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Enhancing Socio-pragmatic Competence through Storytelling

Exploring Discourse Markers in ESL College Learners' Oral Narratives

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Abstract

This study, addressing gaps highlighted by Lucarevschi (2016), investigates learners' oral narratives and the role of discourse markers (DMs) in enhancing grammatical and socio-pragmatic competence in English as a Second Language (ESL). The research analyses a corpus of 36 narratives produced by upper-intermediate college learners. Participants were asked to narrate a weird event that happened to them. Then they were instructed on traits of spoken English (DMs included) and the phases of oral narratives (Labov and Waletzky 1967). Lastly, they were asked to re-narrate their stories. A mixed-methods analysis of DM occurrences was used, employing González's (2004) taxonomy. Results show a statistically significant increase in the use of specific DMs after instruction (*so*, *you know*) and a gradual acquisition of informal conversational features. Comparison with native speakers' narratives (González 2004) reveals learners' alignment in DM range and pragmatic functions but differences in overall frequency and use, as the overreliance on *so* and *and* seem to suggest.
The findings challenge the perception of DMs as language elements which do not need to be taught and advocate for their explicit inclusion in higher education ESL instruction to enhance coherence and socio-pragmatic competence. Limitations are acknowledged, especially in the monologic focus used. Further research on DM use in ESL conversational narrative contexts is suggested.

1. Introduction

Over the years, scholars have consistently agreed that narratives pervade all cultures and historical periods, appearing through spoken, written, or multimodal texts across various genres (see Ochs and Capps 2001; and more recently, Gatti and Hoffman 2024). People tell stories for several reasons, including starting or enhancing socialisation, being seen in the world, and enforcing a sense of identity and social understanding in a community. Narrative is thus a versatile phenomenon that permeates various dimensions of human existence, and its content and form strongly relate to the context in which it is conceived and told (Freeman 2015).

Labov and Waletzky (1967) (L&W from now on) analysed the account of life-risking events experienced by people living in suburban USA and proposed a framework with six segments: *abstract*, signalling the story's start, often highlighting its topic; *orientation*, which informs on the time, space, and main actors in the story; *complicating action*, reporting the disruptive event that makes the story worth telling; *resolution*, which reports the outcome of the event; *evaluation*, through which the narrator shares their perspective; *coda*, signalling that the story is over. Orientation, complicating action and resolution are always necessary because they convey the core narrative content and have relatively fixed positions. The abstract and coda, by nature more interlocutor-oriented, are optional features.

L&W's (1967) focus on 'long' first-person narratives told during interviews and often centred around 'life or death' experiences was later juxtaposed to explorations of 'small' stories, i.e. everyday anecdotes about seemingly minor or routine events. Post-Labovian research conceives storytelling as a multifaceted activity, often occurring in conversation (Georgakopoulou 2007; 2006; Norrick 2000), which can significantly influence personal identity and interpersonal relationships (Ochs and Capps 2001, 17). A variety of narrative genres were investigated in both casual and formal situations, from argumentative discourse (Schiffrin 1990) to habitual narratives on past experiences (Carranza 1998), to anecdotes in workplace interactions (Holmes 2006), to retellings (Schiffrin 2006; Norrick 1997).

Using storytelling in learning contexts of English as a second language (ESL)[1] can become a precious tool to enhance the quality of teaching with a sparkle of novelty, and can substantially impact language learning (see Wright 2000). Narratives are a solid tool to develop learners' communicative skills (see Nguyen and Phuong 2024; Ghafar 2024; Sulastri et al. 2022), because when learners communicate, give opinions, and share knowledge from their personal experience, they need to focus on language use to activate original, "genuinely rich and productive language practice" (Swan 1985, 84).

Recently, there has been growing acknowledgment of the relevance of storytelling in educational practices at the university level (Zaitseva et al. 2024), including ESL learning contexts (Guoying and Xiaolin 2019) also through digital approaches (see Raffone 2023). Nevertheless, as Allami and Ramezanian (2019) pointed out, stories told by native speakers (see Norrick 2005; 2003; 2000; Riessman 2008; 2002) have only occasionally been compared to ESL learners' stories (Lin 2016; Kang 2006; 2003; Lee 2003).

[1] Here, *second* language is used as an umbrella term including various contexts of English learning, like EFL (English as a foreign language), ESL (English as a second language), ESOL (English for speakers of other languages), EAL (English as an additional language), thus comprising frameworks that support non-native speakers' English proficiency in both English-speaking countries and international contexts.

This study aims to contribute to the body of research by examining whether, after college instruction, ESL learners not only increase the use of specific linguistic measures in their oral narratives (namely, DMs) but also begin to approximate native-like patterns. More particularly, the choice arises from the necessity to address a knowledge gap highlighted by Lucarevschi (2016). In exploring the studies on the enhancement of learners' grammar abilities (e.g. Hsu 2010; Bardovi-Harlig 1995) and the improvement of speaking skills (Li and Seedhouse 2010; Cary 1998) through storytelling, Lucarevschi emphasised the relationship between storytelling and oral grammar accuracy and recommended future studies in the field.

In order to address this need, this paper adopts a factual perspective on learners' acquisition and use of discourse markers. Specifically, the research questions (RQs) are as follows:

1. Does the use of pragmatic discourse markers increase once the learners are made aware of the traits of spoken English? How?
2. After instruction, to what extent do learners' discourse markers align with those used by native speakers?
3. Do learners use different pragmatic discourse markers compared to those used by native speakers after instruction?

Accordingly, this study explores the aforementioned relationship by suggesting that socio-pragmatic skills in informal spoken English are part of oral grammar accuracy, and that discourse markers can be considered indicators of this accuracy.

In the following sections, the framework of DMs in oral narratives is established, and stories are analysed.

2. Discourse markers in oral narratives

Discourse markers (DMs, from now on) characterise spoken English, carrying out a pragmatic function attached so loosely to the clause that they can also work as independent non-clausal units. They can be either single lexemes or multiword expressions, and their task is to "facilitate the ongoing interaction" (Biber et al. 1999, 140). The spectrum of DMs is vast and heterogeneous, and scholars have given various accounts of their characteristics (see Fischer 2006), with different ways of defining and conceiving them (see Cuenca 2013).

Clearly, the more proficient the use of DMs is, the more effective the communication will be. Therefore, it is pivotal to aid ESL students in their learning and use. Among the most recent studies of DMs in ESL learning contexts, Huang and colleagues investigated the developmental patterns of *well*, *you know*, and *like* across four fluency levels, and:

> a strong positive correlation between perceived fluency and the overall frequency of DMs was found, suggesting that the use of DMs in learner data develops linearly with the increasing fluency levels. (2022, 70)

Zhaoyi (2025) confirmed that proficiency level significantly influences how learners use pragmatic markers through a comparison of *like* in spoken interactions among Thai EFL learners at intermediate and advanced levels. Advanced learners use *like* more frequently, while intermediate learners produce a wider range of DM combinations containing *like*. These studies commonly indicated important pedagogical implications: "learners in the classroom could be instructed to become aware of the use of DMs in order to improve fluency and interaction in significant dialogues" (Huang et al. 2022, 71) and so:

> explicit teaching of DMs in English language classes should be taken into consideration, as these linguistic elements can provide learners with important tools to convey their intended meaning more smoothly and effectively. (Morady Moghaddam 2023, 1036; see also Zhaoy 2025)

DMs are essential in oral narratives because they move across all its phases (see Labov 1972; Labov and Waletzky 1967). Their specificity has been noted by Schiffrin, who drew examples from Labovian narratives to show how prominent discourse tasks in conversational storytelling require mutual speaker-listener attention through markers, i.e. the "sequentially dependent elements that bracket units of talk" (1987, 31) and contribute to discourse coherence, aiding the recognition of segments and patterns. Fraser (2009) argued that DMs marked sequential discourse, and Norrick (2001) reinforced this view looking at recurrent DMs like *and* or *but* and giving examples of their specificity in oral stories. Detached from any lexical meaning and having different functions from those in other contexts, DMs are targeted to the participant and serve to initiate and conclude narration traits, guide through the narrative sequence, re-orient through interruptions, and aid the focus on the main chain of events. Norrick suggested that these considerations could extend to other DMs in narratives. Romano and Cuenca (2013) emphasised the pragmatic value of DMs. Although there is a higher frequency in objectively structured narratives, the stories told spontaneously present a higher range of them, which shows that DMs are employed to guide the listener to the story's meaning and interpretation.

González compared the use of DMs in native English and native Catalan oral narratives and argued that DMs "are not used arbitrarily, but are context and genre-dependent" (2004, 1). González (2004) focused on those DMs referred to as intensifiers, so those that are not indispensable for the core propositional meaning of a text but are crucial for understanding the intended message of the speaker. In particular, the DMs studied maintain two main macro-functions: they organise discourse, contributing to its coherence, and they assist the listener in

interpreting the intended message. González's (2004) research enumerated a taxonomy of DMs frequently occurring for both languages, whereby 23 functions of markers were categorised under four discourse components:

> (a) rhetorical, if the function is related to the speaker's intentions and attitudes, thoughts and actions; (b) sequential, if the function is related to segment-structural features; (c) ideational, if the function is related to the ideas described in the textworld; and (d) inferential, if the function is related to the cognitive context that is shared between speaker and hearer. (González 2004, 349)

This taxonomy was particularly suitable for this study. It ensured the analysis included markers authentically used by native speakers in storytelling and allowed for a direct comparison of learners' DM usage against a reliable baseline. The nine DMs within English narratives that González (2004) identified are the following: *so*, *well*, *then*, *I mean*, *you know*, *anyway*, *you see*, *okay*, and *now*. These were traced by ranking DMs according to their frequency of use, observing the context in which each marker occurred to establish a correlation between the DM and the specific narrative segment, and studying the functions the DM served within each narrative part. The findings from the abovementioned study substantiate the hypothesis that a narrator's use of such DMs is not arbitrary or independent of context.

Research on DMs in ESL narrative productions is not extensive. Early work by Müller (2005) investigated the use of *so*, *well*, *you know*, and *like* by American and German ESL students retelling and discussing a silent movie. The results revealed that both groups used *so* most frequently, and that Germans used *well* slightly more often than Americans, although the difference was not statistically significant.

Subsequent studies have mainly focused on the use and acquisition of DMs in written narratives or specific genres (see Rabab'ah 2022; AbManan and Raslee 2017; Alghamdi 2014). In contrast, Iglesias Moreno (2017) compared the use of *well* by Spanish EFL learners and native speakers in interactions, which are meaningfully tied to conversational storytelling, where pragmatic fluency is essential. Iglesias Moreno (2017) found that, in these contexts, learners rarely employed *well*, resulting in a distinctly non-native discourse pattern. This finding, when compared to Müller's (2005) results, enhances the need for pragmatic instruction within conversational approaches to language teaching.

More recently, research has begun to examine DMs in spoken narrative contexts. Nakahama (2018) investigated ESL and EFL learners telling stories to native speakers, finding that ESL learners produced more DMs than EFL learners, who received more recasts from their native interlocutors. Finally, Jakupčević (2019) analysed the use of DMs in picture-based narrative tasks by sixteen English learners aged ten to eleven. This study showed that while these learners employed a limited range of DMs to structure their narratives, they did so correctly

and strategically, indicating an awareness of the pragmatic uses of DMs and a readiness for further learning.

3. Methodology

Storytelling was included as part of the second-year English Language and Translation course I taught with my colleague Sergio Pizziconi for the Bachelor of Arts degree in Intercultural and Interlinguistic Mediation at the University for Foreigners of Siena. Learning to tell stories offered support to themes of the syllabus, like the need to adhere to the conventions of spoken English based on the context of communication, whether formal, neutral, or informal (see Halliday and Hasan 1985), to the nature of the communicative event, whether interactional or monologic. In a one-semester course designed for a C1 exit level in English, students were asked to record themselves while telling a peculiar fictional or real anecdote about their lives. After that, they were taught about pragmatic traits of spoken English in conversation (e.g., Thornbury and Slade 2006; Carter and McCarthy 1997) and L&W's phases of oral narratives (see also Petrocelli and Pizziconi, 2024). Subsequently, students were asked to record themselves telling the story again. The aim was to analyse how the formal learning of traits of spoken English and the phases of oral narratives influence the type of language that students use when telling a story. The assumption is that narratives are a powerful tool for developing socio-pragmatic skills (Thornbury and Slade 2006) because learners are pushed to fine-tune their linguistic choices to adjust to a more informal conversational setting, where stories are usually told.

As mentioned before, the objective of this study is first to explore if and how learners increase their use of DMs after being made aware of their communicative role. Second, it assesses how closely these uses align with those found in González (2004). Finally, it considers whether learners still favour different markers from those used by natives. This analysis offers insights into learners' progress and explores whether teaching pragmatic DMs is relevant at advanced levels.

The focus on DMs was driven by providing different forms and uses, presented as characteristic conversational features. A discrete inoculation of knowledge in the field was attempted. The intent was for the learners not to feel that they were expected or required to use DMs in the second version of the story. Instead, the goal was to see if the enhanced awareness of the necessity to use forms of conversational English led learners towards the use of DMs. Table 1 below offers an overview of the course design and pedagogical focus.

Course Type	One-semester C1-exit level university course
Methodology	• Theoretical explanations of pragmatic features, including discourse markers. • Hands-on activities: identifying and categorising pragmatic features, rewriting dialogues, searching for authentic pragmatic features in online sources (e.g., YouTube interviews, TED talks, social media posts). • Emphasis on bridging theory and real-world use.
Pragmatic Features	• Puns • Hesitators (ehm, erm) • Vague language • Tags • Fixed expressions (e.g., but there we are) • Reduced forms (gonna, wanna, ellipsis, contractions) • False starts, tails, topic switches • Deixis • Discourse markers (e.g., anyway, you know, like, so, right, okay) • Greetings/farewells • Vocatives (Madam, hey) • Polite speech-act formulae (please, thank you, pardon) • Interjections (ouch, wow) • Response elicitors (Okay? Alright?) • Response forms (ok, yes, no) • Expletives/taboo words • Hedges (kind of, sort of, or something) • Understaters/downtoners (a bit, just) • Intensifiers (really, indeed, terribly)
Narrative Structure	Labov and Waletzky's (1967) and Labov's (1972) phases of oral narratives as pivotal discourse elements for structuring spoken storytelling.

Tab. 1: Course design and pedagogical focus

Storytelling often occurs in conversation, therefore, it is important to examine narratives in the context of interaction (Georgakopoulou 2006; see Norrick 2000) rather than in formal interviews and monologic form because of the risk of a certain degree of de-contextualisation. However, the choice to analyse stories told as monologues was motivated to ensure a sort of 'sterile' magnifying glass, which allowed to observe DMs used to shift between different contextual spaces without disfluency and interruptions. Moreover, an oral narrative, even in conversational contexts, is undoubtedly characterised by at least some monologic parts, where pragmatic markers are significant as there is no verbal feedback from an interlocutor.

González's (2004) study was used here as a reference point and in data comparison, adopting Biber's general description of DMs (Biber et al. 1999, 140) for several reasons. Firstly, while other scholars, such as Schiffrin (1987), have extensively analysed DMs in conversational English, González's (2004) focus on storytelling uniquely aligns with the objectives of this study. Secondly, the corpus comprises 40 narratives, closely matching the 36 stories analysed here. As for the participants, their main characteristics make the two groups sufficiently comparable. Native participants were adult native English speakers aged between 25 and 35 with university-level education. Table 2 presents the participants' demographic characteristics.

Participants in the study	
Age range	or 34 years (average 22.5 yrs)
Education level	Pursuing a Bachelor's degree, English majors.
L1	32 Italian native speakers; 4 from French- and Spanish-speaking backgrounds
Gender identity	4 male; 32 female

Tab. 2: Participants' demographics

Thirdly, González's (2004) study followed L&W's (1967) approach, posing an open-ended question, which participants were invited to respond to in a monologic form: *Have you ever been in a situation where you thought you were in serious danger?* The present study adopted a slightly modified approach. Participants recorded a narrative in response to the prompt *Tell about a weird story in your life.* This prompt was chosen to maintain continuity with the scholars' monologic designs and also to ensure that each participant could have something to narrate. Unlike life-risking events and yes/no formats that might have led to non-responses, this revised prompt ensured all participants could engage in the task. ~~A~~

For RQ1 (see Introduction), *Does the use of pragmatic DMs increase once the learners are made aware of the traits of spoken English? How?* Transcripts 1 and 2 were analysed. For the other two RQs, focused on the comparison with native speakers, only Transcript 2 was used (RQ2: *After instruction, to what extent do learners' DMs align with those used by native speakers?* RQ3: *Do learners use different pragmatic DMs compared to those used by native speakers after instruction?*)

In Table 3, the outline of the corpus is presented[2].

Position along course sequence		Number of stories	Number of words
Transcript 1	The story before familiarisation with traits of spoken English	36	6940
Transcript 2	The story after familiarisation with traits of spoken English	36	7998

Tab. 3: Learner corpus

DMs were ranked according to their frequency of use, observing the context and the specific narrative segment in which they occurred and studying the functions of the DM within each narrative part.

The DMs selected were those identified by González (2004): *so*, *well*, *then*, *I mean*, *you know*, *anyway*, *you see*, *okay*, and *now*. DMs in each transcript were identified through the concordance list in the Sketch Engine software (Kilgarriff et al. 2014; http://www.sketchengine.eu). Those

[2] In the transcripts, a full stop indicates a pause of 1 second or longer, a comma signifies a pause of less than 1 second, exclamation marks denote emphasis, and question marks indicate interrogative intonation.

forms where the lexeme covers uses that are not addressable to those of a DM were not included. An example of such case is the first four occurrences of *well* in Figure 1.

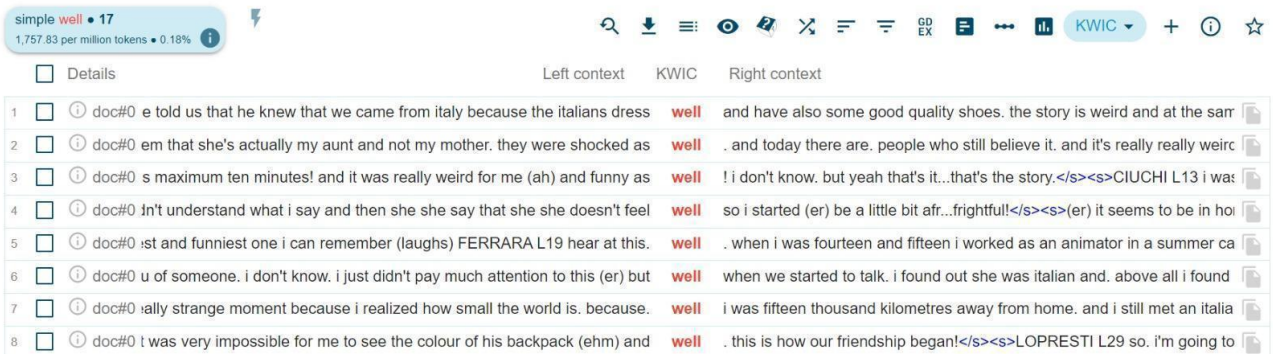

Fig. 1: Example of DM selection from the list of concordances on Sketch Engine

This study primarily used a mixed-method approach. The following sections present results alongside specific details on the procedures adopted for each RQ.

4. RQ1: The quantitative use of pragmatic DMs after formal instruction

The first research question measures if the use of pragmatic DMs in learners' stories increases once the learners have been made aware of the traits of spoken English. To answer this question, I first compared the frequency and percentage per million tokens of each DM in transcripts 1 (T1) and 2 (T2), as shown in Table 4 and Figure 2 below.

DM	**T1**		**T2**	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
well	9	0.11%	13	0.13%
you know	5	0.063%	22	0.23%
I mean	1	0.013%	3	0.031%
you see	0	0	0	0
now	1	0.013%	1	0.01%
then	35	0.44%	31	0.32%
anyway	1	0.013%	3	0.031%
okay	7	0.089%	7	0.072%
So	81	1%	107	1.1%

Note: Percentages are calculated per million tokens

Tab. 4: Percentual occurrence of DMs in T1 and T2

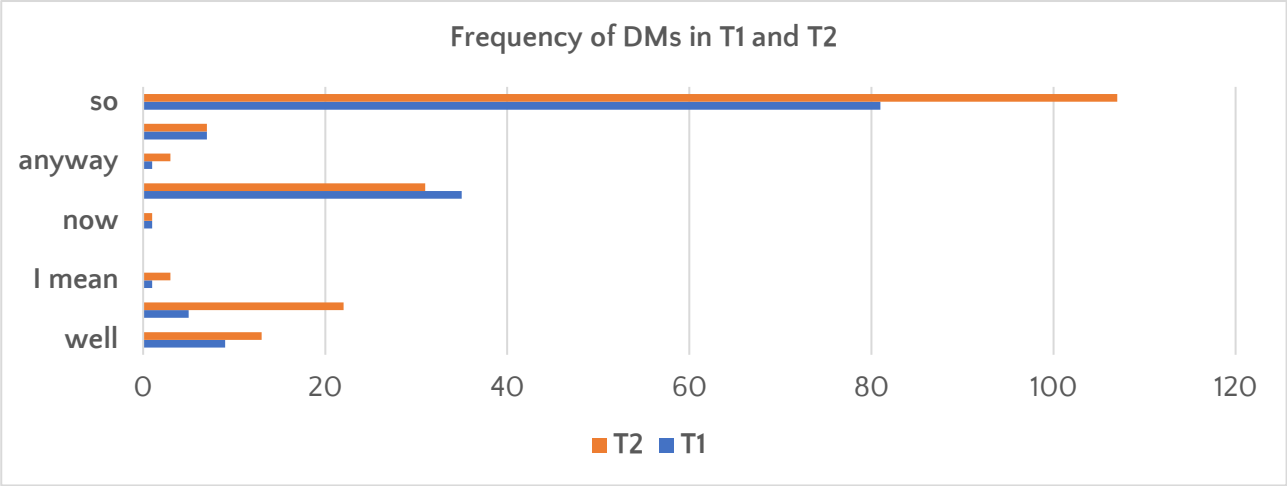

Fig. 2: Frequency of DMs in Learner corpus T1 and T2

Looking at the absolute and relative usage in the table and figure below, an overall increase is noticeable, especially for some forms like *you know* and *so*. Strangely, the use of *then* seems to have decreased slightly, while *okay* and *now* stay stable.

To understand whether the increase of DMs was statistically significant, I ran the Exact Wilcoxon's signed rank test with the Pratt version, a non-parametric test based on comparing the ranks of paired observations. I analysed the four DMs with a minimum of nine occurrences in one of the two texts (*so*, *well*, *you know*, *then*). The results are shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4 below.

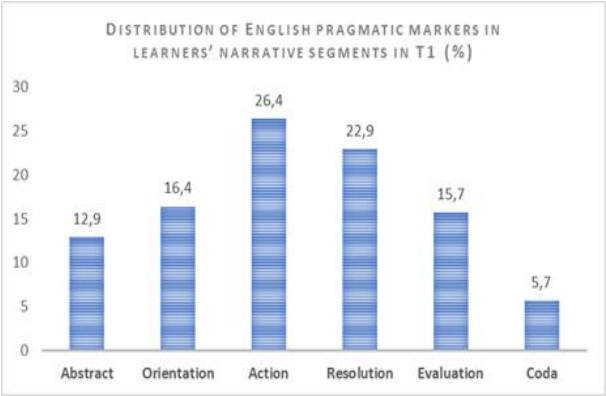

Fig. 3: Distribution of DMs in T1

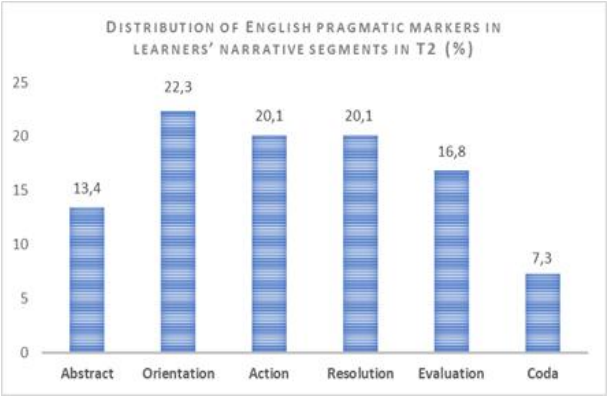

Fig. 4: Distribution of DMs in T2

The null hypothesis of equal distribution between the two scores was rejected for *so* at a significance level of 5% (p-value = 0.01016) and for *you know* (p-value = 0.0112). This means that the increase of *so* and *you know* in T2 is statistically significant. Conversely, the null hypothesis on the distribution of *then* (p-value = 0.541) and *well* (p-value = 0.3594) is not rejected. All in all, the global increase is statistically significant for some DMs.

Figures 3 and 4 present the percentage distribution of each DM across the six segments. All segments experience some kind of shift in the use of DMs from T1 and T2, with a notable

development in the orientation segment. There is also a broader distribution of DMs within the abstract and coda. These segments are essential in signalling the beginning and end of the story, which suggests that learners have developed a heightened sensitivity towards their listener-oriented, and therefore inherently conversational, nature. The DM-rich orientation could be the participants' way of signalling informality and narrative cohesion early on. The increase of DM use in the evaluation segment suggests the enhancement of forms of emotional involvement in the story narrated, as shown further down. Learners tend to use fewer pragmatic DMs in the action and resolution of T2, reasonably because this is where the bulk of the narrative unfolds. Therefore, learners may more likely lean towards the use of markers that serve a primarily sequential and logical function.

Figure 5 focuses on the DMs with the highest increase: *so*, *well*, and *you know*.

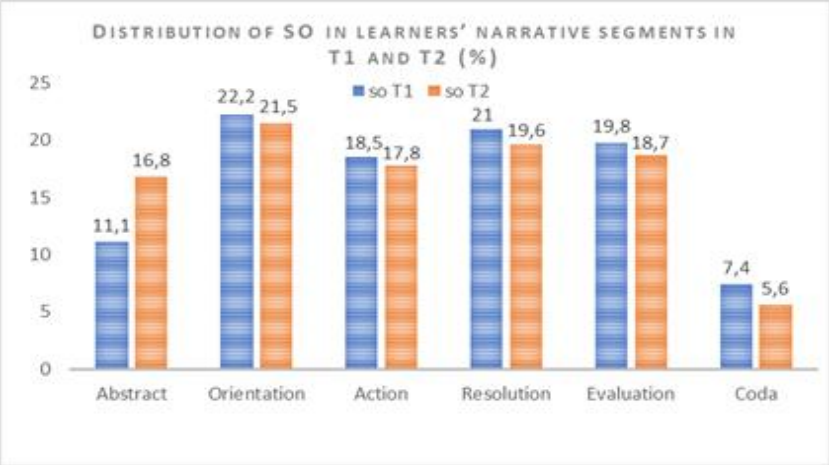

Fig. 5: Distribution of *so* in T1 and T2 across narrative segments

So displays an increase in the abstract segment but a decrease in other segments. The increase aligns with this DM's function to introduce a story's main premise (González, 2004), as in Example (2) below.

(1) T1L30: When I was 17 years old

(2) T2L30: *So* I'm going to tell you about my weird story. when I was 17 I went with my class on a trip

The observed decrease of *so* in other segments, such as action and resolution, suggests that learners may be replacing it with alternative markers that fulfil comparable functions. In orientation, for instance, learners sometimes replace *so*, (see Examples 3 and 4): "*anyway*. ehm. i *really* wanted to..." reflecting a gradual increase in propositional complexity and DM use.

(3) T1L35: my main goal was to put into practice my English skills, *so* I decided to order the food

(4) T2L35: anyway. ehm. i really wanted to practice my english. *so* i was like "yeah yeah let me order for you."

In (6), although *so* is sacrificed, the learner seems to move towards more personalised and explicit expressions of evaluation (*I think*), making the narrative more engaging.

(5) T1L18: *so* it was the weirdest moment of that trip

(6) T2L18: i think that this was the weirdest moment of that trip

Another noticeable change in awareness is evident in the use of *so* in (8), where it does not merely start narration, being integrated into an evaluative statement (*I'm going to tell you a weird story*) that sets a more personal tone. Additionally, the emergence of *like* as a generaliser reflects a shift towards more colloquial speech patterns.

(7) T1L29: *so* it was a Saturday night of 2017. and I parked my motor-scooter on.

(8) T2L29: *I'm going to tell you a weird story of my life. so* it was *like a* Saturday night of 2017.

In (10), *so* is introduced to signal a conclusion on the preceding events through external evaluation, whereas in (9), the assessment on the story is mostly transmitted through more straightforward epistemic modal expression (*I'm sure*).

(9) T1L15: we still talk about this experience today. and still today they think it was a joke, but i'm sure that. erm. i have seen someone.

(10) T2L15: *so*. the moral of the story is that. in my opinion. exist some supernatural presence!

The development of the use of *so* to indicate the progression from one event to the next is evident through the comparison of (11) and (12), which tells about the encounter of a ghostly neighbour.

In (12), the sequence of events is unravelled with greater clarity through the significantly increased use of *so*, which enhances the narrative coherence and evaluative depth.

(11) T1L13: i have to give a pass to people that live in my small country. *so* that they can have a free entrance for the show. i spent two week giving these tickets to my neighbours. one day i went to one of my neighbour house. she is an old woman and she lives in a big house. when i enter to her house i saw this woman and. she seems a ghost!! [...] *so* i started to be. a little bit frightful! it seems to be in an horror movie and also the atmosphere was terrible. when i was able to run away. i started running

(12) T2L13: *so*. i spent two week. ehm. giving this pass. ehm. to my. neighbours. ehm. *so*. one day i went to one of my neighbour house. […]. *so* i. ehm. had to give her this pass, ehm, and when i entered to his hou. to her house. i saw this woman erm that seems erm, a ghost! […] *so* i started, erm, be a little bit afr... frightful! erm, it seems to be in horror movie and. also the atmosphere was terrible! *so*. when i was able to go away, i started running. […]

Figure 6 below shows the distribution of *well* across the six segments.

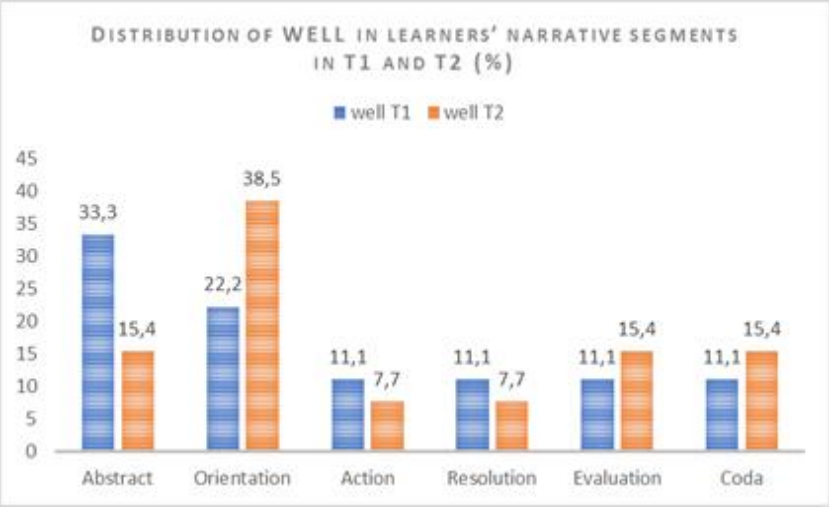

Fig. 6: Distribution of *well* in T1 and T2 across narrative segments

The use of *well* increases in coda, orientation and evaluation. In (14), the introduction of *well* enhances the speaker's narrative by signalling a reflective pause and clarifying the subsequent evaluative statement, which at the same time gives a more colloquial tone to the story. Rather than simply reporting the event, the use of *well* in T2 helps structure discourse more effectively, emphasising the speaker's realisation. Interestingly, the presence of *well* decreases in abstract,

action, and resolution segments, which might indicate a preference for more sequential markers.

(13) T1L25: but once we started to talk, erm, i found out she was italian […] i realized how small the world is because. i was 15 thousands km away from home. and i still met an italian girl!

(14) T2L25: but *well* when we started to talk. i found out she was italian […] i realized how small the world is. Because. *well* I was fifteen thousand kilometres away from home.

The distribution of *you know* across the six segments is shown in Figure 7.

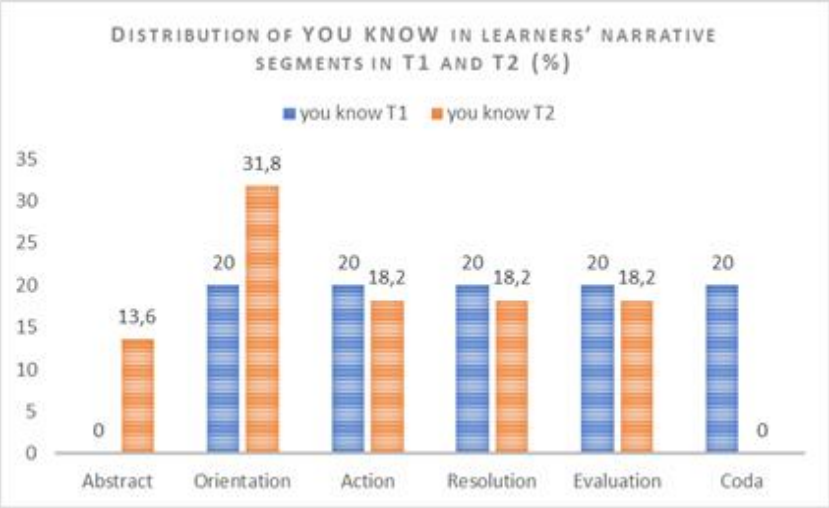

Fig. 7: Distribution of *you know* in T1 and T2 across narrative segments

You know is the second DM to increase in T2, especially in orientation, probably because it serves to 'warm up' the narrative space for the listener to be involved in the story.

(15) T1L18: we were, erm, there to study but could also visit the city.

(16) T2L18: we went there to. study but we could also like *you know*… visit.

(17) T1L9: we have always been. erm. in the basketball field

(18) T2L9: *you know* we have always been in the basketball field.

Notably, *you know* disappears entirely in the coda, which may suggest learners are prioritising other stylistic elements for narrative closure. In (19), *you know* functions as a filler in the coda, but in (20), it is absent, replaced by evaluative intensifiers (*actually*), a cleft sentence (*that dream I made*) and person deixis (*to me*) that amplify the speaker's assessment. Thus, hesitation gives way to a more emphatic narrative conclusion.

(19) T1L2: what happened that time, *you know*, was very strange!

(20) T2L2: what happened, this time to… to me. was really. strange because. that dream i made (erm) was, was real! actually.

Overall, the distribution of DMs across narrative segments in T2 aligns more closely with their common functions. These shifts indicate that learners are not only increasing their use of DMs but are also more aware of their use. This analysis suggests that teaching the traits of spoken English and DMs did contribute to increasing their use and the participants' awareness of their function. The next step is to examine how closely, after instruction, learners' use of these markers aligns with native speakers' use of DMs in storytelling.

5. RQ2: Learners' DMs in oral narratives

The second research question intends to understand if the learners use typical DMs in narratives. I carried out a comparison between González's (2004) native English frequencies in storytelling and my T2 frequencies to understand how closely the latter approximate native English uses. To test whether the two variables (DMs reported by Gonzáles and DMs in T2) were distributed similarly, I used the Fisher exact test, which is preferred to the Chi-square test when the theoretical frequencies are less than 5, as in this case. The result indicated an association between the two variables (p-value = 3.19). So, despite some differences, the DMs in the two corpora vary similarly, and data is comparable: learners use the same range of DMs typically used in oral narratives by native speakers. It is necessary now to understand if and how they differ.

Table 5 provides an overview of the distribution of the DMs in both corpora. The comparison of the two frequency lists finds that *so* is the most used DM in both corpora. Interestingly, it covers over half of the use of all DMs in the learner corpus.

González 2004 (native speakers)	Learners of English in their second version of the story (T2)

Frequency scale of English pragmatic markers			Frequency scale of English pragmatic markers		
	Frequency	Percentage		Frequency	Percentage
so	65	37%	*so*	107	57.2%
well	36	20.6%	*then*	31	16.6%
then	28	16%	*you know*	22	11.8%
I mean	15	8.6%	*well*	13	7.0%
you know	13	7.4%	*okay*	7	3.7%
anyway	11	6.3%	*I mean*	3	1.6%
you see	3	1.7%	*anyway*	3	1.6%
okay	2	1.2%	*you see*	0	0.0%
now	2	1.2%	*now*	1	0.5%
Total	175	100%	Total	187	100%

Tab. 5: Frequency scale of English pragmatic markers in González 2004 and in the Learner corpus

The intense use of *so* in learner corpora might be due to the multiple related meanings it can have. In general, *so* often serves as a prototypical example of either 'result' (e.g. Schiffrin 1987) or 'inference' (e.g. Fraser 1999). Van Dijk (1979) highlights that *so* serves both semantic functions, to indicate a result between states, and pragmatic functions, to signal a conclusion, link conversation turns, and introduce new details. Learners may persist in using *so* after instruction, due to its polysemous nature, a result that is consistent with previous studies noting differences between native and non-native use. Buysse (2012), for example, found that non-native speakers, specifically Belgian learners, used *so* significantly more than native English speakers. House (2022) highlighted that in lingua franca contexts, *so* performs multiple functions: it signals causal and inferential connections between clauses, introduces new topics (see also Di Ferrante 2021), and acts as a deictic tool to buy time or refer back to earlier parts of the conversation.

It is impossible to compare instances from González's (2004) corpus, which is not available, but we can highlight some meaningful examples of occurrences in the learner corpus, like below.

The comparison of DM frequency in the two corpora reveals meaningful differences between native speakers and learners. Learners use *so* considerably more (57.2%) than natives (37%). This result impacts even more considering that *so* increased in a statistically significant way from T1 to T2. This might indicate that learners, in the process of increasing their DM uses, lean onto a DM with multifunctional characteristics to implement their developing pragmatic competence. In contrast, *then,* the second most recurrent DM, most often accompanied by *and*, is used at similar rates (16%) by both groups and, in light of this, its gradual decrease from T1 to T2 may signal that learners are increasingly aligning with proficient speaker patterns.

You know is the third most frequent DM in the learner corpus. Its primary use is to fill the silence needed to think about what to say next and to emphasise the force of propositions. Considering the age of the learners, this is in line with the general uses made by young native speakers, as opposed to adults, who seem to use it primarily as a textual monitor to enhance coherence in communication (Buysse 2017). As it turns out, this data seems to confirm learners' improvement.

A different trend is seen with *well*, the second most used DM by native speakers (20.6%), but only used by 7% of all other DMs in the learner corpus. *Well* is used to initiate or close topics and conversations, and it can indicate a shift in content or discourse direction (Biber et al. 1999; Svartvik 1980; Watts 1989; Carter and McCarthy 2006). From what arises from the learner corpus, most of these uses tend to be supplied by *so*.

O*kay* is used by 3.7% of all DMs studied, as opposed to native speakers (1.2%). Learners frequently rely on this DM to feel more secure in opening the narrative and facilitating the flow of conversation.

(21) T2L14: *okay*. i am going to tell a story of my childhood. when i was like six or seven years old.

The DMs *I mean*, *anyway*, *you see*, *now* are relatively infrequent in learners' stories. If the situation is similar in the native speakers' corpus for *you see* and *now*, it diverges for *I mean* and *anyway*, which are more commonly used by natives.

All in all, while progress seems evident through RQ1, the differences between learners and native speakers in DM use suggests that fostering pragmatic competence remains essential at advanced levels to approximate authentic language use.

6. RQ3: Learners' use of other pragmatic DMs from González's (2004)

To better understand learners' pragmatic strategies for structuring their oral narratives, other pragmatic DMs were searched besides those outlined by González (2004). The DM *and*, was found to have frequencies above natives' most occurring forms, and *like* above the least occurring ones.

And is traditionally understood as a coordinating conjunction. However, in spoken English, it also manages discourse and enhances conversational flow, giving a sense of immediacy (Schiffrin 1987). In storytelling *and* organises discourse by linking sequences, filling pauses and marking emphasis as in "*and* that's why at the end he gave us a little souvenir" (T2L1). In analysing the occurrences of *and* within the present corpus, it was ensured that its use as a

pragmatic DM was clearly distinguished from its traditional role within syntactic coordination. I classified those instances where *and* co-occurs with *so* or *then*.

The DM *like* has been extensively studied and is recognised as a versatile feature of informal speech, preferred mainly by youth (Blyth, Recktenwald and Wang 1990). Firstly, it has a hedging function that softens propositions and approximates instances (D'Arcy 2007). It also introduces examples or explanations (see Beeching 2016; Blanchard and Buysse 2021) and is a valuable device for pausing and organising speech while maintaining fluency (Polat 2011). Jucker and Smith (1998, 174) point out that *like*, with *you know*, and *I mean* are "presentation markers" aimed to modify and accompany the speaker's information. This is opposed to "reception markers" such as *yeah*, *oh* and *okay*.

Table 6 shows the frequency of *and* and *like* in the learner corpus.

	Abstract	Orientation	Action	Resolution	Evaluation	Coda	Total
and	3 (1.9%)	38 (24.7%)	38 (24.7%)	42 (27.9%)	25 (16.2%)	9 (5.8%)	156
like	-	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	5 (62.5%)	-	8

Tab. 6: Distribution of other English pragmatic markers in learners' T2 narrative segments (N and %)

It is immediately evident that the frequency of *and* is significantly higher than that of *like*. Nevertheless, *like* surpasses the occurrences of other DMs analysed, such as *okay, I mean, anyway, you see,* and *now*.

The learners use *and* in a range of pragmatic functions. First, they sequence events, sometimes in combination with *then*. However, this use is often repetitive, suggesting a reliance on *and* as a default connective, as in (22).

(22) T2L34: *and* i decided to go upstairs. *and* nothing was wrong. like, nothing was out of place. *and* then, i heard a cold breeze down my neck. *and*, as i turned around to check the window, i realised that the window was perfectly closed.

And is also employed to add emphasis, particularly in evaluative segments, often in codas, to highlight the significance of events or the emotional involvement in the story's turnouts. The use of *and* is particularly interesting in (23), where the coda is introduced by *and*. It is followed by a fake conversational turn, which indicates a particular awareness of interactive strategies.

(23) T2L9: *and* that was my horror story. what's yours?

Lastly, learners show reliance on *and* for pauses on several occasions. This can occur through immediate repetition or hesitation markers (24).

(24) T2L30: a man stop… stopped me and talked to me in spanish *and*, *and* in fact he was asking me if i wanted to join.

All these instances confirm the pragmatic multifunctionality of *and*. While some uses align with native speaker norms, such as sequential linking or bridging turns, others, like repetitive use or filling hesitations, suggest areas where learners are still developing proficiency in managing spoken discourse.

The data reveals that the pragmatic use of *and* in the learners' narratives is so prevalent that, by percentage, it surpasses even the use of *so* (Figures 8 and 9).

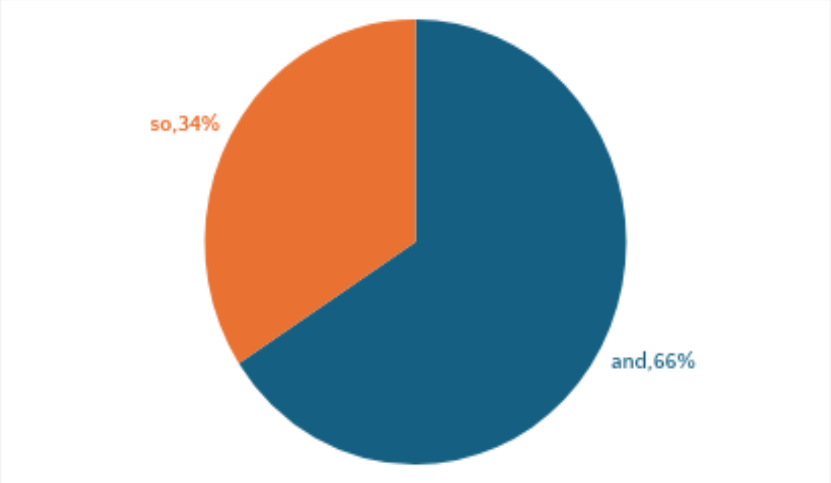

Fig. 8: Frequency of *so* and *and* in the Learner corpus

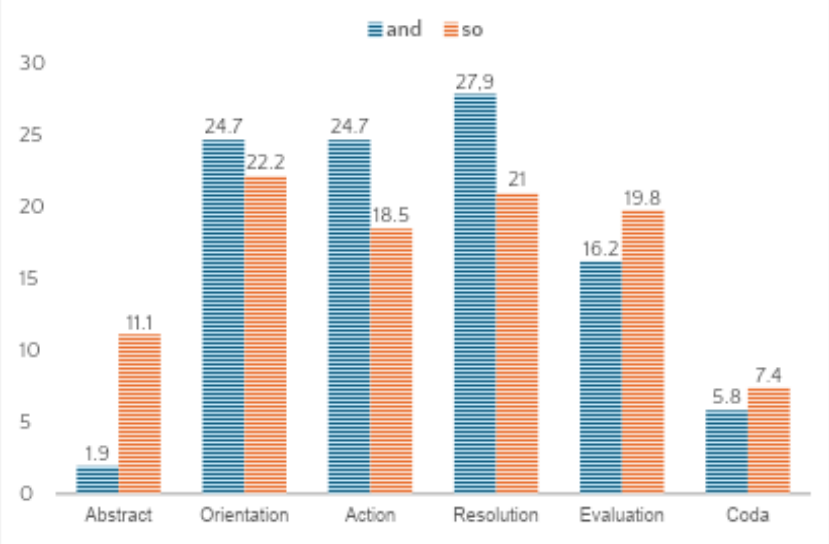

Fig. 9: Distribution of *so* and *and* across the six Learner corpus segments

Both *and* and *so* are particularly abundant in the orientation segment. However, in action and resolution, which together make up the bulk of the narration, the presence of *so* is more significant. On the other hand, *and* frequently appears to emphasise the turnout of events (evaluation and coda).

In comparison, González's (2004) findings demonstrated a markedly different pattern. In native speakers' narratives, *so* is dominant in the action segment, accounting for 70.8% of its usage. This contrast accentuates a key difference between the learners' use of DMs and native speakers' patterns. While learners rely heavily on *and* to structure and transition between narrative segments, their use of *so* does not reflect the same prominence observed in González's (2004) native speaker data, particularly within action segments. This suggests that *and* functions as a versatile but sometimes overused tool for learners, compensating for their less frequent and nuanced use of other potential DMs with the same function.

The DM *like* occurs in the learner corpus occasionally and performs various functions that align with patterns observed in spoken English (see Andersen 2001;). For example, *like* is used for approximation (T2L35: "we spent *like* a week in the united kingdom"), to enhance explanation (T2L3: "nothing was wrong. *like*. nothing was out of place"), occasionally with direct speech (T2L35: "so i was *like*, yeah yeah let me order for you"), and to draw analogies, reflecting learners' efforts to create imagery when conveying subjective experiences (T2L9: "i was shocked and I was *like*, what really?"). However, *like* mostly appears as a filler, helping learners maintain fluency during pauses or moments of hesitation. This is evident in T2L36: "he slapped my cheeks. erm. *like*. i i i was completely surprised," where *like* acts as a bridge, allowing the speaker to express emotional surprise while structuring their story.

The relatively modest but notable frequency of *like* indicates an emerging awareness among learners of its utility in spoken English. Studies have shown that advanced learners gradually adopt markers such as *like* as their pragmatic competence improves, particularly in contexts requiring hedging (Müller 2005). The learners of this corpus may thus be attempting to incorporate informal, conversational English in their narratives.

7. Conclusions

The findings from this study provide insights into how learners acquire and use DMs. They highlight both areas of alignment with native speaker patterns and of divergence, as well as the potential for pedagogical intervention.

The quantitative analysis of DM occurrence before and after raising learners' awareness of spoken English traits reveal an overall increase in their use, with significant gains in specific markers, *so* and *you know*, suggesting that learners internalised and applied these features. In

contrast, *then* and *well* do not display significant changes, indicating a more selective adoption of pragmatic markers.

When compared with oral stories told by natives (González 2004), the data reveals that learners replicate the same range of DMs, which shows an understanding of their pragmatic roles. While differences in frequency exist, such as the overuse of *so* (57.2% in learners vs 37% in natives), learners also tend to employ markers' functions in ways comparable to native speakers.

Lastly, learners substantially employ some other markers that were not highlighted in González (2004), such as *and* and *like*. *And* is present in all narrative phases, particularly in orientation, action and resolution, where it surpasses *so* in frequency. This seems to suggest that while heading to a C1 level of proficiency, learners still rely on simpler structures to manage narrative flow while trying to adhere to pragmatic language uses. In contrast, *like* is less frequent and concentrated in evaluative phases, which signals that learners' awareness of its role is emerging. This pattern suggests that the learners from this corpus are gradually incorporating informal, conversational features into their narratives. Potentially, this occurs not only thanks to the exposure to media and peer interaction but also to the knowledge offered in their course.

Overall, while learners display notable progress in adopting native-like DM patterns, aspects to develop remain. If T2 reveals both an increase in DM use and signs of growing awareness, the comparison with proficient speaker norms shows that learners have not yet reached a proficient level of competence in the matter. This suggests that DMs should not be overlooked in advanced-level courses (C1); on the contrary, it might be at higher levels that pragmatic competence could be emphasised to help learners approximate authentic language use in real-world storytelling. Therefore, this study challenges the notion of DMs as "language which is not taught" (Hellermann and Vergun 2007), stressing the need to implement this kind of instruction. Educators can help learners navigate complex discourse structures by incorporating targeted instruction in DMs, enhancing their fluency, coherence, and pragmatics in spoken English.

This recommendation is made with full awareness and despite the study's inherent limitations. For example, focusing on the corpus of a single type of learners (Italian college students) restricts generalisability to other learner populations or linguistic backgrounds. Additionally, the stories told in monologic form may not have captured the full range of DM use occurring in conversational storytelling and naturalistic settings. Future research is thus necessary to understand learner strategies for DM acquisition better and develop more effective pedagogical practices. It would be particularly interesting to gain deeper insights into how ESL learners in educational settings become aware of, internalise, and use DMs in interaction. This

entails further exploring variables like learners' level of awareness of pragmatic functions, exposure to natural input, and opportunity for interaction.

Studies like those by Müller (2005) and Jakupević (2019) have shown that learners may use DMs correctly but in a different range and distribution from native speakers, which indicates the need for explicit, pragmatically instructed teaching. Corpus-driven and data-oriented learning approaches could prove particularly effective in encouraging learners' awareness of natural DM frequency and use. Longitudinal or task-based studies may further show how the level of DM knowledge and use increases over time and what kind and amount of feedback, reflection, or collaborative activities can best improve learners' acquisition. Finally, the influence of learners' L1s is also worth further exploring because cross-linguistic transfer may affect discourse structuring preferences in subtle but impactful ways.

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Bionote

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