

**The Multifunctional Use of Discourse
Markers in an ESL Classroom:
An Empirical Study of
'Okay,' 'Oh,' 'Well,' and 'So'**

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of the discourse markers "okay," "oh," "well," and "so" in ESL classrooms in the Mion District of Education, Ghana. These markers play a crucial role in guiding communication, structuring discourse, and influencing both student engagement and instructional practices. A mixed methods approach was adopted, analyzing a corpus of over 50,000 words derived from recordings and transcriptions of classroom interactions across various sessions. The data were analyzed using SPSS for quantitative analysis and thematic analysis. The findings revealed the multifunctional nature of each marker: "okay" acts as both a transition activator and a feedback mechanism, "oh" is used to express surprise and emotional responses, and "well" serves as a versatile discourse marker that primarily manages turn-taking, alleviates potentially uncooperative situations, and signals uncertainty or insufficiency. Additionally, the marker "so" was found to fulfill multiple functions, including summarizing, transitioning between topics, sequencing events and ideas, emphasizing and reinforcing points, and indicating what will be discussed next. These insights emphasize the importance of discourse markers in shaping classroom communication and the overall learning experience in ESL contexts.

Keywords: *Discourse markers, English language, classroom discourse, instructional practices*

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Introduction

Discourse markers (DMs) have garnered significant attention from researchers since their emergence as a key area of study within linguistics. This interest stems from their crucial role in establishing cohesion and coherence in both spoken and written texts. The meanings attributed to DMs have varied among scholars, leading to diverse definitions. For instance, Schiffrin (1987) characterizes DMs as essential elements that provide support and structure to conversations, while Redeker (1991) highlights their function in directing attention to specific referential aspects of speech in relation to the preceding discourse context. The theoretical status of DMs has been a central focus in research, particularly concerning their use and purpose. Schiffrin (1987) asserts that each DM carries its own meaning, whereas Redeker (1991) argues that the meaning of a DM is best understood through its function, which reveals the inherent value of the utterance. Fraser (1999) defines DMs as a pragmatic class comprising lexical items that belong to syntactic categories such as conjunctions, adverbials, and prepositional phrases. He also notes that DMs are referred to by various terms, including "discourse markers," "discourse connectives," "discourse operators," and "cue phrases." The terminology for DMs varies across researchers. For example, Aijmer (2002) uses the term "discourse particles," whereas Fraser (1988) and Bazzanella (1990) prefer "connectives." In contrast, the term "pragmatic marker" is commonly employed by scholars such as Redeker (1990), Brinton (2010), Erman (2001), and Andersen (2000). These variations in terminology reflect the nuanced perspectives and interpretations within the field of discourse marker studies.

However, the use of discourse markers (DMs) plays a crucial role in shaping communication, particularly in language learning environments like English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. These markers, including markers such as *okay*, *oh*, *well*, and *so*, serve multiple functions that go beyond simple fillers, helping to structure conversations, manage turn-taking, and signal shifts in meaning or topic. While DMs have garnered significant attention in the field of linguistics, their role in language acquisition, especially within ESL contexts, remains a compelling area of study. This paper seeks to explore the multifunctional nature of DMs, focusing specifically on the usage of *okay*, *oh*, *well*, and *so* in ESL classrooms. Through an empirical study in a senior high school in the Mion District of Education, Ghana, this research aims to identify the various ways in which these markers are employed by both teachers and students.

Multifunctionality of the DMs

Research on the multifunctionality of discourse markers (DMs) has predominantly focused on high-frequency markers such as "so," "okay," "well," and "you know" in spoken English, particularly in conversational contexts (Buysse, 2012; Cuenca & Marín, 2008; Gaines, 2011; Haselow, 2011; Müller, 2004). Yin (2019) explored the diverse functions of "so" across various registers and social contexts, highlighting its pedagogical implications and practical applications. Similarly, Gaines (2011) examined the multifunctionality of "okay" within police interviews, revealing its role in task and communication management. While "okay" often helps to signal transitions between questions or foster solidarity between interviewer and interviewee, it can also take on more confrontational or challenging tones, directing

the dialogue towards a more adversarial path. Kim (2020) analyzed the DM "by the way," demonstrating its versatility beyond signaling sudden topic shifts. While commonly used as a digression marker to introduce a change in topic, "by the way" also serves to provide supplementary or background information and functions as a mitigating device to soften potentially sensitive or disruptive statements. These findings underscore its broader communicative importance in enhancing conversational dynamics. Lee (2017) conducted a focused study on the use of "okay" as a DM among Korean EFL teachers in classroom settings. The research involved recordings of English lessons by six Korean teachers, which were transcribed and analyzed using the Conversation Analysis framework. Lee's findings highlight the versatility of "okay" within EFL classrooms, where it performs multiple functions crucial to effective teaching and learning. His work suggests that, "okay" is frequently used by teachers to capture students' attention, a key component of classroom management. By signaling the start of instruction or transitions between activities, "okay" helps ensure students focus and remain engaged. Second, it serves as feedback to indicate agreement or acceptance, offering immediate verbal confirmation that reinforces students' responses and fosters a positive learning environment. Lastly, "okay" functions as a transition activator, enabling smooth progression between lesson phases or topics. For instance, it facilitates movement from the presentation phase to the practice stage or within different sections of an activity, maintaining an unbroken sequence. This transitional role is particularly essential in EFL contexts, where clear signals prevent confusion and enhance students' comprehension.

Approaches to the study of DMs

Recent research on discourse markers (DMs) has focused on various approaches to understanding their functions and meanings. For instance, a theory of enunciative and predicative operations examines specific DMs such as "anyway" and "indeed" (Debras, 2018). Yang (2014) proposes an approach that integrates corpus linguistics, conversation analysis, and classroom modes analysis to investigate their use in teachers' spoken discourse. In her work, Hata (2016) emphasizes the importance of multimodality, highlighting non-linguistic functions of DMs that are often overlooked in traditional text-based studies. Fischer's (2006) book offers a comprehensive collection of papers, exploring various perspectives, including polysemy-based and monosemy-based views on DMs, as well as topics like lexical semantics, pragmatics, and prosody. These diverse approaches reveal the complexity and versatility of DMs in organizing conversation, managing turn-taking, and conveying speaker attitudes across different communication dimensions.

Deborah Schiffrin's work on discourse markers provides a robust framework for analyzing these linguistic elements. In her seminal 1987 book *Discourse Markers*, Schiffrin defines DMs as sequentially dependent elements that bracket units of conversation. Two key features of this definition stand out: sequential dependency and the bracketing function of discourse markers. Sequential dependency highlights

how DMs rely on surrounding context to convey meaning, while bracketing underscores their role in demarcating chunks of talk, such as sentences or conversational turns.

Schiffrin's functional approach categorizes discourse markers based on their roles in five major domains: exchange structure, information state, action structure, participation framework, and ideational structure. These domains represent various ways in which interactional aspects of conversation are managed, relationships between speech acts are maintained for coherence, presenter-listener links are regulated, and information flow is controlled. This multi-functional perspective enhances our understanding of how discourse markers function in real-life communication, especially within the dynamic environment of an ESL classroom. This paper applies Schiffrin's framework to investigate the multifunctionality of the discourse markers "okay," "oh," "well," and "so" in ESL classrooms. The data were collected from naturally occurring classroom interactions, focusing on both the teachers' and students' use of these markers.

Literature Review

Discourse markers (DMs) are widely recognized for their multifunctionality and significance across various linguistic contexts. Yang (2011) and Guo (2015) emphasize the need for a multi-functional framework to analyze discourse markers, highlighting their inherent flexibility and diverse roles in communication. From a historical perspective, Zhi-qiang (2008) and Mélac (2021) provide valuable insights that help address the challenges associated with studying discourse markers, offering a deeper understanding of their evolution and usage. Additionally, Chen (2014) examines the crucial role of DMs in enhancing ESL/EFL learners' listening comprehension, while Qian (2021) underscores the need for further research in this area. Kapranov (2021), through a quantitative analysis of academic essays, explores how participants employ discourse markers from various categories, shedding light on their functional diversity in written academic discourse.

"Okay" as a DM

Discourse markers, such as "okay," perform a wide range of functions in communication, including explicating logical connections between utterances, expressing attitudes, and managing interactions (Dylgjeri, 2014; Guo, 2003; Bolly, 2015). These markers are particularly significant in political discourse, classroom interactions, and the organization of texts (Dylgjeri, 2014; Castro, 2009; Heine, 2022). They also help anchor speech within ongoing discourse and enable recipients to make inferences about the speaker's intent (Bolly, 2015). The key attributes of discourse markers are their polyfunctionality and flexibility (Guo, 2015). However, Crible (2019) suggests the need for a more comprehensive model to account for their diverse roles.

The use of "okay" as a discourse marker varies across contexts. For instance, it serves as an attention-getting device for students and signals approval before further discourse in classroom settings (Akbaş, 2022; Lee, 2017). In computer science seminar talks, "okay" helps listeners follow the structure of the presentation (Rendle-Short, 1999). In German conversation, it functions as a neutral acceptance token (Oloff, 2019), while in South African English, it is used for conversational management and as a marker for turn-taking (Huddleston, 2014).

Discourse markers like "okay" play a pivotal role in structuring and orienting spoken discourse, particularly in signaling relationships between segments of talk through their core procedural meaning (Popescu-Belis, 2003). In EFL learning contexts, "okay" serves multiple purposes, including gaining attention and indicating agreement (Lee, 2017). It often appears at conversational transition points, signaling readiness to move on to a new topic (Beach, 1993). During academic advising sessions, its usage is systematic, with specific functions and interpretations (Guthrie, 1997).

Moreover, the interpretation of "okay" can be influenced by prosody and context, with context being the stronger predictor (Gravano, 2007). In classroom discourse, "okay" is highly multifunctional, marking both positive and negative feedback provided by teachers on various forms of student work (Fagan, 2012). This multifunctionality underscores the importance of "okay" as a dynamic tool for communication across diverse settings.

Discourse markers (DMs), such as "okay," exhibit remarkable multifunctionality in various communicative contexts. Jong-Mi (2017) investigates the use of "okay" in Korean EFL teachers' classrooms, analyzing naturally occurring discourses to highlight its significant roles. The study identifies that teachers often use "okay" to gain students' attention, particularly at the beginning of a sequence when initiating a turn. This prompts students to focus on the discourse, ensuring they remain attentive, especially in the absence of feedback. By using "okay," teachers effectively manage classroom interactions, creating clear turn-taking cues and fostering student engagement in class activities. Additionally, "okay" serves as a response-seeking device when teachers accept students' answers, often appearing in the third position within initiation-response-feedback sequences. Lastly, "okay" functions as a transition activator, enabling smooth shifts between lesson phases while maintaining coherence. For example, phrases like, "Okay children, let's move on now," facilitate effective classroom management by organizing interactions seamlessly.

Akbaş and Bal-Gezegin (2022) explore the use of "okay" in English Medium Instruction (EMI) classrooms in Turkey. Focusing on undergraduate mathematics lectures, their study employs corpus linguistics and conversation analysis to uncover the educational and interactional purposes of "okay." Similar to Jong-Mi (2017), their findings highlight "okay" as an attention-directing tool, guiding students to key

points during lectures. Additionally, "okay" is strategically used before providing translations of complex terms, bridging language barriers and simplifying terminologies for students. Akbaş and Bal-Gezegin (2022) also discuss how "okay" fosters dialogic spaces, promoting meaningful engagement and class participation. These findings further underscore the multifunctional nature of "okay" in educational contexts.

Nowotny (2004) identifies four main functions of "okay" across different discourse types, including classroom, telephone, task-oriented, and service-related contexts. These functions are framing markers, tag-positioned comprehension checks, affirmative releasing markers, and negative releasing markers. Among these, framing markers are the most common in classroom and task-oriented discourse, signaling the start of new topics or transitions within conversations. Using "okay" as a framing marker helps structure discourse and guide participants through communication steps. Tag-positioned comprehension checks confirm understanding or agreement, fostering mutual comprehension. Meanwhile, affirmative releasing markers indicate acceptance, ensuring a smooth conversational flow. Negative releasing markers, though less frequent, signify shifts away from unfavorable points or states, marking transitions effectively. Earlier research by Broderick (2001) corroborates these functions, particularly in bilingual classroom discourse, further validating their applicability across diverse communicative contexts.

Fairhurst (2013) examines "okay" as a conversational management tool and a fundamental marker in interactions. The study highlights its pivotal role in regulating turn-taking and monitoring comprehension to ensure smooth exchanges. In educational settings, "okay" frequently confirms understanding or agreement, enhancing the clarity and flow of lessons. Similarly, in informal conversations, its use maintains continuity of thought and avoids ambiguity, fostering coherent communication. Across various studies, the multifunctionality of "okay" emerges as a key component in organizing, managing, and facilitating interactions across diverse settings.

“Oh” as a DM

The Discourse marker ‘Oh’ has several functions in discourse. Surprise, fear or pain can be shown by the usage of this discourse marker (Amino,2020) which helps managing information and requesting clarification during occupational meetings(Amino2020). When used in constructed dialogue it shows stance of a speaker (Trester ,2009). In verbal interaction it helps in managing and maintaining an interaction (Foolen 2011). Besides that, “oh” also makes possible information integration in spontaneous talk (Tree1999). Most frequently used discourse markers in English conversations include “oh” (Zarei ,2013) as well as self-attentive topics (Bolden ,2006). This indicates conversational monitoring device therefore showing alignment with the ongoing conversation (Cohen ,2012). Trihartanti & Damayanti (2014) claim that “oh” can be used as mitigator while ending talk or switching topics

which are sensitive acts threatening to the hearer's face. By employing "oh", students can avoid engaging into FTAs – face-threatening acts, which is important for maintaining politeness and social harmony (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The main meaning behind 'oh' among students according to the study by Trihartanti and Damayanti (2014) seems to be "pure surprise". In other words, this use shows how markers can play a role in conveying emotions and managing interpersonal relationships during conversation. It signals the hearer and invites them into the speaker's new standpoint or realization when spoken with the right tone (Heritage, 1984), in achieving effective communication through clear expression, structured approach and responsiveness

"Well" as a DM

The discourse marker "well" serves various functions in spoken discourse. In several instances, it may start an utterance, show hesitation, soften face-threatening acts, repair a speech error and change/shifting a topic (Tonio 2021; Yong-ping 2003). In English-Vietnamese communication, "well" suggests textual problems or difficulties of expression (Diễm 2023). "Well" in L2 learners' dialogues functions in various levels including content-related meaning, structural-related meanings and social meaning (Hongying 2020). Media discourse use "well" as shaping interaction and getting ready for the second turn of adjacency pairs (Faisal 2023). Nevertheless, Chinese learners of English tend to underuse "well", employing mainly its delay and initiation marker functions (Li 2012). The historical development of the use of "well" in English has seen it perform different functions at Old, Middle and Early Modern English periods (Jucker 1997). On the other hand, Trihartanti and Damayanti (2014) claimed that 'well' is mainly used as a mitigator of face threats especially in spontaneous opinion discussion contexts. This use of 'well' to soften potential face threats supports its role as a strategic discourse marker to navigate delicate conversational terrain (Jucker, 1993).

"So" as a DM

The discourse marker "so" serves multiple functions in spoken English, contributing to conversational structure, coherence, and the flow of information. It plays a role in turn-taking and turn release, with turn-retaining tokens typically being shorter and less forceful than turn-releasing ones (Rennie et al., 2016). As noted by Bolden (2008), "so" is often used to initiate conversations, particularly in phone calls, where it introduces the first intended topic. In Malaysian ESL job interviews, "so" functions as an introductory device for summaries, a continuation marker, a signal of sequential relationships or textual ordering, a floor-holding mechanism, and a means of introducing elaborations or new information (Turiman, 2020). Among Flemish university students, "so" has been observed as the most frequently used discourse marker, often occurring in question-answer sequences. Collectively, these studies highlight "so" as a dynamic and versatile DM that facilitates conversational

structure, maintains coherence, and enables the free flow of information in both native and non-native English contexts.

Byusse (2012) investigates the use of "so" among Belgian university students in their final year of English studies, comparing learners from English Linguistics and Commercial Sciences majors. The study, based on an analysis of interview corpora, reveals that learners of English employ "so" significantly more often than native speakers. Moreover, English Linguistics majors use "so" slightly more frequently than their Commercial Sciences counterparts. The study identifies ten distinct functions of "so," classified into three domains: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Byusse attributes the multifunctionality of "so" to its polysemous nature, which enables it to perform diverse roles across communicative contexts.

Bolden (2009) offers a broader exploration of "so" in everyday conversations using conversational analysis methodology. Her study examines numerous recorded interactions to uncover how "so" initiates emerging or incipient actions. Specifically, she analyzes its role in marking question-like sequences, signaling that the subsequent action is independent rather than a direct response to prior talk. Bolden finds that "so" frequently appears in contexts where the next activity is relevant or anticipated but has not yet been addressed. Additionally, she argues that speakers use "so" to position themselves in relation to their interactional goals, fostering coherence and understanding for upcoming actions. Together, these findings underscore the multifunctional and context-dependent roles of "so" in spoken English communication.

Methodology

A mixed-methods research approach was employed, utilizing a concurrent design. This design involves the simultaneous collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data within the same study (Dawadi et al., 2021).

The study used stratified and convenience sampling techniques to select schools and teachers. According to the District Assembly report of 2017, there are approximately 152 schools in the district, including 70 kindergarten (KG) schools, 70 primary schools, and 12 junior high schools, all organized under six circuits. Additionally, the district has around 618 trained professional teachers. Stratification was done based on the circuits within the district, ensuring proportional representation from each circuit in the sample. Within each circuit, convenience sampling was employed to select 2 schools and 4 teachers per school, resulting in a sample size of 48 teachers. This sampling process involved selecting schools and teachers who were easily accessible for participation in the research.

The primary data collection tool was a corpus of approximately 50,000 words, gathered through recordings of classroom conversations between teachers and students from 48 different classrooms. Each recording session lasted between 20 to 30 minutes, capturing a wide range of instructional interactions in which discourse

markers naturally occurred. Participants' consent was obtained prior to recording, ensuring confidentiality and respecting privacy throughout the research process.

The analysis was conducted in two phases. In Phase 1, quantitative analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), complemented by qualitative analysis of each discourse marker. The quantitative data was first used to analyze the frequency of each marker, considering their functions as they appeared in the transcription. This was followed by thematic analysis. The recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy, facilitating systematic coding of discourse markers. Each instance of markers such as "okay," "oh," "well," and "so" was identified and categorized according to predefined criteria, capturing the nuances of their usage in context.

Conversation Analysis (CA)

This research employed a Conversation Analytical approach to examine the multi-functions of discourse markers. Conversation Analysis (CA) is a methodological approach focused on studying talk-in-interaction, particularly how conversational participants construct meaning and social order through their exchanges. Developed by sociologists Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson in the 1960s, CA is grounded in the belief that conversation is a highly organized, systematic activity governed by specific conversational rules. It analyzes the structure and sequence of talk, including elements such as turn-taking, pauses, and repairs, to uncover how social order is maintained in everyday communication (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974).

A central feature of CA is its focus on "talk as action" (Schegloff, 2007). This concept emphasizes that each utterance or conversational turn is not merely a communicative act but performs a specific function or action. For example, a question is not simply a string of words but an action that invites a response, and a request functions to elicit help or information. As such, conversation is understood as a dynamic, coordinated activity, where each participant's actions are contextually and sequentially relevant to the ongoing interaction.

An important aspect of CA is the study of "turn-taking." In conversation, participants take turns speaking, often with brief pauses or overlaps. These turns are not random but follow a recognizable pattern that participants adhere to, ensuring smooth communication (Sacks et al., 1974). Turn-taking mechanisms can reveal insights into social relations and hierarchies. For instance, interruptions or shifts in speaking order can signal power dynamics or indicate conversational dominance.

Another significant concept within CA is "repair," which refers to how participants address and resolve misunderstandings, mistakes, or ambiguities in conversation. Repair can occur at various levels, such as repairing a word, phrase, or an entire

sentence. According to Schegloff (2007), repair is a crucial mechanism that speakers use to maintain the coherence and flow of conversation, ensuring that communication remains intelligible and aligned.

Findings

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the discourse functions of the markers "okay," "oh," "well," and "so" in classroom interactions. Each marker performs unique roles that play a crucial part in shaping classroom dynamics and enhancing instructional practices.

The DM “Okay”

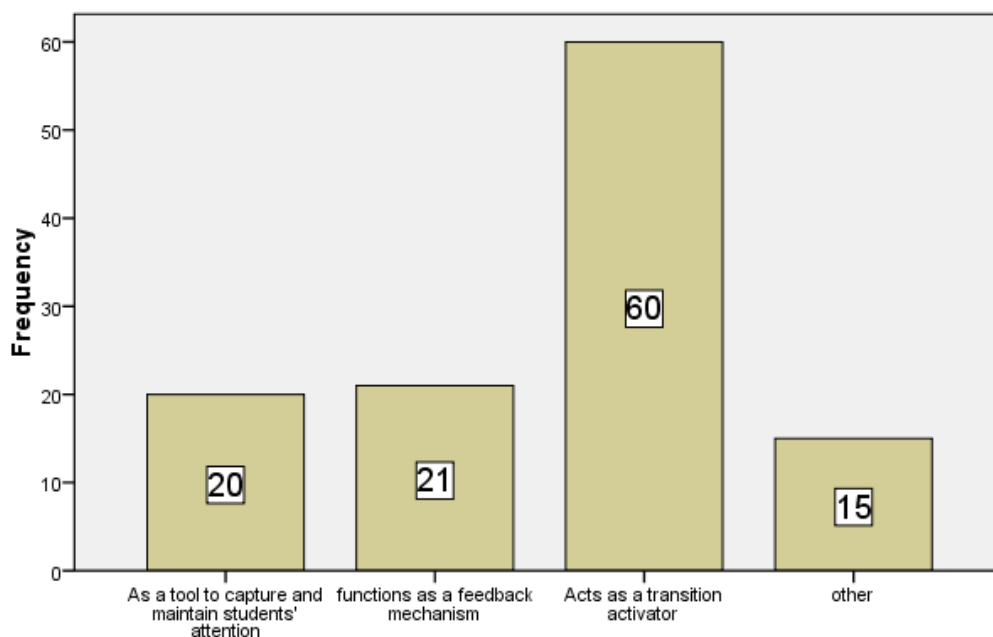


Figure 1: The Discourse Marker “Okay”

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of the discourse marker (DM) “okay” in classroom settings, categorized into four main functions: attracting and maintaining students’ attention, providing feedback, serving as a transition activator, and other miscellaneous functions. The figure also highlights the frequency values for each category among all instances of “okay” usage.

The most common function of “okay” is as a transition activator, accounting for 60 occurrences out of a total of 116 instances. This indicates its crucial role in signaling shifts between activities or topics during lessons. The second most frequent use is as a feedback mechanism, appearing in 21 cases. Here, teachers use “okay” to affirm students’ contributions, fostering a positive and supportive classroom atmosphere. Additionally, “okay” is employed to capture and sustain students’ attention in 20 instances. This demonstrates its effectiveness in redirecting focus and keeping

students engaged during instruction. Lastly, the category labeled “other” encompasses uses of “okay” beyond the aforementioned functions, with 15 occurrences.

Function of the Discourse Marker “Okay”

As a Tool to Capture and Maintain Students' Attention

One of the main function of the DM "okay" is to validate students' comprehension. For instance, a teacher says,

Quotation 1:

B: Teacher: <What will happen to her performance in school>

A: Student: <She will not perform in school>

B: Teacher: <Okay. Then, if we all agree to that, what do you think will happen to Alima in the future? What will happen to Alima in the future? If this thing continues?>

A: Student: <she will drop out from school>

In this context, the instructor uses "okay" to signify that all students are in agreement. This usage serves to acknowledge and validate their ideas, reinforcing their understanding. By employing "okay," the teacher communicates that he has actively listened to the students and are ready to move forward with the discussion based on this shared understanding. This approach not only enhances students' confidence in their knowledge but also motivates them to engage more actively in future class discussions.

Acting as a Transition Activator

One of the main functions of "okay" used by the teachers is its role as *transition activator* which serves as an essential tool in acknowledging students' contributions while transitioning to new topics. For example, one teacher says:

Quotation 2:

B: Teacher: <What theme manifest in the story>

A: Student: <Justice and moral integrity>

B: Teacher: <Okay, fine, this one more question: how do the themes of social justice and moral integrity manifest in the story>

This use of "okay" links the recognition of students' answers to the introduction of another question. By employing "okay," the teacher shows that they have considered the students' input before moving on. This practice reinforces the idea that students' contributions are valuable and encourages their continued participation in advancing the lesson. Furthermore, it helps maintain the flow of conversation, preventing abrupt shifts from one discussion segment to another.

Functioning as a Feedback Mechanism

Furthermore, the use of "okay" as *a feedback mechanism* can enhance student engagement. When students hear "okay" in response to their answers or comments, they receive immediate feedback that their contributions are on track. This positive reinforcement can boost their confidence and encourage deeper engagement with the subject matter. For instance, another teacher says:

Quotation 3:

A: Student: <If the person was boy, he will not suffer that much... boys can easily hustle to cater for themselves, unlike girls>

B: Teacher: <Okay, good point. Now, what about this perspective?" So we agree. So your point is there. Their point is also there. So now we are moving. Now we are taking out the gender. We are now going to put a different circumstance in there. Let's look at it like this. If the person is poor or rich. Is the expectation different?>

A: Student: <If the person comes from ...umm.. rich family he won't suffer that from attending school in different place, because the parent can easily him to get good accommodation>

The use of "okay" acknowledges the student's input while setting the stage for further exploration of the topic. This expression not only affirms the student's initial contribution but also encourages additional critical thinking and dialogue. Furthermore, "okay" serves a purpose beyond simply confirming understanding or responding to contributions; it fosters a classroom environment where students feel comfortable expressing their opinions without fear of reprisal. This creates a supportive atmosphere that promotes open communication and active participation.

The DM "Oh"

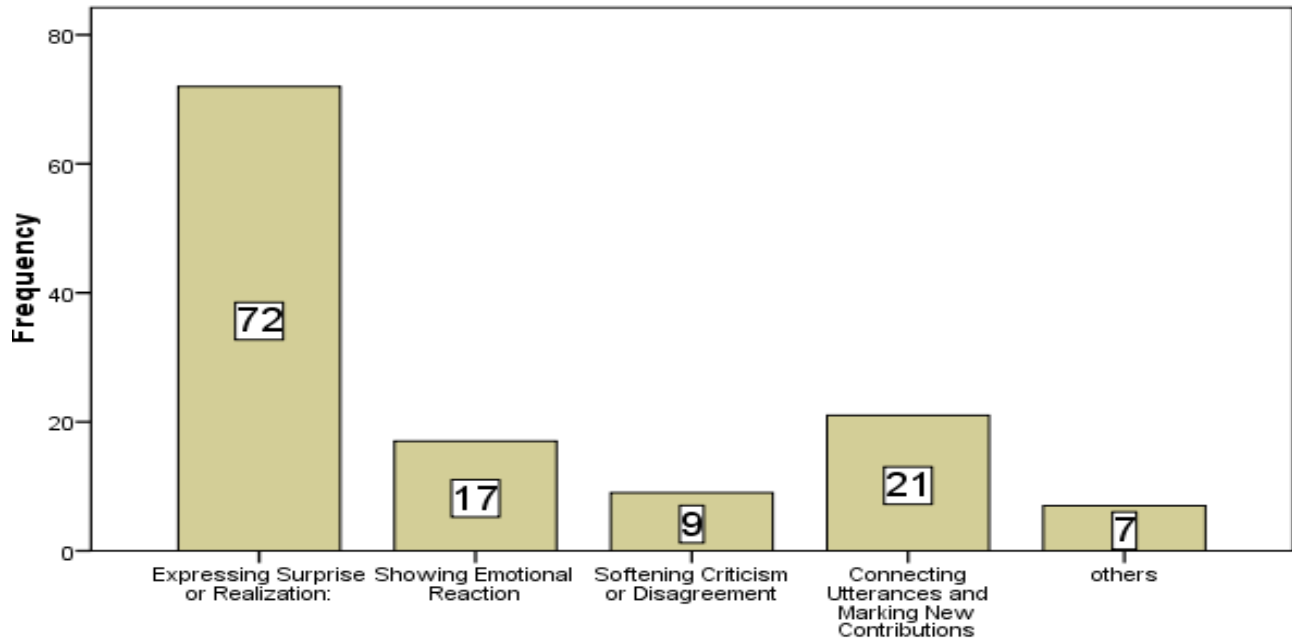


Figure 2: The Discourse Marker “Oh”

Figure 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the functions of "oh" as a discourse marker, offering valuable insights into its role in communication. As shown in Figure 2, the primary function of "oh" is to express surprise or realization, accounting for 72 out of 125 instances. This high frequency highlights "oh" as a cognitive response marker, commonly used when people encounter unexpected information or experience a moment of sudden understanding. For example, an individual might say "oh" when receiving new information or having a significant revelation during everyday conversations. This usage reflects a natural, instinctive reaction to novel stimuli, making "oh" a key component of vocal communication that signals moments of discovery or surprise. Another significant function that 'oh' performs is indicating emotional reactions, which make up about 17 cases of all the cases observed.” This suggests that in addition to signaling cognitive realization, "oh" can also convey other emotions, such as disappointment or displeasure, depending on its context and intonation pattern. This versatility allows individuals to express sentiments with fewer words, making it an efficient tool for communicating feelings concisely. For instance, "oh" can soften criticism or disagreement, as reflected in 9 of the recorded instances. By doing so, it serves as a way to mitigate negative reactions, making potentially harsh feedback or opposing views sound less confrontational. For example, "Oh, I see your point, but I still disagree" can introduce a contrary opinion more gently. Another significant function of "oh," as shown in the Figure, is its role in connecting utterances and marking new contributions, accounting for about 21 instances. In this capacity, "oh" acts as a discourse marker that facilitates the flow of conversation, helping speakers transition between different points or introduce new

topics. By using "oh," speakers can maintain coherence in the dialogue and ensure smooth communication, contributing to a well-organized and continuous discussion. This illustrates how "oh" helps structure conversations, fostering clarity and continuity in exchanges.

Function of the DM “oh”

*Expressing Surprise or Realization*

When expressing surprise or emphasizing particular details, ‘oh’ can elicit various emotions. For example:

Quotation 4:

A: Student: <Say...some goats can walk as far as miles.>

B: Teacher: <Oh, they can’t go far. But usually they come back to places where there is food and shelter that they are familiar with.>

The discourse marker "oh" introduces an element of surprise or emphasis, particularly regarding the extent to which goats can wander off. This use of "oh" highlights the suddenness of the situation, drawing the listener's attention to its unexpected nature and signaling that this detail holds significance for the speaker. In some instances, "oh" also conveys realization or agreement with what has been suggested or stated. For example:

Quotation 5:

A: Student: <She can seek for help sir, or?>

B: Teacher: <Oh, it’s better if she reports this case to the police right away. This will be crucial as it helps her keep an official record of what happened not only for her own safety but also for others who might meet the same fate someday. The faster she contacts authorities, the better chances of evidence collection and necessary action being taken against perpetrators.>

The DM ‘Oh’ is also used to mean “I see”. For example, in a dialogue such as:

Quotation 6:

A: Student: <Can we used this, sir>

B: Techer: <Oh, I didn’t know I could do this; that explains why they suggested us

taking that route though; let me follow up on it and see how possible it could be put into practice; thank you—it would really make a difference to our projects' success.>

The discourse marker "oh" signifies that the speaker has acknowledged what someone else has said. It is often followed by an expression of agreement or confirmation, indicating that the speaker accepts the information as true or valid. Additionally, "oh" provides a momentary pause, allowing the speaker to reflect on what they have heard before continuing their speech. This reflective function enhances the flow of conversation by ensuring thoughtful and deliberate responses.

###Connecting Utterances and Marking New Contributions

Apart from expressing emotion, 'oh' also plays a critical role in linking utterances and structuring conversations. It helps to show where new contributions start or link them to previous ones. For instance:

Quotation 7:

B: Student: <But...if we're going by that, are we still using the role play>

A: Teacher: <Oh, that means our approach has to change. Should this information check out we shall have to rethink our strategy and bring about certain changes in our plan. The situation needs reevaluation so that we are sure we are on the right track ahead. Bring all those details closer and examine them so as we can now decide what course of action should be taken concerning this new happening.>

In this context, "oh" signifies a moment of sudden comprehension. The speaker uses "oh" to transition from merely acknowledging the information to explaining or drawing conclusions about it, allowing time for further thought or elaboration. This usage highlights the speaker's shift from passively receiving information to actively processing and interpreting it.

The DM "well"

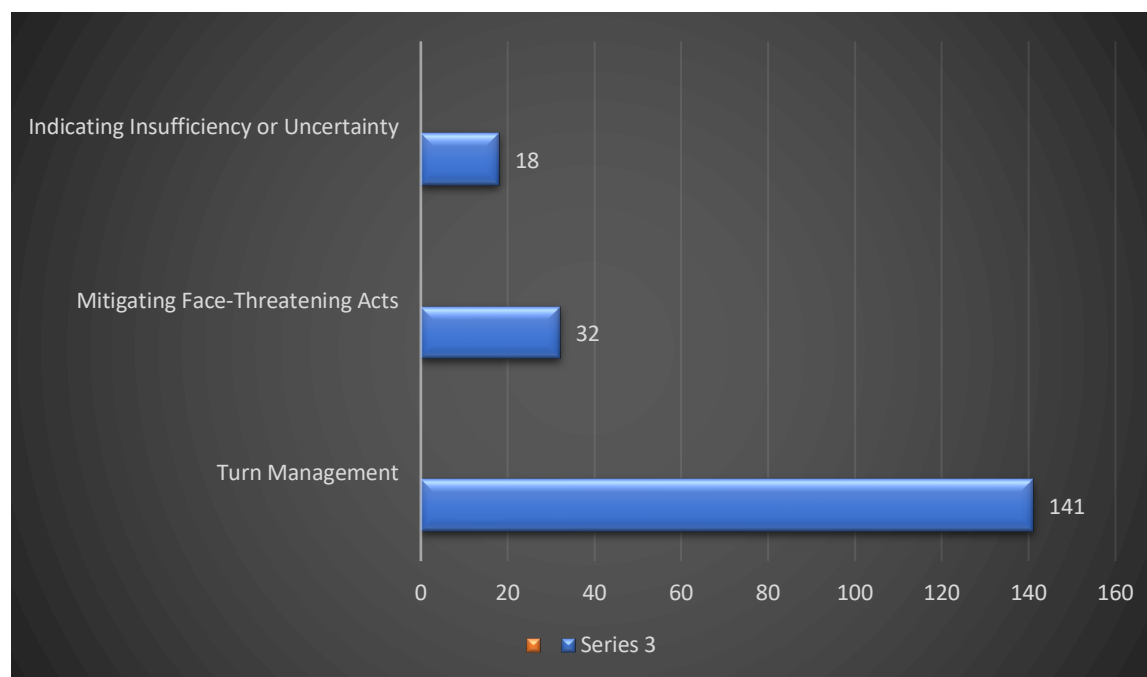


Figure 3: Discourse Marker “well”

The discourse marker "well" serves multiple important functions in communication, with its primary role being turn management, which accounts for 60% of its usage. In conversational discourse, turn management is essential for maintaining the orderly exchange of dialogue. "Well" often signals the beginning of a speaker's turn, indicating readiness to contribute. It can also help hold the floor, preventing interruptions as the speaker gathers their thoughts or elaborates on a point. Additionally, "well" facilitates smooth turn transitions, signaling the end of one speaker's contribution and inviting the next speaker to take over. This dominant function underscores its role in enhancing conversational flow, preventing overlaps, and ensuring effective communication.

Another significant function of "well" is its role in mitigating face-threatening acts, making up 13.6% of its usage. In social interactions, preserving face—an individual's self-esteem and social value—is crucial. Face-threatening acts, such as criticisms, disagreements, or rejections, can strain relationships if not handled carefully. "Well" acts as a softening device, cushioning the impact of potentially confrontational remarks. By prefacing such statements with "well," speakers can reduce the perceived harshness, making their comments appear more considerate and less direct. This function highlights "well" as a politeness strategy, promoting harmonious interactions and minimizing conflict.

The marker "well" also functions to indicate insufficiency or uncertainty, accounting for 7.7% of its usage. In this context, "well" signals hesitation, doubt, or incomplete information. It acts as a hedge, allowing the speaker to express their thoughts tentatively and invite further discussion or clarification. This use reflects the speaker's awareness of their limitations and openness to input, fostering a collaborative and adaptive communication environment.

Lastly, the category labeled "others" accounts for 18.7% of "well" usage, encompassing a variety of context-specific functions that enhance discourse. These may include using "well" to bridge topics, emphasize points, or perform other nuanced roles that contribute to conversational coherence and fluidity.

###Turn Management

In spoken interaction, smoothly managing turns is essential for maintaining the natural flow of conversation. The discourse marker "well" is frequently used to signal a shift in speakers or to introduce a new topic, thereby facilitating effective turn management. For example, in a classroom setting, a teacher demonstrated this by saying:

Quotation 8:

A: Teacher: <Yes okay.... So let's move on too next story... Well I'm reading next story... It is an interesting story about resilience and adventure.. Despite many challenges faced by the protagonist, his determination and bravery propel the story. >

Here, "*well*" serves as a cue that a new portion of the discussion is beginning. This subtle marker helps listeners prepare for the shift in focus, ensuring that the conversation progresses smoothly without abrupt interruptions.

###Mitigating Face-Threatening Acts

Communication often requires addressing sensitive topics or differing opinions, which can pose a threat to the interlocutor's face, or social self-esteem. The discourse marker "well" is often used to mitigate the potential impact of such face-threatening acts, making interactions more polite and less confrontational. For instance, when navigating differing opinions among participants, a teacher highlighted how "well" softens the delivery by saying:

Quotation 9:

B: Student: <Is't it correct, sir. I think it could not be right to emphasize that....>

A: Teacher: <Well, what about Alidu?

B: Student: <I'm saying yes.

A: Teacher: <His input is crucial to our discussion, and his perspective could provide valuable insights.>

By prefacing the response with "well," the speaker acknowledges the complexity of the issue and reduces the bluntness of their statement. This use of "well" demonstrates a sensitivity to the conversational context, fostering a more respectful and considerate dialogue.

###Indicating Insufficiency or Uncertainty

"Well" also has an important role in marking inadequacy or uncertainty of response. This use frequently precedes an explanation or an answer the speaker believes might not be complete or satisfactory. For instance, one teacher said:

Quotation 10:

B: Student: <What time is the exam...are we going to...>

A: Teacher: <Well, let's assume the exam is not going to be a problem. In that case, we should focus on optimizing our study strategies and making the most of our preparation time.>

This demonstrates that the speaker is making an assumption and acknowledges that the exam may not account for all possible factors. The use of "well" signals to the audience that the speaker's information might be limited, thereby setting the stage for further discussion or clarification.

The discourse marker "well" as in the above helps to perform multifunction in conversation: manage conversational turns, mitigate towards face-threatening acts, and indicate insufficiency or uncertainty. In the text provided, it shows how "well" might ease communication, signal transitions, soften what might become some sort of stark statement, and indicate briefly the limitations of one's knowledge. All of this respects, clarifies, and makes an interaction effective by pointing out how subtly influential the discourse markers can be in everyday communication.

The Usage of "So" as a Discourse Marker in Different Contexts

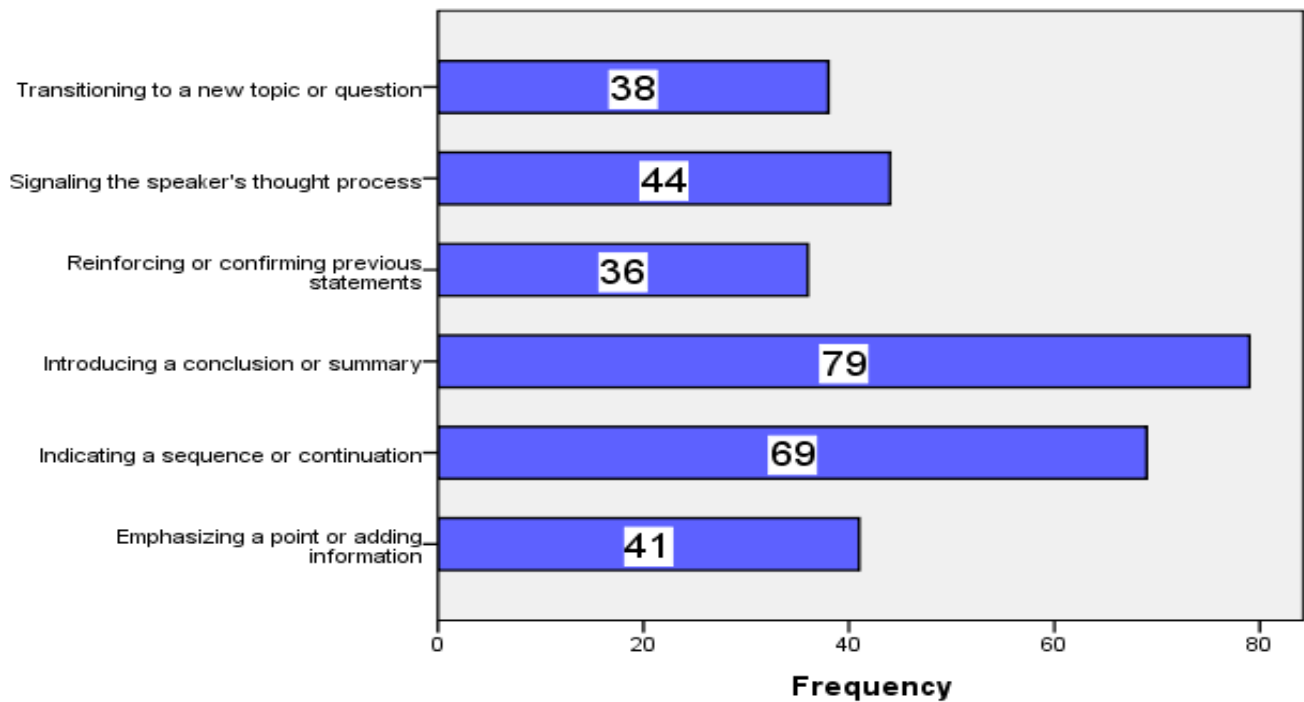


Figure 4: Discourse Marker "so"

The discourse marker "so," as illustrated in Figure 4, demonstrates its multi-dimensional nature by fulfilling various roles in both written and spoken communication. An analysis of 310 instances reveals six primary functions of "so," including: introducing conclusions or summaries; transitioning to new topics or questions; indicating sequence or continuation; emphasizing or adding information; reinforcing or confirming prior statements; and signaling the speaker's thought process.

The most frequent function observed is using "so" to introduce conclusions or summaries, accounting for 79 instances, or 25.5% of the total examples (25.7% among valid responses). This indicates that "so" is primarily employed to synthesize ideas and provide final thoughts or implications. Its use helps tie together discussions, guiding readers or listeners toward a clear takeaway message.

"So" is also commonly used as a shift mechanism to transition between topics or questions, with 38 occurrences, representing 12.3% of total cases (12.4% of valid responses). This function is particularly significant in maintaining coherence in structured discourse, such as academic writing or formal conversations, as it ensures a smooth flow of ideas.

Additionally, "so" is used to indicate sequence or continuation, occurring 69 times (22.3% of total cases and 22.5% of valid responses). In this capacity, "so" serves as a marker of progression, linking arguments, narratives, or procedural steps. It helps convey the logical flow of ideas, making it a key tool for creating structured and ordered communication.

Emphasizing points or adding information is another notable function, with 41 instances (13.2% of total cases, 13.4% of valid responses). This highlights "so" as a means of reinforcing key aspects of a discussion while introducing additional details, ensuring important elements stand out within the broader context.

"So" also plays a role in reinforcing or confirming prior statements, as evidenced by 36 occurrences (11.6% of total cases, 11.7% of valid responses). This use underscores its utility as a tool for affirmation, providing supporting evidence and restating significant points, especially in argumentative writing or discussions.

Lastly, "so" signals the speaker's thought process in 44 instances, accounting for 14% of total cases (14.3% of valid responses). This usage highlights "so" as a self-reflective marker, revealing the speaker's reasoning and enabling the audience to follow the sequence of thoughts effectively.

Functions of the Discourse Marker "So" in Conversational Context

The discourse marker "so" serves as a versatile tool in facilitating dialogue and structuring the speaker's narration. Its usage can be analyzed across six primary functions: summarizing or concluding; transitioning to a new subject or posing a question; indicating sequence or continuation; adding information to emphasize a point; reinforcing or confirming previous statements; and reflecting the speaker's thought process.

Introduction of Conclusions/Summaries

"So" is commonly used to bring out conclusion and summary by capturing key information from past argument into a single recognizable ending. Therefore, for example in the sentence:

Quotation 11:

A: Teacher: < By simply keeping an organized notebook or having set aside times for studying, and even actively participating in class can greatly influence one's performance academically...So, for every student, there is need to develop strong study habits as well as time management skills>

The use of "so" in this context serves to summarize previous points about whether one could approach any teacher for support. This application indicates that the discussion has reached its conclusion on this topic.

Moving on to New Topics or Questions

Another key function of "so" is to transition smoothly to new topics, facilitating a seamless flow in the conversation. This is evident in expressions such as...

Quotation 12:

A: Teacher: <It is crucial that we predict some possible challenges in advance and work on strategies of addressing them. **So**, now then what next? How do we handle any possible obstacles that may come our way during the execution of this new policy? This may involve assessing resource needs, training staff, and setting up feedback mechanisms to monitor progress and make necessary adjustments >

This means that "so" changes focus from one part of the talk to another making it easy for hearers to identify what comes next. It plays a significant role in maintaining coherence within texts thus avoiding abruptness that may confuse audience.

Indicating Sequences or Continuations

Moreover, 'so' indicates sequences or continuing thoughts

Quotation 13:

B: Student: <I will inform the headmaster about that sir>

A: Teacher: <...**So** you also link with head teacher to ensure consistent approach towards student development as well as school management. Coordinating with the head teacher will enable you speak with one's voice when dealing with educational problems>

In referring back and forth between two different characters who are sharing their thoughts on different matters, the word 'So' creates a linkage necessary for effective understanding among readers.

Stressing a Point/Adding Information

Another function of "so" is to emphasize points or introduce new information. For example, "Wow! So that's what I am adding" highlights the significance of the additional knowledge shared. This use directs the conversation toward specific details, drawing attention to important points.

Making it Stronger or Repeating What Has Been Said Earlier

"So" can make stronger or repeat what has been said earlier (Tannen, 1989) to give it additional weight. For instance,

Quotation 14:

A: Teacher: <It is easier to explain complicated concepts using a metaphor. For example, when you say, “time is a thief” it becomes possible for readers to understand how time can slip away."So now we are saying that it makes our writings more effective. As we go along, we will look at how metaphors result into clear and detailed images and even cause deep feelings within us. Moreover, in this case, we will be engaged in writing of our own metaphors so as to improve our skills of descriptive writing.>

The DM “so” as used here means that the speaker is reaffirming a collective understanding or decision of the group. This use of “so” helps to solidify agreements and ensure mutual comprehension.

Indicating the Speaker’s Thought Process

Finally, “so” indicates the thinking process of a speaker at the moment meaning either reflecting on something or about to add more points in his contribution. E.g.,

Quotation 15:

A: Teacher: <Let me work out solving few examples which will highlight each stage involved in solving process. So now— I am going to... I am about to show you how one would solve quadratic equations by employing the quadratic formula. We will divide the formula into its various parts and learn how to do step-by-step application of the same. Afterwards, practice problems shall be given for you to strengthen your comprehension ability on them. Additionally, we are going to point out common errors and some verification tips for solutions>

Here, "so" serves as an introductory word, creating a pause that allows the speaker to collect their thoughts before continuing with their line of thought.

The discourse marker "so" fulfills multiple functions in conversation: summarizing points, transitioning between topics, sequencing events and ideas, emphasizing or reinforcing statements, and providing a moment for reflection on what to say next. These roles contribute to the coherence and smooth flow of conversations, enhancing communication. Understanding these functions reveals how conversations unfold naturally, often without our awareness, with discourse markers playing a subtle yet powerful role in shaping our interactions with others.

Summary of the Functions of the DMs

Discourse Marker	Function	Mean Frequency
Okay	Transition Activator	0.517

	Feedback Mechanism	0.181
	Capturing Student's Attention	0.172
	Other	0.129
Oh	Expressing Surprise/Realization	0.576
	Indicating Emotional Reactions	0.136
	Softening Criticism/Disagreement	0.072
	Other	-
Well	Turn Management	0.60
	Mitigating Face-Threatening Acts	0.136
	Indicating Insufficiency/Uncertainty	0.077
	Other	0.187
So	Introducing Conclusion/Summary	0.255
	Transitioning to Another Topic/Question	0.123
	Indicating Sequence/Continuation	0.223
	Emphasizing/Adding Information	0.132
	Reinforcing/Confirming Statements	Previous 0.116
	Signifying Thought Process	0.142

The discourse marker "okay" is frequently used as a transition initiator, with a mean frequency of 0.517, highlighting its role in linking different parts of lessons and structuring teacher talk effectively. It facilitates the smooth progression of conversations by guiding students through various stages of the learning process. Additionally, "okay" serves as a feedback mechanism (mean frequency of 0.181), providing teachers with an immediate response to students' inputs. It also helps capture learners' attention, with a mean frequency of 0.172, ensuring sustained focus and engagement during class. While less common, there are other uses of "okay" (mean of 0.129), contributing to its versatility in communication.

The discourse marker "oh" primarily functions as a cognitive response marker, with a mean frequency of 0.576. This reflects its role in signaling sudden understanding or realization during interactions. "Oh" expresses moments of discovery or surprise, enriching conversational exchanges. In addition to surprise, "oh" can convey a range of emotions, such as disappointment or pleasure, depending on context and intonation (mean of 0.136). Moreover, "oh" softens disagreement or criticism (mean frequency of 0.072), easing potential conflicts and fostering constructive dialogue.

The marker "well" is predominantly used as a turn manager, with an average frequency of 0.60, underscoring its importance in managing conversation flow, signaling readiness to speak, and facilitating speaker transitions. Its frequent use in this capacity ensures effective communication during dialogues. Additionally, "well" softens criticism or disagreements (mean of 0.136), preventing impoliteness and maintaining conversational harmony. It also signals uncertainty (mean frequency of 0.077), preparing listeners for requests for clarification. Furthermore, "well" functions as a topic shifter or enhancer (mean of 0.187), contributing to the coherence and fluency of conversations.

Finally, "so" is commonly used to introduce conclusions or summaries, with a mean frequency of 0.255. This function highlights its role in synthesizing ideas and guiding the audience toward key takeaways or implications. Additionally, "so" facilitates smooth transitions between topics, serving as an introduction to new issues or questions.

Discussion

Based on the provided data and literature review, the discourse markers "okay," "oh," and "and" play essential roles in classroom discourse and other conversational settings. This section discusses the results in relation to existing literature. The study reveals that "okay" primarily functions as a transition activator, followed by roles as a feedback mechanism and a tool to capture attention. These findings align with Jong-Mi's (2017) research, which highlights "okay" as a key marker for gaining attention, providing feedback, and facilitating transitions in classroom settings. Jong-Mi observed that "okay" is strategically used to manage classroom interactions and maintain student engagement. Similarly, Akbaş and Bal-Gezegin (2022) noted its role in directing attention and promoting class interaction. Furthermore, the current study expands on the existing literature by emphasizing "okay" as a feedback mechanism that affirms student contributions and fosters a supportive learning atmosphere, enhancing student confidence and participation through positive reinforcement.

The analysis shows that "oh" is primarily used to express surprise or realization, followed by emotional reactions and softening criticism or disagreement. These findings corroborate the research of Jong-Mi (2017) and Akbaş and Bal-Gezegin (2022), where "oh" plays a similar role in managing interactional dynamics and conveying nuanced emotions. Akbaş and Bal-Gezegin (2022) specifically highlighted

how "oh" aids in controlling classroom interactions and setting a supportive tone, which aligns with the current study's finding that "oh" can soften criticism or disagreement, helping to maintain a friendly atmosphere.

One major function of "well," as demonstrated in this study, is turn management, comprising 60% of its usage. This aligns with the literature, where "well" is regularly identified as a marker that initiates turns, bridges topics, and manages conversational flow (Tonio, 2021; Yong-ping, 2003). The study also reveals that in 13.6% of cases, "well" serves to mitigate face-threatening acts, a usage well-supported in the literature. "Well" is widely regarded as a mitigating device that softens potentially confrontational statements (Trihartanti & Damayanti, 2014; Jucker, 1993). Furthermore, the study's finding that "well" is used to signal insufficiency or uncertainty in 7.7% of cases supports the notion that "well" conveys doubt and tentativeness, allowing for further discussions (Hongying, 2020).

The discourse marker "so" serves a variety of functions in spoken English, as reflected in both the research results and the literature reviewed. The analysis of "so" demonstrates its significant role in managing and organizing spoken discourse, aligning with existing research on its multifaceted use. According to Algouzi (2021) and Turiman (2020), "so" is described as a marker that indicates results, introduces new sequences, marks main ideas, signals transitions, and initiates turns. This corresponds with the observed functions of "so" in the present study, highlighting its importance in structuring discourse and managing conversation flow.

Turiman's (2020) research specifically emphasizes how "so" is used in job interviews to introduce summaries, continue topics, and mark sequential relationships, which reflects the current study's findings on "so" as a key marker for summarizing and transitioning between topics. Rendle-Short (2003) discusses the role of "so" in monologic talk, such as seminars, where it helps orient listeners and manage the structure of presentations. This is consistent with the high frequency of "so" observed in the study for introducing new topics or questions.

Reiter (2013) explores the use of "so" in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) conversations, noting its combination with other discourse markers. This supports the study's finding that "so" functions effectively in various communicative contexts and can work alongside markers like "okay" and "because" to enhance discourse coherence.

Implications

The findings of this study will have significant pedagogical implications for ESL instruction. Understanding how discourse markers (DMs) function in the classroom will enable educators to incorporate them more effectively into their teaching strategies, potentially improving students' comprehension and conversational skills.

DMs such as "oh," "well," and "so" will play a crucial role in enhancing classroom interaction for ESL learners by helping them manage the flow of conversation and navigate various discourse contexts. For instance, "oh" will signal a shift in understanding, prompting learners to reflect on new information and adjust their thinking. This marker will help students recognize when they need to reconsider or update their perspective, fostering deeper engagement with the material. "Well" will serve multiple functions, such as managing turn-taking, softening disagreements, and indicating hesitation. It will allow learners to engage more confidently in discussions by providing them with a moment to think or to introduce a new point without abruptness. In classroom settings, this marker will also help students introduce new topics or express uncertainty, promoting smoother and more thoughtful interactions. By emphasizing the use of these markers, teachers will help ESL learners improve their communication skills, both academically and socially. Ultimately, understanding and using DMs effectively will support learners' integration into English-speaking communities, enhancing their overall language proficiency and confidence in both formal and informal interactions.

Conclusion

Discourse markers such as "okay," "oh," "well," and "so" play essential roles in English language learning contexts, particularly among teachers in Mion District. The analysis reveals the diverse functions of these markers: "okay" primarily serves as a transition activator and feedback mechanism, crucial for maintaining student attention and confirming understanding. "Oh" is mostly used to express surprise and emotional reactions, while also softening criticism or disagreement, thereby creating a supportive classroom environment. "Well" proves to be a versatile discourse marker, most commonly used in turn management, mitigating face-threatening acts, and signaling insufficiency or uncertainty. The marker "so" serves multiple purposes, such as summarizing, transitioning between topics, sequencing events, emphasizing key points, and preparing listeners for what will be discussed next. These findings highlight the subtle but impactful ways in which discourse markers enhance communication and instructional practices, ultimately boosting student engagement and improving learning outcomes in educational settings.

Discourse markers like "oh," "well," and "so" also have significant implications for ESL learners' communication skills. They play a crucial role in structuring conversations, signaling shifts in thought, and guiding interaction. For example, when learners use "oh," it demonstrates their ability to acknowledge new information or reflect on what has been said, which is vital for developing an engaged and responsive conversational style. Likewise, the use of "well" signals hesitation or thoughtfulness, allowing learners to manage their responses carefully, avoiding hasty or ill-formed answers. This contributes to more natural, socially acceptable interactions, especially in contexts where politeness and tact are valued. The marker "so," often used to summarize or conclude ideas, helps learners achieve clarity and coherence in their speech, signaling when a topic is concluding or a transition is

taking place. This is particularly beneficial in formal settings such as academic discussions, where structure and clarity are essential for effective communication. Additionally, these markers can influence the tone of conversations by softening statements or reducing face-threatening acts, making interactions more pleasant and less confrontational. Through the use of these markers, ESL learners demonstrate a deeper understanding of social cues and conversational dynamics, fostering more effective and contextually appropriate communication. Ultimately, the correct application of discourse markers enhances learners' social integration, academic performance, and overall fluency in English.

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