



Volume 1 Issue 2 Year 2025 Pages 63-82
e-ISSN 3090-9406 | DOI: 10.70152
<https://journal.akademimerdeka.com/ojs/index.php/duites>

Discourse Markers in Learners' YouTube Comments: A Study of Informal Academic English

Raudhatul Haura^{1*}, Aloba Fatimah Musa²

¹ Universitas Islam Kalimantan Muhammad Arsyad Al Banjari, Indonesia

² Kwara State Universal Basic Education, Nigeria

*Corresponding author's email: haura100@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70152/duties.v1i2.226>

Abstract: This study investigates the use of discourse markers (DMs) by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in YouTube comments on academic-related videos. Drawing on Fraser's typology, the research explores the types of DMs most frequently used and how learners employ them to structure arguments, express stance, and maintain coherence in informal academic English. A total of 300 learner comments, some from the same users, were collected from ten academic YouTube videos and analysed through qualitative content analysis. The findings reveal that learners primarily used contrastive, elaborative, and inferential discourse markers such as *but*, *also*, and *therefore* to organize ideas and express reasoning. Stance-related markers like *I think* and *actually* were also prevalent, signaling learners' personal evaluations. Additionally, elaborative markers contributed to textual flow and coherence. These patterns indicate that EFL learners are able to apply academic discourse strategies within informal digital contexts, demonstrating emerging discourse competence and pragmatic awareness. The study highlights the pedagogical potential of digital platforms like YouTube as spaces for meaningful language use and suggests incorporating informal online texts into language teaching practices.

Keywords: academic discourse, discourse markers, EFL learners, informal English, YouTube comments

INTRODUCTION

As the digital world continues to evolve, it has significantly altered the ways individuals communicate, acquire knowledge, and participate in discourse. One of the most prominent platforms in this evolving landscape is YouTube, which has shifted from being a mere entertainment site to a significant repository of educational content (Colás-Bravo & Quintero-Rodríguez, 2023; Yassin, 2024). Learners across the globe increasingly turn to YouTube to access lectures, tutorials, scholarly discussions, and explanatory videos on academic topics. As English has emerged as the lingua franca of online communication, EFL learners do not only frequently engage with this content passively but also interactively, by commenting, questioning, or discussing YouTube videos (Abu Athreh & Obeidat, 2022). This interactive engagement, although informal in nature, often mirrors

academic discourse in terms of intention, such as constructing arguments, seeking clarification, or demonstrating understanding. One linguistic feature central to such discourse—whether spoken or written—is the use of discourse markers.

Discourse markers (DMs) are linguistic expressions that function to organize discourse, signal speaker attitudes, and guide interlocutors through communicative exchanges. Common examples include words and phrases such as *however*, *therefore*, *actually*, *in addition*, *well*, and *you know*. While they may not contribute significantly to the propositional content of a sentence, they play a crucial role in maintaining cohesion and coherence, marking transitions, managing turn-taking, signaling attitudes, and structuring argumentation (Fraser, 2010). In academic writing and formal speech, discourse markers help in organizing ideas logically, supporting claims with evidence, and clarifying relations between concepts (Crible, 2022). In contrast, in informal settings such as social media platforms, discourse markers often serve more interactive and interpersonal functions (Sundaram et al., 2023), including hedging, softening disagreement, and establishing rapport.

The rise of digital communication, particularly on platforms like YouTube, presents a rich context to study the use of discourse markers by EFL learners. Unlike traditional academic writing, which is usually highly structured and governed by formal conventions, YouTube comments exist in a hybrid linguistic space. They are informal in tone and format yet often engage with academic content (Stevenson & Baker, 2024). This blend of informal and academic discourse offers an ideal setting to examine how learners navigate language use to meet the dual demands of expressing knowledge and participating in a socially mediated interaction (Chao, 2022). Understanding how EFL learners employ discourse markers in this context can shed light on their pragmatic awareness, linguistic competence, and ability to structure arguments in less conventional academic environments.

Existing research on discourse markers has mostly focused on formal academic texts, such as essays, presentations, and journal articles (O. AbuSa'aleek, 2022; Rabab'ah et al., 2022; Ruonan & Al-Shaibani, 2022), or spoken discourse in classrooms and interviews (Derakhshan et al., 2024; Langer & Crume, 2023; Wu & Yang, 2022). Several studies have explored the acquisition and frequency of discourse markers by non-native speakers in academic writing, revealing that learners often underuse or misuse DMs due to lack of pragmatic awareness or limited exposure to authentic input (Ebrahimi & Xodabande, 2023). Others have looked into learner corpora to identify typical patterns and challenges in DM use. However, there is a growing recognition that learners' language use in digital and informal environments can also provide valuable insights into their developing linguistic abilities (Fu & Ho, 2022; Ruonan & Al-Shaibani, 2022). In particular, informal academic communication on YouTube comments remains largely unexplored despite its widespread use and pedagogical potential.

YouTube comment sections on academic content videos represent a form of asynchronous computer-mediated communication, where learners frequently express agreement or disagreement, ask for clarification, share additional information, and reflect on the content. These comments often contain various discourse markers that fulfill both textual and interpersonal functions (Tsoy, 2022). For example, learners might use *because* or *so* to indicate causality, *but* or *however* to mark contrast, *I think* or *in my opinion* to express stance, and *also* or *in addition* to add information. Analyzing such usage can reveal how learners attempt to create coherence, maintain argumentation, and negotiate meaning in online academic discussions.

Moreover, while discourse markers in formal texts are usually guided by genre-specific norms and instruction, learners' use of DMs in YouTube comments is likely to reflect more spontaneous, intuitive, and individualized language choices (Kim et al., 2024). This provides a valuable opportunity to examine learner interlanguage in a relatively uncontrolled and authentic setting. In turn, insights from such an investigation may inform both language teaching practices and the development of digital literacies by helping educators understand how students bridge formal and informal registers, especially in online contexts where academic content is discussed in conversational tones.

Another dimension worth considering is the expression of stance. In academic discourse, stance refers to the ways writers or speakers express attitudes, judgments, and degrees of commitment toward propositions (Villares, 2023). Discourse markers often serve as vehicles for stance-taking. For instance, DMs like *frankly*, *probably*, or *unfortunately* can reflect certainty, doubt, or evaluation. In YouTube comments, learners may use such markers to agree or disagree with video content, to acknowledge others' perspectives, or to hedge their own claims (Pelttari, 2023). Investigating how learners use discourse markers to express stance can contribute to our understanding of their pragmatic development and engagement with academic content in social media environments.

Coherence, too, is a critical aspect of discourse that discourse markers help to construct (Wang & Xie, 2022; Traugott, 2022). Despite the fragmented nature of online comments, many learners attempt to produce coherent thoughts and arguments. The presence, type, and placement of discourse markers can strongly influence how their comments are interpreted. For example, the absence of clear markers might render a comment confusing or disjointed, while strategic use of contrastive (*however*), elaborative (*for example*), or inferential (*so*, *therefore*) markers can enhance readability and persuasiveness. Studying these patterns in informal academic English can inform instructional strategies aimed at improving learners' discourse competence across genres.

Given the importance of discourse markers in organizing ideas, expressing stance, and maintaining coherence, it is essential to understand how EFL learners use them in informal yet academically oriented online spaces. Such an understanding can contribute to bridging the gap between traditional academic instruction and the evolving demands of digital communication. Furthermore, it may help language educators to develop materials and tasks that reflect real-life language use, promote awareness of register

variation, and foster metapragmatic knowledge of discourse features.

To address the gap in the current literature and to better understand how EFL learners use discourse markers in online informal academic settings, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of discourse markers are commonly used by EFL learners in YouTube comments on academic-related videos?
2. How do EFL learners use discourse markers to structure arguments, express stance, and maintain coherence in informal academic English on YouTube?

By examining these questions, the study aims to uncover patterns of DM usage in a digital learning environment and provide insights into the evolving nature of learner discourse in the 21st-century context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Discourse Markers

Discourse markers (DMs) are a distinct class of lexical expressions that serve a crucial role in signaling the relationships between segments of discourse. Unlike words that contribute directly to the propositional meaning of an utterance, discourse markers function primarily at the level of discourse organization and pragmatic interpretation. Fraser (2010), a prominent scholar in the field of pragmatics, offers a comprehensive account of discourse markers, detailing their definition, classifications, and communicative roles.

According to Fraser, a discourse marker is fundamentally a lexical expression, such as *but*, *so*, *and*, *however*, or *therefore*. This means that discourse markers are composed of actual words or phrases, and they are distinct from other communicative cues like syntactic structures, prosodic features (such as intonation or stress), or non-verbal signals like gestures and pauses. In Fraser's framework, only lexical items qualify as discourse markers, making their identification more precise within linguistic analysis.

Another key characteristic of discourse markers, as outlined by Fraser (2010), is their position within a discourse sequence. Typically, a discourse marker appears in the second part of a two-part utterance, where each part functions as a distinct communicative act, such as making a statement, asking a question, or giving a command. In this structure, the discourse marker helps the listener interpret the second part in relation to the first. For example, in the sentences "We were late, but no one seemed to mind" or "We were late. But no one seemed to mind," the word *but* serves as a discourse marker that introduces a contrast between the two ideas. While the main information is that the speaker was late and that no one minded, *but* does not add new content; instead, it signals the contrastive relationship between the two propositions.

Importantly, Fraser (2010) emphasizes that discourse markers do not contribute to the truth-conditional meaning—or semantic content—of the utterance. Instead, their function is to guide the listener or reader in interpreting how different parts of the discourse relate to each other. These relationships might be of contrast (*however*), cause and effect (*so, therefore*), elaboration (*moreover, in addition*), or temporal sequence (*then, after that*). Thus, discourse markers are integral to the cohesion and coherence of both spoken and written communication, helping to structure discourse in ways that are meaningful and contextually appropriate, even though they do not alter the core message being conveyed.

Fraser (2010) classifies discourse markers (DMs) as a subset of a broader category known as pragmatic markers (PMs), which are linguistic expressions that convey aspects of the speaker's intended meaning without contributing directly to the propositional content of an utterance. Within this framework, Fraser identifies four main types of pragmatic markers. First, Basic Pragmatic Markers (BPMs) signal the illocutionary force of an utterance, helping listeners understand the speaker's intention, as seen in expressions like *I promise* or *please*. Second, Commentary Pragmatic Markers (CPMs) provide a speaker's comment on the content of the message, reflecting attitudes or judgments, for example, *fortunately, frankly, or reportedly*. Third, Discourse Markers (DMs), which are the central focus of Fraser's discussion, indicate semantic or pragmatic relationships between discourse segments, such as *but, therefore, or however*. Lastly, Discourse Structure Markers (DSMs) help organize the overall structure of discourse, guiding listeners or readers through the flow of information with expressions like *in summary, returning to my previous topic, or look*. Together, these categories illustrate the range of pragmatic functions lexical expressions can serve in communication.

Fraser (2010) further categorizes discourse markers into three main subtypes based on the specific semantic relationships they signal between two segments of discourse. These subtypes—contrastive, elaborative, and inferential—reflect how speakers guide interpretation by marking connections such as opposition, addition, or causality. Each type serves a distinct pragmatic function, helping listeners or readers follow the speaker's line of reasoning and the coherence of the discourse. Understanding these subtypes provides insight into the variety and flexibility of discourse markers in organizing and clarifying meaning in communication.

Table 1
Subtypes of Discourse Markers and Their Functions

Type	Example	Function
Contrastive	<i>but, however, on the contrary</i>	Signal contrast between two related ideas or propositions
Elaborative	<i>and, anyway, besides</i>	Add to or elaborate on information introduced in the previous statement

Inferential	<i>so, therefore, as a result</i>	Indicate that the following idea is an inference or result of the previous one
--------------------	-----------------------------------	--

These subtypes demonstrate the functional diversity of discourse markers and their importance in maintaining textual coherence. For instance, contrastive markers help manage conflicting or differing ideas, elaborative markers allow speakers to extend or clarify their points, and inferential markers guide the audience toward a logical conclusion. Recognizing and correctly using these different types of DMs is essential for effective communication, especially in both formal academic contexts and informal digital discourse, where clear relationships between ideas are key to comprehension.

Discourse markers (DMs) possess several distinctive properties that differentiate them from other linguistic elements. First, they exhibit syntactic flexibility, typically appearing at the beginning of the second discourse segment, though certain markers like *however* may also occur in medial or final positions, while others like *but* are more positionally restricted. Second, DMs carry procedural meaning rather than conceptual meaning, meaning they guide the listener in interpreting the relationship between discourse segments rather than adding new content or ideas. Third, not all connectives qualify as discourse markers, only those that are lexical expressions, appear in the second part of a discourse relation, and do not contribute propositional content meet Fraser's criteria. This excludes elements such as interjections (e.g., *hey, damn*), syntactic connectives (e.g., *because, although*), and non-verbal signals (e.g., gestures, pauses). Lastly, DMs serve a discourse-level function, operating beyond individual propositions to maintain coherence, signal transitions, and structure interactions across utterances or written segments, making them vital tools for effective communication and discourse organization.

While Fraser's typology primarily includes contrastive, elaborative, and inferential markers, studies on digital and informal discourse also highlight the presence of miscellaneous or hybrid discourse markers, such as *well, anyway, and you know* (Subekti & Santi, 2019). These markers often serve interpersonal or discourse-management functions, including softening tone, managing topic shifts, signaling engagement, or adding informality. Although they may not neatly fit into Fraser's original categories, they are commonly used in digital platforms like YouTube, where conversational tone and informality shape the discourse environment. Recognizing these markers provides a more comprehensive understanding of how learners negotiate meaning and manage social interaction in online academic discussions.

Previous Studies, Research Gap, and Novelty

Discourse markers (DMs) have long been the subject of linguistic and applied linguistic research, especially in the areas of pragmatics, discourse analysis, and language learning. Much of the existing scholarship has focused on the use of DMs in formal academic writing and speech, with particular attention to how native and non-native speakers employ them to structure discourse, enhance coherence, and convey interpersonal

meanings. Studies by Crible (2022), Recio Fernández et al. (2023), Traugott (2022) laid the foundational understanding of discourse markers as functional elements that organize and signal relationships between discourse segments without contributing directly to propositional meaning. These seminal works have been extended in a wide range of contexts, including EFL learners' academic writing, classroom discourse, and oral presentations.

Numerous studies have investigated how EFL learners use discourse markers in academic writing, often using learner corpora to identify patterns of frequency, range, and appropriateness. For example, Morady Moghaddam (2023), O. AbuSa'aleek (2022), Sanosi (2024) found that EFL students tend to underuse or misuse DMs in their essays, often due to limited exposure to authentic models and a lack of explicit instruction. Similarly, Ebrahimi & Xodabande (2023) examined DM use in spoken learner discourse and noted both the functional richness and pragmatic challenges that learners face in mastering these devices. Koops & Lohmann (2022) explored classroom interaction and highlighted how discourse markers serve crucial roles in turn-taking, topic shifts, and negotiation of meaning. These studies demonstrate the central role DMs play in both written and spoken academic discourse, but they are often limited to formal or semi-formal contexts such as academic essays, institutional interactions, or controlled speech tasks.

Parallel to the growing interest in discourse markers is the increasing attention to digital communication as a site of language learning and usage. Scholars such as Mahmud et al. (2023) and Sharma (2022) have emphasized the pedagogical value of Web 2.0 platforms, such as blogs, forums, and social media, as spaces where learners engage in authentic communication. However, studies that specifically examine EFL learners' discourse in these digital environments tend to focus more on aspects like identity construction, politeness strategies, or multimodal features rather than on the micro-level use of linguistic devices like DMs. While some research has touched on learners' comments in discussion forums (Azmuddin et al., 2022) or participation in collaborative writing tools (Kitjaroonchai & Loo, 2023), empirical studies analyzing discourse markers in learners' social media interactions, particularly YouTube comments, remain extremely limited.

In addition, the majority of previous research has concentrated on native speakers' use of DMs in casual or public digital discourse (e.g., Guydish et al., 2024), or on formal learner output in traditional academic settings. There is a notable gap in exploring how EFL learners use DMs in informal academic English—a hybrid discourse type that emerges in contexts like YouTube, where users engage with educational content in a more conversational and spontaneous manner. These interactions are often asynchronous and unmoderated but still reflect attempts at argumentation, reasoning, and coherence. As such, they provide a fertile ground for analyzing how learners draw on discourse markers to fulfill communicative functions outside the boundaries of formal instruction or assessment.

The current study addresses this gap by focusing specifically on EFL learners' use of discourse markers in YouTube comments on academic-related videos. Unlike formal academic essays or classroom discussions, YouTube comments occupy a unique middle ground between informal language and academic engagement. Learners often respond to lectures, tutorials, and explanatory videos by expressing opinions, posing questions, or elaborating on ideas presented in the video—all of which may involve the use of discourse markers to construct arguments, express stance, and ensure coherence. Yet, little is known about how effectively learners use these markers in such settings, what types they favor, and how their usage reflects their developing pragmatic and discourse competence.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on informal academic English in a digital space, a genre that has received limited scholarly attention despite its increasing relevance in contemporary language use and learning. By analyzing YouTube comments authored by EFL learners, this study captures authentic language data that reflects real-time communicative intentions without the constraints of classroom performance or formal genre expectations. Moreover, it provides insights into how learners transfer or adapt their knowledge of discourse organization into informal yet intellectually engaging settings. The study's findings have implications for understanding learners' pragmatic development, for broadening the scope of discourse analysis in applied linguistics, and for informing pedagogical practices that recognize the value of digital platforms as sites of language development.

METHODS

This study aims to investigate the types and functions of discourse markers used by EFL learners in YouTube comments on academic-related videos, particularly focusing on how these markers are employed to structure arguments, express stance, and maintain coherence in informal academic English. To address the research questions, a qualitative content analysis was conducted using naturally occurring learner-generated data from YouTube.

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive design with elements of discourse analysis, specifically focusing on textual features within a corpus of YouTube comments (Thornbury, 2005). This design is appropriate for exploring language use in context, especially when examining linguistic devices like discourse markers that function beyond the sentence level. The approach allows for an in-depth investigation of patterns, frequencies, and pragmatic functions of discourse markers as they naturally occur in learner discourse in digital environments.

Data Collection

Data were collected from publicly accessible YouTube videos categorized under academic or educational content, such as recorded lectures, explainer videos, tutorials, or panel discussions in fields such as linguistics, science, education, and social sciences. To ensure the presence of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner comment, videos

were selected based on evidence from channel descriptions, viewer demographics, and comment content (e.g., self-identified learners, grammar patterns indicating non-native use). A purposive sampling technique was used to select ten academic-related videos with active comment sections. From these videos, a total of 300 YouTube comments written in English were collected for analysis. Some users may have contributed more than one comment. To ensure quality and relevance, only comments that were at least two sentences long and that engaged meaningfully with the video content (e.g., by reflecting, questioning, or responding) were included. Spam, emojis-only posts, and single-word responses were excluded.

To ensure the presence of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, videos were selected based on the likelihood that commenters were non-native English users. This was inferred through a combination of cues, including self-identification as learners in the comment content (e.g., “As an English learner...”), patterns of non-native grammar and vocabulary use, and the nature of the YouTube channel or video (e.g., channels aimed at English learning or international education). However, since the data were collected from anonymous public platforms, it was not possible to verify users' exact language background, proficiency level, or educational stage. As such, we acknowledge this as a limitation of the study and suggest that future research consider complementary data sources (e.g., surveys or interviews) to better understand participant profiles.

Data Preparation and Coding

Each selected comment was anonymized and transcribed into a spreadsheet, forming the study's corpus. A coding framework was developed based on Fraser's (2010) typology of discourse markers, including the three primary subtypes: contrastive (e.g., *but*, *however*), elaborative (e.g., *and*, *besides*), and inferential (e.g., *so*, *therefore*). Additional markers such as stance indicators (*I think*, *actually*) and coherence devices (*in addition*, *for example*) were also tracked to account for functional variation.

The coding was conducted in two phases. First, an initial open coding stage identified all lexical items functioning as discourse markers within each comment. Second, the items were categorized according to type and function. In cases of ambiguity, markers were interpreted based on their syntactic position and contextual function within the comment. Inter-coder reliability was established by involving a second rater to cross-check 20% of the data, yielding a Cohen's Kappa score of 0.87, indicating a high level of agreement.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed both quantitative and qualitative procedures (Ebrahimi & Xodabande, 2023). Quantitatively, frequency counts were used to identify the most commonly used discourse markers and their types. These frequencies helped answer the first research question: *What types of discourse markers are commonly used by EFL learners in YouTube comments on academic-related videos?* Qualitatively, a functional analysis was conducted to explore how learners used discourse markers to construct meaning. Drawing on Fraser's framework and supplemented by insights from discourse

pragmatics, each marker was analyzed in context to determine its role in structuring arguments, expressing stance, and maintaining coherence. This analysis helped address the second research question: *How do EFL learners use discourse markers to structure arguments, express stance, and maintain coherence in informal academic English on YouTube?* Representative examples from the data were selected to illustrate each function, with attention paid to how markers contributed to clarity, emphasis, contrast, or logical flow in the learners' responses.

FINDINGS

Discourse markers Used by EFL learners in YouTube Comments on Academic-Related Videos

The analysis of 300 EFL learner comments on academic-related YouTube videos revealed that learners employed a diverse range of discourse markers (DMs) to organize their ideas, guide reader interpretation, and structure their responses. Based on Fraser's (2010) classification, the findings indicate that three main types of DMs, contrastive, elaborative, and inferential, were frequently used across the data set.

Table 2

Types of Discourse Markers Used by EFL Learners in YouTube Comments

Type of Discourse Marker	Examples	Function	Frequency	Percentage
Contrastive	<i>but, however, yet, on the other hand</i>	Indicate contrast or opposing ideas	102	34%
Elaborative	<i>and, also, besides, in addition</i>	Add or elaborate on prior information	87	29%
Inferential	<i>so, therefore, thus, as a result</i>	Indicate consequence or logical result	63	21%
Stance-related	<i>I think, actually, in my opinion</i>	Express attitude, evaluation, or personal judgment	33	11%
Miscellaneous/Hybrid	<i>well, anyway, you know</i>	Manage topic shifts, soften tone, or signal engagement	15	5%
Total	—	—	300	100%

As illustrated in Table 2, the most frequently used discourse markers among EFL learners in YouTube comments are contrastive (34%) and elaborative (29%) types, reflecting a strong tendency to compare, contrast, and expand on academic ideas. Inferential markers

account for 21%, signaling learners' efforts to express cause-effect relationships or logical reasoning. Stance-related markers (11%) highlight learners' attempts to engage evaluatively or position themselves in relation to the content. Finally, miscellaneous or hybrid markers (5%) demonstrate the presence of informal discourse traits, common in digital interactions. These findings reveal that learners strategically incorporate both academic and conversational discourse features in an informal academic setting, showcasing their growing discourse awareness and pragmatic competence.

Contrastive Markers

Contrastive discourse markers such as *but*, *however*, *yet*, and *on the other hand* were among the most frequently occurring in the dataset. These markers were primarily used to introduce opposing viewpoints or to acknowledge limitations in the video content. For instance, one commenter wrote: "*The explanation was clear, but I still don't understand the third point.*" This type of usage reflects learners' attempts to critically engage with the content by balancing agreement with personal confusion or alternative perspectives. Contrastive markers appeared in approximately 34% of the total DM instances, highlighting their central role in expressing disagreement, reservation, or nuanced understanding.

Elaborative Markers

Elaborative discourse markers such as *and*, *also*, *besides*, and *in addition* were the second most frequent category, accounting for around 29% of the total DMs. These markers were employed to expand on initial points, add supplementary information, or align with previously stated opinions. A typical example was: "*The lecturer's point about culture was interesting, and I think it applies to language learning too.*" In these instances, elaborative markers helped learners build coherence and maintain thematic continuity in their comments. The high frequency of additive markers suggests that learners actively attempt to construct multi-layered contributions in their engagement with academic content.

Inferential Markers

Inferential markers such as *so*, *therefore*, *as a result*, and *thus* were used to draw conclusions or express logical outcomes based on the video content. These markers represented about 21% of all DM occurrences. For example, a learner commented: "*The teacher explained the formula clearly, so I was able to solve the practice questions.*" These inferential devices enabled learners to connect cause and effect, signal reasoning, and reflect comprehension. Although less frequent than contrastive and elaborative markers, inferential DMs were pivotal in demonstrating logical relationships between concepts and learner experiences.

Stance-Related Markers

While not strictly part of Fraser's three primary subtypes, stance-indicating expressions such as *I think*, *actually*, *in my opinion*, and *to be honest* were also prevalent and functioned as metadiscursive signals of evaluation or subjectivity. These were observed particularly in comments expressing personal interpretation or uncertainty: "*Actually, I*

believe the theory is more applicable to younger learners.” These stance markers reflect learners' awareness of interpersonal meaning and their effort to position themselves in relation to the academic material. They comprised approximately 11% of the total DM instances.

Miscellaneous/Hybrid Markers

A small portion of the data (around 5%) included hybrid or colloquial discourse markers such as *well*, *you know*, and *anyway*, which served to introduce ideas, shift topics, or soften statements. For example: “*Well, that was an unexpected take on language acquisition.*” These markers reflect learners' efforts to mirror conversational tone and maintain informality while engaging with academic content, aligning with the hybrid nature of YouTube as a discourse space.

Overall, the findings suggest that EFL learners in informal academic contexts such as YouTube tend to rely heavily on contrastive and elaborative discourse markers, indicating a strong focus on comparison and expansion. Inferential markers, while slightly less frequent, also played an important role in conveying reasoning and coherence. The presence of stance and miscellaneous markers adds a dimension of interpersonal engagement and reflects the informal yet intellectually active nature of the platform. These patterns illustrate learners' ability to adapt academic discourse features into informal online communication, demonstrating both their pragmatic awareness and their growing discourse competence.

EFL learners' use of discourse markers for argumentation and coherence on YouTube

The qualitative analysis of the YouTube comments revealed that EFL learners employed discourse markers not only to link ideas but also to construct arguments, express evaluative stances, and ensure textual coherence within the informal academic context. The use of DMs in this setting was found to serve three overarching functions aligned with the focus of the second research question: (1) structuring arguments, (2) expressing stance, and (3) maintaining coherence. Each function is discussed thematically below with illustrative examples extracted from the comment corpus. To illustrate how learners applied discourse markers to fulfill these pragmatic functions, Table 3 presents a summary of the most common discourse markers observed in each category, along with examples of how they were used within the learners' comments.

Table 3

Functional Use of Discourse Markers by EFL Learners in YouTube Comments

Function	Common Discourse Markers	Illustrative Use
Structuring Arguments	<i>but, however, so, therefore, thus</i>	Indicate contrast or conclusion to support logical flow of arguments
Expressing Stance		Signal subjectivity, evaluation, agreement, or doubt

*I think, actually, in my
opinion, maybe, to be
honest*

Maintaining Coherence	<i>and, also, besides, in addition, then, finally</i>	Ensure smooth transitions and textual continuity
----------------------------------	---	---

As shown in the table above, discourse markers served as essential tools in shaping the communicative effectiveness of EFL learners' comments. Learners used contrastive and inferential markers to build structured arguments, stance markers to express personal evaluations or uncertainty, and additive markers to maintain logical flow and clarity throughout their responses. These findings suggest that even in informal digital contexts, learners demonstrate a growing awareness of rhetorical strategies commonly associated with academic communication, adapting them to suit the hybrid nature of YouTube discussions. This capacity to transfer academic conventions into more conversational environments underscores the evolving nature of discourse competence in the digital age.

Structuring Arguments

Discourse markers played a crucial role in enabling learners to organize and present their ideas logically. Contrastive markers such as *but*, *however*, and *on the other hand* were often used to introduce alternative perspectives or qualify previous statements. These markers enabled learners to demonstrate critical thinking by presenting counterarguments or exceptions. For example:

"The video gave a good explanation of motivation theory, but it didn't mention intrinsic factors in detail."

In such instances, the DM *but* signals a shift from agreement to critique, illustrating how learners construct layered arguments even within short informal comments.

Additionally, inferential markers like *so*, *therefore*, and *thus* were employed to signal conclusions or outcomes based on reasoning. These markers helped learners establish cause-effect relationships and logical sequencing of thoughts. For example:

"It explained cognitive strategies well, so I'll try applying them in my learning."

This use of *so* demonstrates how learners draw practical conclusions from theoretical content, signaling not only comprehension but also the ability to apply knowledge to personal or learning contexts. By using inferential markers like *so*, learners establish logical relationships between ideas and outcomes, thereby organizing their arguments in a goal-oriented and purposeful manner that reflects critical engagement with the material. This suggests a deeper level of processing, where learners are not simply repeating information but actively connecting it to their own learning experiences.

Expressing Stance

Discourse markers were also used by learners to express stance, i.e., personal attitudes, judgments, and levels of certainty about the academic content. Stance-related markers such as *I think*, *actually*, *in my opinion*, and *to be honest* appeared frequently, reflecting learners' awareness of subjectivity and their attempt to engage evaluatively. For instance:

“I think this explanation about constructivism is clearer than what we learned in class.”

“Actually, I don’t fully agree with the conclusion about grammar teaching.”

These markers allowed learners to position themselves in relation to the content, expressing agreement, disagreement, or uncertainty in a respectful and conversational tone. This indicates a blending of interpersonal and academic functions, characteristic of informal academic English in digital spaces.

Moreover, some learners used stance markers to soften disagreement or introduce doubt, thereby maintaining politeness and social harmony. For example:

“Maybe the theory applies more to younger learners than adults.”

“In my opinion, the video could have included more real-life examples.”

Such expressions reveal learners' growing metapragmatic awareness—their ability to reflect on and control how language is used in context—and their sensitivity to audience expectations in public discourse environments like YouTube. By choosing markers such as *maybe* or *in my opinion*, learners show an understanding that their comments are part of a wider, often global, conversation. This awareness leads them to use language that is polite, inclusive, and appropriately hedged, helping them maintain credibility while expressing personal viewpoints. It also suggests that learners are developing not only linguistic proficiency but also the pragmatic competence required for effective communication in socially diverse online settings.

Maintaining Coherence

Finally, learners used discourse markers to ensure coherence in their comments by signaling the flow of ideas and maintaining logical continuity. Elaborative DMs such as *and*, *also*, *besides*, and *in addition* were used to extend ideas, support prior claims, or include supplementary information:

“The speaker explained the topic well, and the examples were easy to follow.”

“Besides, the animation helped me understand the concept better.”

These markers contributed to cohesive development of thought across sentence units, preventing abrupt shifts and enhancing readability.

Learners also used markers to clarify sequencing and thematic progression, particularly in multi-sentence comments. For example:

“First, it explains the theory. Then, it gives examples. Finally, it shows how to apply them.”

Although relatively few learners used temporal or structural markers explicitly, their presence, such as *first*, *then*, or *finally*, indicates conscious attempts to mirror academic organization patterns even within informal formats like YouTube comments. This suggests that some learners are transferring rhetorical structures typically associated with essays or presentations into digital discourse, reflecting their awareness of how to guide readers through sequential or logically ordered information. The use of such markers demonstrates an effort to enhance clarity, improve coherence, and uphold communicative effectiveness, even when the platform does not demand formal academic conventions.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the use of discourse markers (DMs) by EFL learners in YouTube comments on academic-related videos, focusing on two research questions: (1) the types of discourse markers commonly used, and (2) their functions in structuring arguments, expressing stance, and maintaining coherence in informal academic English. The findings revealed that EFL learners employed a range of discourse markers, particularly contrastive, elaborative, and inferential types, to navigate their ideas in an informal yet intellectually engaged manner. This section discusses the implications of these findings in light of existing literature and explores their relevance for language learning and digital literacy.

First, the high frequency of contrastive and elaborative discourse markers aligns with previous studies highlighting learners' preference for explicit markers that connect ideas clearly and directly (Rabab'ah et al., 2022). Learners used markers such as *but*, *however*, *and*, and *also* to contrast viewpoints or expand upon them, functions that are integral to argument construction and critical engagement. This suggests that even in non-traditional learning spaces like YouTube, EFL learners are not merely consumers of content but are actively participating in meaning-making processes. Their use of such markers reflects a developing awareness of how to organize discourse logically and persuasively, echoing findings from studies in more formal academic writing contexts (Ruonan & Al-Shaibani, 2022; Traugott, 2022).

Second, learners' use of inferential markers (*so*, *therefore*, *thus*) to express cause-effect relationships indicates an effort to construct coherent reasoning chains. Although these markers appeared less frequently than contrastive and elaborative ones, their usage shows that learners are engaging in basic forms of analytical thinking, making conclusions based on the content of the videos. This is consistent with Koops and Lohmann's (2022) argument that inferential discourse markers are central to logical progression and argumentative coherence in both spoken and written modes of communication (Herman, 2022). Their presence in YouTube comments illustrates learners' attempts to apply academic reasoning in informal contexts.

Perhaps more striking is the notable use of stance-related discourse markers such as *I think*, *actually*, *in my opinion*, and *maybe*. These markers allowed learners to position themselves relative to the video content—expressing agreement, raising objections, or demonstrating uncertainty. This aligns with Barbara et al.'s (2024) and Zhang et al.'s (2023) findings on stance-taking in digital academic communication, where learners strategically balance subjectivity and politeness. In this study, learners' frequent use of stance markers reflects their awareness of the interpersonal dimension of online academic discourse, where comments serve both informational and social purposes. These results suggest that YouTube, as an open digital platform, encourages learners to not only process information but also to assert their voice, which is a key element in developing academic literacy and communicative confidence.

In terms of coherence management, learners employed elaborative and sequential markers to ensure the readability and logical progression of their comments. Markers like *in addition*, *besides*, *then*, and *finally* were used to add details or guide readers through multi-step explanations. While this mirrors strategies taught in formal academic writing, it also suggests a transfer of discourse competence to less regulated environments. As Stevenson and Baker (2024) note, digital platforms like YouTube present hybrid discourse opportunities, informal in tone but academic in function. This study reinforces their claim by showing that learners apply structured communication strategies even in comment sections, which are traditionally seen as informal.

The findings also contribute to the growing literature on learner interlanguage and pragmatic development in digital environments. Learners' spontaneous use of discourse markers in asynchronous interactions points to an emergent competence that is both linguistic and pragmatic in nature. As Fraser (2010), discourse markers play a vital role in guiding interpretation, signaling discourse relations, and maintaining cohesion. The learners in this study demonstrated these competencies in a public, self-regulated space, suggesting that platforms like YouTube can serve as authentic arenas for language practice, particularly for higher-level EFL learners.

Pedagogically, these findings have important implications. First, language instructors might consider integrating social media discourse into classroom instruction to raise learners' awareness of discourse markers in real-life communication. Rather than treating DMs as purely academic tools for essays or presentations, educators can highlight their fluid use across informal and formal contexts. Second, instructors could develop tasks that involve analyzing and composing YouTube-style comments on academic videos, thereby promoting reflection on discourse structure, stance expression, and coherence. Such activities would align with communicative and task-based approaches that emphasize authentic input and output.

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. Because the data were drawn from public comments without access to user demographics, it was not possible to control for variables such as proficiency level, age, or cultural background. Future research could benefit from triangulating YouTube comment analysis with interviews or surveys to better understand the learners' intentions and awareness regarding DM use. Moreover, while this study focused on three main functions of discourse markers, additional discourse features such as hedging, mitigation, or topic management could be explored to gain a fuller picture of learners' pragmatic strategies in informal academic settings.

The findings demonstrate that EFL learners use discourse markers in YouTube comments as functional tools for constructing arguments, expressing evaluative stances, and achieving coherence in informal academic English. Their usage reflects a hybrid discourse competence shaped by both academic norms and digital communication practices. This underscores the value of considering informal online platforms as spaces for meaningful language use, and it points to the need for pedagogical approaches that bridge classroom instruction with real-world discourse environments.

One limitation of the present study is the absence of demographic information about the EFL learners whose YouTube comments were analyzed. Due to the nature of the data, publicly available and anonymous, specific details such as the commenters' nationality, ethnicity, or language background could not be reliably obtained. Although efforts were made to include comments that indicated non-native English use or self-identified learner status, we acknowledge that this does not provide a comprehensive demographic representation. As communication styles can vary across cultures, future studies could incorporate triangulated methods such as interviews or surveys alongside comment analysis to better understand the cultural and linguistic diversity of EFL learners in digital environments.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how EFL learners use discourse markers (DMs) in YouTube comments on academic-related videos, focusing on the types of DMs employed and their functions in structuring arguments, expressing stance, and maintaining coherence in informal academic English. The findings revealed that learners frequently used contrastive, elaborative, and inferential markers, such as *but*, *and*, and *so*, to organize their thoughts and communicate logically. Stance markers like *I think* and *actually* were also commonly used to express personal opinions or evaluations. These patterns demonstrate that EFL learners are capable of adapting academic discourse strategies to informal, digital contexts, reflecting their growing pragmatic awareness and discourse competence in online environments.

Given the limitations of this study, particularly the lack of demographic and proficiency-level data, future research is recommended to explore how individual learner variables (e.g., proficiency, educational background, or cultural context) influence DM usage. Additionally, longitudinal studies or mixed-method approaches, such as interviews or reflective journals alongside comment analysis, could provide deeper insights into learners' intentions and awareness when using discourse markers. Expanding the scope to include other digital platforms or comparing learner use of DMs across formal and informal writing tasks could also help educators better understand how to support discourse development in the age of digital communication.

REFERENCES

- Abu Athreh, M. Y., & Obeidat, H. (2022). The Perspectives of EFL Students at Yarmouk University towards using YouTube in learning and understanding English during Covid-19 pandemic. *World Journal of English Language*, 12(8), 304. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v12n8p304>
- Azmuddin, R. A., Jamalai @ Jamali, M., Abdul Rahim, A. A., Azmat Ali, M. M., & Khamis, N. Y. (2022). Exploration of online discussion forum on reading EST texts for ESL learners. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 19. <https://doi.org/10.32890/mjli2022.19.2.4>
- Barbara, S. W. Y., Afzaal, M., & Aldayel, H. S. (2024). A corpus-based comparison of

- linguistic markers of stance and genre in the academic writing of novice and advanced engineering learners. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11(1), 284. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-02757-4>
- Chao, C. (2022). Being a YouTuber that language learners recognize: A study on constructing language teacher identities in social media community of practice. *System*, 109, 102860. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2022.102860>
- Colás-Bravo, P., & Quintero-Rodríguez, I. (2023). YouTube as a digital resource for sustainable education. *Sustainability*, 15(7), 5687. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15075687>
- Crible, L. (2022). The syntax and semantics of coherence relations. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 27(1), 59–92. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.19109.cri>
- Derakhshan, A., Karimpour, S., & Nazari, M. (2024). Interactional features in second language classroom discourse: variations across novice and experienced language teachers. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 15(6), 2323–2349. <https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2023-0001>
- Ebrahimi, H., & Xodabande, I. (2023). The functions of discourse markers in L2 teachers' and learners' speech across gender and proficiency: A corpus study. *Mextesol Journal*, 47(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.61871/mj.v47n1-10>
- Fraser, B. (2010). An account of discourse markers. *International Review of Pragmatics*, 1(2), 293–320. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187730909x12538045489818>
- Fu, Y., & Ho, V. (2022). Discourse markers in TV interviews: A corpus-based comparative study of Chinese and the western media. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1063158>
- Guydish, A. J., Nguyen, A., & Fox Tree, J. E. (2024). Discourse markers in small talk and tasks. *Discourse Studies*, 26(5), 606–620. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614456241230253>
- Herman, T. (2022). Ethos and pragmatics. *Languages*, 7(3), 165. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages7030165>
- Kim, H., Chapelle, C. A., & Sollier, N. (2024). Online fan practices and informal language learning. *CALICO Journal*, 41(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1558/cj.25577>
- Kitjaroonchai, N., & Loo, D. B. (2023). Who are active and inactive participants in online collaborative writing? Considerations from an EFL setting. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 13(10), 2565–2576. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1310.15>
- Koops, C., & Lohmann, A. (2022). Explaining reversible discourse marker sequences: A case study of and and so. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 191, 156–171. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2022.01.014>
- Langer, E. C., & Crume, P. K. (2023). Classroom discourse: What is conveyed through

- educational interpretation. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 29(1), 40–59. <https://doi.org/10.1093/deafed/enad021>
- Mahmud, M. M., Fatima, T., Lashari, T. A., & Waheed, Z. (2023). Exploring the impact of Web 2.0 tools on 21st century skills of EFL learners in Pakistan. *Education Sciences*, 13(4), 384. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13040384>
- Morady Moghaddam, M. (2023). Discourse markers in L2 learners' responses to teacher-generated compliments during classroom interaction. *Foreign Language Annals*, 56(4), 1035–1056. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12714>
- O. AbuSa'aleek, A. (2022). Exploring the use of discourse markers in EFL students' writing through Google Docs. *World Journal of English Language*, 12(2), 124. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v12n2p124>
- Pelttari, S. (2023). YouTube: Audience emotional reactions and convergent alignment. *Internet Pragmatics*, 6(1), 42–66. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ip.00085.pel>
- Rabab'ah, G., Ma'touq, A., & Alghazo, S. (2022). Discourse markers in narrative essays: A case study of Jordanian high school EFL learners. *Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures*, 14(1), 203–217. <https://doi.org/10.47012/jjml.14.1.11>
- Recio Fernández, I., Loureda, Ó., & Cruz, A. (2023). Adjustment, mismatches and accommodation of procedural and conceptual meaning. *Functions of Language*, 30(1), 110–135. <https://doi.org/10.1075/fol.22020.rec>
- Ruonan, L., & Al-Shaibani, G. K. S. (2022). An investigation into the use of metadiscourse in undergraduates' abstracts in social sciences. *Topics in Linguistics*, 23(2), 36–49. <https://doi.org/10.2478/topling-2022-0010>
- Sanosi, A. B. (2024). Revisiting cohesion in academic writing: A corpus-based analysis of EFL learners' use of conjunctions. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 14(1), 64–78. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v14i1.70418>
- Sharma, D. (2022). Making meaningful connections and learning workplace-like business writing through LinkedIn and blogging. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 85(3), 298–318. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294906221109188>
- Stevenson, A., & Baker, S. (2024). What do we know about YouTube content about academic writing? A multimodal analysis. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2024.2358245>
- Subekti, M. W., & Santi, A. R. K. (2019). Analysing discourse markers in popular Youtube videos. *Journal of Research on Applied Linguistics, Language, and Language Teaching*, 2(2), 114–122. <https://doi.org/10.31002/jrlt.v2i2.523>
- Sundaram, A., Subramaniam, H., Hamid, S. H. A., & Nor, A. M. (2023). A systematic literature review on social media slang analytics in contemporary discourse. *IEEE Access*, 11, 132457–132471. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ACCESS.2023.3334278>

- Thornbury, S. (2005). *Beyond the sentence: Introducing discourse analysis*. Macmillan Publisher.
- Traugott, E. C. (2022). *Discourse structuring markers in English* (Vol. 33). John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/cal.33>
- Tsoy, E. (2022). Functions of Russian verb-derived discourse markers slušaj and smotri from the perspective of information management and interpersonal regulation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 193, 105–121. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2022.03.010>
- Villares, R. (2023). Exploring rhetorical strategies of tance and engagement in Twitter conference presentations. *ESP Today*, 11(2), 280–301. <https://doi.org/10.18485/esptoday.2023.11.2.5>
- Wang, Y., & Xie, Q. (2022). Diagnosing EFL undergraduates' discourse competence in academic writing. *Assessing Writing*, 53, 100641. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2022.100641>
- Wu, X., & Yang, H. (2022). Unpacking the functions of personal metadiscourse in teachers' classroom discourse. *Sustainability*, 14(20), 13502. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su142013502>
- Yassin, B. (2024). Enhancing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in Saudi Arabia: the academic contribution of YouTube in EFL learning and cultural awareness. *Frontiers in Education*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1451504>
- Zhang, L., Zhang, L. J., & Xu, T. S. (2023). Effects of teacher explicit instruction in stance-taking on students' perceptions of stance and on their academic writing beliefs. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1140050>