

Analysis of Discourse Markers in Thai EFL Students' Essay Writing: A Case Study of a University in Northern Thailand

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Abstract

In English language learning and teaching, writing is one skill that students need to study and improve on. To achieve this, discourse markers play a vital role. This research, therefore, is an analysis of the use and misuse of discourse markers in Thai EFL students' essay writing in a northern university in Thailand. Data were collected from 262 essays including 131 argumentative essays and 131 descriptive essays from 131 dual-degree undergraduate students enrolled in a Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Arts in English program, taking Note-taking and Summarizing for a Career course. Data were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics and qualitatively using qualitative content analysis. The quantitative results showed that the students mostly used inferential discourse markers, followed by contrastive discourse markers, and elaborative discourse markers, respectively. Moreover, the qualitative results demonstrated that the students misused discourse makers at the sentence level within paragraphs without any clear link between ideas in the paragraphs. This implies that students need to learn more about cohesion and coherence through the use of discourse markers in writing.

Keywords: Discourse Markers; Essay Writing; Thai EFL Students

Introduction

In English language learning and teaching, writing is one important skill that teachers need to train their learners in order to develop the learners' academic writing skill (Estaji & Salimi, 2018). Among the four main language skills including listening, speaking, and reading, writing is one of the basic skills that requires linguistic competence in morphology and syntax. Writing requires the writer

to use grammar and word choices in sentences correctly. In essay writing, students need to write different paragraphs in the introduction, body, and conclusion. To do this, students need to use appropriate words from their academic word lists (Sharndama & Yakubu, 2013). Writing has always been the most complex skill in language teaching for not only students who write in their own mother tongues but also students who study in a foreign language (Dülger, 2007). Furthermore, one stage in writing is that it requires students to use words and phrase to link the ideas in writing (Kaewlai, 2021; Rajabi & Fahim, 2015). In terms of literacy, students who study English as a foreign language have been found to have problems with writing because they have to apply many techniques in their writing such as utilizing various vocabulary, applying essential grammar, using correct punctuation, and checking word spelling. There are four main stages in essay writing such as planning or pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing (Kaewnuch, 2016).

The use of discourse markers (DMs henceforth) in writing can establish a coherent relation in a text by using the appropriate words or conjunction. Writers can use various markers in sentences to connect their writing from one sentence to another sentence, or use it as a text planner from language specific knowledge of the expression in contents. In pragmatics, one of the functions of DMs is to fulfill certain linguistic meaning in expression or communication (Khan, 2016). The studies of DMs have been studied by many scholars, researchers, and educators over the past decade because DMs play an important role in the parsing process in writing. For instance, the marker strengthens and expresses a contextual implication for further evident that the writer wants to express (Hutchinson, 2004; Zhao, 2014). Arya (2020) demonstrates that DMs are devices which play important roles in holding and connecting in meaningful ways spoken and written texts, particularly, in English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL) settings.

This study, therefore, aims to examine the use of DMs and their functions in Thai EFL students' essay writing which can be significantly used to enhance their academic writing performance. As Thai EFL students are never taught DMs in their courses, the researcher as an educator would like to focus on the use of DMs in Thai EFL students' essay writing.

Objectives

1. To investigate the frequency of discourse markers in undergraduate students essays at a university in northern Thailand; and
2. To analyze the use and misuse of discourse markers in the students' essays.

Scope of Research

In this study, the scopes including of contents, participants, area and time are as follows:

1. Contents: The total essays in this study were 262 including 131 argumentative essays and 131 descriptive essays. In this study, the researcher focused on analyzing the use and misuse of three types of discourse markers, namely, contrastive discourse markers (CDMs), elaborative discourse markers (EDMs), and inferential discourse markers (IDMs).

2. Participants: The participants were 131 fourth-year students majoring in Bachelor in Education and Bachelor in English who enrolled in a Note-taking and Summarizing for Career course. For their background information, all of them are non-native writers and speakers of English. They passed the language proficiency tests provided by the university.

3. Area: The research was conducted at School of Education, and School of Liberal Arts, the University of Phayao.

4. Time: The research was conducted from week 6 to week 8 in semester 1 academic year 2021.

Literature Review

Discourse Markers in Writing

In essay writing, Discourse Markers (DMs henceforth) are one of the important parts for effective academic writing in English. Cohesion is a major component in academic writing, but some students lack a deep and wide knowledge in using DMs. The effective use of DMs has been seen as a central component in academic writing (Karaata, Çepik & Çetin, 2012). Simmons-Mackie and Damico (2010) illustrated that DMs are potential contributor to communicative competence that show good organization in the writing process. DMs are expressions to add to discourse coherence that use in communication such as discourse connectives, discourse operators, discourse particles, and sentence connectives. For example, the marker *and* is used to connect two independent clauses by

using a coordinate conjunction. Syntactically, DMs also use the grammatical structure from three sources, namely, conjunction, adverbs, and prepositional phrases. Examples of coordinating conjunctions include *and*, *but*, and *or* while examples of subordinate conjunctions are *so*, *and* *because* (Fraser, 1999).

Maschler and Schiffri (2015) demonstrated that DMs express a set of linguistic items. Some examples are *and*, *but*, and *because*. These DMs have been used to express certain meaning in the structure of ideas by conjunctive relations in semantic field. Other examples like *so*, *and therefore* are used in other relation functions. In sociolinguistics, markers could work at different levels of discourse to connect utterances on either a sentence or across different sentences. For example, the DM *because* can be used to connect action and ideas together. Another aspect is that it could display a relationship between adjacent utterances. Thus, the use of markers impacts the analysis of cohesion in a text, and it helps the readers to interpret the message of the preceded sentence. Ament and Páres (2017) observed that the acquisition of DMs has been used as a connector in learning a foreign language as it can help the reader to interpret an utterance correctly. Students, indeed, need to deal with its interpretation and integration in their own writings. Furthermore, DMs usage as discourse connectives can affect to the meaning in the contexts as well. It can help for smooth reading and simplify the right intentions from the writers' purposes (Chen, 2019).

Over the past decade, there are many studies that have been based on the analysis of DMs in writing particularly in the foreign language learning. Ali and Mahadin (2016) defined that the use of DMs from students who studied English as a foreign language is affected by the language proficiency levels. For example, the intermediate learners and advanced learners employed different types of markers in their writing. Surjowati (2018) illustrated that students' language ability affect their writing. In writing English, the low grade students employed less DMs than high grade students. This is because they faced difficulties in their writing including using unfamiliar markers to express in their own writing. Rahimi (2011) indicated that though students can use various types of DMs in writing, their problems is they could not apply them in their writing, and it makes their writing lack relationships to create a coherent text. Tiryaki (2017) revealed that DMs have been used as a powerful way in writing which can be supported to create more cohesion. Karimah et al. (2021) demonstrated that students misuse DMs in the pattern that is related to linguistic strategy. Therefore, teachers or educators should be aware of the importance of learning and teaching of the use of DMs.

Theoretical Framework

The study employed Fraser's taxonomy (2009) which represented three categories of discourse markers including contrastive discourse makers (CDMs), elaborative discourse markers (EDMs), and inferential discourse markers (EDMs). The 18 selected discourse markers were chosen based on the corpus of CQP Web from cqpweb.lancs.ac.uk and each words and phrases appeared more than 4,000 frequencies. The discourse markers used in the study were as follows:

1. Contrastive Discourse Marker (CDM) signals a direct or indirect contrast namely *but*, *although*, *though*, *however*, *nevertheless*, and *on the other hand*.
2. Elaborative Discourse Marker (EDM) signals an elaboration to the information contained *and*, *for example*, *for instance*, *furthermore*, *in addition*, and *moreover*.
3. Inferential Discourse Marker (IDM) signals a basis for inferring including *so*, *as a result*, *because*, *because of*, *therefore*, and *thus*.

Therefore, these types of DMs were used to analyze the frequency of DMs use and misuse in the students' essays.

In conclusion, DMs can affect to students' writing, particularly, students' academic writing. DM, therefore, is one factor in learning and teaching English as a foreign language for all students in which they can apply to make more cohesion and coherence in their writing. Hence, the researcher is interested in investigating and analyzing the use and misuse of DMs in term that it could be utilized in the English language teaching.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study were 131 students who already took three courses in writing including Practical Reading and Writing, Progressive Reading and Writing, and Advance Reading and Writing. All of them passed the language proficiency tests provided by the university. For their background information, all of them are non-native writers and speakers of English. This study is carried out in the first semester of academic year 2021 during a Note-taking and Summarizing for Career course with dual-degree undergraduate students in the B.Ed. in Education program, and B.A. in English program. The participants of the study were selected using purposive sampling. All students from the five classes from section one to section five received the same treatment as well as teaching and evaluation materials.

Instruments

In this study, students' written essays were used as data source. The participants were asked to write an argumentative essay and a descriptive essay. The topic of the argumentative essay was: *Can the online class be effective during the COVID-19 pandemic?*, and the topic for the descriptive essay was *Describe your favorite place during the COVID-19 pandemic*. The two topics were selected based on the three lecturers who taught the Note-taking and Summarizing for Careers course to ensure the appropriateness of the topic for the participants. The selected topics were also based on the contemporary social issues that the students were familiar with. The participants were given two weeks to write the essays.

Data Collection

Without any instruction, the students were given two types of essays: argumentative and descriptive to write on. The data collection procedure included:

1. The data was collected from two types of students' essay writing. The lecturers assigned essay topics to students in the same week of study, and allowed students two weeks for writing.
2. The use of DMs from the students' essay was classified by taxonomy into the frequency of use for each type.

Data Analysis

In this study, the steps for data analysis were as follows:

1. The texts in the corpus of the study were subjected to manual analysis. The introduction, body, and conclusion of the essays were read, and re-read severally by the researcher.
2. The lists of DMs found in each essay were identified in order to assess the extent of usage.
3. Discussion of the finding was finally done based on the classification of the discourse markers by use, and misuse, and analyzed descriptively using frequency and percentage.

Results

Table 1 The Frequency Use of Discourse Markers in Students' Essay Writing

Discourse Markers	Argumentative Essay		Descriptive Essay		Overall Use	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Contrastive Discourse Markers (CDMs)						
1. But	73	44.24	41	55.41	114	47.70
2. Although	10	6.06	4	5.41	14	5.86
3. Though	2	1.21	0	0.00	2	0.84
4. However	60	36.36	27	36.49	87	36.40
5. Nevertheless	7	4.24	2	2.70	9	3.77
6. On the other hand	13	7.88	0	0.00	13	5.44
Total	165	100.00	74	100.00	239	100.00
Elaborative Discourse Markers (EDMs)						
1. And	48	30.97	30	41.67	78	34.36
2. For example	35	22.58	7	9.72	42	18.50
3. For instance	3	1.94	1	1.39	4	1.76
4. Furthermore	10	6.45	8	11.11	18	7.93
5. In addition	29	18.71	6	8.33	35	15.42
6. Moreover	30	19.35	20	27.78	50	22.03
Total	155	100.00	72	100.00	227	100.00
Inferential Discourse Markers (IDMs)						
1. So	39	23.21	65	56.03	104	36.62
2. As a result	24	14.29	7	6.03	31	10.92
3. Because	61	36.31	36	31.03	97	34.15
4. Because of	7	4.17	2	1.72	9	3.17
5. Therefore	27	16.07	3	2.59	30	10.56
6. Thus	10	5.95	3	2.59	13	4.58
Total	168	100	116	100	284	100

To answer the first research objective from Table 1, it showed that the majority of contrastive discourse markers was 47.70% for *but*, followed by 36.40% for *however*, 5.86% for *although*, 5.44% for *on the other hand*, 3.77% for *nevertheless*, and 0.84% for *though*, respectively. With regard to the use of elaborative discourse markers, the highest use was *and* (34.36%), *moreover* (22.03%), *for example* (18.50%), *in addition* (15.42%), *furthermore* (7.93%), and *for instance* (1.76%), respectively. Regarding inferential discourse markers, the most frequent use was *so* (36.62%), followed by *because* (34.15%), *as a result* (10.92%), *therefore* (10.56%), *thus* (4.58%),

and *because of* (3.17%), respectively. To sum up, the highest use of DMs in students essay writing was inferential discourse markers, followed by contrastive discourse markers, and elaborative discourse markers, respectively.

Discussion

Analyzing the use of discourse markers in students' essay writing

To answer the second research objective due to the types of DMs in this study, the examples obtain from the original writing from students' written.

The students used *but*, *however*, *although*, *on the other hand*, *nevertheless*, and *though* in their essay writing as examples of contrastive discourse markers (CDMs). It shows that the students use *but*, and *though* to connect the prior sentence, and use *however*, *although*, *on the other hand*, and *nevertheless* at the beginning of the sentence (see Extracts 1–6 for examples of use).

Extract 1: Most students want to go back to the university, *but* they cannot do that and they have to study online (Essay 130)

Extract 2: Many schools are not allowed students to study in schools and arrange online learning. *However*, online learning is not as effective as it could be because there are some problems such as distractions, atmosphere, and devices. (Essay 121)

Extract 3: *Although* online education has many technological advances, teachers and students still require a traditional education to succeed in studying. (Essay 39)

Extract 4: It has forced us all to make a lot of lifestyle changes. Whether working or living, we must stay in our own homes to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. *On the other hand*, it allows me to spend time with myself and know that my favorite place is my home. (Essay 135)

Extract 5: There are many benefits of the online learning at home which students can be safe from the virus. *Nevertheless*, there are impacts from the online class such as the physical and mental health problem. (Essay 96)

Extract 6: I want to go out with friends, *though* I have to stay home in this situation. (Essay 149)

From Extracts 1–6 samples of CDMs, it is clear that students used *but*, and *though* to connect two sentences. While the uses of *however*, *although*, *on the other hand*, and *nevertheless* were used at the beginning of the sentences. Based on the findings of Khan (2016), it revealed that students who study English, particularly, as a foreign language, need to embed various techniques in their writing. For instance, they have to choose the correct markers or words to connect sentences in their essay writing.

Secondly, the uses of elaborative discourse markers (EDMs) were *and*, *moreover*, *for example*, *in addition*, *furthermore*, and *for instance*. Regarding the uses of EDMs, the students used only one marker *and* to connect the prior clause. While the markers *moreover*, *for example*, *in addition*, *furthermore*, and *for instance* were used at the beginning of the sentence. The examples from the data are presented in Extracts 7–12.

Extract 7: Many institutions begin to work from home including teachers in schools and universities. The online class has been used at this time, *and* I do not agree with online learning. (Essay 79)

Extract 8: Online class is now used for every institution. It is good for both students and teachers to reduce the risk of having COVID-19. *Moreover*, they can also record the video of teaching to learn later. (Essay 65)

Extract 9: In online learning, the most important is electronic devices. If a student does not have any electronic devices, he or she might lose from class. *For example*, a friend of mine had only one mobile phone and she has to share it with her younger sister. Sometimes, she needs to share her mobile phone to her younger sister and she absents from the class. (Essay 121)

Extract 10: Besides, my family members have good hygiene. *For instance*, we always wash our hands, wear masks, avoid crowded public places, eat hot food, and use serving spoons. (Essay 195)

Extract 11: We can reduce family expenses because we do not have to pay for a rent at the university and we do not pay for our meals. *Furthermore*, if we miss the class, we can review our lessons from watching video clips. And if we did not understand, we can replay the video and go back to watch our lesson by ourselves. (Essay 2)

Extract 12: Many university students are losing chances for good studies and effective activities. *In addition*, the reduction of interaction between students and lecturers lead to the low efficiency of online study. (Essay 97)

It can be seen that the students used *and* to connect two sentences. However, the students used *moreover*, *for example*, *for instance*, *furthermore*, and *in addition* at the beginning of the new sentences which also link the ideas from the previous sentences. Besides, it was related to Fraser's (1999) study which reported that the students use DMs as a function of coordinating conjunction to connect two independent clauses due to the use from grammar structure.

Thirdly, the use of inferential discourse markers (IDMs) were *so*, *because*, *as a result*, *therefore*, *thus*, and *because of*. The DMs *because* and *because of* used as the connector to the prior sentences. While *so*, *as a result*, *therefore*, and *thus* were used at the beginning of the sentences. The sample uses are as follows:

Extract 13: My parents did not work during the outbreak and my brother school is also closed as well. *So*, I have time to do activities with my family. (Essay 179)

Extract 14: If they cannot go to school, it is better to study online at home, *because* online learning can be done everywhere and every time, you can also record a video to review and reskill as you want. It shows that is very convenient to all students. (Essay 92)

Extract 15: The announcement of many schools and institutes allowed students to study through online. *As a result*, I have to stay at home and study online by using Microsoft Teams (Essay 80).

Extract 16: It is impossible to go back to study at the university *because of* the COVID-19 pandemic. (Essay 67)

Extract 17: One thing is that is should deal with the internet system for all students. *Therefore*, online teaching during the COVID-19 will bring more advantages than disadvantages. We all must never stop learning new things and always accept the changes. (Essay 34)

Extract 18: Another thing I like about online learning is that I can review my lessons from watching the video clips. *Thus*, it makes me feel comfortable for my online classes. (Essay 75)

From Extracts 13–18, it shows that students used *because* and *because of* to connect two sentences. While the DMs *so*, *as a result*, *therefore*, and *thus* used at the beginning of the sentence to support and strengthen the previous sentences. The research results are consistent with the earlier research of Maschler and Schiffrin (2015) which indicated that the role of discourse marker in writing is that it could express certain meaning in the grammar structure. To illustrate this, the marker *because* can be used as conjunctive to connect different sentences and bring more new ideas.

Analyzing the misuse of discourse markers in students' essay writing

In analyzing the misuse of DMs students' writing, there were four DMs that were misused by the students; *although*, *for example*, *because of*, and *but*.

Firstly, the examples of the misuse of *although* are shown in Extracts 19–21.

Extract 19: *Although* online learning brings some disadvantages, *but* it also shows some advantages. (Essay 70)

Extract 20: *Although* I want to study in the classroom, *but* online is the best choice for all students. (Essay 90)

Extract 21: *Although* COVID-19 pandemic still happens every day, *but* we try our best to study from online courses. (Essay 127)

For the misuse of DMs *although*, it shows that students use it inappropriately because they started the sentence with the marker *although*. This is in line with the study of Fraser (1999) that students still missed the DMs and one cause of this is from the translation from their mother tongue. The function of *but* is that it can be used at the beginning and the middle of the sentence. The structure in using *although* at the beginning of the sentence is that the writer should use comma (,) after the first clause, then the writer writes the second clause. The sample shows that student used *but* at the beginning of the second sentence. From this misuse, it is concluded that the students write based on their mother tongue conventions by translating from Thai into English.

Secondly, the examples of the misuse of *for example* are presented in Extracts 22–24.

Extract 22: There are many devices that students need to use for their online learning. *For example*, a mobile phone, a laptop or computer and a mobile phone. (Essay 60)

Extract 23: There are many rooms in my house. *For example*, three bed rooms, two bathrooms, one dining room, and one kitchen. (Essay 160)

Extract 24: During the COVID-19, I stay home with my family and we did many activities together. *For example*, playing games, reading novels, doing yoga and painting with watercolors. (Essay 175)

The italicized DM *for example* revealed that students misused it because after this marker, they use words instead of sentences. In the sample sentences, students should use *such as* instead because the use *for example* is that the students need to write a sentence. For the misuse of the DM *for example*, the students misused it with another DM *such as* that was not employed in this study. The Extracts 22–24 show that students misuse *for example* with *such as*. For the use of *for example*, it is followed by a sentence, but the student uses words after this markers. This is echoes in the work of Sharndama and Yakubu (2013); Kaewnuch (2016) that students need to use the academic word list appropriately with their writing.

Thirdly, students still misused the markers *because of*. The examples are as follows:

Extract 25: I love to stay in my room *because of* I do not want to go out and meet lots of people. I am worry about the spread of COVID-19. (Essay 171)

Extract 26: At home, I love to spend time with my favorite books *because of* I cannot go anywhere in the COVID-19 pandemic. (Essay 180)

Extract 27: After studying, I always take photos around my garden *because of* I love to watch my flowers and trees. (Essay 188)

To elaborate on the misuse of DM *because of*, it shows that students use it before the sentences inappropriately. In fact, they have to use *because* instead *because of*. If they use *because of*, they have to write phrases. The misuse of DM *because of* by the student is inappropriate. Extracts 25–27 show that student misused the markers *because of* with *because*. In sentence writing, the use of DM *because of* always follows by words or phrases. It is related with the work of Khan (2016) that student need to use the correct makers for their writing.

Lastly, the misuse of DM *but* is one of markers that students still use inappropriately as follows:

Extract 28: There are advantages and disadvantages of online classroom *but* in this situation, online class is the best way to save ourselves during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Essay 103)

Extract 29: I do not want to study from online classes *but* I have to stay home and continue my online study. (Essay 157)

Extract 30: I love to go to the university to meet my friends *but* I cannot study in the class because of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Essay 160)

For the misuse of *but*, it shows that students used the DM *but* at the beginning of a sentence which is inappropriate because normally the DM *but* is always used to join two independent clauses. The DM *but* can be used as a conjunction to connect two sentences or clauses. The students used it inappropriately because they did not add comma (,) before *but*. To illustrate this, student should use the contrastive discourse marker *however* instead and it can be used at the beginning of the sentence which is more appropriate. It is directed to the work of Ament and Páres (2017) that students need to interpret and integrate the meaning of the sentence correctly.

Conclusion

After data collection, the study found that students commonly use all types all DMs. The DMs used by students were *but*, *however*, *although*, *on the other hand*, *nevertheless*, *though*, *and*, *moreover*, *for example*, *in addition*, *furthermore*, *for instance*, *so*, *because*, *as a result*, *therefore*, *thus*, and *because of*. For contrastive discourse markers, most students used *but* at 47.70%. In elaborative discourse markers, DM *and* was used the most at 34.36%. Students used *so* the most for inferential discourse markers at 36.62%. Most students embedded the use of DMs in their essay writing to make more coherent and cohesive connection. However, some students misused DMs in connecting ideas in paragraphs. With regard to the misuse of students' writing, for example, the misuse of their writing revealed that their mother tongues influence their writing because their writing depends on their translation from Thai into English. For example, they misuse DM *although* by adding *but* in the sentence. It is because they think in their own language before writing in English. Another problem is that they still misused the punctuation in their writing. To illustrate this, students misused DM *but* in their writing because they did not add comma (,) after this marker. Based on this misuse, it can be concluded that students have limited knowledge about using some markers. Students need to improve their writing skill by learning more about the use of DMs because it can impact negatively on their writing quality. Though most students can apply DMs in their writing, some students still need to learn more. Therefore, it could provide implications for students and teachers which can help improve students writing.

Suggestion

For research on writing, it could be conducted to find other techniques use in students writing such as grammar or tenses to explore the misuse of their writing that can develop their English writing abilities further. For the study on DMs towards students, it could be conducted with speeches or other types of essays or other types of writings. It would be interesting to see what will be different from this type of research conducted with only argumentative and descriptive essays.

New Knowledge

Based on this research results, it is possible to conclude that Thai EFL undergraduate students still misuse some DMs in their essay writing. This implicates that students need to be taught how to use DMs in different types of writing. Language teachers should employ the instruction approaches or techniques that help students to use it correctly and appropriately. Furthermore, the utilization of learning DMs is that it can help students reflect their writing abilities and apply in their future career. It can be used towards colleagues because it is one of important ways to increases the work capabilities, and communicate in the workplaces. The new knowledge is demonstrated in the picture below.

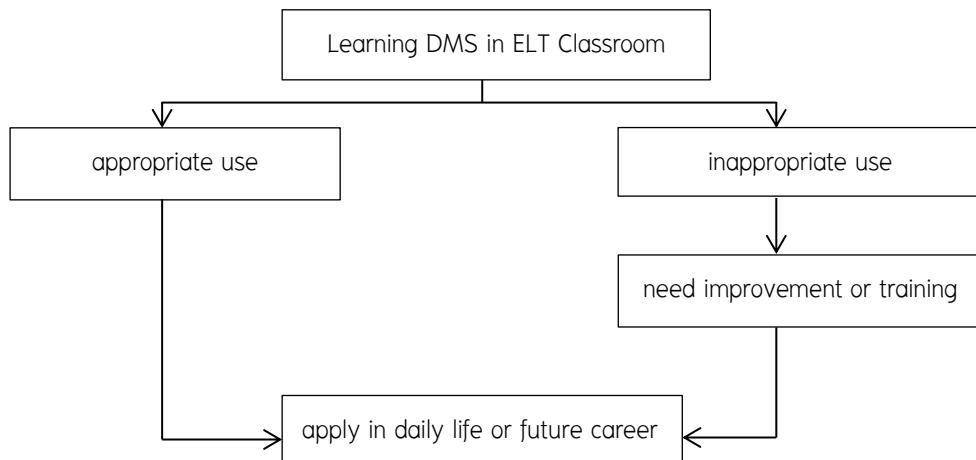


Figure 1 Learning Discourse Makers in ELT Classroom

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