

## Discourse Markers as Triggers of Code-switching in EFL Classes

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**Abstract:** *In secondary EFL classes, teachers often switch codes when they express their ideas that students do not understand. Those switches are often triggered by such discourse markers as Well, Ok in English, and Good in Chinese. It seems that these discourse markers mostly occur at the beginning or at the end of the digression, with topics shifting. In this paper, four of these discourse makers are described in the structuring functions within ongoing teachers' discourse in EFL classroom, and examples from the corpora are given, indicating that the different functions in discourse strategies exist between English and Chinese.*

**Keywords:** *Discourse markers; triggers; code-switching; EFL classes.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Discourse markers, defined as a linguistic device that speakers use to signal how the upcoming unit of speech or text relates to the current discourse state (Schiffrin 1987), are frequently used in utterances of code-switching by the teachers observed in language classrooms. This paper refers to discourse marker as the expressions in teachers' discourse that used pragmatically, with a structural and organizational function in classroom. It is partly based on Redeker's definition of what she calls "discourse operators", namely "a word or phrase-for instance a conjunction, adverbial, comment clause, interjection- that is uttered with the primary function of bringing to the listeners' attention a particular kind of linkage of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context"(Redeker, 1991: 1168). In teachers discourse in EFL classrooms, many code-switches are triggered by discourse markers such as, *OK, 好(Good), Well*, etc. These markers are discussed when researchers analyze the structure patterns of code-switching. More about functions of discourse markers across the class periods will be focused. First all, the discourse markers used in utterance units are calculated in the periods or teachers and are analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, and then according to our observations and interviews after recording, the functions of several most frequently used markers as *OK, Yeah, Now, 好(Good)* will be discussed, lastly, the conclusion will be made to summarize the use of discourse makers in teacher's code-switching.

### 2. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

#### 2.1. Sampling Classes and Subjects

English classes were chosen from grade two in junior classes and senior classes in 2013-2014 academic years. Ten of English teachers of two different grades were asked to participate in this project and nineteen of their lessons were observed and audio-taped. In the pilot researches (Yao & Zeng 2006a, b), some code choices were motivated by simple lexical gaps (that is, sometimes, teachers switch to another language simply because they cannot think of the appropriate lexical items in one language). In addition to that, it is reasonable to expect that teachers' code switches are motivated by other factors, such as the students' language ability, teachers' own experience, the difficulty of the tasks, the type of the lesson (text lesson, exercise lesson, listening etc). All the teachers switch intentionally and their switches to Chinese are intended to reach communicative and pedagogical goals.

Among those teachers participating this study, half are junior teachers and half senior teachers, four are males and six females for comparison, two class periods (one period is 45 minutes) for each teacher are recoded, yielding a total of 19 periods of classroom discourse data.

## 2.2. Recording the Classes

All the class sessions observed in the second semester were audio-taped (All the research data were collected using audio tape recorders). The purpose for audio-taping sessions was twofold: First, a more complete record of the interactions between teachers and students, especially teachers utterances. Second, during the interviews the audiotapes were used to help teachers remember what they had said, thought, and felt in class. The recording was divided into two stages of time, one for each period about 3 months of interval. During the observation and recording, teachers were just told that the goal of observing their classes was to pursue the way in which language was used in English language classes. This was to avoid conscious code-switching on one hand or, on the other hand, to prevent the avoidance of spontaneous use of students' native language.

## 2.3. Transcribing and Coding the Recordings

Every utterance of the classes was transcribed as possible as we can, although the research mainly focused the teachers' utterances. Some symbols were used to represent the teachers and students who were identified by the T (T=1, 2, 3 .....10) and S or Ss respectively. Some features such as laughs, gestures, intonation, volume and interruptions in transcriptions were complemented by ethnographic notes in remedying the defect of not providing the facial expressions of the teachers and students. The transcription conventions were referred to conventions in works of Arthur (1996), Heller & Martin-Jones (2001), Flood, et al. (1997), and Lisa (2003) and some ideas were based on Baker (1997).

According to others' researches and our observation, the teachers' talk are divided into units of utterance and the units are categorized into four types labeled as (E); (C); E(C); C (E) based on Myers-Scotton's MLF model (1993b): (E) refers to the utterance completely in English; (C) refers to the utterance completely in Chinese; E(C) indicates that the utterance is in the target language (English) with one word or phrase in Chinese embedded and C (E) refers to the utterance in Chinese with one word or phrase in the target language (English).

Once identified and coded, discourse markers were categorized according to the functions used by teachers, then the number of those markers is counted in each period. The transcripts are analyzed numerically and qualitatively according to the different markers (such as yeah, ok, good etc.) and the functions which these markers fulfilled.

All the discourse analysis is based on transcriptions of the audio tape recordings. Utterance units with Chinese will be translated into English when they are analyzed. The original transcriptions are presented immediately after each extract for analytical purposes and to facilitate the text for readers. The ethnographic approach of the whole project is to have helpful information about the classroom context for the interpretation.

## 3. DISCOURSE MARKERS IN TEACHERS' CODE-SWITCHING

The following tables display the distribution of several major discourse markers used in nineteen class periods or by teachers. Of the total of 893 markers which trigger code alternation in the nineteen periods, four major markers mentioned above account for 715 cases, occupying eighty percent of the total. Table1 gives the number of occurrences of discourse markers in unit initial position in the data, while Table2 presents the markers used by teachers. What table1 illustrates clearly is the wide range in the frequency of discourse markers used in the periods, from the 14.8 percent of the total in the highest case in data 16, to 0.6 percent, the lowest case in data 1. Table2 shows that the most frequently used marker is *Now*, while the least frequently used marker is Chinese marker 好(*good*). Table 3 and Chart 1 display the details of the frequency and percentages of the four major discourse markers used by teachers.

**Table1.** *Distribution of discourse markers in the nineteen-period sample*

	Ok	Now	Yeah	好(Good)	Total	Percent (%)
<b>D 1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0.6</b>
D2	14	18	3	17	52	7.3
D3	16	12	6	8	42	5.9
D4	5	15	16	0	36	5.0
D5	0	8	1	0	9	1.3
D6	5	12	9	2	28	3.9

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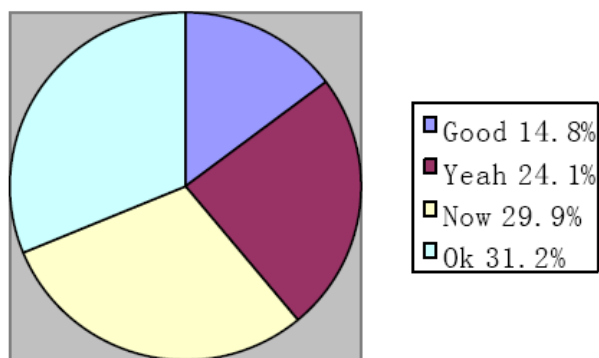
D7	21	16	10	15	62	8.7
D8	3	10	1	0	14	2.0
D9	33	8	2	22	65	9.1
D10	15	6	1	12	34	4.8
D11	3	18	0	7	28	3.9
D12	26	11	4	0	41	5.7
D13	21	10	7	1	39	5.5
D14	2	19	4	0	25	3.5
D15	3	2	0	1	6	0.8
D16	21	2	80	3	106	14.8
D17	13	8	19	9	49	6.9
D18	2	25	2	5	34	4.8
D19	7	23	7	4	41	5.7
Total	214(30%)	223(31%)	172(24%)	106(15%)	715(100%)	100%

**Table2.** Distribution of discourse markers in the teacher sample

	Ok	Now	Yeah	好	Total	Percent (%)
T1	4	0	0	0	4	0.6
T2	30	30	9	25	94	13.1
T3	5	15	16	0	36	5.0
T4	5	20	10	2	37	5.2
T5	24	26	11	15	76	10.6
T6	51	32	3	41	127	17.8
T7	47	21	11	1	80	11.2
T8	5	21	4	1	31	4.3
T9	34	10	99	12	155	21.7
T10	9	48	9	9	75	10.5
Total	214(30%)	223(31%)	172(24%)	106(15%)	715(100%)	100%

**Table3.** Frequency of discourse markers

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	好(Good)	106	14.8	14.8
	Yeah	172	24.1	24.1
	Now	214	29.9	29.9
	Ok	223	31.2	31.2
	Total	715	100.0	100.0



**Chart1.** Pie chart of frequency of four discourse markers

### 4. FUNCTIONS OF DISCOURSE MARKERS AS TRIGGERS TO SWITCH CODES

Four categories are identified to denote different marker usages: first, single word acknowledgements, such as *Okay, right, yes, yeah*; second, interjections with discourse purposes, such as *soh, well, mm*; third, coordinating conjuncts used as discourse markers, such as *so, but*; last, adverbials used as discourse markers, such as *then, now, first*. Here we only focus several markers frequently used teachers in the data: three English discourse markers, *Ok(ay)*, *Yeah*, and *Now*, and one Chinese discourse marker *好(good)*. All the above discourse markers are in unit-initial positions and may trigger code switches in upcoming utterances.

#### 4.1. The Functions of *Ok (ay)* in Teachers' Talk

*Okay* has a rather informal status in spoken English, but it can have many uses in spoken dialogue systems, depending on the level of formality required for the service. According to Stenstrom (1994), he assigns various functions to *Okay* depending on its location within an utterance. *Okay* at the beginning of a turn expresses agreement, and can also indicate acknowledgement of the preceding utterance. *Okay* in second position following "yes" emphasizes the agreement expressed by "yes". However, that role depends on the intonation of the utterance. For example, "Yes, *OK*" (spoken with a sigh) potentially indicates reluctant agreement or consent. On the other hand, "Yes, *OK*" (spoken with stress on *Okay*) indicates impatience with the interlocutor. *Okay* within the turn finishes a topic, and *Okay* at the end of a turn asks for confirmation (Again depending on intonation). Here, we only analyze those which are in unit-initial position.

Re-examining table 1 and table 2, there are important differences between the periods or teachers in using *Okay*. T6 and T7 use *Ok(ay)* more frequently than other teachers, accounting for 51 units and 47 units respectively, while in Data 5, no single *Okay* used by T4 is found at all.

In the data, most initial unit OKs are used to trigger to code switch for expressing agreement or indicating acknowledgement of the preceding utterance, as Stenstrom (1994) points out. 'OKs' in the following extracts indicate that the teachers acknowledge what he or she just uttered or the student responded. English marker *OK* usually triggers marked switches from Chinese to English. For example (**italicized part in brackets is translation**):

##### Extract 1

D1-303 T: 他旅游的路线怎么样(*what about his travel route?*) C EL

D1-304 OK, read this passage, the last part and fill the blank E CM

We also find some cases in which *OK* triggers marked switches by the same teacher or other teachers.

##### Extract 2

D2-680 T: Yeah, Study at home with somebody E CL

D2-681 OK, 第十一题(*eleventh*) C (E) CM

##### Extract 3

D9-081 S: (xxx)

D9-082 T: Ok! 前面很不错, 后面稍微停了一下(*the first part is very good, but there is a pause in the last part*) C (E) PR

And switched utterances can function as other different moves: suggest action; request action, request validation; request information and elaborates-repeats. For example:

##### Extract 4

D9-429 T: Mr. Bean, 憨豆先生 (*Mr. Bean*) E (C) CL

D9-430 OK, 大家看下他的表情 (*everybody looks at his expression*) C (E) CM

(Suggest action)

##### Extract 5

D9-550 T: 喜剧, 不是喜剧演员, 是整个剧本让人发笑 (*comedy, not comedian, is the whole play that makes people laugh*) (C) CL

D9-551 OK, The second one is? (...) (E) EL

(Request validation)

##### Extract 6

D9-099 T: 就是有一个快乐的农民在场吗? (*is that 'is there a pleasant peasant present?'*) (C) EL

D9-100 Ok, repeat this sentence. (E) CM

(Request action)

D9-099 T: (C) EL

D9-100 Ok, repeat this sentence. (E) CM

Extract 7

D9-140 T: 注意它的念法 (*Pay attention to it pronunciation*) E(C) CM

D9-141 OK, now, next question (E) CM

(Request information)

Extract 8

D12-162 T: OK, 如果不是绝对的没有关系, 可能是只有一部分有关 (*if it is not absolutely unrelated, maybe it is partially related*), C(E) CL

D12-163 Has something to with something, OK? E EL

D12-164 OK, 至少不是完全相关性 (*at least it is not completely related*) C (E) CL

(Elaborates-repeats)

#### 4.2. The Functions of 'Yeah' in Teachers' Talk

All the teachers except T1 use the discourse marker *yeah* in their classes. Table 1 and Table 2 display the distribution of *yeah* in period and teacher sample. there are also important differences between teachers or periods. For instance, it seems that T9 particularly preferred to use more *yeahs* than other teachers, whereas T1 didn't use one at all during the whole period.

The discourse markers *Yeah* or *Yes* (and variations like *yup* which is not found in our corpus) can play many different roles in teachers' discourse. As such *yeah* serves as a particularly useful illustration of how to decide among speech utterance types, how to recognize fillers (in this case discourse markers) that are included within larger speech utterances rather than acting as speech utterances of their own.

In the data, initial unit 'Yeah' is also used to express agreement or indicate acknowledgement of the preceding utterance and as a trigger to code-switch for eliciting a response or repeat or explain the prior utterance, as the following examples show:

Extract 9

D3-013 S: Argue, a-r-g-u-e, argue, 争吵(*argue*)

D3-014 T: 争吵(*argue*) C RE

D3-015 Yeah, now, next, 打电话给某人(*call somebody*) E(C) EL

Extract 10

D4-276 T: the father of science fiction E RE

D4-277 科幻小说之父(*the father of science fiction*) C RE

D4-278 Yeah, so you should know him E CM

Discourse marker *yeah* can also be invoked to provide a (positive) reaction, affirmation, or endorsement of something the other speaker has said, in which case it is tagged as a discourse response. Providing a (positive) reaction is usually followed by students' correct response:

Extract 11

D4-630 T: now 许振(*Xu Chen*), translate E(C) CM

D4-631 Yeah, 再见面还要很久(*how long we will meet again*) C(E) EL

Discourse marker *yeah* can serve to affirm to the speaker's own statement, for example:

Extract 12

D16-043 T: to practice these tongue twisters, We can pronounce the words correctly (E) CL

D16-044 yeah, 通过练习这些绕口令, 我们可以正确发音(*by practicing these tongue twisters, we can pronounce correctly*) C (E) RE

Sometimes the speaker endorses something that the other speaker has said. For example:

Extract 13

D3-172 T: 能不能(*can we say*) ask a problem? E(C) EL

D3-173 Ss: 不能(*No*)

D3-174 T: Yeah, ok, now, is it serious or not? E EL

*Yeah* sometimes serves as a direct response to a question, in which case, it should be tagged as a statement speech utterance, only if said question is querying a response, not merely querying a feedback.

Extract 14

D16-230 T: 看到没有啊? (*do you see?*) (C) EL

D16-231 yeah 这里有六幅图, 是不是? (*yeah here there are six pictures, aren't there?*) (C) EL

#### 4.3. The Functions of 'now' in Teacher's Talk

The most frequent use of discourse marker in our corpus is 'Now' which accounts for 223 cases, occupying 31 percent of the total. All the teachers except T1 used 'Now' as a trigger to code-switch in their talk. There are also important differences between teachers, among whom T10 preferred to use more 'Nows' than other teachers. Following Schiffrin(1987:230), "now" is a deictic element that "marks a speaker's progression through discourse time, by displaying attention to an upcoming idea, unit or orientation and/or participation framework" (230). Here, it is important, however, to distinguish 'now' as a discourse marker or conjunctive element from the adverb 'now'. The adverbial refers to "the time at which a proposition is present to be true", whereas the discourse marker 'now' "occurs in discourse in which the speaker progresses through a cumulative series of subordinate units" (Schiffrin 1987:228). Here we are interested in the discourse marker 'Now' which triggers the code-switching in teacher's talk. First, teachers use 'now' to mark his teaching progression through discourse time. In the following extract, 'now' can mark an orderly progression through a sequence of subordinate parts, and 'now' marks one part of that sequence.

Extract 15

D2-215 T: 这个句型(*This pattern drill*)What do you think Shine will be in five years C (E) CL

D2-216 这个句型要掌握(*This pattern drill should be grasped*) C CM

D2-217 I think she will be a doctor E CL

D2-218 Ok, group one, group one E CM

D2-219 有更多的高楼大厦(*there will be more high buildings*) C CL

D2-220 Now, write down. <The teacher writes the sentence on the blackboard> E CM

D2-221 There will be more buildings E CL

Second, As Ball (1986:85) points out, "now is transitional, frequently the opening word from a new speaker, but the same speaker can use it to indicate a new idea or stage with a topic" (Ball1986:85). That is, *now* can be as a marker of transition in thematic progression. In classroom interactions, teachers would often use *now* to indicate a new topic or task. In the following extract, after explaining some grammatical points, the teacher uses the discourse marker *now* as a trigger to switch code to target language, indicating another task for the students.

Extract 16

D5-053 T: 'Should' do you know? E EL

- D5-054 Ss: 应该(*Should*)  
 D5-055 T: Right. It is a modal verb ‘应该’ (*‘should’*) E(C) LG  
 D5-056 这两个词都是情态动词(*these two words are modal verbs*) C LG  
 D5-057 Now, listen E CM

Finally, overlapping with the second one, the teachers employ *now* to display attention to an upcoming idea. As Grosz and Sidner (1986) explains, *now* marks an attentional change, creating a new focus space of salient objects and topics. For example:

Extract 17

- D3-506 T: Ah, you should, you could, 对不对(isn't it)? E(C) EL  
 D3-507 啊,这两个词语气会稍有不同(*Ah, the two words have a little difference in mood*) C LG  
 D3-508 Now, please, 看到(*look at*) grammar focus C(E) CM  
 D3-509 What should I do? E EL  
 D3-510 啊,我该怎么办(*Ah, what should I do?*)? C RE  
 :  
 D3-537 Now, please, 翻过来(*turn back*), 3A C (E) CM  
 D3-538 Make a conversation E CM  
 D3-539 What do you think of advice? E EL

However, there are cases where the speaker does not explicitly utter an introduction topic at the beginning of the segment, with the result that the attention-shifting *now* is attached to the initial topic. For example:

Extract 18

- D3-051 S: c-o-u-l-d  
 D3-052 T: Could, yeah, sit down E CM  
 D3-053 能,能.啊(*can, can, Ah*) C CL  
 D3-054 Should E CL  
 D3-055 OK, everyone, let's learn the new lesson, Unit 2 E CM  
 D3-056 What should I do, should <On the blackboard>, Should E EL  
 D3-057 Ss:应该(*should*)  
 D3-058 T: 应该,应该(*should should*) C RE  
 D3-059 Now, we have learned E CL  
 D3-060 we have learned E RE  
 D3-061 啊,我们学过的,是吧(*Ah, we have learned it, haven't we?*)? C RE

#### 4.4. The Functions of ‘好’(good) in Teachers' Talk

As a discourse marker, *hao* can occur in different positions and indeed has different syntactic functions. Looking at *hao* based on spoken database, Miracle (1991) finds that *hao* not only (i) plays a role in the development and closure of the commissive/requestive social actions, but also (ii) serves to make assertions or mark a transition to a new topic or social activity, (iii) marks the closure of telephone calls or other physical activity, and (iv) when used within a particular speaker's turn, functions as a marker of idea management of signaling a completion of prior topic or activity and a transition of another topic or activity.

In teacher's discourse, *Hao* mainly serves to make assertions or mark a transition to a **new topic** or task, usually in a different code or mark the closure of particular task and a transition to another task.

Extract 19

D2-060 T: 把它写下来(*write it down*) C RE

D2-061 好(*good*), next, 1-c,1-c E(C) CM

Extract 20

D3-615 T: either用于否定句或疑问句的句尾(*is used in the end of negative or question sentence*) C (E) LG

D3-616 好,举个例子啊(*Good, take an example*) C CM

The unmarked use of *hao* is followed by Chinese utterances; however teachers tend to use English words or mixed codes after *hao*. Among 106 cases of *hao* used in the corpus, 59 cases of *hao* are followed by English utterances.

Extract 21

D6-266 T: OK, sit down E CM

D6-267 好, 这段翻译起来比较困难(*Good, it is more difficult to translate this paragraph*) C CM

Extract 22

D5-298 T: Like doing something E RE

D5-299 好(*Good*), the last one E(C) CM

From the data, teachers used more marked utterances than unmarked ones. It is suggested that teachers try to use less marked utterances as possible as they can.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In EFL classes, teachers employ a lot of discourse markers. It is found that discourse markers can trigger code-switching. Four major discourse markers have been described and their functions have been discussed. Other discourse markers also play a very important role in teaching. The disappearance or appearance of some classroom discourse markers are connected with the particular contexts of classroom discourse. They are made and organized socially and culturally, so they must be interlaced with society and the culture of the society. In EFL classes, each discourse marker may have different functions in process of teacher as they are described in the above sections, and different discourse markers may have the same function in teachers' discourse.

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