead quickly in the course of conversation, or the learner's lack of awareness of creating smooth transitions between topics.

Conversation Engagement

DMs indicating conversational engagement fell under the three remaining categories, namely textual referential, cognitive, and interpersonal categories. Under the referential category as seen in Figure 5, DMs identified in the corpus were *and, but, so, or, because* and *OK* (163, 130, 74, 27, 18, 14 occurrences respectively). These DMs functioned mainly as prompts to either give turns (15%), hold turns (15.54%) or take turns (13.8%), primarily to build on to what was being discussed. These textual referential DMs took the turn-initial position when giving and taking turns, while taking the turn-medial position when holding turns.

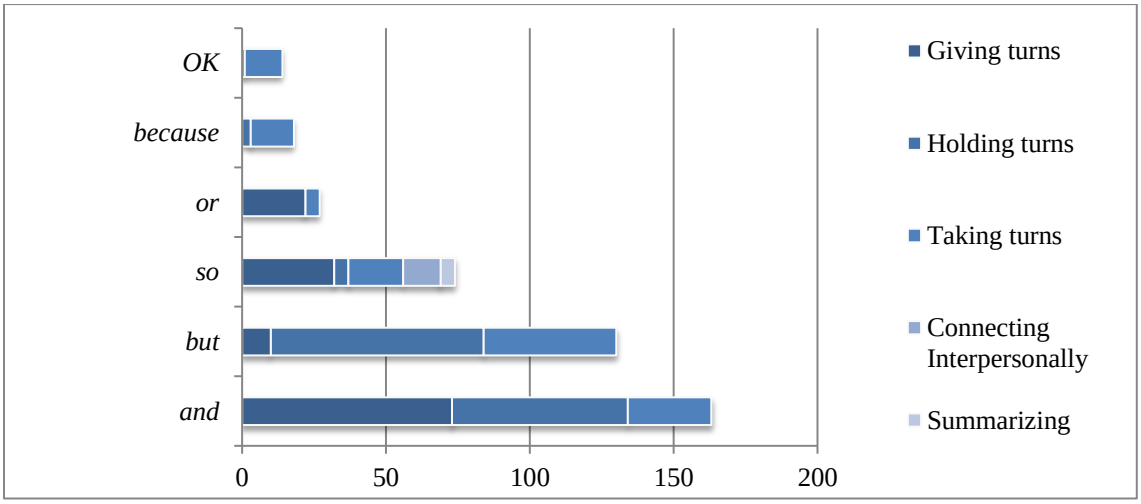


Figure 5 Distribution of Referential DMs

Because *and* takes up dual roles in speech, coordinating ideas as well as marking speaker continuation (Schiffrin, 1987), it is perhaps the most basic DM, particularly for EFL learners, to resort to when the task at hand is to jointly construct a conversation. This explains why *and* was the most frequently used in this study as well as in other DM studies involving EFL learners (e.g. Aşık and Cephe, 2013; Nookam, 2010).

But, also identified under the referential category, was utilized the second most frequently. Because its contrastive nature is knowledge, context and proposition-bound (Schiffrin, 1987), its function was closely connected to the conversational content. Thus, from

the data, *but* carried different "dimensions of contrastive meaning" (Hussein, 2008; Schiffrin, 1987) depending on the topic of discussion. This demonstrated an overall understanding of the different pragmatic functions of *but.* Interestingly, however, *but* was employed most often to index additional information, not so much to contradict but to further contribute. The following excerpt* illustrates how *but* is used to hold the turn, adding on new information.

1		Student 20:	...yeah, so I accidentally I was accidentally biten (bitten) by by them (laugh) yes from the part of my body...
2		Guest 20:	you were unlucky (laugh) =
3		Student 20:	= yes UNlucky (laugh) very hurt [(laugh)
4		Guest 20:	[very painful =
5	→	**Student 20:**	= yes (laugh), **but** when I'm - when when I have the chance to to try the the egg red ant in spicy soup? it's quite nice. **But but** yeah - yes **but** it's a new experience. (laugh)

In line 5, we can see how the DM *but* takes different functions. The first *but* indexes contrast to the student's prior negative experience with red ants. In this instance, *but* could also have been substituted with *however*. In this context, the second, third and fourth *but* could take the same meaning as *nevertheless*, and functions to keep the turn and expand the conversation.

Giving, taking and holding turns were some of the common roles of *so,* being a versatile DM. However, *so* also functioned referentially to indicate summary (5 instances = 0.54%), and even to connect interpersonally with interlocutors (13 instances = 1.41%). As observed from a number of instances in this corpus, the multi-functionality of *so*, e.g. working referentially and interpersonally, echoes findings of other studies (e.g. Buysse, 2012; Bolden, 2006). The excerpt below illustrates the multifunctionality of so, fulfilling structural, referential and interpersonal functions.

1		Guest 24:	...because this is my fourth semester. [yes.]
2	→	**Student 24:**	[oh **so** it's your last semester here? =
3		Guest 24:	= no, [I'm a Ph.D. degree? so I - my scholarship got 3 years.]
4		Student 24:	[oh oh Ph.D.. ah::: =
5		Guest 24:	= so I am in the second year. =
6	→	**Student 24:**	= oh **so** one year to go [(laugh)]
7		Guest 24:	[YES yes one year already. for Ph.D. as you know - we have to finish our course[work in the first year]
8		Student 24:	[mm-hm yeah]
9		Guest 24:	in the third semester - I passed my qualified exam? =
10		Student 24:	[ah:::]
11		Guest 24:	[now this is my fourth semester so have to emphasize on thesis. =
12	→	**Student 24:**	= oh kay [**so** alMOST there (laugh)]
13		Guest 24:	[yes. try - ALmost. try to get the thesis topic. yeah....

In lines 2, 6 and 12, *so* was mainly used as a discourse-organizing device partly to summarize and indicate a result relation by referring to what the guest had just said. By doing so, it also indexed connection, sympathy and encouragement. Implementing *so* in this way

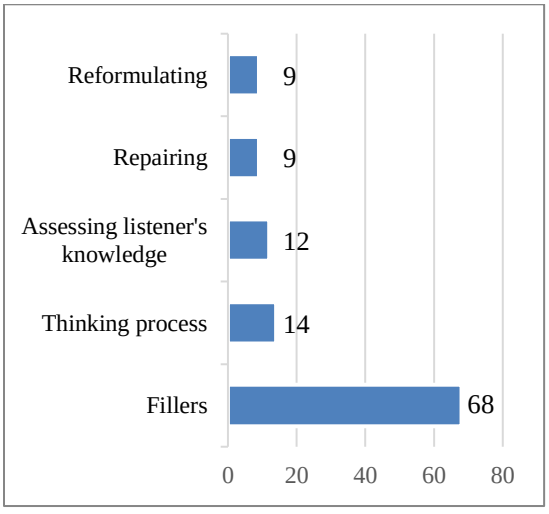
established rapport with the guest, thus making the interpersonal role of *so* prominent. The implementation of *so* in this way, however, was reserved for the more advanced participants. Nevertheless, the prevalence of *so* to give turns in the present corpus supports Johnson (2002), who has characterized "so-prefaced questions" as "topic developers". For EFL participants, using *so* for referential indexing somehow rendered more sophistication than using *and* in cases where substitution was acceptable.

As expected, the DM *or* was used referentially more to give turns than to take turns, as it possesses more of a "hearer-directed" (Schiffrin, 1987) nature. From the data, it was more often deployed in the turn-final position, leaving the statement open for the guest to fill in. In other instances, *or* occurred in the turn-initial position with an option for the guest to choose from. *Or* was not used extensively as a DM although it may have been a simple way for participants to elicit information or gain a response from interlocutors or even to shift responsibility of maintaining the conversation.

As a referential DM, *because* was found to be the least prevalent in the data, existing primarily to take turns and often found following another marker, e.g. *Yeah, because...; Right, because...; Ah, because...* to offer additional explanation from the perspective of the student, usually in agreement with previous information. In no instance was the DM *because* reduced in form, which is in line with Fung and Carter's (2007) findings. Frequently used in native speaker colloquial speech (Stenström & Andersen, 1996), *cos* may not be readily transferred to L2 speech since learners have more exposure to the written and formal form of the word, rather than the spoken form.

OK functioning as textual referential markers was commonly found used for taking turns (13 occurrences) during the conversation. *OK* occurred mostly turn-initially to signal turns and new topics. This reflected the participatory role of the students who employed them to manage the conversation. *OK* was not found to hold turns. This was not unexpected, because OK functioning as a textual referential marker typically occurs as turn takers/givers or topic switchers to reorient the ongoing conversation (Fraser, 1996).

It was quite natural to see that DMs functioning as textual referential markers were more prevalent than those functioning as textual structural indices since conversation, for the most part, involves relating and referring to experiences and ideas. It follows, however, that explicit DM instruction may be needed to increase EFL learner awareness of how a variety of DM use can offer richer, more natural exchanges and even be used to effectively establish rapport.



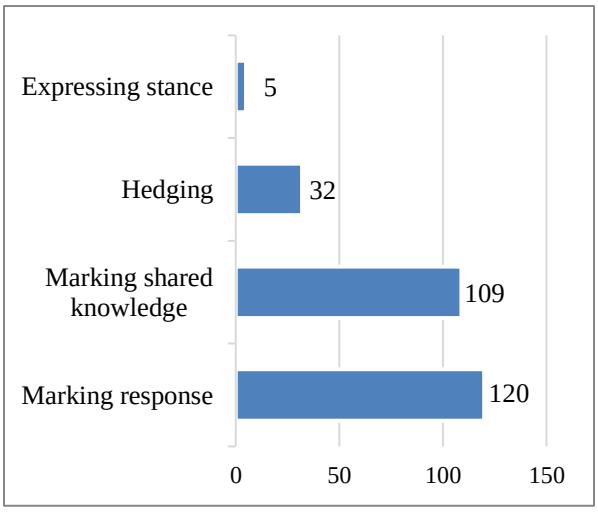


Figure 6 Distribution of Cognitive DMs **Figure 7** Distribution of Interpersonal DMs

As shown in Figure 6, DMs identified under the cognitive function were employed in five areas: to fill in the silence (7.39%) using *and, OK, so* (33, 29, 6 occurrences respectively); to assess interlocutor's knowledge (1.52%) using *you know* (14 occurrences); to index thinking process (1.3%) using *or something, or something like that, well* (6, 5, 1 occurrences respectively); to repair (0.98%) using *I mean* (9 occurrences); and to clarify (0.76%) using *actually* (7 occurrences). These DMs indicating various cognitive processes reflected participants' somewhat active engagement throughout the conversations.

As evidenced from the data, fillers used were *and, OK,* and *so*. There was no presence of other DMs used as fillers that would otherwise be heard in native speech, e.g. *well, how should I put it*, especially when participants were at a loss for words. Certainly, most fillers found in the data were non-word utterances, like *ah*, *er* or *mm*, which came naturally to the participants, but were not included in the study. One observation from the audio files was that vowel lengthening of DM fillers was not common. This may signify that the fillers were meant to index thinking but not necessarily to hold the floor.

In contrast to the researcher's expectations, DMs indexing repair and clarification were not prevalent even though the cultural exchange conversation task lent itself to opportunities for repair and clarification particularly when participants needed to make self-corrections, fix misunderstandings their foreign counterpart may have had, or even when failure to comprehend transpired due to unfamiliar accents. From the data, the small number of DMs *actually* was employed in the left periphery to mark clarification. They were unaccompanied by *well*, which, according to Aijmer (2015), can be used to soften what may sound like impositions. Meanwhile, the expression, *I mean*, found in the data was employed to make repairs and to elucidate what participants meant to express.

That cognitive DMs played a restricted role in conversation engagement and accounted for the smallest part of the four functions (Figure 2) may imply a lack of awareness of the forms and functions available, the inability to retrieve them in time of need, or simply the lack of necessity. If lack of cognitive DM use arises from the former two reasons, EFL learners would be at a disadvantage particularly when communication calls for guarding the floor or immediate repair and clarification.

Figure 7 illustrates interpersonal DMs being employed most prevalently to mark response (13.04%). From most to least prevalent were *OK, wow, good, great, cool, really, interesting, true, no way, sure.* These DMs signaled participants' involvement and active listening. *OK* appearing again under this category as the most commonly used (55 occurrences) indicates a natural over-reliance on this word given that it is a loan word widely used in daily Thai conversation. Wutthichamnong (2016) has found that in Thai, *OK* holds altogether eleven pragmatic functions. Thus, knowledge of how native speakers use *OK* in a conversational context would then prevent students from using *OK* where it would sound impolite.

DMs functioning to confirm or mark shared knowledge (11.85%) were: r*ight* (Most often deployed in the right periphery to make a question.)*; I see.; You know; OK* (13 occurrences); *I (totally) agree.; I think so.; That's right.; You are right.* These markers, especially, *you know* (16 occurrences) were helpful in creating solidarity between interlocutors for participants who did use them. However, they were not prevalent.

Hedging (3.48%) – using *just, I think., kind of, a little* and expressing stance (0.54%) – using *basically, actually, definitely, exactly* constituted the smallest sample of DMs used for

interpersonal purposes. The few instances of *actually* occurred in the right periphery, which according to Aijmer (2015), is used parenthetically as a softening function. Although hedges play an important part in softening claims, playing down authority and criticisms, reducing 'face threatening acts' and are used as an overall politeness strategy (O'Keefe et al., 2007), they were not frequently employed among participants even though part of the task involved discussing issues that may have been controversial. Needless to say, although the merits of including hedging in EFL instruction have been acknowledged, hedging appears to be an aspect that is not easily mastered due to the subtle aspects of their features (Rose, 2005) and the "limitations in the control of processing" (Bialystok as cited in Rose, 2005) of adult learners. Nonetheless, previous research has shown that explicit instruction in L2 pragmatics, in particular, direct metapragmatic instruction, is effective (Culpeper et al., 2018). Additionally, scholars like Thornbury (2005) have provided extensive discussions on awareness-raising activities that can be carried out in classrooms, which could aid the teaching of hedging.

Indexing attitude and stance may be one of the most difficult for EFL students as the relationship or distance between participants and their foreign counterpart may be an obstacle governing their choice to reserve any subjective expression. Face-saving may also come into play as Thai participants may not consider themselves in the position to freely express their stance for the sake of avoiding conflict. As supported by Pattapong (2015), Thais handle their social interactions with care, relying on the principle of Kreng-jai or being considerate, in order to maintain their interpersonal relationships as Thais strive to save both their face as well as others'. Ultimately, to express attitude and stance requires being sensitive to the underlying meanings or nuances that these DMs (e.g. *apparently, literally, mind you*) carry. Thai EFL learners who are not familiar with the essence of the target language may find this challenging. As suggested by Taguchi (2015), abundant opportunities for interactive target language practice in authentic settings that involve language use for social functions are needed to aid development in such pragmatic areas.

Summary and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the occurrences of DMs in cultural exchange conversations between Thai EFL participants and non-Thai speakers of English. Results revealed 34 DMs used by participants making up a total of 5.57% of the total corpus. Overall, it was observed that *and, OK, but,* and *so* were the most frequently used DMs, from most to least in this order, with a possible over-reliance on *OK*. Naturally, DMs functioned most actively during the engagement of conversations with most DMs working referentially, indicating a reasonably healthy involvement on the part of the students. Although the second most frequent function of DMs was interpersonally to respond, mark shared knowledge, hedge and mark stance, this function was restricted in occurrences. Cognitive DMs found in the data functioned mainly as fillers, while other cognitive functions, namely marking thinking process, assessing listener's knowledge, repairing and reformulating were limited. Structural DMs, useful for managing conversations, also occurred minimally. Those evident were employed either in combination with other expressions (e.g. *OK, let's start...*) to clearly mark shifts in topics or to shift topics abruptly with a single DM.

Findings have clearly pointed to deficiencies of DM usage in this context. This pedagogically implies the need to emphasize how Thai EFL learners may benefit from employing DMs during a conversation on both global and local levels. Although a significant amount of class time may not necessarily be devoted to DM instruction, awareness should be

raised on how DMs can work globally to smoothly manage and clearly maneuver the course of a conversation, signposting as the conversation progresses. Locally, the power of DMs to index rapport, interpersonally bond and effectively connect with interlocutors by marking or confirming shared knowledge, or hedging for politeness or mitigation may be highlighted. As part of interpersonal DM instruction, teachers may also emphasize the importance of 'three-part exchanges' (Tsui, 1994), which is an important element of conversational interaction that indexes the acknowledgement of an answer and, thus has pragmatic effects that can positively or negatively affect the interlocutor.

Attention should also be given to the use of DMs to prompt reformulation, repair, check and express understanding, or even to express stance for mutual comprehension. Increased awareness of DM knowledge and usage would be beneficial for learners in real world situations and may even impact positively on certain networking, meetings or negotiation transactions. Introduction to certain DMs that did not emerge in this corpus, such as *now, anyway, you see*. and the possibilities of how they can be implemented in context would also equip EFL learners with a variety of DMs they could benefit from.

That DM competence is seldom acquired in classrooms (Polat, 2011), all the more indicates the significance of including DMs as part of speaking instruction or conversation classes as the teachability of pragmatics, which includes DMs as conversational devices, has been confirmed by many studies (e.g. Culpeper et al., 2018; Taguchi, 2015). How explicit instruction, which has been said to be largely more effective than implicit pragmatic instruction (Taguchi, 2015) can be used creatively in combination with specific pragmatic targets and assessment task characteristics to develop DM competence is open for further investigation. Opportunities for learners to interact in natural or even virtual settings with native speakers and pick-up DMs incidentally, as suggested by Hellermann and Vergun (2007), would also be useful.

Although findings from this small-scale study can by no means lead to any solid generalization, this study has unveiled how Thai EFL learners, without any prior or formal instruction on DMs, use them in semi-authentic exchanges with non-Thai speakers of English. These findings reiterate the value of including DM instruction in Thai EFL speaking classes or in other EFL instructional contexts. More specifically, the findings have pointed to gaps in DM usage that in turn suggest areas of further attention particularly on conversation management and engagement skills, which instructors can address in communication classes. The limitations of this study, however, point to different areas of possible future research. The findings of this study were drawn from a small corpus and excluded certain DMs, e.g., *oh, yeah,* or *like.* Including such items in a larger student corpus and comparing to that of native speaker use in similar contexts would offer a more cohesive picture of DM use and would yield potentially generalizable results. In addition, verbal protocols were not incorporated. Included in future DM research, verbal protocols by participants may provide a better understanding of why particular DMs were implemented or lacking during the course of conversations. Certainly there are many other factors governing DM use: interlocutors' role and relationship, individual exposure or experience with the target language, the individual's tendency towards particular DM usage, and register that can be taken into account. What we have gleaned from this study, however, was how DM usage as observed via semi-naturalistic conversation data can serve as a significant indicator of how well EFL learners perform in interactive social situations where learner agency is challenged and exercised.

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions (Adapted from Tsui, 1994)

=	A second utterance latched immediately to the first utterance with no overlap
[ ]	Overlapping utterances
-	Short untimed pause within an utterance. More for longer pauses (--).
.	Falling intonation.
?	Rising intonation. Not necessarily a question.
:	Lengthened vowels. More for longer vowel sounds (:::).
CAPITAL	Emphatic expression
...	Utterances which have been removed
( )	Transcribers comments