

Exploring the Use of Discourse Markers in EFL Students' Writing through Google Docs

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the discourse markers (DMs) used in EFL undergraduates' writing through Google Docs. It tends to find out whether there are any significant differences in DMs used in the narrative, descriptive, and process essays, and the significant issues arising from the EFL undergraduates' use of DMs in essay writing. It adopted a qualitative case study to obtain data from 36 narrative, descriptive, and process essays written by 12 pairs of EFL undergraduates. The DMs in written essays are investigated, categorized, and analyzed according to Fraser's (1988) model of message relationship markers. The findings indicate that (1) there is no relationship between the number of words within the essays and the number of message relationship markers, (2) the EFL undergraduates use the highest number of parallel DMs in the three essays: narrative, descriptive, and process essays, followed by contrastive, inferential, and elaborative DMs, respectively. The thematic analysis of the EFL undergraduates' written essays (3) showed a range of significant issues such as the overuse of DMs, EFL undergraduates' misuse and ignorance of DMs, and the multiple uses of DMs. Finally, the study presents pedagogical implications for writing instructors in increasing awareness of EFL undergraduates of DMs, including their varied types, functions, and proper uses in writing courses.

Keywords: collaborative writing, discourse markers, essay writing, Google docs

1. Introduction

Theorists and researchers in second language acquisition (SLA) have always been fascinated by how learners develop second language (L2) writing literacy. They appear to be quite engaged in supporting L2 learners in overcoming persistent errors in the L2 writing process (Pourdana et al., 2021). A range of written corrective feedback WCF modes appears to have been utilized to draw L2 learners' attention to linguistic structures and to prompt continuous self-monitoring of their language learning process (Hyland, 2002; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010). Google Docs has been mentioned in various previous research (Alharbi, 2019; Bradley & Thoušny, 2017; Ebadi & Rahimi, 2017; Ishtaiwa & Aburezeq, 2015) promising tools for e-feedback practices. These studies asserted that Google Docs could be an excellent platform for collaborative writing and editing because students can write, share, and revise their work utilizing the editing features. In addition, teachers and students can also use the commenting function to exchange written feedback and the reply function to respond to feedback (Alharbi 2019).

Written discourse in classroom environments can be seen as a deliberate engagement between writers and readers. This is clear evidence of a text that only exists as part of an engagement between writers and readers (Hoey, 2001). Developing writing skills is a crucial and challenging aspect of language learning. Traditionally, the grammatical system of DMs has been conceptualized as resources for speakers and writers to mark transitions in the development of a text to mark rhetorical ties used to develop the text step by step, and the rhetorical ties marked in this way by DMs are semantic relations that organize the text as a flow of meaning (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). With English's reputation as an international language and its widespread use, a growing number of EFL learners are pursuing academic goals where they required to produce written essays. One fascinating area of research in second language writing is how EFL learners deal with DMs in their writing. What makes the use of DMs in EFL writing is still under-explored (Al-khazraji, 2019; Pourdana et al., 2021; Zahro et al., 2021; Hamza, 2018). Pourdana et al. (2021) investigated metalinguistic written corrective feedback on DMs in writing performance through the mobile application of WhatsApp messenger as a mobile-mediated environment. EFL learners' overuse or underuse of DMs

in essay writing might lead to semantic or pragmatic misinterpretations (Zare-ee *et al.*, 2017). Hamza (2018) explored the common errors of using DMs by Iraqi EFL learners in a discourse completion test. Similarly, Dumlao and Wilang (2019) called for future studies on the misuse of DMs in students writing, leading to the incoherence of the texts and becoming difficult to understand.

Such calls for future studies urged the researcher to explore DMs used in students' writing in terms of the nature of DMs used in students' writing through Google Docs and whether there are any significant differences in DMs used in the narrative, descriptive, and process essays. In addition to the significant issues arising from the EFL undergraduates' use of DMs in essay writing. The current study presents the findings of the analysis of 36 narrative, descriptive, and process essays written by EFL undergraduates. It aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of DMs are used in EFL undergraduates' writing through Google Docs?
2. Are there any significant differences in DMs used in narrative, descriptive and process essays?
3. What significant issues emerged from the EFL undergraduates' use of DMs in essay writing?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Perspective

Previous research on DMs (see, Fraser, 1996, 1988; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Hyland, 2004; Schiffrin, 1987) has focused on the crucial role of DMs in writing and provided some classifications of DMs. The models presented by Fraser (1988, 1996) are among the most relevant frameworks for analyzing DMs in the writing process. Jalilifar (2008) stated that Fraser's model of DMs fits written discourse, and it appears to be the most accurate model used for the classification of written discourse. DMs in written discourse serve according to Fraser, (1996) as "an expression which signals the relationship of the basic message to the foregoing discourse." (p.186). Likely, Halliday and Hasan (1976) stated that DMs are crucial for generating coherence in a meaningful spoken or written discourse. DMs are connective components that tie different text parts at various levels of phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. According to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) model of grammatical cohesion, DMs consist of four main categories: additive, adversative, causal, or temporal devices.). The term DMs has been called cohesive conjunctions, discourse particle, connective (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), discourse operators (Redeker, 1990), pragmatic particles (Östman, 1995), discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987), and (Fraser, 2006).

Schiffrin (1987), defined DMs as "linguistic elements which signal relations between units of talk by virtue of their syntactic and semantic properties and by virtue of their sequential relations as initial or terminal brackets demarcating discourse units." (p.40). Furthermore, Fraser (1999) defined DMs as a "class of lexical expressions drawn primarily from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases." (p.931). DMs are integral to writing quality (Dülger, 2007); they have a number of grammatical characteristics that distinguish them from other lexical and grammatical elements (Heine *et al.*, 2021). According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), the grammatical system of DMs provides resources for speakers and writers to mark transitions in the development of a text that is, to mark rhetorical ties used to develop the text step by step, and the rhetorical ties marked in this way by DMs are semantic relations that organize the text as a flow of meaning.

DMs occur at the beginning, middle, or end of a sentence. They have various levels of semantic meaning regardless of their positions, and so can communicate a discourse relationship between statements or signal writers' attitudes (Iseni, *et al.*, 2016). EFL learners use elaborative markers extensively in their writings due to their high exposure to the DMs in their mother language (Murray, 1990). Learning DMs is most typically generated in a traditional classroom context. The L2 teacher and learners engage face-to-face, with a few efforts in a computer-assisted or mobile-mediated online L2 learning environment (Pourdana *et al.*, 2021).

2.2 Research on Discourse Markers in EFL Students' Writing

Student-instructor interaction has found no evidence of any long-term increase in DMs accuracy after receiving metalinguistic WCF, as reported by Pourdana *et al.* (2021). Other findings indicated that the distribution of additive, causal, adversative, and temporal DMs fluctuated and was unsystematic in all written essays. Moreover, Dumlao and Wilang (2019) found that L2 students of English overused some types of DMs in their writings, such as temporal and inferential DMs. In addition to the significant differences between L1 and L2 students utilize DMs mainly their frequency and functions. Hamza's (2018) study noticed that the EFL learners are unable to use the accurate DMs in the correct position. In addition, the findings reported that the EFL learners committed mistakes when selecting DMs because the EFL learners are unaware of the meaning and function of DMs. Meanwhile, a study by Zare-ee *et al.* (2017) showed how EFL learners used some types of DMs more frequently than others. The elaborative DMs "and"

and "also" was the most regular in EFL written discourse. Another study by Ali and Mahadin, (2016) reported that EFL learners' proficiency levels influence the usage of DMs. They found that the intermediate EFL learners used more sets of DMs than the advanced EFL learners.

Previous studies showed that the employment of DMs has also been reflected in the quality of EFL writings (Jalilifar's, 2008; Norment, 1994). According to Jalilifar's (2008) study, there is a direct and positive correlation between writing quality and the number of well-functioned DMs. Norment (1994) found a correlation between the frequency of DMs and the quality of writing. Furthermore, Rahimi (2011) reported that using a variety of DMs in writing cannot be a significant predictor of writing quality. Moreover, Martínez (2002) found that the highest-rated writing tasks used a wider variety of DMs, namely, elaborative, inferential, and contrastive, on the other hand, the low-rated writing tasks tended to use the contrastive markers "but" and "although" redundantly. Likely, Fareh, *et al.*, (2020), pointed out that the ability of ELF in recognizing and producing DMS was somewhat low, and their ability to determine the roles of DMs in context was below expectations. Martínez (2002) reported that native Spanish speakers utilize DMs frequently and appropriately in Spanish and English. However, in terms of the number of markers utilized and the types of markers used, they noticed several variations between the writings in English and Spanish.

In terms of cohesion, previous research has focused on the role of DMs in creating cohesion inside the written discourse (see, Al-Kohlani, 2010; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Karaata *et al.*, 2012; Yunus & Haris, 2014). DMs help produce a cohesive discourse which is the essence and substance of writing (Karaata *et al.*, 2012). However, Al-Kohlani (2010) stated that using DMs infrequently affects the writing coherence. According to Dergisi (2010), good writing is about coherence and cohesiveness of the text, not only about grammar. Finally, DMs offer unrestricted interaction and discourse coherence (Zhao, 2013).

2.3 Research on Google Docs as Effective Collaborative Writing and Editing Tool

Technology is an effective tool for facilitating immediate and effective electronic feedback and engagement (Carless & Winstone, 2020). Among the various technological applications used in EFL learning and teaching is Google Docs which allows students to freely edit and modify their writing (Alharbi, 2019; Perron & Sellers, 2011, Saeed & Qunayeer, 2020); it facilitated active dialogic feedback and engaging students dynamically (Jeong, 2016). Instructors heavily use various collaborative writing and editing tools to exchange e-feedback with EFL learners or peer-to-peer e-feedback.

Previous studies (Alharbi, 2019; Bradley & Thoušny, 2017; Ebadi & Rahimi, 2017; Ishtaiwa & Aburezeq, 2015; Neumann & Kopcha, 2019; Saeed & Qunayeer 2020) have focused on interactive e-feedback of EFL learners' writing through Google Docs. According to these studies, Google Docs is free online software that allows EFL students to create and edit documents online. The previous studies revealed that Google Docs could be an ideal platform for collaborative writing and editing. Students can write, share, and revise their writing using editing tools. According to Alharbi (2019), teachers and students can use the commenting tools to exchange written feedback and the reply function to respond to feedback.

In this study, EFL learners used Google Docs as collaborative writing and editing tools to prepare peer writing tasks, narrative, descriptive, and process essays. In addition, EFL peer learners exchange e-feedback that concentrates on global and local issues in their writing tasks, editing, and drafting their writing. The researcher argues that peer learners' exchange of e-feedback via Google Docs allows EFL learners to collaborate deeply in processing and discussing their writing tasks. Therefore, in this study, the researcher planned to explore DMs used in in EFL undergraduates' writing through Google Docs, whether there are any significant differences in DMs used in the narrative, descriptive, and process essays, and the significant issues arising from the EFL undergraduates' use of DMs in essay writing.

3. Methods

3.1 Study Setting

The Fraser's (1988) model of DMs guides the methodology of the present study. This study used a qualitative case study which is, according to Merriam (1988), "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit," (p.16), to obtain data that enriches our knowledge of the message relationship markers: parallel, contrastive, inferential, and elaborative DMs in the narrative, descriptive, and process essays. The present study was conducted among 24 EFL undergraduates joining a writing course in a Saudi university; their first language is Arabic. They have been selected randomly to assured the population representativeness. They have been studying English as a foreign language at college of Science and Art, department of English at Translation, Unaizah.

The participants shared range age from 18 to 20. They studied a course name *writing 2* which introduces EFL undergraduates to short essay writing in different genres, such as narrative, descriptive, and process essays. This course was offered in the second level, second semester for the academic year 2020-2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, through the university's LMS to maintain learning and instruction practices.

3.2 The Procedure and Data Collection

The EFL undergraduates took their online classes on narrative essays, descriptive, and process essays in writing courses. Ethical considerations were preserved. The author got written permission from of the committee of research. Furthermore, after got also permission to conduct the study from the head of the department, the researcher explained the aims of the research to the participants and requested them to participants in the study. They orally expressed agreement. Students also assured that their information and written manuscripts would be anonymously assigned. The EFL undergraduates were assigned to 12 pairs to participate in the activities through Google Docs. Each pair were asked to create and share Google Docs pages through emails. Next, the writing course instructor provided instructions to EFL undergraduates on the peer narrative, descriptive, and process essay writing tasks. Finally, each pair collaborated, wrote, and exchanged feedback on their essays through Google Docs document. The data was collected from EFL undergraduates' final drafts of the peer narrative, descriptive, and process essay writing tasks in Google Docs.

4. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using a qualitative analysis. First, the DMs in EFL undergraduates' final drafts of the peer narrative, descriptive, and process essay writing tasks were investigated, categorized, and analyzed according to Fraser's (1988) model of Message Relationship Markers, which "signal how the current message relates to an earlier part of the discourse" (Fraser, 1988, p.7). Fraser (1988) divided the patterns of the message relationship markers into four subcategories: parallel, contrastive, elaborative, and inferential DMs, as illustrated in Table 1. To assign some of the writing examples of the participants, the author used P to refer to the word "pair" followed by number of the pair from (1 into 12).

Table 1. Fraser's (1988) classification of message relationship markers

Message Relationship Markers	Definition	Sample of Fraser's DMs
Parallel DMs	Markers indicate that the current message is parallel to some previous discourse.	<i>"also, alternatively, analogously, by the same token, correspondingly, equally, likewise, or, otherwise, similarly"</i>
Contrastive DMs	Markers indicate that the sense of contrast.	<i>"all the same, but, despite, however, in spite of, in comparison, in contrast, instead, never/nonetheless, on the one/other hand, on the contrary, rather, regardless, still, though, well, yet"</i>
Elaborative DMs	Markers signals indicate that the current statement is a continuation of a previous one.	<i>"also, besides, better, for example, for instance, further(more), in addition, in fact, in other words, in particular, indeed, more accurately, more precisely, more specifically, moreover, namely, that is"</i>
Inferential DMs	Markers indicate that the present utterance conveys a message consequential to the preceding.	<i>"accordingly, as a consequence, as a result, consequently, hence, in this/that case, of course, so, then, therefore, thus"</i>

5. Findings

The present section presents the findings obtained from analyzing 36 narrative, descriptive, and process essays written by EFL undergraduates through Google Docs into two main themes: the nature of message relationship markers in students' writing through Google Docs and the patterns of DMs based on the essay type.

5.1 The Nature of Message Relationship Markers in Students' Writing through Google Docs

Based on the descriptive analysis of the nature of message relationship markers in EFL undergraduates' writing. As Table 2 illustrates, quantification of the number of words and the message relationship markers in 36 narrative, descriptive, and process essays presents a fascinating insight into the relationship between the numbers of words inside the essays with the number of message relationship markers.

The findings showed that among the three essays type, EFL undergraduates generated the highest number of words in descriptive essays (5540), followed by process essays (5244) and narrative essays (4079), respectively. It is evident that the number of message relationship markers as the most frequently formulated by EFL undergraduates

(376) in process essays, followed by descriptive essays (345), and finally and narrative essays (217). The EFL undergraduates provided the total number of (14863) words and (938) message relationship markers in (36) essays.

The above findings indicate the highest number of message relationship markers employed in process essays than the other essay types. In addition, the findings indicate no relationship between the numbers of words inside the essays with the number of message relationship markers.

Table 2. The distribution of message relationship markers in all peer/collaborative written tasks

No	Essay type	No. of essays	No. of words	No. of DMs
1	Narrative	12	4079	217
2	Descriptive	12	5540	345
3	Process	12	5244	376
Overall		36	14863	938

5.2 The Patterns of the Message Relationship Markers Based on the Essay Type

The patterns of the message relationship markers; parallel, contrastive, elaborative, inferential DMs used by the EFL undergraduates in their writing is another finding of the qualitative analysis of the message relationship markers, which indicate that the EFL undergraduates use a variety of the message relationship markers in the three essays type, narrative, descriptive, and process essays.

The EFL undergraduates use a total number of (938) message relationship markers in (36) essays of three different types, narrative, descriptive, and process essays as Table 3 illustrates that among the four patterns of the message relationship markers; parallel, contrastive, elaborative, inferential, the EFL undergraduates use the highest number of parallel DMs (690) in the three essays type, narrative, descriptive, and process essays followed by contrastive DMs (100), inferential DMs (96) and elaborative DMs (52).

Furthermore, the findings illustrate that the EFL undergraduates use a total number of parallel DMs (690) in the three essays type, narrative, descriptive, and process essays. The parallel DMs in process essays (281) outnumbered the parallel DMs in descriptive essays (226) and narrative essays (183). In addition, the findings show that the EFL undergraduates use a total number of contrastive DMs (100) in the three essays type. The EFL undergraduates used the highest number of contrastive DMs in descriptive essays (40) and process essays (40), whereas contrastive DMs occurred less frequently in the narrative essays (20).

The EFL undergraduates use a total number of inferential DMs (938) in the three essays type. The most frequently inferential DMs (938) employed by EFL undergraduates were in descriptive essays (53), followed by process essays (32), and finally, narrative essays (11). Finally, the findings show that elaborative DMs got the lowest instance among the other types of message relationship markers employed by the EFL undergraduates, as indicated by the total number of elaborative DMs (52). The most frequently elaborative DMs (938) employed by EFL undergraduates were in descriptive essays (26), followed by process essays (23), and, finally, narrative essays (3).

The above findings indicate that the EFL undergraduates use the highest number of parallel DMs in the three essays type, narrative, descriptive, and process essays followed by contrastive DMs, inferential DMs and elaborative DMs.

Table 3. Number and percentage of the type of message relationship markers

No	Essay type	Parallel DMs	Contrastive DMs	Elaborative DMs	Inferential DMs
1	Narrative	183	20	3	11
2	Descriptive	226	40	26	53
3	Process	281	40	23	32
Overall		690	100	52	96

Table 4 below illustrates samples of the various types of message relationship markers used by the EFL undergraduates in the three essays type, narrative, descriptive, and process essays.

Table 4. Sample of Message Relationship Markers in peer/collaborative written tasks

MRMs	Sample
Parallel DMs	“There were a lot of monuments from all over the world. <i>Also</i> , I visited the most popular place in Paris, the Eiffel tower. I went up to see the tower from the top, <i>and</i> I was amazed <i>and</i> frightened by the view.”
Contrastive DMs	“I did not want to go because I’m not fond of museums. <i>However</i> , I did not want to let them down, so I accompanied them. I was very impressed by how large the city was, <i>but</i> it was also very crowded.”
Elaborative DMs	“Friends can change your mood; <i>for example</i> , they can cheer you up when you feel sad. His name is Ali. He was born in England, <i>more specifically</i> in Manchester.”
Inferential DMs	“I didn’t know how to drive back <i>then</i> ; I called my friend who was always by my side to help me. In conclusion, there is no doubt that friends help in our challenging and bad lifetimes. <i>So</i> friends always try to save us from dangerous things and provide timely advice.”

5.3 Significant Issues Arising from the EFL Undergraduates’ Use of DMs in Essay Writing

Analyzing EFL undergraduates’ use of DMs in essay writing has reported various significant issues. They are discussed under the following sub-themes.

5.4 EFL Undergraduates’ Overuse of DMs

Overuse of DMs in essay writing has been clearly noticed. EFL undergraduates often initiate overuse of DMs either because they had significant difficulty understanding the comprehension and generation of DMs or due to a lack of awareness and knowledge of English DMs. As a result, they rely on the repetition of MDs found in their native language instead of its variant.

This is evidenced by the following extract of peer/collaborative written tasks through Google Docs.

P1. “People always come to buy expensive paintings *so* that they can hang them on the back of their desks. *However*, I did not want to let them down, *so* I accompanied them. I was more inclined to old cars, *so* I went there. I did not want to bother her, *so* I went to the painting section. While I was walking to the section, I forgot that I had come here with my cousins, *so* I went to look for them.”

It can be noticed from the above excerpt that EFL undergraduates overuse of the inferential DMs “So” in their peer/collaborative written tasks.

The frequency of the message relationship markers; parallel, contrastive, elaborative, inferential DMs used by the EFL undergraduates in their writing is another finding, which indicate that the EFL undergraduates use a particular DM in the three essays type, narrative, descriptive, and process essays more frequent than the rest of DMs.

The descriptive statistics of the occurrence of the most frequent DMs as Table 5 indicates that the EFL undergraduates overused specific DMs like the parallel DMs "and" (622), followed by inferential DMs "then" (64), contrastive DMs "but" (48), and elaborative DMs "Also" (31).

Table 5. Most frequent used DMs in peer/collaborative written tasks

No	Message Relationship Markers	DMs	Occurrence
1	Parallel DMs	And	622
2	Contrastive DMs	But	48
3	Elaborative DMs	Also	31
4	Inferential DMs	Then	64

5.5 EFL Undergraduates’ Misuse and Ignorance of DMs

Another instance of DMs misuse is typically associated with written discourse. For example, misuse of DMs in essay writing has been noticed. EFL undergraduates’ misused or underused of DMs in essay writing can lead to semantic misunderstandings. This is evidenced by the following extract of peer/collaborative written tasks through Google Docs.

P2. “*And* a real friend always wants to see you happy *and* see a smile on your face *and* not judge other people *and* make fun of them because that is a negative thing to do.”

It can be noticed from the above excerpt that EFL undergraduates misuse the parallel DMs "and" in their essay as they begin the sentence with the DM and repeat the exact parallel DMs "and" between the sentences instead of using a comma. This occurs because the EFL undergraduates apply the knowledge of their native language when writing in

the second language.

In terms of EFL undergraduates' ignorance of DMs, the analysis of 36 narrative, descriptive, and process essays written by EFL undergraduates indicates the absence of many message relationship markers; parallel, contrastive, elaborative, inferential DMs. EFL undergraduates focus mainly on the word and sentence level, ignoring some of the meaning relationships and coherence within the text. The EFL undergraduates did not employ the following DMs in their essay writing. Parallel DMs such as *"alternatively, correspondingly, equally, likewise, otherwise, similarly,"* contrastive DMs such as *"all the same, conversely, despite, in spite of, in comparison, in contrast,"* elaborative DMs such as *"above all, for instance, further(more), in other words, in particular,"* inferential DMs such as *"as a consequence, consequently, hence, in this/that case, of course, thus."*

5.6 EFL Undergraduates' Multiple Use of DMs

Another exciting and noteworthy issue that arises from the EFL undergraduates' essay writing is the multiple uses of DMs. In which more than one DM occurs within the same text sentence. This is evidenced by the following extract of peer/collaborative written tasks through Google Docs.

P7. *"Meanwhile, we seasoned the meat **and then** seasoned the rice as well."*

P12. *"**However**, it is necessary to get time for friends, family, **and** school activities, **so** that you do not get bored and stressed."*

It can be noticed from the above excerpts that EFL undergraduates use multiple DMs of the parallel DM "and" and inferential DMs "then" in their essay as shown in P7. In addition, the excerpts P12 illustrates the use multiple DMs contrastive DM "however", parallel DM "and" and inferential DMs "so" in their essay.

6. Discussion

The first research question that this study tries to answer is, 'what type of DMs are used in EFL undergraduates' writing through Google Docs?', the study found that the EFL Saudi students employed three types of discourse markers: parallel, contrastive, elaborative and inferential. The most frequently used were the parallel discourse markers in all of the three types of essays. They appeared 690 times followed by contrastive DMs in which they reoccurred 100 times. Inferential DMs were the third frequent type. They used 96 times and finally the elaborative DMs which employed just 52 times. The current study's finding presents a fascinating insight into the various DMs used by the EFL undergraduates in composing/ writing their essays in the form of four main categories of the message relationship markers: parallel, contrastive, elaborative, and inferential. The findings indicate that the EFL undergraduates use the highest number of parallel DMs in the three essays: narrative, descriptive, and process essays, followed by contrastive DMs, inferential DMs, and elaborative DMs. Knowing how to use DMs in practice can significantly impact the quality of discourse produced by ESL learners (Al-khazraji, 2019). This finding supports the finding of a few other studies in terms of using various types of message relationship markers; parallel, contrastive, elaborative, inferential (Dumlao & Wilang, 2019; Jalilifar's, 2008; Martínez, 2002; Zare-ee *et al.*, 2017; Yagi *et al.*, 2020). Jalilifar (2008) reported that EFL learners used DMs with different degrees of incidence.

Furthermore, the study also aimed to explore, 'what significant issues emerged from the EFL undergraduates' use of DMs in essay writing?' The study reported three significant issues Saudi EFL learners' writings. They whether overused, misused or multiple use of discourse markers. Parallel DMs were the most frequent DMs was 'and'. It reoccurred 622 times. Inferential DMs 'then' repeated 64 times whereas in contrastive DMs 'but' repeated 48 and finally, 'also' occurred 48 times as an elaborative DMs. This finding is confirmed by Dumlao and Wilang (2019) who found the overuse of some types of DMs, such as temporal and inferential DMs, in L2 English users' writings. This finding revealed that students' competence in writing is still shallow. This claim is supported by Martínez (2002), Ali and Mahadin (2016) who reported the direct relationship between students' proficiency level in writing and their usage of DMs. Likely, it can be interpreted the reason for misuse or overuse of discourse markers to the students' inability to understand them.

7. Conclusion

This study was conducted in response to the challenging issues and concerns on research in second language writing, which is how EFL undergraduates deal with DMs in their essay writing during the coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, the present study was designed to fill the gaps revealed in recent studies emphasizing the need for further research on the nature of DMs used in students' writing through Google Docs and whether there are any significant differences in DMs used in the narrative, descriptive, and process essays, the importance of the DMs in enhancing the quality of essay writing and increasing text comprehension. In addition to helping EFL undergraduates

to produce cohesive text (Pourdana et al., 2021; Zahro et al. 2021; Hamza, 2018, Yagi et al., 2020).

This study adds to recent studies by determining the nature of message relationship markers employed in EFL undergraduates' writing through Google Docs during the coronavirus pandemic in the three essays type, narrative, descriptive, and process essays. The findings show that the highest number of message relationship markers employed in process essays than the other essay types. In addition, the findings indicate no relationship between the numbers of words inside the essays with the number of message relationship markers. This finding contradicts Jalilifar (2008); there is a direct correlation between the number of words in the compositions and DMs.

The absence of DMs within the text leads to the text's incoherence. It is apparent that DMs are essential in constructing cohesive texts rather than a collection of isolated sentences.

The findings of the current study have several implications for EFL teachers. Accordingly, the written discourse in classroom environments can be a deliberate engagement between writers and readers. DMs are integral to writing quality. Due to the overuse and irregular use of some DMs, which create a problem in writing, EFL teachers should increase EFL undergraduates' awareness of DMs, including their varied types, functions, and proper uses. EFL teachers need to introduce EFL undergraduates' students to various DMs and how native speakers use them to avoid overemphasizing particular types while neglecting others; hence relying on just one or two types of DMs leads to repetition and misunderstanding.

The present study addresses several limitations and raises critical questions valuable for future research. First, the small number of essays might have affected the findings. Therefore, the future investigation should comprise a relatively large sample size of the essays. At the same time, this study focused on analyzing DMs in narrative, descriptive, and process essays written by EFL undergraduates through Google Docs. Future studies may also focus on analyzing DMs written essays by postgraduates of language programs. This study adopted Fraser's (1988) classification of parallel, contrastive, elaborative, and inferential message relationship markers. Therefore, further research should focus on other primary categories such as topic and discourse activity markers.

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