

## Challenges in the Use of Discourse Markers in English as Second Language (ESL) Writing: Evidence from Selected Grade Twelve Pupils in Kitwe District, Zambia

Clara Mulenga Mumbi  
Mpelembe Secondary School

John Simwinga  
University of Zambia, Department of Literature and Languages, Zambia

### Abstract

*The role of discourse markers (DMs) in English text production and comprehension has long been recognized to the extent that in Zambia, where English is taught and used as second language (ESL), these linguistic entities constitute specific teaching/learning topics at both Junior and Senior Secondary School levels in the country. The expectation is that by the end of Senior Secondary School pupils are able to use these units competently resulting in the production of coherent pieces of discourse. The purpose of this study was to examine challenges experienced in the use of DMs in composition writing by a sample of 150 Grade Twelve (G12) ESL learners selected from three secondary schools in Kitwe district, Zambia in the 2014 academic year. The data were collected from 300 scripts comprising two samples of written pieces of discourse produced by each of the 150 pupils. The researcher employed descriptive research design with text analysis as specific research approach based on the perspective of written discourse as rule-structured object or product of a completed activity. A four-stage qualitative approach was applied in data analysis, guided by Fraser's (1999) taxonomy of discourse markers, involving marking and scoring out of 20 each of the 300 scripts, locating the DMs used in each of the 300 scripts, classifying each of the DMS according to its communicative function as either propositional or non-propositional and, finally, identification and cataloguing of instances of inappropriate uses of DMs as reflection of the challenges experienced. The findings indicate that participants experience a multiplicity of challenges in the use of DMs. The study concluded with specific recommendations for both pedagogy and further research.*

**Keywords:** ESL, Writing, Discourse Markers, Grade Twelve Pupils.

## 1. Introduction

Swan and Smith (2005) define a discourse marker as “a word or expression which shows the connection between what is being said and the wider context.” This definition entails that such linguistic units either connect a sentence to what comes before or after it or indicate a speaker’s attitude to what he or she is saying thereby promoting textual cohesion and enhancing discourse coherence and comprehensibility. The perspective held by Swan and Smith finds support in Kopple (1985) who points out that discourse markers are linguistic items which appear both in spoken and written language and help the listener or reader organize, interpret and evaluate the information. Building on Kopple’s perspective Blakemore (1992: 177) states that “every speaker must make some decision about what to make explicit and what to leave implicit, and that every speaker must make a decision about the extent to which he should use the linguistic form of his utterance to guide the interpretation process.” The observation made by Blackmore is as applicable to spoken discourse as it is to written discourse. It is the case that discourse markers signal the listener or reader of continuity in text or the relationship between the preceding and the following text. They guide the reader to predict the direction of the flow of discourse, linking the various text elements. This observation might explain why Brown and Levinson (1987) cited in Barnabas & Adamu (2012) state that skilful use of discourse markers often indicates a higher level of fluency and an ability to produce and understand authentic language. Similarly, Litman (1996) cited by Barnabas & Adamu (2012) states that discourse markers are linguistic devices available for a writer to structure a discourse by signalling to the reader the relationship between the current and the preceding discourse. In this regard, as stated by Blakemore (1987, 1992, 2002) and Sperber and Wilson (1995), discourse markers impose constraints on the implicatures the hearer can draw from the discourse and that discourse without discourse markers is open to more than one type of implicature which might result in misunderstanding. According to Fraser (1990: 302) “a discourse marker is a lexical expression which signals the relation of either contrast (James is fat *but* Mary is thin), implication (John is here, *so* we can start the party), or elaboration (John went home. *Furthermore*, he took his toys) between the interpretation of segment two and segment one.” In composition writing DMs are linking words that may be described as the ‘glue’ that binds together a piece of writing, making the different parts of the text ‘stick together’ Gerard (2010). By grammatical category, there are three types of discourse markers: conjunctions (such as *and*, *yet*), adverbs (such as *however*, *consequently* and *moreover*) and prepositional phrases (such as ‘*in contrast*’, ‘*in any case*’, ‘*in spite of*’, ‘*in addition*’ and ‘*on the other hand*’). Appropriate utilization of DMs enables writers to organise and present their written pieces of discourse in a cohesive and coherent manner by giving guidance to an audience (reader) as to what the writer’s intentions and attitudes are regarding the text. Therefore, failure to or inappropriate use of DMs, has the potential to lead to discourse incomprehensibility.

The theoretical status of DMs has been explained from two related perspectives: the coherence-based approach and the relevance-theoretic account. Within coherence theory it is

asserted that one of the characteristics of coherent texts is the presence of a definable set of coherence relations whose recovery or recognition is essential for comprehension. In this regard, the function of DMs or 'cue phrases', as they are sometimes called, is to make such coherence relations explicit (Mann and Thompson, 1986; Fraser, 1990, 1999; Sanders, Spooren and Noordman, 1993; Knott and Dale, 1994; Hovy and Maier, 1994). The understanding is that the explicit presence of coherence relations in a piece of discourse requires equally the explicit presence of linguistic items through which such relations are realised. Consequently knowledge and correct use of such linguistic units would enhance discourse coherence while lack of knowledge and incorrect use would obscure discourse coherence. Within relevance theory, the most influential point of view on DMs is held by Blakemore (1987) who states that hearers (and readers) interpret information by searching for relevance. According to Blakemore, connectives, also known as discourse markers, contribute essentially to the interpretation process. From this theoretical perspective, connectives are considered signals which, in spoken and written pieces of discourse, the speaker and the writer respectively use to guide cooperatively both the hearer's and the reader's interpretative process. It is the case, therefore, that Discourse Markers constitute one of the linguistic devices the sender may use to unambiguously guide the receiver as to the intended interpretation of a given set of propositions. More specifically, these elements constrain the relevant context for the interpretation of an utterance, reinforcing some inferences while eliminating others thereby facilitating appropriate processing of information.

The two perspectives are more complementary than mutually exclusive. On both accounts DMs have a constraining function. For coherence theorists DMs constrain the relational propositions which express the coherence relations the receiver needs to recover in order to interpret a given piece of discourse. For relevance theorists DMs constrain the interpretation process by guiding the receiver towards the intended context and contextual effects. On both the coherence-based approach and the relevance-theoretic account DMs play a facilitating role. Therefore, the present study applied both theories in interpreting the use of DMs by Grade 12 ESL learners under investigation. Since DMs facilitate communication, it is logical to suppose that the lack of DMs in an ESL learner's written composition, or their inappropriate use, could hinder successful communication or lead to misunderstanding. Therefore, ESL learners must learn to signal the relations of their propositions to those which precede and follow. Additionally, in terms of communicative competence, ESL learners must competently employ the appropriate DMs if they are to communicate effectively.

Arising from the two theoretical approaches presented earlier, Fraser's (1999: 946-950) taxonomy of DMs was selected as framework for the identification and analysis of the DMs in Grade 12 ESL learners' pieces of written composition. In his 1999 paper Fraser defines DMs as a pragmatic class of lexical expressions drawn primarily from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbials and prepositional phrases which are used for signalling the relationship between the interpretation of the segment they introduce (S2) and the prior segment (S1). Fraser

(1999) classifies discourse makers into two categories: propositional and non-propositional. Propositional discourse markers are used to relate the propositions or messages of the sentences while non-propositional discourse markers are used to signal aspects of discourse structure or topic like organization and management. The propositional discourse markers are sub-classified into contrastive, collateral, inferential and causal markers. The non-propositional discourse markers are identified as discourse structure markers, topic change markers and discourse activity markers. Table 1 below illustrates the two categories of DMs according to Fraser (1999).

**Table 1: Fraser’s (1999) Categories of Discourse Markers**

Discourse Markers	
Propositional Discourse Markers	Non-Propositional Discourse Markers
1. Collateral (Elaborative) Discourse Markers	1. Discourse Structure Markers
2. Inferential Discourse Markers	2. Topic Change Markers
3. Contrastive Discourse Markers	3. Discourse Activity Markers
4. Causative Discourse Markers	

Table 1 above illustrates the two categories of discourse markers identified by Fraser (1999). Propositional discourse markers relate propositions at the sentence level while non-propositional discourse markers contribute to the organisation of discourse in terms of thematic progression. When used correctly, these two categories of discourse markers greatly enhance discourse cohesion and coherence resulting in discourse comprehensibility.

In Zambia, English has remained the official language at national level since independence. In addition, until 2014, it was also the official language of classroom instruction from Grade One to the highest level of education following official proclamation by the Ministry of Education in 1965. However, since 2014 familiar local languages are being used for literacy, numeracy and as media of classroom instruction in all subjects until Grade Four. During this period, English is taught as one of the subjects. From Grade Five on, English is introduced as medium of instruction while, at the same time, both the familiar local languages and English continue being taught as subjects. As a result of Government decisions, English is required to be used as the only medium of instruction in all forms of post primary education in Zambia, in parliament, for the administration of the country, for all national and international official communication and in the more important commercial and industrial sectors. Further, English is the only official language that is enshrined in the Zambian Constitution, and is perceived by many as a passport to upward socio-economic mobility (Sekeleti, 1983). There are also seven Zambian languages which enjoy official status at regional level. These are: Bemba, Kaonde, Lozi, Lunda, Luvale, Nyanja and Tonga. They are used for certain official purposes such as literacy campaigns, broadcasting and the dissemination of official information. As officially stipulated, Bemba is required to be used in the Luapula, Northern, Muchinga, Copperbelt and

Central Province: Kabwe, Mkushi and Serenje; Nyanja in Lusaka and Eastern Provinces; Tonga in Southern Province and part of the Central Province: Kabwe and Mumbwa; Lozi in the Western Province and Livingstone; Kaonde chiefly in the Solwezi and Kasempa districts; Lunda mainly in the Mwinilunga, Chizela, and parts of Kabompo districts and Luvale principally in Zambezi and parts of Kabompo districts. In the school curriculum, the seven regional official Zambian languages are taught only as school subjects in prescribed regions of the country. It is the case, therefore, that in Zambia, English as second language (ESL) is taught as a compulsory subject in the school curriculum and is considered the determining subject for certification purposes at both primary and secondary education levels. To this end, English is considered to be an essential or indispensable language that learners should master if their success in secondary and tertiary education is to be assured. Inevitably, such mastery is expected to include the appropriate use of DMs. In order to underscore the role of DMs in English text production and comprehension, these linguistic entities constitute specific teaching/learning topics at both Junior and Senior Secondary School levels in the country. The expectation is that by the end of Senior Secondary School pupils are able to use these units proficiently resulting in the production of coherent pieces of discourse.

At practical level, it was expected that the identification and description of the challenges in the use of DMs experienced by the learners would provide guidance to secondary school teachers and tertiary education lecturers on how to structure remedial English teaching for both secondary and tertiary education level learners in order to enhance the comprehensibility of their written pieces of discourse.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

According to the Junior Secondary School English Language Syllabus, by the end of Grade Nine, learners are expected to have mastered the use of DMs to enhance discourse coherence. The use of these elements is consolidated further from Grade Ten to Grade Twelve on the expectation that by the end of Grade Twelve the pupils should be able to write coherently with the aid of the appropriate discourse markers as they prepare themselves for entry into tertiary education institutions. However, this is not the case as every year Chief examiners of 'O' level English composition point out a number of concerns regarding the quality of written pieces of composition produced by the Grade Twelve learners. Most notable of these are limited vocabulary, inadequate rhetorical organisation and poor or inadequate use of discourse markers. To date, there is lack of knowledge on the specific challenges which learners experience in the use of DMs. Stated as a question the problem under investigation is: what challenges do Grade Twelve pupils experience in the use of DMs?

### 3. Research Questions

Arising from the problem stated above, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

- (i) what discourse markers do Grade Twelve ESL learners use in their written pieces of English composition?
- (ii) what communicative functions do the discourse markers used by Grade Twelve ESL learners in their written pieces of English composition serve?
- (iii) how do the discourse markers used by Grade Twelve ESL learners in their written pieces of English composition enhance or obscure discourse coherence?

### 3. Literature review

Various studies have been conducted on discourse markers under English as Foreign Language (EFL), English as Second Language (ESL) and English as First Language (L1) settings. Some of these have provided evidence that there is a strong relationship between use of discourse markers and coherence, others have indicated that overall there is no statistically significant relationship while yet others have outlined instances of inappropriate use of DMs resulting in the production of incoherent pieces of discourse. It was not the intention of the present study to undertake an exhaustive review of all such studies but to sample only those which were considered to be of direct relevance to the present task.

Most notable of DM studies on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) included Martinez (2004), Feng (2010) whose study revealed that due to misuse or inappropriate use of discourse markers, students' articles became less cohesive and coherent, Kalajahi et. al; (2012) whose study revealed that the more DMs were employed, the higher the score the written scripts attained. Narita, et. al (2004) whose study revealed the prominence of overuse of *in addition, of course, moreover, and first*, while there was an apparent under-use of the logical connectors such as *and instead, then and yet* and concluded that the influence of L1 transfer on the learners' use of conjunctions remained indefinite, Lai (2008) whose results revealed that even though the participants used conjunctions appropriately, they committed errors in utilising some conjunctions (*therefore, furthermore, in other words, besides, nevertheless, by contrast, on the contrary, because*) in their writing, Jalilifar (2008) whose findings revealed that the informants utilized a variety of DMs and that there was a positive relationship between writing experience and appropriate use of discourse markers, Djigunovic and Vickov (2010) whose study observed that the learners tended to use a relatively small range of English DMs and that identified L1 interference and inadequate input, as possible causes of low acquisition of English DMs, Simci (2012) whose results indicated that Lithuanian learners and the native learners used stylistically inappropriate [spoken] discourse markers in their academic essays and that such use contributed to the excessively oral tone exhibited in learners' writing, Daif-Allah and Albeshir (2013) which revealed that the students overused the additive connectors followed by the causative, the

contrastive and the illustrative ones and that students' use of DMs was too limited and the ones that were most frequently used were *and*, *in addition* and *for example* and that there was a positive and direct relationship between test scores and the use of discourse markers, Hamed (2014) whose findings revealed that the informants employed the conjunctions inappropriately and that adversative conjunctions posed the most difficulty for the learners followed by additives and causals thereby confirming previous studies that EFL learners have difficulty in employing conjunctions in their writing. A review of studies on discourse markers as used by English Language learners in EFL settings as presented above was necessary for the present study for a number of reasons. Firstly none of the studies was conducted in an ESL setting indicating knowledge gap in this respect. Secondly none of the studies was based on data from a secondary school environment thereby indicating another knowledge gap. Finally, none of the studies was based on the *Zambian context*, which was another knowledge gap.

Most notable of DM studies on **English as Second Language (ESL)** include Kamali and Noori (2015) whose findings revealed that teaching DMs to students enhances their awareness and sensitivity of discourse and subsequently sharpens their writing skills and recommended that more attention should be paid to the teaching of DMs to learners, Alghamdi (2014) whose results revealed an overuse of DMs at sentence-initial position and an unnecessary use of semantically similar DMs within the boundary of a single sentence and showed that correct use and frequency of discourse markers were key indicators of the quality of ESL writing, Haris and Yunus (2014) whose study revealed that a number of students misused DMs, with some informants overusing certain DMs, while others still, used some advanced DMs in their essays and that misuse and overuse of DMs really affected the flow of informants' written pieces of discourse made them less coherent and recommended that DMs be emphasized in the teaching and learning processes because they are overtly an important resource in written discourse, Chen (2015) whose study revealed that the learners under investigation tended to initiate propositions with, *in my opinion* as a commitment to an important idea, with *I think* while expressing an attitude toward the topic in question, and *so* as an explanation or conclusion to the issue under discussion which was attributed to students' lack of knowledge about rhetorical structures and conventions associated with English academic writing and as a result of L1 interference and recommended explicit instruction on rhetorical structures and conventions of academic writing to L2 learners. Studies on discourse markers as used by English Language learners in ESL settings were also considered important for the investigation because they were based on data collected from post secondary education users of English outside Zambia.

## **5      Methodology**

### **5.1    Research participants**

The researcher considered all the 2014 Grade Twelve ESL learners in the study sites as constituting the study population. These sites were: Mpelelmbe Secondary School, Helen

Kaunda Girls' Secondary School and Mukuba Boys' Secondary School. The selection of the three schools was purposively done on the basis that the selected schools had adequate numbers of classes in terms of male and female ESL learners as the schools comprised one co-education and two single sex schools. The Grade level of the participants was also purposively sampled because the researcher sought to make inferences on whether or not the discourse markers Grade Twelve ESL learners had mastered at this stage in their education were adequate to enable them produce coherent pieces of discourse. From the total population of the 2014 Grade 12 ESL learners at Mpelembe Secondary School, Helen Kaunda Girls' Secondary School and Mukuba Boys' Secondary school, a sample of one hundred and fifty (150) learners participated in the study, 50 drawn from each of the three schools. The three schools were purposively selected while simple random sampling was used to select the classes from which the pupils were drawn.

## 5.2 *Data Generation*

In order to generate data for the study, the researcher employed descriptive research design with text analysis as specific research approach based on the perspective of written discourse as rule-structured object or product of a completed activity (Hyland, 2016). Each of the 150 learners was asked to write two pieces of composition in English: one being the *free style* narrative type and the other being the *guided* comparative/contrastive type. The two tasks were prescribed in accordance with the requirements of the school curriculum in that ESL learners at senior level are required to write two pieces of composition in Paper 1, one from Section 1 and the other from Section 2, respectively. The questions that were included required the participants to express themselves in naturally-occurring language as expected in a classroom environment based on the format of the final Grade Twelve English Composition examination which the pupils were scheduled to write later in the year.

Data were generated through the analysis of 300 composition scripts produced by the 150 Grade Twelve ESL learners in the English Language Paper 1 End of Term 1 Test in the research areas. The test was prepared and administered by the researcher with the permission of subject teachers from the three schools under a controlled environment in order to ensure none of the 2014 Grade 12 ESL learner from study areas had prior access to the task or extra time. The candidates were given one hour forty-five minutes to answer the questions as required of them in the final Grade 12 examination setting. This was done to ensure uniformity in content. The 300 scripts were analysed to find out the discourse markers the learners employed in composition writing and whether or not the application of these features enhanced or obscured discourse coherence.

## 5.3 *Data Analysis*

### 5.3.1 *Qualitative Data Analysis*

A four-stage qualitative approach was applied in data analysis. The first involved marking and scoring out of 20 each of the 300 scripts. The scores were useful in assessing the



link between use of DMs and discourse coherence and comprehensibility. The average performance of the pupils in the two tasks is indicated in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Average scores of the learners in the two pieces of composition**

Average Score out of 20	%	No. of pupils' Scripts	%
16	80	20	06
15	75	14	05
14	70	20	07
13	65	17	06
12	60	31	10
11	55	15	05
10	50	35	12
Total		152	51
Below 10	Below 50%	148	49
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 above shows that only 51 % of the pupils' scripts scored above 50%. The rest, 49%, scored below 50% which is below the credit level band under the Examinations Council of Zambia GCE grading scale. The low scores were due to a combination of both limited and inappropriate use of discourse markers.

The second comprised locating the DMs used in each of the 300 scripts and highlighting them by means of a highlighter. Thirdly, each of the DMs was classified according to its communicative function as either propositional or non-propositional. The categorisation was based on Halliday and Hassan (1976) and Frazer (1999). Finally, identification and cataloguing of instances of appropriate and inappropriate uses of DMs was done. Appropriate use, as evaluated by the researcher, constituted manifestation of proficiency in the utilisation of discourse markers while inappropriate use implied lack of proficiency and constituted the challenges. Enumeration of the occurrences of the various types of DMs was also conducted to determine the frequency with which each of the DMs was used.

### 5.3.2 Quantitative Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis was supplemented by limited application of quantitative aspects in form of descriptive statistics to show the frequencies with which the various categories of DMs occurred. Understanding of the extent to which each category of discourse markers is featured in the participants' pieces of discourse.

## 6. Results and Discussion

The study revealed that while the participants employed both propositional and non-propositional discourse markers in their writing, they only used a limited number of DMs, most of which were inappropriately applied. This finding suggests the participants' awareness of the

relevance of DMs in discourse production and comprehension and is supported by Kalajahi (2012) whose results revealed that all the participants in his study were fully aware of utilising DMs in their writing but did not have sufficient knowledge for the proper use and choice of appropriate ones resulting in their experiencing challenges in the use of the DMs. In the present study these challenges were reflected under seven patterns: wrong relation (WR), non-equivalent exchange (NEE), semantic incompleteness (SI), distraction (D), surface logicity (SL), overuse (O) and the use of speech-related (SR) DMs.

### 6.1 Non-equivalent Exchange

The problem of non-equivalent exchange pattern was discovered in both narrative and discursive pieces of composition. The use of non-equivalent patterns hampered the smooth and logical flow of information in that the DMs used did not logically relate proposition (S2) to proposition (S1) thereby making the pieces of composition in which they were used incomprehensible as illustrated below in examples 1, 2, 3 and 4 below.

1. Mr. Semi was a very hardworking man during his time as Minister. It **furthermore** helped him to improve the conditions of the farmers.
2. Unsanitary conditions are a common sight in compounds all over urban areas. It **therefore**, makes it difficult for the government to provide social services.
3. Mr. Semi read pamphlets and worked on the farm after dropping out of school. They **additionally** contributed to his success in college.
4. Rural-urban migration has contributed to a lot of the problems being faced in urban areas. They **furthermore** become over-populated because of rural migrants.

Examples 1 to 4 above illustrate the application of non-equivalent exchange in the use of discourse markers. **It** in examples 1 and 2 as well as **they** in example 3 and 4 do not clearly refer to any specific antecedents resulting in the use of **furthermore**, **therefore**, **additionally** and **furthermore** respectively being illogical.

### 6.2 Overuse

The pattern of overuse was identified as a result of the high density of the occurrence of DMs in two perspectives. The first type of overuse related to the preceding variant of a DM lacking clarity with regard to how it relates to the other segment to which the DM is expected to connect. As a result, there were breaks in the flow of information because the learners' utilisation of DMs did not successfully cue readers to the relationships between respective sentences resulting in incomprehensibility on the part of the reader. The second type of overuse

related to repetition of a particular DM instead of using its variant. Examples 5 and 6 below illustrate overuse of the first type while 7 and 8 reflect overuse of the second type.

5.     **But**, when his father died, he was still in college. **In contrast to** other students, Semi worked hard than any other boy or girl. He is **also** very disciplined and determined.
6.     **Because** they are poor, they give in to temptations so easily. **Compared to** those who live in towns, people from rural areas are used as conduits of crime by criminals. **Furthermore** contributes to trust issues among people.
7.     **As a result of** rural-urban migration there are many street kids in urban areas. **As a result** they have no one to support them they steal and commit other terrible crimes. **As a result**, they are a danger to society.
8.     After the death of his father, R. Semi devoted his time to developing the farm **and** studying **and** he worked tirelessly both at college **and** the farm **and** he was awarded for his hard work **and** he is today remembered as a successful man **and** his works are written in books.

Examples 5 and 6 above show a case of overuse because of the absence of precedents for **but** and **because** respectively thereby mystifying the reader as to the type of propositions to which the sentences provide follow-up. Further, the reader is unable to predict the direction being sued by the writer with regard to the flow of discourse in linking the various elements because, the use of the DMs **compared to** and **furthermore** in 6 break the flow of information between the preceding information in the first segment (S1) and the subsequent segments.

Examples 7 and 8 involve repetition of the use of **and** six times and the use of **as a result** three times respectively.

### 6.3    *Surface logicality*

The pattern of surface logicality involves the use of discourse markers to impose logicality or bridge the gap among propositions when actually their existence does not. Examples 9, 10, 11 and 12 below illustrate the problem of surface logicality.

9.     Mr. Semi was elected chairman of Farmers' Corporative Union in 1968. **However**, two years later he was appointed Minister of Agriculture. **However**, he brought a lot of positive changes to the ministry.
10.    Mr. Semi attained many accolades in his life as a young man. **Additionally**, it was his commitment and dedication to whatever he did that made him be very successful in life; **additionally**, he was a happy man.

11. Many people nowadays flee village life to come to towns to find a better life. **Consequently**, they end up disappointed when they find the difficult conditions town urban life has to offer. **Consequently** they find no jobs and no place to stay.
12. Mostly people from rural areas do not find jobs in town. **Therefore**, they try hard to find means and ways of survival. **Hence** they end up committing crimes and spend their lives behind bars.

Examples 9, 10, 11 and 12 above demonstrate the inappropriate use of DMs under the category known as surface logicity in that **however**, **additionally**, **consequently** and **therefore/hence** do not serve as appropriate logical connectors for (S1) and (S2) resulting in incomprehensibility and incoherence.

#### 6.4 Wrong Relation

The fourth pattern of inappropriate use of DMs is wrong relation which showed in learners' written discourse as a result of failure by the participants to use suitable discourse markers to express a certain textual relation. Examples of wrong relation as extracted from the participants pieces of work are presented in 13 to 16 below.

13. In 1930 Semi started school at Gamba Primary School. **Additionally**, he stopped school to work on his father's farm.
14. Semi studied for a diploma course in agriculture from 1944 to 1945. **Yet**, he was their best student in his intake.
15. There are just a lot of people in urban areas. **Because**, rural-urban migration does not contribute to the rapid increase in crime.
16. Shanty compounds hide criminals from rural areas. **Nevertheless**, they trouble a lot of innocent people.

Examples 13 and 14 show the misuse of the DMs **additionally** and **yet** in the pattern of wrong relation. The use of the elaborative marker **additionally**, in example 13 is incorrect because the following proposition suggests a contrast not an elaboration. Example 14 shows the misuse of **yet** in the pattern of wrong relation because the succeeding sentence indicates an elaboration not a contrast.

Examples 15 and 16 also display the misuse of DMs in the pattern of wrong relation. The use of the causative DM **because** in example 15 is inappropriate because it does not provide logical connection of (S2) to (S1). Instead of employing a causative DM, the learner should have employed an inferential DM. Additionally, the contrastive marker **nevertheless**, in example 16 is inappropriate since the preceding sentence required a causative DM to bridge the sense between

the foregoing and the subsequent sentence. As such, a collateral or elaborative DM would have been appropriate in this instance. Examples 15 and 16 should have read:

- 15 (a) There are just a lot of people in urban areas. **As a result**, rural-urban migration does not contribute to the rapid increase in crime.
- 16 (a) Shanty compounds hide criminals from rural areas. **Consequently**, they trouble a lot of innocent people.

### 6.5 *Semantic Incompletion*

Semantic incompletion is an instance whereby there is lack of elaboration in the use of the discourse marker resulting in the marker being less functional and to a greater extent ‘hanging.’ Examples of this type are indicated in 17, 18, 19 and 20 below.

17. His father died in 1945. **As a result**, Mr. Semi worked alone.
18. Three years after his studies in the USA, Mr. Semi returned to teach at Yabo Agriculture College **Therefore**, he served.
19. People face a lot of problems when they come to urban areas. **As a result** they commit crimes.
20. Zambia is a land of freedom. **So** people are free to be where they want.

Examples 17, 18, 19 and 20 above show the misuse of the DMs *as a result*, *therefore* and *so* in the pattern of semantic incompletion. The examples are inappropriate because there should be more explanation about the inferences suggested by the DMs. However, the learners under investigation ended their writing abruptly leaving the reader in suspense or ‘hanging’ as to what the writer intended to convey. This type of writing creates discourse incomprehensibility resulting in low scores in composition writing among ESL learners.

### 6.6 *Distraction*

The pattern of distraction showed up in participants’ written pieces of discourse as a result of their unnecessary use of DMs as demonstrated in examples 21, 22, 23 and 24 below.

21. Honourable Semi was appointed minister during the 2<sup>nd</sup> five year plan. **Therefore**, through his hard work, 132, 000 acres of land was cultivated from 120, 000 cultivated during the first five-year plan.

22. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> five year plan, only spices were imported. As for the exports *nevertheless*, 27 tons of rice, oil and machinery were exported.
23. Rape cases, murder, robberies, ritual killings and stealing are very common in urban areas. The people in urban areas are *however*, responsible for these crimes and not the people from rural areas.
24. There are a lot of criminals in urban areas who commit serious crimes and these are *yet* not from rural areas.

The excerpts 21, 22, 23 and 24 above illustrate the inappropriate use of the DMs *therefore*, *nevertheless*, *however* and *yet* in the pattern of distraction. Without the use of these DMs the sentences remain logical. Therefore, the use of DMs in this manner distracts the readers and hampers discourse coherence.

#### 6.7 *Use of Discourse Markers Associated with Spoken Discourse*

The other misuse or inappropriate use of DMs concerned the use of DMs that are characteristic of spoken instances of discourse. These are illustrated in 25 to 28 below.

25. *Actually*, Mr Semi worked on the farm single handed after the death of his father.
26. *Honestly*, Honourable Semi was a very hardworking man and that is why he achieved a lot for himself and his country.
27. Many people come to urban areas with the hope that they will acquire riches *as you know* there are many opportunities in urban areas.
28. *Frankly*, the people from rural areas face many challenges which lead them into crime.

In examples 25, 26, 27 and 28 above the DMs *actually*, *honestly*, *as you know* and *frankly* are characteristic of spoken discourse. Their use in formal pieces of written discourse suggests lack of sensitivity by the writers to the lexical choice requirements of various registers of language use.

The results provided substantial evidence of inappropriate use of DMs, which constituted challenges experienced by the participants, resulting in discourse incomprehensibility. Among the seven categories of inappropriate use of discourse markers, discovered and discussed in this study, wrong relation was found to be the most notable challenge followed by non-equivalent exchange. Under non-equivalent exchange the use of the DMs appears appropriate at face value but deeper semantic analysis reveals lack of antecedent specificity for the DM used resulting in discourse incoherence since the function of DMs is to “signal relationships between prior and coming discourse” (Biber and Barbieri, 2007:265). A third category of inappropriate use of DMs related to semantic incompleteness in which involved lack of elaboration resulting in failure by the learners under investigation to hold the flow of information to the end thereby formulating sentences which ended abruptly. Distraction constituted the fourth category of inappropriate use

of DMs. This pattern involved the use of DMs in slots where they were not required. The pattern can be attributed to lack of familiarity with the concept of a variant of a given DM and the context in which it is used. The implication of this observation is that the study participants were not sufficiently conversant with the use and functions of DMs. However, studies show that explicit instruction of pupils on the use of discourse markers is very cardinal in augmenting the quality of writing (Hamid and Kaveifard, 2011; Kamali and Noori, 2015). Most of the existing research on DMs in both spoken and written discourse has emphasised the essential role of DMs in building discourse coherence (Redeker, 1990; Schiffrin, 2001; Dulger, 2007; Hernandez, 2008) which is a requirement for all formal writing. Surface logicity exists where the writer attempts to impose logicity or to bridge the gap among propositions through the application of DMs, yet their use results in the production of illogical constructions. The pattern of surface logicity was found to occur due to misunderstanding of the concept of a given variant and the context in which it is used. This observation reflects lack of familiarity with the use of such DMs and, consequently, lack of proficiency.

Inappropriate use of discourse markers was also manifested through overuse of certain DMs suggesting limited repertoire of internalised DMs on the part of the Grade 12 ESL learners. Overuse of a limited set of preferred or better understood DMs causes breaks in the flow of information thereby obscuring discourse coherence. This finding resonates with those of Tinko (2004) and Kalajahi *et al* (2012) as well as with Li and Schmitt (2009) who discovered that since non-native student writers lack deeper knowledge of DMs, they overuse the limited set of those which they know well. For example, most of the learners investigated in this study used the DM *and* more than once. The other observation arising from the analysis of the data is that some learners also used only one DM repeatedly instead of a variety of them. Overuse of specific DMs was indicative of limited exposure of the participants to the available range of DMs and the contexts in which they are used. This observation seems to suggest inadequate proficiency in the use of discourse markers by the participants even after twelve years of learning and using English as a second language. The learners under investigation failed to generate the reader's interest in reading the script on account of unclear organization, development and flow of information in their pieces of composition. Lack of variation in the use of DMs in composition writing suggests lack of proficiency and renders a piece of writing monotonous thereby putting off the reader resulting in low scores.

Another occurrence of inappropriate use of DMs related to the presence of DMs which are typically characteristic of spoken instances of discourse. When used in written discourse such DMs do not serve as either functional or organisational facilitators of discourse. In other words, such use does not show how the two propositions involved in the first sentence (S1) and the second (S2) are related. The prevalent use of speech-related discourse markers in the written pieces of discourse produced by the participants seems to suggest both first language (L1) interference and lack of knowledge about the rhetorical structures and conventions associated

with written formal English. DMs such as *actually, now, honestly, as you know, I think, frankly* were the most frequently employed by Grade 12 ESL learners. The findings seem to suggest lack of competence in the appropriate use of use of DMs emanating from lack of familiarity with the wide range or repertoire of DMs that are available for use, which in turn suggests limited proficiency. These findings support those of previous studies by Alghamdi (2014) whose work revealed overuse of DMs at sentence-initial position and an unnecessary use of semantically similar DMs within the boundary of a single sentence; Daif-Allah and Albeshir (2013) whose findings revealed that the students overused the additive connectors followed by the causative, the contrastive and the illustrative ones and that students' use of DMs was too limited and the ones that were most frequently used were *and, in addition* and *for example*; Narita, Sato and Sugiura (2004) whose study revealed overuse of *in addition, of course, moreover, and first*, underuse of the logical connectors such as *and instead, then* and *yet* and influence of L1 transfer on the learners' use of conjunctions remained indefinite; Lai (2008) whose results indicated that even though the groups investigated committed errors in utilising some conjunctions (*therefore, furthermore, in other words, besides, nevertheless, by contrast, on the contrary, because*) in their writing; Djigunovic and Vickov's (2010) whose findings revealed that the participants had relatively poor command of English resulting in the tendency to use a relatively small range of English DMs and attributed the low acquisition of English DMs to L1 interference and inadequate input; Simci (2012) who observed that the use of speech-related DMs in learner academic writing contributed to the excessively oral tone exhibited in learners' writing resulting in the attainment of low scores; Hamed (2014) who observed that the participants employed the conjunctions inappropriately and that adversative conjunctions posed the most difficulty for the learners followed by additives and causals and Chen (2015) whose findings revealed that the learners under investigation tended to initiate propositions with *in my opinion, I think* and *so* which are associated with spoken discourse and attributed the practice to students' lack of knowledge about rhetorical structures and conventions associated with English academic writing and as a result of L1 interference.

Based on the qualitatively generated and analysed data and in relation to the findings from literature review presented in this study, it can be concluded that the Grade 12 learners whose scripts were analysed are not sufficiently proficient in the use of the DMs. Consequently, they are unable to use DMs appropriately to facilitate discourse coherence and comprehensibility thereby attaining low scores in their written pieces of discourse.

### 6.2 Implications of the Study

The findings from the present study raise two major implications. The first is that there is inadequate teaching of DMs and how they are used. This observation explains why only a limited number of DMs were used out of so many that are available. Another implication is that there is inadequate practice on the use of even the few DMs with which the learners are familiar



thereby accounting for the widespread inappropriate use of DMs observed in the analysed scripts.

### *6.3 Conclusion*

The ability to write coherently in order to comprehensively convey information remains a mandatory skill for all school leavers as they prepare for either further education or employment. The present study has yielded evidence that the attainment of such skill can be enhanced through the achievement of proficiency in the use of discourse markers thereby rendering support to both theory and literature. This observation explains the inclusion of DMs in the English Language Syllabus from Grade 8 to Grade 12. From the presentation and discussion of the results there is demonstration of use of discourse markers by all the Grade 12 ESL learners who participated in the study, recording a total of 1,829 instances of use of discourse markers from 300 scripts giving an average of six DMs per script. It is the case, therefore, that the participants are aware of the relevance of discourse markers in enhancing discourse coherence and comprehensibility. However, the use of only 44 out of the 107 available discourse markers as well as the prevalent inappropriate use of discourse markers seems to suggest that there is inadequate proficiency in the learners at Grade 12 level. Consequently, they are unable to produce sufficiently coherent and comprehensible pieces of composition resulting in low scores. In this regard, the study has provided evidence of lack of proficiency in the use of discourse markers by the Grade 12 ESL learners who participated in the study.

### *6.4 Recommendations*

Arising from the discussion of the findings, the implications and the conclusion drawn some recommendations are hereby proposed for pedagogy and further research.

#### *6.4.1 Recommendations for pedagogy*

- (i) English Language Curriculum Designers should expand the Secondary School English Language Syllabus to incorporate all the propositional and non-propositional DMs discussed in this study.
- (ii) Secondary school teachers of English language should progressively teach all the propositional and no-propositional discourse markers from Grade 8 to Grade 12.
- (iii) Secondary school teachers of English language should progressively engage learners into regularly practising the appropriate use of all the propositional and non-propositional discourse markers from Grade 8 to Grade 12.

6.4.2 *Recommendations for further research*

- (i) Longitudinal studies on the development of proficiency in the use of discourse markers in English composition writing by grade level.
- (ii) The extent of inappropriate use of discourse markers arising from first language interference.
- (iii) The functional roles of DMs used in other positions other than initial.
- (iv) Proficiency in the use of discourse markers in essays written by students in higher institutions of learning.

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