

The Consequences of Ignoring Discourse Markers and Oral Performance in Algerian Classrooms

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Abstract:

This study examines the drawbacks of neglecting discourse markers and spoken language in Algerian classrooms. Most Algerian secondary school teachers tend to focus on grammar, vocabulary, reading texts and doing activities. The main aim of this study is to investigate the negative impacts of neglecting discourse markers and spoken language on learners' fluency in English and their language pronunciation. To conduct this study, the researcher adapted a mixed method approach and selected 50 pupils from third year foreign language and scientific class in Mohammed Laamari secondary school. Accordingly, the researcher used three instruments, starting with spoken task, learners' questionnaire then classroom observation. The study revealed that the neglect of discourse markers and spoken language in classrooms has significant drawbacks on learners' communicative competence. Also, most of the learners do not really know how to use discourse markers correctly in Algerian classrooms. These results underscore the urgent need for pedagogical reforms

Keywords: Communication, discourse markers, fluency, language, pronunciation, spoken language.

Introduction :

Language learning is a complex process that goes beyond the mastery of grammar rules and vocabulary. Learners need to develop the ability to speak language effectively and appropriately. A key element in spoken communication is the use of discourse markers, which contribute to coherence and fluency competence. In Algerian classrooms, English is taught as a foreign language with an emphasis on grammar and written expression. Teaching methods and assessment practices largely revolve around written exams, where learners are required to answer questions on paper. This orientations towards the written mode leads to the neglect of spoken discourse and discourse markers. Learners may acquire knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, yet they often lack the ability to express themselves fluently, coherently and appropriately in real-life communication. This mismatch between learning and speaking constitutes a pedagogical gap that hinders learners' overall competence in English. The main aim of this study is to investigate the drawbacks of neglecting discourse markers and spoken language in Algerian classrooms. The study seeks to highlight the importances of integrating oral communication into language teaching. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the field of didactics and curriculum designers. Through this article, the researcher will suggest pedagogical recommendations for integrating spoken discourse into teaching and evaluation. Particularly, the research will answer the following questions: what are the consequences of this neglect on learners' oral performance and communicative competence? How do learners and teachers perceive the role of spoken language in the

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EFL classroom? And what pedagogical measures can be proposed to integrate spoken discourse into classroom practice? Accordingly, we hypothesized that the neglect of spoken language and discourse markers in Algerian classrooms negatively affects learners' fluency and pragmatic awareness. In addition, the current teaching and assessment practices that privilege writing over speaking limit the development of communicative competence. This study adopts a mixed approach to explore the problem in depth. It is hypothesized that the neglect of discourse markers and oral activities significantly limits students' communicative competence and pragmatic fluency.

1- Literature review:

1-1- Discourse markers (DMs):

There is no general agreement upon the definition of discourse markers. It has been given various functions and roles. (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 31) defines them as "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk". Also, (Fraser, 1999, p. 91) provides a clear definition of discourse markers "A class of lexical expressions drawn primarily from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbs and prepositional phrases". With certain exceptions, they signal a relationship between the interpretation of the segment they introduce S2 and the prior segment S1. (Blakemore, 2004, p. 221) provides a functional definition to discourse markers as she states that "it refers to a syntactically heterogeneous class of expressions". In the same line of thought (Bouzar, 2016, p. 68) adds that "It has a great function in discourse and encoded meaning in the sentence".

1-2- Characteristics of discourse markers:

According to (Schourup, 1999) DMs are different from other word classes. He identified several characteristics that distinguish DMs from other discourses. These features related to the nature and functions of DMs in speech. He addressed the following characteristics.

1-2-1- Connectivity:

(Schourup, 1999) claimed that discourse markers enable the speakers to connect between utterances and other discourse units. This connection creates a mutual understanding between the speaker and listener. He embraced the coherence-based approach that considers DMs as means of creating cohesion in speech.

1-2-2 - Optionality:

(Schourup, 1999, p. 231) argued that DMs are considered optional and additional. So that if you remove them from speech, the meaning will not change and the speech is still correct syntactically, grammatically and semantically.

1-2-3- Non-truth conditionality:

(Schourup, 1999) believed that DMs do not impact the truth conditions of the sentences. Additionally, he (1999) claimed that the characteristics of non-truth conditionality of DMs sets them apart from "content" words, disjunctive forms and hearsay sentences adverbials, that impact the truth conditions.

1-2-4- Initial position:

(Schourup, 1999) noted that DMs come in the initial position which is a significant feature. They are used to represent the utterance although they can appear in other places like in the middle or at the end.

1-2-5- Orality:

According to (Schourup, 1999, p. 234), DMs are used in spoken language rather than written language. Moreover, their placement can vary between spoken and written language. The meaning of DMs can be changed from one context to another depending on the speaker's situation and circumstances.

1-2-6- Multi-categorical:

(Schourup, 1999) stated that DMs cannot be categorized into one class or group. They are considered as a functional category that encompasses different syntactic classes,

including “adverbs (e.g. actually), coordinating and subordinating conjunctions (e.g. so, but), interjections (e.g. oh), clause (e.g. you know) and verbs (e.g. look! listen!)” (Schourup, 1999, p. 234). these characteristics are strong evidence that DMs’ function in discourse is crucial and contribute to the organization of communication

1-3- The Importance of Spoken Language:

Speaking is regarded as a fundamental communicative skill in language learning. it plays a vital role in facilitating language acquisition (LA) and supporting second language learning (SLL). It is often considered the most crucial skill because it enables learners to actively participate during conversations, internalize linguistic structures, and apply them appropriately in communication. (Hatch, 1978) emphasized the central role of speaking in second language acquisition (SLA), arguing that interaction with more proficient speakers provides learners with opportunities to practice and exposure to the target language. Similarly, (Swain, 1985) underscored the importance of speaking, emphasising that it enables learners to acquire new linguistic forms. Also, fostering awareness of aspects of the target language not yet mastered. In addition, (Burns, 1998) highlighted that speaking is important in educational contexts, since learners need oral skills to develop subject-specific thinking and to participate meaningfully in both academic and social fields. Overall, speaking functions as a powerful tool for exploration, consolidation of knowledge, and the effective use of spoken English in diverse learning situations.

1-4- Strategies for Enhancing Oral Proficiency:

Oral communication involves the productive skill of listening. The interaction between speaker and listener is a complex process. The speaker starts encoding ideas and pronounce them. While the listener has to decode or interpret them. During this process, sentences are carefully structured and linked together through perceiving, recalling and articulating a number of sounds that formulate language. To improve oral performance, educators and inspectors should follow four oral techniques (Derradji, 2008).

1-4-1- Group work:

Group work is a situation where pupils are divided into small units and they are given a task to perform. These units create a conducive atmosphere to oral performance and rise the possibilities for interpersonal interactions. In group work, students need to interact with their peers and create social relations to develop their linguistic skills. Accordingly, they will learn new vocabulary and expressions related to the given context and teaching each other how to pronounce them. (Derradji, 2008)

1-4-2- Problem solving:

Problem solving is a type of tasks that stimulates the learner to search for solutions to overcome a specific problem. Problem solving can either be an individual or collective work. Also, it can be a short term or project task. In this activity, pupils are put in a depending context where they have to communicate and participate orally in groups in order to conduct the research exchanging relevant ideas and topics. As a final word, problem solving is an innovative technique. It fosters curiosity in learners and creates an interactive atmosphere that develops oral proficiency. (Derradji, 2008)

1-4-3- Role play:

Role play is an effective technique to develop interaction and oral performance in foreign language classes. In this task, learners take parts and roles during the lesson. It is a motivating method that encourages interaction between learners and their teachers. (Robinson, P. C., 1981) suggests that role play takes many forms. in addition, it helps participants to build up their own character, movements, talk structures, situations and themes. The rest of the class and the teacher can intervene and give help when the players are in need. This method promotes spontaneous oral exchanges between learners who acquire new interactive skills of informing, persuading, arguing, discussing and

complaining. Also, role play is a challenging and dynamic technique which is based on changing situations and roles between learners. (Derradji, 2008)

1-4-4- Discussions:

A discussion is a strategy for enhancing oral performance. It enables learners to give and take opinions, to argue and share point of view. They interact orally in a collective effort to solve the task or problematic situation. In a discussion, not only the speaking skill is fostered, but also the ability to listen and understand. In this technique, learners initiate their own language and put it in a communicative context (Derradji, 2008).

2- Methodology:

2-1- Research design:

This study adopts both qualitative and quantitative case study design grounded in discourse analysis and supported by spoken task, learners' questionnaire and classroom-based observation. The rationale for combining quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (observation) tools i. e. the use of triangulation method, is to enhance validity and provide credible results. In addition, it enables educators and inspectors to provide appropriate solution. The main goal is to explore the drawbacks of neglecting discourse markers and oral language in Algerian secondary schools and to suggest solutions and recommendations for enhancing learners' academic levels.

2-2- Research Participants and Setting:

The participants for this study were fifty students, mainly third year level from secondary school of Mohammed Laamari foreign language and scientific classes. Fifty learners are considered representative because the researcher aims to explore general tendencies rather than generalizing findings. Moreover. Similar studies were based on the same sample sizes could obtain reliable and valid results. They are aged between 17 and 19 and will answer the questionnaire and do the oral task. Finally, the researcher will attend four sessions to observe and analyse the use of discourse markers (yes, well, you know, but, 'and' so) and learners' participation in class. The criteria include having a proficient level of English and prior knowledge about the use of discourse markers. The sample size was determined based on the principles of data saturation, aiming to achieve a comprehensive understanding of participants' experience and perspectives (Guest, G., Bunce, A., and Johnson, L., 2006). The table one presents the demographic characteristics of the participants, including percentages.

Demographic Characteristic	Count	Percentage (%)
Female	36	72,00%
Male	14	28,00%

Table 1. Demographic Information

2-3- Data collection method:

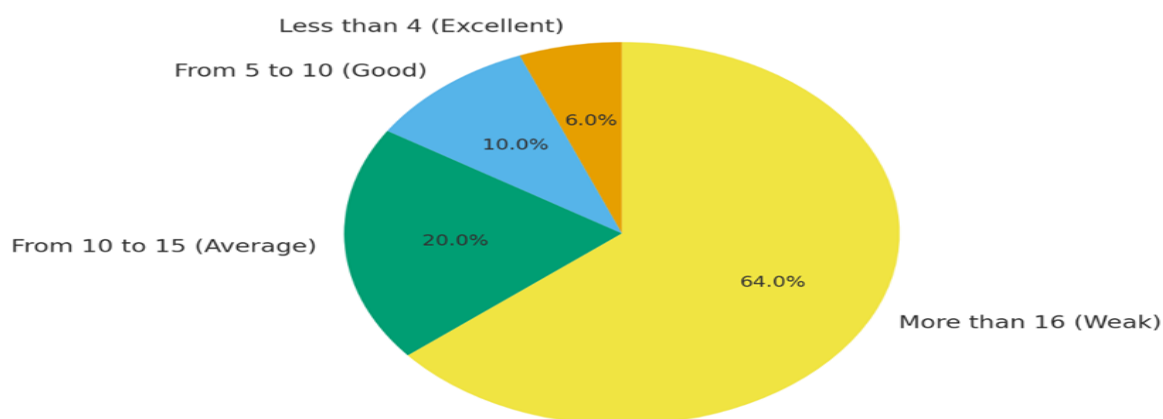
The data will be gathered using three tools:

2-3-1- Oral task:

In this activity the teacher asked learners to explain the causes of pollution in Algeria in ten lines. They were given some discourse markers to use in their paragraphs like (so, but, well, you know). Finally, they read aloud their paragraphs and the teacher counts and corrects their mistakes.

Table 2 and figure 1 present learners mistakes including pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. 3 participants (6%) have made less than 4 mistakes. While 5 participants (10%) have done from 5 to 10 mistakes. Also 10 participants (20%) have made from 10 to 15 mistakes. Finally, we have 32 participants (64%) made more than 16 mistakes.

Mistakes (pronunciation/ grammar/ vocabulary)	Number of learners (50 learners)	Percentage %
Less than 4 (excellent)	03	6,00%
From 5 to 10 (good)	05	10,00%
From 10 to 15 (Average)	10	20,00%
More than 16 (weak)	32	64,00%

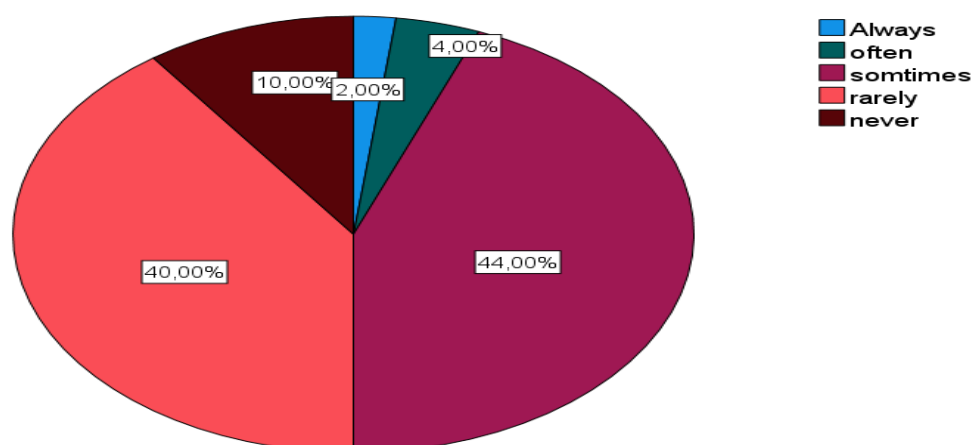
Table 2. learners' mistakes**Distribution of Learners' Mistakes****Figure 1. distribution of learners' mistakes**

2-3-2- Learners' questionnaire:

The questionnaire was conducted after the oral task. It is divided into three sections: background information, spoken English in classroom and awareness about using discourse markers.

Q1- How often do you practice speaking English in class?

Among the participants who conducted the questionnaire, the data as shown in figure 2 reveals that 1 participant (2%) always practices speaking English in class. 2 participants (4%) usually speak the language while 22 participants (44%) practice it occasionally. 20 participants (40%) rarely speak English but 5 participants (10%) never use it in class.

**Figure 2. speaking English in class**

Q2- Do you pass oral exams with oral written exams?

When the researcher asked learners if they pass oral exams with written exams, two learners respond positively 1 participant (02%) replied 'always' and 1 participant (02%) answered 'often'; whereas, 48 participants (96%) replied that they never pass oral exams.

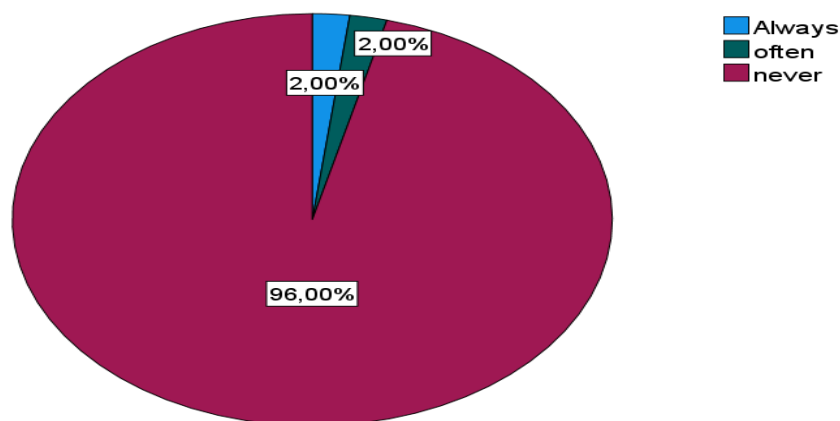


Figure 3. Passing oral exams

Q 3- Do you feel confident when speaking English in class?

Among the participants, 17 participants (34%) feel confident when they speak English in class while 6 participants (12%) feel the opposite. Also 16 participants (32%) could sometimes speak language confidently; whereas, 11 participants (22%) do not really participate in class.

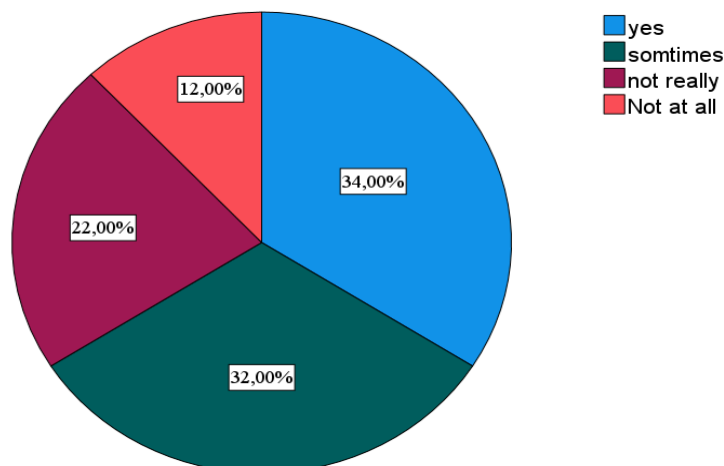


Figure 4. Speaking English confidently in class

Q 4- Do you know what discourse markers are?

The participants were asked if they knew discourse markers. 12 participants (24%) said that they have no idea about them; whereas, 3 participants (06%) could identify this lexical class. 35 participants (70%) which is the majority replied that they know a little about DMs.

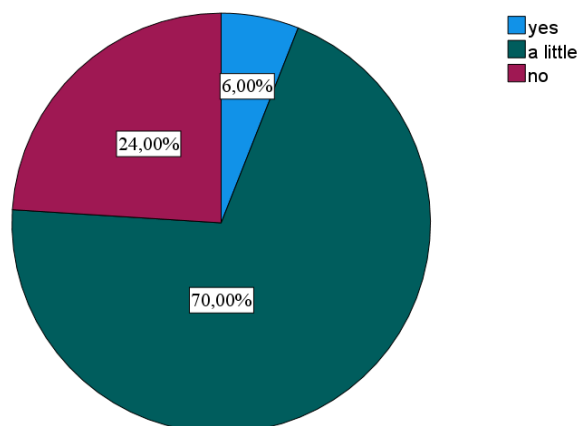


Figure 5. identifying discourse markers

Q 5- Which of the following discourse markers do you often use when speaking?

The frequency of usage demonstrated that 34 participants (86%) use the discourse markers 'yes', 6 participants (12%) use 'so', while just one participant (02%) use 'well' in speech. Also, no participant (00%) use 'you know' or 'but'.

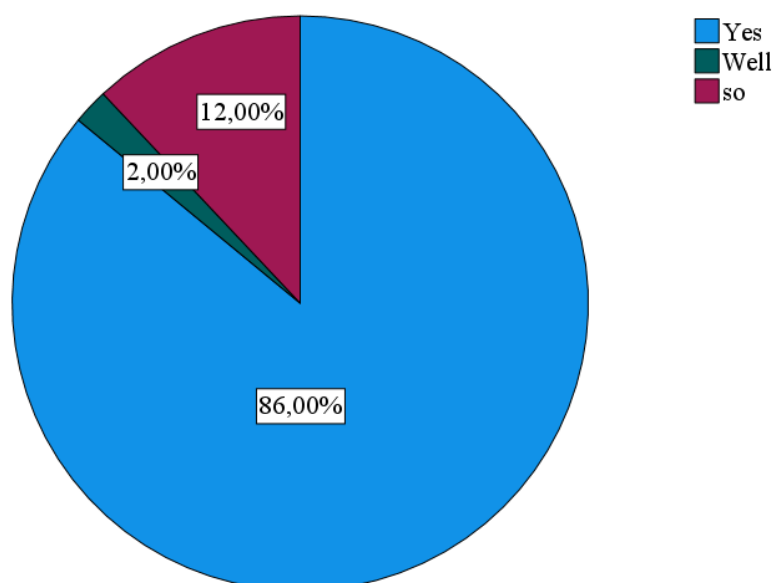


Figure 6. the most used discourse marker

Q 6- In your opinion, why are discourse markers important in speaking?

The participants were asked about the importance of DMs in speech. 35 participants (70%) answered that they connect ideas, 10 participants (20%) replied that the user of discourse markers sound more fluent while 5 participants (10%) said that they have no idea.

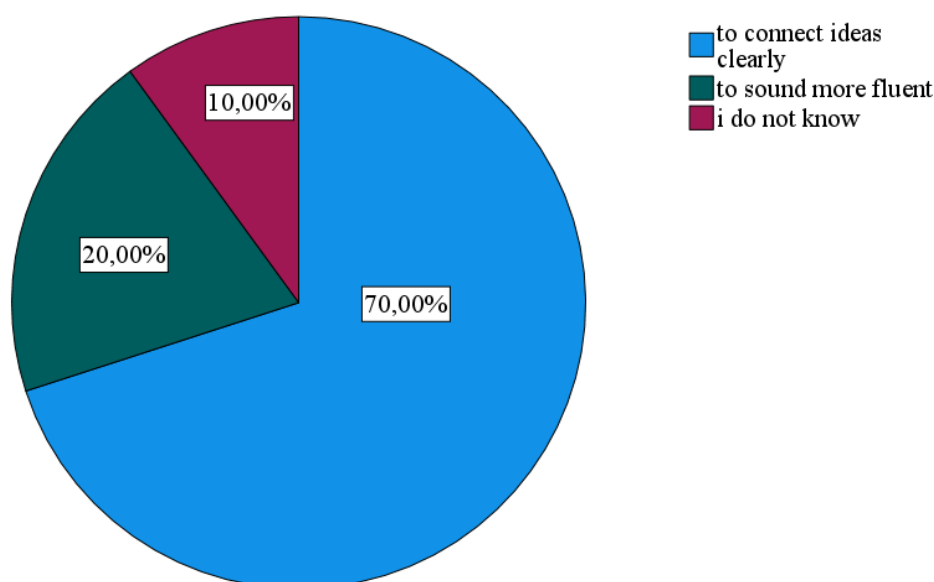


Figure 7. The importance of discourse markers

Q 7- Do you think your teachers focus on discourse markers when teaching speaking?

When the researcher asked learners if their teachers focus on discourse markers in class, 3 participants (6%) answered 'yes' and 2 participants (4%) replied 'no'. while 31 participants (62%) said that their teachers sometimes focus on using discourse markers and 14 participants (28%) replied that they rarely focus on them.

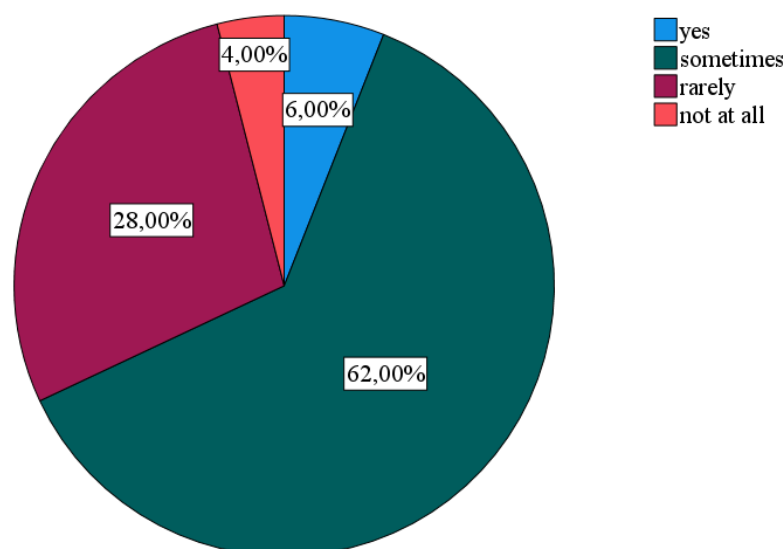


Figure 8. Teacher's focus on teaching DMs

2-3-3- Classroom observation:

This task helps us to collect qualitative data that reflects how learners use discourse markers in class. The data were analysed through a coding and thematic approach. Also, the researcher will focus on learners' participation in class using the English language. So that the investigator attended four sessions in the third-year foreign language and scientific class in Mohammed Laamari secondary school. The first two sessions collected data related to use of DMs (so, but, well, you know, and yes); while the subsequence two sessions will focus on spoken language in class. Accordingly, the first two sessions were conducted in the third-year foreign language class with the teacher of English. The researcher focused on learners' interaction in English. The number of the learners were 13 participants divided into 04 males (30,77%) and 9 females (69,23%) aged between 17 and 19. The second two sessions were conducted in the third-year scientific class with the teacher of English. The researcher focused on learners' use of DMs. The number of the learners were 37 divided into 24 females (64,84%) and 13 males (35,14%) aged between 17 and 19. The data were then coded using short labels representing specific features:

- I. **DM+** → correct use of discourse markers.
- II. **DM-** → misuse of discourse markers.
- III. **FL** → fluency problem (pauses, hesitation).
- IV. **COH** → coherence problem (disorganized speech).

3- Results and interpretation:

The findings of this study provide valuable insights about the impact of neglecting discourse markers and spoken language in Algerian secondary schools. It alerts a real challenge for Algerian teachers and inspectors to think about new methods and techniques to balance between written and spoken language. Also, teachers should highlight the importance of discourse markers in connecting ideas to improve learners' levels in spoken skill.

3-1- Spoken task:

The largest group was the learners who made more than 16 mistakes (32 learners 64%). This showed that most learners struggle significantly with spoken language, discourse markers, grammar and vocabulary. The second group (10 learners 20%) fell in the average range (10 – 15 mistakes). This group demonstrated some competence but still requires improvement; whereas, only 3 learners (6%) and 5 learners (10%) scored good and excellent levels.

The results indicated a serious learning problem and most students were not reaching an acceptable level. The teaching methods and curriculum may not be effective enough. In addition, only a small minority perform at a high level. This means that there is clear need for intervention focusing on intensive pronunciation, vocabulary and spoken tasks.

3-2- Learners' questionnaire:

3-2-1- Speaking English in Class (Q1):

The majority of students (94%) either speak English only 'sometimes', 'rarely', or 'never'. Very few (6%) uses 'often' or 'always'. The data represents that the majority of students rarely use English in classroom communication. This suggests a strong reliance on their native language or a lack of practice opportunities, which limits oral fluency development.

3-2-2- Passing Oral Exams vs Written Exams (Q2):

Almost all students (96%) did not pass oral exams when compared to written exams. this shows that students focus more on grammar, reading, and writing than on oral practice. It indicates a gap between written proficiency and spoken competence.

3-2-3- Confidence in Speaking English (Q3)

About one-third of the students feel confident when speaking English, while more than half (66%) lack consistent confidence or avoid participation. Only 34% participants could speak and practice their English, while many are hesitant or anxious. This lack of confidence is likely connected to limited practice, fear of mistakes, and insufficient encouragement from classroom dynamics.

3-2-4- Knowledge of Discourse Markers (Q4)

Most participants (70%) have only a superficial understanding of discourse markers, while very few (6%) can identify them properly. The majority of learners only have partial awareness of discourse markers (words like however, therefore, actually), which are crucial for structuring spoken interaction. This lack of knowledge reduces their ability to communicate ideas fluently and cohesively.

3-2-5- The most used discourse markers in speaking (Q5)

Students rely heavily on the very basic marker (yes) while barely using other common discourse markers like 'so' or 'well'. More complex markers (you know, but) are completely absent. Accordingly, they overwhelmingly depend on a single marker (yes), demonstrating a lack of variety in their spoken English. This suggests they are not exposed to or trained in the natural use of discourse markers that enhance fluency and coherence.

3-2-6- Importance of discourse markers in speaking (Q6)

Most students (70%) recognize that discourse markers help in connecting ideas, while some (20%) view them as tools for fluency. A minority (10%) are unaware of their importance. While most students understand that discourse markers connect ideas, they still fail to use them effectively in practice. This gap between awareness and actual use reveals insufficient practice and reinforcement in class.

3-2-7- Teacher focuses on discourse markers in class (Q7)

Teachers seem to give limited and irregular attention to discourse markers. Most students (62%) say teachers sometimes highlight them, while only 6% say teachers regularly do so. they rarely or only occasionally focus on discourse markers. This lack of explicit teaching and practice opportunities could explain why students show limited usage and weak oral performance.

3-3- Classroom observation:

Most students rarely use English in class, which hinders oral skill development. Teachers give little attention to teaching discourse markers and oral fluency strategies, which contributes to weak speaking abilities. The most of the classes are teacher-centred class when the teacher asks and students just apply. The majority of learners lack confidence in speaking English, often avoiding participation. They have limited awareness

and extremely restricted use of discourse markers, relying mostly on basic fillers. Accordingly, observation results indicated that (**DM-**, **FL** and **COH**) were the most frequent codes during classroom speaking tasks in the two classes. only two out of fifteen students were able to use a discourse marker correctly (**DM+**), however, the others relied mainly on pauses such as *uh* and *you know* (**FL**). These repeated hesitations indicated fluency problems when speaking. In general, the findings suggest that students' oral proficiency is underdeveloped because of the following key factors:

- Insufficient practice of spoken English in classrooms. For example, when the teacher asks questions, some learners just reply and repeat (yes, yes...) trying to avoid the discussion.
- Low confidence and anxiety in oral expression.
- Neglect of discourse markers in both student usage and teacher instruction.
- High focus on written expression and low attention toward oral performance.
- Teachers focus on grammar and memorization rather than oral performance.
- Teachers struggle to provide individual attention because of the overcrowded classes.
- They use outdated textbooks and have no access to authentic resources (videos on online courses).
- Learners prefer to use French and English has a little presence in class.
- Fear of making mistakes discourages them from using speaking.
- Students claim that English is irrelevant to their immediate needs and it is an additional module.
- Some of them struggle with pronunciation and they put DMs in the wrong positions.
- Learners often translate DMs from Arabic or French directly into English.
- Teachers perceive DMs as “unnecessary” or “not important”, even though they are crucial for cohesion.

4- Conclusion:

According to the obtained data, the researcher emphasises that Algerian teachers and inspectors should think about new methods and approaches to enhance learners spoken language. This aim can be achieved through oral exams involved with written exams. Also, giving learners the chance to participate orally and do part of the lesson. teachers should encourage learners to engage in spontaneous speech to express their opinions. Moreover, teachers should motivate them to rise their self-confidence. They must encourage pair and group work to reduce anxiety and promote active participation using oral activities such as role plays, debates, group discussions and presentations.

In general teachers and inspectors in Algeria would better follow a number of recommendations to improve learners' levels in spoken language and using discourse markers. First, they should balance written and oral evaluation to motivate students to improve both skills. In addition, design oral exams that test fluency, coherence, and use of discourse markers. Second, teachers must provide a supportive atmosphere where mistakes are treated as learning opportunities. Then use peer feedback and positive reinforcement to reduce speaking anxiety. Third, they have to introduce discourse markers systematically in lessons, provide examples in authentic contexts (conversations, dialogues, presentations) and encourage students to practice them in oral tasks. Forth, Teachers should receive training on how to integrate discourse markers into speaking lessons. They should emphasize communicative teaching approaches instead of focusing only on grammar and writing. In addition, educators can expose students to movies, podcasts, and real-life conversations to observe natural use of discourse markers. Moreover, incorporate listening and shadowing activities where students repeat and imitate native speakers' use of fillers and markers. Finally, they must motivate students to record themselves speaking and self-assess their discourse marker use. Also, provide speaking clubs or online platforms for extra practice outside the classroom.

Like any other work, this research faced a number of constraints and obstacles that prevent the researcher from achieving more goals and aims. The first challenge was the native language of the learners. Most of the learners prefer to speak their mother tongue in class and avoid using the target language. Second, the cultural framework has a great impact on learners' oral performance. They tend to be shy and feel embarrassed when the teacher selects an individual student to speak. Third, the learners did not interact as usual because of the first contact with the researcher. To sum up, Algeria's vast area and intermingling of cultures prevent the researcher from generalizing the results.

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