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Research Paper

Interpersonal Discourse Markers in Online vs. Face-to-Face EFL Classes

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Abstract

Lack of contextual cues which are richly present in face-to-face communication imposes some conversational constraints on the interpersonal relationships in online classes. One of the means of expressing interpersonal stance is using discourse markers. For the purposes of the present study, namely to investigate how the means of expressing interpersonal stance may be influenced by the medium of instruction (online vs. face-to-face), video recordings of six face-to-face and three online classes were investigated for interpersonal discourse markers. A 300-minute video for the face-to-face and a 119-minute video for the online classes were obtained. The courses were General English ones, upper intermediate level. Results show that the occurrence of discourse markers in online classes was about twice more than in the face-to-face ones. In online classes teachers demonstrate creativity and innovation in using DMs for expressing interpersonal stances which may be to compensate for the limitations of the medium. It is concluded that the medium of instruction has an effect on the amount of discourse markers applied. This can raise awareness with regard to limitations and affordances of the online settings and lead to quality instruction.

Keywords: Computer-Mediated Communication, Discourse Marker, Interpersonal Stance, Medium of Instruction, Online Course,

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1. Introduction

Discourse markers (DMs) are "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk" (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 31). They can have diverse meanings and are highly context-specific (Aijmer, 2002; Duran & Unamano, 2001; Maschler & Schiffrin, 2015; Silva, 2006; Tanghe, 2016). DMs are defined by Swan (2005, p. 159) as words or expressions which show the connection between "what is being said and what has already been said or is going to be said". In fact, the main function of DMs is to cue or connect one part of a text to another, or to the aims of the participants or their background assumptions (Lee-Goldman, 2011).

What counts as a DM has not yet been settled; for instance, to some researchers such as Hellerman and Vergun (2007) *well* is an obvious DM, whereas to some others like Wilkins (1992) it is not so. Sometimes they are equated with fillers or hedges and at some other times these are kept distinct (Fox Tree, 2010). Fraser (1999) has generalized important characteristics of DMs as (a) having a core meaning that can be boosted by the context; (b) signalling a relationship between the preceding and the upcoming utterance; (c) relating two parts of discourse; real-lifely, it does not intend to contribute to the propositional meaning of either segment.

DMs have not only grammatical functions, but also interactional ones (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1999). Brinton (1996) believes that DMs have textual and interpersonal pragmatic functions. Indeed, they "are useful in locating the utterance in an interpersonal and interactive dimension" (Bazzanella, 2006, p. 456). Overall, DMs have three types of functions, namely interactional (intersubjective), textual (or text planning) and attitudinal (subjective) functions (Degand & Simon-Vandenberg, 2011; Dér, 2010). According to Heine (2013), the main function of DMs is relating an utterance to the situation of discourse. Generally, due to their

polyfunctional nature, quantifying and qualifying DMs is intricate (Landone, 2012). In fact, the functions of DMs can be discerned based on the communicative objective, in the context. Even intonation by itself may convey a different function for the DM (Landone, 2012). Every single occurrence should be analysed as in the case of *well* done by Borderia and Fischer (2021).

With regard to the position of DMs, Landone (2012) explains that they are very often placed in the title, alone or along with other structures; their meaning may or may not be reflected in the upcoming utterance. Generally, DMs which are used to admit or confirm and those which express evidentiality usually precede a disagreement, and thus reduce its force. She believes that certain DMs are used to make referents (*now, you know, etc.*) and others to respond (*well, okay, etc.*).

DMs can help overcome the constraints of spontaneous speech like reviewability and reviseability (Fox Tree, 2010); for instance, *oh* can be applied to show that the forthcoming information belongs to earlier ones in the discourse and *I mean* can be applied to represent that the following information corrects a foregoing error (Fox Tree, 2000). Fox Tree (2010) believes that different variations of spontaneous talk, for instance, face-to-face vs. monologue, may contain varying amounts of DMs. If a foreign language learner makes a grammatical mistake, practically every native speaker or a more proficient learner can correct him; however, if he omits, misuses or overuses a DM, he may be perceived as impolite or awkward, but the native speaker cannot pinpoint an 'error' (Liao, 2009). However, as DMs are not taught explicitly in the classroom, sometimes students are not fully aware of their proper applications; therefore, the class should provide a suitable context for the learners to learn the appropriate use of DMs and EFL teachers should pay special attention to how students use them.

Online classes have their own limitations and affordances. As teachers and students are not meeting face-to-face, their interpersonal relations may be affected. The purpose of the present study is to see how the use of DMs as one of the means of expressing interpersonal stance may be influenced by the medium of instruction (online vs. face-to-face). This can raise teachers' awareness and consequently lead to a higher quality instruction, especially with regard to interpersonal behaviours.

2. Literature review

One of the studies on DMs applied by teachers and learners in face-to-face foreign language classes is done by Amador, O'Riordan and Chambers (2006) who investigated the uses of DMs in French and Spanish classrooms. A quantitative analysis revealed that in both classes the occurrence of DMs was sparse and a qualitative analysis depicted the major functions of DMs in classroom discourse which mainly had to do with the role of the teacher in the classroom. They distinguished five categories for functions of DMs, as introducing a new topic or activity; motivating or encouraging students; calling for the students' attention; clarifying what has been said and rephrasing.

Another study investigating functions and frequencies of DMs in EFL classroom interaction was performed by Castro (2009). Qualitative analysis of data manifested that DMs have a number of interpersonal and textual functions and thus the coherent flow of the discourse in classroom interaction is enhanced. Furthermore, Mohammadi (2019) probed the meaning potential of three Persian focus management markers in classrooms and reemphasized that meaning potentials could be actualized through situational language use and within context.

Additionally, Hellerman and Vergun (2007) investigated how beginning adult learners of English use DMs and concluded that compared with native

speakers, foreign language learners underutilize DMs. They even have problems with pragmatic functions of DMs. The DMs which are primarily ideational have greater semantic weight and are taught and applied first while those that are mainly pragmatic and interactional appear later in the speech of learners. Other studies confirming the under usage of DMs by non-native speakers include Öztürk and Durmuşoğlu Köse (2021) and Trillo (2002), considering native Turkish and Spanish learners of English, respectively. Liao (2009), too, studied the variation in the use of DMs by Chinese teaching assistants in the US. While the non-native assistant did use many of the same DMs as native speakers, they either did not fully adopt the functions of DMs or employed different and sometimes irrelevant functions.

Martín-Laguna and Alcón-Soler (2018) studied the development of discourse-pragmatic markers in a multilingual (Spanish, English and Catalan) classroom and found significant enhancement in the production of textual discourse-pragmatic markers in English, while an irregular pattern was found for interpersonal discourse-pragmatic markers. They also learned that learning trajectories in the minority language (Catalan in this study) and the L3 (i.e., English) were more unstable and the patterns interacted with each other. This contrasted with the linear development found in the majority language (here Spanish).

Nejadansari and Mohammadi (2015) investigated the frequency, pragmatic function and distribution of DMs in the Iranian university EFL classroom discourse, quantitatively and qualitatively. They found out that subjects applied few DMs. Even sometimes they misapplied them by overusing some, namely information indicating DMs and underusing others, namely closing and turn giving markers. Shahbaz, Sheikh and Shahbaz Ali (2013) studied how Chinese teachers of English use DMs and compared non-native and native teachers in terms of the DMs they apply. They concluded

that there is a good deal of discrepancy between native and non-native teachers in the functional use of DMs. Although non-natives have acquired the use of some DMs, this is limited and often lacks pragmatic functions. Some DMs like *ok*, *well* and *right* are inappropriately used by non-native teachers. Christodoulidou (2011), too, investigated the application of DMs in pedagogic setting and concluded that the imbalanced and insufficient use of DMs and their relevant functions call for a closer attention and training.

The use of DMs in English writing of Native Iranians in the absence of instruction was probed by Shabani and Goljani (2015). It was indicated that with the increase in students' proficiency level, frequency and appropriateness of use of DMs augmented too. Then, DMs were taught explicitly and students' writings were assessed accordingly. It was demonstrated that learners' awareness of the proper use of DMs raised significantly and they started to use more diverse and appropriate DMs in their compositions. Finally, it was suggested that the type of treatment should be tuned to the proficiency level of the learners.

Christina (2021) studied the role of informal L2 learning and learner motivation in the spoken use of DMs by Non-native Greek learners of English. The changes in learners' use of DMs over time and the interaction of diverse individual and contextual factors with the use of DMs were investigated. Finally, the determining role of leisure-oriented informal L2 learning in broad and frequent use of markers was revealed.

One emerging and proliferating form of classrooms is online classroom. As a result of the prompt progression of communication technologies, there has been a swift increment in various modes of social interaction via computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Park, 2007). DM patterns and use are medium specific (Fox Tree, 2010; Landone, 2012; Park, 2007). These

medium factors include technological factors, such as asynchronous connection and durability, and situational agents (Landone, 2012).

DMs may be applied less frequently in electronic conversations (Fox Tree, 2010) and this may be one of the factors that cause the online conversations seem less polite than spoken interactions (Brennan & Ohaeri, 1999). Contrarily, some researchers such as Landone (2012) and Park (2007) believe that people in CMC apply a large amount of interpersonally oriented language. The explanation is that in face-to-face communication, communicational and paralinguistic features facilitate understanding and enhance interpersonal relationships, namely participants impart affective and interpersonal status by resorting to various creative linguistic and paralinguistic devices and mechanisms, such as facial expressions, gestures, prosodic features, contractions and the like; however, in CMC people have to resort to language to make up for the lack of paralinguistic devices.

Among the major studies investigating the use of DMs in online setting is the study by Brennan and Ohaeri (1999). They believed that hedges (for example *sort of*, *kind of* and *like*) are discourse markers whose functions are to modify semantic meaning or to abate the force of an ensuing utterance. These DMs are used more frequently in face-to-face communication than in CMC. Their explanation is that typing and using keyboard demand more effort and time than speaking. Accordingly, they reason that the impression of CMC being less polite than face-to-face interaction cannot be attributed to the depersonalization of CMC, rather it is due to the less frequent use of hedges that is itself because of the typing requirements. Fox Tree (2010) found that DMs used in instant messaging overlap with those found in dialogue, but the rates of use differ. In conversations, the mean rate of DMs was almost twice as high as in instant messaging.

Meanwhile, Landone (2012) concluded that interactive DMs, that are deeply rooted in oral conversation, are also frequently employed in online forum and perform their typical functions. She investigated the use of interpersonal DMs in a Spanish language digital forum. Dialogical DMs were shown to be widely available in online forum, both in terms of variety and quantity, and almost all of the dialogical functions of DMs existed. This is especially advantageous for establishing and managing rapport in a context which lacks the usual face-to-face, non-verbal and supra-segmental cues such as facial expressions, body language, kinesics, proxemics and features of voice like intonation, rate, volume, etc. This implies that rapport management is not governed by the features of the medium. In fact, the absence of supra-segmental cues in this context, causes the DMs to be most frequently used in the title position. This marks the speakers' urgent need to provide clear and immediate signals to prevent misunderstanding.

Moreover, Park (2007) studied DMs for their affective and interpersonal roles in communication in synchronous online discourse. He, too, believes that due to lack of the contextual indications that are exuberant in the face-to-face interaction, the CMC imposes conversational limitations on language users and asserts that online language users demonstrate dynamic innovations and creativity to compensate for the restrictions of the medium by expressing interpersonal and affective stances through resorting to various creative linguistic and paralinguistic devices.

3. Method

For the purposes of the work, namely to analyse DMs used in the face-to-face and online pedagogic setting focusing on interpersonal aspect, Fung and Carter's (2007) theoretical framework is applied (Table 1). They have presented a functionally-based account of pedagogic discourse and grounded it both on Schiffrin's (1987) conceptualisation of a multi-dimensional model

of coherence and Aijmer's (2002) interpersonal perspective. Accordingly, DM functions may be interpersonal, structural, cognitive and referential.

Table 1.

A Functional Paradigm of Discourse Markers in Pedagogic Discourse

Interpersonal	Referential	Structural	Cognitive
Marking shared knowledge: <i>you know, see, you see, listen</i>	Cause: <i>because, cos</i>	Opening & closing topics: <i>well, now, OK/okay,</i>	Signifying thinking process: <i>I think, I see, well, and</i>
Indicating attitudes: <i>I think, well, really, obviously, absolutely, basically, exactly, sort of, kind of, like, to be frank, to be honest, just, oh</i>	Contrast: <i>but, yet, however, nevertheless, and</i>	<i>right/alright, let's start, let's discuss, let me conclude the discussion</i>	Reformulation/Self-correction: <i>I mean, that is, in other words, to put it in another way, what I mean is</i>
	Comparison: <i>Similarly, likewise</i>	Sequence: <i>first, firstly, second, secondly, next, then, finally</i>	Elaboration: <i>like, I mean</i>
	Coordination: <i>and</i>	Topic shifts: <i>so, now, well, and what about, how about</i>	Hesitation: <i>well, sort of</i>
	Disjunction: <i>or</i>		
	Consequence: <i>so</i>		
Showing responses: <i>OK/okay, oh, right/alright, yeah, yes, I see, great, oh great, sure</i>	Digression: <i>anyway</i>	Summarizing opinions: <i>so</i>	Assessing the listener's knowledge about the utterances: <i>you know</i>
		Continuation of topics: <i>yeah, and, cos, so</i>	

On the interpersonal level of this functional paradigm, which is the main concern of this study, DMs specifically serve as solidarity building devices that mark social and affective functions of spoken discourse. They can facilitate and pinpoint shared knowledge (*you know, see, you see, listen*). They can indicate speakers' attitudes (*I think, well, really, obviously, absolutely, basically, exactly, sort of, kind of, like, to be frank, to be honest, just, oh*) and their disposition toward propositional meanings (*basically, real-lifely, really, obviously, absolutely, exactly*). They can also show responses like confirmation, agreement, and acknowledgment (*OK/okay, oh, right/alright, yeah, yes, I see, great, oh great, sure*). On the referential

ground, they demonstrate textual relationships, like comparison, cause, contrast, consequence, coordination, disjunction, digression, etc. Structurally, DMs orientate and organize the discourse in progress and signal links and transitions between topics, like opening, shifting, continuing and closing of topics, indicating sequence and summarizing opinions; and finally, cognitively, they assist indicating speaker's thinking processes, marking repairs such as self-correction, elaboration, reformulation, and hesitation. They also mark speaker's evaluation of the listener's background knowledge.

To complement this framework, the properties of DMs were taken into consideration. Heine (2013, p. 1209) supposes properties of DMs as:

- a. being syntactically independent of the preceding and upcoming utterance;
- b. being, typically, prosodically distinct in their environment;
- c. having non-restrictive meaning; namely their meaning is not part of the propositional meaning of a clause; it may also show the speaker's metatextual stance;
- d. having procedural rather than conceptual-propositional meaning; namely they have no or only decreased semantic content; in fact, their meaning is mostly metacommunicative and metatextual rather than conceptual;
- e. being typically short, non-compositional and mainly invariable.

The video recordings consisted of six face-to-face classes and three online ones. In the latter, the teacher and the students could hear each other and the students did not type anything and simply respond to or ask questions orally. The first and last part of each class which dealt with greetings and other issues, like calling the roll list, which are not directly related to the core lesson were deleted and a 300-minute video for the face-to-face and a 119-minute video for the online class were obtained from general English courses, upper intermediate level. Individual DMs were investigated in the related context. Some of them have several functions and only interpersonal

functions are the focus of this study. The analysis was done twice by the researcher to ensure reliability.

4. Results and Discussion

In addition to interpersonal DMs proposed by Fung and Carter (2007), some other semantically similar DMs were identified. Their properties as DMs were checked according to Heine (2013) and their context was probed. Examples of such DMs include: no, that's great, exactly, excellent, very good. Additionally, teachers sometimes used DMs in their native language rather than English. So, the Persian equivalents and their related derivatives which could be counted as DMs based on the context and their properties were taken into account. These include *bælé* (yes), *aré* (yeah), *bébinid/ bébin* (see). Table 2 represents the frequency of interpersonal DMs introduced by Fung and Carter and the added ones in both online and face-to-face classes.

Table 2.

<i>Frequency Of Interpersonal DMs in Face-To-Face and Online Classes</i>			
DM		F: face-to-face class	F: online class
See	English	0	0
	Persian (2 variations)		
	<i>bébinid</i>	6	4
	<i>bébin</i>	1	0
You know	English	5	0
	Persian (<i>midunid</i>)	1	0
Really	Just in English	2	3
Absolutely	English	0	0
	Persian (<i>kamélæen</i>)	2	0
Ok	Just in English	6	14
Right	Just in English	0	1
Yeah	English	4	9
	Persian (<i>aré</i>)	1	0
Yes	English	48	19
	Persian (<i>bælé</i>)	21	2
Great	Just in English	0	2
Oh great	Just in English	0	2
Sure	Just in English	0	1

Interpersonal Discourse ...

That sounds great	Just in English	0	1
That's great	Just in English	0	1
Great idea	Just in English	0	1
Excellent	English	0	2
	Persian (<i>æhsænt</i>)	2	0
Very good	Just in English	1	5
Good	Just in English	9	6
Exactly	Just in English	0	1
Aha	Just in English	2	23
Uhum	Just in English	11	7
No	English	1	2
	Persian (<i>næ</i>)	7	1
	<i>Khob</i> (ok/ well)	4	0

In both types of classes, the least applied DMs are those indicating attitude. In fact, except for *really* and the Persian equivalent of *absolutely*, none of them has been used. This may be due to the context the main purpose of which is transferring information and checking for comprehension and not transferring ideas and discussing them.

The most frequent type of interpersonal DMs is the one which shows a response. In this category, DMs have more variety, too, especially in the online classes. The diversity of DMs used in the face-to-face and online classes differ. In the face-to-face ones, more native language DMs are applied but in the online ones, they are mostly in English. In fact, generally, online classes were dominantly in English, perhaps because the students could have the opportunity to watch it later too; additionally, the teachers seem to feel closer to students in the face-to-face classes, thus, Persian DMs are more prevalent in such classes.

DMs which marked shared knowledge were quite frequent in face-to-face classes. They appeared both in Persian and English but mostly in Persian; that may have psychological explanations. It should be noted that Fuller (2003) believes that *you know* is applied more frequently by non-native

speakers, compared with native speakers. This may also explain why it is used more frequently in Persian. An English instance is Example 1.

Example 1.

T. lose power, gain power You know lose and gain are opposites.

you know is usually preceded by *as*; as in Example 2:

Example 2.

T. influence, as you know, its synonym is effect.

See is not used in English, but its equivalents in Persian have been used. Of course, because of the inflection in Persian *you see* and *see* are the same (*bébinid, shoma bébinid*) but the singular and plural differ (*bébinid, bébin*) and it is often accompanied by *bæchéha* (guys), *bébinid bæchéha* (see guys). An example is presented in 3.

Example 3.

T. *bébinid bæchéha*, in *yeki æz hæmoon tæfavothatyé* American English *væ* British English *é*.

‘see guys, it is one of those differences between American English and British English’

The most frequent interpersonal DM is *yes*. It has several applications. Of course, instances of *yes/ no* which are responses to *yes/no* question or request are excluded from this study because based on the definition of DMs they operate on the propositional level. This is also done by Lee-Goldman (2011) in analyzing *no* as a DM. *Yes* may be used for confirmation as in Example 4 or used as structural DM as in Example 5. Clearly, those which had confirmatory and not structural function were taken into account here.

Example 4.

T. a synonym for obtain?

S. Gain.

T. yes.

Example 5.

S. He was a juvenile.

76 Teaching English Language

Interpersonal Discourse ...

T. yes? (with rising intonation)

S. and has not reached the legal age.

Yes is used noticeably more frequently in face-to-face classes rather than in online ones. The reason is that in face-to-face classes, teachers ask much more questions to check for understanding and more exercises are done and *yes* is used to confirm the answers.

According to Liao (2009) *yeah* can have several functions such as marking transition (structural), indicating agreement, giving comment on the preceding utterance and a specific function used by non-native speakers: self-repair. This latter use is rarely seen in the discourse of native speakers. Neither is it seen in this study. The most common interpersonal use of *yeah* in the present study is to confirm or show agreement. In fact, here, *yeah* is used in the same context as *yes* but less frequently. That is similar to Persian where the more formal form *bælé* is used more frequently than the informal one *aré*. Sometimes *aha* or *uhum* are used interchangeably in the same context, namely to confirm as in Example 6.

Example 6.

T. What is routine?

S1. Everything I do every day.

T. Yes, the things you do every day. Thank you. We use it in Persian, too. Right?

S. Right.

T. For example?

S2. Exercise

T. Yes

S3. Eating

T. Aha

S4. Going to work

T. Uhum

S5. Studying

T. Yeah

S6. Watching TV.

T. Yeah, exactly.

Some researchers like Lee-Goldman (2011) regard *no* as a DM which can have three functions of topic shift, turn-taking conflict resolution and misunderstanding management. The latter of these functions is interpersonal. An instance of it, in the present study is Example 7.

Example 7.

A student joined the online class in the last minutes of the class.

T. Those students who cannot get online on time can download the lesson later. (in Persian)

S. Sorry, so I'll leave now.

T. No, that is ok. I meant if you are busy you can watch the video later.

No can be used as the negative counterpart of confirmatory *yes*, i.e. to disconfirm as in Example 8.

Example 8.

S. My brother works to metro.

T. næ, Chi mikhay bégi?

'No, what do you want to say?'

Ok can be used to acknowledge the preceding utterance and display understanding (Shahbaz et al., 2013). It can be used with different intonations and functions. It may have rising intonation to check for understanding or neutral to confirm and falling to mark transition. In this study, it is dominantly used as structural Discourse Markers. The major instances of interpersonal *ok* are those applied to confirm the previous utterance, as in Example 9.

Example 9.

S. The boy whose sister was in our class had been in the bank.

T. Ok.

According to Schiffrin (1987), one of the uses of *well* is a response to a former question. *Well*, too, is dominantly structural; it can act as a delay device with which the speaker can gain time to think about the response. Among its interpersonal functions is mitigating face threat (Jucker, 1993). In

fact, it can have both structural and mitigating functions simultaneously as in Example 10.

Example 10.

Speaker. Can we have lunch together?

Hearer. Well, I am a bit busy today.

In addition to showing a turn change, *well* here indicates the speaker's interpersonal tendency to attenuate the force of the refusal or rejection. This may also be applicable to mitigating the force of a request, disagreement, insufficient and irrelevant response or apology (Park, 2007). It may also be used to request for clarification or elaboration (Alami, 2015).

Interestingly, no instance of *well* was observed in either class. However, the Persian DM *khob* which may mean both *ok* or *well*, has been used to acknowledge the preceding utterance (Example 11), as a response (Example 12) and to mitigate the face-threatening act (Example 13)

Example 11.

T. Police Craig ro dastgir kard. Khob, un bood k jorm ro mortakeb shodé bood.

'The police arrested Craig. Well, that was he who had committed the crime.'

Example 12.

S. mitunim gozineh d ro bezanim?

'Can we chose option d?'

T. khob, tu matn k uno nadare.

'Well, that is not mentioned in the text'

Example 13.

S. He was in the bank. (The student pronounced the word bank incorrectly)

T. khob bank ké isfahaniye.

'Well, bank is the Isfahani pronunciation'

As is stated in Liao (2009) native speakers frequently use *well* as requests or self-responses. However, in the present study, like Liao's study on non-native speakers, none of the occurrences of *well* (in Persian) had either of these two functions.

One of the functions of *right* is self-monitoring (Tang, 2010). It may also be a transition marker (Schleef, 2008). Of these two functions, the former is intrapersonal and the latter is structural. Furthermore, *right* can have a self-confirmatory function, namely sometimes teachers want to ensure the truthfulness of what they say hence they utilize *right* (Shahbaz et al., 2013). This DM is used just once throughout this study, and it was in the online class as in Example 6, above. Of course, some teachers overuse this DM habitually as in Shahbaz et al. (2013), but this is not the case in the present study. Teachers have even underused it.

DMs *great*, *oh great*, *sure* and their other equivalents such as *excellent*, *very good*, *that sounds great* are used dominantly in online classes. In fact, this group of DM caused the diversity of interpersonal DMs in the online class. An example is the following (Example 14):

Example 14.

S1. I like walk.

T. is he right?

S2. I like to walk.

T. very good. I like to walk; good.

Of course, in the above example *good* is structural and makes transition to the next part. The only instance of *sure* in the whole sample is as a response to thank you, that is a formulaic response.

Finally, on the whole, 136 instances of DMs appeared in the face-to-face classes and 107 DMs in the online ones. As the total time of the face-to-face class was 300 minutes and that of the online was 119 minutes that would be about 4.5 and 9 DMs in every 10 minutes in the face-to-face class and online class, respectively. That is, the use of DMs in the online class is about twice as much as that in the face-to-face class.

5. Conclusion

Given in the study, the focus was on interpersonal DMs, *ok* and *right* with transition functions could not be taken into account. Therefore, *yes* is found to be the most frequent DM, followed by *aha*, *ok*, *yeah* and *you see*. These can be compared to the results of the previous studies. For instance, Fuller (2003) found out that native speakers used *you know*, *oh*, *well*, *yeah*, *like* and *I mean* more frequently than other DMs. In the study by Fung and Carter (2007) it was found that learners liberally use referentially functional DMs like *and*, *but*, *OK*, *so*, and *because*, but their use of other markers such as *yeah*, *really*, *I see*, *you see*, *well*, *right*, *cos*, *you know*, *say*, *sort of* is restricted. Additionally, *ok* and *right* have been found by Schlee (2004) to be the most prevalent DMs in the discourse of native teachers and students. These are used more frequently than *you know*, particularly when they function as transition markers. Finally, Trillo (2002) showed that in the discourse of native speakers the “involvement markers”, namely DMs which promote the involvement of interlocutors in the thinking process, like *well*, *you know*, and *I mean* are more frequent. It is confirmed by Othman (2010) that in the classroom discourse the primary function of *ok*, *right* and *yeah* is to take a turn. They can relate to the idea and structural organization and signal intended information and actions.

The medium of instruction had an effect on the amount of DMs applied. Lack of the contextual clues which are richly present in face-to-face communication imposes some conversational constraints on CMC. This absence of cues may cause miscommunication or linguistic ambiguity. Therefore, communicating through online spaces can potentially present a threat to the public self-image of the interlocutors. Hereupon, in online education efficient interpersonal communication comprising solidarity and rapport is a critical factor (Park, 2007).

In the present study, teachers in online classes employ a great amount of interpersonally oriented language which is in line with Landone (2012) and Park (2007). In fact, the occurrence of DMs in online classes was about twice more than in the face-to-face classes. Teachers show creativity by using a larger variety of DMs. Functions of DMs did not differ significantly in the two contexts; meanwhile, they were mainly in English in the online class and in Persian in the face-to-face class which calls for further research and investigation. Furthermore, it can be concluded that in line with Brennan and Ohaeri (1999), users apply fewer DMs or hedges in CMC due to typing requirements. If the medium is equipped with voice, this burden is removed and learners use DMs more frequently, even more than that of face-to-face communication in order to compensate for the depersonalized aspect of CMC. Finally, in the same way that the personality type and gender influence language learning strategies in distance learning (Ghafar Samar, 2007) the use of DMs may also be influenced by these two factors. This can be subject to further investigation.

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