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Acquisition of Discourse Markers – Evidence from EFL Writing

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The paper focuses on a mixed-method study aimed at investigating Croatian primary and secondary school students' use of English discourse markers in written language production. The results of the study, carried out on a sample of 200 participants, indicate that Croatian EFL learners have a relatively poor command of English discourse markers at both proficiency levels. The results suggest that they tend to use a relatively small range of English discourse markers and point to L1 interference and inadequate input as possible causes of low acquisition of English discourse markers. Key words: discourse markers, written production, L1 interference, Croatian primary and secondary EFL students.

1 Introduction

„...if a foreign language learner says *five sheeps* or *he goed*, he can be corrected by practically every native speaker. If, on the other hand, he omits a *well*, the likely reaction will be that he is dogmatic, impolite, boring, awkward to talk to etc, but a native speaker cannot pinpoint an "error"“.

(Svartvik, 1980:171)

As Svartvik points out, native speakers will notice and correct any mistakes of morphological nature occurring in the language production of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners while, due to an inadequate use of discourse markers (words and phrases like *well*, *you know*, *in other words*, *moreover* etc.),

their language behaviour is likely to be interpreted as deficient, boring, impolite, weird, and the like. In this they may not always be able to precisely define the cause of such perception. Discourse markers belong to fine and subtle discourse-pragmatic linguistic aspects which reflect those social and cultural values of the language that are generally known to its native speakers. Discourse markers play a vital role in the overall organisation of native speaker discourse because they contribute towards a pragmatic meaning of an utterance, creating cohesion and coherence in both written and spoken language communication. Insufficient knowledge of these linguistic items and their inaccurate use may therefore cause misunderstanding and difficulty in coherent interpretation and may hinder communication efficiency as well as interpersonal and intercultural interaction. Due to crucial significance of discourse markers in language communication the knowledge of their linguistic properties, together with the ability to use them intelligibly, is regarded as an indispensable component of the discourse, pragmatic, and, in more general terms, communicative competence.

If we accept that discourse markers play a decisive part in communication among native speakers, then we cannot but agree with Müller (2005: 14), who claims that we are dealing with important elements which need to be mastered by non-native speakers as well. Müller further assumes that, although they may not achieve a native-like competence, the majority of foreign language (FL) learners would strive to avoid their linguistic behaviour being judged in a way similar to the one mentioned by Svartvik. Success in FL learning is frequently evaluated by the extent to which linguistic behaviour of FL learners resembles native speaker behaviour in the same type of situations. This undoubtedly includes appropriate use of discourse markers, which opens the question of the degree of their acquisition by FL students.

In spite of the highly important role of discourse markers in achieving discourse coherence, it may be noted that they have been rather neglected in the FL curriculum (Romero Trillo, 2002, Müller, 2005). A great number of EFL students have traditionally experienced the "grammatical" aspect of the FL as being the basic aim of FL learning, in which "grammatical" knowledge is frequently equated with accurate use of syntax, phonology, morphology, and semantics, which make the propositional content of an utterance clear and acceptable. Discourse markers, on the other hand, are not explicitly taught, although they make an integral part of the discourse, pragmatic, and strategic, i.e. communicative competence, which is acknowledged as the most important aim of FL learning (cf. Hellermann and Vergun, 2007, Müller, *ibid.*).

It has also been observed that empirical research into these linguistic items in the field of FL learning has also been largely neglected (Ellis, 1994, Müller, 2004), which is somewhat surprising considering the negative consequences resulting from insufficient mastery of discourse markers or their inadequate use. Most studies conducted to date are relatively recent (dating back to the 1990s) and focused on the description and comparison between the use of English discourse markers by native speakers and by EFL learners. Judging from the available literature, empirical research seems to be mostly based on data obtained

from oral language samples, and mostly conducted on small samples of learners of advanced adolescents. The existing findings suggest that EFL learners use discourse markers less frequently than native speakers (Weinert, 1998), and often use them in inadequate ways, i.e. ways in which they would never be used by native speakers (Yang, 2005). Furthermore, some of the findings seem to be indicative of an overuse of particular discourse markers as, for example, *but*, *and* and *so* (Paatola, 2002; Hays, 1992). This type of language behaviour is viewed by the authors as a result of L1 interference (Müller, 2005), pragmatic fossilization (Romero Trillo, 2002), unnatural language input in the formal educational context, as well as a consequence of FL teaching approaches that mostly focus on grammar and literal (semantic) meanings of words (Fung and Carter, 2007). An under-representation of discourse markers in English textbooks is also pointed out, together with questionable competences of English teachers in using English discourse markers in spoken language (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Hellermann and Vergun, 2007).

Research looking into ways in which non-native speakers use discourse markers in written English texts (which is negligible compared to research into discourse markers in spoken English) deals with the issues listed above from two somewhat different theoretical angles.

A greater part of empirical studies conducted in this area is concerned with the use of *cohesive devices* as employed in essays written by non-native speakers of English.¹ What makes the studies interesting is that these language devices include words which serve functions similar to those of discourse markers, and are terminologically identified as *cohesive devices*, *conjunctions* or *connectors*. Some linguists, such as McCarthy (1991), Aijmer (2002), and Buitkien (2005), tend to equate discourse markers with conjunctions: they consider discourse markers to be just a more general notion and claim that they, except for conjunctions, are characteristic of written texts. The mentioned studies seem to be theoretically based on ideas of Halliday and Hasan (1976). We are therefore here dealing with a theoretical perspective within which cohesive devices are brought into a close relationship with cohesion and coherence as the principal determinants of the text. Conjunctions (connectors), along with other cohesive devices (referential cohesion, substitution, ellipsis, and lexical cohesion), are thus regarded as a mechanism specifying particular semantic relations existing between two sentences. Their main function becomes manifest in connecting language utterances into a coherent and cohesive written discourse.

Apart from research based on a semantic approach as promoted by Halliday and Hasan, over the past ten years new empirical research has been emerging primarily based on Fraser's pragmatic approach (1990, 1999; e.g. Martinez, 2004), as well as Schiffrin's discourse approach (1987; e.g. Ying, 2007) and Swan's

¹ A smaller part of similar research has been conducted in the area of the so-called *on-line* writing, mostly electronic messages, (e.g.: Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth, 1997, 2001).

categorisation of discourse markers (1980, 2005; e.g. Dülger, 2007). Consistent with these theoretical orientations, the language items discussed here are referred to exclusively as *discourse markers*² and are recognised as words which promote oral and written communication, or as words promoting the listener's and reader's comprehension of a coherent discourse (cf. Fraser, 1996). Unlike empirical research based on the semantic theory, with the exception of Schleppegrell (1996), who does not include connectors such as *you know, well, right, OK*, which - as Schiffrin (ibid.) claims - are typical of spoken English, the authors incorporate these discourse markers in their analyses as well. They reiterate that, in writing, EFL learners tend to use the same discourse markers that they use in speech (Yardley, 2000). This observation seems to be further corroborated by a classification of discourse markers used in Japanese and Chinese textbooks of English, which are mainly based on the classifications provided by Fraser (1996), Swan (1980), and Schiffrin (1987) (cf. Ying, 2007). Almost identical to results of discourse markers acquisition research in spoken EFL, some research conducted in the field of writing skills also seems to indicate relatively low levels of acquisition, as well as insufficient knowledge of their syntactic and semantic features. However, a comparatively small number of studies have focused on the acquisition of English discourse markers and these have almost invariably been carried out on small samples of advanced learners. Consequently, there have as yet been no clear generalisations concerning discourse markers acquisition in EFL learning which might serve to establish guidelines for mastering these linguistic items in formal learning contexts. Due to all this, a need for more intensive research has been voiced during the last decade. It has been emphasised that such research should be conducted on larger samples comprising participants of different ages and levels of language competence, and from a variety of socio-cultural backgrounds.

The study described below is an attempt to extend the current knowledge about acquisition and use of English discourse markers by EFL learners.

² Being subject of interest of many linguists of different theoretical orientations discourse markers are referred to by means of a wide range of terms (e.g. *cue phrases*, Knott and Dale, 1994/, *discourse operators*, Redeker, 1991/, *pragmatic particles*, Ostman, 1981/, *discourse particles*, Schourup, 1985/, etc.).

Brinton (1996:29) gives a number in excess of 20, while Fraser (1998:301) identifies 15 terms, with partially overlapping references.

2 The study

2.1 Aim

In our study we decided to focus on the Croatian EFL learners' use of English discourse markers at the level of writing skills. Besides the general need for research into acquisition and use of discourse markers by FL learners (see previous section), our motivation for such a study grew out of the awareness that 1) it is in the development of EFL writing skills that discourse markers are exceptionally significant – enabling learners to produce well-structured texts that are logically connected into an intelligible whole (Dülger, 2007); 2) research has identified the use of discourse markers as a discriminating factor in relation to the quality of EFL compositions (Martinez, 2004), and 3) writing in English involves considerable difficulties for Croatian EFL learners (Zergollern-Miletić, 2007), with the greatest obstacles being logically connecting sentences and creating well-structured written compositions.

In our study the answers to the following research questions were of particular interest:

1. What is the frequency of use of English discourse markers at the level of writing among Croatian EFL learners?
2. Does frequency of use of discourse markers correlate with proficiency levels?
3. What are the general characteristics of English discourse markers use on the part of Croatian EFL learners?

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 Participants

A sample of 200 participants, comprising primary school EFL eighth-graders (aged 14) (Sample group I) and secondary school fourth-graders (age 18) (Sample group II), took part in the study. There were 100 participants in each sample group. There were 116 female (58%) and 84 male participants (42%). They had all started learning EFL in the fourth grade of primary school at the age of 10 and had been exposed to the same total number of lessons of English within the sample group. None of the participants had spent any considerable time in an English-speaking country. With regard to the parents' education level, the majority of parents (both mothers and fathers) in both groups had secondary education.

2.2.2 Instruments

The instrument used in the study was a writing test designed and validated by a team of Hungarian experts (Fekete, Major and Nikolov, 1999; Alderson,



Nagy and Oveges, 2000). It had been used in a previous study carried out as part of the Croatian national project called *The English Language in Croatia*³. The test consisted of one open-type task: a guided letter. Participants were required to read a short text (a competition for an annual award for the best friend) and respond with a formal letter addressed to the magazine editor, the person of a superior social status whom they did not know. The task provided the following cues instructing participants as to what they should address in the letter:

- a) who the person is
- b) what the person looks like
- c) what the person does
- d) the experiences they have shared
- e) why the person should get the award.

From the way in which the task was formulated, it is evident that it was aimed at investigating a wide range of knowledge and competences in written communication interaction, narration, and presentations of arguments, including use of:

- language of interaction, narration and argumentation
- cohesive and other devices aimed at achieving the coherence of the text
- vocabulary
- grammar forms and structures
- spelling rules.

With regard to the topic, the test corresponded with interests of both age groups. In terms of the required language competence it was accessible to both groups. The test represented a type of task to which participants had frequently been exposed in the course of their regular EFL classes. The EFL curriculum for both sample groups included development of writing skills based on writing compositions, mainly narrative and argumentative in nature. Such type of writing tasks served also as end-of-year English language tests whose scores were an important component of the final grade in English.

2.2.3 Procedure

Both sample groups were tested on the same day (close to the end of the 2008/09 school year) in order to avoid participants informing each other about the task content. The testing was conducted in a usual classroom environment during regular English classes. It lasted for 45 minutes and participants' English teacher was present during the testing. Care was taken that teachers were not

³ This research project (2002-2006) was sponsored by the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (No 0130514), with Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović as principal researcher.



aware of the final aim of the study. We did not want to reveal in advance our intention to focus on discourse markers because we wanted to avoid possible pre-teaching of discourse markers prior to or during the writing task. Also, we did not disclose in advance the topic participants were to write on in order to avoid possible teacher temptation to prepare participants for writing about this particular topic.

Following the testing, an analysis of discourse markers was conducted. This implied identifying and classifying all discourse markers found in the corpus of compositions. In identifying discourse markers we relied on Fraser's (1999) and Swan's (2005) classifications. In this way four groups of markers were formed: elaborative, contrastive, inferential, and temporal markers. The discourse markers which were not listed as belonging to any group from Fraser's categorisation were included into a separate variable referred to as "other discourse markers". This enabled us to take into consideration all the discourse markers appearing in participants' compositions. Frequencies of the following English discourse markers were statistically computed: *but, still, although, despite, however, instead of, nevertheless, and, also, for example, well, or, in addition, above all, I mean, that is, too, because, so, as a conclusion, of course, for that reason, when, after, then, meanwhile, finally, immediately, before, eventually, I think, really, you know, first, OK, I don't know, just as, actually, oh*. Although the last marker has been listed in Schiffrin's (1987) discourse markers classification, we included it because we found it interesting in view of the fact that it is typical of discourse in spoken English.

2.3. Results and discussion

The quantitative data was analysed using the statistical package SPSS 13.0 for Windows. Results are presented in section 2.3.1. This is followed by results of more qualitatively-oriented analyses presented in section 2.3.2.

2.3.1 Analysis of discourse markers frequency distribution

2.3.1.1 Sample group I (primary school participants)

Judging by the mean values of discourse markers frequency distribution in compositions written by primary school participants (see Figure 1), these learners seem to have most frequently used elaborative discourse markers (4.68 per composition). The second most frequently used markers are inferential (1.77 per composition), followed by temporal (1.14 per composition), then contrastive (1.10 per composition), and, finally, 'other discourse markers' (0.85 per composition).

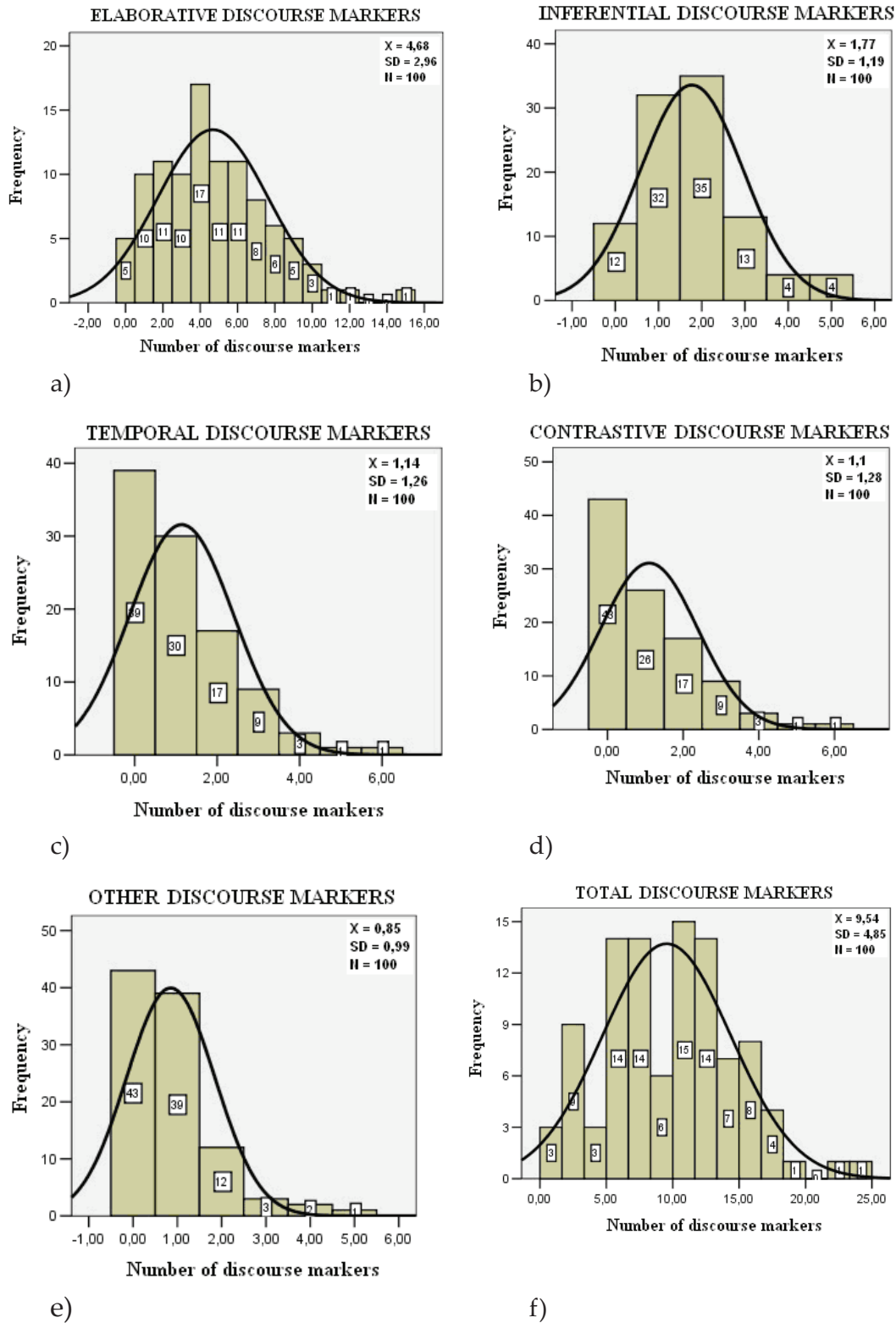


Figure 1. Discourse markers frequency distribution in primary school participants' compositions

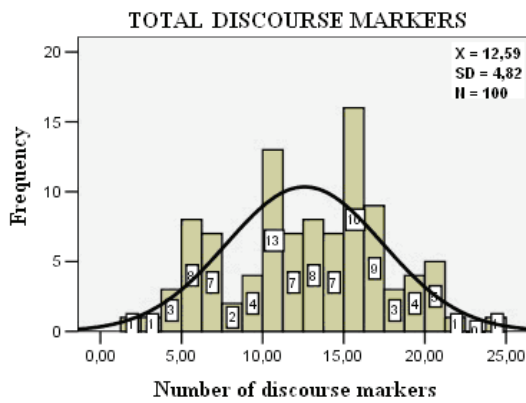
As shown in graph 1a, the number of *elaborative* discourse markers per primary school participants' composition ranges between 0 and 15. This also represents the widest range of discourse markers per composition in this particular sample group. The highest number of pupils (17, or 17% of the total number of primary school participants) used 4 elaborative discourse markers each. The highest frequencies were observed to range between 1 to 6 elaborative markers per composition. Five participants did not use a single elaborative marker. When this is compared to the corresponding data for other types of discourse markers, it can be noticed that this type of markers included the lowest number of participants who did not use any marker belonging to the markers type. The highest number of elaborative discourse markers (15) was used by only one primary school participant. In the 7-15 range of elaborative markers per composition the frequencies tend to be decreasing. The number of *inferential* discourse markers used per composition (graph 1b) ranges between 0 and 5. The majority of participants (35) used no more than two inferential markers each, with as many as 33 students having used only one inferential discourse marker. With respect to *temporal* discourse markers (graph 1c), primary school participants used 6 discourse markers at the most (only one participant), while as many as 35 pupils used no temporal discourse markers whatsoever. A large number of participants (30) used only one temporal marker per composition. Exceptionally high frequencies in minimal numbers or total absence of discourse markers was found in the *contrastive* discourse markers frequency distribution (graph 1d). As many as 43 primary school participants did not use a single contrastive discourse marker; 26 participants used one, while only 17 participants used two. Similar results were obtained regarding "other discourse markers" (graph 1e): 82% of primary school participants used either none (43%) or only one (39%).

Looking at the total number of all discourse markers found in primary school compositions (graph 1f), participants appear to have used between 0 and 24 markers. Two compositions were written without a single discourse marker, while one participant used as many as 24 discourse markers. As is evident from the related graph, the highest frequencies were observed in the 5-15 range of discourse markers per composition. Within this range the largest number of participants (10) used 10 discourse markers each, while a slightly smaller number of participants (8) used 7, or 13 each. The curve seems to indicate a significant decrease in the number of participants with respect to the increase in the number of discourse markers per composition (ranging between 16 and 24).

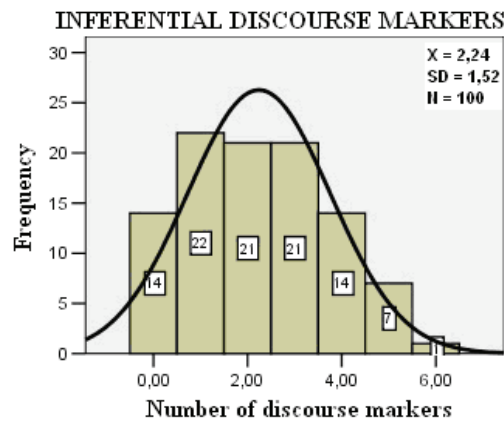
2.3.1.2 Sample group II (secondary school participants)

The mean values obtained for the compositions written by secondary school participants (see graphs in Figure 2) seem to exhibit similarities with the values obtained for primary school participants in the sequence of discourse markers with respect to the degree of their frequency in participants' compositions. Accordingly, secondary school participants seem to have most frequently used elaborative discourse markers (6.03 per composition). This is followed by

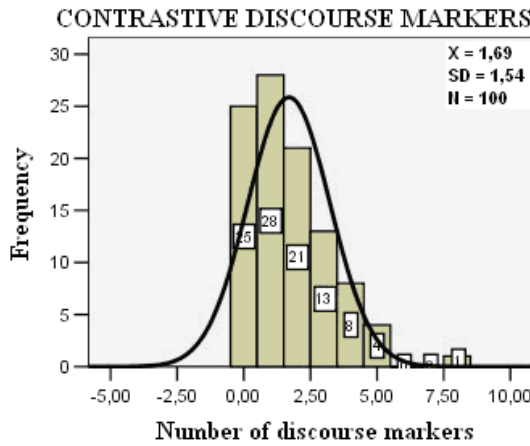
inferential discourse markers (2.24 per composition). In contrast to results of primary school participants, contrastive discourse markers (1.69 per composition) are third on the list, followed by temporal (1.61 per composition) and, finally, “other discourse markers” (1.02 per composition). Generally speaking, secondary school participants seem to have used more discourse markers in their compositions than primary school students.



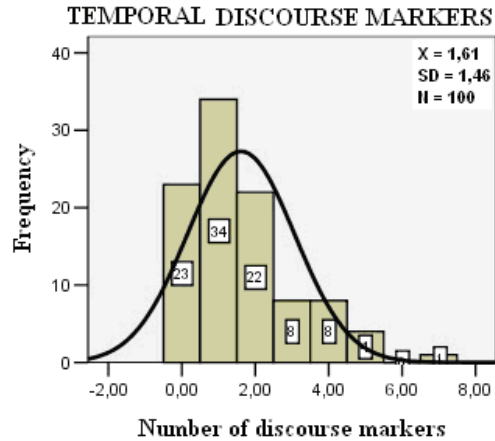
a)



b)



c)



d)

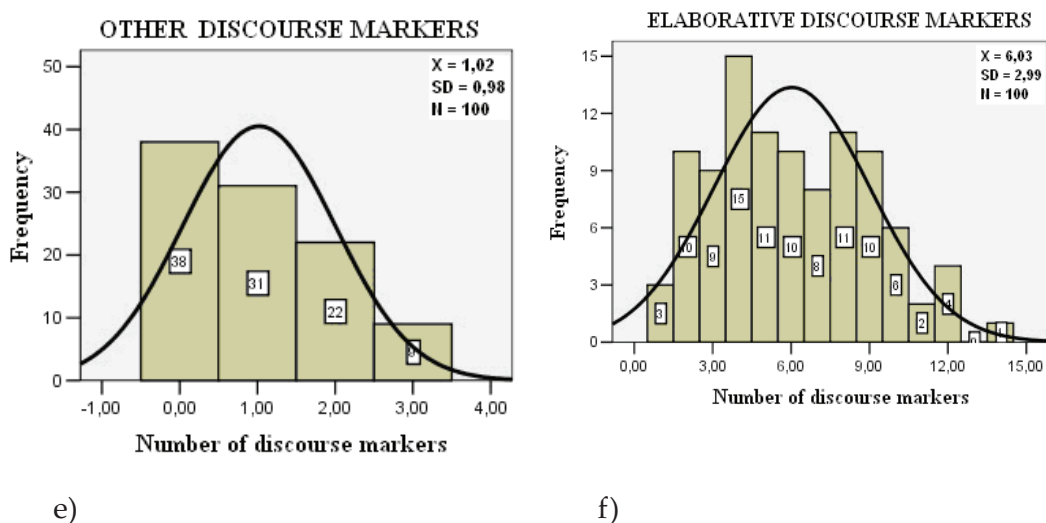


Figure 2. Discourse markers frequency distribution in secondary school participants' compositions

As shown in graph 2a, the number of *elaborative* markers per composition in the secondary school sample group ranges between 1 and 14, with one elaborative marker being used by 3 secondary school participants, while the largest number of these markers (14) was used by one participant. The highest frequencies ranged between 2 and 9 elaborative markers per composition. This was the only type of discourse markers that was not missing from a single composition. *Inferential* discourse markers frequency distribution (graph 2b) indicates that its use ranged between 0 up to 6 per composition. Within this range it may be noted that 14 participants did not use a single inferential marker, while only one used 6. The third most frequently used markers were *contrastive* discourse markers (graph 2c). Their use ranged between 0 and 8 markers per composition: 25 students did not use a single contrastive marker, while as many as 8 contrastive discourse markers were found in one composition. The largest number of pupils (28) used only one marker each. As far as *temporal* discourse markers are concerned (graph 2d), the highest frequencies were observed in their minimal numbers per composition. One or two temporal discourse markers were used by as many as 56 participants, while 23 did not use a single one. As shown in graph 2e, "other discourse markers" seemed to represent a group of the least frequently used markers. Within the range of only 0 to 3 markers per composition, none was used by 38 students; one per composition was used by 31 participants, 22 participants used two, while 9 participants used 3 per composition.

The frequency distribution of all the discourse markers used in the secondary school compositions (graph 2f) shows that the number of discourse markers used per composition ranged between 2 and 24, with one secondary school participant having the minimum or the maximum number of the discourse markers respectively. The highest frequencies fell within the 10-17 range. A total

of 15 English discourse markers were observed in compositions written by the largest number of secondary school participants (11).

2.3.1.3 Discussion

As far as an extensive use of elaborative discourse markers recorded in both groups of participants is concerned, we maintain that it may have resulted from the framework of the writing task. The composition participants wrote had a form of a guided letter, which implied elements of descriptive writing. From the point of view of content, the letter was focused on describing the physical and character features of the person proposed for the best friend award. Furthermore, judging by the cues given in task instructions participants were required to describe a common experience shared with the chosen person, and explain their decision by providing arguments in favour. It was therefore a descriptive text, which generally requires an elaboration of ideas and, due to signalling relations between textual segments, greatly depends on the use of elaborative discourse markers (cf. Jalilifar, 2008). Within a wide range of their discourse functions, these discourse markers offer various possibilities of indicating quasi-parallel relationships existing between text segments (cf. Fraser, 1999), which makes them a convenient cohesive device suitable for different forms of writing. Their dominance over other types of discourse markers in different types of compositions was reported by Zhang (2000), Martinez (2004) and Jalilifar (2008).⁴ According to McCutchen (2000), a possible reason for a high representation of elaborative discourse markers can be found in the development sequence of discourse markers in the process of acquisition of these language items. Her findings suggest that elaborative discourse markers are the ones acquired first, followed by inferential and contrastive ones. Due to their semantic features some markers (e.g. *and* and *or*) tend to be used earlier and more frequently than other discourse markers.⁵ An almost identical sequence was observed with Iranian students (Jalilifar, 2008) and with Spanish students (Martinez, 2004).

2.3.1.4 Significance of differences in use of discourse makers between two sample groups

As shown above, considerable differences could be observed between primary school and secondary school participants in their use of English discourse markers. In order to check the statistical significance of these differences we performed a Rank Sum Test, i.e. the Mann-Whitney Test.

⁴ The data obtained by the research into discourse markers use in compositions written by Iranian students (Jalilifar, 2008) is of particular interest here: elaborative discourse markers frequency seems to decrease with the increase in the students' experience in writing EFL compositions. In other words, in the Iranian population, the author established the existence of a negative relationship between an increase in the skills of quality EFL writing and the use of elaborative discourse markers.

⁵ Choi (2007) established that *and*, in its function of a discourse marker, starts to appear in child production as early as the age of four.

Table 1. *Differences between Sample I group (primary school participants) and Sample II group (secondary school participants) with regard to use of discourse markers (ranks)*

	Sample group	N	Mean rank	Rank Sum
Contrastive discourse markers	Primary school	100	88.75	8874.50
	Secondary school	100	112.26	11225.50
Elaborative discourse markers	Primary school	100	87.76	8776.00
	Secondary school	100	113.24	11324.00
Inferential discourse markers	Primary school	100	91.61	9161.00
	Secondary school	100	109.39	10939.00
Temporal discourse markers	Primary school	100	90.71	9070.50
	Secondary school	100	110.30	11029.50
Other discourse markers	Primary school	100	95.00	9500.00
	Secondary school	100	106.00	10600.00
Total discourse markers	Primary school	100	82.98	8298.00
	Secondary school	100	118.02	11802.00

Table 2. *Differences between Sample I group and Sample II group with regard to use of discourse markers (test statistics)*

	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Contrastive discourse markers	3824.500	8874.500	-2.974	.003
Elaborative discourse markers	3726.000	8776.000	-3.129	.002
Inferential discourse markers	4111.000	9161.000	-2.228	.026
Temporal discourse markers	4020.500	9070.500	-2.483	.013
Other discourse markers	4450.000	9500.000	-1.428	.153
Total discourse markers	3248.000	8298.000	-4.289	.000

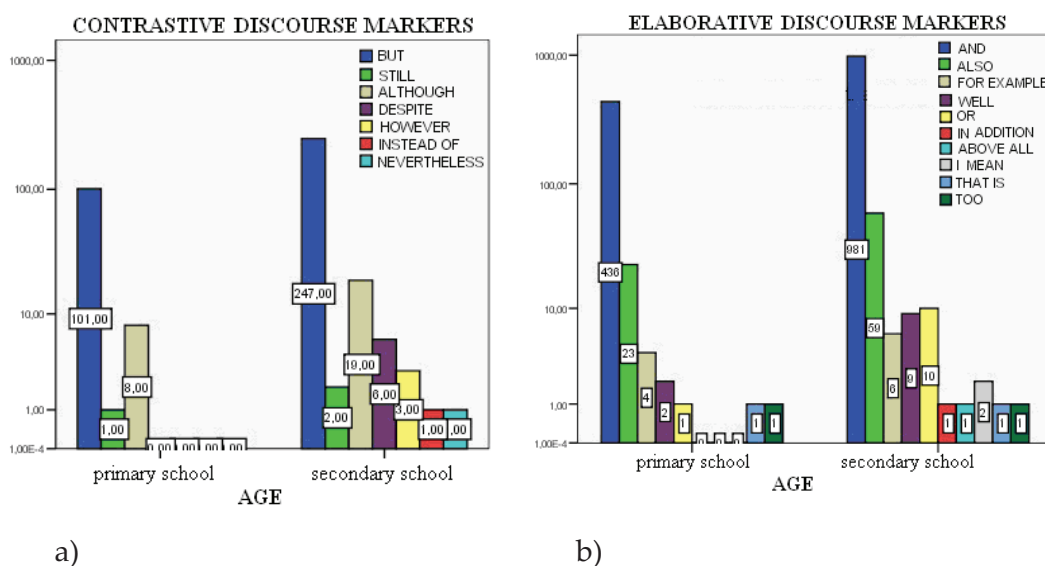
As results presented in Tables 1 and 2 indicate, there are statistically significant differences in the frequency of use of English discourse markers between primary and secondary school participants. The greatest statistically significant differences can be found in the total number of discourse markers used per composition ($p = .000$). The mean rank values in the tables (see Table 1) clearly indicate a more frequent use of discourse markers by secondary school students. Analysis of the rank sum test results point to statistically significant differences between the two sample groups in the use of particular types of English discourse markers. Judging by the coefficients of statistical significance (see Table 2), such

differences can be found in all types of markers, except for those classified as "other discourse markers". As is evident from the mean ranks, secondary school participants used a higher number of particular discourse markers in all of the included types. We found such a finding expectable, considering the fact that secondary school participants had a substantially longer experience of EFL learning, and had generally been exposed to it for a longer time. A similar finding was obtained in the study with Iranian EFL learners (Jalilifar, 2008), in which a positive correlation was established between the educational experience and the frequency of discourse markers use. In other words, the longer the experience of learning EFL, the more frequent the use of English discourse markers. We believe that this can explain all the differences in frequencies of discourse markers between primary and secondary school participants, which were confirmed as statistically significant.

2.3.2 General Characteristics of English Discourse Markers Use

3.3.2.1 Results of qualitative analysis of categories of discourse markers used in participants' compositions

In order to gain further insights into characteristics and possible specific features associated with the use of discourse markers we analysed our data in a qualitative way too. The qualitative analysis was directed towards particular discourse markers within the five categories in order to find out which individual discourse markers were the most salient within each category and to look for reasons why. Figure 3 shows the distribution of particular discourse markers within the five categories. The graphs in Figure 3 show frequencies of individual discourse markers for the two sample groups separately.



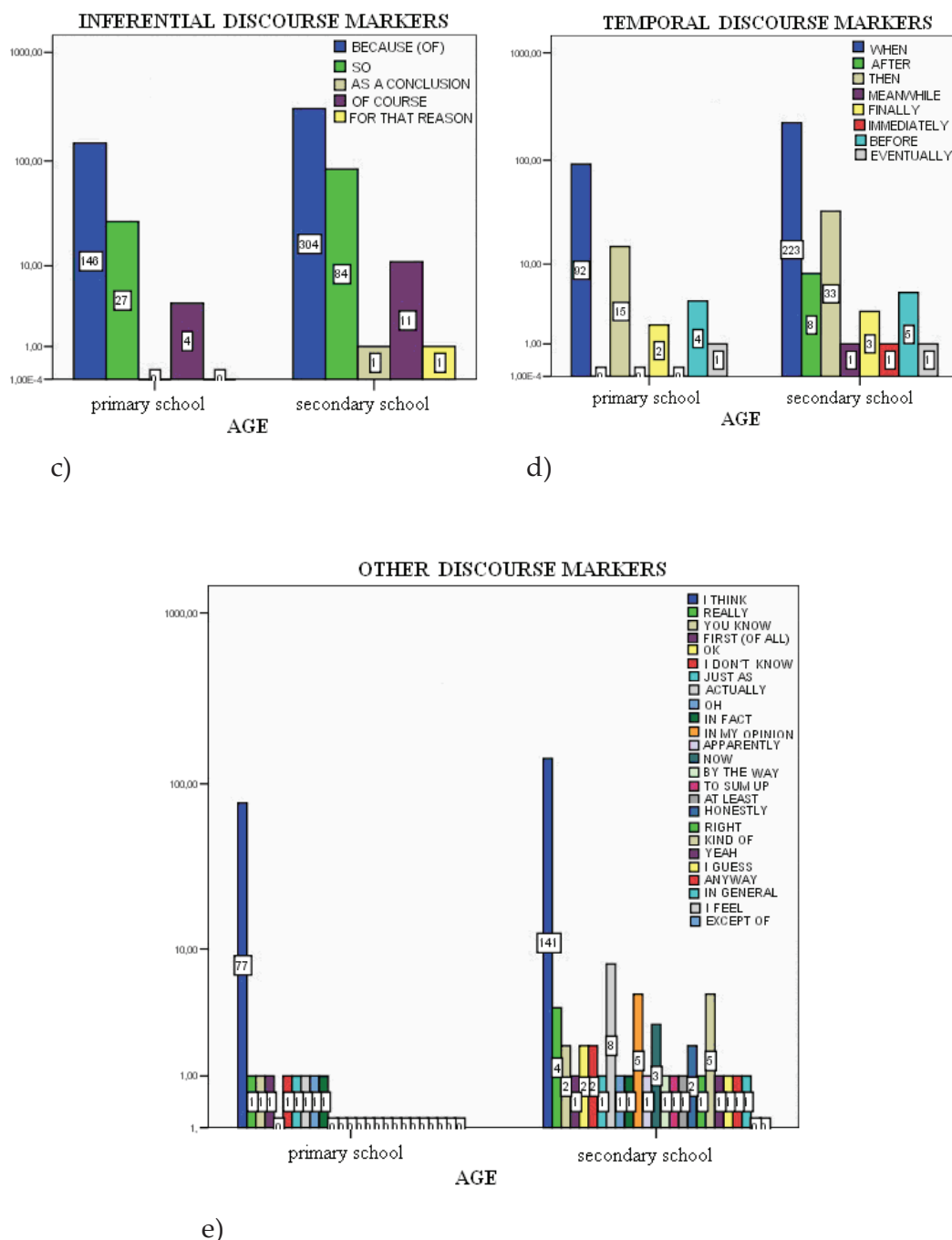


Figure 3. Discourse markers frequency distribution

As is clearly evident from the graphs, the use of English discourse markers in both groups of participants is characterised, generally speaking, by a high dominance of one discourse marker within each of the five categories. The frequencies clearly show that, compared to the dominant one, the presence of other discourse markers was almost symbolical. In the *contrastive* discourse

markers category (graph 3a), *but* had the highest frequency in both samples. The total number of this discourse marker identified in primary school participants' compositions was 101, whereas in secondary school participants' compositions the number amounted to as many as 247. In spite of the fact that marker *although* ranked second in both samples, its frequencies were almost incomparable with frequencies of *but*. Thus, in primary school compositions, marker *although* occurred only 8 times as compared to 19 times in secondary school compositions. The third and last contrastive marker used by both groups of participants was *still*. Its occurrence was minimal: only once in primary participants' compositions and twice in secondary. *But*, *although* and *still* were the only contrastive discourse markers used by primary school participants. The following contrastive discourse markers were used by secondary school participants: *despite* (19), *however* (3), *instead of* (1), and *nevertheless* (1).

As previous analyses showed, *elaborative* discourse markers seem to occur most frequently. The most frequently occurring elaborative marker (see graph 3b) in both samples was *and*. The frequency of this marker in primary school compositions totalled 436, whereas it amounted to as many as 981 in secondary school compositions. Considerably lower frequencies were recorded for the remaining nine elaborative markers. Marker *also* ranked second in frequency in both sample groups (23 and 59 in primary and secondary school compositions respectively). Other elaborative markers observed in the compositions of both groups were as follows: *for example*, *well*, *or*, *that is*, and *too*. Additionally, in secondary school compositions discourse markers *in addition*, *above all*, and *I mean* also occurred. As graph 3c shows, the following *inferential* markers were found in the compositions: *because (of)*, *so*, *as a conclusion*, *of course*, and *for that reason*. In both sample groups marker *because (of)* seems to have been used most frequently, its frequency amounting to 146 in primary school compositions and 304 in secondary school compositions. It is followed by marker *so*, with a frequency of 27 and 84 in primary school and secondary school compositions respectively. The third inferential discourse marker whose use (with a substantially lower frequency) was identified in compositions of both groups was *of course*. Apart from the ones mentioned above, secondary school participants also used *as a conclusion* (1) and *for that reason* (1). As for *temporal* discourse markers (graph 3d), the following markers were identified: *when*, *after*, *then*, *meanwhile*, *finally*, *immediately*, *before*, and *eventually*. Discourse marker *when* was most frequently used by participants of both groups, its frequency totalling 92 in primary and 223 in secondary school participants' compositions respectively. It is followed by marker *then*, which appears to have been used 15 times by primary school participants and 33 times by secondary school participants. In primary school compositions no occurrence of *after*, *meanwhile* and *immediately* was observed. In the last category of discourse markers, referred to as "*other discourse markers*" (graph 3e), the following markers were identified: *I think*, *really*, *you know*, *first (of all)*, *OK*, *I don't know*, *just as*, *actually*, *oh*, *in fact*, *in my opinion*, *apparently*, *now*, *by the way*, *to sum up*, *at least*, *honestly*, *right*, *kind of*, *yeah*, *I guess*, *anyway*, *in general*, *I feel*, and *except of*. Discourse marker *I think* was dominant in both groups of participants, totalling 77 in primary and

141 times in secondary school compositions. As shown in graph 3e, all other discourse markers from this category were only symbolically represented in both participant groups.

These results indicate that all participants tended to (over)use a single discourse marker within a particular category. Within the contrastive discourse markers category it appeared to be *but*, while the dominant elaborative marker was *and*. The most frequent inferential discourse marker was *because*, temporal *when*, whereas in the "other discourse markers" category our participants mostly preferred marker *I think*.

The discourse marker that by far exceeded the frequencies of all other discourse markers in both sample groups was *and*, occurring as many as 436 times in primary participants' compositions, while in secondary school compositions its frequency totalled 981. Such high frequencies of this marker, which performs a wide range of discourse functions, made the compositions read rather monotonously. McCarthy (1991, in Ying, 2007) mentions four discourse functions of *and*: additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. In our corpus discourse marker *and* was used almost invariably in its additive function. The following examples illustrate the use of this discourse marker:

Primary school participants:

- (S1) *She is a very good friend and we go to the same class.*
 (S3) *She is very beautiful and thin and she looks perfect. She has a beautiful smile and she is always happy and I like it very much.*

Secondary school participants:

- (S124) *We solved a lot of problems and difficult situations without arguing, and probably we'll go to the same college and be best friends in the future.*
 (S145) *Money for Karla isn't important and she is just special and would always be special for me, my best friend Karla.*

2.3.2.2 Discussion

A high dominance of one marker within each discourse marker category, as well as an almost symbolic incidence of other discourse markers in the same category, seems to be a distinctive feature of our participants' compositions in both sample groups. Discourse markers having appreciably the highest frequencies were: *and*, *but*, *because (of)*, *when*, and *I think*. We believe that such frequencies can be primarily attributed to the interference from Croatian as participants' L1. As Vickov (2010) indicated, use of discourse markers by the same participants in their L1 compositions showed an identical picture. The most frequent discourse markers there were *i*, *ali*, *jer*, *kad(a)* and *(ja) mislim*, which are the Croatian equivalents of the English discourse markers mentioned. This corroborates findings of some other studies, thus supporting the claims about the L1 influence on acquisition of English discourse markers (e.g. Zhang Meissuo,

2000; Romero Trillo, 2002; Müller, 2005). It needs to be noted that this was the case with participants of both proficiency levels included in our study. This appears to be consistent with the results of the research conducted by Demirci and Kleiner (1997), suggesting that discourse markers used by EFL students result from their attempts to translate from L1. Interference from L1 is corroborated by the way in which our participants used discourse marker *and*. In a qualitative analysis in her study mentioned above, Vickov (ibid.) found that the same participants used the corresponding Croatian discourse marker *i* almost exclusively in its additive function, i.e. in the same function in which English discourse marker *and* was used. In addition, the tendency to place marker *and* in sentence initial position was observed, which was typical of participants' compositions in Croatian.

Another possible reason for a strong dominance of these discourse markers can be found, we believe, in their abundant presence in the current EFL teaching materials. They are precisely those markers to which participants had been exposed since the beginning of EFL learning, primarily through textbooks such as *Happy Street* (Maidment and Roberts, 2003), *Building Blocks* (Čajo and Vranković, 2007). In our opinion, this should hardly be surprising since, according to Fraser (in Fischer, 2006), these markers, particularly *and* and *but*, are regarded as primary discourse markers within their respective groups, performing a wide range of discourse functions. In *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (2001), at the A2 level of communicative language competence (the level which our primary school sample group was expected to have attained) learners are expected to be capable of connecting words by means of simple conjunctions like *and*, *but*, and *because*. However, the high dominance of these basic markers in written production of secondary school participants suggests that English discourse markers are, generally speaking, neglected in Croatian EFL classrooms. Such a negative trend has been observed in other contexts too (e.g. Sankoff et al., 1997; Müller, 2005). Therefore, we tend to agree with Fung and Carter (2007) and Romero Trillo (2002), who explain the poor range of discourse markers and high frequencies of particular markers in the language production of EFL students as a consequence of unnatural linguistic input to which they seem to be exposed. In addition, as these authors claim, current language teaching approaches are still largely focused on traditional grammar, and on literal or propositional (semantic) meanings of words rather than on their pragmatic use. This appears to be reflected in Croatian EFL textbooks as well. A closer examination of current primary and secondary school EFL textbooks shows that they almost entirely lack a systematic presentation of syntactic and semantic features of English discourse markers. Nor are there any explanations or exercises associated with illustrating their discourse and pragmatic functions. Such a situation has been traced in two current series of primary EFL textbooks that we analysed: *Dip In* (Mardešić et al., 2003) and *Way To Go Plus* (Breka et al., 2007). In these widely used materials the only cohesive devices that appear are *and*, *but*, *because* and *so*, and they do so mainly as an integral part of vocabulary inventory of texts within teaching units and the pertaining exercises. An exception to this can be found in textbook *Way To Go 3 Plus*, intended for primary sixth-

graders: within an isolated exercise dedicated to the development of writing skills, the discourse markers mentioned above are pointed out as linguistic devices serving to connect sentences. Along with a very brief explanation of the basic meanings of each of these discourse markers the author offers one sentence to illustrate the use of a particular discourse marker, followed by an exercise in which students are required to use a particular marker to join the beginnings of sentences with a pertaining end. The situation does not seem to be much better in the case of secondary EFL textbooks, either. Discourse markers are presented there rather poorly and without a systematic explanation of their discourse and pragmatic functions.

One of the possible reasons for a high frequency of the discourse markers discussed above can perhaps be found in the fact that markers such as *and*, *but*, *because* and *I think* are very simple in their orthographic and phonological structure, and are semantically unambiguous, which makes them easy to both acquire and use. It is along these lines that Yardley (2000) remarked that, although advanced learners are acquainted with other English discourse markers as well, it is symptomatic that they tend to use simple markers like *and* and *but* in both speech and writing. If we add to this insufficient exposure to discourse markers in EFL classrooms, absence of systematic practice in their appropriate use in different contexts, multiple meanings of particular markers, and possible ambiguities compared to the corresponding equivalents in L1 (e.g. *namely-naime*),⁶ learners' inclination towards using simple primary discourse markers should hardly be surprising.

Our findings could be observed from the aspect of EFL teacher talk which, as Müller (2005) claims, is very probably as influential as textbooks. Teacher talk represents one of the principal models of English usage in the classroom environment. At the same time, it is one of the main sources of the English language to which learners are most frequently exposed. Judging from findings of studies of accidental vocabulary learning (Swanborn and De Glopper, 1999), which results from repeated exposure to particular lexical items, it should be only logical to assume that EFL teachers do not frequently use discourse markers. Since correct usage of various discourse markers in different discourse situations requires a native-like communicative competence, the question arises as to how far teachers approximate native speaker speech, as well as to what degree teachers of English are capable of illustrating authentic use of English discourse markers. Croatian teachers of English are not required to spend time in an English-speaking country, which would certainly enable them to further develop their pragmatic and, generally speaking, communicative competence. A study on the use of English discourse markers in teachers' speech conducted by Hellermann and Vergun (2007) seems to bear witness to the fact that teachers indeed use a variety of discourse markers, but mostly the ones typical of the

⁶ On translation relations between *namely* and *naime*, as well as on other equivalents of the Croatian connector *naime*, for more details see Antunović (1988).



transitions between teaching activities and generally to manage the lesson (e.g. *alright, now, so* and *OK*). The register of teachers' speech, characterised by such overtones, contributes to the artificial language input and decontextualised nature of the teaching environment, which cannot provide learners with a good basis for acquiring discourse and pragmatic functions of discourse markers.

3. Conclusion

Based on our findings, it can be concluded that Croatian primary and secondary EFL learners differ significantly in the degree of English discourse markers acquisition, but only in quantitative terms. More specifically, in their written language production secondary school learners seem to use English discourse markers much more frequently. Further, Croatian learners generally make use of a relatively poor range of English discourse markers. Additionally, in the course of secondary school education no significant step forward seems to be made in the acquisition of these language items with respect to mastering their different types. We can also conclude that at both communicative competence levels we examined Croatian EFL learners seem to most frequently use those discourse markers that they normally use in their L1, with the usage functions of such discourse markers appearing to be almost identical. From these particular conclusions the following generalisation may be made: in EFL learning Croatian learners seem to exhibit a relatively low level of mastery of English discourse markers. Such a conclusion points to a pressing need for a framework within which systematic teaching of English discourse markers would be ensured. In our opinion, it should be based on such language activities as would promote learners' awareness of discourse markers as cohesive elements, at the same time developing a sensitivity for their semantic and pragmatic features.

Suggestions for further study

We would like to suggest that further research be undertaken to throw more light on acquisition of discourse markers. Valuable insights into use of discourse markers at the writing skills level are likely to come from investigations that would include different types of written production. A comparative study of discourse markers in written and oral production could be equally enlightening. Studying uses of discourse markers across learner ages, proficiency levels and L1 background could point to a possible natural order of acquisition of discourse markers. Comparing acquisition of discourse markers in L2 with those in L1 might help explain processes that lie behind use of markers by L2 learners in both L1 and 2. Many of these suggestions imply a need for longitudinal research.



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USVAJANJE DISKURSNIH OZNAKA U ENGLISKOME KAO STRANOME JEZIKU NA RAZINI PISANJA

U radu se analiziraju rezultati istraživanja kojim se, na osnovi kvantitativne i kvalitativne analize, ispituju karakteristike uporabe engleskih diskursnih oznaka kod hrvatskih osnovnoškolskih i srednjoškolskih učenika u području pisane jezične produkcije. Istraživanje je provedeno na uzorku od ukupno 200 ispitanika. Rezultati upozoravaju na relativno nizak stupanj usvojenosti engleskih diskursnih oznaka na objema razinama ovladanosti engleskim jezikom. Ustanovljeno je da hrvatski učenici, općenito, upotrebljavaju razmjerno siromašan opseg engleskih diskursnih oznaka te da je njihovo usvajanje, između ostalog, povezano s ovladanošću diskursnim oznakama na materinskome (hrvatskome) jeziku i izloženošću neadekvatnome jezičnome unosu.

Key words: discourse markers, EFL, writing skill, A2 level, B1 level.

Ključne riječi: diskursne oznake, engleski kao strani jezik, vještina pisanja, razina A2, razina B1.

