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Mirjana Matea Kovač, Eva Jakupčević

DISCOURSE MARKER USE IN L2 ENGLISH: A CASE STUDY WITH ENGINEERING STUDENTS

As essential elements of pragmatic and communicative competence, discourse markers (DMs) can help L2 learners not only to sound more natural, but also to cope with the difficulties posed by speaking in a foreign language. However, research has mostly shown that L2 learners tend to use DMs differently to L1 speakers - less frequently, with a narrower range or for different functions. Due to the great importance of these linguistic elements in L2 speech, more information is needed about how learners from different linguistic backgrounds and in different contexts use DMs. The present study aims to expand the existing knowledge by providing insight into the DM use of 33 Croatian Engineering students (upper-intermediate L2 English speakers) in a repeated narrative task in English. The results point to a very poor performance when it comes to the range of DMs utilized, with the basic DM *and* overwhelmingly used to achieve coherence in the narratives. The reason for this result most likely lies in the unnatural input that learners are exposed to in the classroom environment, as well as the lack of focus on these units in L2 education and relevant materials. Thus, our results point to a necessity to address the inclusion of DMs both in EFL teacher education programmes, as well as programmes for L2 learners.

Key words: discourse markers; speech fluency; pragmatic competence; pragmatic fossilization

1. INTRODUCTION

Discourse markers (DMs), words and phrases such as *you know, I mean, well* and *yeah*, are ubiquitous in natural, spontaneous speech, all the while eluding conclusive definitions and strict taxonomies. As multifunctional linguistic units which support interaction, DMs serve to connect an utterance to its co-text and/or context (Buysse 2012; Romero-Trillo 2013). They create the interactive bonds between interlocutors and guide them through communication, helping them draw conclusions about the direction the interaction is heading in by signalling the speaker's communicative intention (Fraser 1999; Iglesias Moreno 2001), which makes DMs essential elements of unplanned, spontaneous communication (Fox Tree 2010). These units function meta-pragmatically by supporting ongoing communication independently of the propositional content or the syntactic structure of the utterance (de Klerk 2005). The original propositional meaning of DMs has been modified, and they "have adopted a communicative status that weaves the net of discourse between the addressor, the addressee, and the context of a given message" (Romero-Trillo 2013: 1). Syntactically optional, DMs do not add to the propositional content of the utterance, nor do they modify its semantic content in any way (Müller 2005). When these linguistic units are left out of the utterance, the sentence remains grammatically correct and its meaning is not lost; however, it becomes less clear (de Klerk 2005; Müller 2005). In other words, DMs "focus on the way communication is negotiated rather than on its content" (Fox Tree 2010: 270).

There is no definitive list of units belonging to this group or their functions, and the large number of corpus-based studies, usually focusing on a limited number of these units, add to the confusion by revealing an increasing number of context-bound uses. The reason for this lies in the simple fact that DMs can do many things, and their functions can be conceptualized as a long list of varying roles (Fox Tree 2010). However, a division commonly referenced in research is that into textual and interpersonal functions of DMs. According to Brinton (1996), DMs function textually to start and close the discourse, as an aid in turn-taking, as a filler or hesitation device, to mark boundaries in talk, mark old or new information, mark sequential dependence and for repairs. Interpersonally, they function to express responses or reactions, as back-channel signals, to achieve cooperation and sharing or as face-savers.

Their prevalence in discourse has led them to be the subject of studies from a number of different perspectives (see e.g. Maschler and Schiffrin (2015) for a detailed overview), with little agreement among researchers on even the basic issues such as

the name or the scope of this essential group of linguistic elements. However, despite the lack of consensus when it comes to the “technical” matters, there is an overall understanding that these units play an indispensable role in the pragmatic competence of speakers (Hasselgren 2002). Their great importance for achieving fluency and pragmatic competence, which in turn represents a key element of communicative competence, makes discourse markers highly relevant for L2 learners. Not only does the correct use of DMs contribute to natural-sounding speech (de Klerk 2005), but it can also assist L2 speakers in understanding the connections and relevance of different parts of conversations, at the same time reducing the effort that is needed for information processing (Wei 2011).

Existing studies of the DM use of L2 speakers largely compare them to L1 speakers and often point at differences between these two groups, with L2 speakers using DMs less frequently than L1 speakers or using them in for different functions. In one of the most cited studies in this area, Müller (2005) compared the frequencies and functions of four DMs (*well, so, you know, like*) in the speech of L1 (American) and L2 (German) speakers of English, university students. Although the two groups used the DMs in similar ways, the differences between them lay in the fact that the L2 speakers used the DMs less frequently and with a narrower range of functions, while completely disregarding some. Interaction and contact with L1 speakers were shown to contribute to DM use more similar to that of L1 speakers. Similarly, Aijmer (2011) found that Swedish learners of English used the DM *well* for different functions than their L1 counterparts, which she contributes to the fact that they are L2 speakers who have different needs when it comes to communication and interaction. The effect of proficiency on DM use was the focus of a study by Neary-Sundquist (2014), who compared L2 (Chinese and Korean) speakers of English on four proficiency levels with their L1 counterparts. Her results indicate that the frequency and range of DM use grows with proficiency. However, although the learners at the highest level of proficiency use DMs almost as frequently as L1 speakers, they still used a narrower range of these units. Wei (2011) showed that more advanced learners were more successful at adapting to the context than learners with a lower proficiency, they exhibited more spontaneity in speech and were more efficient in managing interaction and implementing the social functions of language.

Regardless of their importance for successful communication in an L2, DMs have been shown to be neglected in the classroom context. For example, EFL textbooks have been found to lack pragmatic content in general (Ren, Han 2016), as well as discourse markers, which often seem to be presented inadequately to learners, with

incomplete information about the range of their possible roles or the necessary contextual information (Lam 2009). The general input that learners are exposed to in the classroom, i.e. teacher talk, has also been described as potentially unsuitable for the successful acquisition of these units. Teachers' language in general might be restricted by the inherent specificities of the educational context, while those who are non-native speakers might not have the adequate level of pragmatic competence themselves to illustrate natural language which would contain a variety of these units (Hellermann, Vergun 2007; Müller 2005; Romero-Trillo 2002).

Despite the increasing number of studies of DMs in the area of second language acquisition, it remains of key importance to gain as much insight as possible into the production of L2 learners from different language backgrounds, with different levels of proficiency and in different contexts in order to form a more complete picture which could serve to inform and facilitate L2 learning practices. For this reason, the aim of this study is to provide insight into the frequency and diversity of DM use of Croatian students, speakers of L2 English, in a repeated narrative task.

2. PROCEDURES

The overall aim of the present study was to determine the frequency and diversity of DM use of Croatian university students, EFL learners with a high level of proficiency in the English language, in a repeated narrative task. A total of 33 Croatian EFL learners (Learner 1 – Learner 33) participated in in this small-scale, preliminary study, all of them first-year students of Electrical Engineering at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture, University of Split. The students reported similar backgrounds when it comes to their EFL experience. They all learnt English in primary and secondary school and/or foreign language school, and none of them had spent more than ten consecutive days in an English-speaking country. The students were selected according to the results of the secondary school-leaving examination (the Croatian State Matura Exam) in English, in which they all scored excellent or very good grades at the highest level of the exam (B2 level). The study was conducted in the academic year 2016/2017.

For the purposes of the study, a narrative task was used requiring the participants to tell a story based on images, which has frequently been used in similar research to date (e.g. Kormos, Dénes 2004). The chosen task was taken from a popular collection of cartoons used for the purposes of similar studies measuring aspects of spoken per-

formance (fluency, grammatical correctness, lexical diversity and similar) (Kormos, Dénes 2004; Riazantseva 2001; etc.). The task is relatively simple because it is structured and its content very familiar. The six drawings with related content satisfy the criterion of structuredness as the action has a beginning, a middle and a predictable ending with a clearly set out chronology of the action sequence (Tavakoli, Skehan 2005). The words and phrases necessary to form the story, in which a man and a woman with a dog meet in a park, get married and finally part ways, are familiar to the speakers because they require the knowledge of very frequent formulaic expressions. The study includes the forming of a story on the basis of images in such a manner that the listener who cannot see the images can understand and correctly interpret the speaker's story. The participants could choose to tell the story in the present, past or future tense and were not restricted by time. They had 30 seconds to prepare. The tasks were performed in a room at the Faculty in very informal surroundings in which the listener sat across from the speaker, recording the narrative. After telling the story once, the participant was asked to tell the same story again. Task repetition has been shown to have a positive influence on speaker fluency (e.g. de Jong, Perfetti 2011; Lambert, Kromos, Min 2017), as in the first try, attention is often focused on the task itself. For this reason, we can expect that in the second, more relaxed and fluent round, the students would structure their stories better, using a larger range of DMs.

The story was recorded and processed using the Audacity software, and transcribed for analysis. In the identification of DMs, a list of DMs provided by Fung and Carter (2007) was used. The analysis of DMs was performed manually, as the status and meaning of these units depends on the context. For example, the word *so* has many non-DM functions, e.g. a part of the phrase "so far" meaning until now, or an adverb meaning "very" (e.g. It's *so* good). Another example of a word with multiple functions is *and*. According to Fraser (1999), when the word *and* connects whole utterances (sentences), or when it appears at the initial position in an utterance, it is a DM, while when it connects single words or phrases (e.g. bread *and* butter), it is a conjunction. Thus, not all of the occurrences of these words in the corpus were counted as DMs. In line with Fuller (2003), the following characteristics were used as the criteria for determining the status of a word or phrase as a DM:

- 1) DMs are used to signal the relationship between discourse units.
- 2) DMs are grammatically optional.
- 3) DMs do not change the truth conditions of the propositions in the utterances they frame (Schourup 1999, as cited in Fuller 2003).

Due to a lack of a clear definition of discourse markers, the listed characteristics also constitute a definition of these units used in the present study.

Examples from the transcripts:

Learner 1

and that dinner developed erer... and they started to liking each other... and eventually they got married.... and in the last scene we can see the man walking the dog alone...and it is probably because the woman died or something...and that's it

Learner 2

so this guy named Dean is walking around the park is like really stressed out. He hasn't got he hasn't got his salary on time...and suddenly he sees this girl named Petra. She is erer walking her dog and they see they look alike....so she is really pretty

3. RESULTS

The results of the analysis of DM in the narratives are shown in Table 1, where the sample values for the first encounter and the repeated task are presented. It can be noted that the participants used slightly over 25 DMs per 1000 syllables in the first encounter with the task and almost 24 DMs per 1000 syllables in the repeated task. To investigate whether there are statistically significant differences, a suitable statistical test was chosen.

Table 1: Sample values for the discourse markers in the two narratives in English

<i>Discourse marker</i>	<i>First encounter</i>	<i>Repetition</i>
<i>Min</i>	0	0
<i>Me</i>	20.83	21.05
<i>Max</i>	67.96	71.43
<i>Mean</i>	25.33	23.99
<i>SD</i>	18.05	21.05
<i>SE</i>	3.14	3.11

Min - minimum, *Me* - median, *Max* - maximum, *Mean* - Arithmetic mean, *SD* - standard deviation, *SE* - standard error

The Shapiro-Wilk has been used to test normality, emphasised in many papers as the highly efficient normality test. According to this test, Table 2, no significant deviations from the normal distribution have been obtained. Therefore, the t-test for dependent samples, Table 3, is used.

Table 2: The results of the Shapiro-Wilk normality test

<i>Discourse markers</i>	<i>SHAPIRO - WILK</i>	
	<i>W</i>	<i>p</i>
	0.976	0.646

The results indicate that there is no significant difference between the frequency of discourse markers between the two narratives (first encounter and repeated task) ($\alpha= 0.05$).

Table 3: t-test for dependent samples

<i>Discourse markers</i>	<i>t-Test</i>		
	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	0.412	32	0.683

Figure 1 displays the distribution of DMs in both stories. The image shows that the DM *and* is by far the most frequent DM used by the participants (64.14%). Other DMs are significantly less frequent (23.63% *so*, then 8.44%, *OK* 0.84% and *you know* 0.42%).

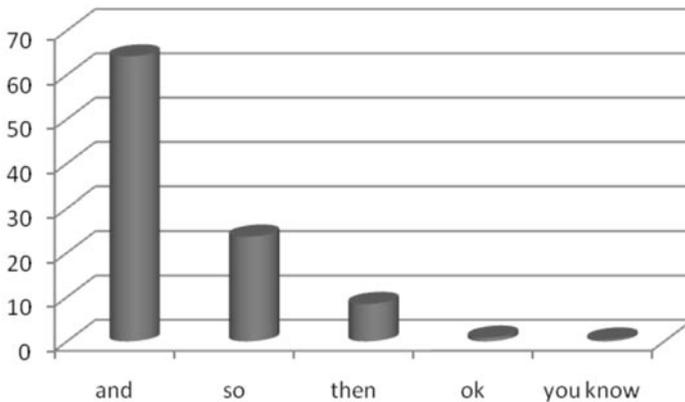


Figure 1: The distribution of the discourse markers in both stories

4. DISCUSSION

The results of the present study have shown that Croatian students use a very limited range of only five DMs (*and, so, then, ok, you know*) in both stories, regardless of whether it is the first encounter with the task or task repetition. These results are somewhat surprising given that these students are all skilled users of English at the upper-intermediate (B2) level or higher. According to the Croatian National Curriculum for English (Ministry of Science and Education 2019), after the last year of secondary school, Croatian students should be able to connect text elements into a logical whole using appropriate and complex language structures. While they do structure their narratives, the participants in this study do so almost exclusively by using the simple DM *and*.

In research to date, it has been shown that the L2 learners' skill at DM use grows with their level of proficiency (Buysse 2010; Wei 2011), which does not seem to be the case with our participants. The L2 learners at the highest level of proficiency in the study conducted by Neary-Sundquist (2014) use 58 different DMs, the most frequent in all groups being *I think, so, also, just, you know*, which was very close to the number of DMs used by L1 speakers (69). However, even for these learners, the 3 most frequent DMs (*just, so, you know*) accounted for 67.7% of all DM occurrences. Nevertheless, our participants did not exhibit a range that would even be comparable to that of the learners in Neary-Sundquist's (2014) study. The fact that our participants were engineering students might also be relevant. For example, Buysse (2010) com-

pared L1 speakers with two groups of Dutch students, those who had English language and linguistic as their major, and those who were students of commercial sciences. All of the students used fewer interpersonal markers such as *like*, *sort of*, *you know*, while they overused textual markers such as *well* and *so*. However, students of English linguistics were closer to L1 speakers in the way they used interpersonal markers, which the authors contribute to their exposure and better command of the English language. The fact that our students studied Engineering might have influenced their performance. However, these students have only started their studies, so this suggestion would have to be confirmed by further research that would compare students in different stages of studies and students from different educational backgrounds.

The very high frequency of the DM *and* in our results is to some extent understandable, as *and* is one of the most frequent words in the English language, and it can perform a whole range of different functions in speech. For example, it can express addition or coordination between clauses, mark continuation or transition, mark relevance or sequence between utterances (Fung, Carter 2007). In his study of children's L1 English, Choi (2007) noticed that children at the age of 4 use *and* as an "all-around" marker for the explicit marking of coherence relation, with the frequency of its use decreasing with age and the acquisition of more specific DMs. In the L2 context, Jakupčević (2019) found that young Croatian learners of English also rely on *and* in their narratives to perform a range of different functions, while disregarding other DMs. The author concludes that age and the level of proficiency of the learners are the probable reason for this overuse; however, the results of the present study seem to suggest that there are other factors to blame. One possibility is the occurrence of pragmatic fossilization, as suggested by Romero-Trillo (2002). The author explains pragmatic fossilization as a consequence of the fact that non-native speakers usually follow a "form-to-function" process. They learn specific items which are then contextualised at later stages, which leads to a lacking implementation of the pragmatic track of language learning. In other words, as opposed to native speakers who acquire grammar, semantics and pragmatics at the same time, with non-native speakers in formal contexts, the pragmatic track is neglected, leading to pragmatic fossilization. Romero-Trillo (2002) confirmed this in his study of DM use of children and adults, L1 and L2 (Spanish) speakers of English, where he concluded that pragmatic fossilization occurs as a result of the lacking input in the formal instructional context. This conclusion was prompted by the fact that while L1 and L2 children differed only slightly in their use of DMs, adult L2 speakers exhibited more striking differences from their L1 counterparts and used DMs in inappropriate ways. According to the

author, the results indicate that pragmatic fossilization occurs at some later point in the language learning process, and it is most likely caused by the inadequate input that the learners are exposed to in the formal classroom environment. There is a possibility, thus, that the participants in our study were also exposed to input in the classroom which was not rich in DMs and which did not reinforce their pragmatic development sufficiently.

The two existing studies of DMs in EFL teacher talk in the Croatian context seem to support these conclusions. For example, in their study of Croatian EFL teachers' DM use, Vickov and Jakupčević (2017) found that although the teachers employed a variety of different DMs in their speech, the three most frequent DMs (*ok, so* and *and*) together accounted for almost half of all of the DM occurrences in the corpus. It is interesting to note that the three most frequent DMs in this study are identical to the three most frequent DMs in the present study. Furthermore, Vickov and Jakupčević (2020) showed that EFL teachers, L1 and L2 speakers of English, differ significantly in the way they use DM clusters (two or more co-occurring DMs) in their classroom talk, with the teachers in the L2 group using a smaller range of DM clusters much less frequently. However, as indicated by Hellermann and Vergun (2007), it is not only non-native teacher talk that is potentially lacking when it comes to DM use. The L2 English teachers in their study, native speakers of English, did not use the examined DMs (*like, well, you know*) in their teacher talk at all.

These results suggest that the restrictions inherent in the classroom context make it difficult to ensure that the speech used is natural and contains elements such as DMs. Some further factors that may lead to DMs being neglected in the FL classroom is their multifunctionality, or the fact that their many meanings and functions may often be vague to L2 speakers (Fox Tree 2010). Another reason may lie in the fact that they may be considered a feature of informal, less articulate language (Mullan 2017), which may lead to learners and teachers avoiding these units in more formal contexts. Finally, studies of EFL textbooks have also shown them to be lacking in the way they incorporate pragmatic content in general (Diepenbroek, Derwing 2013), as well as in the way they treat discourse markers, which are often presented without any additional information about their potential functions, or in a decontextualized manner (Lam 2009). As it is impossible to fully understand any type of pragmatic content, including DMs, without contextual information, these kinds of materials cannot be expected to support learners in coming to the right conclusions as to when and how to use DMs and other pragmatic features of language.

In any case, the potential neglect of DMs in the classroom context is an essential

issue as DMs are significant for L2 learners for a variety of reasons. First of all, they can facilitate the development of L2 fluency as a subcategory of formulaic language, which is of great relevance for L2 development (Hasselgreen 2004). As an important part of conversational grammar, they help L2 speakers in establishing interaction and making their intended meaning clearer for the interlocutors (Aijmer 2011). Furthermore, real-time communication poses a heavy cognitive burden on the participants, which means they benefit greatly from information about what to pay attention to, what to disregard and how to interpret what has been said (de Klerk 2005). This is especially true of L2 speakers who are faced with more complex demands as they tackle speaking in a language that is not their L1. In that regard, L2 speakers can profit from the use of these units as they can facilitate interpretation of their interlocutor's discourse and aid them in gaining valuable thinking and planning time (Müller 2005). Being able to hesitate in a natural way is of great importance for L2 speakers, as they need techniques to gain time to be able to resolve their planning and production problems (Gilquin 2008). The use of DMs can also help make communication with L1 speakers easier by achieving a more informal atmosphere (Ter-raschke 2007). Finally, DM use different to that of L1 speakers might have unintended consequences in regard to how L2 learners are perceived as speakers in that they could be subtly marked as less proficient, less clear or even rude or unwilling to participate in interaction fully (Hellermann, Vergun 2007; Lam 2009).

It seems that, despite the recognized importance of DMs, as well as pragmatic competence in wider terms, these units still seem to receive limited attention in the classroom context, and L2 learners are often expected to “pick them up” on their own, with time (Hellermann, Vergun 2007). Yet, research in L2 pragmatics has shown that pragmatic competence does not necessarily develop automatically, along with lexico-grammatical proficiency (O’Keefe, Clancy, Adolphs 2011). Our results may thus serve as a warning of the potential consequences of neglecting pragmatics in the language classroom.

4. CONCLUSION

Due to the great importance of DM use for fluent and natural speech of both L1 and L2 speakers, as well as the many ways in which these units can facilitate dealing with online speech issues, the aim of the present study was to make a much-needed contribution to the existing knowledge about DM use in L2 English. The study thus in-

cluded an analysis of repeated narratives of 33 Croatian engineering students who had all completed a B2-level school leaving exam in English in order to determine the frequency and range of DMs used by the participants to structure their stories.

The main finding of the present study was the surprisingly low diversity of DM used by the students, despite their high level of proficiency in English. Our participants completed a high school programme which requires them to be able to use complex linguistic elements to connect their discourse and passed the B2-level school leaving exam. However, in their narratives, the students relied heavily on the very basic DM *and* to structure their narratives. Despite the fact that *and* has a variety of diverse functions that it can perform in speech, this overreliance is most likely an indicator of greater issues that lie in the background. These issues seem to stem from the wider neglect of the need to expose L2 learners to authentic, natural materials, both in learning materials such as textbooks, as well as in the single biggest source of input in the classroom – teacher talk. Thus, the main implication of this study is to caution of the need for a greater focus on pragmatic competence in general, and specifically on the way discourse markers are presented in textbooks, used by EFL teachers and taught in the classroom context. Without attention to such detail, learners, even those who successfully complete high-level exams, are left without some of the basic tools that would help them make their narratives clearer and more logically structured, as well as aid them in naturally performing the essential work of online talk such as repairs and hesitations.

The small sample used in this study makes it difficult to generalise the results of the study, and research that would encompass a greater number of students, as well as their teachers, would provide more information about the potential reasons behind their lacking DM use. Also, as the present study was conducted on engineering students, i.e. students who study a technical subject, further research that would compare these results with a wider population of students would be of great interest. Moreover, further research is needed that would include different types of production as well as different context. For example, an interactive task would maybe provide more opportunities for the use of interpersonal discourse markers. Finally, a longitudinal study of Croatian learners through primary and secondary school years would be highly beneficial as it would help us understand more about how and when DMs are acquired, and if/when pragmatic fossilization occurs.

To sum up, we believe our results have provided an interesting and useful insight into the production of Croatian L2 learners. Hopefully, the findings of our study will motivate further research in this area and lead to improvements in the ways DMs are

included in curricula and formal education in general.

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DISKURSNE OZNAKE U ENGLESKOMU KAO STRANOMU JEZIKU: STUDIJA SLUČAJA SA STUDENTIMA STROJARSTVA

Sažetak

Kao osnovni elementi pragmatske i komunikacijske kompetencije, diskursne oznake (DO) učenicima stranih jezika mogu pomoći da zvuče prirodnije, kao i da se nose s poteškoćama koje predstavlja govor na stranomu jeziku. No, istraživanja su većinom pokazala da učenici stranih jezika DO rabe na različit način od izvornih govornika – rjeđe, u manjemu rasponu ili za drugačije funkcije. Zbog velike važnosti ovih jezičnih elemenata u govoru na stranomu jeziku, potrebno je više informacija o tome kako učenici s različitim jezičnim pozadinama i u različitim kontekstima rabe DO. Cilj ovoga istraživanja je proširiti postojeće znanje pružajući uvid u uporabu DO 33 hrvatskih studenata elektrotehnike (govornika engleskog jezika na višoj srednjoj razini) u ponovljenom narativnom zadatku na engleskomu jeziku. Rezultati ukazuju na vrlo slabu izvedbu što se tiče raspona upotrijebljenih DO, uz učestalu uporabu osnovne DO *and* za postizanje koherencije u pričama. Razlog ovakvim rezultatima najvjerojatnije leži u neprirodnom unosu kojemu su učenici izloženi u kontekstu učionice, kao i nedostatku fokusa na ovo elemente u nastavi i udžbenicima stranih jezika. Naši rezultati stoga ukazuju na potrebu da se DO uključe u programe obrazovanja budućih nastavnika, kao i programe za učenje stranih jezika.

Ključne riječi: diskursne oznake; govorna fluentnost; pragmatska kompetencija; pragmatska fosilizacija

Adresa autorica
Author's address

Mirjana Matea Kovač
Eva Jakupčević

Sveučilište u Splitu
Filozofski fakultet
mirjana@ffst.hr
ejakupcevic@ffst.hr