A Comparison between Thai University Students and English Speakers Using Contrastive Discourse Markers

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Abstract
This study aimed at investigating the use of discourse markers by Thai University Students and English Speakers and examination of Thai students on the contrastive discourse markers. The subjects consisted of 107 respondents: 79 Thai students and 28 English speakers responding to a set of questionnaires. This study used quantitative and qualitative methods. The data was statistically analyzed as for quantitative method and categorized for qualitative method. The study was divided into three sections: the distinction between contrast and non-contrast; the variability of Contrastive Discourse Markers; and interchangeability of although and while. First, the result revealed that Thai students could distinguish between the contrast and non-contrast relation between two utterances at more considerable rate than the English speakers for the given contexts partly because of the different pragmatic use. Second, where there are various Contrastive Discourse Markers (CDM) to choose, Thai students tend to form a set of rules to deal with the ‘appropriate’ answers, while English speakers consider the authentic use rather than the semantic use in general. Finally, for the interchangeability of although and while, Thai students tended to use the two problematic discourse markers more interchangeably than English speakers in general context. Thai students also produced some own rules whenever they feel the ambiguity, while the English speakers used their sense of language.

Keywords: contrastive discourse markers, cohesive devices, applied linguistics

1. Introduction
There are many Contrastive Discourse Markers (CDMs), e.g. but, however, in contrast, etc., for Thai students to comprehend and choose in order to create a compound or complex structure with the “appropriate” CDM, which is considered difficult for students at intermediate or lower level. English speakers, on the other hand, are able to choose the “appropriate” coordinators and subordinators at once to express concessive or contrastive meaning of the two contrastive related-ideas. English has a variety of discourse markers to show contrasts which seem to outnumber those of Thai, for example, but, yet, however, nevertheless, nonetheless, in contrast, by contrast, instead, in spite, despite, although, though, even though, on the other hand, and so on. Thai students found it difficult to distinguish among those discourse markers, particularly in writing tasks because of numerous discourse markers.

Apart from the diversity of the discourse markers which can cause students to struggle, the apparent interchangeability of the CDMs can also be the cause of confusion. The English speakers agree to some extent that in some situations contrastive discourse markers, for example, although/ while and but/ however can be used interchangeably in some contexts. The perception of contexts, however, is complicated and time-consuming for teaching in class. It is almost impossible for an instructor to show a wide range of examples to cover all of the contexts in class time.
2. Literature Review
The literature review consists of two main areas: Contrastive Discourse Markers and related research studies. The key concepts with explanations and research studies are as follows:

2.1 Contrastive Discourse Markers (CDMs)

Discourse Markers and Contrastive Discourse Markers
The Discourse Markers are synonymous in various degrees to the other terminology. Fraser (1996) views Discourse Markers as signals of a relationship between the mentioned utterance and the forthcoming utterances, and puts Discourse Markers under the Pragmatic Markers. Fraser (1998) later claimed that there were 15 different names of “discourse markers”, fashioned by many scholars from a number of research projects in this field. Knott and Sanders (1998) call the term connectives or linguistic devices. Brown (2001) defines Discourse Markers in terms of its notional to indicate contrast, results, conditions, etc. and calls it “sentence connectors” when he means the written discourse markers. Swan (2005) defines a 'discourse marker' as 'a word or expression which shows the connection between what is being said and the wider context'. Cowan (2008) uses the term Discourse Connectors to describe the connecting word in a clause or a sentence to show relationships such as ordering, addition, and contrast (p.667). He restricted the Discourse Markers to the spoken language, which are not the part of a sentence, or so-called Discourse Particle (Aijmer, 2002).

With regards to the linguists’ point of view, discourse markers are made differently from the semantic and pragmatic view point. Semantically, “markers are seen as processing instructions, intended to aid the hearer in integrating the unit hosting the marker into a coherent mental representation of the unfolding discourse” (Mosegaard-Hansen, 1998). Blakemore (2002) argued that the semantic view of discourse markers, in some cases, would not be a truth-conditional because it contains only knowledge of the discourse markers and its expressions but does not identify the truth condition (p. 27). This leads to an implicature phenomena, or “a component of speaker meaning that constitutes an aspect of what is meant in a speaker’s utterance without being part of what is said” and “What a speaker intends to communicate is characteristically far richer than what she directly expresses; linguistic meaning radically underdetermines the message conveyed and understood” (Horn, 2005). This is the case of dialogues or conversations without connectives or discourse markers. For this research, both semantic and pragmatic views are accepted to explain the exceptional case of the English speakers’ use of CDM only.

The prominent CDMs are recognized through conjunctions. Conjunctions can be treated as either grammatical or semantic items. In spoken language, to connect the two discourses, at least two basic notions must be accounted for: Basic operations, source of coherence, polarity and order of segments (Knott and Sanders (1998). The contrastive relation consists of one negative polarity (the former utterance presenting a negation of the content of the latter one) and other notions. For example:

a) Last week, the weather was bad in Scotland, whereas in the Netherlands the sun was shining.

The relation of the two sentences is descriptively defined as Negative polarity, Basic operation (Additive) and Semantic ground. The discourse marker ‘whereas’ is used explicitly to represent the writer’s or the speaker’s idea of contrastive relation.
2.2 Classification of Contrastive Discourse Markers
Grote et al. (1995) explored the range of Discourse Markers used in English and German so as to establish the framework of DM use in bilingual text. They defined a concession as a markers used when the speaker wanted to convince the hearer, prevent false implicatures and inform about surprising events. In this definition, they combined the idea of contrast and concession as one.

With regards to Calhoun (2009), contrastiveness is an important feature of discourse which lies at the intersection of prosodic, semantic and pragmatic systems. The contrastiveness occurs when a speaker has an intention to make the salient contrast between a particular element in an utterance and other entity or concept.

2.3 Selected Contrastive Discourse Markers of the Study
The following contrastive discourse markers are selected and highlighted in this study in relevance to their classroom lessons particularly appearing in English foundation course book II and III of Thammasat University: but, yet, though, although, while, whereas, on the contrary, on the other hand, nevertheless.

2.4 Related Research Studies
A number of studies have been conducted concerning Discourse Markers. There are three perspectives of discourse marker studies: Markers and Cohesion, Markers and Discourse, and Markers and Pragmatics, led by Halliday and Hasan (1976), Schriffin (1987), and Fraser (1996) respectively. In this study, the researcher adopted both Schriffin’s and Fraser’s perspective since the two researchers clearly mentioned the ‘discourse marker’ in the sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects.

Granger and Tyson (1996) studied cohesion in discourse through connector usage between native English speakers and non-native. This corpus-based study referred to ICLE corpus of learner English to test the hypothesis of the overuse of connectors by students. They found that the overuse of connectors is not a major case. For qualitative study, they examined the overuse of connectors and semantic, stylistic and syntactic misuse.

Alongso (1997) investigates interlingual errors that 28 high-school Spanish students make when they are learning English as a foreign language. The interlingual errors found from the corpus consist of four types: transfer of structure, overextension of analogy, interlingual/intralingual and substitution.

Weingarten (2003) studies Concession in Spoken English with an emphasis on connectors-oriented approach. The data is collected from the archive of spoken language in the English section of the department of linguistics at Konstanz university in German during 1980s-1990s. Weingarten found that Concession is a common, yet context-sensitive phenomenon, and can be varied for the private domain (pp.232-233).

Lewis (2003) explores the Concession and Contrast discourse markers in English and French in asynchronous online discussion. The data are taken from online discussions hosted by four periodicals: The Financial Times, The Guardian, Le Monde, and Le Nouvel Observateur. By
using conversation analysis, Lewis found that there are two factors that influence language style: the nature of the medium and the social context of the communication.

Fortuno (2006) created a corpus of contrastive connectors from American and British English lectures in various subjects to analyze spoken academic discourse. Fortuno also contrasts between English and Spanish lectures of the same subjects. It is found that Contrastive, Causal and Temporal are three majors discourse marker types. The internal discourse relations of contrastive ideas are mostly discussed in both American and Spanish lectures (p.260).

Fung and Carter (2007) examined the use of discourse markers among Secondary school students in a study, Discourse Markers and Spoken English: Native and Learner Use in Pedagogic Settings, by using the CONCORDE corpus of spoken British English. They found that the Hong Kong learners preferably use semantic functional discourse markers such as and, but, because, so, etc. rather than other pragmatic functional markers such as yeah, really, I see, well, etc.

Saez (2003) investigated students’ uses of discourse markers in writing tasks to find out whether there are significant differences in the numbers and types of discourse markers when comparing the difference between Spanish and English in the use of discourse markers in argumentative texts. Students had difficulty choosing the appropriate Contrastive Discourse Markers for their writing. In addition, the qualified argumentative texts written by the students were selected because of the considerable use of the CDM.

Wang (2008) did a comparative study of however and its Chinese counterparts by using two translation corpora (the HLM parallel corpus, and the Babel English-Chinese Parallel Corpus). The result reveals that the Chinese contrastive relations are implied, not directly stated through the connectors, and if there are such connectors, the connectors can be found at the initial positions. Wang claims that the positioning of however is a focus of the teaching.

Spenader and Lobanova (2009) employ the RST annotated corpus (Carlson et al., 2003 cited by Spenader and Lobanova), to examine discourse markers or cue phrases as evidence of the three-way distinction of Contrast relations, Contrast, Antithesis and Concession, recognized in standard Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST, Mann and Thompson 1987). The result shows that Concession use is much more different from Contrast and Antithesis (p. 218), reflecting the lexical marking choices. Although and Despite are considered “reliable” discourse markers of concession, while However does not always represent Contrast relations.

Feng (2010) investigated the articles collected from 38 students, majoring in tourism management and English. Feng created a small corpus and examined the use of discourse markers. The result reveals that the students used discourse markers in a considerable rate. The problem found in using discourse markers are avoidance of use, incorrect use, and overuse.

3. Research Methodology

The collected data of this study can be identified with two approaches: quantitative and qualitative. It is a cross-sectional research design, and the data is collected through the ability to comprehend and produce the language of the subjects from the Contrastive Discourse
Marker Test (CDM Test in multiple choice format). The quantitative approach is employed to consider whether the variability and interchangeability of CDM uses exist as well as the frequencies. The descriptive statistics will be used to find the frequent use of discourse markers. Then, the tallying of frequencies is needed as well as comparing the different groups of participants (e.g. higher level students, and the lower ones; Thai students and the English native speakers) by using Pearson Chi-square test. In addition, the qualitative approach will elaborate description and comprehension of the progress in details, i.e. focus on sequential nature of interactional acts (Ellis, 1994). This study will analyze the data collected from the Thai students and English native speakers’ open-ended questions. Thai students also have to do a Thai version of the test to measure the influence of L1.

The total and valid data collected from 107 respondents for this study consist of 3 categories: 28 English speakers in various careers and nationalities; 50 students with lower English proficiency (studying English Course I); 29 students with upper English proficiency (Study English Course II)

4. Findings
The Contrastive Discourse Marker test takers consist of English speakers and 2 groups of students (Upper English proficiency group and Lower English proficiency group). In general, there are more males then females in English speaker test takers. The age range of the English speakers varies from 22 to above 50 years old, and all of them have either Bachelor’s or Master’s degrees. The majority of the test subjects (85.7%) are native English speakers from the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and the others 14.3% speak English as a second language. More than half of the English speakers (67.9%) work in academic institutions such as schools, colleges, universities as lecturers or instructors, while the rest of them (32.1%) work as professionals in various fields.

There are more females than males in student groups. The age range is between 18 – 22 years old, all of the 79 students are first year students, either studying English Foundation course I (36.7%) or English Foundation course II (63.3%) at Thammasat University, Lampang campus. They use English as a foreign language, mostly in classrooms.

4.1 Hypotheses and Tests
The hypotheses of the study “A Comparison between Thai University Students and English Speakers Using Contrastive Discourse Markers” are established to test whether there is any difference among the three subjects of the study: English speakers, Thai upper group, and Thai Lower group in terms of the correct answers of all items in Part 1: the non-contrast or contrast relationship between two clauses. Three hypotheses are set as follows:

Hypothesis$\_0$ = No differences among three groups of study

$H_0 : \mu_1 = \mu_2 = \mu_3$

Hypothesis$\_1$ = Difference exists between English speakers and upper Thai student groups

$H_1 : \mu_1 \neq \mu_2 + \mu_3$

Hypothesis$\_2$ = Difference exists between Thai upper group and lower Thai student group
\[ H_2 : \mu_2 \neq \mu_3 \]

\[ \mu_1 = \text{Means of English speaker group’s correct answers}, \]
\[ \mu_2 = \text{Means of upper Thai student group’s correct answers}, \]
\[ \mu_3 = \text{Means of Lower Thai student group’s correct answers}, \]

The level of significance is at \( \leq 0.05 \)

Each correct answer will be awarded 1 point, and 0 for each incorrect answer. After the Means are computed, the F-test is used to compare the Means of correct answers among three groups of subjects with the level of significance at 0.05. The result of the statistical data revealed that there was a big difference between the correct answers between English speakers and Thai groups at the level of significance at 0.00. The English speakers provided more correct answers than Thai students when it comes to contrast or non-contrast dilemma. Therefore, the \( H_0 \) is rejected, but \( H_1 \) is accepted. Moreover, there was no difference between two groups of students (Upper and Lower groups) since the level of significance was more than 0.1, so \( H_2 \) is rejected.

4.2 Discussions of the Findings

In the discussions of the finding section, research questions will be replied with the empirical data. The quantitative and qualitative analyses will be used and discussed to elaborate the extent of the answers.

4.2.1 How do Thai students at beginner (low proficiency) level and intermediate (higher proficiency) level use contrastive discourse markers?

Thai students at beginner level perform as well as those at the intermediate level. They both can distinguish between the non-contrast (reason and additional idea) and contrast at a different semantic comprehension level. The distinction between contrastive DM and reason DM has made clear, which is related to Iten (1998a) who claimed that contrast and reason cannot be used in the same context. When Thai students make a distinction between contrast and reason, sometimes their interpretation is incorrect. This is in accordance with König (1989) and Knott and Sanders (1998), who claimed that this linguistic feature can be a problematic issue for ESL students because of the closest meaning of contrast and non-contrast feature.

When they have to choose more than one discourse markers to fit the context, they use the semantic or consider the meaning of the utterances first and then the coherence of the new sentence. The result is correlated with Weingarten (2003) who claimed that the various uses of CDM would occur due to contexts. In some contexts, more than one CDM are allowed. Some invented techniques are found in CDM test Thai version to filter out the ‘inappropriate’ discourse markers. In fact, all of the discourse markers are syntactically correct. The reasons why they decide to choose or not to choose certain discourse markers are from their cognition of semantic knowledge. The basic discourse markers they have seen or used i.e. but and while. The other CDMs are less popular because it is found in written texts or seldom heard. They do not want to take risks by selecting the elaborating words like nevertheless or on the contrary. This result is on par with those of Granger and Tyson (1996) who state that language leaners do not overuse the connectors. However, the result is not justified with Feng (2012). The Chinese students tend to avoid using, to misuse or to overuse the CDM, while Thai students use CDMs in anyplace where they can with a restriction of variety.

For the last ambiguous point which the although as a concession and while as a contrast, Thai students did not fully accept the universal interchangeability of although and while as
claimed by Burchfield (1996) and Garner (2009) because they want to distinguish between the two as they did in Thai version of CDM test. Thai students believe that the distinction between the two CDMs should be clarified not just by hearing (Iten, 1998b), and the use of them can be varied by the private domain (Weingarten, 1997).

4.2.2 How do English speakers use contrastive discourse markers?
The English speakers in this research are not homogeneous, though most of them use English as their first language. They also have some struggles to distinguish between the non-contrast and contrast ideas. This is a phenomenon of what is meant is not necessary what it said (or seen) or the linguistic meaning underdetermines the intended message (Horn, 2011). Another claim from Blakemore (2002) can be raised to support the idea that semantic view of discourse markers is not always telling the truth (of the relationship between two utterances). When the English speakers have to deal with a set of discourse markers, they tend to allow more choices or variety of use. However, they opted out the CDMs which appear in the written language the same way as Thai students did. The pragmatic use is the key for sorting out the possible discourse markers to fit the contexts. Saying the sentence aloud or trusting their sense is common among the English speakers. In addition, the English speakers do not all agree with the interchangeability of although and while. The answers are varied because of the various contexts as stated by Lewis (2003) that the social context of communication plays a role in concession and contrast discourse markers. These two discourse markers have proven to be one of the linguistic ambiguities by all means.

4.2.3 To what extent and in what ways do Thai students apply the rules of Contrastive Discourse Markers in spoken language and writing?
As Ellis (1994) mentioned about the interference of L1 to L2, the result revealed that no significant interference of L1 in this CDM test since Thai students taking English and Thai versions of the CDM test show slightly different responses. The major difference is the non-contrast and contrast meaning of the sentences. Thai students in general still struggle to distinguish between the non-contrast (reason and additional ideas) and the contrast, compared to the English speakers. In addition, the comprehensive rules in semantic relations are built when the students have more options of discourse markers to choose.

In the Thai version of the CDM test, the translated discourse markers are found also in spoken and written language just the same as those in the English version. Therefore, the frequently-used discourse marker in the sharp contrast (but) in the Thai version for spoken language is exactly the same as in English version. For written language, Thai university students usually come across with the formal language for their textbooks, so the use of some discourse markers (nevertheless, whereas, however) in written text are found in only the Thai version, but not in the English one.

In conclusion, Thai students set a number of self-generated rules in the strategy-use part for distinction between the two or more discourse markers. The rule is triggered only when there is an ambiguity of the language, not in all situations.

5. Recommendations
This study is designed to suit the nature of the subjects of the study, who are EFL students at beginner and intermediate levels. There are two interesting areas for further research. First, the other types of discourse markers should be examined, i.e. temporal and causal discourse
markers so as to find another aspect of using discourse markers for Thai students. Second, the spoken language on contrastive discourse markers should be followed if their environment is set in English as an international language since the data collection will complete the modes of productive skill, speaking and writing.

**References**


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