



Investigating Female Students Use of Discourse Markers in Writing: A Linguistic Study at an EFL Context

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Abstract

Discourse markers (DMs), as a set of language elements, are essential for structuring written material, indicating connections between concepts and ideas, and improving coherence in written texts. Gaining an understanding of how EFL students use DMs helps better understand students' writing ability, language growth, and textual organizing techniques. This study aimed to investigate female students' use of DMs in writing. This was achieved through discovering the patterns of marker usage, potential challenges faced by learners, and strategies for enhancing the effective use of DMs in written English. A comparative analysis of texts produced by 24 female students (EFL setting) at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia was applied to fulfill the aim of the study. The results of this study showed that Saudi female students employ a relatively small variety of DMs. The use of restricted variety of DMs is the main focus of their writing. The most frequently DMs used are "and," "or," "as," "so," and "if". Nevertheless, the accuracy of these DMs is low. However, the amount of other DMs used by them is very low. Finally, this study draws a significant contribution to the study of second languages as it focused on exploring the discourse markers frequently used that enable teachers to pay attention to and work forward to encourage students to vary their use of DMs in their writing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Discourse marks (DMs) are words or phrases that guide the flow of conversation in writing or voice, indicate linkages between ideas, and aid in the coherent organization of a work. They are essential to student writing because they facilitate the organization of the argument or narrative, which helps the reader comprehend the writer's point of view. Swan (1995) defines discourse as:

“Discourse means ‘pieces of language longer than a sentence.’ Some words and expressions are used to show how discourse is constructed. They can show the connection between what a speaker is saying and what has already been said or what is being said; they can indicate what speakers think about what they are saying or what others have said..” (p. 151)

According to Chapwanya and Nel (2024), DMs are generally understood to be single words or multi-word phrases that help control the structure and flow of written or spoken discourses. Different viewpoints and analyses of DMs have been applied to various English varieties, leading to a variety of terminology, definitions, and theoretical frameworks related to the establishment and preservation of cohesion and coherence in discourses.

In reference to the various terms used in the field, concepts such as "discourse markers" (Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 1999; Blakemore, 2002; Müller, 2005), "discourse connectives" (Blakemore, 2002), "discourse particles" (Aijmer, 2002; Lam, 2009a, 2009b), and "pragmatic markers" (Brinton, 2010; Oladipupo & Unuabonah, 2020) are used interchangeably. Some scholars distinguish between DMs and discourse particles, though DMs are included in the broad category known as discourse particles. DMs are words like then, well, so, however, and now that indicate a relationship in sequence between the preceding discourse and the current essential message (Fraser, 1990). DMs are relational features that indicate condition, topic shift, elaboration, contrast, and justification between two sentences (Traugott and Dasher, 2002).

DMs are non-propositional, prosodically, syntactically, and semantically autonomous discourse parts serving a communicative purpose (Diewald, 2006). DMs, according to Fraser (2009), are things that suggest a connection between the discourse segment that contains them and the one that comes before it. DMs, according to Cuenca (2013), are connecting words that indicate propositional meanings and grammatical links, such as clausal initials in compound sentences. DMs, such as "oh," "well," "y'know," and "but," are linguistic items used in cognitive, emotive, social, and textual contexts (Maschler & Schiffrin 2015). DMs are linguistic instruments that contribute to the articulation of various concepts and enhance the structural elements of communication. It is commonly known that mastering the use of DMs is crucial for overcoming common challenges faced by those learning a new language, such as uncertainty, and difficulties maintaining coherent conversations (Suryadi et al., 2024). DMs convey clauses' syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic relationships with their immediate surroundings, indicating their conversation status (Shirtz, 2024).

From the scholars' discussions, Yi (2024) extracted scholarly definitions into five categories: coherence, relevance, syntactic-pragmatic, grammatical and prosodic-phonetic approaches to DMs. Alsaawi (2022) argued that scholars have concentrated on the theoretical status of DMs and the circumstances surrounding their deployment. He clarified his argument by giving the example of Schiffrin (1987) who proposed that every DM has a unique meaning, and Redeker (1991) who contended that a DM's meaning depends on how well it clarifies the utterance's

inherent value. However, Ali and Mahadin (2015) argued that both syntactically and semantically, DMs are optional. Since their removal does not make the discourse parts that contain them grammatically incorrect, they are syntactically optional. For example, deleting “actually” from the sentence (She was tired actually), does not make the sentence ungrammatical.

The reason for the semantic optionality of DMs is that, although they do not "create" the relationships between the discourse units they connect, they do "signal" them. Therefore, if the DM "but" is removed from the statement (Sami arrived on time, but Sara was late), the hearer receives the same message. DMs are linguistic components that researchers want to examine, even though they may not always agree on the specific components to focus on or what to name the subject of their investigation (Maschler & Schiffrin, 2015). The study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the types of DMs used by the Saudi female graduates?
2. What are the functions of DMs used in Saudi female graduates' sentences?
3. How accurately do the Saudi female graduates incorporate the DMs in their sentences?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1.DMs in Arab EFL contexts

DMs have been explored by the several scholars in different contexts. Alsaawi (2022) highlighted the use of DMs among senior university students of English in Saudi Arabia and found that the insufficient exposure to DMs in their courses was the cause of the EFL students' difficulties in using DMs in their writing. In the studies on Iraqi undergraduate and postgraduate students, Alahmed and Kırmızı (2021) and Alahmad et al. (2020) created four categories from the DMs that the participants used: Contrastive Markers (CDMs), Elaborative Markers (EDMs), Implicative Markers (IDMs), and Temporal Markers (TDMs). According to the study's findings, the majority of participants (64%) employed EDMs, with TDMs (20%), CMDs (10%), and IDMs (6%). It was determined that the students had overused conjunctions such "and," "or," "but," "as," and "also." They had also mishandled a few DMs in their writing. The study also found that in order for students' writing to be at the academic level, they must improve their use of DMs.

Furthermore, a similar conclusion was made by Fareh (2014) where he showed that when writing English essays, Arab learners of the language face significant macrolinguistic issues, such as run-on sentences, poor paragraph development, ignorance of the logical relationships between sentences, coherence issues, and cooperative principle violations. He added that students very often misused the connective DMs such as “and” and “but” in their writing.

Alqasham et al. (2021) identified how the coherence and cohesiveness of the writing produced by Saudi EFL students were ranged from improper usage of connecting devices to underuse. Asassfeh et al. (2013) conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 146 English major students' essays in which they discussed the use of logical connections, another term for DMs. The researchers looked into how frequently and in what ways logical connections (LCs) were used. According to their findings, Jordanian EFL students frequently "incorporate a higher number of LCs compared to what the context requires." Stated differently, the subjects exhibit a propensity to overuse or stuff their essays with LCs. Additionally, a limited selection of LCs is seen to be used regularly and redundantly by the subjects. For example, 80% of the additive LCs used by the students are the LC "and," whereas 93% of the instances of causative connections are represented by the LCs "because" and "so."

According to Ali and Mahadin (2016a), the intermediate students at the University of Jordan used gadgets to carry out a limited number of tasks at a more constrained number of locations. Furthermore, compared to their advanced counterparts, intermediate learners' DMs were observed to be drawn from a greater number of redundant syntactic categories. It was determined that the competence levels of EFL learners had an impact on the use of DMs. Further, Ali and Mahadin (2016b) indicated that advanced EFL learners were able to use a variety of DMs that fall into the structural and referential categories. However, it has been noted that these students either employ certain textual discourse indicators sparingly or not at all. This could be attributed to the cultural distinctions between native and non-native subjects, formal schooling, and the influence of the EFL learners' first language.

Khuwaileh and Al Shoumali (2000) concluded that similar deficits in bad English writing are correlated with Arabic. As a result, the widely held belief in ELT that all students are proficient in their native tongue is false, as is a large portion of the criticism levelled at ELT programs for Arabic speakers due to their inadequate English writing abilities. Studies including Al-Hazmi (2006), Ezza (2010), Umair (2011), and Iseni et al. (2016) have examined the usage of DMs among Arab EFL learners and resulted that Arab EFL learners have trouble with their writing, which includes using DMs improperly, excessively, or insufficiently.

The predominant research on DMs thus far has focused on the utilization and interpretation in different contexts. Little is known about the interpretation of DMs in remote environments, particularly used by Saudi female EFL learners. The current study looks at how Saudi female EFL learners use the different DMs in their online discussions.

3. METHODS

The study uses the qualitative approach to explore the use of DMs by Saudi female graduates. In this approach, the researcher examines and highlights themes of interest to the study (Menter et al. 2011). The participants of the study are 24 Saudi female graduates registered in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) courses. These participants were taught online using collaborate-ultra feature of the Blackboard learning management system (LMS). These students were given several online activities such as the use of online dictionaries, watching videos, Google translate etc. to enhance their linguistic skills. For the purpose of this study, the researcher asked them to decide on a topic of their own choice on which they could have discussions with other students. One of the students was asked to open the discussion with her topic in the discussion forum of Blackboard LMS. Then all the other students were encouraged to post at least one comment. However, they were given the freedom to post the comments as many as they wanted. The list of topics, number of comments in each topic and their percentages are given Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Topics selected by the students, comments on them and their percentages*

No.	Topics	No. of posts in each topic	Percentage of posts
1.	Sports	23	4.72%
2.	Artificial intelligence	23	4.72%
3.	Cybercrime	21	4.31%
4.	Seven wonders of the world	21	4.31%
5.	Health and fitness	20	4.10%
6.	The coffee	20	4.10%
7.	Book genre	21	4.31%
8.	Online shopping	20	4.10%
9.	Countryside life	20	4.10%
10.	The train has many advantages and suits all	21	4.31%
11.	Online shopping and normal shopping	19	3.90%
12.	Harmful jokes known as bullying	20	4.10%
13.	The human mind and the development we have reached	18	3.69%
14.	Staying up late	23	4.72%
15.	Healthy lifestyle	20	4.10%
16.	Travel	20	4.10%
17.	Drawing	20	4.10%
18.	The best daily routine	19	3.90%
19.	Movies	19	3.90%
20.	Life and social media	23	4.72%
21.	University life	19	3.90%
22.	Social media	20	4.10%
23.	Effects of lack of sleep	19	3.90%
24.	How exercise affects our life	18	3.69%
	Total	487	100%

4. RESULTS

As Table 2 and Figure 1 given below represent the DMs used by the Saudi female students, at the same time it also indicates that these students rarely use DMs. However, there are some DMs which are mostly used by the students. In simple words, we can say that the range of DMs used by the Saudi students is very limited. The total number of DMs used by the Saudi female students is 48. The total number of words that all the 24 students wrote was 25933 and the total number of DMs used was 4311. Thus the rate of DMs used is about 17%. However, their use is limited except some of them. Interestingly, the mostly used DMs with more than 1% occurrence are 10 in number. However, 38 DMs are used with less than 1% occurrence. The DM “and” shows the highest occurrence in number that is 1597 with the rate of 37.044%. This shows that the “and” DM is very common and highly used by the Saudi students. After this, the second highest DM used is “or” which is 898 with the rate of 20.83%. Then the third mostly used DM is “as” that is 639 in occurrence with the rate of 14.822%. It is followed by the DM “so” which is 341 in occurrence with the rate of 7.91%. Then it is followed by the DM “if” that shows the occurrence 237 with the percentage value of 5.50%.

Table 2. *The frequency and percentage of DMs used by Saudi female students*

DMs	Frequency	Percentage
After	9	0.208%
After that	6	0.139%
Afterwards	2	0.046%
Also	103	2.389%
Although	1	0.023%
And	1597	37.044%
As	639	14.822%
As a result	1	0.023%
As for me	2	0.046%
As well as	7	0.162%
Because	55	1.275%
Because of that	1	0.023%
Before	18	0.417%
But	109	2.528%
Certainly	4	0.092%
Consequently	1	0.023%
Despite	2	0.046%
Even though	1	0.023%
Finally	6	0.139%
First	7	0.162%
First of all	3	0.069%
Firstly	1	0.023%
For example	2	0.046%
For me	21	0.487%
Furthermore	3	0.069%

However	27	0.626%
I mean	2	0.046%
If	237	5.497%
In addition	14	0.324%
In case	1	0.023%
In contrast	2	0.046%
In fact	14	0.324%
In other words	1	0.023%
In summary	1	0.023%
Indeed	1	0.023%
Moreover	3	0.069%
Next	3	0.069%
On the other hand	5	0.115%
Or	898	20.830%
Overall	58	1.345%
Particularly	3	0.069%
Second	4	0.092%
So	341	7.909%
Such as	51	1.183%
Then	22	0.510%
Therefore	2	0.046%
Too	14	0.324%
Yet	6	0.139%
Total DMs used	4311	100%
Total words	25933	

Thus the DMs “and”, “or”, “as”, “so” and “if” are identified as the mostly used DMs by the Saudi female students. Below are the examples from different students’ comments shared in the discussion forum when they were sharing their thoughts and ideas on the topics that they selected for the discussion.

For me, one of the seven wonders of the world that I would like to visit is the Great Wall of China, and walk around it and see its wonderful nature and also the Taj Mahal (India), curious about this place and I want to visit it very much, yes, there are things and places discovered recently or in the past that are considered one of the wonders of this world, a golden bridge and the heads of Easter Island, Red square and many others that are considered one of the wonders of the world. (Student)

The above 95 words example shows how the student used the connective DM “and”. It has occurred 7 times in this large sentence. Here, the student keeps on constructing the sentences with the help of the conjunction “and” which makes the sentences longer which are difficult for the readers. This shows that the student doesn’t have the proper knowledge of how to use the DM “and” for constructing the sentences.

Social media can be both good or bad for society. It lets people connect or share, but it can also make them feel bad about themselves or get addicted. How you handle mean comments or cyberbullying online matters. It's important to be kind, block or report rude people, or talk to someone you trust or if it's bothering you. And sometimes, it's okay to take a break or stay away from social media if it's getting too much. (Student)

The DM “or” was the second highest used in number. This DM represents the options or choices that the writer expresses in his text. The example above shows how the student used this DM. It is found 8 times in the 78 words example. Below are the other examples that show the frequently used DMs “as”, “so” and “if”.

Movies are a way to change my mood. As I love watching all genres except horror, because As I think I can't stand. I enjoy watching crimes, investigations, and comedies. But not all movies are good as just a few of them are good. (Student)

It is so right! Cybercrimes are increasing hugely around the world at a very high rate, so much so that huge companies have been exposed to cybercrimes, and several problems and cases have been filed because of that, so you should be careful and use anti-virus software, keep it updated, and contact companies directly regarding suspicious requests so you confirm their credibility and Secure your mobile phone or the system, and finally verify that the sites have their names correct. If they are exposed, so you must inform the authorities as soon as possible, and they will deal with them. (Student)

The best daily routine is when if i wake up early and if I take a shower. After that i do something to eat. Then i do my homeworks if i have. If i don't, i just watch something on TV or do some work. If I do some work I don't watch TV. (Student)

Interestingly, some of the students used the DMs which were not discussed in the literature. Moreover, they are the results of their L1 code transferred to the L2 code. The Arabic speakers more frequently use بالنسبة لي /bilnisbah li:/ (translated as ‘for me’ and ‘as for me’) in their conversations when they give their remarks or opinions on something. The below examples show the use of this kind of DM.

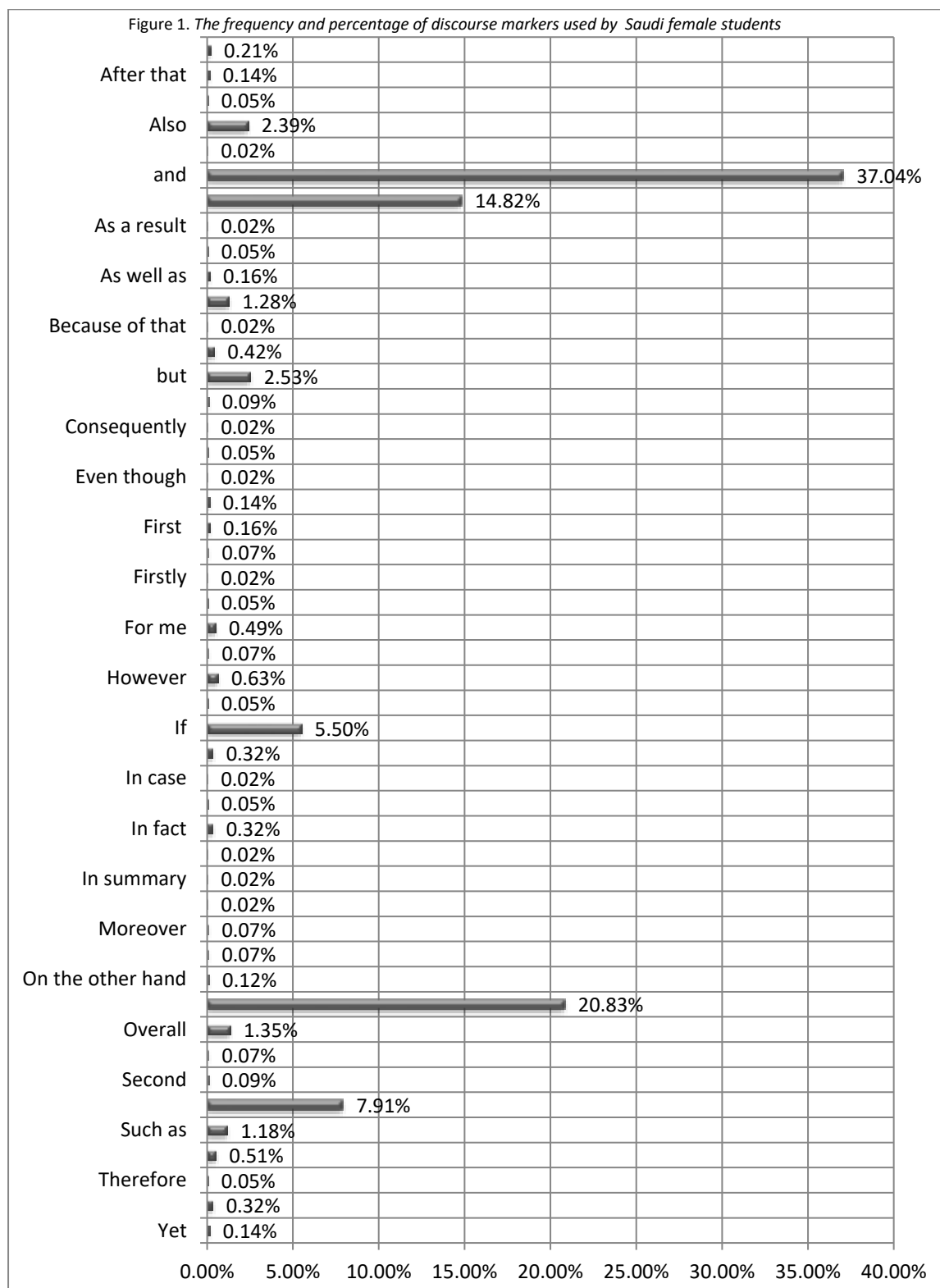
for me, healthy lifestyle is often associated with being physically active, eating a balanced diet, getting enough sleep, and managing stress levels. (Student)

Firstly, for me, I prefer online because it consumes less time and you can have everything you have in mind. Unlike the mall, you may not find what you want and it costs a high price, and this is not the case for me. (Student)

As for me, I love football. I learned it from my father. Sport is very enjoyable and makes you have a good mood. (Student)

In the first example above, the students transferred the L1 code into English. However, in the second example, she used two DMs ‘firstly’ and ‘for me’ together. Hence these examples show how the Saudi female incorporate the DMs in their writing. According to Alsaawi (2022), in

an attempt to mimic the scientific publications Saudi students read, they frequently utilize lengthy sentences in their writing.



However, short phrases are generally avoided in scientific articles since they are thought to make them harder to understand. Furthermore, the long sentences are supposed to help the writers establish their authority and strengthen their points of view.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings in this study indicate that the range of DMs used by the Saudi female students is very limited. Their writing revolves round the limited number of DMs. These mostly used DMs are “and”, “or”, ‘as”, “so” and “if”. However, these DMs are incorporated with low accuracy. These findings go in line with several studies (Fareh, 2014; Fareh et al. 2020; AbuSa’aleek, 2022, and Alsaawi, 2022) conducted previously which showed that the Arab EFL learners have difficulties while using DMs in their writing.

It's interesting to note that some students employed DMs that weren't covered in the literature. They are also the outcome of their L1 code being converted to the L2 code. When expressing their thoughts or opinions in a discourse, Arabic speakers more often employ بالنسبة لي/bilnisbah li:/, which is translated as "for me" and "as for me." The usage of this type of DM is demonstrated in their writing. This finding goes in line with Alsaawi, (2022) and Alkhudiry and Al-Ahdal (2020). Ali and Mahadin (2016b) also concluded that the students are seen to use certain textual discourse indicators sparingly or not at all. This could be attributed to the cultural distinctions between native and non-native subjects, formal schooling, and the influence of the EFL learners' first language.

Regardless of the linguistic value provided to the overall meaning, this is evident in the misuse, underuse, and overuse of certain DMs (Alsaawi, 2022). Alahmed et al. (2020) claimed that students overuse certain DMs in order to exceed their vocabulary limit. Sentences with a high percentage of DMs are high-quality and effective. This language use caused their writing to become weak instead of powerful and impactful. According to Shariq (2020), it is normal for everyone to make mistakes, but the frequency varies from person to person. Just as mistakes lead to growth and awareness in all facets of life, so too do mistakes for language learners.

6. CONCLUSION

The focus of this study was to explore and highlight the use of DMs by the Saudi female EFL learners. These learners were given the task to post their comments in the discussion forum of blackboard learning management system. All the students participated with great efforts and shared their thoughts on different topics selected by them. The researcher identified and analyzed the DMs used by them. Results showed that these students overused some DMs like “and”, “or”, “as”, “so” and “if”. Furthermore, they also underused the other DMs. Despite their use of DMs, it was also found that they misused some DMs. Moreover, the students' inadequate exposure to DMs in their classes was clearly the cause of their shortcomings in using DMs in their writing. These students also used some different DMs when expressing their thoughts or opinions in a discourse, Arabic speakers more often employ بالنسبة لي/bilnisbah li:/, which is translated as "for me" and "as for me." Thus students must find a balance because employing

DMs excessively or poorly might result in writing that is clunky and repetitious. In conclusion, this research makes a significant contribution to the study of second languages. It focused on how discourse markers might help students write better.

5.1. Limitations and Future Research Direction

The present paper solely investigated the types and usage of DMs by the Saudi female EFL learners. Given the limited scope of this article, the data generated from the remote discussion of students on blackboard discussion forum. Perhaps with the use of language-specific focus group interviews or online questionnaires, more study is required to probe the reasons or explanations for the neglect of DMs and other speech style elements in remote situations. It is also suggested that further research should focus on incorporation of DMs by both male and female EFL learners.

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