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From Pragmatic Challenges to Pedagogical Opportunity: A Qualitative Study of Sri Lankan Students' Use of Discourse Markers

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Abstract— Discourse markers play a major role in structuring the ideas and ensuring the coherence in both written and spoken communication in our day to day life. However, learners often show limited knowledge of their functional and contextual application in second language environment like Sri Lanka. This study shows how Sri Lankan students understand and apply discourse markers, emphasizing the challenges they have while applying them appropriately in various communicative situations. Data were gathered from 22 TESOL practitioners through an open-ended questionnaire to record their opinions, experiences and challenges they have noticed among their students based on a qualitative research design. The results show that although the students often use discourse markers in casual communication, they are unsure of their purposes and find it difficult to utilize them successfully in formal and academic settings, which may lead to misuse, overuse or avoidance. These challenges are seen as pedagogical opportunities rather than just linguistic deficiencies. The study emphasizes the necessity of teaching discourse markers explicitly and contextually in teaching English, especially through communicative approaches which are aligned with TESOL practices. Increasing learners' pragmatic awareness can help them use the language more confidently and effectively, closing the gap between informal and formal discourse competency.

Keywords— Discourse Markers, Pragmatic awareness, Pedagogical opportunities, Second language learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Discourse markers are essential for structuring ideas and ensuring coherence in written and spoken contexts. They function as linguistic tools which help interpretation and lead to a productive communication. Appropriate usage of discourse markers is a crucial component of learners' communicative competence in the TESOL (Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Languages) context. However, learners frequently show only limited knowledge of their contextual and functional use in second language situations like in Sri Lanka.

Learners in multilingual contexts are influenced by discourse patterns in their native languages, such as Tamil and Sinhala.

For instance, Sinhala phrases with some particular pragmatic terms, such as “aney” and “ah”, are frequently used in casual conversation. Although this kind of familiarity helps learners communicate in native language, it can also make it more difficult for them to apply English discourse markers in formal and academic settings. Consequently, this may lead students to misuse, overuse or avoid discourse markers.

Many students struggle with the proper use of discourse markers while having a reasonable level of General English proficiency as they lack pragmatic awareness and are not exposed to their contextual functions. This shows a gap between formal communicative competency and casual language usage from a TESOL viewpoint. Although previous studies emphasize the importance of pragmatic skills in language learning and acquisition, TESOL practitioners' perspectives on learners' use of discourse markers in multilingual environments have received less attention.

This study examines students' challenges in using discourse markers as a pedagogical opportunity within the framework of turning crisis into opportunity. This study aims to identify important issues in students' use of discourse markers and offer pedagogical approaches which can improve students' pragmatic awareness and efficient language use by analysing TESOL practitioners' perspectives.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Discourse markers are generally known as important components for maintaining coherence and cohesion in both written and spoken contexts. They serve as linguistic tools which guide interpretation and indicate connections between ideas (Schiffrin, 1987). According to Fraser (1999), discourse markers are lexical terms which connect discourse segments and are essential for structuring communication. Therefore, communicative competency in learning English is closely linked to the the appropriate use of discourse markers.



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The development of pragmatic competence, which includes the appropriate use of discourse markers, has been recognized as a crucial element of language proficiency in the field of second language acquisition (Thomas, 1983). However, studies show that, as discourse markers are multifunctional and context dependent, second language learners frequently struggle to master them (Muller, 2005). Learners recognize certain discourse markers but they may find it difficult to use them effectively in various communicative situations, especially in formal and informal settings which can lead to misuse, overuse or avoidance.

Cross-linguistic effect makes using discourse markers in English even more difficult in multilingual settings like Sri Lanka. Discourse markers which have culturally embedded pragmatic meanings, are usually familiar to learners in their first languages, such as Tamil and Sinhala. For example, in casual communication, Sinhala terms like “aney” serve as discourse markers. According to transfer theory in second language acquisition (Odlin, 1989), such first language effect can impact learners’ use of target language features, resulting in unpredictability and confusion in usage.

According to the TESOL perspective, these challenges emphasize the value of explicit and context based education. Previous studies show that communicative language teaching methods, such as task based language teaching which encourage meaningful language use and improve pragmatic awareness, are beneficial to the learners (Long, 1996). Despite this, discourse markers are frequently neglected in classroom education, with a strong focus on grammar than pragmatic knowledge.

Even though the existing studies show valuable insights about discourse markers in language pedagogy, only a limited attention has been given to the perceptions of TESOL practitioners in multilingual situations like Sri Lanka. Considering the teachers’ observations can help to develop more successful teaching strategies and offer insightful pedagogical information about learners’ challenges. Therefore, this study aims to close this gap by examining how TESOL practitioners view learners’ use of discourse markers and finding ways to improve pragmatic knowledge in English language teaching and learning.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research design in order to analyse how TESOL practitioners view students’ use of discourse markers in English. As it allows a thorough understanding of participants’ experiences, observations and interpretations of learners’ pragmatic language use, a qualitative approach was considered as an appropriate design for this study.

A. Participants

22 TESOL practitioners took part in this study as the participants who currently working as English language teachers, facilitators and lecturers. Convenience sampling method was used to choose them based on their availability and willingness to take part in the study. This study was able to collect a variety of perspectives on the learners’ use of discourse markers as they had different types of teaching experiences.

B. Data Collection

An open-ended questionnaire was used to gather the information about the participants’ observations of learners’ use of discourse markers. The questionnaire covered topics like learners’ awareness level, general usage patterns, difficulties they faced and the differences between informal and formal usage. Participants were able to express their opinions freely and contribute rich qualitative data by using open-ended questions.

C. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the gathered data in order to find important themes and recurrent patterns in their responses. Themes such as awareness, misuse, overuse, avoidance and contextual problems were identified as the key themes by coding and classifying the data. With this method, it was able to methodically analyse the data and come to insightful conclusions on how learners use discourse markers.

D. Ethical Considerations

The participation was entirely voluntary and participants were informed already about the purpose of the research. No personal information of the participants was recorded and the data were used only for academic purposes by maintaining the confidentiality and ethical integrity throughout the research procedure.

IV. RESULTS

Based on the thematic analysis of the responses gathered from 22 TESOL practitioners, it could be identified many recurring patterns on how learners use discourse markers in English. The results show that though learners generally use discourse markers in their casual communication, they often show only limited awareness of their contextual and functional usage in formal and academic contexts.



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The limited level of pragmatic awareness was one of the main themes found among the learners. Most of the participants observed that students frequently use discourse markers without fully comprehending their communication purposes. According to the participants, learners often rely on a limited number of commonly used discourse markers in spoken communication, such as “so”, “okay” and “you know” while showing some kind of hesitation when trying use a larger variety of discourse markers effectively in academic writing and formal discussions.

Misuse and overuse of discourse markers was another important theme found in this analysis. TESOL practitioners noticed that students frequently use discourse markers excessively or in inappropriate circumstances which impairs communication coherence and clarity. Further, some practitioners mentioned that learners sometimes use discourse markers from their native languages when communicating in English. Especially, learners’ Sinhala discourse markers like “aney” and “ah” which were found to be often used pragmatic terms which influence learners’ awareness of similar functions in English discourse.

Moreover, the results also showed a noticeable difference between formal and casual language usage. The participants said that when students use discourse markers in informal spoken interaction, they seem more confident. At the same time, they face challenges to use them successfully in official writing, academic presentations and classroom discussions. Furthermore, according to a several number of practitioners, students often avoid using unfamiliar discourse markers in formal settings because of the fear of making mistakes and feeling artificial.

Also, the participants highlighted how the limited knowledge of discourse markers are explicitly taught in English language pedagogy. Based on the most of the TESOL practitioners, pragmatic components like discourse markers are given comparatively less attention in classroom environments which mostly focus more on vocabulary acquisition and grammar. Because of this, students have less opportunities to acquire communicative flexibility and contextual awareness in using discourse markers.

Overall, the results show that poor pragmatic awareness, contextual uncertainty and insufficient pedagogical focus on discourse components in English language teaching and learning, all impact on the learners’ challenges with discourse markers.

V. DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that rather than a lack of general language competency, learners’ challenges with discourse markers are directly linked to low pragmatic awareness. Despite the fact that learners often use discourse markers in casual communication, their lack of clarity about their contextual and functional usage implies that they are often unaware of the communicative functions these discourse markers serve in English discourse. This supports the previous studies which highlights pragmatic ability as a crucial aspect of second language proficiency and the need of focused attention in language teaching.

Cross-linguistic transfer from learners’ native languages may also have an impact on the misuse, overuse and avoidance of discourse markers noticed by TESOL practitioners. Learners are naturally exposed to discourse markers in Tamil and Sinhala from an early age in multilingual environments like Sri Lanka. Expressions like “aney” and “ah” are common in casual conversation and influence learners’ comprehension of conversational structure. However, these first language discourse markers’ pragmatic purposes do not always match those English discourse markers, which causes usage to be inconsistent and unclear. This indicates how learners’ pragmatic progress in English can be influenced by their multilingual backgrounds.

The gap between formal language proficiency and casual communication is another important issue brought to light by this study. In informal conversations, learners seem more comfortable using well-known discourse markers, but they find it difficult to use them correctly in formal communication and academic situations. This shows that learners may not be sufficiently prepared to apply discourse markers in a variety of communicative contexts through classroom teaching. Therefore, these results point to the necessity of emphasizing discourse level competency more in English language pedagogy.

From a TESOL point of view, these difficulties should be seen as pedagogical opportunities rather than just language deficiencies. This study argues that learners’ challenges with discourse markers might direct the creation of more successful teaching strategies. Task based language teaching, communicative tasks, contextualized examples and explicit instructions can help students gain pragmatic awareness and become more proficient at using discourse markers.

Integrating authentic spoken and written materials into classroom practices could help learners better grasp how discourse markers naturally occur in communication.

Overall, the results highlight how crucial it is to include pragmatic elements like discourse markers in English language pedagogy. TESOL practitioners can help to close the gap between casual language use and formal communicative competence by addressing learners' contextual and functional understanding of discourse markers. This will increase learners' confidence and efficiency in communicating in English.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study investigates how TESOL practitioners perceived learners' usage of discourse markers in English in the context of second language learning in Sri Lanka. The results showed that while learners generally use discourse markers in casual conversation, they typically struggle to comprehend and use them correctly in formal and academic settings. Misuse, overuse, avoidance and a lack of pragmatic awareness were found as the main challenges affecting learners' communicative proficiency. This study also emphasized how learners' use of English discourse markers is influenced by their first language discourse practices and multilingual backgrounds. The study further highlights the significance of explicitly teaching discourse markers through communicative and context based approaches in order to improve learners' pragmatic awareness and efficient language usage. Overall, the results emphasize the need to more effectively include pragmatic competence into English language teaching approaches and advance knowledge of discourse marker usage in Sri Lankan language learning.

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