

**The Use of Discourse Markers in narrative
by Chinese speakers of L2 European Portuguese**

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Abstract

In an attempt to examine the use of discourse makers by Chinese speakers of Second Language (L2) European Portuguese (EP) in oral narrative production, the current study is oriented by two research questions: (1) how is the frequency, distribution and variety of the discourse makers used by Chinese speakers of L2 EP? (2) is L2 proficiency level a potential factor that affects the use of discourse markers in narrative? On the basis of quantitative and qualitative analysis on the empirical data collected from 13 Chinese learners of EP, the results reveal that learners at a higher L2 level tend to produce more discourse markers in narrative, especially the structuring discourse markers. However, when it comes to the variety and distribution of this linguistic term, it seems that the richness of discourse markers does not correlate positively with L2 level and that almost all these expressions occur in the sentence-initial position.

Keywords: discourse markers; narrative discourse; Chinese speakers; Portuguese as Second Language.

Resumo

Tendo como objetivo verificar o uso de marcadores discursivos por falantes chineses de Português Europeu como Língua Segunda (PL2), procede-se ao presente trabalho orientado pelas duas questões de pesquisa: (1) como é a frequência, distribuição e variedade dos marcadores discursivos usados por falantes chineses de PL2? (2) o nível de proficiência em PL2 pode constituir um fator potencial que influencia o uso de marcadores discursivos na produção oral de narrativas? Baseados na análise quantitativa e qualitativa elaborada em relação à data empírica recolhida a partir de 13 aprendentes chineses, os resultados mostram que os aprendentes em um nível de proficiência mais alto tendem a produzir mais marcadores discursivos nas narrativas, sobretudo os marcadores da estruturação. No entanto, no que diz respeito à variedade e à distribuição, parece que não existe uma correlação positiva entre a diversidade dos marcadores discursivos e o nível de proficiência e quase todas as expressões deste género ocorrem no início de frase.

Palavras-chave: marcadores discursivos; discurso da narrativa; aprendentes chineses; Português como Língua Segunda.

1. Introduction

The notion “discourse markers”, albeit with no definition universally accepted, refers to a wide range of linguistic expressions that serve as devices in oral discourse to “manage the interaction (...), to smooth interpersonal relations through politeness discourse strategies (...) and (...) to contribute to discourse coherence” (Lopes 2016: 441). Some examples of this linguistic term in European Portuguese (henceforth EP) are *certo?* (“right”), *ora bem* (“well”) and *porém* (“however”). Moreover, it should be pointed out that discourse markers share some common properties, as suggested by Müller (2005) and Lopes (2016), such as syntactically heterogeneous class of linguistic expressions, a range of prosodic contours and syntactic distributions, syntactic independence, lack of semantic content, orality and multifunctionality.

Taken into consideration the features of discourse markers mentioned above, there is no doubt that these linguistic elements fulfil essential functions in communication. For this reason, there have been many studies, since the nineties, which use empirical data

with the aim of describing native and non-native speakers' performance on the use of discourse markers, for a number of researchers on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have acknowledged the importance of communicative competence in Second Language (L2). That is to say, only knowledge of grammatical rules and vocabulary itself does not suffice and an L2 learner also needs "a large store of procedural knowledge, including that required to fill in its own gaps by drawing on the necessary bits of declarative knowledge and incorporating them seamlessly into one's communicative behaviour" (DeKeyser 2017: 18).

However, despite the fact that discourse markers have become an area of concern in L2 development of communicative competence, the use of this linguistic item by L2 EP speakers is under-studied in the literature (for L2 English speakers, see Hays 1992, Müller 2005, Buysse 2012; for L2 German speakers, see Rösler 1982, Fishcher and Drescher 1996).

In response to the above, the research goal of the current study is to explore the use of discourse markers in oral narrative produced by Chinese speakers of L2 EP with regard to their frequency, distribution and variety. In addition, the study also sets out to examine if the L2 proficiency can be one of the potential factors that affect the use of discourse markers in narrative discourse.

To achieve these goals, the structure of the article is as follows: Section 2 is dedicated to a brief description on some crucial properties of discourse markers, as well as their relationship with L2 development of communicative competence. Section 3 will specify the research questions and introduce the methodology that guides the collection of empirical data used for the current study. Section 4 and Section 5 will present statistical evidence based on the results and discuss the use of discourse markers found in the oral narrative discourse produced by Chinese speakers of L2 EP, concerning the frequency, distribution and variety of discourse markers, according to different L2 proficiency levels.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Discourse markers: definition, functions and its properties

Taken into consideration different approaches in different theoretical frameworks, the definition of Discourse Markers, term used by Shiffrin (1987), Schourup (1999) and Jucker and Ziv (1998), has been widely discussed from a large range of perspectives, such as Cohesion (for example Halliday & Hasan 1976; Schiffrin 1985; Lenk 1995) and Relevance Theory (for example Blakemore 2002). The cohesion framework, which

focuses more on the textual functions, underlines that discourse markers “provide contextual coordinates for utterances: they index an utterance to the local contexts in which utterances are produced and in which they are to be interpreted” (Schiffrin 1987: 326). However, Relevance Theory pays much more attention to cognitive processes, indicating that discourse markers are the expressions that can “encode a constraint on pragmatic inferences” (Blakemore 2002: 4), that is, the number of possible interpretations can be reduced through the use of discourse markers.

According to Lopes (2016), the concept of this term can include two sub-categories with regard to its polyfunctionality, although both of these subsets (almost) do not alter the propositional meaning of an utterance (Lopes 2016). The first category, also known as “pragmatic markers” (Watts 1988), concentrates more on “(...) the interactional aspects between the participants that are expressed through the use of particles (...)” (Lenk 1997: 2) in an unplanned and spontaneous conversation, such as *certo?* (“right?”) and *olha* (“look”) in EP. The second category of discourse markers is assumed to establish the coherence between different segments of a discourse, which can help the hearer or the reader to form a mental representation of the whole discourse (Schiffrin 1987; Lopes 2016). Some examples of these discourse markers in EP are *porém* (“however”), *efetivamente* (“actually”) and *portanto* (“so”).

Therefore, in this study, we choose to follow the descriptive analyse elaborated by Lopes (2016) exclusively about discourse markers in EP and focus only on the second onset of these linguistic expressions, which seems to be a very plausible option since in the current study the narrative approach will be adopted in order to analyse the use of discourse markers by the Chinese speakers of L2 EP.

As for the properties of discourse markers, several common properties are addressed by Müller (2005) and Lopes (2016), such as syntactically heterogenous class of linguistic expressions, a range of prosodic contours and syntactic distributions, syntactic independence, lack of semantic content, orality and multifunctionality. Between these properties, let us take a look at two individual features that are closely related to the present study: a range of syntactic distributions and multifunctionality.

About the syntactic distribution of discourse markers, they usually occur in the sentence-initial position. However, some may not be restricted to this distribution and can be used in the middle or the end of an utterance, as long as they do not “occur within noun phrases or prepositional phrases” (Lopes 2016: 443), as shows in the following examples with *portanto* (“so”) in EP (Lopes, Pezatti & Novaes 2001):

- (1) a. *Não há ninguém em casa. Portanto, os meus pais já saíram.*
b. *Não há ninguém em casa. Os meus pais, portanto, já saíram.*
c.* *Não há ninguém em casa. Os, portanto, meus pais já saíram.*
“There is nobody at home. Therefore, my parents have already left.”

As for multiple functions, Aijmer (2002) considers that the multifunctionality is one of the fundamental properties through which we can distinguish discourse markers from other linguistic expressions, as she claims: “Discourse particles are different from ordinary words in language because of the large number of pragmatic values that they can be associated with. Nevertheless, speakers are not troubled by this multifunctionality” (Aijmer 2002: 3). In EP, for example, the discourse marker *enfim* (“finally”) can fulfil different functions. See the following sentences taken from Lopes (2016):

(2) a. *E o sucesso desta novela (...) prende-se com pontos tão inequívocos como a boa direção de autores, a utilização de uma história portuguesa (...), enfim, a introdução de um ritmo de trabalho espartano.*

“And the success of this soap opera is the outcome of the director’s role concerning the actores, the choice of a Portuguese story, *and, finally*, the introduction of a spartan rhythm of work.”

b. *Carrego água para o gado, trato do gado, trabalho com o tractor, enfim, faço tudo o que é preciso fazer.*

“I feed and water the cattle, work with the tractor, *well/to sum up*, I do everything necessary.”

As we can observe, the discourse marker *enfim* (“finally”) in EP can be interpreted as a discourse-structuring discourse marker in (2a), which helps to organize and order the discourse segments, or as a summary discourse marker in (2b). Therefore, at this point, the classes of discourse markers in EP will be discussed in the next section.

2.2. Classes of discourse markers in European Portuguese

In an attempt to analyse the use of discourse markers by Chinese speakers of L2 EP, it is decided to follow the existing categorizations of Lopes (2016), which are based on

seven functional categories: elaborative, contrastive, conclusive, justificative, reformulative, summary and discourse-structuring.

Elaborative discourse markers are assumed to provide additional information, specifying the content of the previous utterance. Discourse markers in the contrastive category are considered to mark two distinct discourse relations or two comparable situations. Conclusive discourse markers are thought to lead a conclusion of what has been stated. Discourse markers in the justificative category can introduce an utterance that serves as a justification for what was previously said. Reformulative discourse are used to rephrase an utterance, clarifying the previous discourse segments in order to avoid possible communicative misunderstandings. Summary discourse markers not only can introduce an utterance considered to be a summary of previous utterances, but also “signal that the next utterance is the final part of a discourse sequence on a common topic” (Lopes 2016: 452). The final category, discourse-structuring discourse markers, fulfils textual functions on how the flow of discourse is to be segmented. See Table 1 for a summary of the categories, functions and examples of discourse markers in EP.

Table 1 - Categorization of discourse markers in EP according to functions

Functions	Example items
Elaborative	de facto, com efeito, na verdade, na realidade, a saber, por exemplo, nomeadamente, em particular, por um lado...por outro lado, além do mais
Contrastive	porém, contudo, todavia, no entanto, mas, pelo contrário, ao invés
Conclusive	logo, portanto, então, assim, por conseguinte
Justificative	pois, porque, que, visto que
Reformulative	ou seja, quer dizer, isto é, por outras palavras, ou antes, aliás
Summary	em suma, em resumo, enfim, numa palavra
Structuring	em primeiro lugar, para começar, a seguir, depois, finalmente, por último

2.3. Communicative competence and discourse markers

Referring to research in SLA, many authors agree that when talking about the successful acquisition of a L2, not only learning of different linguistic forms but also how they are used by L2 speakers in communication should be taken into consideration (for example Ellis 1994). From this perspective, the term “communicative competence”, first proposed by Hymes (1972) and later developed by other academics (for example Canale and Swain 1980), has been frequently mentioned in works on SLA. The main components

of communicative competence encompass four categories: linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence.

Linguistic competence, according to Liu (2017), refers to “knowledge of pronunciation, vocabulary, morphology, semantics and syntax of the language” (Liu 2017: 482) and it is “the necessary prerequisite for any communication at least to some degree” (Müller 2005: 18). In this sense, the use of discourse markers is related to this competence, since, for example, discourse markers cannot occur within any noun phrases or prepositional phrases, like we mentioned before. However, use of discourse markers is generally thought to be more related to pragmatic, discourse and strategic competence (Müller 2005; Liu 2017).

Pragmatic competence is defined as “an aspect of communicative competence which refers to the ability to communicate appropriately in particular contexts of use” (Jaworski 1998: 249) and can include two components: illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. In this sense, use of discourse markers can contribute to the formation of coherence in discourse, as well as the negotiation of the relationship between the speaker and the hearer. As for discourse competence, it is assumed that language learners should learn to organize and order their discourse segments in various ways, such as taking conversation turns and marking its continuation, succession and conclusion. Therefore, this is no question that use of discourse markers is relevant to L2 speakers’ discourse competence. Concerning the term “strategic competence”, Müller (2005) summarizes that it “manifests itself when non-native speakers use discourse markers to express or to introduce the expression of lexical difficulties (...) or to appeal for the hearer’s understanding” (Müller 2005: 18). Hence, as Liu (2015) claims, use of discourse markers can be a filler or delaying tactic when the speaker meets the difficulty of finding the appropriate or intended expression for a later utterance.

3. The present study

3.1. Research questions

The purpose of this study is to analyze the use of discourse markers by Chinese speakers of L2 EP by observing what discourse markers they used and how they used them in an oral narrative task. In order to achieve these objectives, the current study is oriented by two specific research questions:

(1) How is the frequency, distribution and variety of different discourse markers used by Chinese speakers of L2 EP in a narrative discourse?

(2) If the proficiency level in L2 can be a factor that affects the use of discourse markers in a narrative discourse produced by Chinese speakers of L2 EP?

3.2. Participants

The task of collecting discourse markers in an oral narrative was applied to a sample of 13 participants (n=13). Results from a sociolinguistic background questionnaire, applied to the participants before the task, showed that all the thirteen participants are fourth-year undergraduate students of L2 EP from the same university in Beijing. They are aged between twenty-one to twenty-two years old.

All participants speak mandarin Chinese as their native language (L1) and have learned English in formal instruction setting for at least 10 years in China. As for their European Portuguese language learning experience, all of them have learnt Portuguese as L2 for three years and most of the student shared the same group of teachers during their study which are from mainland China, Portugal and Brazil. Concerning the study abroad context, 12 participants have never been to any Portuguese-speaking country. However, one student had studied in a Portuguese as Foreign Language program in Portugal for 8 months before we elaborated the current study. In addition, all the participants confessed that they are fully motivated to learn the Portuguese language and hope to achieve a good level of proficiency in Portuguese. In this sense, we can assume that there exists a linguistic homogeneity with regard to the participants' sociolinguistic background (such as previous language knowledge, learning context and motivation in L2 learning).

Besides, participants were asked, at the end of the questionnaire, to evaluate their Portuguese proficiency according to the *Quadro Europeu Comum de Referência para as Línguas* (QECRL, Common European Framework of References for Languages) and they were divided into three experimental groups based on their self-evaluation: Group 1 with 5 B1 level participants, Group 2 with 5 B2 level students and Group 3 with 3 students of C1 level. The description of the three groups can be seen in Table 2:

Table 2 - Participants' self-assessed proficiency level in European Portuguese

Experimental group	Number of participants	European Portuguese level
Group 1	5	B1
Group 2	5	B2
Group3	3	C1

3.3. Data collection

In this section, two aspects related to data collection of the current study are presented: the procedure of collecting and the processing of data.

Two instruments were adopted to collect data: a questionnaire and an oral narrative task (story retelling). The questionnaire was used to get the sociolinguistic background of all the participants, in which they were asked about their age, university courses, language-learning experience, motivation of learning Portuguese and if they have been to any Portuguese-speaking country. After obtaining the basic information, the students were asked to make a self-evaluation about their level of Portuguese proficiency, the aim of which is to divide the participants into 3 different groups according to their level. The self-evaluation was based on the *Quadro Europeu Comum de Referência para as Línguas* (QECL, Common European Framework of References for Languages).

As for the oral narrative task, the recording of the narratives took place in September of 2021, in a classroom where there was only one participant and one investigator at the same time. All the members of each group were required to watch the same video. The video was a three-minute fragment of American animation “*Tom and Jerry*”. To avoid any potential influence on participants, there was no dialogue nor narration voice in the video. After watching the animation fragment, participants were told to retell the story within three minutes. Participants all gave permission to be recorded during their narratives, but they were not told about the aim of the study. We’d like to point out that this oral narrative task was totally non-elicited. No instructions or elicitations were given by the investigator, and there was no interaction between the researcher and participant during the narrative. Thus, participants finished the narratives all by themselves.

The data includes thirteen audio files of narratives in Portuguese between one minute and half to three minutes. The files were transcribed into texts by researchers following the transcription conventions of Müller (2005: 281) (see Appendix 1). The investigator identified and marked the discourse markers appeared with bold letters, indicated the frequency of each discourse markers used by different groups, and classified them by their functional categories (Lopes 2016), which are: elaborative, contrastive, conclusive, justificative, reformulative, summary and discourse-structuring.

As to the processing of data, the current study made use of both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. The quantitative approach helped us to offer an overview of the results by presenting the frequency and variety of the discourse markers used by

each level of participants. Supported by this overview, we can verify if the level of Portuguese could influence the use of discourse markers in such language (Müller 2005; Lopes 2016).

Certainly, we are aware of that this study shares one of the limitations of many discourse markers studies: the volume of sample is small. However, a small corpus has its own advantage, since “a small corpus is seen as a body of relevant and reliable evidence and (...) the evidence is interpreted by the scholar directly” (Sunclair 2001: xi).

4. An overview of the results

In this section, we will present the results that are found in the empirical data. First of all, the total number of tokens and discourse markers produced by the participants was calculated. As we can observe in Table 3, although B1 group produced more words than the other groups (622 tokens), it is C1 group that used discourse markers with the highest frequency in their narrative (12.11%).

Table 3 – Absolute percentage of discourse markers produced in narrative

Level	Words spoken	Discourse markers spoken	
		Total	%
B1	622	64	10.29
B2	544	45	8.27
C1	545	66	12.11

In order to assess the variety of discourse markers produced by the participants of different L2 levels, further analyses were carried out with respect to the percentage of each functional category in each experimental group. Regarding the contrastive and conclusive categories, it is B1 group that produced them with the highest frequency (4.67% and 1.45%, respectively). However, C1 group produced more the structuring discourse markers than the other two experimental groups (7.52%), as in Table 4.

Table 4 – Absolute percentage of different classes of discourse markers produced in narrative

Level	Words spoken	Elaborative		Contrastive		Conclusive		Justificative		Reformulative		Summary		Structuring	
		Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
B1	622	1	0.16	29	4.67	9	1.45	0	0	0	0	0	0	25	4.02
B2	544	1	0.18	12	2.01	1	0.18	1	0.18	0	0	0	0	30	5.51
C1	545	1	0.18	12	2.20	1	0.18	1	0.18	0	0	0	0	41	7.52

4.1. Use of discourse markers by B1 learners

We will now start with B1 level, which encompasses 5 participants. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 - Use of discourse markers of EP in narrative by Chinese speakers of B1 level

Item	Occurrence	Function
1. Mas	28	contrastive
2. E	12	structuring
3. Então	9	conclusive
4. Depois	3	structuring
5. No mesmo tempo	2	structuring
6. Neste momento	2	structuring
7. De repente	2	structuring
8. Em primeiro lugar	1	structuring
9. Simultaneamente	1	structuring
10. Pelo contrário	1	contrastive
11. No início	1	structuring
12. De facto	1	elaborative
13. No fim	1	structuring

Participants of B1 level used in total 64 discourse markers. The most used discourse marker in this group is *mas* (“but”, “however”, etc.), which is used 28 times. The second most used one is *e* (“and”, “besides”, etc.), being used 12 times, followed by *então* (“then”, “therefore”, etc. 9 times), *depois* (“after”, 3 times), *no mesmo tempo* (“at the same time”, twice), *neste momento* (“at this moment”, twice), *de repente* (“suddenly”, twice). Other discourse markers which occur only once are *em primeiro lugar* (“first”, “in the first place”, “first of all”, “to start” etc.), *simultaneamente* (“simultaneously”,

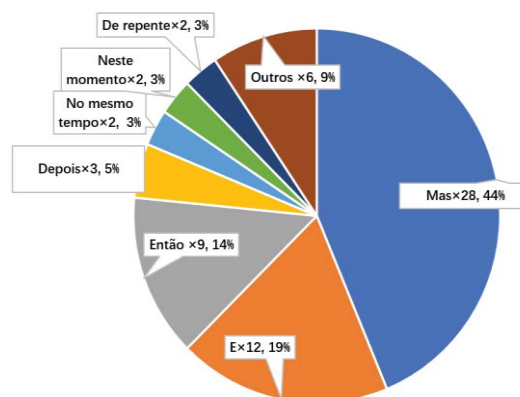
“alongside”, etc.), *pelo contrário* (“conversely”, “on the other hand”), *no início* (“at the beginning”), *de facto* (“actually”) and *no fim* (“finally”).

Concerning the function of discourse markers, participants of B1 level produced four different discourse markers: contrastive, structuring, conclusive and elaborative. As for contrastive, *mas* (“but”) and *pelo contrário* (“conversely”) are selected by this level. As for conclusive, *então* (“then”) seems to be the only choice; for elaborative, students used only *de facto* (“actually”). The structuring discourse markers used by this level include *e* (“and”), *depois* (“after that”), *no mesmo tempo* (“at the same time”), *neste momento* (“at this moment”), *de repente* (“suddenly”), *em primeiro lugar* (“in the first place”), *simultaneamente* (“simultaneously”) *no início* (“at the beginning”) and *no fim* (“finally”).

Therefore, except for structuring discourse markers, the other four categories in this level only contain one item respectively. Therefore, we will now concentrate on structuring discourse markers and see the percentage of each item contained within it. The structuring discourse markers are applied in total 25 times, among which, 48% is *e* (“and”), 12% is *depois* (“then”), 8% is *no mesmo tempo* (“at the same time”), another 8% is *neste momento* (“at this moment”), the last 8% is *de repente* (“suddenly”). As for *em primeiro lugar* (“in the first place”), *simultaneamente* (“simultaneously”), *no início* (“at the beginning”) and *no fim* (“finally”), each accounts for 4%.

To enable better understanding of the data, we also presented the data in Diagram 1 below, which presents each item with its appropriate percentage.

Diagram 1 - Use of discourse markers of EP in narrative by Chinese speakers of B1 level



The three most used discourse markers in B1 level are *mas* (“but”), *e* (“and”) and *então* (“then”). To make the data more convictive, we selected 3 segments respectively in the narrative of this level, in which *mas* (“but”), *e* (“and”) and *então* (“then”) appear most frequently and the transcription is presented below.

(3) a. *Mas* (“but”)

“(…)o gatinho toma, toma um banho na casa de banho, uh **mas mas** o rato, **mas** o rato uh desaparece. Uh neste, neste momento, uh o gato quer, o o o gato quer apanhar este rato, **mas .. mas não... mas não.. mas não.. uh.. mas não viu, mas não viu este rato este rato. (...)**” (Participant 3)

b. *E* (“and”)

“(…) **E...** uh quando o rato uh uh apareceu uh apareceu, uh apareceu, uh... o gatinho.. uh..uh.. fica muito uh refresca **e** uh o rato uh quer fazer amizade com o gatinho(...)

” (Participant 2)

c. *Então* (“then”)

“(…) **Então** o, **então**, o gatinho é .. é enviado uh pelo pelo gato para apanhar este este rato. Uh pelo contrário, ele, ele.. ele quer, até ele quer.. ele quer ser amigo, quer ser amigo com o gatinho. **Então...** uh mas, mas, mas este gato (...)

” (Participant 5)

4.2. Use of discourse markers by B2 learners

As for B2 level, we observed a rather different result, which is presented in Table 6.

Table 6 - Use of discourse markers of EP in narrative by Chinese speakers of B2 level

Item	Ocurrence	Function
1. E	21	structuring
2. Mas	8	contrastive
3. No final	5	structuring
4. Neste momento	1	structuring
5. Por isso	1	conclusive
6. Enquanto	1	contrastive
7. Em vez de	1	contrastive
8. Apesar de	1	contrastive
9. Por exemplo	1	elaborative
10. No fim	1	structuring
11. No início	1	structuring
12. No entanto	1	contrastive
13. Como	1	justificative
14. De repente	1	structuring

It is obvious that there are 45 discourse markers registered for this level, among which, *e* (“and”), in contrast to the previous level, placed first with 21 occurrences; followed by *mas* (“but”, “otherwise”, etc.) with 8 incidences and *no final* (“in the end”) which occurred 5 times. Other discourse markers only occur once: *neste momento* (“at this moment”), *por isso* (“thus”, “so”, “then”, “therefore”, etc.), *enquanto* (“while”, “whereas”), *em vez de* (“instead of”, “rather than”), *apesar de* (“although”, “though”), *por exemplo* (“for exemple”), *no fim* (“at the end”, “in the end”, “at last”), *no início* (“at first”, “at the beginning”), *no entanto* (“but”, “however”, “though”), *como* (“as”, “since”), *de repente* (“suddenly”).

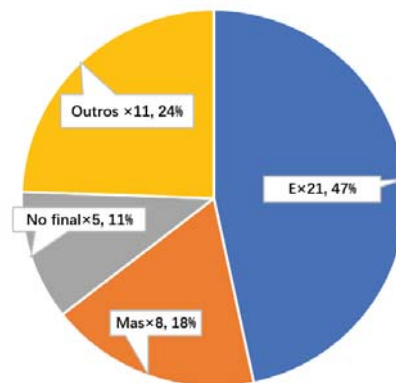
From the data presented in Table 6, it is not difficult to identify that there are five different types of discourse markers used by students of B2 level compared to B1, that is to say, there is no justificative discourse markers in B1 level, but this category took place in the narrative discourse produced by participants of B2 level.

Concerning the frequencies of each class of discourse markers, there are five items containing in contrastive, among which 66.67% is *mas* (“but”). As for *enquanto* (“while”, “whereas”), *em vez de* (“instead of”), *apesar de* (“although”), *no entanto* (“however”), each accounts for 8.33%. Structuring discourse markers in B2 contain 6 items, of which

70% are *e* (“and”), 16.67% are *no final* (“in the end”). As for *neste momento* (“at this moment”), *no fim* (“finally”), *no início* (“at the beginning”) and *de repente* (“suddenly”), each accounts for 3.33%. Conclusive discourse markers in B2 carry only one item: *por isso* (“so”, “then”). Similarly, elaborative discourse markers also carry only one item: *por exemplo* (“for example”). As for the justificative category, there is only one item containing in justificative, namely, *como* (“as”).

Again, to enable better understanding of the data, we have presented the data in Diagram 2 below, which indicates each item with its appropriate percentage.

Diagram 2 - Use of discourse markers of EP in narrative by Chinese speakers of B2 level



The three most used discourse markers in B2 level are *e* (“and”), *mas* (“but”) and *no final* (“in the end”) in B2 level and we selected three segments respectively in which *e* (“and”), *mas* (“but”) and *no final* (“in the end”) appear most frequently and the transcriptions are presented below.

(4) a. *E* (“and”)

“(...)Neste momento uh o.. o rato... uh.. o rato Jerry uh apareceu e .. e .. uh.. e.. per.. perguntou o Tom (...)” (Participant 10)

b. *Mas* (“but”)

“(...) **mas** o rato faz algo para destruir este ensino. E o Tom quero apanhar o rato e, **mas** durante este processo, o rato escrever gatos e ratos são amigos, e o gato quero apanhar o rato, **mas** ele não é inteligente (...)” (Participant 6)

c. *No final* (“in the end”)

“(…) *No final uh no final o... gatinho começou, começou a aprender com o rato e proteger proteger o rato. E... o ao... no final o Tom ficou muito zangado e.. uh continuava a uh... apanhar o Jerry (...)*”. (Participant 8)

4.3. Use of discourse markers by C1 learners

The next level to be analyzed is the C1 level.

Table 7 - Use of discourse markers of EP in narrative by Chinese speakers of C1 level

Item	Occurrence	Function
1. E	27	structuring
2. Mas	12	contrastive
3. Então	11	conclusive
4. Depois	5	structuring
5. Enfim	2	structuring
6. Aquele momento	2	structuring
7. No final	2	structuring
8. Ao mesmo tempo	1	structuring
9. De facto	1	elaborative
10. Por acaso	1	structuring
11. Porque	1	justificative
12. Após	1	structuring

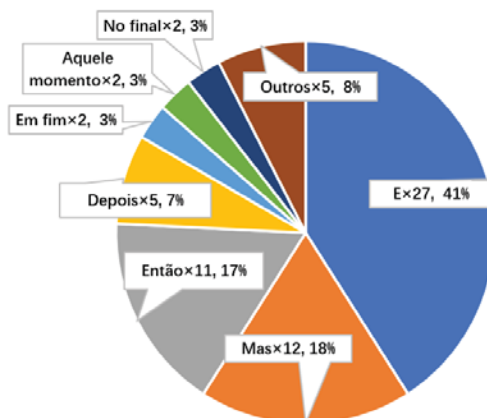
In comparison to the other two levels, this level has the least variation. The overall use of discourse markers is limited to twelve. We can observe from the Table 7 that the most used discourse marker in C1 is *e* (“and”), which occurs 27 times; followed by *mas* (“but”), which occurs 12 times; *então* (“then”, “therefore”, “thus”) was used 11 times, *depois* (“after”, “then”) 5 times, *em fim* (“finally”) twice, *aquele momento* (“at that time”) twice and *no final* (“finally”) twice. Other discourse markers were used only once in this level: *ao mesmo tempo* (“at the same time”), *de facto* (“actually”), *por acaso* (“by chance”), *porque* (“because”), *após* (“after”, “then”).

In terms of the function, we can divide the discourse markers used by students of C1 level into five categories: structuring, contrastive, conclusive, elaborative and justificative. Except for the structuring discourse marker, the other four categories in this level contain only 1 item.

E (“and”) is the most popular one in structuring, with a frequency of 65.9%. *Depois* (“then”, “after that”) takes the second place with a frequency of 12.2%. *Enfim* (“finally”), *aquele momento* (“at that time”), *no final* (“in the end”) account for 4.9% respectively and *ao mesmo tempo* (“at the same time”), *por acaso* (“by chance”), *após* (“after”, “then”) account for 2.4% each.

To enable better understanding of the data, we have presented Diagram 3 to show each item with its appropriate percentage.

Diagram 3 - Use of discourse markers of EP in narrative by Chinese speakers of C1 level



As with the B1 and B2 levels, we selected three segments respectively in which the 3 most frequently used discourse markers in the C1 level, *e* (“and”), *mas* (“but”) and *então* (“then”), appear most frequently and the transcriptions are presented below.

(5) a. *E* (“and”)

“(…) *mas* uh o gato pequeno não ouviu nada e .. uh ao mesmo tempo, o Jerry ocorreu e faz, uh fez uma, uma pausa uh... dentro da.. uh aula do Tom e.. de facto, o gato pequeno quer fazer amizade com o Jerry (...)” (Participant 11)

b. *Mas* (“but”)

“(…) O Tom, o Tom vai à casa de banho para buscar o gatinho e caçar o Jerry, **mas** ele está, **mas** o Jerry é muito inteligente e fica atrás do gatinho para que o Tom não possa ver (...)” (Participant 11)

c. *Então* (“then”)

“(...) *ele é ainda muito jovem, uh mas o gato ajuda uh ajuda-o muito, uh então eles ficaram .. então eles tornam-se amigos (...)*” (Participant 12)

5. Discussion

Although this study did not carry out any test to detect any significant differences between these three experimental groups due to the limited sample size of the corpus, the results mentioned above still offer some interesting points for discussion.

Findings demonstrate that C1 group was found to use more discourse markers in narrative than the other two experimental groups, indicating a general rise in the frequency of discourse markers with increased proficiency in L2. It seems to reflect that these higher proficiency learners of EP may have a more sensitive communicative competence in their ability to mark discourse cohesion with more awareness in their oral narrative production, which could lead us to claim that the number of hours of learning and exposure to the L2 “(...) may provide learners with more opportunities for communication and thus make them more aware of how they express themselves (...)” (Ament & Paré 2018: 501).

The trend was also found when taking into consideration the use of discourse markers in the structuring category. Since the structuring discourse markers may be incorporated into narrative more easily than other discourse marker categories because of their functions in opening/closing of topics, sequencing topic shifts and continuation of or return to topics, all experimental groups were detected to use this class with the highest frequency in comparison with the other classes. However, it should be underlined that C1 group, in this case, also produced more the structuring category than B1 and B2 groups. This finding actually corresponds to those from Wei (2011) and Neary-Sundquist (2014), who claim that advanced L2 learners tend to produce more structuring discourse markers in an attempt to emphasize discourse information and help them become more fluent in L2.

Additionally, if we turn to the interpretation of the results in terms of the contrastive discourse markers, it was found that B1 group produced a higher rate of this class during the narrative production task, which, at the first sight, seems to be opposite to the finding from the corpus that learners at higher proficiency level in L2 EP use more discourse markers. However, when examining the empirical data with precision (see example (3a)),

it might be the case that, learners at lower proficiency tend to overuse the contrastive discourse marker *mas* (“but”) as a filler or delaying tactic when encountering the difficulty of finding appropriate words for a later utterance (Hasselgreen, 2004). Besides, other possibilities that may account for higher percentage of use of the contrastive marker *mas* (“but”) by the lower proficiency groups (mainly B1) can be that “they could be marking greater uncertainty about what they are saying, or they may be overusing this (...) to compensate for the fact that they do not have a command of a greater variety of expression” (Neary-Sundquist 2014: 654).

Hence, in terms of the variety of discourse markers in oral narrative produced by Chinese speakers of L2 EP, the number of discourse markers was relatively limited for all the groups, which occurred from 12 different items at C1 level (which belong to 5 categories) to 14 different items at B2 level (which belong to 5 categories), through 13 different items at B1 level (which belong to 4 categories). In addition, it should be pointed out that none of these experimental groups used any discourse markers in the reformulative or summary categories, which exhibits, to some extent, that Chinese speakers of L2 EP may acquire those two discourse marker classes in a more delayed fashion regarding the other classes. In this sense, this finding probably does not align with those from Neary-Sundaquist (2014), who indicated that speakers at higher level use a larger repertoire of discourse markers than speakers at lower level.

In relation to syntactic distribution of the discourse markers used by Chinese speakers of L2 EP, diversity of syntactic positions was not detected, for all the discourse markers found in the corpus occurred in the sentence-initial position, except only one utterance where the marker *por acaso* (“by chance”) was used in the end. Moreover, it was also found that some speakers, even at higher level, produced occasionally some discourse markers considered to be syntactically ungrammatical in EP, such as **no mesmo tempo* (“at the same time”), produced twice by B1 group and **no final* (“finally”), produced five times by B2 group and once by C1 group.

Taken into account the lack of richness in the different expressions and in the syntactic distribution of the discourse markers used by these learners in narrative, it seems that the use of discourse markers might cause a special learnability problem for Chinese speakers of L2 EP when producing an oral narrative. In fact, according to Ellis (1997, 2002), some criteria for determining the difficulty of grammatical items can be: (a) Linguistic complexity (formal and functional complexity); (b) Reliability of the pedagogical rule; (c) Metalanguage; (d) L1/L2 contrast; (e) Frequency of the grammatical

item in input; (f) Redundancy in communication and (g) Perceptual saliency. As for the use of discourse markers, all of these areas can be possible explanations when it comes to the use of discourse markers in narrative by L2 learners.

More precisely, although discourse markers sometimes may contribute little to the message (redundant features), they are formally and functionally complex in EP, since they are syntactically heterogeneous class of linguistic expressions and can be associated with a large number of discourse functions and pragmatic values. However, the use of discourse markers is seldom taught in formal instructed L2 setting and these linguistic expressions are usually considered to be “secondary, extraneous and optional compared with the necessity of mastering categories such as verbs, nouns and prepositions” (Neary-Sundquist 2014: 653). L2 teachers usually rely on their intuition when explaining them and textbooks even do not offer any reliable rules in relation to the use of discourse markers. From the perspective of input frequency, discourse markers, especially discourse markers in narrative, rarely occur in formal L2 learning context. And even when the input occurs, discourse markers are not easy to be noticed by L2 learners. Nevertheless, further studies should be carried out in order to analyse if the previous linguistic knowledge (mainly L1) affects the use of discourse markers in narrative produced by Chinese speakers of L2 EP.

6. Conclusion and directions for future research

In the current study, two research questions are proposed: (a) how is the frequency, variety and distribution of discourse markers used by Chinese speakers of L2 EP in a narrative discourse and (b) if the proficiency level in L2 can affect their use of discourse markers. Regarding these two questions, the findings showed that in narrative production, Chinese speakers of L2 EP at a higher proficiency level (C1) seem to produce more discourse markers than those at lower levels (B1 and B2), especially with regard to the structuring discourse markers, which could be a sign of increased oral fluency and a more sensitive communicative competence. Moreover, it was found some learners at a lower level (mainly from B1 group) tend to overuse the contrastive marker *mas* (“but”) as a strategy to solve problems such as lack of appropriate expressions.

However, when it comes to the variety and distribution of discourse markers, it seems that the L2 proficiency is not a factor that affects the use, for the richness of these expressions does not increase across proficiency levels in EP. Additionally, the

acquisition of the reformulative and summary discourse markers may be considered to be more delayed in comparison with the other classes.

Faced with these findings, we presume that the patterns of how Chinese speakers of L2 EP use discourse markers are highly related to the pedagogical rules during their L2 learning, including teaching materials, teaching methods and so on. Thus, taken into account the pragmatic values and discourse functions of discourse markers, we here suggest the L2 EP students should be exposed to more real communicative situations.

To confirm our findings of the current study and to learn more about the acquisition of discourse markers by Chinese learners of L2 EP, it is important to do more future researches triggered by this one, that include a much-increased number of participants (which should involve EP native speakers as control group) and a larger variety of tasks, such as interactional conversations or even writing tasks. Meanwhile, to ensure that the data could be analysed more scientifically in the future, some statistic tests should also be applied.

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Appendix 1 Transcription symbols

Units

Word {space}

Truncated word -

Speakers

Speaker identity/turn start :

Speech overlap []

Transitional continuity

Final .

Continuing ,

Appeal ?

Pauses

Long, medium ...

Short ..

Non-word notations

Filled pause uh, um

Agreement (backchannel). mhm, uh huh

Negation nhn