

# An Analysis of Contrastive Discourse Markers in Students' Essays

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**Abstract:** The interest of the theoretical status of discourse markers has been increasing within the past two decades. The studies of it are focusing on what they are, what they mean, and how they function in many contexts. In writing, the use of discourse markers is to create the coherence and cohesion in a text which is considered as the requirement of a good text. It is found that very few studies concerning discourse markers in English writing were conducted in Indonesian setting especially in Aceh. Aimed to find out how students use contrastive discourse markers in English writing, the current study was carried to use qualitative approach focusing on document analysis as the instrument of collecting data. The participants engaged in this study were 26 students at the Department of English Language Education of UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh. The result of this study showed that students used variants, misused and overused CDMs. The misuses were ranging from incorrect position of certain markers, inappropriate punctuation, and the misunderstanding of the use of markers. The overuse of CDMs was also found by the researcher in students' essays. Based on the findings, this study provided implications for students, teachers, and researchers.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Within the past two decades, the interest of the theoretical status of discourse markers has been increasing. The studies of it were focusing on what they are, what they mean, and what they functions in many contexts. Some studies have investigated the roles of discourse markers in upgrading the quality of the text. The results show that discourse markers will affect the quality of writing if it is used properly by writers (Jalilifar, 2008). Discourse markers help writers increase the quality of writing. It helps writers in providing clues which make the messages of a text clearly, succinctly, and easily interpretable. Basically, to interpret the messages in written communication is more difficult than spoken one. In written communication, there are no additional means of help such as facial expressions or gesture to ensure that the message is accurately understood by interlocutor. By using discourse markers, writers

will easily connect the ideas and make it easily interpreted by readers. As said by Al-Kohlani (2010) that besides providing the cohesion in connecting-words in the text, discourse markers is also important tool in gaining communication in the text.

The use of discourse markers is to create the coherence and cohesion in a text which is considered as the requirement of a good text. Feng (2010) says that a good writing is not only about grammar but also about cohesive and coherence. Cohesion is the element in a text which makes connection between parts of the text. Halliday and Hasan (2014) says that cohesion is a set of resources that build relations in discourse above grammatical structures. Coherence, on the other hand, resides not in the text, but is rather the outcome of a dialogue between the text and listener or reader. It helps group sentences into paragraphs and paragraphs into sections forming a hierarchical structure to the text. Dewi (2012) says that the coherence relations combine

different part or unit of text and develop a structure view of the text (cited in Yunus and Haris, 2014). In addition, Al-Kohlani (2010) states that the competency in using discourse markers affects the coherence in writing especially in advanced level.

In spite of the fact that discourse markers are important in writing, the use of discourse markers itself becomes a complicated thing for students in learning writing. Especially for EFL and ESL students, it is complicated by issues of proficiency in the target language, first language literacy, and differences in culture and rhetorical approach to the text (Jalilifar, 2008). The lack of sense in building meaning in a text is a typical phenomenon that is commonly found in the EFL writing. This is related to the students' problems in using discourse markers which are obvious. It is because they are non-native writers who have different interpretation and comprehension of using various discourse markers in their essays (Rahayu and Cahyono, 2015). Recently, several studies have been conducted on how EFL and ESL students truly compose and what difficulties they face in their own writing. The results show that one of the writing problems among English language learners is using discourse markers in different texts correctly (Shareef, 2015).

Based on the writer experience, one of the types of discourse markers that make students confused is contrastive discourse markers. It is difficult to comprehend and choose appropriate contrastive discourse markers in order to create a compound or complex structure of a text in writing. It is difficult because contrastive discourse markers have the vast number of items. The interchangeability of it also becomes the problem which can cause students' confusions. Some of them would change the structure of the sentences when they are inserted in different order. This kind of material becomes more complicated by the lack of time in learning it. It is complicated and time-consuming to teach in class. It is almost impossible for an instructor to show a wide range of examples to cover all of the contexts in class time.

The aim of this study is to investigate the use of contrastive discourse markers by students and what kinds of contrastive discourse markers are commonly used by them. The researcher also wants to know whether there are misused or overused contrastive discourse markers in their writing.

There are several studies that examined the using of discourse markers. The first study was *"A Comparison between Thai University Students and English Speakers Using Contrastive Discourse Markers"* conducted by Sitthirak (2013). The

respondent consisted of 107 respondents: Seventy-nine Thai students and 28 English speakers. The data was collected using contrastive discourse markers multiple choice test. The result revealed in two. First, Thai students could distinguish between the contrast and non-contrast relation between two utterances at more considerable rate than the English speakers for the given contexts. The other result showed where there were various contrastive discourse markers to choose, Thai students tended to form a set of rules to deal with the 'appropriate' answers. Meanwhile, English speakers consider the authentic use rather than the semantic use in general. Finally, for the interchangeability of markers *although* and *while*, Thai students tended to use the two problematic discourse markers more interchangeably than English speakers in general context.

The next previous study that was relevant with this current research was entitled *"The Use of Discourse Markers among Form Four SLL Students in Essay Writing"* conducted by Yunus and Haris (2014) They discovered how 30 secondary school students in *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Hulu Kelang* used discourse markers in their essay writing and identified the teachers' perception about the usage of discourse markers among students. The misused, overused, and advanced use of it had become something identified by them. The result of the research showed that the misuse and overuse of discourse markers indeed affected the flow of the students' essay writing and made it less coherent.

Another study similar to the current one was conducted by Zhang and He (2015) entitled *A Survey on the Use of Causal Discourse Markers among Chinese English Majors*. The study involved 135 sophomores who major in English Teaching from China West Normal University in Sichuan Province as the sample. It aimed to explore the deeper reasons causing their using features on the use of causal discourse markers. The questionnaire was used to collect the data from participants. The result showed the reasons that caused English majors using of causal discourse markers are as follow: 1) lack of stylistic awareness; 2) intentionally avoiding making mistakes; 3) time factor; 4) negative L1 transfer; 5) teachers' influence.

Although there are many studies about discourse markers in writing, researcher found that it is very few studies concerning discourse markers in English writing were conducted in Indonesian setting especially in Aceh. Therefore in the present study researcher would like to raise up this kind of research in Aceh setting. This current study also has

the differences with the the previous study as well. The present study only focused on contrastive discourse markers used by students in English writing.

## 2 RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative research design which is focusing on document analysis. Qualitative research provides an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about their social and material circumstances, experiences, perspectives and histories (Ritchie et al., 2013). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) state that qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study the objects in their natural settings, attempt to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (cited in Ospina, 2004).

Document analysis involves the study of existing documents, either to understand their substantive content or to illuminate deeper meanings which may be revealed by their style and coverage (Ritchie et al., 2013). The documents which were analyzed in this research are students' written essay papers. It used to find out the information about how students use contrastive discourse markers in their essays. The students' written essays papers also expected to inform the researcher and readers regarding to common used, misused and overused of contrastive discourse markers. Moreover, it will reveal what are the problems faced by students' in their use of contrastive discourse markers

The participants took part in this research were 26 students at the Department of English Language Education of UIN Ar-Raniry. They were selected based on the criteria that determined and required by researcher. They were English department students who took writing course and would write an essay in the current semester.

This research used students' essays as the instrument of collecting data. Before collecting the data, the researcher asked for the cooperation from the writing lecturers of the selected classroom to ask the students to write an essay. Students were given about 1.5 hours to write an essay with free topic about 3-4 paragraph. Afer students finished their essays, lecturer collected it and gave it to researcher. The collected essays were analyzed by the researcher.

## 3 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Data Analysis

There were several steps employed in order to analyze the data obtained. The first step was collecting all documents in form of students' essays and analyzing them. The students' essays were read thoroughly one by one by the researcher to find contrastive markers used by the students. First, the researcher analyzed the common markers used by the students. It was counted through the percentage of the occurrence of that marker in students' essays. Then, the researcher analyzed what markers that were misused in students' essays. Misused markers mean that the markers are not used properly. It can be in term of place or the use of punctuation. The last step was analyzing the contrastive marker which is overused by students. The researcher tried to find the marker which is used by them excessively.

### 3.2 Result

From the analysis of students' essays, the researcher found that there were 9 variants of contrastive discourse markers used by students. They were "but, however, although, but also, even though, while, instead, whereas, and on the other hand". Those 9 variants of contrastive discourse markers only represent half of contrastive markers items introduced by Fraser (1999).

Contrastive Discourse Markers	Frequency	Percentages
But	59	66.29
However	8	9.00
Although	6	6.74
Not only.. But also..	10	11.23
Even though	2	2.24
While	1	1.12
Instead	1	1.12
Whereas	1	1.12
On the other hand	1	1.12
TOTAL	89	100

Based on students' essays, there were 6 contrastive discourse markers item misused. They were "but", "not only.. but also..", "However", "While", "Whereas", "Although", and "even though".

Sample 3

Drinking alcohol is seldom thing that happen in our environment. We have to be grateful of it. **But**, we also need to worry about effects of drinking alcohol. [sic]

The use of "but" at the beginning of sentence is not suitable because "but" is a coordinating conjunction that has function to join two independent clause. Contrastive discourse marker "However" is more suitable to replace marker "but" in sentence above.

Drinking alcohol is seldom thing that happen in our environment. We have to be grateful of it. **However**, we also need to worry about effects of drinking alcohol

Sample 10

Almost of the people agree about it **but** there are a lot of people skip breakfast with some reason like not enough time, too lazy to wake up, wanting to spend the extra time dozing in bed etc.[sic]

We feel lazy because we lost concentration. Some people aware about that effect **but**, they still skip breakfast.[sic]

When the researcher analyzed the essay from this sample (sample 10), the researcher perceived that all of contrastive discourse marker "but" are used wrongly by this participant in his essay. He used this kind of marker to contrast two ideas. Theoretically, marker "but" is used as coordinating conjunction to join two independent clauses which are set off by comma "," . This participant was correct in term of word chosen for contrasting his ideas. However, he put marker "but" inappropriately. He repeatedly put "but" at the end of the first clause then put comma after it. The rules of using marker "but" as conjunction that showing contrast are that this marker should be put at the initial position of the second clause and use coma in front of this pattern

Sample 5

Because it was their habit throwing rubbish, we can see when they go to amusement park they leave their rubbish there because they did not care for clean environment. **Although**, there was provide garbage almost all in the place. [Sic]

Sample 8

**Although**, people smoke when they are depressed, lonely or bored and it help them to reduce the stress.[sic]

The samples above were used marker "although" as the conjunction showing contrastive relation in their statement. The use of "although" above is not suitable. There are two mistakes of the use of "although" above. First, they used it to contrast two independent sentences, whereas the truly function of this marker is to contrast two clauses, independent and dependent clauses. The second mistake is they used it in the sense of "however" which is placed in the initial position of the sentences and set off by comma "," right after that marker.

There were also some participants who overused the contrastive discourse markers in their essays. The researcher found that the overuse of discourse markers is in using "but". The overuse here is in term that they use "but" as the combination of the other contrastive discourse markers like "although" and "even though".

Sample 4

Many people die because consuming the alcohol. **Even though** they knew about the effect for their bodies **but** they still do it.[sic]

Sample 6

**Although** the television has positive side **but** we have to realize that television also have negative sides. [sic]

Two samples above were used markers "although" and "even though" together with marker "but" in a sentence. The use of two subordinating conjunction in a sentence will make the sentence become wrong. Both "but" and "although" are **subordinating conjunctions** and **introduce subordinating clauses**. When we use both in the same sentence, as in the sentences above, there is no main clause or independent clause in those sentences. It can be categorized as overused because contrastive discourse markers "but" was not needed by the sentences. Since concessive relation has shown by markers "although" and "even though". Moreover, the sentences above will be correct if we eliminate one conjunction.

**Even though** they knew about the effect for their bodies, they still do it.

They knew about the effect for their bodies, **but** they still do it.

Researcher found that there are 9 variants of contrastive discourse markers used by students. These six variants used by students only represent half of total contrastive markers introduced by Fraser adapted and highlighted by the researcher in this research. The markers used by the students are *but*, *however*, *although*, *not only... but also...*, *even though*, *while*, *instead*, *whereas*, and *on the other hand*. From 9 variants markers, the common markers that appear frequently in students essay were; *but* (66.29%), *not only... but also...* (11.23 %), *however* (8.98%) and *although* (6.74%). This results confirms the studies made by Rahayu and Cahyono (2015) which found that *but*, *however*, *although*, are included in the common variants of contrastive markers used by Indonesian students in EFL context. In *Grammar for English Teacher*, also confirms that those variants of contrastive discourse markers are mostly used in the writing context to show contrastive relations. On the other hand, the other markers including *even though* (2.24%), *while*, *instead* (1.12%), *whereas* (1.12%), and *on the other hand* (1.12%) were used minimally by the students. It shows that they are lacking from the variety in using markers. They tend to use markers “*but*” which is more flexible in the usage.

The researcher found that there were 6 contrastive discourse markers item misused. They were “*but*”, “*not only..but also..*”, “*however*”, “*while*”, “*whereas*”, “*although*”, and “*even though*”. The misused referred in the current study comprises incorrect position, inappropriate punctuation, and misunderstanding the use of those markers. Although “*but*” appeared as the most common contrastive discourse markers used by students, it is also marked as the most frequently misused contrastive markers. Regarding other markers, the errors made by students also in the scope of misunderstanding of the use of conjunction. Taken as example, the use of “*but also*” to contrast something that is not parallel, the use of “*however*” in “*although*” or “*even though*” place or vice versa, and the use of “*while*” and “*whereas*” inappropriately.

The misused of using contrastive discourse markers can be concluded by the researcher as the effect of L1 context. Students tend to use markers in the sense of their L1. For example, Indonesian language does not use punctuation and conjunctions in the same way as English does. Whereas punctuation that follows conjunction is important and is grammatical meaning in English. Issue on punctuation is an important element in writing and should be noticed. In this research, many participants made error in using

some punctuation especially related to the use of comma “*;*” that makes their writing error grammatically. They used it inappropriately or did not use it when they put punctuation that required comma. This finding has resemblance with Hirvela, Nussbaum, and Pierson (cited in Barry, 2012) that found comma mistakes appear to be a common feature of students writing. The other mistake made by students was the way they position conjunctions. Many variants of DMs are polysemy which means their meaning will be varied depending on what situation or context they are placed.

Regarding to the overuse of CDMs, the researcher did not find many cases in students’ essays. The overuse found in this study is only about putting and joining two contrastive discourse markers in one sentence. It is true that discourse markers can extend our sentences, but overusing them can make the sentences awkward or inappropriate. The example is when we use two contrastive markers in a single sentence but there is no main clause or independent clause in those sentences. This kind of sentence using contrastive markers is grammatically error.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

After all the data had been collected and analyzed, the researcher found that the CDMs commonly used by students are “*but*”, “*however*”, “*although*”, “*Even though*”, “*on the other hand*”, “*still*”, “*not only... but also...*”, and “*while*”/“*whereas*”. These variants of CDMs only represent half of total contrastive markers introduced by Fraser (1999) which is highlighted by the researcher in this study. The misuses of CDMs made by students are ranging from incorrect position of certain markers, inappropriate punctuation, and the misunderstanding of the use of markers. Regarding the overuse of CDMs, the case found by the researcher is students’ putting and joining two contrastive discourse markers in one sentence.

Based on the findings stated above, the researcher can conclude that the participants of this study are less competent in using the variations of CDMs as they have limited ability to use these devices. Participants also have limited knowledge about the using of these devices. It showed by many misuses of CDMs ranging from incorrect position of certain markers, inappropriate punctuation, and the misunderstanding of the use of markers.

Despite the small number of participants employed in this study which affect to the limitation

of generalization of the result, this study provide implications for students, teachers, and researchers.

This study provides insight of how students of English department use CDMs in their writing. Hopefully, they can develop and improve their ability in using these markers to produce much better kind of writing.

This research also can help teachers understand the problems faced by students as well as providing the way to overcome it. It is necessary to provide some pedagogical implications for the language learning and teaching to improve their discourse competence in terms of employing the CDMs.

Other researchers who have an interest in the use of DMs in writing may conduct future research regarding the use of others DMs in writing. The larger sample than this research is needed to find more accurately data. The variations of instrument as well as data collection methods different from this study are also required.

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