

# Discourse marker acquisition and out-of-school activities: evidence from EFL writing

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**Abstract** - *The present paper attempts to investigate what out-of-school activities might positively affect the acquisition of discourse markers (DMs) which seems to be one of the most demanding areas for EFL learners. Two equal size groups of Croatian primary and secondary school learners (N = 200) completed a writing test in English and a questionnaire aimed at establishing the degree to which the respondents were exposed to out-of-school activities. The results reveal that the out-of-school activity which EFL learners might best benefit from is reading authentic English literature. It is followed by watching English TV programs and surfing English websites. The findings of the study reflect a need for enhancing EFL learners' awareness of the benefits and possibilities for out-of-school activities by incorporating tasks and teaching materials that bring the out-of-school activities into EFL classrooms.*

**Keywords** - *Discourse marker acquisition, out-of-school activities, EFL writing*

## 1. Introduction

Discourse markers (DMs) present fine and subtle linguistic items which native speakers begin to acquire in their childhood within both linguistic and extralinguistic contexts of their natural, first language environment. Due to their multifaceted discourse features as well as to their multifunctional nature, DMs seem to be one of the most demanding areas in the process of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). Their semantic and pragmalinguistic complexity is likely to demand more than the traditional pedagogical setting can offer. As will be elaborated in the following chapter, the current EFL classroom environment does not seem to provide a solid basis for high quality DM acquisition. Classroom constraints related to a small number of EFL classes (at average, only two to three fortyfive-minute classes per week), EFL textbooks which lack a systematic representation of DMs and artificial, decontextualized language input appear not to provide sufficient support in acquiring English DMs. Therefore, other types of EFL exposure should be taken into consideration in order to provide learners with substantial EFL input. In this respect, it is logical to presuppose that additional exposure to

authentic English across a range of out-of-school activities might positively affect DM acquisition.

The out-of-school experience of EFL has already been recognised as having a positive impact on learners' EFL achievement, particularly at the primary school level. The ELLiE study (aimed at investigating the effectiveness of the teaching of languages in primary schools in a range of European countries), for example, recorded the influence of subtitled television programmes and films as a significant factor in children's reading and listening achievements. The results of the study clearly emphasize the importance of out-of-school foreign language exposure the awareness of which may enable policy-makers and practitioners to plan such curricula that would provide learners with substantial foreign language input as well as the assistance to acquire it [7]. Thinking of DMs as of nuanced and complex linguistic items, additional learning opportunities in form of out-of-school activities could enable EFL learners to significantly increase incidental vocabulary (DM) learning through an enjoyable social experience. However, in order to systematically use all the potential of out-of-school EFL exposure, teachers should know, in the first place, what types of out-of-school activities are most closely related to DM acquisition. It is not enough to encourage learners to be exposed to English whenever and wherever possible. Both policy-makers and practitioners should know precisely what out-of-school activities should be systematically stimulated as to facilitate EFL learners' acquisition of DMs. They should enhance learners' awareness of the benefits and possibilities for out-of-school activities by incorporating tasks and teaching materials that bring the out-of-school activities into EFL classrooms. Bearing this in mind, the present study attempts to investigate what out-of-school activities are significantly positively related to learners' use of English DMs in written language at two proficiency levels. The results of the study are expected to shed additional light on the issue of DM acquisition in EFL and to provide guidance to policy-makers and practitioners on what out-of-school learning environments might be extended into curriculum for maximum benefit to EFL learners in the area of DM acquisition.

## 2. Discourse markers in EFL research

Over the past three decades a plethora of linguistic literature has recognised DMs as undoubtedly one of crucial factors in establishing coherence and cohesion in both spoken and written discourse [1], [2], [8], [9], [10], [13], [19] and [31]. This makes DMs a constituent part of discourse and pragmatic competence, and, in more general terms, communicative competence. However, in spite of their highly important role in native speaker communication, DMs seem to be rather neglected in foreign language (FL) acquisition research [6] and [25]. This comes as a surprise, especially with respect to the fact that insufficient knowledge of DMs and their incorrect use may cause misunderstanding and difficulty in coherent interpretation and may hinder communication efficiency as well as interpersonal and intercultural interaction [36] and [27]. As to EFL, the majority of the studies conducted to date are based on data obtained from small-size spoken samples (composed mostly of advanced adolescents) and report on EFL learners' poor command of DMs [22] and [11]. In the domain of spoken EFL, almost all empirical research focus on the comparison between the use of English DMs by native speakers and by EFL learners. According to their findings, EFL learners seem to use DMs less frequently than native speakers [35] and tend to use them in inadequate ways, i.e. ways in which they would never be used by native speakers [38]. They are also inclined to overusing particular DMs such as *but*, *and* and *so* [14] and [28]. Causes for EFL learners' relatively poor command of English DMs seem to lie in mother tongue interference [4] and [21], pragmatic fossilization [29], unnatural language input in the formal educational context [11], under-representation of DMs in EFL textbooks as well as in EFL teachers' insufficient competences in the field of English DM use [3] and [15]. On the other hand, Müller [26] also points to a factor that could contribute to the improvement of non-native speakers' usage of English DMs, at least, for some particular types of DMs. Her research has shown that non-native (German) speakers' performance in English DM usage tends to be more native-like when they learn to use DMs through contact with native speakers (this has been confirmed for the markers *so* and *like*).

Although non-native speaker use of DMs in written English has been scarcely studied, it seems to be characterized by similar deficiencies as in spoken English. Studies concerned with DM use in EFL writing are mostly based on Fraser's pragmatic approach [8, 9] (e.g. [22] and [17]) as well as Schiffrin's discourse approach [30] (e.g. [40]) and Swan's categorisation of DMs [32] (e.g. [5]). They

are primarily concerned with the comparison of native and non-native use of DMs and the relationship between DM use and writing quality. Generally speaking, the results of the studies to-date suggest that EFL learners, compared with native speakers, underutilize DMs and overuse certain types of these linguistic items, mainly elaborative marker *and* as well as the inferential markers *so* and *because* [33]. Qualitative analyses in the area also point to EFL learners' misuse of DMs in writing, which is believed to be the consequence of L1 interference and the transfer of L1 rhetorical features [37] and [34] as well as of insufficient and inadequate presentation of DMs in teaching materials and writing teaching procedures [20]. EFL learners do not seem to have substantial knowledge of syntactic and semantic features of DMs, which ultimately leads to a relatively low level of English DM use. Ying [40], for example, points to the Chinese and Japanese EFL learners' misuse of the marker *but* caused by their insufficient knowledge of the subtle context-dependent differences in use that exist between *but* and *though*, on the one hand, and between *but* and *while* on the other. Yardley [39] warns that DMs which EFL learners do not use in speech will not be used in their writing either. According to his own teaching experience, involving DMs in the learners' conversational lexicon might considerably facilitate elegance and fluency in writing. As an example, he points to Japanese intermediate EFL students who, although being acquainted with a large variety of English DMs, still use almost only markers *and*, *also* and *but* in both their speaking and writing in English. Yardley sees this primarily as a consequence of poor representation of DMs in English textbooks in which DMs are mostly presented only in the form of lists and "fill-in-the-blank" exercises which do not provide students with an opportunity to internalize DMs.

As to the relationship between DM use and writing quality, it is generally believed that the larger number of DMs used, the higher quality in writing will be achieved. In analyzing DM use in persuasive essays by ESL university students, Intarparawat and Steffensen [16] found that better rated essays were characterized, among other things, by a high density of DMs. Similar findings were obtained in a research study conducted by Martinez [22] who investigated the use of DMs in the expository compositions of EFL Spanish undergraduates. The main findings were that students employed a variety of discourse markers with some types used more frequently than others. Elaborative markers were the most frequently used, followed by contrastive markers. A statistically significant relationship was found between the scores of the compositions and the number of DMs used in

the same compositions. As a matter of fact, the larger the number of DMs used, the higher the score of the composition. This observation seems to be further corroborated by Jalilifar's research [17] which focused on investigating DMs in descriptive compositions of 90 junior and senior Iranian EFL students. The results also point to elaborative markers as the most frequently used and to a positive relationship between the quality of the compositions and the number of DMs used.

So far, however, there has been little, if any, large-scale research into the factors which potentially affect EFL learners' use of DMs, particularly in the domain of writing skills and different proficiency levels. Given the complex semantic and syntactic nature of DMs and their multifunctionality in terms of pragmatic and discourse meanings, it can be assumed, in the first place, that the larger learners' exposure to EFL, the higher quality of their DM use. As stated in the introductory chapter, this study is aimed at identifying those out-of-school activities that are significantly positively related to DM acquisition. The study was conducted with Croatian EFL learners who have not as yet been subjected to systematic research in the field of English DM use.

### 3. The study

The study presented in this paper is part of large-scale research aimed at investigating Croatian EFL learners' acquisition of DMs in written language production. The results of the research indicate that Croatian EFL learners have a relatively poor command of English DMs at A2 and B1 proficiency levels. Not only do they rarely use DMs in English writing, but they also seem to make use of a relatively poor range of individual types of English DMs. As the results suggest, possible causes of this may lie in inadequate input noted in the current EFL textbooks, but also in L1 (Croatian) interference. The learners seem to most frequently use those DMs that they normally use in their L1, with the usage functions of such DMs appearing to be almost identical. Finally, although DMs need not necessarily be the predictors of writing quality, the findings show that the larger number of DMs used the higher level of writing quality.

This paper focuses on the research stage related to investigating extracurricular factors which may influence DM use in EFL writing. More precisely, the specific research question that guided the present study is: what out-of-school activities might have a positive impact on DM acquisition at the primary and secondary school level, as measured by correlations between the respondents' exposure to the

extracurricular English and the frequencies of DM use in EFL writing.

#### 3.1. Participants

The study was carried out on a sample of 200 participants divided into two sample groups, each having 100 examinees. The first group (Sample group I) was comprised of primary school EFL eighth-graders (aged 14) and the second group (Sample group II) included secondary school fourth-graders (aged 18). There were 116 female (58%) and 84 male participants (42%). They had all started learning English as a foreign language in the fourth grade of primary school (at the age of 10) and had been exposed to the same total number of English lessons within the respective sample group. None of the participants had spent any considerable time in an English-speaking country.

#### 3.2. Instruments

Two research instruments were used to collect data: a writing test (a composition) and a questionnaire. Compositions as one of the research instruments were used in order to measure the degree to which Croatian EFL learners have acquired English DMs at levels A2 and B1. The compositions were written in both L2 English and L1 Croatian as one of the research aims was also to investigate the participants' DM acquisition in L1 and the possible L1 interference in the domain of L2 DM acquisition. The composition was in the form of 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: who the person is, what the person looks like, what the person does, the experiences they have shared and why the person should get the award. The composition was aimed at investigating a wide range of knowledge and competences in written communication, narration, and presentations of arguments (see Appendix I).

In this paper, the focus is on the questionnaire the aim of which was to get an insight into the factors which could potentially affect DM acquisition in both sample groups. After obtaining personal data (name and surname, class and school) from respondents, data which demanded information related to English language learning outside the classroom was asked in the first part of the questionnaire. Participants provided information on their use of modern media (the Internet and television) and on reading in English in the second

part of the questionnaire. The questionnaire used was a structured one, with close-ended questions. The questionnaire was in Croatian and the participants completed it during their regular English class (see Appendix II).

### 3.3. Results and Discussion

For the purpose of investigating factors which could have an influence on the learners' DM use in writing in English, a possible correlation between the frequencies of properly used DMs in the participants' compositions and the exposure to EFL out-of-school activities was observed. The following extracurricular activities were taken into consideration: learning English outside the classroom, "surfing" English websites, watching English-language TV programs and reading literature written in English.

#### 3.3.1. Learning English outside the classroom

The correlation between learning English outside the classroom (e.g. in private foreign language schools and home-based one-to-one lessons) and the use of English DMs was the first object of our investigation. According to the results obtained by the implementation of the ANOVA test (Figure 1), those primary school participants, who also learned English outside the classroom, considerably more frequently used DMs in their composition writing ( $p=0,03768$ ). With secondary school participants

(Figure 2), the statistically significant correlation between learning English outside the classroom and the frequency in the use of DMs was not measured ( $p=0,21585$ ). However, in our sample, there was a relatively small number of secondary school participants who learned English outside the classroom. Such a disparity compared to those participants who did not learn English outside the classroom make a reliable explanation of this finding impossible. However, as figure 2 clearly shows, in the compositions of the relatively small number of secondary school participants who learned English outside the classroom, it is obvious that these participants tended to use a larger number of DMs. This tendency, like the finding related to sample I, could be explained by the fact that learning outside the classroom increases learner exposure to English. This, in principle, should increase language competence, but also increases multiple opportunities to expose learners to the acquisition of DMs. Furthermore, it should be noted that EFL learning in private foreign language schools and one-to-one courses takes place in small-size groups (usually from 5 to 10 learners) in which all the learners can actively participate in classroom interaction, in a much more relaxed atmosphere and with much more freedom on behalf of the teachers with respect to choosing authentic language material. Finally, opportunities to practise writing increase as well.

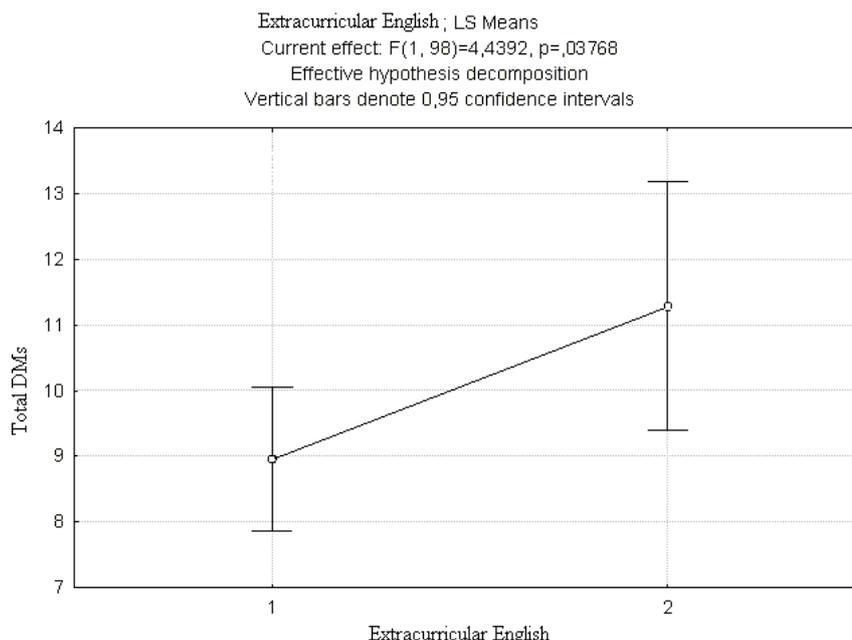


Figure 1. DM use and extracurricular English (Sample I)

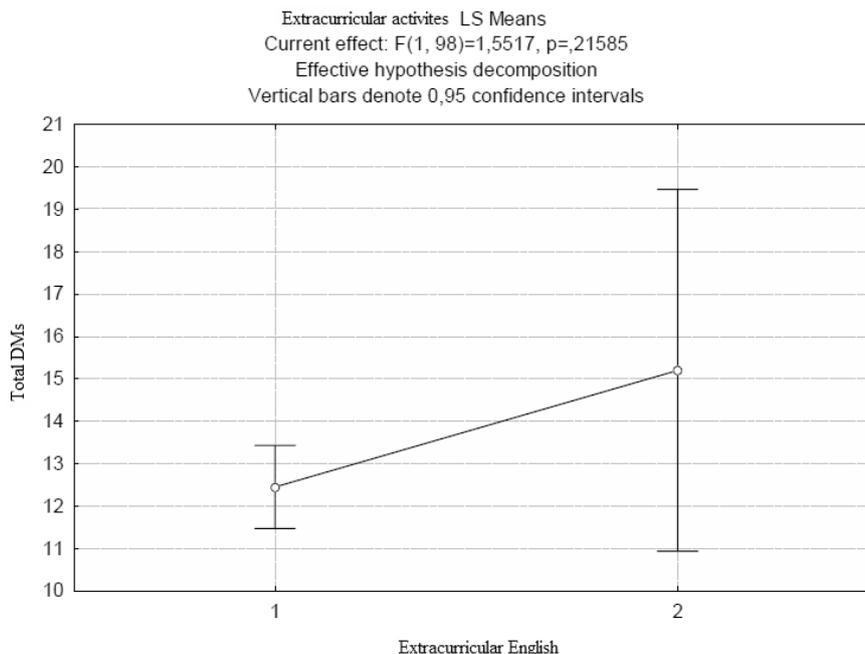


Figure 2. DM use and extracurricular English (Sample II)

3.3.2. “Surfing” English websites

In the area of learner exposure to English, we further analyzed a possible correlation of the use of English DMs and using the Internet. With regard to the age of the participants, ANOVA testing gained varying results. As is obvious from Figure 3, in Sample I there was a statistically significant correlation between “surfing” English websites and the use of English DMs ( $p=0,00262$ ). The results suggest that more frequent use of English Internet sites resulted in more frequent use of DMs when writing in English. In other words, the results point to the tendency that more frequent use of English websites increases the level of acquisition of English DMs. This is not surprising if one considers the following. Firstly, the Internet enables learner contact with authentic texts written in English including various language styles, registers and jargons and a variety of communication situations. Secondly, based on the fact that the vast majority of learners frequently surfed the Internet in English, it can be implied that learners were highly motivated to perform that activity. Finally, learner exposure to the language materials in English through the Internet (which can also be aural) provides an excellent opportunity for the so called ‘incidental’ learning of English vocabulary [24]. Furthermore, if one takes into consideration the poor representation of DMs in the formal teaching process, but also the complex nature of their discourse functions, it is obvious that visiting websites in English is for primary school learners fertile ground for acquiring English DMs.

Therefore, the above stated results point to the potential usefulness of computers in EFL teaching in the domain of DM acquisition. As figure 4 presents, there is no statistically significant correlation between visiting English websites and DM frequencies in Sample II ( $p=0,19982$ ). In fact, there is a tendency for the secondary school participants who rarely surfed the Internet in English to more frequently use DMs. Bearing in mind these results in the light of earlier analyses of the primary school sample results, it can be assumed that the acquisition of these language units in the early stages of learning develops more quickly than in later stages. It can also be assumed that in later stages mere exposure to English is no longer sufficient to substantially increase competences in this area of language acquisition. Apart from that, it could be presumed that the observed differences in Sample I imply that the primary school participants were less exposed to English, not only through the Internet, but, generally, outside of school than their secondary school counterparts. It is to be expected because secondary school students are very much interested in various forms of entertainment such as film, music, sport, which today are mainly tied to English speaking countries. They are therefore highly motivated to search for information in English, and the Internet is only one of the sources of information relevant to them. Their previous language knowledge makes contact with various forms of extra-curricular experiences with English possible providing them with opportunities to enrich their linguistic knowledge mainly, we believe, in the area of English

vocabulary. On the other hand, primary school learners have just started to develop and recognise their own spheres of interest, and their previous language knowledge is not so developed as to inspire them for additional, out-of-school acquisition of language knowledge and competences. It can therefore be concluded that primary school learners who were motivated to surf English webistes and who consequently, among other things, enriched their vocabulary, had a considerable advantage over learners who did not. Similar conclusions have been

reached from other research on the influence of the Internet on developing certain language skills such as reading and listening (e.g. [18] and [12]). The given results point to the conclusion that any generalisation related to the possible influence of the Internet on the acquisition of English DMs should be reached after separate experimental research on the role of the Internet in the process of language learning has been carried out with strict control of various cognitive and social variables.

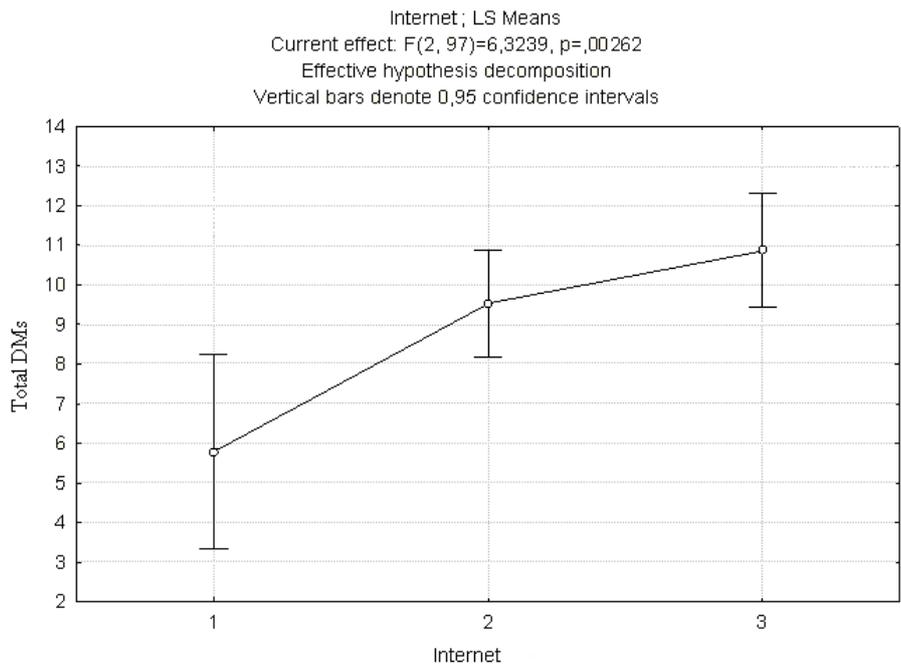


Figure 3. DM use and “surfing” English websites (Sample I)

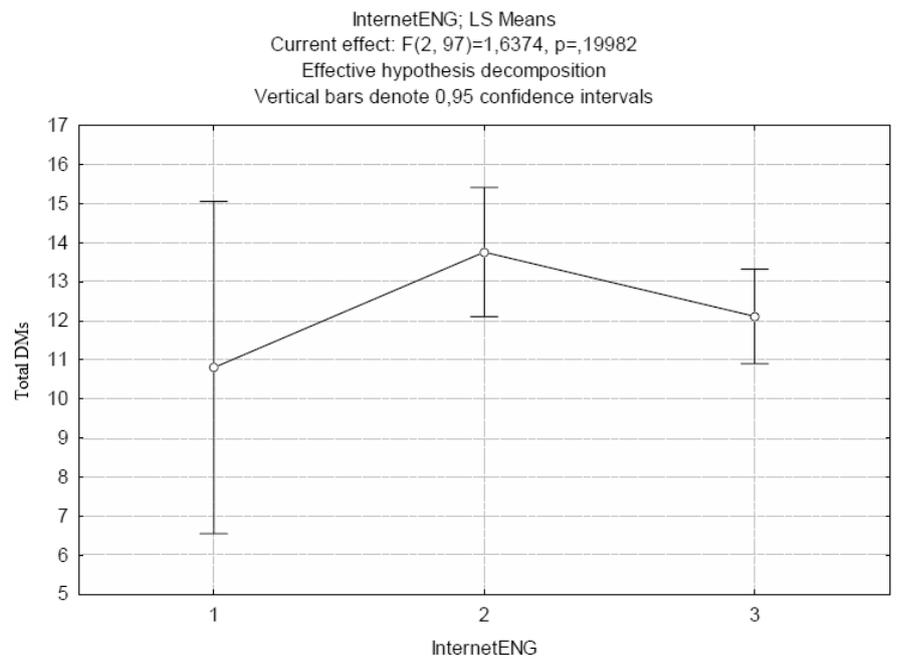


Figure 4. DM use and “surfing” English websites (Sample II)

3.3.3. *Watching English-language TV programs*

Further analysis revealed that in Sample I watching English-language television programs to a certain extent influences the use of English DMs in writing. As can be concluded from Figure 5, the results of the analysis of variance support the following: the more primary school participants watched television in English, the more they used English DMs in writing. On the other hand, in Sample II this variable did not prove to be a factor which was statistically significantly related to the frequency of markers in students' compositions (Figure 6). Furthermore, more frequent use of DMs was observed in those secondary school participants who rarely watched television in English. Such a finding corresponds to

the previously stated results of the analysis of the correlation between English DM use and "surfing" English websites. As a matter of fact, the presumption has been confirmed that in earlier stages of learning, at the primary school stage, learner exposure to English through the use of contemporary electronic media has a positive influence on the acquisition of English DMs, which, on the other hand, does not seem to be the case with the secondary school level. As we tried to emphasize in the discussion on the previous two variables, we believe that, in this case also, a more detailed analysis of the causes that led to the obtained findings, requires separate experimental research.

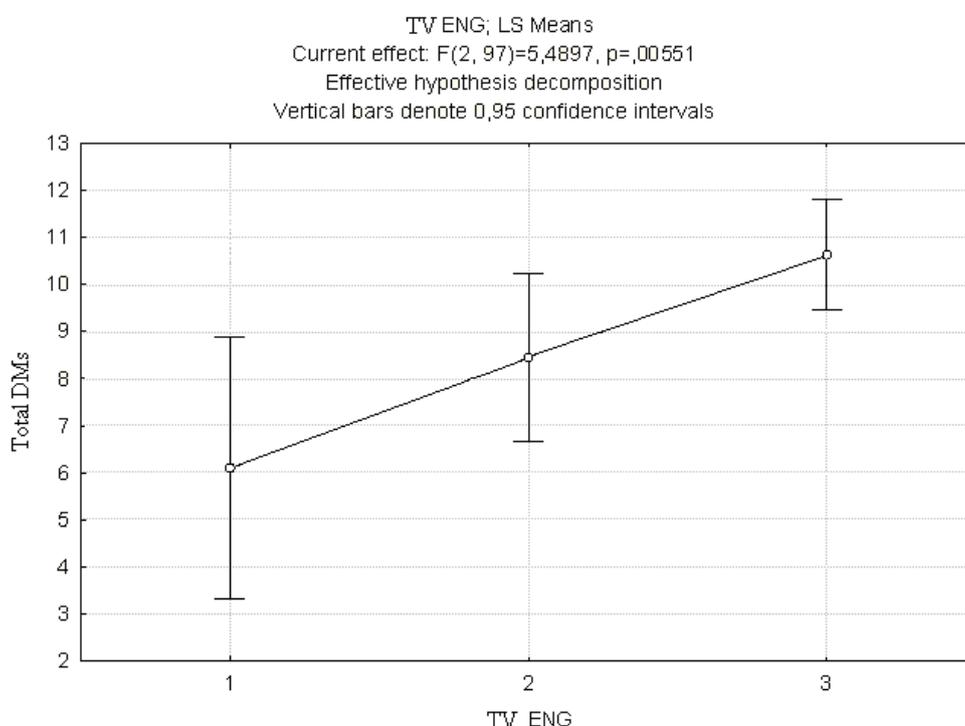
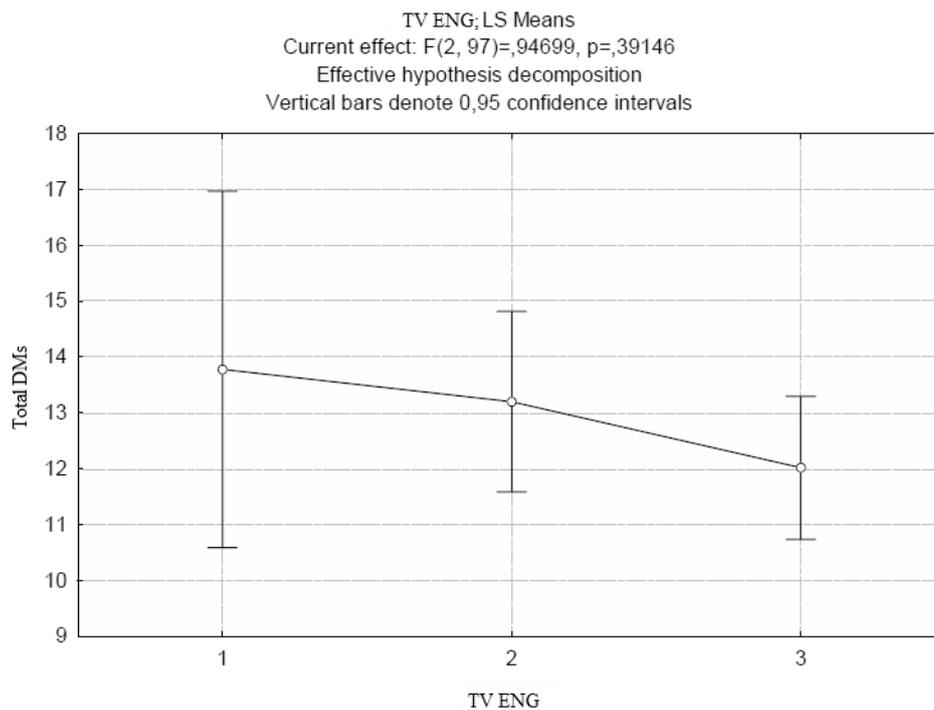


Figure 5. *DM use and watching English-language TV programs (Sample I)*



*Figure 6. DM use and watching English-language TV programs (Sample II)*

### 3.3.4. Reading literature written in English

Given that our research is aimed at analysing the use of DMs in the area of writing skills, we were particularly interested in the research results demonstrating a possible correlation with reading literature written in English, that is, with the exposure of learners to the English written word within the framework of authentic texts. As can be seen in figure 7, the results corroborate the findings related to the two previous variables in Sample I. In other words, the larger exposure to authentic texts in English on part of the primary school participants was, the larger the frequencies of DMs in their writings were. Even though there is no statistically significant correlation between the use of English DMs and reading in English in the sample of secondary school participants ( $p = 0,22702$ ), the results show the same tendency – the more frequently students read in English, the more frequent their use of English DMs was (Figure 8). Such a finding did not come as a surprise because it was related to a

type of out-of-school activity in English which brought the learners into direct contact with the authentic use of English DMs in written texts. In other words, by reading texts the authors of which were native speakers of English and which belong to various thematic areas, learners were offered, in various types of contexts, the chance to meet those markers typical of English written discourse. We assume that repeated exposure of learners to authentically written texts in English will develop their sensitivity to the existence of DMs as cohesive linguistic elements.

With the assumption that learners are motivated to read, that is, that we are talking about texts that are in accordance with their interests, curiosity and the desire to acquire additional knowledge from certain areas, we believe that reading texts written in authentic English is one of the best ways to develop learner awareness of the various functions of English DMs.

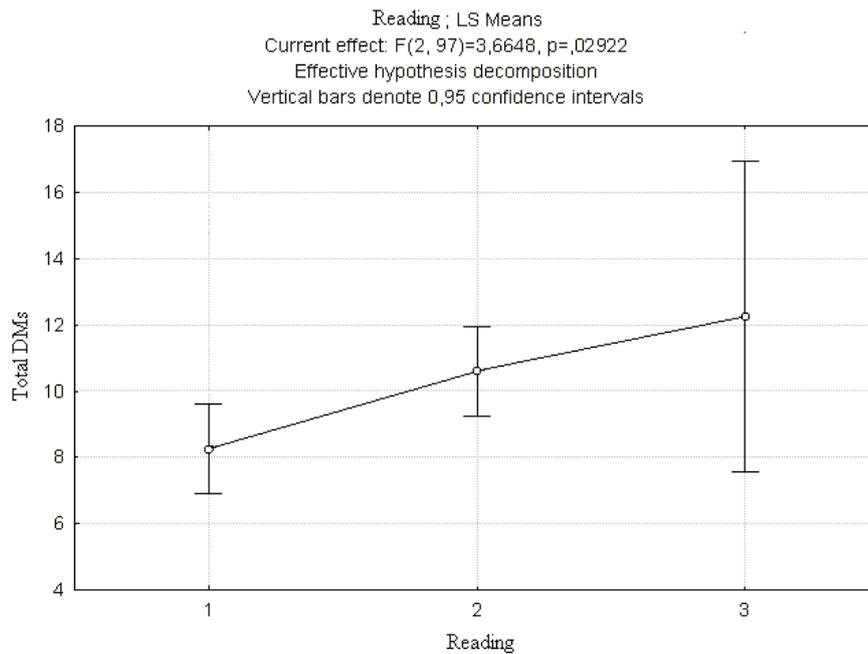


Figure 7. DM use and reading literature written in English (Sample I)

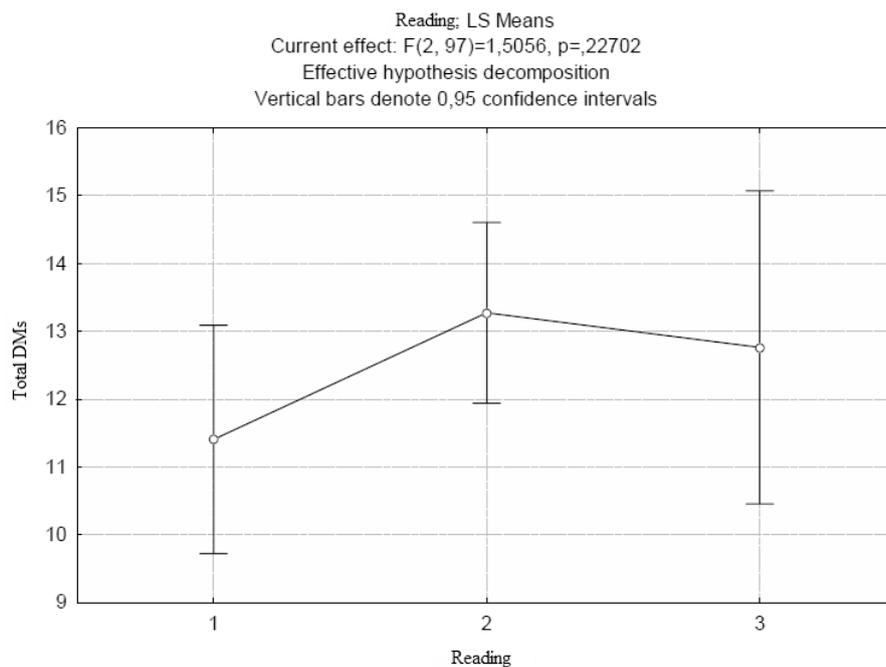


Figure 8. DM use and reading literature written in English (Sample II)

#### 4. Concluding remarks

The findings of the present study point to a number of out-of-school activities which seem to positively influence to a certain degree DM use in EFL writing: learning English outside the classroom, “surfing” English websites, watching English-language TV programs and reading literature written in English. The positive impact of the activities related to

extracurricular English is much more evident at a lower proficiency level (A2) where it has been observed that the larger exposure to such activities is, the more frequent use of DMs is. Although there were no statistically significant correlations between the stated activities and DM use on part of the secondary school participants (B1), the results suggest a similar tendency as with the primary school sample.

Given the fact that the presence and adequate use of DMs is a necessary prerequisite to creating a smooth and reader-friendly written text, EFL teachers should encourage learner exposure to all the activities that may facilitate DM acquisition. As is evident from the results of our study, this is especially important for primary EFL learners whose use of English DMs in writing might be improved if they were additionally exposed to various sources of authentic English. We believe that EFL learners could benefit greatly from involving the elements of the stated out-of-school activities into their regular English classes and EFL textbooks. This particularly refers to reading English literature, the extracts of English TV programs as well as to using English websites. In this respect, both policy-makers and practitioners should plan and develop such curricula and teaching materials that would systematically stimulate and encourage learners' exposure to the stated out-of-school EFL activities. They should enhance learners' awareness of the benefits and possibilities for out-of-school activities by incorporating tasks and language exercises that bring the out-of-school activities into EFL classrooms. In addition, if these out-of-school activities are skillfully incorporated into developing writing skills within the process view approach (cf. [23] and [5]), EFL learners' awareness of nuanced differences in DM functions and meanings may be increased. Finally, taking into consideration, on the one hand, the significance of DMs as cohesive devices performing very important discourse and pragmatic functions, and on the other, a lack of studies in DM acquisition, particularly in the domain of EFL writing, the present study will hopefully trigger further research which would throw more light on the acquisition of these complex linguistic items.

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**Appendix I.**

Name and surname: -----

**Letter Writing Task**

This text appeared in an internet magazine for teenagers.

\_\_\_\_\_

**Award for Best Friend**

Which friend do you like best? Write about that special person (boy or girl) and give him or her the chance to win the Award for Best Friend!

\_\_\_\_\_

In your letter to the editor of the magazine, write about

- who the person is
- what the person looks like
- what the person does
- a story about something you did together
- why the person should get the Award.

**Appendix II.**

Name and Surname: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

**I**

How long have you been learning English? \_\_\_\_\_ years

Do you learn English out of school? NO YES (If yes, where? \_\_\_\_\_ )

Do you learn another foreign language besides English? NO YES

(If yes, which language? \_\_\_\_\_ )

**II**

Do you use the Internet and /or e-mail? NEVER RARELY OFTEN

Do you visit Internet sites in English? NEVER RARELY OFTEN

Do you watch television programs in English on cable TV, satellite or other?

NEVER

RARELY OFTEN

Do you read literature (books, magazines, papers etc. ) in English?

NEVER

RARELY OFTEN

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