

Improving English Majors' Speaking Through Discourse Marker Instruction: A Case Study at a Vietnamese University

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Abstract—The current study was conducted at a university in Vietnam to investigate the effects of discourse marker instruction on the speaking performance of second-year English majors. Specifically, it examined changes in the frequency of discourse marker use, overall speaking ability, functional appropriateness in the use of discourse markers, and students' perceptions of learning about discourse markers. The study employed a mixed-methods design involving both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Eighty second-year English-major students participated in the study and were divided into two groups: an experimental group of 40 students who received function-based discourse marker instruction over a period of five weeks, and a control group of 40 students who were taught using traditional methods. Data were collected through pre-tests administered before the intervention, post-tests conducted after the intervention, an eight-item questionnaire on students' perceptions of learning discourse markers, and semi-structured interviews consisting of three questions for the experimental group. The findings revealed that the experimental group, which received explicit instruction on discourse markers, showed significant improvement in overall speaking ability compared to the control group, with the mean score rising from 5.78 (SD = 0.96) in the pre-test to 6.85 (SD = 0.99) in the post-test. In addition, the frequency of discourse marker use in spoken communication increased considerably after the instruction. Most students also reported positive perceptions of the instruction, particularly regarding improvements in fluency, coherence, and speaking confidence, as reflected in the questionnaire and interview data. The study suggests that explicit, function-based instruction in discourse markers is an effective pedagogical approach to improving EFL learners' speaking ability and should be systematically integrated into speaking courses.

Index Terms—discourse markers, speaking fluency, pragmatic competence, EFL students, Vietnam

I. INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the four core language skills and plays a crucial role in both real-life communication and language learning. Learners of English are required not only to produce linguistically accurate language but also to express ideas fluently and effectively in social interaction (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In the context of globalization, effective English-speaking ability enables students to participate in international academic and professional environments (Carter & Nunan, 2010). However, successful speaking involves more than accurate pronunciation and grammatical control; it also requires the ability to organize ideas, connect utterances, and adjust language use according to communicative contexts. These aspects of spoken communication are closely associated with the use of linguistic devices, particularly discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1999).

Discourse markers—such as *well*, *actually*, *you know*, and *so*—serve important pragmatic and organizational functions in spoken discourse. These markers help speakers manage the flow of conversation, signal relationships between ideas, and enhance the naturalness of spoken language (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1999). Research has consistently shown that appropriate and flexible use of discourse markers is a key indicator of speaking fluency and interactional competence (Wray, 2002; Taguchi, 2011). More recent empirical studies further confirm that learners who use discourse markers more accurately and flexibly are perceived as more fluent and communicatively competent, and that explicit instruction in discourse markers can improve coherence and effectiveness in EFL speaking tasks (Brown et al., 2023; Suryadi et al., 2024).

Globally, discourse markers have been widely examined in EFL and ESL contexts. Foundational studies conceptualize them as organizational and pragmatic devices that structure spoken discourse and facilitate interaction (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1999). Empirical research across different contexts shows that learners who receive explicit instruction in

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discourse markers demonstrate better organization of ideas and greater flexibility in spoken interaction (Aijmer, 2002). Nevertheless, much of this research has focused on Western or major EFL contexts, while studies examining systematic instruction of discourse markers in Vietnamese higher education remain limited.

In Vietnam, research directly addressing discourse markers used in spoken English is still scarce. Existing studies suggest that although Vietnamese EFL learners recognize the importance of discourse markers, their actual use in spoken interaction is often limited and inconsistent. For example, Que (2024) reports that English-major students use discourse markers sparingly despite acknowledging their communicative value. Similarly, Tran Thanh Du et al. (2025) found that learners lack familiarity with the range and functions of different discourse markers, indicating a need for systematic instruction. Most studies at the tertiary level remain descriptive, focusing on the frequency or types of markers rather than on pedagogical intervention (Truong, 2022). Although Van's (2022) study focuses on written discourse, it similarly reveals a gap between learners' awareness of discourse markers and their actual use, suggesting that this issue may also extend to spoken English.

In the Vietnamese context, English-major students generally use discourse markers in English oral communication; however, their use is often not highly effective, as these markers are not always employed appropriately in context and are sometimes used mechanically. As a result, students' speaking tends to lack fluency and naturalness. In addition, in the English-major curricula of some universities in Vietnam, discourse markers have not received sufficient attention and have not been systematically integrated into speaking instruction. For example, at Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam, the course *Functions of English* incorporates the teaching of discourse markers into speaking activities, and preliminary observations have suggested improvements in students' coherence and naturalness in conversation. However, there is still a lack of empirical evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of such systematic discourse marker instruction on students' speaking ability. Therefore, this study aims to examine the effects of explicit and systematic discourse marker instruction on the speaking performance of English-major students, with particular attention to changes in the frequency of discourse marker use in spoken communication after the instructional intervention. In addition, the study explores English-major students' perceptions of learning and using discourse markers in speaking activities.

This study seeks to answer the following two research questions:

(i) *To what extent does explicit and systematic instruction of discourse markers affect English-major students' overall speaking performance?*

(ii) *What are English-major students' perceptions of learning discourse markers for improving their speaking skills?*

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Conceptualizations of Speaking in Foreign Language Teaching

Speaking is widely regarded as one of the most complex skills in foreign language learning due to its real-time and interactive nature (Bygate, 1987; Brown, 2001). It requires learners to simultaneously process ideas, select appropriate language forms, and manage interaction with others (Luoma, 2004). More recent studies emphasize that effective speaking goes beyond grammatical accuracy and involves fluency, comprehensibility, and the ability to organize discourse during communication (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Goh & Burns, 2012). In this sense, the use of discourse markers plays a crucial role in helping speakers maintain coherence and naturalness in spoken interaction.

B. Speaking as an Interactive and Real-Time Skill

Speaking is inherently an interactive skill that unfolds in real time and requires immediate language processing. Unlike writing, spoken communication does not allow speakers sufficient time to plan or revise their language production extensively. As a result, speakers must simultaneously generate ideas, select appropriate linguistic forms, and employ communication strategies to maintain interaction and achieve communicative goals (Bygate, 1987; Levelt, 1989). In second-language contexts, this real-time nature of speaking poses considerable cognitive demands on learners, requiring them not only to convey meaning accurately but also to respond appropriately to interlocutors, manage turn-taking, and sustain the flow of conversation. Goh and Burns (2012) argue that effective speaking involves the coordination of linguistic resources and interactional skills under time pressure. Moreover, recent research on second-language fluency has reinforced the central role of real-time interaction in spoken proficiency, with fluent spoken discourse being characterized by smooth, effortless verbal exchanges that reflect learners' ability to negotiate meaning dynamically with others (Peltonen, 2024).

Additional studies of technology-supported speaking practice further confirm that structured real-time interaction—whether between learners and AI bots or human interlocutors can enhance oral proficiency, particularly in terms of fluency and communicative competence (Ding & Yusof, 2025).

C. Common Challenges in EFL Learners' Speaking Performance

Despite years of formal instruction, many EFL learners continue to experience considerable difficulties in speaking performance. One of the most commonly reported problems is the lack of naturalness in spoken production. Learners often rely heavily on pre-planned sentences or textbook expressions, which results in speech that sounds unnatural and overly formal in spontaneous communication (Goh & Burns, 2012).

Another prevalent challenge concerns discourse organization. EFL learners' spoken output is frequently characterized by fragmented ideas and weak logical connections between utterances. Without adequate linguistic resources to signal transitions, elaboration, or speaker stance, learners struggle to maintain coherence and sustain the flow of conversation, particularly in extended speaking tasks (Luoma, 2004; Peltonen, 2024).

In addition, many learners tend to transfer structures and expressions directly from their first language when speaking English. This tendency often leads to speech that is grammatically acceptable but pragmatically inappropriate, further reducing communicative effectiveness. Derwing and Munro (2015) argue that such problems are closely related to learners' limited ability to manage spoken discourse in real time rather than to a lack of grammatical knowledge alone.

Taken together, these challenges indicate that EFL learners' speaking difficulties are not merely a matter of linguistic accuracy but are largely associated with their limited capacity to organize spoken discourse and manage interaction effectively. This highlights the need for pedagogical attention to discourse-level features, particularly the use of discourse markers, as a means of enhancing fluency, coherence, and naturalness in spoken communication.

D. Implications for Discourse Organization in Speaking

The interactive and real-time nature of speaking has important implications for how spoken discourse is organized in second language communication. Given the cognitive demands imposed by real-time processing, speakers require linguistic resources that enable them to structure their speech, signal relationships between ideas, and manage interaction efficiently. Without such resources, spoken output is likely to become fragmented, disjointed, and difficult for interlocutors to follow (Luoma, 2004).

Research in second language speaking has shown that effective spoken communication depends not only on grammatical accuracy but also on speakers' ability to organize discourse coherently and maintain the flow of interaction. Fluent speakers are able to use various discourse-level devices to mark transitions, elaborate ideas, express stance, and manage turn-taking, thereby enhancing both comprehensibility and naturalness in spoken interaction (Goh & Burns, 2012; Peltonen, 2024).

In EFL contexts, however, learners often lack systematic instruction in discourse organization and are therefore limited in their ability to manage spoken interaction effectively. This gap highlights the pedagogical importance of focusing on discourse-level features in speaking instruction. Among these features, discourse markers play a particularly crucial role, as they help speakers gain planning time, signal logical relations, and sustain interaction in real-time communication. Consequently, greater instructional attention to discourse markers may contribute significantly to the development of fluency, coherence, and communicative effectiveness in EFL learners' speaking performance.

Beyond facilitating coherence in everyday communication, the ability to manage spoken discourse effectively is also a critical determinant of performance in standardized speaking assessments. Effective discourse management contributes directly to what is often described as natural speech in English communication, namely, speech that flows logically, maintains interaction smoothly, and reflects appropriate pragmatic control. Natural speech is not merely the absence of grammatical errors; rather, it is characterized by coherent organization, appropriate use of cohesive devices, smooth transitions between ideas, and effective interactional management.

These features are explicitly reflected in major speaking assessment rubrics. In the Speaking Scoring Rubrics regulated by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) since 2014, criteria such as fluency and coherence, discourse organization, and interactional competence are emphasized as key components of higher-level performance. Similarly, the TOEFL iBT Independent Speaking Rubrics developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) evaluate delivery, language use, and topic development, with high-scoring responses demonstrating clear organization, logical progression of ideas, and effective use of cohesive devices. The IELTS Speaking Band Descriptors, regulated and developed by the British Council, IDP Education, and Cambridge University Press & Assessment, explicitly include "Fluency and Coherence" as one of the four main criteria, highlighting candidates' ability to organize extended speech, use cohesive devices appropriately, and maintain flow without excessive hesitation.

Across these frameworks, the effective management of speaking discourse through logical structuring, cohesive devices, and pragmatic markers serves as an important indicator of advanced speaking proficiency. Therefore, the development of discourse management skills, including the appropriate use of discourse markers, is not only essential for communicative naturalness but also directly aligned with high-stakes speaking assessment criteria.

E. Criteria for Assessing Speaking Proficiency and the Role of Discourse Markers

Speaking proficiency in EFL contexts is commonly assessed using multidimensional criteria that go beyond grammatical accuracy and lexical range. Internationally recognized frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the Vietnamese Framework of Foreign Language Proficiency emphasize the importance of communicative effectiveness, particularly at intermediate and higher proficiency levels (Council of Europe, 2020; Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 2014).

Across these frameworks, several core criteria are consistently highlighted, including fluency and coherence, interactive communication, and discourse management. Fluency refers to the ability to produce speech smoothly with minimal hesitation, while coherence concerns the logical organization and connectedness of spoken ideas. Interactive communication focuses on speakers' capacity to respond appropriately to interlocutors, manage turn-taking, and sustain interaction. Discourse management, meanwhile, involves the effective organization of extended spoken discourse and the

use of linguistic resources to signal relationships between ideas. These criteria are also clearly reflected in large-scale speaking assessments such as IELTS and VSTEP. In the IELTS speaking band descriptors, for example, higher-band candidates are characterized by their ability to speak fluently with only occasional repetition or self-correction and to use cohesive devices flexibly and appropriately. Similarly, VSTEP speaking descriptors at Level 5 place strong emphasis on learners' ability to maintain coherence, manage interaction, and express ideas clearly in extended spoken responses.

Within these assessment frameworks, discourse markers play a crucial role in shaping speaking performance. By using discourse markers, speakers are able to maintain the flow of speech, link ideas coherently, and signal logical and pragmatic relationships such as contrast, elaboration, or conclusion. The appropriate and flexible use of discourse markers is therefore often regarded as an indicator of higher speaking proficiency, as it reflects speakers' ability to manage discourse and interaction effectively rather than merely produce grammatically correct sentences.

In sum, the use of spoken discourse markers constitutes an important component of the assessment of speaking proficiency, particularly at intermediate and advanced levels. Their role in enhancing fluency, coherence, and interactional effectiveness underscores the need for greater pedagogical and evaluative attention to discourse markers in EFL speaking instruction and assessment.

F. Speaking Discourse Markers: Definitions and Functions

Discourse markers have been widely examined as an important discourse-level feature in spoken communication. Schiffrin (1987) defines discourse markers as linguistic elements that function to organize discourse and signal relationships between units of talk rather than to contribute propositional meaning. Similarly, Fraser (1999) argues that discourse markers do not add conceptual meaning to an utterance but serve pragmatic functions by indicating how the current utterance relates to the preceding discourse. In EFL contexts, discourse markers are therefore viewed primarily as devices that facilitate discourse coherence and interaction rather than as carriers of core lexical meaning.

More recent studies have further emphasized the pragmatic and interactional nature of discourse markers in spoken language. Crible (2018) highlights that discourse markers play a crucial role in managing spoken discourse by helping speakers structure their talk, express stance, and negotiate meaning in real-time interaction. From a pedagogical perspective, Müller (2019) notes that the effective use of discourse markers is closely associated with higher levels of spoken proficiency and pragmatic competence among L2 learners.

In spoken communication, discourse markers perform a range of functions. First, they help organize discourse by signaling sequencing, transitions, and topic shifts (e.g., *first, next, finally*). Second, they allow speakers to express attitudes, evaluations, and stance (e.g., *well, you know, I think*), contributing to interpersonal meaning. Third, discourse markers are used to manage interaction by signaling reformulation, emphasis, or confirmation (e.g., *actually, I mean, right*). Finally, they assist speakers in gaining planning time and maintaining fluency during real-time speech production (e.g., *well, let me see*), thereby reducing processing pressure.

Empirical research has consistently shown that the use of discourse markers has a positive impact on spoken performance. Appropriate and flexible use of discourse markers contributes to greater fluency by helping speakers sustain the flow of speech, enhances naturalness by approximating authentic spoken discourse, and improves overall communicative effectiveness by making spoken messages easier for interlocutors to follow (Crible, 2018; Peltonen, 2024). Consequently, discourse markers can be regarded as a key indicator of advanced speaking ability, particularly at intermediate and higher proficiency levels in EFL contexts.

From a pragmatic perspective, improvement in discourse marker use should be examined not only in terms of frequency but also in terms of functional appropriateness in context. As argued by Crible (2018) and Taguchi (2011), increased use without pragmatic control may result in mechanical or inappropriate discourse. Therefore, both quantitative and qualitative analyses are necessary to capture changes in learners' discourse marker use following explicit instruction.

G. Models of Teaching Speaking Discourse Markers

Recent research has highlighted the importance of pedagogical approaches to teaching discourse markers in second-language speaking. Broadly, three approaches can be identified: incidental teaching through speaking tasks, implicit learning through exposure, and explicit, function-based instruction.

Incidental teaching introduces discourse markers naturally through communicative activities without making them the focus of instruction. While this approach aligns with communicative language teaching, studies suggest that exposure alone does not guarantee learners' understanding of the pragmatic functions of discourse markers. Learners may notice the forms but often fail to use them appropriately in interaction, particularly in EFL contexts with limited authentic input (Burns & Richards, 2018). Implicit learning assumes that learners acquire discourse markers gradually through repeated exposure to spoken input. However, recent research in second-language pragmatics indicates that pragmatic features such as discourse markers are difficult to acquire without instructional guidance. As a result, learners may underuse discourse markers or apply them in a mechanical and context-inappropriate manner (Taguchi & Roever, 2020). In contrast, explicit and systematic instruction has been shown to be more effective in developing learners' pragmatic competence. This approach raises learners' awareness of discourse markers and emphasizes their communicative functions. Empirical evidence demonstrates that explicit, function-based instruction supports more frequent and appropriate use of discourse markers, contributing to greater fluency and coherence in L2 speech (Crible, 2018).

The *Functions of English* model exemplifies a function-based approach to teaching speaking discourse markers.

Discourse markers are organized according to communicative functions such as organizing discourse, expressing stance, and managing interaction, and are taught in realistic speaking contexts. This functional orientation helps learners understand when and why discourse markers should be used, rather than relying on rote memorization (Taguchi & Roever, 2020).

Recent studies further show that function-based instruction reduces inappropriate use of discourse markers and enhances the naturalness of spoken discourse. Learners who receive such instruction demonstrate greater flexibility and control in managing spoken interaction, which contributes to higher perceived speaking proficiency (Crible, 2018; Peltonen, 2024).

In conclusion, compared with incidental and implicit approaches, teaching discourse markers through a function-based model such as *Functions of English* offers clearer pedagogical advantages. Explicit instruction that links discourse markers to communicative functions and contextualized use is more effective in fostering fluent and pragmatically appropriate spoken performance in EFL learners.

H. Previous Studies on Teaching Discourse Markers in Speaking

Previous studies have consistently shown that discourse markers play an important role in second-language speaking by enhancing fluency and discourse coherence. Research indicates that learners who use discourse markers appropriately are perceived as more fluent and communicatively effective, as discourse markers help organize ideas and manage spoken interaction (Crible, 2018; Peltonen, 2024). Experimental studies further demonstrate that explicit, function-based instruction leads to greater improvement in learners' use of discourse markers than incidental exposure or implicit learning.

In EFL contexts, particularly in Asia, learners tend to underuse discourse markers or rely on a limited range of forms, resulting in spoken discourse that lacks naturalness. This tendency has been attributed to instructional practices that prioritize grammatical accuracy over discourse-level and pragmatic features of speaking (Burns & Richards, 2018; Taguchi & Roever, 2020).

Similar findings have been reported in the Vietnamese EFL context. Existing studies indicate that Vietnamese university students use discourse markers infrequently and often inappropriately in spoken English. Discourse markers are rarely taught explicitly in speaking courses and are commonly treated as optional elements rather than essential resources for managing interaction and coherence (Nguyen & Tran, 2020).

Despite these findings, empirical research on teaching discourse markers in Vietnam remains limited. In particular, there is a lack of experimental studies comparing traditional speaking instruction with systematic, function-based instruction in discourse markers. To address this gap, the present study aims to investigate the effects of explicit discourse marker instruction on EFL learners' speaking performance at a Vietnamese university, thereby contributing empirical evidence to both local and international research.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

A mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, was employed in this study. The research was conducted with two groups randomly selected from two classes, namely the control group and the experimental group. The control group was taught speaking through the traditional method. In contrast, the experimental group received instruction on the use of discourse markers based on their functions. Data were collected through pre-tests and post-tests of speaking skills to measure learners' improvement in speaking performance after the discourse marker instruction. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics. In addition, data obtained from the questionnaire and interviews were analyzed in terms of frequencies and percentages to further clarify the findings. Specifically, descriptive statistics were used to analyze students' speaking performance. Moreover, the qualitative data collected from the questionnaire responses and interviews were analyzed thematically to compare them with the quantitative results and to provide deeper insights into students' perceptions of learning and using discourse markers in speaking activities.

B. Participants

The participants were 80 second-year English-major students at a university in Vietnam, randomly selected from two existing classes. The students were assigned to two groups, each consisting of 40 students: the control group (N = 40) and the experimental group (N = 40). All participants had studied English as a compulsory subject throughout their high school years. Their English speaking proficiency levels were relatively similar. To ensure group equivalence prior to the instructional intervention, the results of the speaking pre-test were examined, confirming that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups. All participants had completed foundational speaking courses and were at a comparable level of English proficiency at the time in the study.

C. Instructional Treatment

The experimental group received treatment over five sessions, during which students were given explicit and systematic instruction on the use of discourse markers in spoken communication. The instruction focused on common discourse markers frequently used in everyday communication and their communicative functions (see Table 1). In each session,

students were introduced to and guided through the following activities: explicit explanation of the functions of discourse markers, analysis of discourse markers in authentic spoken examples, guided speaking practice, and communicative speaking tasks requiring the contextualized use of discourse markers. In contrast, the control group received traditional instruction, with no explicit focus on discourse markers.

TABLE 1
COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS OF ENGLISH

	Communicative functions
1	Organizing discourse; expressing stance and evaluation; managing interaction and reformulation (<i>e.g., well, let me see; first, then, finally; well, actually, I think; you know, I mean, right</i>)
2	Making greetings and saying goodbye
3	Describing things, places and people, instructing people how to do things, checking understanding
4	Giving opinions, agreeing and disagreeing, discussing
5	Talking about oneself, starting a conversation, making a date
6	Talking about past events
7	Using conversation techniques
8	Making suggestions and giving advice, expressing enthusiasm, persuading
9	Telling a story
10	Describing places and people
11	Dealing with moods and feelings

Adopted from Jones, L. (1981). Functions of English. Cambridge University Press.

Jones (1981) presents a broader range of communicative functions in *Functions of English*. However, for the purposes of the present study, the researchers selected only eleven functions because they were closely aligned with classroom instruction and English proficiency tests.

D. Research Instruments

Each research instrument was designed to address specific research questions in the study. Both tests were designed in the same format so that changes in students' speaking performance could be compared more reliably across the two testing points. Both the pre-test and post-test were rated independently by two experienced raters, and the same two raters scored both tests to ensure consistency across the assessment process. Both raters held doctoral degrees in language education and had extensive experience in teaching English-speaking courses as well as assessing students' speaking performance. Their professional expertise contributed to the reliability and validity of the speaking scores used in this study.

Speaking Tests (Pre-test and Post-test):

The pre-test and post-test were employed to quantitatively measure changes in students' speaking ability before and after the intervention. Regarding structure and appropriateness, both tests followed standard Cambridge English-speaking tasks, including structured interview questions and short extended speaking tasks. The total score for each test was 10 points. Both tests evaluated students' overall speaking performance in terms of fluency, coherence, and interactive effectiveness. The pre-test and post-test shared the same format to help ensure the reliability and comparability of the results before and after the intervention. The test scores were analyzed using SPSS in terms of mean, standard deviation, mode, maximum score, and minimum score to examine differences within groups and between groups.

Questionnaire:

An eight-item questionnaire was used to examine students' perceptions of the usefulness of discourse markers in speaking, their confidence in using them, and the perceived impact of discourse marker instruction on speaking fluency and coherence after the intervention. The questionnaire data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize students' responses, with the findings reported mainly in percentages. The percentage distribution of responses provided an overview of students' perceptions of the usefulness of discourse marker instruction and its perceived effects on their speaking performance.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To better understand students' attitudes toward discourse marker instruction, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with ten students randomly chosen from the experimental group after the post-test. The interviews also explored their learning experiences in speaking activities. The interview protocol consisted of three open-ended questions focusing on students' perceptions of discourse marker instruction and its influence on their speaking performance. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes. The interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of students' attitudes, perceived benefits, challenges, and suggestions regarding discourse marker instruction, thereby triangulating the questionnaire findings.

E. Data Collection Procedures

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were employed. The study employed several main instruments, including the speaking pre-test and post-test, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. Data collection took place in three stages. The researchers conducted the pre-test before the intervention and administered the post-test and questionnaires after the treatment. In the final stage, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with ten students from the experimental group to obtain more detailed insights into their learning experiences.

F. Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed the quantitative data using SPSS Statistics, including the mean, median, mode, and standard deviation (SD) for the speaking test scores and Likert-scale responses. To identify statistical differences, the researchers conducted an independent-samples t-test for between-group comparisons at the post-test stage and a paired-samples t-test for within-group comparisons between the pre-test and post-test. Statistical significance was determined at $p < .05$. These procedures provided a clear assessment of the effects of discourse marker instruction on students' speaking performance.

The researchers analyzed the qualitative data collected from the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews using thematic analysis. They applied open coding to identify recurring themes related to students' attitudes toward discourse marker instruction and their learning experiences in speaking activities after the intervention. They then triangulated the qualitative findings with the quantitative results to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of discourse marker instruction.

G. Ethical Considerations

Participation in the research was voluntary, and the participants provided informed consent. Students were told that their participation would not influence their course grades and that the researchers would keep all data confidential and use them solely for research purposes.

IV. RESULTS

A. Pre-Test Results

Before conducting the experimental study, the researcher gave both the control group and the experimental group a pre-test. The following section presents the pre-test results.

TABLE 2
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE SPEAKING PRE-TEST

		Control group	Experimental group
N	Valid	40	40
	Missing	0	0
Mean		5.63	5.78
Median		6.00	6.00
Mode		6	7
Std. Deviation		1.07	0.96
Minimum		3	4
Maximum		8	8

As shown in Table 2, the pre-test results of the control group and the experimental group were quite similar. The mean score of the control group was 5.63, while that of the experimental group was 5.78, with a difference of only 0.15 points. Both groups had the same median score of 6.00. The mode of the control group was 6, whereas that of the experimental group was 7. In terms of score dispersion, the standard deviation of the control group was 1.07, compared with 0.96 for the experimental group, indicating that the variability of scores in the two groups was also similar. Regarding the score range, the minimum scores were 3 and 4, respectively, and the maximum score was 8 for both groups. These results indicated that the two groups had relatively similar speaking performance before the experiment. Therefore, the control group and the experimental group could be considered equivalent at baseline before the intervention. This provided a reliable basis for the research on improving English majors' speaking through discourse marker instruction.

B. Post-Test Results

TABLE 3
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE SPEAKING POST-TEST

		Control group	Experimental group
N	Valid	40	40
	Missing	0	0
Mean		5.70	6.85
Median		6.00	6.00
Mode		6	7
Std. Deviation		1.01	0.99
Minimum		4	5
Maximum		8	9

After five weeks of the experiment, the post-test results in Table 3 showed a clearer difference between the control group and the experimental group. The mean score of the control group was 5.70, which was only slightly higher than its pre-test mean of 5.63, showing an increase of only 0.07 points. In contrast, the mean score of the experimental group increased markedly from 5.78 in the pre-test to 6.85 in the post-test, representing a gain of 1.07 points. Similarly, the standard deviation of the control group changed slightly from 1.07 in the pre-test to 1.01 in the post-test. For the experimental group, the standard deviation also changed only slightly, from 0.96 to 0.99. In addition, the score range of

the experimental group showed improvement in both the minimum and maximum scores, from 4 and 8 in the pre-test to 5 and 9 in the post-test. Meanwhile, the control group showed only a slight change, with the minimum score increasing from 3 to 4, while the maximum score remained unchanged at 8. These results indicated that the experimental group made greater improvements in speaking performance than the control group after the intervention. This also d the effectiveness of discourse marker instruction in improving English-major students' speaking performance.

C. Questionnaire Results

After conducting the pre-test and post-test, the next step was to administer a questionnaire to investigate students' perceptions of learning and using discourse markers in speaking activities. This questionnaire consisted of eight statements and was administered to 40 students in the experimental group. The detailed results were presented as follows.

TABLE 4
QUESTIONNAIRE ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING DISCOURSE MARKERS (N=40)

No	Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1	Discourse markers help me organize my ideas more clearly when speaking English.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (10%)	21 (52.5%)	15 (37.5%)
2	Using discourse markers helps me maintain the flow of speech and speak more fluently.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (7.5%)	19 (47.5%)	18 (45%)
3	Discourse markers make my spoken English sound more natural.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (12.5%)	26 (65%)	9 (22.5%)
4	I feel more confident when using discourse markers in speaking activities.	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	4 (10%)	17 (42.5%)	17 (42.5%)
5	I am more aware of when and how to use discourse markers after the instruction.	2 (5%)	4 (10%)	5 (12.5%)	16 (40%)	13 (32.5%)
6	I can use discourse markers appropriately in different speaking contexts.	4 (10%)	3 (7.5%)	3 (7.5%)	20 (50%)	10 (25%)
7	Learning discourse markers helps me manage interaction better during conversations.	1 (2.5%)	2 (5%)	3 (7.5%)	22 (55%)	12 (30%)
8	Overall, learning discourse markers was useful for improving my speaking skills.	2 (5%)	4 (10%)	4 (10%)	18 (45%)	12 (30%)

(1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree)

As shown in Table 4, most of the English-major students surveyed had very positive perceptions of learning and using discourse markers in speaking activities. On average, 82.8% of the students across the eight statements chose "Agree" or "Strongly agree" regarding the usefulness of using discourse markers in speaking classes. Specifically, they believed that discourse markers helped them organize their ideas in a more logical, coherent, and clearer way. They also felt more confident in speaking than before receiving instruction and support from the teacher in using discourse markers. In addition, students reported that they could use these markers appropriately in different contexts and manage interaction better during speaking practice. However, only a small number of students chose "Disagree" or "Strongly disagree," with an average rate of only 7.5%, while neutral responses accounted for 9.7%. This once again confirmed that discourse marker instruction, particularly through speaking activities, was useful and effective in helping students improve their speaking skills significantly. It also helped them become more fluent and confident in speaking.

D. Interview Results

To further support the effectiveness of discourse marker instruction in speaking, semi-structured interviews consisting of three questions were conducted with ten randomly selected students from the experimental group. The purpose was to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of learning discourse markers. The data were then collected, summarized, and the interview responses are presented as follows.

Question 1: After participating in the discourse marker instruction, how has your understanding of discourse markers changed, and in what ways do you think they have influenced your speaking performance?

After summarizing the responses to Question 1, it was found that most English-major students had very positive attitudes toward discourse marker instruction. They believed that discourse markers helped them become more confident in communication because they knew how to use them appropriately and in the right context. In addition, they were able to organize their ideas in a more logical and coherent way. They also mentioned that discourse markers gave them more time to plan what to say and allowed them to manage interaction more effectively.

Question 2: How do you feel about learning discourse markers through explicit instruction in speaking activities? What aspects of this instruction did you find most helpful or challenging?

Similar to Question 1, the responses to Question 2 showed that most students had positive attitudes toward learning discourse markers through explicit instruction in speaking activities. In general, they highly appreciated the role of the teacher in guiding them to understand and use discourse markers effectively, which helped improve their speaking skills considerably. One notable point was that the explanation of the functions of discourse markers and how to use them in spoken communication played a very important role, as it helped students know how to use discourse markers correctly and appropriately in different contexts. In addition, students felt that contextualized speaking practice was very useful, especially in helping them understand when and how to use discourse markers appropriately. However, some students reported that they faced initial challenges, such as remembering different discourse markers and avoiding mechanical use.

These difficulties, however, gradually improved after five weeks of teacher guidance and regular practice in class with their classmates, together with the teacher's observation and support.

Question 3: Do you think discourse marker instruction should be continued or integrated more systematically into speaking courses? Why or why not? Do you have any suggestions for improving this type of instruction?

Regarding Question 3, most students supported the idea that discourse marker instruction should be continued or integrated more systematically into speaking courses because they highly valued its effectiveness. They believed that, thanks to the teacher's guidance and regular practice, they were able to use discourse markers more naturally and effectively in spoken communication. Students also suggested that, especially in speaking classes or public speaking lessons, teachers should spend more time allowing students to practice communication or organize extracurricular activities so that they could have more opportunities to use discourse markers. In addition, some students proposed that the use of discourse markers should be included in the assessment criteria for speaking skills and that bonus marks should be given to those who use discourse markers correctly in order to encourage students to practice them more actively.

V. DISCUSSION

Research Question 1. To what extent does explicit and systematic instruction of discourse markers affect English-major students' overall speaking performance?

In response to Research Question 1, the results showed that explicit and systematic instruction on discourse markers had a positive effect on the overall speaking ability of English-major students. This can be clearly seen after the intervention through the use of discourse marker instruction in speaking activities. The experimental group showed considerable improvement, with the mean score increasing from 5.78 in the pre-test to 6.85 in the post-test. In addition, both the minimum and maximum scores improved, from 4 and 8 in the pre-test to 5 and 9 in the post-test. In contrast, the control group showed only slight improvement, with the mean score increasing from 5.63 in the pre-test to 5.70 in the post-test, while the other scores did not change much. These findings indicate that clear and systematic instruction in the use of discourse markers can help English-major students improve their speaking ability, especially in terms of fluency, coherence, and the ability to organize ideas logically when speaking. Overall, the results support the view that appropriate discourse marker instruction can have a positive influence on English-major students' speaking performance.

This finding is consistent with Schiffrin (1987) and Fraser (1999), who highlighted the role of discourse markers in organizing spoken discourse and connecting ideas. It is also consistent with Wray (2002) and Taguchi (2011), who stated that the appropriate use of discourse markers is closely related to speaking fluency and interactional competence. In addition, this result supports the argument of Taguchi and Roever (2020), Crible (2018), and Peltonen (2024) that explicit and function-based instruction can help learners use discourse markers more effectively in spoken communication.

Research Question 2. What are English-major students' perceptions of learning discourse markers for improving their speaking skills?

Based on the results above, it can be seen that most second-year English-major students were highly supportive and had positive perceptions of learning discourse markers to improve their speaking skills. According to the questionnaire results, most students chose "Agree" and "Strongly agree," indicating that discourse markers helped them improve their speaking considerably. After receiving clear and systematic instruction from the teacher, students were able to use discourse markers more appropriately in different contexts, which helped them speak more fluently, coherently, and logically when presenting their ideas. In addition, they also felt more confident in communication than before receiving instruction on the use of discourse markers. Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews provided additional support for these findings. Similar to the questionnaire results, most interviewed students also expressed strong agreement with discourse marker instruction in speaking classes. They highly appreciated the clear and systematic explanation of the functions of discourse markers and the opportunities to practice using them in contextualized speaking tasks. Moreover, discourse markers helped them maintain the flow of speech, gave them more time to plan during interaction, and allowed them to manage conversations more effectively. However, a small number of students initially found it difficult to remember and use different discourse markers. These difficulties, however, gradually decreased after regular practice and support from the teacher.

These perceptions are aligned with Schiffrin (1987) and Fraser (1999), who pointed out that discourse markers help speakers organize ideas, manage the flow of conversation, and enhance the naturalness of spoken language. The results are in line with Wray (2002) and Taguchi (2011), who noted the close relationship between the appropriate use of discourse markers, speaking fluency, and interactional competence. In the Vietnamese EFL context, the current results are also in agreement with Nguyen and Tran (2020), Nguyen (2024), and Suryadi et al. (2024), who reported that discourse-based instruction and the use of discourse markers can contribute positively to the development of students' speaking skills.

VI. CONCLUSION

A. Findings

This study was conducted at a university in Vietnam with second-year English-major students to investigate whether explicit and systematic discourse marker instruction had an effect on students' speaking ability. The findings showed that

discourse marker instruction had a positive impact on students' speaking ability. This was evidenced by the fact that after five weeks of the experiment, the students in the experimental group, who were guided by the lecturer on how to use discourse markers, showed significant improvement in their speaking skills. Meanwhile, the control group did not show much improvement in speaking when they were taught using the traditional method. Through this survey, it can be emphasized that clear and systematic instruction in discourse markers played an important role in enhancing fluency and coherence in communication. Moreover, after five weeks of discourse marker instruction, questionnaire and interview data from students in the experimental group showed that most of them had positive perceptions and strongly supported the learning of discourse markers in speaking because these markers helped them speak more coherently and fluently. In addition, the students became much more confident in speaking and were able to use discourse markers more appropriately in context than before. In addition, they also suggested that lecturers should continue providing discourse marker instruction in speaking classes and that the university should organize more academic activities and practice opportunities so that students could have more opportunities to practice and apply discourse markers in communication, thereby achieving better results in speaking.

B. Pedagogical Implications

To enhance the effectiveness of teaching speaking, teachers should systematically integrate discourse marker instruction into their lessons. Specifically, instructors should incorporate the teaching of discourse markers into existing speaking modules and provide clear, explicit, and systematic instruction so that students can understand how to use discourse markers appropriately in speaking performance.

In addition, teachers should frequently organize task-based speaking activities in communicative contexts. Before practice begins, instructors need to provide clear guidance and assign specific tasks, such as giving particular contexts or communicative situations for students to practice in. Furthermore, teachers should provide feedback that focuses more specifically on discourse structure and students' use of discourse markers during speaking activities.

Based on the authors' teaching experience, universities should also consider including discourse marker instruction as a separate component of the curriculum so that students can study this aspect of spoken communication more deeply and gain a better understanding of its functions, thereby improving their speaking skills.

C. Limitations and Future Research

Although this study has made meaningful contributions, it still has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, with only 80 participants divided equally between the control group and the experimental group, and the study was limited to students from only one university. This may restrict the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the duration of the study was short, lasting only five weeks. As a result, the researcher could not fully capture the long-term effects of discourse marker instruction on the development of students' speaking skills. In future research, these limitations could be addressed by using a larger sample drawn from more classes across multiple universities, as well as by extending the duration of the study, possibly to one full semester (15 weeks).

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