

## Discourse Markers in EFL Learners' Turn-Taking through Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

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The present paper aims at comparing the two modes of CMC—synchronous and asynchronous—in terms of discourse markers used in turn-initial positions. It further attempts to examine the viability and limitations of these two modes of CMC in fostering EFL learners' face-to-face conversation skills. For these purposes, the present study analyzed 33 Korean EFL learners' Web chat and E-mail exchange data. Discourse markers in the participants' Web chat transcripts and those in their E-mail transcripts were identified and then compared in terms of their frequency and functions. The analysis revealed that the participants show difference in their preference for discourse markers depending on the modes of CMC. Also, the functions of discourse markers used for Web chat showed were strikingly different from those for e-mail. Especially, e-mail discourse markers revealed greater discrepancy from the markers in face-to-face conversation. The differences were found to be attributable to the time factor involved with the turn-taking systems of the two modes of CMC, especially the degree of instantaneousness in their turn-taking. Findings suggest that the turn taking skills and discourse marker use in CMC is not applicable to face-to-face conversation contexts. Pedagogical implications are discussed.

[CMC/synchronous/asynchronous/turn-taking/ discourse marker/chat/e-mail]

### I. INTRODUCTION

Conversation is perhaps the most salient mode of human interaction, and like other human interaction, it is structurally organized (Heritage, 1984). Participants in conversation take and yield turns in a successive ongoing conversation in an orderly manner, making mutual contributions so as to build a coherent conversation as a whole. It is quite a delicate joint venture that has to be executed everyday on a real time basis.

While the ability to send and receive message through smooth turn-taking composes a focal part of conversational competence for foreign language learners as well, it tends to be taken for granted that learners will somehow acquire its mechanism. In language classrooms, these skills hardly become the focus of instruction. The assumption might be that people learn how to take turns by taking turns in actual conversation. However, opportunities for conversation in a foreign language are very limited for learners of English as a foreign language.

The growing diversity in the mode of human communication is posing new opportunities and challenges to language learners and teachers. The rapid growth of computer technology over the past few decades has opened up a new area, allowing people to communicate with each other using text-based messages. Increasingly, people separated in space—and even in time—meet in virtual space via chatting, bulletin board, e-mail, etc. In short, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become a part of our daily lives. Accordingly, the need for non-native speakers of English to communicate via CMC is also increasing. It is thus vital to enable English learners to manage successful exchange in English via CMC, and turn-taking is at the heart of this business.

In addition to the complication that it has caused to language learning, CMC has significance in its facilitative role in language learning as well. In the field of language learning and teaching, research findings have repeatedly shown that CMC exhibits characteristics that show striking similarities to spoken conversation, suggesting that skills gained from CMC may transfer over to spoken language and that CMC through English could be a promising alternative to English conversation classes.

Meanwhile, research on the conversational aspects of CMC has been centered around the synchronous CMC contexts, where users exchange text-based message on a real-time basis. No systematic comparison was made between synchronous CMC (e.g., chat, IRCs, and MOOs, etc.) and asynchronous CMC (e.g., bulletin board, email, etc.), especially in the Korean EFL context. There have been even fewer discussions focusing on L2 learners' turn-taking across these two modes of CMC. As such, there has been no systematic consideration as to the viability of CMC in view of fostering L2 learners' turn-taking skills. This paper thus aims to explore the similarities and differences between synchronous CMC and asynchronous CMC in terms of L2 learners' mode of turn-taking via the medium of text-based CMC. Specifically, we will focus on the discourse markers used for synchronous and asynchronous turn-taking via CMC.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 1. Turn and Turn-Taking

A turn is a basic unit of oral conversation. The interaction in conversation is managed through turn-taking among conversational participants. And the behavior of turn-taking is systematic in several ways (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974): in most cases one party talks at a time; co-occurrences of more than one speakers talking are common but brief; and even if what is to be said is not specified in advance, transitions are made smoothly with no gap. This orderly management of turn-taking, according to Sacks et al., is due to some underlying rules shared by the participants in oral conversation (1974, p. 700). Some of those rules are presented below.

- 1) The current speaker selects next speaker.
- 2) If the current speaker does not select the next, then self-selection can occur. The first starter acquires rights to a turn.
- 3) If 1 or 2 does not occur, the current speaker may continue.
- 4) Even while current speaker is holding the turn, other speakers can take the turn by capturing transition-relevant points.
- 5) Occasionally, more than one participants self-select at the same time.
- 6) When the current speaker doesn't want to relinquish his or her turn, he/she may accomplish this by the use of an utterance incompleter (e.g., *but*, *nevertheless*, *moreover*).

The above rules suggest that turn-taking involves some amount of tension as conversationalists vie for the floor. Rule 2 ("The first starter acquires rights to a turn"), for example, motivates any willing self-selector to start as early as possible. Rule 4 ("Other speakers can take the turn at relevant points even while the current speaker is holding a turn") also involves the pressure to start early and thus competition among conversationalists. This competition for a turn prompts a willing speaker to start first, even when he or she is not ready for a wholesome message. Thus the new speaker often needs more time for further planning of his/her message.

The internal structure of a turn is closely related to such nature of turn-taking system in conversation. As the turn-taking system is a system for sequences of turns, a turn is thought of as a "turn-in-a-series" (Sacks et. al, 1974, p. 722). Turns, as they occur in a series, regularly have a three-part structure: a pre-starter (e.g., *well*, *oh*, *yeah*), a body, and a post-completer (e.g., *isn't it?*, *right?*), as shown in (1). In this paper, we will keep

our focus on the turn-initial pre-starters.

(1) pre-starter	body	post-completer
[Well]	[I'm not ready. I haven't kept you waiting though,]	[have I?]

According to Sacks et al. (1974), pre-starters serve multiple functions. First of all, they are turn-entry devices. They secure a turn, working as time-gaining devices. In order to contribute to the ongoing talk, speakers need some degree of planning for the turn's talk, but an earliest start may disallow a reasonable degree of planning in advance. They also function as a bumper between the prior talk and the current talk in the case of overlap. One or two turn-initial words often overlap with the one or two last words of the prior talk, but their overlap does not usually impair the main part of the message (p. 719), because pre-starters contain only marginal, if any, informational weight, without requiring that the speaker have a perfect master plan as a condition for starting. Studies on conversational structure report that these kinds of beginnings are extraordinarily common in conversation (Sacks, 1975; Schiffrin, 1986).

While Sacks et al. (1974) state that the semantic weight of these turn-initial devices are marginal and do not reveal much about the sentence thus begun, Schiffrin (1986) proposes that the turn-initial markers such as *well*, *and*, *oh*, and *I mean* play pivotal roles at a discourse level. She claims that these turn-entry devices mark the relationship of the current talk to the prior talk, signal the current speaker's orientation and attitude to what has been said, and point toward the direction of the upcoming talk. They contribute to establishing coherence in conversation, providing cohesive ties among turns, and giving orders to conversation. For this reason, Schiffrin (1986) labels them "discourse markers."

In sum, the pre-starter plays a crucial role in managing smooth turn-taking among speakers under time pressure, by providing processing time for the upcoming message, allowing a bumper in case of overlaps, marking the relevance of the current turn to the prior turn, and signaling the direction of the upcoming talk. In the literature, they are termed variously as pre-starters (Sacks et al., 1974), discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1986), involvement markers (Meskill, 1993), and back-channeling (Ducan, 1972), among others. In this paper, we will use the term "discourse markers". While discourse markers can also be placed in a turn-medial or turn-final position, we will limit our discussion to those discourse markers occurring in the turn-initial position.

## 2. Discourse Markers in Conversation

Different turn-initial discourse markers carry different functions in conversation.

Some of the most frequently used discourse markers and their typical functions/distributions are summarized below, based on Schiffrin (1986) and Sacks et al. (1974). The majority of the examples in this section are from Sacks et al. (1974), Schiffrin (1986), and Byron and Heeman (1997).

### 1) Oh

*Oh* is used to signal that the speaker has undergone a change in his/her current state of knowledge, information, orientation, or awareness. It is used when the prior turn gives a brand new information, as well as when the speaker's wrong knowledge is replaced by correct one, as in (2).

- (2) A: So what, you have three kids?  
 B: I have four. Three boys and a girl  
 A: Four *oh* I didn't know that.

*Oh* sometimes signals that there is a shift in subjective (expressive) orientation as in (3), or that old information has become newly relevant by a sudden recall as in (4).

- (3) A: I'm an N.T.A. in school  
 B: What's that?  
 A: Uh: really a cop  
 B: *Oh* really?

- (4) And uh—*Oh!* We- when we go to the kids, we always eat out.

### 2) And

*And* typically signals that the current utterance is a continuation of the same speaker's prior turn or other speakers' prior turn. As a discourse coordinator, *and* identifies the upcoming unit as a coordinate to some prior unit (In (5), "pick up a tanker..." is a coordinate to "fill up the boxcar...").

- (5) A: Fill up the boxcar with the orange  
 B: Okay  
 A: *And* pick up a tanker and bring it back to Elmira

It can also serve as a marker for the speaker's continued turn, signaling that the speaker is not ready to relinquish a turn.

### 3) Well

*Well* typically marks that an upcoming contribution is not fully consonant with the set of possible responses implied in the prior turn. It signals that the upcoming message is an insufficient answer to a question, or that a request being made in the prior turn is not fully complied with in the current turn.

- (6) A: How long would it take to load these from the warehouse into the engine?  
B: Uh *well* we can't load oranges into an engine we need a boxcar

Other functions of *well* include a hesitator or a filler, turn-initiator, and a pre-closing device that opens another round of talk before conversational closure.

### 4) Ah

*Ah* signals understanding of what the previous speaker has said, as in (7),

- (7) A: we got twelve o'clock train back  
B: *Ah* yes

It can also express empathy or other feelings about what has been said in the prior turn, similar to the expressive function of *oh*.

### 5) Yeah/yes/ye

Discourse marker *yeah* is invoked to provide a positive reaction, agreement, or endorsement of something the other speaker has said. When *yeah* occurs at the beginning of a turn, but is not acting as a direct response to a question (e.g., A: Can you read this? B: *Yeah*, of course"), it can be labeled as a discourse marker.

- (8) A: It's supposed to alleviate some of their pain  
B: *Yeah* why not. Legalize a hundred percent  
A: *Yeah* I don't see what the big deal is

## 6) Wow

*Wow* signals that the current speaker is greatly impressed by what is said in the prior turn.

- (9) A: That was a lot to go through. So-  
B: *Wow* you must be relieved to be over that

## 7) Um/Umm

*Um* marks the current speaker's attentiveness by means of filling pauses, allowing a limited amount of processing time before rendering response in time of difficulty.

There are many other discourse markers than the above ones. Some of the frequently used markers in conversation are summarized in Table 1.

**TABLE 1.**  
**Discourse Markers and Their Functions in Communication**

Discourse marker	Function
so	to mark main idea unit, to signal conclusions or summaries
by the way	to mark the start of a digression and to initiate a new topic
anyway	to mark the speaker's thought transition and the return from digression
right	to mark the speaker's interest and understanding of the prior turn
I mean	to signal the speaker's paraphrasing attempt, when the listener shows misunderstanding or non-understanding
I see	to mark understanding of the prior speaker's turn, or to mark that there is no intention to take a turn

### 3. Discourse Markers in Synchronous and Asynchronous CMCs

There is now quite a large storehouse of research on the conversational properties of synchronous CMC, especially Web chat, due to its alleged similarity to face-to-face conversation. Studies have attempted to describe a variety of linguistic and nonlinguistic strategies and devices employed by CMC users in order to cope with Web-specific conditions of communication (Chu, 2006; Chun, 1984; Kötter, 2003; Lee, 2002; Park, 2001; Smith, 2003). Studies suggest that learners use a wide array of communication strategies during synchronous CMC, and even use some linguistic and non-linguistic devices more actively than they do in face-to-face conversation (Chu, 2006; Kötter, 2003; Smith, 2003). Kern (1995) reported that L2 learners in the networked CM discussion produced more turns and sentences, and used a greater variety of discourse structures than they did in oral conversation. Chu (2006) found that learners signal overt indication of understanding (e.g., *Oh you?*, *Wow*, *I see*) much more frequently in

synchronous CMC than in oral conversation.

The active use of communication strategies, according to these studies, can be attributed to the unique characteristics of the CMC environment. First of all, text-based CMC is devoid of visual and auditory aid which plays a crucial role in face-to-face conversation. Kötter (2003) suggests that the lack of visual support such as eye contact, nodding, and facial expressions can prompt learners in the CMC context to use more active strategies in order to keep the conversation going. Chu (2006) also suggested that learners in the text-based CMC are encouraged to compensate the lack of visual and auditory aids by explicitly signaling their continued attention and their interest in the ongoing talk.

Another factor is the time pressure specific to synchronous CMC, which is related to the fact that the speed of typing has to be much slower than the speed of speaking. Smith (2003) found that learners frequently used fillers such as “Well...” and “Um...” during synchronous CMC. Fillers, as mentioned, are time-gaining devices employed to maintain flow of conversation under time pressure. Smith suggests that the heavy use of fillers is indicative of CMC users’ lack of tolerance for extended pauses during CMC.

A more delicate problem comes from the unique way turns are organized in Web chat. In synchronous Web chat, adjacency pairs (e.g., question-answer, request-declining) are frequently disrupted because messages are posted in the order received by the system (Herring, 1999), without regard for what they are responding to. Unlike the turn-taking in oral conversation, where transitions occur quite smoothly and overlaps are kept brief, turns in web-based chatting are very rarely arranged sequentially.

While the time pressure in synchronous CMC may pose tension for turn-taking, the nature of asynchronous CMC precludes such possibility: there is no room for interruptions or overlaps among interlocutors; the current addressor does not have to concern about losing a turn; and the addressee, who is to be the next addressor, does not have to compete for a turn. On the other hand, the point of turn-exit should be decided by the current writer. When one topic is exhausted, he or she has to choose whether to continue with some other topics or just to terminate the message. Under this more relaxed circumstance, it is very likely that e-mail communicators do not need to use time-gaining discourse markers like fillers.

Another significant difference between synchronous and asynchronous CMC lies in the time distance between messages. Messages are sent and received instantaneously in synchronous CMC, whereas there is a significant delay between the times when the message is sent and when it is received by the addressee in asynchronous CMC (Smith, 2003). Web-chat users can read lines just above their current turns, although an adjacency pairs in conversation might be disrupted by other turns. Chat users don’t have



to resort to their memory because the actual lines are available on the monitor in their verbatim state. By contrast, the topics in an e-mail message are responded to only later, say, after three days. It is thus quite unreasonable to imagine that the reader on the other side of the net will open the previous messages to reactivate the topic strands developed so far.

Furthermore, in e-mail, a topic is developed across different times, over multiple turns. As the exchanges develop, new topics are added. So one turn in e-mail comes to contain multiple topics, and in this sense, a turn in e-mail can be said to be equivalent to multiple turns in conversation. Hahn and Jiang (2006), in their study of e-mail exchanges between Korean-Chinese EFL learners, reported that a single turn of their e-mail included multiple topics showing parallel progressions.

The turn-topic relationship and disruption pattern in face-to-face conversation, Web chat, and e-mail can be roughly schematized as follows.

	Conversation	Web chat	E-mail
[Turn 1]	Topic A	Topic A	Topics A & B
[Turn 2]	Topic A	Topic B	Topics A, B & C
[Turn 3]	Topic A	Topic A	Topics B, C & D
[Turn 4]	Topic A	Topic B	Topics B, C, D & E
[Turn 5]	Topic B	Topic A	Topics B, D, E & F
[Turn 6]	Topic B	Topic B	Topics D, F, G & H

In sum, the turn-taking mode of synchronous CMC is different from that of asynchronous CMC in terms of the time pressure, time delay, turn size, the number of topics allocated to a single turn, and the number of turns allocated to a single topic. All these differences suggest that the turn-transition in the two modes of CMC can be qualitatively different, requiring quite different sets of strategies, and thus demonstrating quite different patterns of discourse marker use.

### III. METHOD

#### 1. Research Questions

The present study raised the following research questions.

- 1) What kind of discourse markers do Korean EFL learners use in CMC? Is there any

discrepancy in the types of discourse markers between synchronous CMC and asynchronous CMC?

- 2) Is there any discrepancy in the functions of discourse markers between synchronous CMC and asynchronous CMC?

## 2. Participants

The participants were 33 university English education majors who attended a computer-assisted language learning (CALL) class. They were at their intermediate to lower-advanced levels, with their TOEIC scores ranging from 510s to 820, and were highly motivated to improve their English proficiency. For seven weeks, the students were engaged in a global cultural exchange project, through which they learned how to utilize CALL to enhance language and culture learning. The data analyzed in this study is based on the written transcripts collected through this project.

## 3. Data Collection

### 1) E-Mail Data

The participants in the project were asked to exchange e-mails with other non-native speakers of English via e-mail. For this purpose, each of the participants was assigned a Chinese key partner, through a series of coordination between an English instructor at a Korean university in the Chungbuk area and one at a Chinese university in the Shenzhen area. The e-pairs were then asked to send and receive e-mails on a weekly basis, for seven consecutive weeks. While they were not given any fixed topic in advance, they were encouraged to exchange facts and feelings about themselves and their cultures. After seven weeks of the exchange, the Korean participants were asked to submit the whole e-mail texts sent and received, and to submit them as the program came to an end.

### 2) Web Chat Data

During the project period, the same students who participated in the e-mail exchange project were also asked to join an English chat session at SchMOOze University (<http://schmooze.hunter.cuny.edu/>), a kind of MOO (multi-user object oriented), where users can meet in virtual spaces and have Web chats using English on a real-time basis. They first received an introduction to MOO in general and to SchMOOze University for

two hours, and were informed of its various sectors. They were then asked to access SchMOOze University homepage for the next week and to have online chats with unidentified partners and to exchange information at personal and cultural levels. At SchMOOze, each participant entered a cyberspace called the "classroom" in their own individual time slots, and talked with a stranger/strangers they met there for minimum 30 minutes to maximum three hours. After the chat session, the participants submitted the transcripts of their written conversation, which were automatically shown on their computer screen windows.

#### 4. Data Analysis

The Korean participants were coded using serial numbers. For example, K5 means a Korean participant with the serial number 5. Their partners in e-mail were fixed for the whole project period, and thus were also coded in the same way. For example, the No. 5 Chinese student was coded C5. As the Korean participants had attended only one Web chat session in SchMOOze University, their chat partners were coded using the initials of the names they used in SchMOOze. A total of 317 email texts and 1515 Web chat turns exchanged between 33 Korean participants and their communication partners were analyzed. As the purpose of the study was to examine how EFL learners' use of discourse markers in synchronous CMC shows discrepancy from that in asynchronous CMC, the analysis focused on the discourse markers used by the Korean side of the participants. The discourse markers by their global/local partners were excluded from the analysis.

Frequently employed markers were identified for the chat texts and for the e-mail texts, respectively. The markers were then compared across the two contexts in terms of distributions and functions. Their distributions and functions were also compared with those in face-to-face conversation.

Markers used for other purposes than discourse management were excluded from the analysis. For example, when *yea* was used as an answer to a yes/no question, it was not coded as a discourse marker. On the other hand, when it was used as conversation management devices, such as agreement signal (See Example (8) in Section II.2), it was counted as a discourse marker (Schiffrin, 1986).

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. The Types of Discourse Markers: Synchronous vs. Asynchronous

Like other Web-based chat texts, the transcripts of the MOO chats in our study revealed a great deal of disruption among turns. Frequently, the users of the MOO chat did not wait until the other party's turn was completed. Instead, they tended to enter their message once some ideas were brought to their minds. Complex structures were avoided, which created a series of choppy turns. As was observed in previous studies (Chu, 2006, Herring, 1999), adjacency pairs were frequently disrupted because the users started their turn without waiting until the other party entered their own, and because the messages were posted in the order received by the system.

The following excerpt is from the Web chat text, where two Korean participants talked with VN, a Taiwanese. The three users in the excerpt are presented in acronyms. K stands for a Korean participant and the numbers next to K are serial numbers given to the Korean participants. Grammar and punctuation errors have not been corrected in our examples.

- (10) [Turn 40] K21: I'm Korean student..  
 [Turn 41] K4, do you know Korean?  
 [Turn 42] VN: where are you from Korea?  
 [Turn 43] VN: there are some Korean students visiting here recently  
 [Turn 44] K21: I'm from south Korea  
 [Turn 45] K21: okay~~ we have to do homework  
 [Turn 46] K4: I'm from Je choen do you know that?  
 [Turn 47] K21: VN, do you good at English?  
 [Turn 48] VN: Jecheon, a sea port?  
 [Turn 49] VN: what homework  
 [Turn 50] K21: I live in Daejeon

In Turn 43, VN, a teacher in Taipei tells K21 and K4, two Korean students, that she has met some other Koreans. The answer to Turn 43 (i.e., why there are some Korean students recently) does not appear in the next turn, but in Turn 45 because it is interrupted by Turn 44, which is actually a reply to Turn 42. Turn 45, in turn, is responded to only in Turn 49. Likewise, the topic in Turn 46 is linked to Turn 48 and then to Turn 52.

Due to the disruption, the chat conversation became complicated, creating a condition for more interactive strategies to mark which turn is responded to, and to mark understanding or lack of understanding of the ongoing talk. The participants were found to actively employ turn-initial discourse markers in synchronous chat. On the average,

the Korean participants used a discourse marker per every 9 turns.

A turn in e-mail was much larger in size than that in Web chat. One e-mail text normally included more than 10 sentences. Unlike in Web chat, turns in e-mail rarely began with a discourse marker. Almost all mail texts analyzed began with a letter opening such as "Dear ~" or "Hi~". A more detailed analysis, however, revealed that there occurred quite a few cases of turn-medial discourse markers that closely resembled turn-initial discourse markers of oral conversation or Web chat. Let us examine one of the e-mail texts analyzed in the present study. The text in (11) was written by K2, and comprises the fourth turn in the series of his e-mail exchange with his Chinese e-mail partner C2 (Italics are used to highlight relevant discourse markers).

- (11) How are you, ZY~  
 I'm sorry because I always said to you "sorry". Just kidding...^^  
 [1] Actually I'm not that busy. I'm just little lazy. This semester, our keypal is homework. But I'd like to exchange with you continually.  
 [2] *ah~* it's not your fault. This is my first keypal, so I don't know many of simpler form. So you don't need to feel sorry. [3] *And* last letter, I mistake. I think M.T. is used for every Univ. student. But it's only used Korea. It is simpler form of 'Membership Training'. In another word, it is just travel with my department friends. Sorry about that.  
 [4] *as you know*, many Korean people smoke. In my class lots of my friends are smoke and smoking now. But I'm not smoke. Don't worry about that^^  
 [5] *actually*, JH is my best friend. And his exact name is XXX. I said to him 'my keypal friend knows you' and JH said 'It's amazing' and I feel, too.

The above text alone hardly seems to be a coherent discourse. It is hard to find any internal logical relationship among the subparts [1], [2], [3], [4], and [5]. The topic shifts from "being busy/lazy" to some "simpler form", to explanation of the term "M.T.", to "smoking", and finally to "JH", his best friend.

The coherence of the above e-mail text can be established only when we take into account its interaction with other e-mail texts. When we examine the previous mail (i.e., Turn 3) written by K2's partner, we can find that the subparts of Turn 4 are in fact the replies of the subparts of Turn 3 written by the Chinese counterpart, whose partial transcript is presented below.

- (12) HOW ARE YOU?  
 E~, I'm glad to hear from you, really. never be sorry again for no punctuality

okay? [1] As I have known why you are late—busy. That’s ok. I don’t mind waiting a little bit. [2] well, ‘sth’=something. Cuz I’m lazy enough not to write the full word ‘something’. Sorry, it’s my fault that caused you to be confused. [3] And I have a question as well.

What does ‘M.T.’ mean” military text? I guess so. Yet tell me the true meaning in next letter, please.

[4] Shenzhen is a young city in the south of China.....

[5] E~, you said ‘I’m not freshman so I have to prepare most of the thing.’ I am curious about that. Are you guys required to take M.T. each year? What for?...

[6] there are some Korean students in my campus. They came here to learn Chinese and English... but one thing, I noticed that most korean students smoke. I often meet them smoking in the corridor. Do you smoke? Sorry, it’s so abrupt to ask you. I mean nothing... quit taking it to heart.

[7] my roommate’s key-pal is JH. He’s sophomore like you. You are in the same class aren’t you? ...

Now it becomes clear that K2 is responding to each subpart of C2’s mail: K2’s subpart [1] is a response to C2’s [1]; K2’s subpart [2] is an answer to C2’s question in [2] and also [5]; K2’s subpart [3] is a reply to C2’s [3]; K2’s subpart [4] is a response to C2’s [6]; and K2’s subpart [5] composes an answer to C2’s [7]. When the subparts of the two mails are matched, each pair looks like adjacent turns in conversation, as shown in (13).

(13) C2: well, ‘sth’=something. Cuz I’m lazy enough not to write the full word ‘something’. Sorry, it’s my fault that caused you to be confused.

K2: ah~ it’s not your fault. This is my first keypal, so I don’t know many of simpler form. So you don’t need to feel sorry.

(14) C2: What does ‘M.T.’ mean” military text? I guess so. Yet tell me the true meaning in next letter, please.

K2: I mistake. I think M.T. is used for every Univ. student. But it’s only use Korea. It is simpler form of ‘Memrbership Training’. In another word, it is jut travel with my department friends. Sorry about that.

(15) C2: I often meet them smoking in the corridor. Do you smoke?

K2: as you know, many Korean people smoke. In my class lots of my friends are smoke and smoking now. But I’m not smoke. Don’t worry about

that^^

(16) C2: my roommate's key-pal is JH. He's sophomore like you. You are in the same class aren't you?

K2: actually, JH is my best friend. And his exact name is XXX. I said to him 'my keypal friend knows you and JH said 'It's amazing' and I feel, too.

The rearranged subparts in (13-16) suggest that from a conversational point of view, the subparts of a turn in e-mail actually have a function of "sub-turns", each of which contains a topic and has a corresponding pair part in the prior turn. For this reason, the present study conducted a reanalysis of the e-mail texts, counting a sub-turn as a "turn", and the discourse marker introducing a sub-turn as a "turn-initial" discourse marker. Under these new operational definitions of a turn and a turn-initial discourse marker, the analysis found that the participants quite actively employed discourse markers at the turn-initial position.

On the other hand, the learners were found to use only a small repertoire of discourse markers. In Web chat, only eleven discourse markers (*oh, yea (ya, yes, yeah), ah, um(m..), wow, I see, then, anyway, hey, really, so*) were used five times or more. And only ten markers (*ah, um(m..), and, anyway, by the way, wow, oh, well, then, now*) were used five times or more in e-mail. The turn-initial discourse markers in the Webchat context and the e-mail context are summarized in the table below.

**TABLE 2**  
**Turn-Initial Discourse markers in Web Chat and E-Mail**

Rank	Web chat		E-mail	
	Discourse marker	Token	Discourse marker	Token
1	oh	36	um(m...)	18
2	ya/yea/yes/yeah	25	ah	17
3	ah	12	and	16
4	um(m..)	12	wow	14
5	wow	8	anyway	12
6	I see	8	by the way	12
7	then	7	oh	9
8	anyway	5	well	9
9	hey	5	then	6
10	really	5	now	5
11	so	5	ok	2

*Ah, um(m...), and wow* are among the five most frequently employed discourse markers both in Web chat and in e-mail. *Oh* was the most frequently found marker in the Web chat data, while it occurred only nine times in the e-mail texts. *Ya/yea/yeah/yes*

occurred with high frequency in the Web chat communication, whereas it occurred only twice in the e-mail texts. These differences in occurrence suggest that learners face different needs for discourse markers in order to manage communication, depending on the mode of CMC. Detailed analysis of the frequently occurring discourse markers will be presented in the next section, focusing on their distributional characteristics and functions in contexts.

## 2. Functions of Discourse Markers in CMC: Synchronous vs. Asynchronous

The participants were found to use discourse markers differently depending on whether they are engaged in Web chat or e-mail exchange. Our discussion will center the discourse markers that were heavily employed in Web chat and/or e-mail.

### 1) Ah

*Ah* in face-to-face conversation typically signal the current speaker's understanding of what the previous speaker has said. It is also used to signal emotional response such as surprise. In Web chat too, the participants were found to use *ah* in a quite similar way.

(17) D: People learn Mandarin (Chinese) is easier than Cantonese  
K3: *ah*~ I know [=I see]

(18) M: I want to become a diplomat  
K1: *ah*- it's very nice job

(19) T: we have different kinds of food such as Japanese style, Cantonese style,  
Shanghai style...  
K10: *ah* I want to eat that food

On the other hand, *ah* in e-mail was hardly used as an intellectual or emotional response to the counterpart's prior turn. Rather, it was mainly for signaling that old information has become newly relevant by a sudden recall. *Ah* in e-mail either marked a brand new topic that had suddenly brought up to the writer's mind as in (20) and (21), or reintroduced a topic in the previous turn which had not yet been the focus of the current mail as in (22) and (23). *Ah* was never used to signal understanding of the immediately prior turn. So the major function of *ah* in e-mail was to signal a new topic.

(20) *Ah*, last time, my professor said that we might go to China next year. And she



said when we go to China, we'll meet our keypal (K24)

- (21) *ah~!* My older sister is going to go to your country. So I recommend Potala palace to her... (K28)
- (22) *Ah* Thanks for your song~! (K5)  
(In response to "Now I send you one of my favorite songs. MEET as my first present. I hope you will like it" in C5's previous mail)
- (23) *ah~!* I passed an examination. Thanks to your talk (K30)  
(In response to "You must try your best to do well in your examination....And good luck to you" in C30's previous mail)

## 2) Um/Umm

*Um*, known as a filler used for gaining processing time might be a legitimate member of Web chat discourse markers, considering the time pressure inherent to the chatting environment. The planning and processing time is well reflected in the use of *um* in the following excerpt.

- (24) H: Where are you? your home?  
K24: then, what do you think about this schmooze university?  
K24: yes, I'm home  
H: I'm bothering your meal... sorry.  
K24: *um...* I think this univ. is very useful site to access English.  
H: *um...* schmooze?

Participants even entered *um* as a single entry for a turn as shown in (25), and then presented the main message in the next turn, which reflects the needs of chat users under time pressure to secure their turn and at the same time to signal that the main message soon follows.

- (25) K1: I think Korea is even more conservative than japan  
MM: such things?  
MM: for example  
K1: *umm...*  
K1: in Korea, still men and woman are not equal in the society

MM: mm

On the other hand, it is quite unlikely that learners in e-mail use *um* as much, because the e-mail environment seldom poses any time pressure. *Um*, a device that secures further planning time in oral conversation and Web chat, has little place in e-mail because what the e-mail writer has to do when he needs time would be just to stop and think for a while, and then start typing again. Still, *um* was the most frequently used discourse marker in our e-mail data. What made the Korean e-mail writers use *um*? Let us first examine actual occasions of *um* in our e-mail data. The followings are partial transcripts of the e-mail texts sent by the Korean participants.

(26) I'm sorry, write an e-mail is so late! Because mid-term exam. I have to study hard, but end is not good.

*Um...* I want to go Chinese, but I have no money so when I graduate XXX university, I earn money... (K18)

(27) *Umm...* in the past, Korean sitcom was very humorous, but nowadays, not especially hot. (K5)

(28) *Umm...* anyway, it's my turn to tell something about students' campus life. (K8)

In (26), K18 writes about the delay of a reply due to the mid-term exams, and then he changes his topic to going to China. To the writer's own eyes, this sudden shift might have seemed too abrupt and troublesome for his e-mail partner to adjust to. So, his choice was to put some discourse marker between the two heterogeneous topics that hopefully would frame the second topic and thus separate it from the first. (27) and (28) are the initial portions of sub-turns, which are in response to C5's sub-turn beginning with "Do you know that Korean sitcoms influence our life much?", and to C8's sub-turn beginning with "Now I will tell you something about students' campus life here", respectively. However, as the Korean students have been dealing with other topics in their mail text, they too might have needed to separate their current topic from the previous ones.

In all the occasions, including the above examples, the discourse marker *um* in the turn-initial position of e-mail sub-turns appeared only where there were topic changes. Therefore, we can safely conclude that *um* in e-mail texts were used as a signal that the current writer is thinking about what to say, and further, that there is a topic shift. But the marker did not capitalize on the essential aspect of *um* as a time-gaining device under

time pressure.

### 3) Wow

*Wow*, a signal that the current speaker is impressed by what is said in the prior turn, involves an instantaneous emotional reaction to the prior turn. In the MOO chat, the marker served a similar function as shown in (29) and (30).

(29) VN: South Korea is getting leading technology and fashion in Asia just next to Japan.

K21: *Wow*~~ thank you.

(30) K14: I'm from Korea.

DD: Me too

K14: *Wow* where are chatting now?

On the other hand, in our e-mail data, only three out of the 14 tokens of *wow* occurred in the turn-initial position.

(31) *Wow*~ you also have a lot of members in your family! I know that Chinese are required that have only a child in each families;;; (K14)

(In response to C14's "There are six people in my family.")

The other eleven tokens of *wow* were in fact introduced by a lead-in part, which was a brief restatement of a topic of the partner's prior turn. The lead-in that repeated the topic of the prior turn usually adopted the formula of yes/no interrogative like "Did you/Are you/Have you-?" as in (32).

(32) Did you have vacation during nine days? *Wow*~ I didn't have a vacation (K26)

(In response to the prior turn of C 26, which included "National labor day is coming, I will have nine days for this vacation.")

(33) K32: Can you swim? *Wow*~ I envy you~

(In response to the prior turn of C32, which included "I can enjoy swimming in the swimming pool of our university.")

It seems that the instant characteristic of the emotional response signaled by *wow* made it awkward to "pronounce" it in the absence of the immediate stimulus. But once

the stimulus is reintroduced by the current writer's restatement of the prior topic, *wow* might have been felt to be better suited to the context.

#### 4) Oh

*Oh* was the most heavily used discourse marker in Web chat. As in oral conversation, *Oh* was used to mark that the speaker has undergone a change in his/her current state of knowledge. Most of the tokens were used to mark the change in the current chatter's knowledge due to his/her reception of new information from the other party.

- (34) K19: Before being a university student, I used to listen to soft rock music.  
 MT: we call that 'elevator' music in the U.S.:)  
 K19: but now I listen to all kinds of music especially world music:)  
 MT: What is world music?  
 K19: *oh* elevator music? That's funny.  
 MT: that's usually what is played in elevators.  
 K19: *oh* I got it.

It was sometimes used to express the current writer's subjective change.

- (35) F: I like write essay and novel—publishing my own work is my final goal in my life.  
 K5: *oh* I envy U
- (36) W: I'm interested in Korea  
 K23: *oh* really?

Out of the total 36, only two tokens of *oh* signaled that old information had become relevant due to a sudden recall.

- (37) DD: you overated? kk  
 K14: ;;;;;  
 K14: maybe~~;;  
 DD: hh  
 K14: *oh* I have to go home now~~

In E-mail, the occurrence of *oh* was not as frequent. In addition, none of the seven

occasions were used for signaling an information change due to the new information from the other party. The main function of *oh* in the Korean EFL learner's e-mail was to signal information becoming relevant due to a self-initiated sudden recall.

- (38) *Oh~* I have a question. How old are you??^o^ (K7)  
 (39) *oh,* I have to stop writing. I have some test about British literature (K20)

The main function of *oh* in e-mail thus is an interjection caused by one's own recall rather than a signal for information change triggered by the other party. This functional contrast of *oh* in e-mail with *oh* in Web-chat suggests that the reciprocal aspect of turn-taking is quite limited in e-mail. As with *wow*, *oh* as a response to what the prior speaker said requires proximity in time between the prior turn and the current turn. In e-mail, the current turn is too far away from the prior turn to invoke such instantaneous reaction as *oh*.

#### 5) Yea/Yeah

Discourse marker *yea*, which provides a positive reaction, agreement, or endorsement of what the other speaker has said in face-to-face interaction, was actively used in Web chat.

- (40) SN: by the way, people didn't use this site anymore.  
 K20: *yea-* always same person here  
 SN: *ya~*

The Korean participants in the e-mail context seldom used this discourse marker, in the absence of an immediately prior turn. This suggests that the discourse marker *yea* is for agreement to an immediately preceding turn, As was the case with *wow*, it seems to have been quite awkward for the mail writers to assume that he is signaling prompt agreement to what the other speaker had said.

#### 6) And

As discussed, the main function of *and* in face-to-face conversation is to signal a continuation of the same speaker's prior turn or other speakers' prior turn. As a discourse

coordinator, *and* identifies the upcoming unit as a coordinate to some prior unit.

*And* occurred only twice in the whole set of Web chat transcripts. Considering *and* is one of the main discourse markers (Byron & Heeman, 1997; Schiffrin, 1986), we can say that the tokens of *and* in our Korean EFL Web chat are close to zero. Meanwhile, the rarely occurring *and* resembled that in oral conversation in terms of its function, i.e., signaling that the current utterance is a continuation of a prior turn. In (41), for example, *and* was used to signal that the current utterance “*and* where are you live?” was a continuation/coordination of the other speaker’s prior turn “do you live in dormitory?”

- (41) DD: do you live in dormitory?  
 K14: dormitory?  
 K14: I don’t understand  
 DD: dormitory means living place in school  
 K14: I see^^  
 ... (The chat continues)  
 D: ok I seem to know that place  
 K14: *and* where are you live?

*And* was the third most frequently used discourse marker in the e-mail data. However, a close look at the data revealed that *and* in the participants’ e-mail texts is not typical of face-to-face conversation.

- (42) (In response to the prior turn by C16 including “International May day is Labors Day. Isn’t there that day in your country? It’s an international day.”)  
 K16: *And* I knew [=came to know] May day by you. Thank you. Korea has Labor Day also.

*And* in K16’ turn-initial position is not appropriate in the above exchange between C16 and K16 because *and* is a signal for additional information. In (42), K16 simply means that his knowledge system has changed thanks to his partner, and thus the right type of discourse marker fitted to this context would be some sort of signals marking understanding or knowledge change (e.g., *I see, oh*). In short, *and* used in our e-mail data was not what Schiffrin (1986) called a “discourse coordinator.”

*And* is not a discourse coordinator in terms of the K16’s own preceding text, either.

- (43) ...I am very busy this weekend because of ROTC test. My family members are five. I’m the first-born son in family. Father, mother, younger brother, younger

sister, and me.

*And* I knew May day by you. Thank you. Korea has Labor Day, also. By the way, when is your vacation over? I hope that we often exchange mail. (K16)

In (43), *and* is a marker that signals a topic change. Thus the role it plays is that of “framing”, i.e., separating the current sub-part from what has been written so far by the same writer. All the tokens of *and* were found to be used to signal a topic change.

## V. CONCLUSION

So far, we have examined Korean EFL learners' use of discourse markers in Web chat and e-mail contexts, and found that the mode of discourse marker use varies depending on whether the mode is synchronous or asynchronous. First, the learners showed different preferences in the use of discourse markers. For example, the discourse marker *oh* was the most frequently occurring marker in Web chat, but was only marginal in e-mail. Second, the distributional patterns and functions of the markers showed remarkable differences. Markers in Web chat and e-mail tended to serve different functions from each other. Although communication via Web chat utilized discourse markers only within limited ranges of functions, their functions showed a certain degree of similarity to those in face-to-face conversation. On the other hand, some of the discourse markers used in the learners' e-mail were found to serve functions that cannot easily be found in face-to-face interaction. Instead, the learners seem to have adapted existing discourse markers to the new context of e-mail, and used them to meet some other requirements unique to e-mail, like signaling a topic shift. Also, discourse markers that signal instantaneous cognitive and emotional response were generally avoided.

The idiosyncratic use of discourse markers in e-mail is most probably accountable to the time delay between turns. As turn-taking in synchronous CMC is carried out on-line, there is always the need to cope with the time factors, just like in face-to-face conversation. On-line Web chat provides an environment where the prior turn is an immediate context. Discourse markers in face-to-face conversation also presupposes this proximity between turns, and the instantaneousness imposed by the proximity in time seems to be a defining element of discourse markers in face-to-face conversation. By contrast, e-mail turns are too far away from each other in time to satisfy the conditions of immediacy involved in real-time conversation. Within such a tension-free environment as e-mail, the role of discourse markers is quite limited.

On the other hand, the remoteness between e-mail turns creates a different set of

challenges, and these challenges require the users to use strategies unique to e-mail context. One of the challenges is that the interlocutors should be faithful to the cooperative principle. That is, the current turn should develop their topics in such a way that their contribution can be relevant to the topics of the prior turn. On the other hand, in the midst of faithfully responding to prior topics, e-mail writers frequently end up with multiple topics within a single turn (Hahn & Jiang, 2006). This requires some sort of linguistic devices such as discourse markers that can mark topic shifts and thereby signal the way how the mail text is organized. In the lack of discourse markers responsible for this function unique to e-mail, the Korean EFL learners in the present study adapted the conventional discourse markers to their e-mail context, causing the markers to deviate from their original functions for face-to-face conversation.

The turn-taking in chatting shares common characteristics with that in face-to-face conversation in that time pressure is a critical element in both modes of communication. However, the turns in our chat data was extremely short in length, with only a few turns made up of more than two sentences. This suggests the learners are under the pressure of having to post their message promptly, that the other party is not patient enough to wait until the whole turn unit is completed. The biased use of discourse markers found in our Web chat data might be partly due to our participants' lack of knowledge of the markers. But it can be at least partially attributed to the difference in turn-taking system.

In sum, the mode of turn-taking and discourse marker use in CMC differs from that in face-to-face conversation, and thus is not readily transferable to oral conversation. Especially, it is hard to expect that our learners would take advantage of asynchronous CMC like e-mail in order to develop knowledge of turn-taking and discourse markers in oral conversation. The asynchronous nature of e-mail seems to contradict with the essential nature of conversational discourse markers that presuppose instantaneousness and prompt time management. The role of instantaneousness and time pressure in the use of discourse markers needs further studies.

One remaining issue is that the role of CMC would go beyond the facilitating effect on developing conversational skills. CMC has now become a major means of communication in its own right, even as vital as face-to-face conversation. EFL learners are thus facing the dual needs of learning and using English not only for performing oral conversation but for successfully managing CMC. In this respect, CMC should be included in the English curriculum not only as a supplementary tool for developing speaking skills but as a major means of communication per se.

From this prospective, it is necessary to understand the newly growing convention for discourse markers in synchronous and asynchronous CMC and help learners acquire adequate CMC competence, rather than to reject these useful tools for not being similar



to oral conversation.

The present paper acquires significance for being a first attempt to directly compare the ways EFL learners use discourse markers in synchronous CMC and asynchronous CMC. On the other hand, this paper has some limitations. First, while the Korean EFL learner group was kept constant both for Web chat and for e-mail, their interlocutor variable was not completely controlled in Web chat. Also, the present paper did not make a direct comparison of EFL learner data and native English speaker data. Understanding the native speaker norm or the international norm in CMC is necessary for a more systematic study of the phenomena. It will also provide more concrete guidelines for teaching how to use English for CMC.

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**Examples in: English**

**Applicable Languages: English**

**Applicable Levels: Secondary/Tertiary**

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