The Pragmatic Functions of High-Frequency Discourse Marker *So* in Chinese EFL Teacher Talk

Wei Kexin[*] and Li Siqing

Foreign Languages College, Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai, China
Email: 2595264132@qq.com (W.K.); siqingle@shnu.edu.cn (L.S.)
*Corresponding author

Abstract—Discourse markers have multiple pragmatic functions and have significant influences on classroom organization and teaching. This study aims to analyze the pragmatic functions of discourse marker so in a self-built corpus of Chinese middle school English classroom discourse. The corpus analysis shows that discourse marker so has various pragmatic functions, including marking results and inferences, managing topics, summarizing, rewording and giving examples at the textual level. Besides, at the interactional level, so functions as a marker of speech acts such as questions, requests, opinions, elicitations and confirmations. The research shows that discourse marker so can make classroom discourse more closely linked, promote students' understanding of teacher's discourse and create a harmonious classroom atmosphere. The findings of this research might have important implications for English teaching and teachers' professional development in middle schools.

Keywords—Chinese middle school English class, discourse marker, *so*, pragmatic functions

I. INTRODUCTION

Discourse marker is a kind of common discourse phenomenon. They seem to be insignificant linguistic elements and do not add any new information to the propositional content of discourse, but they have multiple pragmatic functions and can affect the success of communication. Since the late 1980s, discourse markers have gradually become the focus of scholars at home and aboard. Researchers have found that discourse markers play an important role in conversations and can influence the construction and understanding of discourse.

Previous studies have shown that *so* is a high-frequency discourse marker used by native and non-native speakers. And previous scholars have systematically analyzed the role of *so* in written style, daily conversation, interviews, speeches, TV dramas and so on. Few scholars have studied the discourse marker *so* in teacher talk in Chinese middle school English class. Therefore, the present study aims to analyze the pragmatic functions of discourse marker *so* in Chinese middle school English class, hoping to provide some suggestions for English teaching and teacher's development. Specifically, the study is guided by the following two questions:

1) What is the frequency and distribution of *so* as a discourse marker in Chinese middle school English classroom discourse corpus?

2) What are the pragmatic functions of *so* as a discourse marker in Chinese middle school English class, and how about their frequency and distribution?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars have defined discourse markers and their functions. Discourse markers were defined by Schiffrin [1] as sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk. Fraser [2] pointed out that the core meaning of discourse markers is procedural meaning, not conceptual meaning. Regarding the functions of discourse markers, it was believed that discourse markers can link texts and promote discourse coherence. They also play a guiding and restrictive role in hearer's comprehension process and minimize their cognitive efforts [3]. In addition, discourse markers can fulfill various interactive functions which are essential to the relationship between participants [4].

The use of discourse markers in classroom context is very important. Fung and Crater [5] argued that discourse markers are an indispensable part of successful classroom management and a key component of pragmatic knowledge. Teachers can use discourse markers to structure classroom discourse and make the cohesion of classroom discourse closer, to help students understand the communicative demands of the context and participate in activities more successfully [6]. In addition, discourse markers are essential to the maintenance of conversational cooperation, ensuring interactions go on smoothly [7]. They can reduce social distance between teacher and students and create a better atmosphere for active participation [8].

There are different classifications of the pragmatic functions of discourse marker *so*. Buysse [9] classified the functions of discourse marker *so* in terms of three meta-functions. At the ideational level, *so* can indicate a result. At the interpersonal level, *so* can draw a conclusion, prompt and hold the floor. *So* can introduce a summary, a section of the discourse, a new sequence and elaboration at the textual level. Johnstone *et al.* [10] argued that the functions of discourse marker *so* in conversations can be classified into four categories: indicate causality and logical inference, mark motive and boundary markers. Müller [11] proposed that *so* has pragmatic functions at the textual and interactional levels. At the textual level, *so* can mark result or consequence, summarize, reword and give an example. It can also be used as main idea unit marker, sequential *so* and boundary marker. At the interactional level, *so* can be used as speech act marker of question, request and opinion and marker of a transition relevance place. It can also mark implied result. Previous studies of discourse marker *so* have left many open issues, especially with regards to the pragmatic functions of *so* in Chinee English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher talk in middle school.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs the methodology of conversation analysis. The analysis is based on a self-built corpus of Chinese middle school English classroom discourse. In this study, 10 classes are selected, and the videos are transcribed into text by using online platform (IFLYREC). A total of 30,077 English words were transcribed.

The text corpus is checked manually and processed with the help of AntConc. First, the Concordance is used to extract all *so*-containing cases, and the false retrieval and incomplete cases are manually eliminated. Second, *so* in all effective cases are divided into discourse markers and non-discourse markers. This study only focuses on discourse marker *so* and analyzes its pragmatic functions. Finally, the author summarizes the functions of *so* as a discourse marker in Chinese middle school English class. All the corpus analysis and tagging are done by two people, and the results of different tagging are confirmed to ensure the consistency of the study.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Frequency and Distribution of Discourse Marker so and Its Pragmatic Functions

Using *so* as key word, the concordance function is used to extract 549 valid cases from the corpus. After classification, 75 cases are non-discourse markers (13.66%) and 474 cases are discourse markers (86.34%), as shown in the following Table 1.

Table 1. The frequency and proportion of so in corpus

Items	Non-discourse marker	Discourse marker	Total
Frequency	75	474	549
Proportion	13.66%	86.34%	100%

As shown in Table 1, the frequency and proportion of *so* as non-discourse marker and discourse marker are numerically different ($p < 0.001$). Therefore, *so* is mainly used as discourse marker in Chinese middle school English class.

Table 2. The pragmatic functions and frequency of discourse marker *so* in Chinese middle school English classroom discourse

Level	Pragmatic Function	Frequency	Normalized frequency (per 1,000 words)
Textual level	Marking results and inferences	39	12.97
	Managing topics	78	25.94
	Summarizing	71	23.61
	Rewording	29	9.64
	Giving an example	7	2.33
	Delaying time	8	2.66
Interactional level	Indicating a speech act of question	127	42.22
	Indicating a speech act of request	63	20.95
	Indicating a speech act of opinion	13	4.32
	Indicating a speech act of elicitation	13	4.32
	Indicating a speech act of confirmation	26	8.64

Referring to Müller's [11] summary of the pragmatic functions of discourse marker *so* and the corpus analysis, the author finds that discourse marker *so* plays an important role at textual and interactional level in Chinese middle school English classroom discourse, as shown in the Table 2.

Table 2 shows that there is no significant difference between the pragmatic functions of *so* at the textual and interactional level ($p = 0.662 > 0.05$). In Chinese middle school English class, *so* mainly plays the functions of managing topics, summarizing and indicating results and inferences at the textual level, while at the interactional level it is mainly used to trigger questions and requests.

B. The Qualitative Analysis of Highly Frequent Pragmatic Functions of Discourse Marker so

Based on the quantitative results and combined with classroom discourse cases, this section makes a detailed analysis of the four high-frequency pragmatic functions of *so*.

1) Managing topics

Discourse marker *so* plays multiple management functions in actual teaching. In order to avoid abrupt start and attract students' attention, teachers need to use *so* to open the topic, as shown in Example (1). In the process of classroom teaching, discourse marker *so* can make classroom discourse and activities link more closely, establish the connection between information and promote students' grasp of classroom content, as shown in Example (2). However, the actual teaching activities are not limited to one topic, so teachers need to use discourse marker *so* to change topics naturally, as shown in Example (3). If the topic digresses from the subject, teachers can use *so* to bring back the topic and ensure the classroom teaching continue smoothly, as shown in Example (4).

(1) T: Yes, okay, **so**, first one, as your new teacher I want to…

(2) T: Great ideas. Okay. Well done. I love all your ideas … **So**, now let's review everyone…

(3) T: Okay. And Mary Smith's idea?
S: I don't really care if my friends are the same as me or different.
T: Okay. I don't really care. Okay. Thank you. **So**, these sentences can help us to get their opinions, and we can find they are all at the beginning of the passages, right? …

(4) T: …What are the differences between Huang Lei and Larry?...
……
S: They both like sports.
T: Yeah, **so**, eh, I mean differences. What about Huang Lei?

2) Summarizing

As Müller [11] pointed out, discourse marker *so* can trigger a summary of the preceding content. In summary, the speaker does not present a new idea, but reiterates a more general idea extracted from the previous discourse. In order to help students understand teaching content and ensure teaching effect, teachers often use *so* to summarize the teaching content. As the following example shows, the

teacher uses *so* to summarize the students' answers so as to help them understand the classroom content.

(5) T: …besides studies, what else do you usually do?
S1: I usually read some books.
S2: I often go shopping.
S3: I play basketball.
T: Good, thank you. **So**, see when you have free time, you study, you do sports, you should relax by shopping, right?

3) Trigger questions

In daily conversations, *so* can be used as an action-driven marker to set presuppositions for listeners in order to drive them to respond to the question. Therefore, discourse marker *so* usually appears at the beginning of the turn when it initiates a question, and is combined with the turn of speech right. Such as,

(6) T: …**So**, what about Huang Lei?
S: Huang Lei is short.
(7) T: **So**, what's the meaning of discount?
S: (silent)
T: Does it mean pay more or pay less?
S: Pay less.
T: Pay less. Well done.

Examples (6) and (7) are typical IRF classroom discourse structures. Teachers use discourse marker *so* to elicit questions and expect to receive responses and feedback from students. In Example (6), the student accepts the speech right and answers the teacher's questions. In Example (7), because *discount* is a new word, students are not familiar with it. Therefore, when the teacher asks the meaning of *discount*, students can't answer it. At this point, teachers give two opposite choices to guide students to answer, in order to promote the turn of speech right and the process of classroom activities.

4) Trigger requests

Schiffrin [1] argued that discourse marker *so* can initiate requests at the behavioral level. Therefore, in the process of classroom teaching, teachers can use the discourse marker *so* to attract students' attention and guide them to make correct speech acts. On the other hand, it can make teacher's tone more friendly, reduce the tone of command, thus shortening the psychological distance between teachers and students and creating a better classroom atmosphere.

(8) T: …Okay. **So**, now everyone, let's look at this sentence together.

As shown in the example above, the teacher uses *so* to draw students' attention and ensure that students can respond correctly according to the instructions, thus promoting classroom activities to go on. Müller [11] pointed out that *so*, which initiates speech acts, is directed to the listener, so it can promote teacher-student interaction to some extent.

V. CONCLUSION

Through the quantitative analysis of the usage of *so* in corpus, this study finds that there are significant differences in the frequency and distribution of *so* as discourse marker and non-discourse marker. Therefore, discourse marker *so* is quite common in Chinese middle school English class.

Through qualitative analysis, the research shows that discourse marker *so* plays multiple pragmatic functions. At the textual level, *so* can effectively link up teaching content and teaching activities, strengthen information's relevance, guide and promote students' understanding of discourse. At the interactional level, teachers use *so* to attract students' attention, encourage students to take an active part in classroom activities, shorten the distance between teachers and students and create a harmonious classroom atmosphere.

Based on the findings of this study, the author puts forward the following suggestions for English teaching and English teacher's development: (1) English teachers should develop their awareness of using discourse markers correctly and improve their ability to cohere discourse. (2) Teachers should guide students to pay attention to discourse markers in daily study so as to help students put them into practice and improve their English communication ability. (3) English teachers should improve their language competence and provide a correct language environment and comprehensible input for students.

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