

Understanding Discourse Marker Use in EFL Students' Speech: A Qualitative Follow-Up on Contributing Factors and Strategies for Minimising Their Use

Mr. Ali Wari

EFL teacher + Phd Candidate, English Department, Moulay Ismail University

Abstract

Discourse markers are common features of spontaneous spoken discourse that perform important pragmatic and communicative functions. However, their frequent use may be associated with various linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors involved in speech production. Building on a previous quantitative investigation of discourse marker use across different communicative domains (Wari, 2026), the present qualitative research constitutes a follow-up phase aimed at exploring the factors associated with discourse marker use among Moroccan EFL learners and the strategies they employ to minimise such use. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with twenty Master's students of Applied Linguistics and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed eleven factors associated with discourse marker use and eight communicative strategies reported by the participants for minimising its use. These findings provide qualitative insight into the patterns observed in the preceding quantitative phase and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of discourse marker use in Moroccan EFL spoken discourse and its relationship to strategic competence.

Keywords: discourse markers; Moroccan EFL learners; spoken discourse; qualitative research; thematic analysis; communicative strategies; strategic competence

1. Introduction

Discourse markers are a prominent feature of spontaneous spoken discourse and perform a range of pragmatic, interactional, and discourse organisational functions. Although they may contribute little to the propositional content of an utterance, they can play an important role in structuring discourse, managing interaction, and facilitating speech production (Schiffrin, 1987; Brinton, 1996). Their use should therefore not be regarded as inherently problematic. Nevertheless, frequent or contextually inappropriate use may affect the fluency and effectiveness of spoken communication, particularly when speakers employ discourse markers repeatedly as a means of managing hesitation, planning time, or difficulties in retrieving appropriate linguistic resources.

In a previous quantitative investigation, Wari (2026) examined the frequency of discourse marker use among Moroccan EFL learners across different communicative domains. The findings revealed variation in their frequency of use across the investigated contexts, suggesting that discourse marker production

may be associated with the linguistic demands of the topic being discussed. While these quantitative findings established a pattern of variation, frequency data alone could not provide a detailed account of the factors underlying learners' use of discourse markers. Understanding such patterns requires consideration of learners' own perspectives on why these linguistic devices occur in their speech.

The present study therefore extends the preceding quantitative investigation through a qualitative follow-up. It explores the factors that participants associate with their use of discourse markers and examines the strategies they report employing to minimise their use. By shifting attention from the frequency of discourse markers to participants' explanations and reported strategies, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive account of discourse marker use among Moroccan EFL learners. In doing so, it complements the quantitative findings reported by Wari (2026) and provides further insight into the role of discourse markers within learners' spoken discourse and strategic competence.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Discourse

Discourse is commonly understood as language used in context, while discourse analysis examines how language functions within the situations in which it occurs (Brown & Yule, 1983; Cook, 1989). From this perspective, language use is shaped by the norms, expectations, and contextual conditions surrounding communication. This view is also reflected in Van Dijk's (1993) account of discourse as language use and social interaction situated within a particular social context.

2.2 Discourse Markers

Discourse markers have been approached from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, resulting in considerable variation in their terminology and definition. These differences reflect not only the range of functions attributed to discourse markers but also differing views regarding the boundaries and homogeneity of this linguistic category. Within discourse-analytical frameworks, discourse markers contribute to the organisation and structuring of information in both spoken and written discourse. Although they are not generally required as constitutive elements of syntactic structure, they perform important functions by relating units of discourse and connecting them to the broader discourse context (Aijmer, 2002).

The term discourse marker was popularised by Schiffrin (1987), who described discourse markers as linguistic elements that provide contextual coordinates for the production and interpretation of coherent discourse. Her account emphasises their contribution to coherence across different planes of discourse, including information state, participation framework, ideational structure, action structure, and exchange structure. From this perspective, discourse markers contribute to the organisation and interpretation of discourse by signalling relationships between different components of an interaction.

Other theoretical perspectives similarly emphasise the role of discourse markers in connecting utterances to their interpretive contexts. From a relevance-theoretic perspective, Blakemore (1987) views discourse connectives as linguistic devices that guide hearers towards the intended interpretation by constraining the contextual assumptions relevant to an utterance. Redeker (1991), using the term discourse operators, likewise highlights their role in signalling the relationship between an upcoming utterance and its immediate discourse context. Van Dijk (1979), meanwhile, distinguishes between pragmatic connectives, which express relationships between speech acts, and semantic connectives, which signal relationships between propositions.

Despite these terminological and theoretical differences, these perspectives collectively demonstrate the important role of discourse markers in guiding interpretation and establishing relationships between units of discourse. In the present study, the term discourse markers is adopted to refer to these linguistic devices.

2.3 Characteristics of Discourse Markers

2.3.1 Syntactic and Positional Optionality

Despite differences in their definitions and classifications, discourse markers have been associated with several recurring linguistic characteristics. One of these is syntactic and positional optionality. Schiffrin (1987) observes that discourse markers are generally independent of sentential structure, meaning that their removal does not necessarily affect the grammatical structure of the sentence. Moreover, markers such as *you know*, *I mean*, *oh*, and *like* may occur in different positions within an utterance.

I can tell you, you know, what's wrong.

I was, like, reading a book in the library.

Well, that's a very good question.

I didn't want to bother him, you know?

The optionality of these items depends on their discourse function. In expressions such as "Do you know him?" and "I like reading," *know* and *like* are integral to the grammatical and semantic structure and are not functioning as discourse markers. Syntactic optionality should therefore not be equated with pragmatic redundancy.

Although discourse markers may not be structurally required for an utterance to remain grammatically complete, they can perform important pragmatic and communicative functions. Brinton (1996) and Fraser (1990) emphasise that their absence may affect the naturalness, interpersonal force, or interpretation of discourse even when grammaticality is preserved.

2.3.2 A Prominent Characteristic of Spoken Discourse

Discourse markers are a prominent feature of spontaneous spoken discourse and may occur frequently within a speaker's utterances. Their frequent occurrence has sometimes led them to be stigmatised as indicators of dysfluency or carelessness (Brinton, 1996). However, their presence in speech should not necessarily be interpreted negatively, as discourse markers can perform important pragmatic and interactional functions. Their prevalence in spoken discourse may also be associated with the relatively informal and less planned nature of spoken communication compared with written discourse.

The relationship between discourse marker use and speech planning is particularly relevant in this regard. Östman (1982) associates the use of discourse markers with limited planning time and suggests that they may function as a compensatory resource when speakers have insufficient time to plan and organise their utterances. From this perspective, discourse markers may assist speakers in managing the cognitive demands involved in spontaneous speech production.

2.3.3 Disfluencies

Disfluency refers to interruptions or irregularities in the flow of speech and may take different forms, including pauses, hesitations, repetitions, repairs, and sound prolongations. In second language speech, such features may become particularly noticeable when speakers experience difficulties in planning an utterance, retrieving appropriate linguistic forms, or maintaining the flow of communication. However, their occurrence should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of insufficient language

competence, since hesitation and speech planning difficulties are also natural features of spontaneous spoken discourse.

Discourse markers may occur alongside these features as speakers manage speech production. Their presence should therefore be distinguished from disfluency itself because discourse markers may perform pragmatic and interactional functions in addition to helping speakers maintain conversational flow. Earlier accounts of fluency nevertheless emphasise temporal aspects of speech production. Fillmore (1979), for example, discusses fluency partly in terms of sustaining speech with relatively few pauses, while Lennon (1990) identifies speech rate, filled pauses, and pause patterns as relevant dimensions in the assessment of oral fluency.

2.3.4 Polyfunctionality

Another important characteristic of discourse markers is polyfunctionality. Schifffrin (1987) shows that discourse markers may contribute to the organisation of discourse at more than one level, while Hansen (1998) emphasises that their scope can vary considerably depending on the discourse segment to which they relate. Aijmer (1996) likewise distinguishes between broader discourse organisational functions and more local connections between adjacent parts of discourse.

At a broader level, discourse markers may help speakers introduce or shift topics, manage turns, organise larger stretches of talk, add comments or digressions, summarise information, and clarify earlier points (Aijmer, 1996). At a more local level, they may signal relationships between neighbouring utterances, highlight the relevance or expectedness of information, and facilitate transitions between turns. Their interpretation therefore depends heavily on context and on the communicative function they perform.

For the present study, four characteristics are particularly relevant: discourse markers may contribute little to the propositional content of an utterance; they may nevertheless perform important pragmatic and interactional functions; many are syntactically optional when functioning as discourse markers; and their communicative value depends on function, context, and frequency. The present study therefore does not treat discourse markers as inherently problematic, but examines circumstances in which participants perceived their reliance on them as excessive or unnecessary.

2.4 Recent Research

Research on discourse markers in spoken discourse has consistently demonstrated their importance in communication, particularly in discourse organisation, interaction management, and the expression of interpersonal meanings. While earlier research established the importance of discourse markers in natural conversation, subsequent studies have increasingly examined their use in second-language contexts and their relationship to learners' pragmatic competence.

Among studies of native spoken interaction, Tagliamonte (2005) demonstrated that discourse markers such as *like*, *so*, and *just* are integral features of spontaneous conversation rather than meaningless fillers. Her findings showed that these markers perform a range of functions, including organising discourse, expressing speaker stance, and managing conversational flow. Such findings demonstrate that discourse markers constitute important resources in spoken interaction and provide a useful basis for examining their use in learner speech.

The multifunctional nature of discourse markers was further highlighted by Taboada (2006), who argued that although discourse markers contribute to discourse coherence, they are not the only resources through which speakers and listeners establish meaning. Contextual and pragmatic information also

plays an important role in the interpretation of discourse. Similarly, Crible and Cuenca (2017) demonstrated that discourse markers in authentic spoken interaction may perform multiple functions simultaneously and should therefore be analysed within their interactional context rather than as isolated linguistic forms. These studies highlight the importance of considering both the functions of discourse markers and the communicative contexts in which they occur.

Research has also examined discourse marker use specifically among EFL learners. Shimada and Miura (2019) investigated Japanese university EFL learners' use of discourse markers in spoken and written production and found that learners adjusted their choice of discourse markers according to the communicative task. In spoken interaction, interpersonal markers such as *well* occurred more frequently, suggesting that discourse marker use may be influenced by communicative purpose as well as language proficiency.

Likewise, Pan and Aroonmanakun (2022) compared the spoken discourse markers produced by Thai EFL learners with those used by native English speakers. Their corpus-based analysis revealed differences in both the use of common spoken discourse markers and the pragmatic functions assigned to them. The authors concluded that acquiring the natural use of discourse markers may remain challenging even for advanced EFL learners, highlighting the importance of investigating their occurrence and functions in learner speech.

Within the Moroccan EFL context, Wari (2026) quantitatively investigated the frequency of discourse marker use across different communicative domains. The findings revealed variation in discourse marker frequency according to the topic being discussed, suggesting that their occurrence may be associated with the linguistic demands of different communicative contexts. Although the study established a quantitative pattern of variation, frequency data alone could not provide an in-depth account of the factors that learners themselves associate with their use of discourse markers.

Previous research has therefore provided considerable insight into the frequency, functions, and context-dependent nature of discourse markers. However, less attention has been devoted to learners' own explanations of the factors associated with their use and to the strategies they employ to manage or minimise such use. This issue remains particularly underexplored in the Moroccan EFL context.

The present study addresses this gap through a qualitative follow-up to Wari (2026). It explores the factors that participants associate with their use of discourse markers and the strategies they report employing to minimise such use. In doing so, the study extends the preceding quantitative findings by providing a participant-centred account of discourse marker use among Moroccan EFL learners.

2.5 The Overuse of Discourse Markers: Potential Effects on Listeners and Speakers

2.5.1 Potential Effects on Listeners

The occurrence of discourse markers is a natural feature of spontaneous spoken discourse and does not, in itself, constitute a communicative problem. However, frequent reliance on certain markers, particularly when they function as fillers or hesitation devices, may become distracting to listeners. O'Hair et al. (2007), for example, recommend limiting the unnecessary use of discourse markers used as fillers because of their potential distracting effect on an audience.

Research on fillers and speech disfluencies provides further evidence of their potential effects on listeners. Hazel et al. (2011), for example, discuss the distracting effect of recurrent filler words in public speaking contexts. Such findings are relevant to the present study when discourse markers function primarily as fillers rather than performing an identifiable pragmatic or interactional function.

Experimental research has also investigated the relationship between disfluency and comprehension. Brennan and Schober (2001), for instance, examined listeners' responses to spontaneous instructions containing disfluencies and demonstrated that listeners actively compensate for such disruptions during comprehension. Lickley and Bard (1996) likewise investigated the recognition of disfluencies in spontaneous dialogue, showing that disfluent regions can affect word recognition around the point of interruption.

In addition to comprehension, frequent use of fillers may influence listeners' perceptions of a speaker. Goberman et al. (2011) examined acoustic and fluency-related characteristics associated with perceived speaking anxiety, suggesting that features of speech delivery, including disfluencies, may contribute to listeners' impressions of the speaker. Taken together, these studies indicate that frequent fillers and related disfluency phenomena may affect not only the processing of spoken information but also listeners' perceptions of speech delivery.

2.5.2 Potential Effects on Speakers

Frequent or uncontrolled reliance on discourse markers used primarily as fillers may also influence the effectiveness of speech production. Hazel et al. (2011) suggest that excessive or unconscious filler use may become distracting and reduce communicative effectiveness. Their discussion is particularly relevant when recurrent expressions become habitual rather than being employed for a specific pragmatic or interactional purpose.

The possible influence of filler use on speaker effectiveness has also been examined in professional communication. Conrad et al. (2013), for example, analysed recorded survey invitations delivered by telephone interviewers and examined the relationship between speech characteristics, including filler use, and listeners' willingness to participate. Their findings suggest that speech delivery and disfluency-related features may contribute to how speakers are perceived and how successfully their messages are received.

These findings highlight an important distinction between the functional use of discourse markers and frequent reliance on discourse markers used primarily as fillers or hesitation related expressions. Discourse markers may perform legitimate pragmatic and interactional functions in spoken discourse; therefore, their occurrence should not automatically be regarded as problematic. The issue becomes particularly relevant when their use is frequent, habitual, or perceived by speakers themselves as excessive. This distinction provides a rationale for examining not only the factors associated with discourse marker use but also the strategies learners report employing to minimise unnecessary reliance on such expressions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach and Design

The present study adopts a qualitative research approach and a case study design to explore discourse marker use from the perspectives of Moroccan EFL learners. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study seeks to understand participants' own explanations of the factors associated with their use of discourse markers and the strategies they report employing to minimise such use. Rather than focusing on the frequency of discourse markers, the present qualitative phase examines participants' experiences, perceptions, and reported strategies.

A case study design was employed to allow an in-depth examination of discourse marker use within a specific group and educational context. The study involved twenty Master's students enrolled in the

Applied Linguistics programme at Hassan II University in Casablanca. The specific procedures through which these participants were recruited are described in the Sampling Strategy subsection.

3.2 Data Collection Instrument and Procedures

Data were collected through twenty individual in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interviews constituted the qualitative follow-up to the preceding quantitative investigation reported in Wari (2026). While the quantitative phase identified variation in the frequency of discourse marker use across different communicative domains, the interviews were conducted to explore participants' perspectives on the factors associated with their use of discourse markers and the strategies they employed to minimise such use.

Each participant was interviewed individually for approximately 15 to 20 minutes. The interviews were conducted in a classroom at Hassan II University and were audio-recorded. Notes were also taken during the interviews to complement the recorded data.

The interviews were designed to address the following research questions:

1. Why do Master's students of Applied Linguistics in the English Department in Casablanca use discourse markers when speaking?
2. What strategies have helped them lessen their reliance on discourse markers when speaking?

To address these research questions, the interviews were guided by the following questions:

1. In general, why do you use discourse markers?
2. Have you, at any point, felt that you overused discourse markers when speaking?
3. If yes, what strategies did you use to lessen your reliance on them?

The third question functioned as a follow-up question and was asked when participants reported having experienced what they perceived as overuse of discourse markers. This allowed participants to elaborate on the strategies they had employed to manage or minimise their reliance on these linguistic devices.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

A purposive convenience sampling strategy was employed to recruit the participants. A total of 20 Master's students enrolled in the Applied Linguistics programme at Hassan II University were selected based on their relevance to the objectives of the study and their accessibility.

The purposive component of the sampling strategy also involved variation in participants' prior familiarity with the interviewer. The sample intentionally included both participants who were previously acquainted with the interviewer and participants with whom there was no prior acquaintance. This variation was considered relevant because familiarity with the interviewer could potentially influence the level of speech anxiety experienced during the interaction. Including participants with different levels of prior familiarity therefore allowed the study to explore whether speech anxiety emerged as a factor associated with discourse marker use.

The convenience component was particularly useful because the research process required continued communication with participants during data collection, transcription, and subsequent verification. As the interviews were manually transcribed, maintaining contact with the participants made it possible to clarify unclear utterances when necessary and to obtain additional feedback regarding the accuracy of the transcribed data. This continued access also facilitated the participant-validation procedures employed to enhance the credibility of the qualitative findings.

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

3.4 Data Transcription

Following the completion of the interviews, all audio recordings were manually transcribed. Each recording was listened to repeatedly to ensure that participants' responses were captured as accurately and completely as possible. Manual transcription was considered particularly appropriate for the present qualitative study because it allowed close engagement with the interview data and provided an initial opportunity to become familiar with participants' responses prior to thematic analysis.

Following manual transcription, the transcripts were cross checked using a speech recognition verification tool. The results provided by the tool were compared with the manually produced transcripts to identify potential omissions, misheard words, or other transcription discrepancies. The original audio recordings remained the primary source for resolving any differences identified during this verification process.

As an additional verification procedure, the transcripts were subsequently checked with the participants. Participants were given the opportunity to confirm their responses and clarify any utterances that remained unclear or ambiguous. Any necessary corrections were incorporated into the final transcripts before the data analysis stage. This process was employed to enhance the accuracy and credibility of the transcribed data.

3.5 Research Trustworthiness

Rigour in qualitative research can be established through the concept of trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria were considered throughout the present study to enhance confidence in the research process and findings.

Credibility concerns the extent to which the findings accurately represent participants' perspectives and experiences. One procedure commonly used to enhance credibility is member checking, which involves presenting findings or interpretations to participants for verification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Following the thematic analysis, a meeting was held with the participants to discuss the identified themes and determine whether they accurately represented their perspectives. Participants suggested a small number of modifications to the themes. These modifications were incorporated, and a second meeting was subsequently held to present the revised themes. The participants confirmed that the revised themes and the codes from which they were developed accurately reflected their views and experiences.

Transferability concerns the extent to which findings may be applicable or relevant to other contexts or populations. To facilitate the assessment of transferability, detailed information about the research context, participants, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, transcription process, and data analysis procedures is provided. This description allows readers to assess the extent to which the findings may be relevant to other EFL learning contexts.

Dependability concerns the consistency and transparency of the research process, whereas confirmability concerns the extent to which the findings are grounded in the participants' data rather than being shaped primarily by researcher bias. To enhance these aspects of trustworthiness, the research process was reviewed throughout the study under academic supervision. In addition, the transcription and coding processes were reviewed by two other researchers. Participant verification was also used to confirm that the interpretations and resulting themes adequately represented the participants' perspectives. These procedures contributed to the transparency of the analytical process and reduced the potential influence of researcher bias.

3.6 Data Analysis Procedures

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was considered appropriate because it enabled the systematic identification, organisation, and interpretation of recurring patterns within participants' responses. The analysis followed the main phases of familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

The first phase involved becoming familiar with the data through manual transcription and repeated reading of the interview transcripts. During this process, significant and recurring ideas relevant to the research questions were identified. Initial codes were then generated to capture meaningful features of the participants' responses.

The codes were subsequently examined for similarities and relationships and grouped into potential themes. The transcripts were read repeatedly while the developing themes were compared with the coded extracts and the broader dataset. Themes were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to ensure that each represented a distinct and meaningful pattern in the participants' responses.

This analytical process resulted in 19 themes. Eleven themes represented factors that participants associated with their use of discourse markers, while eight represented strategies they reported employing to minimise their reliance on these linguistic devices. The final themes were then organised according to the two research questions and presented and interpreted in the findings section.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were considered throughout the research process. Bryman (2012) identifies several important ethical considerations in research, including avoiding harm to participants, obtaining informed consent, protecting participants' privacy, and avoiding deception.

Participation in the qualitative study was voluntary. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the procedures involved. They were provided with a consent form and informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Consent was also obtained for the recording, transcription, and analysis of their interview responses.

Participants' privacy and confidentiality were protected throughout the research process. Their identities were not disclosed, and numerical identifiers, such as "Interviewee 5", were used instead of their names when presenting their responses and discussing the findings.

Participants were also involved in the subsequent verification procedures. Following transcription, they were given the opportunity to confirm their responses and clarify any unclear or ambiguous utterances. Following thematic analysis, they were invited to assess whether the identified themes accurately represented their perspectives. Any necessary modifications resulting from this process were incorporated before the findings were finalised. These procedures helped maintain transparency and respect for participants throughout the qualitative research process.

4. Results and Findings

The qualitative interviews were conducted to provide an in depth understanding of participants' perspectives on discourse marker use and to address the following research questions:

1. Why do Master's students of Applied Linguistics in the English Department in Casablanca use discourse markers when speaking?
2. What strategies have helped them lessen their reliance on discourse markers when speaking?

The thematic analysis of the interview data identified 19 themes addressing these two research questions. Eleven themes represented factors that participants associated with their use of discourse markers, while eight themes represented strategies they reported employing to minimise their reliance on these linguistic devices. The findings are presented according to the two research questions.

4.1 Factors Associated with Discourse Marker Use

The first research question sought to identify the factors that participants associated with their use of discourse markers when speaking English. The thematic analysis identified eleven themes: infrequent jargon, hesitation, language transfer, speech anxiety, buying time, native speaker speech imitation, a matter of choice, politeness, habit formation, rapid speech, and complex thought processing.

4.1.1 Infrequent Jargon

Infrequent jargon emerged as one of the factors participants associated with their use of discourse markers. Participants reported experiencing difficulties retrieving appropriate vocabulary when discussing topics that required terminology they did not frequently use in English. Their responses included: “I rarely tackle religious topics in English”, “I needed time to remember words”, “each field has its specific terminology”, “I had to use words that I rarely use”, and “I don’t usually use English to talk about religion”.

These responses suggest that participants associated discourse marker use with difficulties in retrieving less frequently used vocabulary. This finding is particularly relevant to the preceding quantitative findings reported in Wari (2026), which revealed variation in discourse marker frequency across the communicative domains investigated. The participants’ accounts in the present qualitative phase provide a possible explanation for this pattern by indicating that the retrieval of less frequently used domain specific vocabulary may be associated with their use of discourse markers.

4.1.2 Hesitation

Hesitation was another factor that participants associated with discourse marker use. Some participants explicitly referred to hesitation when explaining why discourse markers occurred in their speech. One participant stated, “Yes, I think I hesitate”, while another described hesitation as “the number one reason, if not the only one, that makes me use discourse markers”.

These responses indicate that some participants perceived discourse markers as linguistic resources that occurred when they experienced hesitation during speech production.

4.1.3 Language Transfer

Language transfer also emerged as a factor associated with discourse marker use. Participants referred to the possible influence of their first language and their habitual ways of communicating in Moroccan Arabic. Relevant responses included “mother tongue transfer”, “the way I speak Moroccan Arabic”, “I use them when I speak Darija”, and “especially when the word is in Arabic”.

These responses suggest that some participants perceived aspects of their discourse marker use in English as being influenced by linguistic and communicative patterns associated with their first language.

4.1.4 Speech Anxiety

Speech anxiety was identified as another theme in participants’ accounts. Several participants explicitly associated feelings of anxiety with an increase in their use of discourse markers. Their responses included “definitely when I am anxious”, “it’s because of anxiety”, and “whenever I feel anxious I use a lot of filler words”.

These accounts indicate that participants perceived their emotional state during spoken interaction as a factor associated with discourse marker use. In particular, anxiety appeared to be associated with greater reliance on these linguistic devices for some participants.

4.1.5 Buying Time

Participants also reported using discourse markers as a means of gaining additional planning time while speaking. This theme was reflected in statements such as “make myself some time to think of what to say next” and “filler words buy me time”.

These responses suggest that discourse markers may function as a speech planning resource for some participants, allowing them additional time to formulate or retrieve what they intend to say while maintaining the flow of speech.

4.1.6 Native Speaker Speech Imitation

Another theme identified in the data was the imitation of native speakers’ speech. Some participants reported using discourse markers because they associated these linguistic devices with natural native speaker communication. Their responses included “native speakers also use discourse markers”, “to sound more like a native speaker”, “to sound like a native”, and “even native speakers’ talk is full of them”.

These responses indicate that discourse marker use was not always perceived as resulting from linguistic difficulty. For some participants, their use represented an attempt to reproduce speech patterns they associated with native English speakers.

4.1.7 A Matter of Choice

The analysis also identified personal choice as a factor in discourse marker use. One participant stated, “I think people choose to use them, and I don’t see it as something natural”.

This perspective differs from explanations that associate discourse markers with hesitation, anxiety, or difficulties in speech production. Instead, it suggests that at least some instances of discourse marker use may be perceived by speakers as deliberate linguistic choices. This theme therefore highlights the possibility that participants may differ in the degree of intentionality they associate with their use of discourse markers.

4.1.8 Politeness

Politeness emerged as another factor associated with discourse marker use. Some participants reported employing discourse markers when attempting to communicate their ideas in a less direct or more polite manner. Relevant responses included “I use them when I don’t want to sound mean or impolite” and “it’s a way for me to say what I want to say in a polite way”.

These responses suggest that discourse markers may serve an interpersonal function in participants’ speech. Their use, in this context, was associated with managing how an utterance might be perceived by an interlocutor rather than with difficulties in language production.

4.1.9 Habit Formation

Habit formation was also identified as a factor associated with discourse marker use. One participant explained, “it’s more of a habit for me now because I used to use them a lot”.

This response indicates that repeated use of discourse markers may, from the participant’s perspective, develop into a habitual feature of speech. In such cases, discourse marker use may occur without deliberate planning or a specific communicative intention.

4.1.10 Rapid Speech

Rapid speech emerged as another theme in the qualitative data. One participant reported, “When I speak quickly, I employ them”.

This response suggests that speaking at a faster pace may be associated with greater reliance on discourse markers for some speakers. The participant’s account indicates that the speed of speech production may influence the occurrence of these linguistic devices, particularly when less time is available for planning an utterance.

4.1.11 Complex Thought Processing

The final theme identified in relation to the first research question was complex thought processing. One participant explained that discourse markers occurred “when the idea I am trying to express is too complex that I cannot put it into words”.

This response suggests that discourse marker use may be associated with the cognitive demands involved in formulating and verbalising complex ideas. From the participant’s perspective, difficulty converting a complex thought into an immediately available linguistic form created circumstances in which discourse markers were more likely to occur.

Overall, the findings related to the first research question demonstrate that participants associated discourse marker use with a diverse range of linguistic, cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and habitual factors. These included difficulties retrieving infrequently used vocabulary, hesitation, language transfer, speech anxiety, the need to gain planning time, imitation of native speaker speech, personal choice, politeness, habit formation, rapid speech, and the processing of complex thoughts. The findings therefore suggest that participants did not attribute their use of discourse markers to a single factor, but rather to multiple circumstances surrounding spoken language production.

4.2 Strategies for Minimising Discourse Marker Use

The second research question sought to identify the strategies that participants reported employing to lessen their reliance on discourse markers when speaking:

What strategies have helped participants lessen their reliance on discourse markers when speaking?

The thematic analysis identified eight strategies: building self confidence, strategic pausing, thinking in the target language, speaking naturally and directly, speech recording, replacing unnecessary discourse markers with meaningful expressions, slowing down speech, and practising speaking. These themes were developed from participants’ responses concerning the techniques they had employed when they felt that their reliance on discourse markers had become excessive.

4.2.1 Building Self Confidence

Building self confidence emerged as the first strategy. One participant explained, “I got rid of them by gaining more confidence in my speech”. This response indicates that increased confidence was perceived as helping the participant gain greater control over the use of discourse markers. The strategy is particularly relevant to the earlier finding concerning speech anxiety, since participants associated anxiety with greater reliance on discourse markers during spoken interaction.

4.2.2 Strategic Pausing

Strategic pausing was another strategy reported by the participants. Their responses included, “so instead of using filler words I just pause for some time”, “I practised pausing”, and “you just pause and think”. These responses indicate that participants deliberately replaced some instances of discourse marker use with silence, allowing themselves additional time to plan and formulate their subsequent utterances.

4.2.3 Thinking in the Target Language

Participants also reported attempting to think directly in English rather than formulating an idea in their first language and subsequently translating it. Their responses included, “I stopped thinking in Arabic”, “draw a line between Darija and English”, and “avoid translating”. These accounts indicate that participants perceived reducing dependence on mental translation as a means of limiting the hesitation and discourse marker use that may occur during the transition from one language to another.

4.2.4 Speaking Naturally and Directly

Another theme was speaking naturally and directly. Participants stated, “I would rather sound Moroccan when speaking English instead of American”, “to be straightforward when speaking”, and “I started to keep it simple and direct”. These responses suggest that participants attempted to reduce unnecessary linguistic complexity and avoid imitating speech patterns that did not feel natural to them. This strategy therefore combines directness, simplicity, and the use of a speaking style with which participants felt more comfortable.

4.2.5 Speech Recording

Speech recording emerged from a participant’s statement, “I spoke to myself and recorded myself”. Recording provided the participant with an opportunity to listen retrospectively to his own speech and identify patterns that might be difficult to notice during spontaneous production. The strategy was therefore associated with increased awareness and monitoring of discourse marker use.

4.2.6 Replacing Unnecessary Discourse Markers with Meaningful Expressions

Participants also reported attempting to replace unnecessary discourse markers with expressions that contributed more directly to their intended message. One participant explained, “I tried to replace them with more meaningful words”. This strategy reflects an attempt to distinguish between expressions performing an identifiable communicative function and discourse markers that participants perceived themselves as using unnecessarily.

4.2.7 Slowing Down Speech

Slowing down speech was another strategy identified in the interviews. Participants stated, “I just learnt to speak slowly and think” and “I take my time when speaking and processing ideas”. Their accounts suggest that reducing speech rate provided additional time for planning and formulation and consequently helped them manage their reliance on discourse markers.

4.2.8 Practising Speaking

The final strategy was practising speaking. Participants referred to repeated practice and increased experience of spoken communication, stating, “I started to practise and practise” and “I have practised speaking in front of a public, and deliver as many presentations as I can”. These responses indicate that participants associated repeated speaking practice with greater confidence and control over their spoken production.

5. Discussion

5.1 Infrequent Jargon

One of the most notable findings of the qualitative analysis concerns participants’ reported difficulty in retrieving vocabulary that they rarely use in English. Several participants explained that they seldom discussed topics related to religion and culinary arts in English and therefore experienced greater difficulty retrieving the terminology required to discuss these domains. They associated this lexical retrieval difficulty with increased reliance on discourse markers while formulating their responses.

This finding is particularly relevant when considered alongside the preceding quantitative investigation reported in Wari (2026). The quantitative findings revealed variation in discourse marker frequency across the communicative domains investigated, with discourse markers occurring less frequently when participants discussed Applied Linguistics than when they discussed Culinary Arts and Religion. The present qualitative findings provide a possible participant based explanation for this pattern. As Master's students of Applied Linguistics, participants were regularly exposed to the terminology associated with their field of study, whereas several reported using English less frequently to discuss religion and culinary topics.

This interpretation is consistent with Bortfeld et al. (2001), who found that disfluency rates, including the occurrence of uh and um, were associated with several factors, including discussion of unfamiliar topics. Their findings suggest that the retrieval of less accessible lexical material may increase the demands placed on speech planning and consequently contribute to hesitation related phenomena.

The present finding therefore suggests an association between the accessibility of domain specific vocabulary and participants' discourse marker use. Importantly, however, the preceding quantitative phase did not directly measure participants' familiarity with the three domains. The qualitative accounts presented here should therefore be understood as participants' explanations that help contextualise the quantitative pattern rather than as evidence that unfamiliarity with a particular domain directly causes increased discourse marker use.

5.2 Hesitation

Hesitation emerged as another factor that participants associated with their use of discourse markers. Some participants explicitly identified hesitation as an important reason for their reliance on these linguistic devices when speaking English. This finding suggests that discourse markers may occur when learners experience difficulties in immediately formulating an utterance or retrieving the linguistic resources required to continue speaking.

Hesitation is a common feature of spontaneous speech and may be manifested through pauses, repetitions, repairs, and other interruptions to speech flow. Previous research has frequently discussed hesitation within the broader study of speech disfluency and language production. Speech production research has long associated hesitation and filled pauses with the demands of planning and formulation. Bortfeld et al. (2001), for example, found that disfluency rates varied with factors including topic and conversational conditions. From this perspective, hesitation may arise when planning and production place competing demands on the speaker.

The participants' accounts are consistent with this perspective. Rather than treating the occurrence of discourse markers as evidence of insufficient language competence, the present findings suggest that some participants used them while managing moments of hesitation during ongoing speech production. In such situations, discourse markers may help speakers maintain the conversational floor while additional time is required to formulate the continuation of an utterance.

It is nevertheless important to distinguish hesitation from discourse marker use itself. Discourse markers should not automatically be classified as disfluencies, since they may perform legitimate pragmatic and interactional functions in spoken discourse. The present finding therefore indicates that hesitation was one of the factors participants associated with their use of discourse markers, rather than suggesting that all discourse marker use results from hesitation or constitutes disfluent speech.

5.3 Language Transfer

Language transfer emerged from the qualitative analysis as another factor that participants associated with their use of discourse markers. Language transfer generally refers to the influence that previously acquired languages may exert on the use or acquisition of a target language. In the present study, participants' accounts suggest that such influence may extend beyond the transfer of linguistic forms, sounds, and structures to include habitual patterns of language use.

An important interpretation arising from the participants' responses concerns the possible transfer of discourse habits from the first language to English. Participants referred explicitly to "mother tongue transfer", "the way I speak Moroccan Arabic", and their use of similar expressions when speaking Darija. These responses suggest that learners who frequently rely on particular discourse expressions or discourse markers when speaking their first language may develop comparable patterns when communicating in English. From this perspective, language transfer may involve not only the transfer of linguistic features but also the transfer of habitual ways of managing spoken interaction.

This interpretation is particularly relevant to Moroccan Arabic, in which speakers commonly employ expressions such as /weʃ fhæmti/, /fhæmti/, /smeʃtini/, /zeʃma/, and /ewa/. Such expressions may fulfil different functions depending on the communicative context. They may, for instance, be used to check whether an interlocutor has understood a message, initiate or maintain an interaction, or perform other discourse and interpersonal functions. In other contexts, speakers may employ similar expressions habitually without an easily identifiable contribution to the propositional content of the utterance. Frequent exposure to and use of such expressions in Moroccan Arabic may therefore provide one possible explanation for why some participants perceived their discourse marker use in English as being influenced by their first language.

A second interpretation concerns the language through which speakers initially process and formulate their intended meaning. Participants' responses suggest that discourse marker use may also occur when an intended message is initially processed through the first language before being formulated in English. A speaker may have access to the intended meaning in Moroccan Arabic but experience difficulty retrieving an immediately appropriate English equivalent or expressing the same meaning through the linguistic resources available in English. The time required to reformulate or retrieve the intended expression may consequently create hesitation during speech, during which discourse markers or filled pauses may occur.

This possibility is particularly relevant when considering the structural and lexical differences between Moroccan Arabic and English. Formulating an idea through the linguistic resources of one language and subsequently attempting to express it through another may increase the demands placed on lexical retrieval and speech planning. In this sense, the relationship between language transfer and discourse marker use may also intersect with other themes identified in the present study, particularly hesitation and the need to gain additional planning time.

The present findings therefore raise the possibility that language transfer in spoken EFL communication may operate at more than one level. In addition to the widely examined transfer of linguistic forms and structures, participants' accounts point towards the potential transfer of discourse habits and the influence of first language processing on speech production in English. This interpretation extends the discussion of language transfer towards learners' habitual patterns of discourse management and provides a potentially useful direction for further investigation.

Nevertheless, these interpretations are derived from participants' perceptions and accounts rather than from a direct experimental examination of cross linguistic transfer. They should therefore be regarded as explanatory possibilities generated by the qualitative findings rather than as established causal relationships. Further research would be required to determine the extent to which discourse habits in Moroccan Arabic and first language processing actually influence discourse marker use in English.

5.4 Speech Anxiety

Speech anxiety emerged as another factor that participants associated with their use of discourse markers. Several participants explicitly reported using discourse markers more frequently when they felt anxious during spoken interaction. This finding suggests that the affective conditions surrounding an interaction may be relevant to understanding participants' reliance on discourse markers during speech production.

Speech anxiety has frequently been discussed in relation to public speaking situations in which speakers experience nervousness or apprehension when addressing an audience. However, the context of the present study differed from a conventional public speaking situation, since participants were not required to deliver a speech or presentation. Instead, they participated in individual interviews. The findings are therefore particularly relevant because they suggest that participants' perceptions of speech anxiety were not restricted to formal public speaking but could also emerge during interpersonal spoken interaction.

An important observation in the present study concerns participants' prior familiarity with the interviewer. As explained in the sampling strategy, the sample intentionally included participants who were previously acquainted with the interviewer as well as participants with whom there was no prior acquaintance. This variation provided an opportunity to explore whether familiarity with the interlocutor might emerge as a relevant consideration in participants' accounts of speech anxiety and discourse marker use.

Following the interviews, some participants who had not previously been acquainted with the interviewer explained that the interview situation affected how comfortable they felt during the interaction. They referred to the interviewer as a "stranger" and indicated that they generally felt more comfortable and confident when speaking with someone with whom they were familiar. These accounts suggest that, for some participants, speech anxiety may have been associated not only with the act of speaking English itself but also with contextual and interpersonal conditions surrounding the interaction, including familiarity with the interlocutor.

This observation provides an additional perspective on the relationship between anxiety and discourse marker use. Participants who identified anxiety as a factor in their speech also reported relying on discourse markers when experiencing such feelings. One possible interpretation is that anxiety may increase the demands involved in planning and producing speech, thereby creating conditions in which speakers rely more heavily on discourse markers while organising or formulating their utterances. In this respect, speech anxiety may also interact with other factors identified in the present study, particularly hesitation and the need to gain additional planning time.

The findings therefore broaden the interpretation of speech anxiety within the specific context of this study. From the participants' perspectives, anxiety was not necessarily associated only with formal presentations or public speaking situations. It could also arise from the immediate communicative context and the relationship between interlocutors. In particular, participants' accounts raise the possibility that familiarity with the person with whom they are communicating may influence how

comfortable or anxious they feel during spoken interaction and, consequently, may be associated with their reliance on discourse markers.

Nevertheless, the present study did not experimentally manipulate familiarity with the interviewer or independently measure participants' levels of anxiety. The findings should therefore not be interpreted as demonstrating that unfamiliarity with an interlocutor causes anxiety or increased discourse marker use. Rather, they show that some participants themselves associated their feelings of anxiety, their level of comfort with the interlocutor, and their discourse marker use. Further research comparing interactions with familiar and unfamiliar interlocutors could examine this relationship more directly.

5.5 Buying Time

Buying time emerged as another factor that participants associated with their use of discourse markers. Participants explained that they sometimes relied on these linguistic devices to gain additional time to think about and formulate what they intended to say next. In this sense, discourse markers appeared to function as a resource for managing the temporal demands of spontaneous speech production.

This interpretation is closely related to the cognitive processes involved in producing spoken language. Unlike written communication, spontaneous speech generally requires speakers to plan and produce language within a limited period of time. When an immediately appropriate word, expression, or continuation is not available, speakers may need additional time to organise their thoughts, retrieve lexical items, and formulate the upcoming utterance. During this process, speech may contain filled pauses, silent pauses, repetitions, or discourse markers that enable speakers to maintain the flow of communication while planning what to say next.

The participants' accounts therefore suggest that the use of discourse markers for buying time may serve a compensatory function during speech production. Rather than interrupting an utterance completely while searching for the next linguistic element, speakers may employ a discourse marker to maintain the conversational floor while the formulation process continues. This interpretation also demonstrates a close relationship between the present theme and other themes identified in the study, particularly hesitation and complex thought processing.

This finding is consistent with previous accounts of discourse marker use that associate certain markers with speech planning and the management of conversational time. Schifffrin's work on discourse markers, for example, demonstrates their important role in the organisation and management of spoken interaction. From the perspective of the present participants, buying time constituted one of the functions for which they relied on these linguistic resources during speech production.

The finding does not imply that discourse markers can or should be completely eliminated from spoken language. The need to plan, retrieve, and formulate linguistic material is an inherent part of spontaneous speech production, and some reliance on linguistic resources that facilitate this process may therefore be expected. The more relevant issue in the context of the present study concerns participants' perceived reliance on these devices and the strategies they reported employing when they considered such reliance excessive. These strategies are discussed in relation to the second research question.

5.6 Native Speaker Speech Imitation

Native speakers' speech imitation emerged as another factor that participants associated with their use of discourse markers. Several participants explicitly referred to native speaker speech when explaining their own use of these linguistic devices. Their responses included "native speakers also use discourse markers", "to sound more like a native speaker", "to sound like a native", and "even native speakers' talk is full of them". These responses indicate that, for some participants, discourse marker use was

influenced by their perceptions of how native speakers communicate and by their desire to reproduce features they associate with natural English speech.

Native speakers generally possess extensive experience with the linguistic and sociocultural conventions of the speech communities in which they participate. This experience gives them access not only to grammatical and lexical knowledge but also to sociolinguistic and pragmatic resources that enable them to adjust their language according to different communicative situations. For this reason, exposure to native speaker discourse may provide EFL learners with valuable opportunities to observe how English is used beyond the forms commonly encountered in textbooks and formal classroom instruction.

Cook (1999) discusses the native speaker in relation to second language learning and draws attention to the importance of examining how the target language is actually used. Exposure to naturally occurring language can help learners become familiar with standard and nonstandard forms as well as informal and interactional features of spoken communication. Exposure to naturally occurring language can also reveal informal and interactional features that learners may encounter less often in formal instructional materials. Such differences may help explain why learners sometimes perceive naturally occurring native speaker discourse as more representative of everyday communication.

It is therefore understandable that language learners may attempt, at different stages of their learning experience, to imitate features of native speaker speech. Imitation may constitute part of the process through which learners experiment with pronunciation, vocabulary, expressions, interactional patterns, and other features encountered through exposure to English. The participants' responses suggest that discourse markers may also become part of this imitative process. Expressions heard repeatedly in conversations, films, television programmes, online content, or direct interactions with native speakers may subsequently be incorporated into learners' own speech.

However, the present finding also raises the question of selectivity in imitation. Learners may benefit from distinguishing between linguistic features that serve identifiable communicative functions and features that are reproduced merely because they occur frequently in the speech to which they are exposed. Native speaker speech, like all spontaneous speech, is not characterised by uninterrupted fluency. It may contain hesitations, repetitions, repairs, filled pauses, and frequent discourse markers. Consequently, attempting to reproduce every characteristic of naturally occurring native speaker speech does not necessarily lead to more effective communication.

This distinction can be illustrated through an utterance such as: "So I was, like, at this, like, party, and my friend was, like, asking me to, like, dance." A learner may encounter similar patterns in informal conversations or in American or British television programmes and associate the repeated occurrence of like with natural or native like speech. Reproducing this pattern may therefore be motivated by a desire to approximate the type of English the learner frequently hears. Nevertheless, repeatedly reproducing the form without understanding the functions performed by like in different contexts may lead to reliance on the expression beyond contexts in which its use contributes to the organisation or interpretation of discourse.

The issue, therefore, is not imitation itself. Imitation can provide learners with access to authentic patterns of spoken interaction and may contribute to the development of a more natural command of conversational English. Rather, the issue concerns the manner in which imitation occurs. Unselective imitation may lead learners to reproduce not only useful pragmatic and interactional features but also highly repetitive patterns, hesitations, or other characteristics of spontaneous speech that do not necessarily improve the effectiveness of their own communication. In this respect, the objective of

imitation should not simply be to sound like a native speaker, but to understand the communicative value of the linguistic features being adopted.

The participants' responses also draw attention to an important relationship between imitation and learners' understanding of discourse marker functions. Learners should not focus exclusively on the presence or frequency of particular expressions in native speaker discourse. Attention should also be directed towards their semantic, pragmatic, and interactional properties. A discourse marker that appears to contribute little to the propositional meaning of an utterance may nevertheless perform an important function in organising discourse, expressing stance, managing interaction, mitigating an utterance, or signalling the relationship between parts of discourse. Conversely, repeatedly inserting an expression without a clear communicative function may contribute little to the message being conveyed.

This distinction is particularly important in relation to the broader argument of the present study. The aim of minimising reliance on discourse markers should not be interpreted as advocating their complete avoidance. As discussed previously, discourse markers can perform important functions in spoken communication. The more relevant objective is to distinguish functional use from unnecessary or excessive reliance. Learners who understand the functions of these linguistic devices may be better positioned to determine when their use contributes to communication and when repeated insertion serves primarily as a habitual or hesitation related feature of speech.

The present findings therefore suggest that native speakers' speech imitation represents another possible explanation for discourse marker use among the participants. Unlike factors such as lexical retrieval difficulty, hesitation, or speech anxiety, this theme indicates that discourse marker use may sometimes arise from a learner's conscious or partially conscious desire to approximate a particular model of spoken English. The participants' accounts consequently broaden the explanation of discourse marker use by showing that these linguistic devices may be adopted not only in response to difficulties in speech production but also as features that learners associate with authentic or natural sounding English.

This interpretation remains grounded in participants' perceptions. The present study did not directly measure the amount or type of native speaker input to which individual participants had been exposed, nor did it experimentally establish that exposure to such speech caused particular patterns of discourse marker use. The finding should therefore be interpreted as evidence that some participants perceived native speaker speech imitation as an influence on their own discourse marker use. Further research could examine this relationship more directly by investigating learners' exposure to different forms of spoken English and the 5.7 A Matter of Choice

5.7 A Matter of Choice

A particularly interesting explanation for discourse marker use emerged from one participant's account and was categorised under the theme "A Matter of Choice". The participant suggested that speakers may exercise a certain degree of control over whether they use particular discourse markers, stating, "I think people choose to use them, and I don't see it as something natural". This perspective introduces the possibility that discourse marker use is not always an automatic consequence of hesitation, anxiety, or difficulties in language processing, but may sometimes involve a degree of conscious or selective control.

A similar idea has been discussed by Clark and Fox Tree (2002) in relation to the filled pauses *uh* and *um*. Fox Tree argues that speakers appear to exercise selective control over these expressions and may use them differently depending on the anticipated duration of a delay. Speakers who pause more frequently may also produce more fillers, while speakers may reduce their use when communicative

circumstances require them to do so. This perspective supports the participant's suggestion that speakers may possess at least some degree of control over particular features of their spoken discourse.

The notion of choice, however, requires an important distinction between controlled and uncontrolled discourse marker use. If a speaker deliberately employs a discourse marker because it performs an identifiable pragmatic, interactional, or discourse organisational function, its use may constitute a purposeful communicative choice. Conversely, when an expression contributes little to the intended message and is repeatedly inserted without a clear communicative purpose, reducing unnecessary reliance on it may contribute to more controlled speech.

This distinction is particularly important when discourse markers occur with such frequency that they become distracting to listeners. Frequent hesitation related expressions may direct listeners' attention towards features of speech delivery rather than towards the information being communicated. They may also influence listeners' perceptions of the speaker, particularly in contexts in which fluent and carefully organised speech is expected. From this perspective, learners who are capable of exercising some control over their discourse may benefit from recognising situations in which a particular expression serves a communicative function and situations in which its repeated use is unnecessary.

The participant's interpretation also suggests that moderation may be more appropriate than complete avoidance. Speakers cannot reasonably be expected to eliminate every hesitation, pause, or discourse marker from spontaneous speech, nor would such elimination necessarily be desirable. However, if speakers possess some degree of control over particular expressions, awareness of their frequency and function may allow them to make more deliberate choices about their use. The issue is therefore not simply whether discourse markers should be used or avoided, but whether their use is appropriate to the communicative context and the function they are intended to perform.

This consideration has implications for classroom communication as well. Teachers, as speakers, may benefit from monitoring speech patterns that repeatedly distract attention from the content being communicated, particularly when presenting information to learners. Students, as listeners, should likewise be encouraged to attend primarily to the information and communicative intentions conveyed by a speaker rather than interpreting every hesitation or disfluency as evidence of poor language ability. Effective classroom communication therefore involves responsibilities on both sides of the interaction.

The present finding consequently introduces personal choice and speaker control as another possible dimension of discourse marker use. It also complements the themes discussed previously. Whereas hesitation, speech anxiety, lexical retrieval difficulty, and complex processing may involve circumstances in which speakers have relatively limited immediate control over speech production, the present theme suggests that some discourse marker use may be perceived as more deliberate. Nevertheless, the degree of control speakers actually exercise over individual discourse markers was not directly measured in the present study. "A Matter of Choice" should therefore be understood primarily as a participant generated interpretation supported by relevant theoretical discussion rather than as evidence that all speakers can consciously control all instances of discourse marker use.

5.8 Politeness

Politeness emerged as another factor associated with participants' use of discourse markers. Unlike factors related primarily to difficulties in speech production, this finding draws attention to the pragmatic and interpersonal functions these linguistic devices may perform. Participants reported using them to reduce the directness of their utterances and to avoid appearing rude or impolite. One participant

stated, “I use them when I don’t want to sound mean or impolite”, while another explained, “it’s a way for me to say what I want to say in a polite way”.

This finding can be interpreted in relation to Hymes’ (1972) concept of sociolinguistic competence. Successful communication involves more than grammatical and lexical knowledge; speakers also need to know what can appropriately be said, to whom, when, and how within a particular communicative context. From this perspective, the participants’ reported use of discourse markers for politeness reflects an awareness that the way a message is expressed may influence how it is interpreted by an interlocutor. The finding may also be related to strategic competence, particularly when a speaker deliberately employs linguistic resources to achieve a particular communicative objective. Within the framework proposed by Celce-Murcia et al. (1995), the strategic use of available linguistic resources can contribute to effective communication. If discourse markers are employed to soften an utterance, manage an interpersonal situation, or avoid sounding excessively direct, their use may therefore contribute to the speaker’s broader communicative competence.

Hedging is another relevant concept in interpreting this finding. Hedges can reduce the force, certainty, or directness of an utterance and may consequently perform important interpersonal functions (Fraser, 2010). This may be particularly relevant for second language learners, since insufficient pragmatic knowledge can occasionally result in an intended message being perceived as excessively direct or impolite. Appropriate mitigating devices may help speakers reduce the imposition or directness of their discourse and consequently minimise the possibility of pragmatic failure.

The participants’ responses support this interpretation. Their accounts suggest that discourse markers were not always used because they were unable to formulate an utterance. In some cases, participants reported employing them because they wanted to influence the manner in which their message was received by the interlocutor. This represents an important distinction between discourse markers used primarily in response to speech production difficulties and those employed for identifiable pragmatic purposes.

Consider the following example:

“I can’t um go out like tonight, um, maybe some other time?”

The removal of um and like would not substantially alter the basic propositional content of the utterance. However, these expressions, together with the hesitant formulation of the response, may contribute to making the refusal sound less abrupt. This illustrates an important distinction between semantic optionality and pragmatic function. An expression may contribute little to the propositional meaning of an utterance while still influencing its interpersonal interpretation.

Consequently, discourse markers that appear semantically optional should not automatically be regarded as meaningless. Their communicative importance may instead lie in the pragmatic function they perform. This is particularly important in the context of the present study because it demonstrates that reducing reliance on discourse markers should not mean eliminating their functional use. Learners need to distinguish between discourse markers that perform identifiable pragmatic or interactional functions and expressions that are repeatedly inserted without a clear communicative purpose.

This finding also has implications for EFL instruction in Morocco. Textbooks such as Focus, Gateway to English, Ticket 2 English, and Al Massar are intended to contribute to learners’ development of communicative competence. However, greater attention to discourse markers and their relationship to pragmatics could provide learners with a more explicit understanding of how apparently optional linguistic expressions contribute to interpersonal meaning. Such instruction could also provide teachers

with a clearer basis for addressing discourse marker use as part of spoken communication rather than treating these expressions simply as items that should be avoided.

Learners may therefore benefit from developing awareness of the pragmatic functions performed by discourse markers. Understanding when these expressions contribute to politeness, mitigation, discourse organisation, or interactional management may help learners use them more purposefully. The objective should not be the complete elimination of discourse markers, but the development of sufficient pragmatic awareness to distinguish functional use from unnecessary reliance.

5.9 Habit Formation

Habit formation emerged as another factor that participants associated with their use of discourse markers. One participant explained that “it’s more of a habit for me now because I used to use them a lot”. This response suggests that repeated use of particular discourse markers over time may result in their becoming habitual features of speech, occurring with limited conscious attention or deliberate planning.

Habitual use of particular expressions is not restricted to English. Similar patterns can be observed across languages. In French, for example, expressions such as *du coup* and *genre* may become recurrent features of an individual’s speech and are sometimes informally described as *tics de langage*. This provides an interesting parallel with the participant’s perception that repeated use of particular expressions may eventually become habitual.

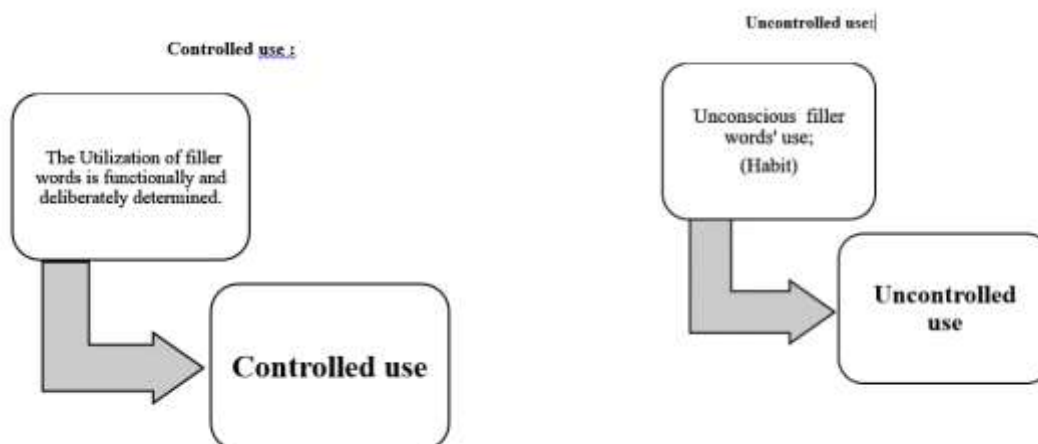
However, habitual discourse marker use should be distinguished from clinical vocal tics. Vocal tics may occur in neurological conditions such as Tourette syndrome and involve involuntary vocalisations. The participant’s account in the present study concerns a different phenomenon: the possibility that ordinary linguistic repetition may gradually become habitual and occur with reduced conscious control. In other words, the recurrent production of a discourse marker does not, in itself, indicate the presence of a neurological disorder.

The concept of habit formation provides a useful explanation for this participant’s experience. Within behavioural accounts, habits are generally understood as behaviours that become increasingly automatic through repetition. A behaviour that may initially involve conscious selection can, through repeated performance, require progressively less conscious deliberation. Applied to discourse marker use, an expression that a learner initially employs deliberately may gradually become a recurrent feature of speech.

This interpretation also introduces an important distinction between controlled and uncontrolled use. Controlled discourse marker use occurs when speakers select an expression according to the pragmatic, interactional, or discourse function it performs and avoid it when it is unnecessary. Uncontrolled use, by contrast, may develop when repeated use has become habitual and an expression is inserted with little conscious attention to its function or appropriateness within the utterance.

The distinction is represented in Figure 1. Controlled use involves the deliberate selection of discourse markers according to their functionality and communicative purpose, whereas uncontrolled use represents habitual or relatively unconscious insertion. The figure therefore illustrates the participant based interpretation that repeated use may gradually reduce the degree of conscious control exercised over particular discourse markers.

Figure 1
Controlled and Uncontrolled Use of Discourse Markers



The concept of habit formation consequently adds another dimension to the findings. Whereas the preceding theme of choice emphasised speakers' potential control over discourse marker use, habit formation demonstrates how repeated use may gradually reduce that control. These two themes are therefore closely related: an expression may initially be selected deliberately but become increasingly automatic through frequent repetition.

5.10 Rapid Speech

Rapid speech was identified by one participant as another factor associated with discourse marker use. The participant stated, "When I speak quickly, I employ them". This observation suggests that increasing the rate of speech may leave some learners with less time to plan, retrieve, and formulate linguistic material before producing it.

One interpretation proposed in the present study is that speaking rapidly may place greater demands on learners whose linguistic resources are not sufficiently automatised to support that rate of production. When speakers attempt to maintain a rate that exceeds their ability to plan and formulate an utterance comfortably, difficulties in lexical retrieval, grammatical formulation, pronunciation, or fluency may become more noticeable. Under such circumstances, discourse markers functioning as planning devices may occur while the speaker attempts to maintain the flow of speech.

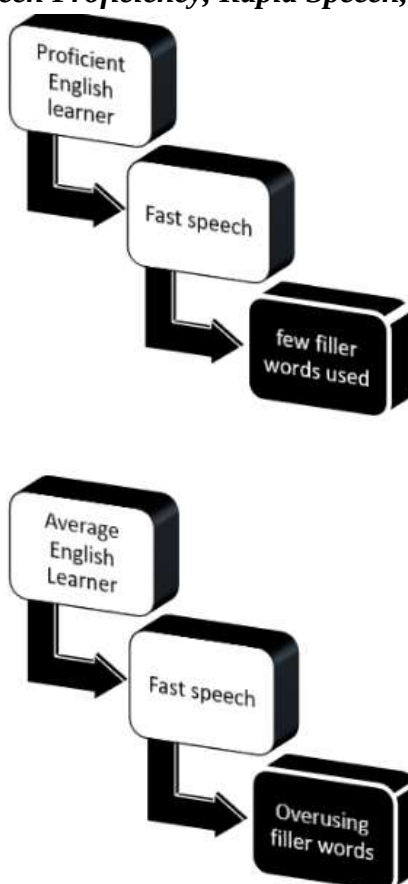
This interpretation was also considered in relation to the author's experience as an EFL learner and observations of language learning. Additional informal insight was obtained from an experienced native English teacher formerly working at the British Council in Casablanca, who observed that many average learners may mispronounce words or produce grammatical errors when attempting to speak rapidly. Although this observation did not specifically establish a relationship between rapid speech and discourse marker use, it supports the broader possibility that attempting to speak beyond one's comfortable processing rate may affect aspects of speech production.

This does not mean that rapid speech necessarily indicates greater proficiency. Learners may sometimes associate fast speech with native speaker competence and consequently attempt to increase their speaking rate in order to sound more proficient or natural. However, effective spoken communication depends not simply on speed but on the speaker's ability to formulate and deliver the intended message accurately and comprehensibly. A relatively proficient learner whose language processing has become more automatised may be capable of maintaining a faster rate without substantially disrupting speech

production, whereas another learner may experience greater processing difficulty when attempting to maintain the same rate.

The distinction underlying this interpretation is illustrated in Figure 2. The figure proposes two possible relationships between proficiency and rapid speech. For a proficient English learner, increased speech rate may remain compatible with relatively fluent speech. For an average learner whose linguistic processing is less automatised, attempting to maintain rapid speech may be accompanied by increased reliance on discourse markers.

Figure 2
Proposed Relationship Between Proficiency, Rapid Speech, and Discourse Marker Use



Note. The figure should be interpreted as a conceptual representation of the interpretation developed from the participant's account rather than as an experimentally established model. In the present qualitative data, rapid speech was identified by one participant, and the relationship between speech rate and discourse marker frequency was not quantitatively measured. The theme nevertheless provides a potentially important insight into how the temporal demands of speech production may influence learners' perceived reliance on discourse markers. Rapid speech is not considered a strategy that would help learners handle challenging situations and communicate effectively; therefore, it does not fall into the category proposed by Celce-Murcia et al. (1995), who refer to this dimension as strategic competence. Rapid speech accompanied by excessive reliance on discourse markers may also interfere with clear message delivery and communicative effectiveness.

5.11 Complex Thought Processing

Complex thought processing emerged as the final factor that participants associated with discourse marker use. Interviewee 18 explained that discourse markers occurred “when the idea I am trying to express is too complex that I cannot put it into words”. This response suggests that the difficulty may not necessarily lie in the absence of an idea, but in the process of converting a complex thought into an appropriate linguistic form.

This interpretation can be related to previous research on filled pauses and cognitive processing. Christenfeld (1994) found that filled pauses increased when speakers faced more complex choices, while Brennan and Williams (1995) showed that filled pauses can signal uncertainty to listeners. Fox Tree (2007) likewise discusses speakers’ and listeners’ interpretations of expressions such as um and uh. These perspectives are consistent with the participant’s perception that discourse markers may occur when the idea being formulated is cognitively demanding.

An important interpretation arising from this finding is that complex thinking may require more demanding linguistic formulation. A speaker may understand the idea that he or she wishes to communicate but require less frequent vocabulary, more elaborate syntactic structures, or more precise lexical choices to verbalise it adequately. Retrieving and organising these linguistic resources may create temporary gaps during speech production. Speakers may leave such gaps silent through pausing or fill them through linguistic devices such as filled pauses and, in some contexts, discourse markers.

During this process, learners may employ several means of reformulating the intended message. They may paraphrase the original idea, retrieve synonyms, replace less accessible vocabulary with more frequent words, or reformulate the message using simpler linguistic structures. These processes may occur deliberately or with limited conscious attention as the speaker attempts to maintain communication while searching for an appropriate linguistic formulation.

This provides a rationale for the use of relatively simple and direct language when complex linguistic formulation is unnecessary. Frequent and familiar lexical items are generally more accessible than words that a learner rarely retrieves from the mental lexicon. Consequently, expressing a complex idea through accessible language may reduce some of the lexical retrieval and planning demands involved in speech production. Importantly, using simple language does not necessarily imply expressing simple ideas. A concept may be intellectually complex while still being communicated through clear and relatively accessible linguistic forms.

From this perspective, learners may benefit from prioritising clarity of expression rather than linguistic complexity for its own sake. When a complex expression can be communicated accurately through simpler and more accessible language, doing so may facilitate meaning transmission and reduce the processing burden involved in spontaneous speech. More elaborate language remains valuable when it is required to express the intended meaning precisely and when the speaker possesses sufficient linguistic resources to use it effectively.

Complex thought processing therefore provides a useful connection among several factors identified in the present study. A cognitively demanding idea may require less accessible vocabulary, increase lexical retrieval demands, produce hesitation, create a need for additional planning time, and consequently increase the likelihood that discourse markers functioning as planning devices will occur. Rather than representing completely independent explanations, some of the themes identified by participants may therefore interact during actual speech production.

5.12 Discussion of Strategies for Minimising Discourse Marker Use

The second group of findings concerns the strategies participants reported using to lessen their reliance on discourse markers. The eight strategies are closely connected to several of the factors identified in relation to the first research question. For example, building self confidence relates to speech anxiety, strategic pausing to buying time and hesitation, thinking in the target language to language transfer, slowing down speech to rapid speech, and speaking naturally and directly to native speaker speech imitation and complex linguistic formulation. The strategies therefore provide participants' responses to some of the difficulties identified in the preceding findings.

5.12.1 Building Self Confidence

Building self confidence was identified by participants as a strategy for reducing their reliance on discourse markers. This finding can be interpreted in relation to the earlier theme of speech anxiety. Participants previously reported that anxiety could contribute to their use of discourse markers; conversely, one participant explained that gaining confidence helped reduce such reliance. Confidence and anxiety may therefore represent closely related affective dimensions of participants' spoken language experiences.

Self confidence in foreign language learning can broadly be understood as learners' belief in their ability to communicate successfully. Developing confidence does not require learners to imitate native speaker speech or to produce error free English. As argued in the preceding discussion of native speaker speech imitation, learners may instead benefit from being selective about the features of spoken English they adopt and from developing a speaking style that enables them to communicate effectively.

An important aspect of confidence is learners' attitude towards errors. Speakers who are excessively concerned about making mistakes or about how their English will be evaluated may experience additional pressure while attempting to communicate. Greater acceptance of errors as part of language learning may allow learners to participate more actively in communicative situations and concentrate more effectively on conveying their intended meaning.

Active participation may also increase opportunities for learners to become aware of recurrent speech patterns. Learners who speak regularly in class, participate in discussions, and deliver presentations provide both themselves and their teachers with opportunities to notice repeated discourse markers or other expressions that may have become habitual. Confidence may consequently facilitate not only communication but also awareness and subsequent monitoring of speech.

The present finding therefore suggests that building self confidence may help some learners gain greater control over discourse marker use, particularly when their reliance on these expressions is associated with anxiety or fear of speaking. This does not imply that confident speakers necessarily use few discourse markers, since discourse markers may also perform important communicative functions. Rather, participants perceived greater confidence as helping them reduce forms of reliance that they themselves considered unnecessary.

5.12.2 Strategic Pausing

Strategic pausing emerged as one of the clearest alternatives participants reported using instead of unnecessary discourse markers. Participants explained that they deliberately paused when they needed time to think rather than immediately filling the silence with expressions such as *um* or other recurrent discourse markers.

This strategy is particularly relevant to the earlier themes of hesitation and buying time. Speakers frequently require time to retrieve vocabulary, formulate an idea, or determine how an utterance should

continue. A pause can provide this planning time without requiring the speaker to fill every moment of silence linguistically. In this respect, strategic pausing may fulfil some of the temporal functions for which participants previously reported using discourse markers.

Accepting silence, however, may be difficult for speakers. A short pause may feel considerably longer to the person speaking than to the listener, particularly when the speaker is concentrating on maintaining conversational flow. Learners may consequently insert discourse markers because they perceive silence as uncomfortable or as evidence that they are struggling to communicate.

Silence itself can nevertheless perform useful communicative functions. A deliberate pause may provide listeners with time to process an important idea, emphasise information, separate different points, or mark a transition to a new topic. Strategic pausing should therefore not necessarily be regarded as an interruption to communication. When used deliberately, it can become part of effective speech delivery. This does not mean that discourse markers should always be replaced by silence. Functional discourse markers may organise discourse, manage interaction, express stance, or fulfil other pragmatic purposes. Strategic pausing is particularly relevant when a learner recognises that an expression is being inserted primarily to occupy planning time and does not perform another necessary communicative function.

5.12.3 Thinking in the Target Language

Thinking in the target language was another strategy participants reported employing. Several participants explained that they attempted to reduce mental translation from Arabic or Darija into English. Their accounts suggest that they perceived direct processing in English as helping them reduce the hesitation that occurred while converting an intended message from one language into another.

This strategy relates directly to the earlier finding concerning language transfer. As previously discussed, one possible explanation proposed by participants was that an idea may initially be processed through the first language before being reformulated in English. When an immediately available English equivalent cannot be retrieved, the speaker may experience a temporary gap and rely on a discourse marker while completing the formulation process.

Thinking directly in English may reduce some of this additional processing for learners who have developed sufficient proficiency to do so. Instead of first constructing an utterance in the first language and then searching for corresponding English forms, learners may gradually develop stronger associations between concepts and English linguistic resources. The purpose is not to eliminate the influence of the first language completely, which would be an unrealistic objective, but to reduce unnecessary dependence on word for word translation during spontaneous communication.

The participants' strategy also has an interesting historical connection with approaches to foreign language teaching that emphasised direct association between meaning and the target language. The Direct Method, associated particularly with Maximilian Berlitz, promoted extensive target language use and generally avoided translation as the principal means of instruction. Although contemporary understandings of language learning do not require complete exclusion of learners' first languages, the participants' accounts similarly emphasise the perceived value of developing the ability to formulate ideas directly through English.

Thinking in the target language may therefore be particularly useful when translation itself becomes a source of delay during spontaneous speech. As learners become more accustomed to processing meaning through English, they may require less time to move between linguistic systems and consequently feel less need to use discourse markers during translation related pauses.

5.12.4 Speaking Naturally and Directly

Speaking naturally and directly was another strategy participants associated with reducing their reliance on discourse markers. This theme contains two closely connected ideas: avoiding the unnecessary imitation of another speaker's style and expressing ideas through relatively simple and direct language. One participant explained, "I would rather sound Moroccan when speaking English instead of American". During the subsequent discussion of the findings, the participant clarified that learners who excessively reproduce particular features associated with native speaker speech may "sound fake" or appear to be "trying too hard to be someone they are not". This participant's interpretation is particularly interesting when considered alongside the earlier theme of native speaker speech imitation.

The participant's argument should not be interpreted as meaning that discourse markers sound natural only when used by native speakers. EFL learners can employ discourse markers appropriately and naturally. Rather, the participant appears to question the unselective reproduction of expressions merely because learners associate them with American, British, or other native speaker varieties of English. A learner may communicate effectively while retaining features associated with his or her own linguistic identity.

The second aspect of the strategy concerns direct and relatively simple language. This idea relates to the earlier discussion of complex thought processing. When speakers attempt to formulate an idea through unfamiliar vocabulary or unnecessarily complicated linguistic structures, lexical retrieval and planning demands may increase. Participants reported that keeping their speech "simple and direct" helped them reduce their reliance on discourse markers.

Simple language should not be equated with simplistic thought or limited proficiency. Complex ideas can frequently be communicated through clear, familiar, and accessible language. When a common lexical item communicates the intended meaning accurately, selecting it rather than a less accessible alternative may reduce retrieval demands and allow the speaker to maintain a more controlled flow of speech.

Speaking naturally and directly therefore represents both an orientation towards authenticity and a practical speech production strategy. Rather than attempting to reproduce every feature associated with another variety of English or pursuing complexity for its own sake, learners may concentrate on expressing their intended meaning clearly through linguistic resources they can use effectively.

5.12.5 Speech Recording

Speech recording was identified as a strategy that enabled participants to monitor their own spoken production. One participant reported speaking to himself and recording his speech. This strategy is particularly valuable because speakers may not notice every recurrent discourse marker, hesitation, pronunciation difficulty, or grammatical problem while concentrating simultaneously on producing an utterance.

Listening retrospectively to a recording changes the learner's position from speaker to listener. During spontaneous production, attention is primarily directed towards constructing and communicating the message. When listening to the recording afterwards, learners can focus specifically on how that message was produced. They may therefore identify discourse markers that occur repeatedly, determine the contexts in which they appear, and consider whether they perform an identifiable function.

Speech recording may consequently serve two related purposes. First, it can facilitate identification by making recurrent patterns more noticeable. Second, once a pattern has been identified, the learner can consider an appropriate response. For example, a learner who discovers that discourse markers occur

primarily during lexical retrieval may practise strategic pausing, whereas another who notices frequent discourse markers during rapid speech may experiment with reducing speech rate.

The accessibility of recording technology makes this strategy particularly practical. Most contemporary smartphones provide straightforward audio recording functions, allowing learners to record short speaking tasks, presentations, reflections, or spontaneous monologues and subsequently review their performance. The pedagogical value lies not in the technology itself but in the opportunities it provides for self monitoring and independent learning.

Speech recording also connects naturally with several of the other strategies identified in this study. It can help learners determine whether they are speaking too rapidly, recognise where strategic pauses could be used, monitor changes following repeated speaking practice, and distinguish functional discourse marker use from habitual reliance. In this sense, recording may operate as a monitoring mechanism through which learners evaluate the effectiveness of other strategies.

5.12.6 Replacing Unnecessary Discourse Markers with Meaningful Expressions

Another strategy proposed by participants was replacing unnecessary discourse markers with more meaningful expressions. One participant explained, “I tried to replace them with more meaningful words”. The underlying principle is that when learners recognise that a recurrent expression contributes little to their intended message, they may attempt to employ an expression that performs a clearer discourse function instead.

Transitional expressions such as *in the same way*, *now let us consider*, and *fundamentally*, depending on the communicative context, may help speakers establish relationships between ideas, introduce a new point, or organise their discourse. Such expressions should not, however, be treated as direct substitutes for every discourse marker. Discourse markers themselves can perform important and sometimes multiple pragmatic functions.

For example, *you know* may perform different functions depending on its position, intonation, and communicative context. Previous accounts have associated it with interactional functions such as seeking acknowledgement from an interlocutor, highlighting information, and contributing to the management of narratives (Schourup, 1985; Östman, 1981). Consequently, replacing a functional discourse marker merely because it is a discourse marker would not necessarily improve communication.

The participants’ strategy is more appropriately understood as replacing unnecessary or habitual discourse markers with expressions that contribute to the organisation or meaning of the utterance when such expressions are needed. If a discourse marker already performs an appropriate communicative function, replacement may be unnecessary. If it is repeatedly inserted without a clear function, the learner may instead pause or employ a more appropriate linguistic expression.

This distinction is particularly relevant to the broader interpretation of the study. The objective is not to make learners’ speech completely devoid of discourse markers but to increase awareness of what particular expressions are doing within an utterance. Learners may then decide whether to retain a functional marker, replace an unnecessary expression, or simply allow a brief pause.

5.12.7 Slowing Down Speech

Slowing down speech was another strategy participants reported employing to lessen their reliance on discourse markers. Participants explained, “I just learnt to speak slowly and think” and “I take my time when speaking and processing ideas”. Their accounts indicate that reducing speech rate provided additional time for planning, lexical retrieval, and formulation.

This strategy corresponds closely to the earlier theme of rapid speech. If attempting to maintain an uncomfortable speaking rate increases processing demands for a particular learner, deliberately slowing down may provide more time for linguistic formulation. The important issue is not speaking slowly for its own sake but adopting a rate that enables the speaker to maintain clarity and control.

Learners may speak rapidly for different reasons. For some, a relatively fast rate may simply reflect their habitual speaking style, including patterns transferred from their first language. Others may deliberately attempt to speak quickly because they associate speed with fluency or native speaker competence. In the latter case, the assumption that greater speed necessarily represents greater proficiency may place unnecessary pressure on speech production.

Fluency should therefore not be reduced to speaking rapidly. Effective spoken communication involves maintaining a sufficiently continuous and coherent flow of speech while conveying an intelligible message. A learner who speaks somewhat more slowly but communicates ideas clearly and coherently may communicate more effectively than one who maintains a rapid rate at the expense of planning and comprehensibility.

Slowing down also creates opportunities for strategic pausing. Rather than attempting to maintain uninterrupted speech, learners can allow themselves sufficient time to organise an idea, retrieve an appropriate word, and give listeners time to process information. The two strategies can consequently operate together: an appropriate speaking rate provides space for deliberate pauses, while strategic pauses reduce the perceived need to fill every moment of silence.

For classroom practice, teachers may therefore encourage learners to prioritise clarity, appropriate pacing, and effective communication rather than treating rapid delivery as an indication of successful speaking. Learners can gradually increase their speaking rate as linguistic processing becomes more automatic, without making speed itself the primary objective.

5.12.8 Practising Speaking

Practising speaking was the final strategy identified from participants' responses. Participants referred to repeated practice, public speaking, and delivering presentations as means through which they had developed greater control over their spoken production. This strategy is particularly significant because regular speaking practice may interact with several of the other strategies identified in the study.

Repeated practice can provide learners with greater experience in retrieving vocabulary, formulating utterances, managing pauses, and communicating under different interactional conditions. It may also contribute to greater confidence. This connection is important given the earlier findings concerning anxiety and hesitation: learners who participate regularly in communicative activities may gradually become more accustomed to producing English under real time conditions.

Presentations and other communicative activities can provide particularly useful opportunities for such practice. They require learners to organise ideas, maintain speech for extended periods, respond to communicative pressure, and monitor how effectively a message is being conveyed. Through repeated exposure to these situations, learners may become more aware of recurrent discourse markers and develop greater control over when and why they employ them.

The interpretation also raises an interesting possibility concerning the speakers with whom learners practise. Repeated exposure to particular speech patterns may influence learners' own production, especially when learners deliberately imitate features they associate with proficient or natural sounding speech. This possibility connects with the earlier theme of native speaker speech imitation and suggests that speaking practice may shape not only fluency and confidence but also recurrent discourse habits.

Being selective does not mean that learners should practise only with speakers who never hesitate or use discourse markers. Such a model would be unrealistic because natural spoken language contains pauses, repairs, and discourse markers. Rather, learners may benefit from exposure to speakers who use these resources effectively and from paying attention to the functions they perform rather than mechanically reproducing their frequency.

Most importantly, practising speaking should not aim at eliminating discourse markers altogether. Some discourse markers perform important pragmatic, interpersonal, and organisational functions, and occasional hesitation is a normal characteristic of spontaneous speech. The objective identified throughout the present study is therefore to help learners lessen unnecessary reliance on discourse markers while developing greater awareness of their functional use.

Taken together, the eight strategies suggest that participants approached discourse marker use through a combination of affective, cognitive, linguistic, behavioural, and self monitoring techniques. Building self confidence addressed affective difficulties; thinking directly in English and slowing down supported speech processing; strategic pausing provided an alternative means of gaining planning time; natural and direct language reduced unnecessary production demands; meaningful expressions supported discourse organisation; recording facilitated self monitoring; and speaking practice provided opportunities to consolidate these strategies. These findings demonstrate the range of techniques that participants themselves reported using to moderate their reliance on discourse markers.

6. Conclusion

The present study qualitatively examined the factors that participants associated with their use of discourse markers in spoken English and the strategies they reported employing to lessen their reliance on these linguistic devices. The thematic analysis identified eleven factors: infrequent jargon, hesitation, language transfer, speech anxiety, buying time, native speaker speech imitation, personal choice, politeness, habit formation, rapid speech, and complex thought processing. These findings demonstrate that discourse marker use was not attributed to a single source but was associated with a combination of linguistic, cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and habitual factors.

The study also identified eight strategies that participants reported using to minimise unnecessary reliance on discourse markers: building self confidence, strategic pausing, thinking in the target language, speaking naturally and directly, speech recording, replacing unnecessary discourse markers with meaningful expressions, slowing down speech, and practising speaking. Several of these strategies corresponded closely to the factors identified in the first part of the study. For example, building self confidence was associated with speech anxiety, strategic pausing with hesitation and buying time, thinking in the target language with language transfer, and slowing down speech with rapid speech. The findings therefore provide a participant centred account not only of why discourse markers may occur but also of how learners attempt to manage their use.

Importantly, the findings do not suggest that discourse markers should be completely eliminated from spoken communication. These linguistic devices can perform important pragmatic, interactional, and discourse organisational functions. The more relevant distinction is between functional discourse marker use and frequent or habitual reliance on expressions that contribute little to a speaker's immediate communicative purpose. Developing awareness of this distinction may enable learners to use discourse markers more deliberately and appropriately.

7. Limitations

The findings of the present study should be considered in light of several limitations. First, the study involved a relatively small sample of twenty Master's students of Applied Linguistics from a specific educational context. The findings therefore represent the experiences and perceptions of this particular group and should not automatically be generalised to all Moroccan EFL learners or to learners in other educational contexts.

Second, the study relied primarily on participants' self reported explanations of their discourse marker use and the strategies they perceived as useful in managing it. Factors such as speech anxiety, familiarity with interlocutors, habitual use, rapid speech, and complex thought processing were not independently or experimentally measured. The findings should therefore be interpreted as participants' perceptions and qualitative explanations rather than as established causal relationships.

Third, some themes identified in the study, particularly habit formation, rapid speech, and the possible transfer of discourse habits from the first language, have received comparatively limited direct attention in previous research on discourse marker use. Although this increases the exploratory value of the findings, further empirical investigation is required before broader conclusions can be drawn.

Finally, the study focused exclusively on spoken discourse. The factors associated with discourse marker use and the strategies employed to manage such use may operate differently in written communication, where speakers have considerably more time to plan, revise, and monitor language production.

8. Further Research

The findings provide several directions for further investigation. Future research could examine more directly the relationship between first language use and discourse marker production in a second or foreign language. In particular, research could investigate whether learners transfer habitual discourse patterns from their first language to English and whether the pragmatic functions associated with particular first language expressions influence the way apparently comparable expressions are used in the target language.

Further studies could also investigate the relationship between speech rate and discourse marker frequency. The present study identified rapid speech as a participant reported factor and slowing down as a corresponding strategy. Experimental or corpus based research comparing discourse marker frequency at different speaking rates could provide stronger evidence regarding this possible relationship.

Habit formation represents another useful area for investigation. Longitudinal research could examine whether repeated use of particular discourse markers gradually becomes more automatic and whether increased awareness, speech recording, strategic pausing, or other interventions can help speakers regain greater control over habitual use.

Future research may also investigate how EFL learners acquire knowledge of the pragmatic and interactional functions of discourse markers. Particular attention could be given to whether such knowledge develops through formal instruction, exposure to naturally occurring English, interaction with proficient speakers, or a combination of these sources.

Another relevant area concerns teachers' perspectives. Research could examine how English language teachers perceive discourse markers, whether they distinguish their functional use from unnecessary discourse marker use, and whether they explicitly encourage, discourage, or teach particular forms of discourse marker use in speaking.

The strategies identified in the present study could also be examined through intervention based research. For example, future studies could investigate whether strategic pausing, speech recording, controlled speaking practice, increased pragmatic awareness, or reduced dependence on mental translation produce measurable changes in learners' discourse marker use over time.

9. Implications

The findings of the present study have several pedagogical implications for Moroccan EFL contexts. Most importantly, discourse markers should not be treated simply as meaningless expressions or features that learners must eliminate. Since they may perform pragmatic, interpersonal, and discourse organisational functions, instruction should help learners distinguish between functional use and unnecessary or habitual reliance.

Discourse markers could be integrated more explicitly into Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis courses. Learners could examine authentic spoken extracts to identify how particular markers contribute to politeness, stance, mitigation, turn management, hesitation, and discourse organisation. Such activities would enable students to understand that expressions contributing little to propositional meaning may still perform important communicative functions.

The strategies identified in the study also offer practical applications for speaking instruction. Teachers can encourage strategic pausing, appropriate speech rate, speech recording, repeated speaking practice, and greater awareness of mental translation. These techniques may help learners monitor their speech and manage discourse marker use more deliberately without aiming at complete elimination.

A further implication concerns teaching materials. Moroccan EFL textbooks could be evaluated to determine how far they address discourse markers and their pragmatic functions. Where such coverage is limited, consciousness raising activities could be introduced in which learners identify discourse markers in spoken texts, examine their functions, and compare functional use with unnecessary repetition (Willis & Willis, 1996).

Overall, the pedagogical emphasis should be on awareness, function, and controlled use rather than avoidance. Helping learners understand why discourse markers are used, when they are communicatively useful, and how unnecessary reliance can be managed may contribute to more effective spoken communication.

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