Milada Walková

Exploring transition markers in class

INTRODUCTION

Transition markers, e.g., *nevertheless* and *consequently*, pose a number of challenges for EAP students, including general overuse, as well as semantic and stylistic misuse. To help prevent or overcome these issues, this paper aims to offer some practical guidance for teaching transition markers. The teaching recommendations are grounded in the findings of previous research, draw on a critical discussion of teaching materials and are illustrated with several teaching activities. It is hoped that the paper will inspire EAP teachers and materials writers.

DEFINING TRANSITION MARKERS

Transition markers are also known in the literature as logical markers (Mur Dueñas, 2009), connectors (Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995), conjunctive adjuncts (Gardezi & Nesi, 2009), linking adjuncts (Richards & Schmidt, 2010), linking adverbials (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999), and linking words (e.g., Harrison, Jakeman & Paterson, 2016). In this paper, I use the term transition markers (TMs), following Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse model, see Table 1.

Table 1 Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse model

Interactive metadiscourse	Interactional metadiscourse
language used to help the reader/hearer understand the text	*language used to help the reader/hearer engage with the text*
transition markers, e.g., *but*	hedges, e.g., *perhaps*
frame markers, e.g., *to conclude*	boosters, e.g., *it is clear that*
endophoric markers, e.g., *see Fig. 1*	attitude markers, e.g., *surprisingly*
evidentials, e.g., *according to*	engagement markers, e.g., *note that*
code glosses, e.g., *such as*	self-mentions, e.g., *I*

TMs, then, are interactive metadiscourse devices which '[help] the reader interpret links between ideas' (Hyland, 2005, p. 50). As such, they are an important means to increase readability of the text. At the same time, TMs are discourse markers (e.g., Maschler & Schiffrin, 2015), i.e., devices which organise the text. The semantic links that TMs signify are of three kinds (Hyland, 2005): addition, e.g., *moreover, and, additionally*; consequence, e.g., *thus, therefore, as a result*, and comparison and contrast,[1] e.g., *likewise, in the same way, similarly* for comparison and *in contrast, on the other hand, however* for contrast. This paper does not discuss individual transition markers in detail; Gardner & Han (2018) and Granger & Tyson (1996) are useful resources.

Student problems

Student problems related to TMs in academic writing are of two broad types: problems with frequency and with appropriacy. As regards frequency, research has found that L2 English student and expert writers typically overuse TMs compared to L1 English writers or to more proficient L2 English writers (Chen, 2006; Lei, 2012; Sultan, 2011; Tapper, 2005). Such an overuse is illustrated in Example 1, an extract from a short essay written by an L2 English student writer taken from the TECCL corpus (Xue, 2015), with the TMs highlighted in bold.

Example 1

Nowadays, numerous college students choose to get a part-time job to rich college life. There is no doubt that taking part-time job would bring plenty of benefits. Above all, part-time job can make our life more enjoyable and meaningful; that is to say, it can add more color to the same day in and day out of the life. What's more, part-time job can make we college students get in touch with the society earlier. We would know what the real world is. And some college students live an extravagant life with a pocket money given by their parents, which keeps them from the hardship of earning money in the real world. More importantly, part-time job can help students gain some useful experience to approach the society and establish some connections in advance. Besides, because not every family is wealthy, getting a part-time job can lighten their burden.

As every coin has two sides, there are still some disadvantages in taking a part-time job. On the one hand, it occupies some of the students' spare time and the time in studying would decrease, maybe it would keep our attention from focusing on learning. Therefore, our study would be affected in a certain extent.

As can be seen in the first paragraph, the writer uses TMs as well as other metadiscoursal devices to list ideas, rather than to draw logical connections between them:

Above all (attitude marker) → enjoyment
What's more (TM of addition) → society
And (TM of addition) → earning money
More importantly (attitude marker) → society
Besides (TM of addition) → extra income

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[1] Comparison and contrast relations are treated together in Hyland (2005), but it might be useful to treat them separately in class.

In fact, what we see here is some repetition and a lack of logical sequencing of ideas. The writer seems to be aware of the usefulness of TMs and other metadiscoursal devices but fails to use them successfully to improve cohesion in the text. It follows that teaching should focus on effective use of TMs, rather than encouraging students to increase their use of TMs.

Research that has investigated frequency of TMs from the point of view of individual semantic classes has found that L2 English writers tend to overuse TMs of addition, but underuse TMs of contrast and consequence (Elahi & Badaleh, 2013; Granger & Tyson, 1996; Narita, Sato & Sugiura, 2004). This finding might be due to novice writers using TMs mostly in the list-like manner illustrated above rather than to compare and contrast ideas or to discuss causal relations. This has implications for focusing on content and critical thinking in teaching writing.

In terms of appropriacy, L2 English writers have been found to misuse TMs both semantically (Gardner & Han, 2018; Granger & Tyson, 1996; Lei, 2012) and stylistically (Gardner & Han, 2018; Granger & Tyson, 1996; Narita et al., 2004). Semantic misuse is illustrated in Example 2, drawn from a text written by an L2 English student writer in the TECCL Corpus (Xue, 2015): The writer uses the TM *besides* in an attempt to draw connections between the ideas presented; however, the TM does not remediate the essential lack of coherence between the ideas presented. In Crewe's (1990, p. 320) words, the writer is 'trying to impose surface logicality'. The writer's attempt does not work because, as Carrell (1982) warns, TMs improve cohesion, but not coherence.

Example 2 [arguing that electricity is better than petrol for the environment]

For one thing, electricity is regarded as one of the 'green fuels'. As we all know, when burning petrol, it will release some poisonous gases. Besides, carbon dioxide gas is the largest greenhouse gas.

Stylistic misuse, in my view, can be divided into three related problems. The first is the selection of colloquial TMs, as illustrated with *besides* and *what's more* in Example 1. Another problem is the sentence-initial use of TMs *and, but, or,* and *so*, for example, the sentence-initial *and* in Example 1. Lastly, a similar problem is that of conjunctions such as *because* and *while* in dependent clauses used as independent clauses, as illustrated in Example 3 from the TECCL (Xue, 2015). In all these examples, students use language appropriate for other, spoken colloquial contexts, but not for academic writing.

Example 3

Some people think that knowledge should be emphasized in education. Because they treat it as the source of study.

Although this paper draws on examples from a lower-level EGAP corpus (Xue, 2015), the learner problems discussed here are also attested in the writing of advanced learners of English (Granger & Tyson, 1996; Narita et al., 2004), including high-scoring university essays (Gardner & Han, 2018), doctoral dissertations (Lei, 2012) and published research articles (Elahi & Badaleh, 2013; Sultan, 2011), as illustrated in Example 4 taken from Gardner & Han (2018, p.872–873). It follows, then, that TMs deserve the attention of EAP teaching at various proficiency levels.

Example 4

> *One implication of HRT having for organisation*
> *of work is that workers have social needs and*
> *managers ought to be aware of and respond*
> *to it. Whereas, to what extent their needs*
> *affect organisation productivity and how to deal*
> *with informal social power are not explicitly*
> *mentioned by Mayo.*

INGREDIENTS OF GOOD PRACTICE

This section points out some weaknesses
of EAP materials designed to teach TMs
which might feed into student problems,
such as the ones discussed above, and
suggests ingredients of good practice in
teaching TMs.

One weakness of some EAP materials is
the use of pedagogic texts that have been
enhanced by increasing the frequency of
TMs to increase their saliency in the text
(as done in Lynch & Anderson, 2013, for
example). While this practice has its merits
for teaching grammatical structures, for
discourse markers, including TMs, it might
create false impressions for students as to
the expected frequency of TMs in their
own texts, resulting in overuse. Therefore,
following Granger & Tyson (1996), Narita
et al. (2004) and Lei (2012), I propose that
for teaching TMs, authentic academic texts
should be used which model an appropriate
frequency of TMs. By authentic texts, I
mean texts which were written for other
purposes than teaching the language.
Authenticity of texts is one of the basic
principles of EAP (Todd, 2003; Hyland &
Hamp-Lyons, 2004) used to initiate students
into the academic community (Spector-
Cohen, Kirschner & Wexler, 2001). It could
be objected that authentic texts are too
difficult for some students to read. Authentic
texts in EAP class, however, need not be only

ones written by expert writers, e.g., journal
articles, but can also include texts by student
writers, e.g., good student examples, with
the latter being more accessible to students.

Another weakness of some EAP materials
is controlled practice of TMs at sentence
level (e.g., Paterson, 2013, p. 65). In this
type of practice, students might be asked to
choose from two or more TMs to complete
a sentence or to use a TM to join two
sentences. This type of activity, however,
might create an impression in students
that any two clauses or sentences can be
joined by a TM, irrespective of context,
and eventually lead to overuse and possibly
semantic misuse when producing full texts.
Since TMs are discourse markers (e.g.,
Maschler & Schiffrin, 2015), one of their
functions is to organise ongoing discourse
beyond sentence level; therefore, their
controlled practice at sentence level only
reduces them to their grammatical function.
For this reason, I propose the use of TMs
should be illustrated in and practised on
longer stretches of text (cf. Gardner &
Han, 2018). Again, it might be argued that
long texts are too demanding for some
students. I am not implying here that full
texts need to be used, though – the teacher
can choose a section of an authentic text
appropriate to the level of the students. As
to the question of which sections might
especially lend themselves to the teaching
of TMs, research is lacking (to the best of
my knowledge) into frequency of TMs in
various sections of specific student or expert
genres. Nevertheless, we can expect to find
the highest frequency and greatest variety
of TMs in a literature review section or a
discussion section of a research article (if the
teacher is to use an expert text, see above)
or a section of an essay where the author
presents and rebuts a counterargument (if

a student text is being used). These sections are likely to provide a number of related ideas, to compare and contrast them, and possibly to discuss consequences, thus drawing on various semantic classes of TMs.

Yet another weakness is a lack of juxtaposition of the three semantic classes of TMs in some EAP materials. For instance, Paterson (2013) focuses on TMs of addition, contrast and consequence separately and due attention is not paid to how the three classes differ and which class might be used in a particular instance. Treating the three classes separately might result in misunderstanding of the semantics, and, consequently, in semantic misuse, of TMs by students. For this reason, I propose that identifying semantic relationships in texts should be an essential component of analysing and producing TMs.

The final weakness is an absence of guidance on the formality of TMs and their use in sentence-initial positions. Thus, while teaching materials might draw students' attention to syntactically acceptable position(s) of individual TMs, they might not explicitly counsel students that certain TMs are not used in sentence-initial position or that some other TMs should be avoided completely in formal academic writing (e.g., Bailey, 2015, p. 181). Therefore, the last ingredient of good teaching practice proposed here is that teaching should aim to raise awareness as to stylistic appropriateness of the use of TMs (cf. also Chen, 2006).

SUGGESTED TEACHING ACTIVITIES

This section proposes four teaching activities that apply the ingredients of good practice discussed above.

ACTIVITY 1

The first activity is an example of a presentation teaching activity. First, students read a selected authentic text and engage with its content. Then, they move on to noticing TMs in the text, for example, by finding their instances, with attention being drawn to their overall frequency and function. This activity can be followed by another activity focusing on the semantics and stylistics of the TMs in the text (see below).

Activity 2

A teaching activity designed for the purpose of identifying semantic relationships might proceed as follows. Students are first introduced to the three[2] semantic classes of TMs with some examples. Then students read an authentic text with TMs highlighted and, for each one, underline the two ideas the TM joins and decide on the semantic relationship between the ideas, thus classifying the TMs in the text into semantic classes. The activity can be made more challenging in two ways. One way is to have students identify TMs in the text themselves first. This may possibly yield a discussion of differences between TMs and other metadiscourse devices. Another adaptation of the activity involves using a

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[2] It might be pedagogically useful to divide the comparison and contrast class into two respective classes of comparison and contrast.

text to create a gap-fill exercise. This activity can be followed by identifying semantic relationships and, accordingly, revising the use of TMs in students' own texts.

Activity 3
Another activity uses an authentic student text which is less successful in the use of TMs. Students start by reading the text, in which TMs have been highlighted. Students evaluate the use of TMs by deciding whether they have been used in an appropriate way, both semantically and stylistically. Finally, they propose better alternatives for the TMs that have been used inappropriately. This activity can also be adapted as a peer review activity.

Activity 4
The last activity aims to raise awareness of stylistic differences in the use of TMs in spoken and written discourse. Students first listen to an authentic academic spoken discourse (e.g., a TED Talk) and read the transcript (or a part of it) to find instances of TMs. Then, they read an authentic academic written discourse (e.g., a journal article section) and find TMs in it. Finally, students make lists of TMs used in the two types of discourse and see which ones are used in a sentence-initial position[3] and compare their findings to write up a list of conventions for formal written academic style.

Conclusion

This paper has pointed out the problems of overuse and semantic as well as stylistic misuse of TMs in student writing. Assuming that these problems might arise from a lack of due exploration of TMs in class, ingredients of good practice in teaching TMs have been proposed. Namely, it has been suggested that, first, in order to avoid overuse, authentic texts should be used to model the use of TMs; second, as another means of avoiding overuse, longer stretches of text, rather than pairs of sentences, should be used to provide controlled practice; third, semantic relations in texts should be considered in order to identify a suitable TM and to avoid semantic misuse; and lastly, in order to avoid stylistic misuse, awareness should be raised as to the stylistic appropriateness of sentence-initial position of some TMs.

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[3] It is perfectly possible that expert academic writing will occasionally contain informally used TMs, e.g., sentence-initial *and* and *but* (see e.g., Bell, 2007). Depending on the students' ability, the teacher might decide to discuss the writer's choices with the students, or to use only texts which do not contain such informal elements, serving the pedagogical purposes followed in this activity.

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