Discourse markers and English acquisition.
A corpus-based comparison of essays in year 9 of junior high school and year 3 of senior high school in Sweden

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Abstract

Using a corpus of school essays of Swedish students in year 9 and 12 of junior and senior high school, the present study compares the level of formality and frequency of discourse markers in the respective year groups. Based on previous literature, discourse markers found in the essays are categorized as either formal or informal. Ten randomly selected essays from each year group are analyzed. The results show that there are discrepancies between grade 9 and year 12 in both formality and frequency of discourse markers. The differences can be connected to second language acquisition and contexts in which the Swedish students acquire English. Outer input of English, made possible by new technology and globalization, has a significant impact on language acquisition, a phenomenon which is new and relatively unexplored. The results of the current study are discussed in the light of the relevance and impacts of the frequent exposure to English through internet activities and media consumption and how it affects language learning. By focusing on discourse markers, which make up an important part of written and spoken language, I attempt to point out patterns that may be relevant and useful for English teachers. Awareness of how combined mechanisms affect and develop students’ acquisition and how to interpret differences in how students use specific grammatical elements such as discourse markers may be useful as a pedagogical analyzing tool. Not least when it comes to the assessment of essays.
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1. Introduction

The field of second language acquisition (SLA) is relevant to all teachers of foreign languages. Without an insight in the processes of SLA, teachers will most likely face difficulties in providing their students with tools that are crucial to second language learning development. In the current study, I have taken the importance of knowledge surrounding SLA in consideration, why the essay includes an introduction to the subject. In the first two chapters of the Swedish Curriculum for the compulsory school, the perspective of language developmental work is accentuated. A parallel focus on language should be part of the teaching in every subject, to secure that students acquire skills important to communication, reflection, and ability to express opinions (Skolverket, 2011).

In the present study, acquisition of English as a second language is studied. Writing proficiency of two different age groups in high school is in focus and will be examined from the main perspective of formality in grammar. The writing of students is something we as teachers come into contact with on a daily basis and regularly assess. As I have taught English for one and a half years, it strikes me how the formality in writing differs between the year groups. I have found that there are certain patterns that indicate an ample gap between year 7 and year 9. In year 7 I find the essays as strikingly informal whereas in grade 9 the informal and “chatty” language suddenly tend to vanish almost completely. Instead formal grammar traits dominate. Discussing this issue with coworkers, I find that they perceive similar notions. Consequently, I am curious and now wish to examine this issue more closely and see if there is any valid ground to my impressions. Reasons why the results may indicate a sudden change in formality in the essays will indeed be addressed, but not by any means validated. The results of the study may be of interest to English teachers in Sweden, be it merely touching upon one detail within the very complex area of SLA.
2. Background

Over the past decades, English has grown to be one of the most globally influential languages in areas such as science, business and communication. Popular culture, movies and music are also produced in English to a considerably large part. English is taught as a second language in most western countries, Sweden included. Furthermore, there is a growing access to extramural English (EE), a concept which describes language exposure outside of the classroom that impacts SLA (Sundqvist, 2009).

Junior high school education is compulsory in Sweden, and English is a compulsory subject often introduced to children as early as in preschool and taught to them from the age of seven. As stated, knowledge of second language acquisition (SLA) is relevant to all teachers, regardless of the subject they teach. However, it is even more crucial that teachers of foreign languages hold great competence in understanding the processes involved during students´ acquisition of a new language. Such competence allows for teachers to spot traits or tendencies in students´ written and oral production important to the assessment of L2 development. Understanding these processes facilitates the planning of the teaching and improves results successfully.

In the present comparative study, I will make an attempt to evaluate one of the common traits of spoken and written language, namely discourse markers, from now on DMs, of which the frequency and extent of formality in student essays should reflect levels of writing skills acquired.

I will compare the use of DMs in student essays of year 9 in junior high school and year 3 of senior high school, to see if I find discrepancies between the two year groups in terms of frequency and level of formality. Finally, I will discuss possible reasons to my findings. Previous literature will be a guide in maneuvering my way through the complex issues to be examined. The various impacts of EE on English acquisition of young people in Sweden are also relevant to the present study and will be discussed in the concluding part.
3. Aim and scope

Essays produced by junior high school students of year 9 and senior high school students of year 12 are examined in the present study. The data is gathered from a corpus of 296,000 words, collected by student teachers at the English department of Uppsala University. I will present closer information about the corpus in the method section.

The present study contains two main foci. The first part contains an introduction to SLA, whereas the second part zooms in on the use of discourse markers among Swedish students in year 9 and year 12.

DMs make up a broad and pragmatically important component in spoken and written communication, why they should be useful to the purpose of this study. DMs are complex and vary in levels of formality, function and grammar, much depending on the diverse settings in which they are applied. I will draw a line between DMs typical of casual spoken conversation and DMs used in formal writing. I will refer to the respective DMs as formal and informal and present examples of both categories. When categorizing the markers in valid categories, I will turn to the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (Biber et al., 1999), among other sources.

Since writing practice throughout junior and senior high school ought to develop Swedish students’ writing skills (and as a side effect also other skills of English), students most likely acquire the use of formal DMs. My hypothesis is that students gradually replace informal DMs with formal DMs between year 9 and year 7.

It is a logical expectation that the students acquire knowledge of formal DMs and that this should reflect in their school essays. Moreover, I will look for possible patterns that reveal whether such development includes conscious choices on behalf of the students, to fulfill textual functions, or if the use of formal DMs tends to be overused and/or imitating input of English rather than showing on increased SLA proficiency. I will also set out to analyze possible findings of informal markers from a corresponding perspective. If the results say anything about Swedish students’ SLA process, it may even be of use in teachers’ assessment of students’ writing, or at least indicate patterns that reveal some useful information about students’ English developmental stages. There might be a possibility that DMs are a useful analyzing tool to teachers in understanding SLA processes.

Apart from providing a general introduction of SLA, the following research questions will be examined in this study:
• Which specific DMs are used in the respective school years, and to what frequency?
• What is the total number of formal DMs and number of informal DMs in each school year?
• Does the total number of DMs differ in each school year?
• Does the level of formality of DMs change between year 9 and year 12?
• Are the potential findings of discrepancies in level of formality and/or frequency of DMs between the year groups in any way connected to online activity and social media habits?

4. Method and material

The material used in the present study is drawn from the Uppsala Learner English Corpus, ULEC, made up by essays written by Swedish high school students. The essays have been collected by student teachers since 2006 and currently contains a total number of 296,000 words. The students write essays on given topics in a simple web interface. Each essay is coded and provides information such as date of composition, register, year in school, level of English, gender of the writer and age of the writer. The common topic of the investigated essays of my study is “Ghosts”. The students were instructed to write an argumentative essay about whether they believe in ghosts or not.

I will compare and analyze twenty randomly chosen essays per respective Swedish high school years 9 and 12. However, I have only used essays which include a minimum of 200 words. The analysis will be based on the first 200 words of each essay of each year group, since the length of the essays vary. Gender will not be a factor in the study and has not been taken in consideration in the random selection of samples. It is not relevant to the purpose of the study and therefore not commented on. Items classified as DMs in previous literature will be picked out and presented in lists to show the general frequency of DMs in the respective year groups and be categorized as either formal or informal. The results will be compared between the year groups. The items categorized as DMs and the justification of the same is presented above. The level of formality established in the study is based on informal DMs as presented by Biber et al. (1999). The DMs in the current study which are counted as formal, are markers that are not listed as informal by Biber et al. (1999).
5. Theoretical perspectives and previous research

There are several disciplinary perspectives and theoretical frameworks in the field of SLA. Hence, it is necessary to outline a general introduction to the areas within SLA that I find relevant for the specific purposes of my study, of which one is to provide the reader with knowledge of SLA. However, the reader should keep in mind that the background information is kept relatively narrow, and serves to provide an overall picture.

I begin by explaining the following common terms; second language acquisition (SLA), first language (L1), Universal grammar (UG), target language, interlanguage and transfer. Further on, I will sketch out distinguishing features of spoken grammar, significant to my research questions.

Finally, I intend to clarify the linguistic element of DMs and their attributes. As we shall see, there is considerable research interest surrounding the linguistic properties of DMs. Definitions in terms of which words and sentences should be recognized as DMs are open to debate. Thus, I will thoroughly study previous research to establish which definitions are the most reliable and useful to my study. In the literature overview the presented concepts of the background section will be discussed. I will connect them to SLA, spoken grammar and DMs from different angles.

5.1 Second language acquisition

SLA is the field of studies and research about the internal and external factors which impact the acquiring of second languages that are subsequent from the mother tongue. In simplification, researchers within the area seek to explain what learners acquire through the process of SLA and how this process works. Every additional language acquired after the first language, the (L1), is referred to as an L2. Hence, an L2 can be a second, third or fifth language, and so forth.

Saville-Troike (2005) describes L2 as a target language, i.e. a language which is acquired through different developmental patterns and for other purposes than those of the mother tongue. The research area of SLA is relatively new, as it first began to emerge during the second part of the twentieth century. It is no coincidence that the research field of SLA primarily belongs to modern day, as an effect of globalization (Ellis, 1997: 3).

Multiple factors impact the SLA process in terms of its pace (some learners acquire a language faster than others) and level of knowledge (some learners acquire more knowledge than others regardless of whether their learner conditions are identical). In the section below, I will attend to a few of the factors involved in the SLA process, as well as discuss the theories behind those factors.
5.2 Universal grammar

The theory of Universal grammar (UG), first formulated by Chomsky, presented arguments which proved that the process of L1 learning was not, in fact, entirely tinged by external factors and individual degrees of linguistic sense. On the contrary, it seemed to develop through a predisposed inner grammar, accessible to all humans.

Theories on language acquisition have taken different approaches throughout modern days. For instance, it was commonly believed that children acquire language because they need to, in order to communicate their needs or wishes. Yet other theorists claimed that language acquisition only occurred through imitation, a view that was widely held in the middle of the twentieth century. However, the theory was later refuted since many of the utterances of small children were quite original and did not resemble any sounds or words exposed to them.

Saville-Troike (2005) writes about the hypothesis of the natural ability, which was verified through facts such as that the steps during the learning of the first language takes place at same age and follows significantly resembling patterns (ibid., 13-14). Regardless of nationality, children seemed to master the same skills at about the same age. Basic phonological and grammar knowledge, for instance, was acquired around the age of five or six. Furthermore, “children can understand and create novel utterances; they are not limited to repeating what they have heard, and indeed the utterances that children produce are often systematically different from those of the adults around them” (ibid., 13-14). In conclusion, L1 development seems to follow the same sequence.

As early as in 1926, Jean Piaget observed that psychological maturity played a more important part in language acquisition than stimuli from the outside world. However, the innate ability to acquire an L1 is also impacted by external factors. In combination with the predisposed inner grammar the language surrounding the child is crucial to the “language-specific knowledge” (Saville-Toike, 2005:15). Language must be used around and by an individual for him or her to acquire it. In sum, we can state that external, alongside internal factors determine the acquisition process. Hence, interaction is crucial, regardless of the UG access. The question of whether UG also impacts L2 acquisition, and to what extent, has been relevant to linguists in their research on how L2 languages are acquired.

5.3 Interlanguage

The term interlanguage was coined during the seventies by linguist Larry Selinker who established that L2 learners seem to construct an inner complex language system throughout the acquisition of a second language. The interlanguage is in transition during the process. The learner draws from
their L1 and simultaneously acquires new knowledge. When the skills interact, a kind of combined and abstract version of learner language emerges which keeps changing (Ellis, 1997:33). The theory behind interlanguage is connected to the Universal grammar theory which, as previously mentioned, proposes that there is an innate biological language faculty which plays an important part in second language acquisition.

When rules, vocabulary, or grammatical traits of the L1 are integrated as parts of the interlanguage they are referred to as transfer. As the word reveals, transfer equals the process during which a certain element of the L1 is applied on the interlanguage. There is positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer translates correctly into the target language, whereas negative transfer fails to do so.

Characteristic of interlanguage is that it differs from the target language as well as the native language of the learner. It can be described in terms of dynamic linguistic patterns and norms, explained in terms of specific cognitive and sociolinguistic processes that shape that system (Ellis, 1997 and Saville-Troike, 2005).

Ellis (1997) asserts that errors in L2 learners’ language use give important clues to teachers when they assess their students. He especially stresses the fact that teachers should be able to analyze which error a learner makes and then categorize it. Two categories outlined by Ellis, which will be defined below, are particularly interesting in the case of this study, namely overgeneralization and omission (1997:15).

According to Ellis (1997), errors do not have to be disadvantageous. On the contrary, errors can be of help to L2 learners. For a learner to detect and then self-correct errors is a great way of acquiring a new language. In the curriculum for Swedish compulsory school, year 7-9, it is stated that:

“Language strategies to understand and be understood when language skills are lacking, such as reformulations, questions and explanations.” (Skolverket, 2011:37). Self-correcting of the L2 language during speech or writing can indeed be considered a learning strategy.

Other factors involved in the interlanguage process include omission and overgeneralization. The latter implies that, as soon as the learner understands a rule or acquires new vocabulary, he or she risks using it in excess, which results in what can be considered, errors. However, errors due to overgeneralization can be regarded as something positive, since it indicates that the learner has acquired new rules and is going through the process of trying those out. As mentioned in the
introduction, errors may be important for teachers to evaluate in the assessment of students’ learning patterns and whether they are making progress or not. Omission, on the contrary is when a learner consistently tends to dodge specific parts of language that have not yet been acquired, or that they are uncertain about. (Ellis, 1997:35).

Carter and McCarthy (2006) stress the need for clarification regarding what is to be considered errors, oddities or acceptable parts of face-to-face conversation. Without general agreement in these questions, how should L2 teachers approach written language production? If it reflects progress in spoken language on behalf of the students, should we then mark it as incorrect since it is used in writing? Ellis (1997) touches upon the subject of error analysis and suggests that to detect errors may sometimes be difficult, especially in cases where a specific sentence or utterance is not grammatically inaccurate, but not preferable depending on issues like context or conventions.

5.4 Spoken grammar

Researchers agree that since spoken grammar generally includes face-to-face interaction, the conventions regarding spoken language are naturally separated from those of language produced in writing. The reasons why are logical because of the different contexts in which language is produced. There are also separate conditions under which spoken versus written language is produced. Some of those different contexts and conditions will be discussed below. However, it is under debate in which ways spoken and written grammar should be classified, and what is to be counted as spoken versus written grammar. And what is even more debated is how spoken and written grammar should be described.

The grammar of conversation has often been explored in relation to the contrasting three written registers of fiction, newspaper journalism and academic prose. Biber et al. (1999) provide a relatively new view on spoken grammar. They focus on conversational grammar as a variety of language which also needs to be examined on its own, without being described alongside written grammar. However, they stress that spoken language and written language belong to the same grammar of English, but differ in features. Biber et al. (1999:1038) claims that “...the same grammar of English can be applied to both the spoken and the written language”. They investigate grammatical features characteristic of oral communication and compare them with other registers, using the “...‘general English’ set of categories or features employed for written as well as spoken English.” (ibid., 1999:1038). It is mentioned that features belonging exclusively in speech also at times occur in written registers. Especially so in the case of fiction, where speech is being
simulated. This claim is interesting to this study, since there is a high frequency of spoken grammar in some of the essays examined.

Biber et al. (1999:1039) claims that one of the most significant differences between written and spoken grammar is that the sentence, as traditionally viewed as the “fundamental structural unit of grammar” is not relevant to analyze in spoken grammar research. They go as far as to claim that such structural unit does not realistically exist in conversational language. The stream of speech in conversation has no clear sentence-delimiting marks such as the initial capital and periods, as do written language. The end of sentences in the English spoken language can be expressed through falling intonation and pauses (ibid., 1999:1039). In relation to this, Biber et al. (1999) as well as McCarthy and O´Keeffe (1998) point out the problems of analyzing transcribed spoken language when it comes to transcribing spoken language into written corpora. The places in which punctuation, question marks and exclamation marks are inserted by the transcriber can end up inconsistent, since it most likely should be a difficult task to perceive and reflect in transcription, all pauses, questions and exclamations. Hence, corpora of spoken language can be somewhat reliable.

Biber et al. (1999) conclude that the sentence is inadequate to analyze in research on spoken grammar. This because there are no reliable methods for defining sentences in terms of their syntactic form or semantic content in conversation. As an alternative, Biber et al. (1999) choose to analyze clausal and non-clausal units to find patterns within spoken grammar.

McCarthy & O´Keeffe (2007) provide examples of If-clauses which seem incomplete in written language:

A: “If you´d like to have a a quick look through those while I´m er, please ask any questions while you´re looking through, and I´ll ask any questions that I´ll need to here.

B: Right okay okay” (ibid., 2007:273).

The above examples by McCarthy & O´Keeffe would seem odd and unclear in writing, while, in face-to-face conversation it is a common way to express polite requests or giving polite instructions (McCarthy & O´Keeffe, 2007:273). Biber et al. (1999) present three principles, tied to the conditions of face-to-face conversation which perhaps relates to pragmatics more than to grammar:

(1) Keep talking
(2) Limited planning ahead
The first principle represents the need to keep conversation going. During a conversation, it is rare for one of the participants to stop in the middle of the ongoing conversation. The second principle suggested by Biber et al. (1999) is the limited possibility for a speaker of planning ahead. Hence, there are strategies available to a speaker in case of him or her reaching a dead-end in the conversation. Hesitation is commonly expressed through interjections and DMs. The discourse marker well, which we will see is indeed versatile, could be uttered to repair a situation of a dead end during a conversation. So could like, and you know. Principle (3), qualification of what has been said is the strategy of adding information to what has already been said. It is used whenever there is need to clarify or modify an oral statement. Biber et al. (1999:1067) refers to such strategy as a retrospective “tag”.

5.5 The Add-on strategy

In simplification, and consistent with the name, the add-on strategy is when a speaker extends an utterance by linking pieces of information together, which adds to the previous piece of information and so on. In terms of grammar, it can be described as a speaker, or in this case a writer, dividing an utterance “into a linear sequence of short finite-clause-like segments” (Biber et al., 2016: 438). There are semantic connections between the units which simultaneously express isolated ideas or thoughts. Another trait is that the segments follow in line without overlapping or interruption and that repetition and dysfluency thereby is omitted.

In academic writing, “the internal vertical lines which marks boundaries of finite-clause-like segments are usually nonexistent” (Biber et al., 2016:439). There are normally no single-class units and the clauses contain many words. The differences are rather large in how language is produced in written versus spoken contexts.

5.6 Ellipsis

According to Biber et al. (2016) ellipsis is one of the mayor characteristics of spoken conversation, as a result of limited time and planning ahead during spontaneous speech (Biber et al., 2002:441). It occurs when words are omitted in a clause without changing the intended meaning of the message. The listener will grasp the content of an utterance in spite of the missing words. It is also a feature which has to do with simplification of language to make it less time consuming. In speaking, there are circumstances which help convey meaning, such as facial expressions, voice intonation, previous information or knowledge, physical context and more, which are not available.
to a writer who is restricted to one-way communication (Biber et al., 2002:441). The transfer of ellipsis from oral conversation to writing is complicated, in the sense that the reader may not grasp the intended message of the text. (Biber et al., 2002:442).

5.7 Discourse markers

Discourse markers are inserts of single words or short phrases which generally, but not necessarily, take the initial position of an utterance. According to Biber at al. (1999), the general functions of DMs are to signal transitions during a conversation and/or to create a sense of interaction between speaker, hearer and message (ibid., 1999:1086). The routine use of DMs in conversation is no doubt a major characteristic of spontaneous and interactional spoken language which exists in all languages. In accordance with previous research, DMs are to be considered separated from the content and the syntactic structure of an utterance (Taguchi, 2002:44). Hence, we can determine that DMs are independent, in that they have no lexical meaning. However, they fulfill pragmatic purposes that create cohesion to a context in which a conversation takes place. Speakers can accentuate important parts of a conversation or sentence and convey attitudes and emotions. According to Fraser (1999), DMs depend on the context in which they are integrated and ‘negotiated’ in order to make sense. DMs fulfill various pragmatic functions. The general function, whether in spoken or written contexts, is to create cohesion and continuity in spoken or written communication. Generally, different DMs are used in speaking and writing. DMs in a context of face-to-face conversation may not be commonly used in texts and vice versa, due to writing and speaking conventions as well as different pragmatic uses (Biber et al., 1999:1086). Hellermann & Vergun (2006) are amongst the few SLA researchers to focus specifically on L2 learners’ acquisition of DMs. They propose that the use of DMs by L2 learners represents “language which is not being taught” through examining different settings in which acquisition of DMs take place. The results point to the fact that the use of DMs is more common among foreign learners that are exposed to the L2 in settings outside of formal settings such as school.

Formal DMs are rarely used in everyday, informal speech. However, they can be found in speeches, debates or within similar formal contexts. Furthermore, DMs of formal nature are commonly found in texts and referred to as discourse connectors, sentence connectors, linking words, linking adverbials or linking phrases. They fill the same function as DMs in speech in that they connect ideas or introduce a new topic in an ongoing conversation. However, they do not fill the same pragmatic functions as DMs in speech, but are restricted to textual functions such as creating cohesion.
The DMs analyzed in this essay are labeled either formal or informal; formal DMs being markers representative of written grammar, and informal DMs representative of spoken grammar. The distribution of the markers in the respective categories is mainly based on the classification of Biber et al. (1999). DMs typical of written grammar are placed in five formal categories depending on function; summation, apposition, result/inference, contrast/concession and transition (Biber et al., 1999:875). DMs that could be placed in one of above categories count as formal in the current investigation. The grammatical properties of all the formal DMs listed by Biber et al. (1999) turned out to be linking adverbials. Some examples of formal DMs, typical to written (often formal) texts found in Biber et al. (1999) and which of some occurred in the student essays are;

**function of summation:**
in sum
to conclude
in conclusion

**function of apposition:**
which is to say
In other words

**function of result/inference:**
therefore
consequently
thus

**function of contrast/ concession:**
In contrast
on the other hand
however

**function of transition:**
incidentally

In addition to creating cohesion in writing or conversation, informal DMs often have pragmatic functions different from formal ones and often depend on physical contexts to make sense.

DMs typical in speech include interjections (oh, wow) and response forms (yeah, ok). Informal DMs in terms of their grammatical properties, found in ULEC include;

inserts such as well, like and right
interjections such as oh, ah, wow
stance adverbs such as anyway
linking adverbs such as so and then
5.8 The discourse marker well: some background

Since I will focus particularly on well, it seemed appropriate to include a more detailed background on this discourse marker. According to Biber et al. (1999), well has the general function of a “deliberation signal” (Biber et al., 1999:1086). It is used in order for the speaker to give a brief thought or consideration to the point at issue. Moreover, Biber et al. (1999) propose that well also serves to relate a speaker’s response to an ongoing topic, and marks contrast in relation to something being uttered in conversation. At times, this contrast introduces disagreement (ibid., 1999:1087).

Hellermann & Vergun (2006) label well as a reception marker with the function of aiding the turn taking of the speakers as well as making a similar interpretation as Biber et al. (1999) in that they talk about a response that one speaker gives in order to make a contrast, or to some extent modify what has been said (Hellermann & Vergun, 2006:160). Such a response often expresses disagreement, but it can also “soften” what was uttered prior, in terms of making a negative response sound somewhat less negative and negotiable. Hellermann & Vergun (2006) define well as a DM that belongs to “the subtle discourse-pragmatic aspects of the language” (ibid., 2006:158). By this they mean to say that a word like well, which at first glance perhaps may seem like an empty expression in oral discourse, in fact changes the meaning and impact. Fraser (1999) asks: “In the acquisition of a second language, which DMs are learned first, and is this influenced by native language?” (Fraser, 1999:950).

Esfandiari Baiat et al. (2013) found in their analysis of well that the marker is the most frequently used one in conversation. As well as Hellermann & Vergun (2006) and Biber et al. (1999), Esfandiari Baiat et al. (2013) interpret the pragmatic function of well as initiating or responsive.

Since both Hellermann & Vergun (2006) and Biber et al. (1999) exclusively exemplify the marker well in spoken contexts it should be accurate, in line with the aims of this study, to refer to it as informal.

I have chosen to start by presenting previous research and interpretations of the discourse marker well to give a clear outline of what this marker represents. It is highly relevant to the analysis of my own results and examples, and will make it possible for the reader to understand how these are interpreted.

Another interesting aspect about well as the most commonly used marker in oral communication is that it is also very frequent in the essays of the Swedish 9th graders. The use of well reflects oral
communication and that the students gradually acquire formal writing skills and successively replace a chatty language style in their written production with formal linking words and connectors which are taught in the classroom. More studies on how and when DMs are acquired by L2 learners are needed to find dependable results. *Well* was used frequently as DMs by the students in year 9. In year 12 however, *well* was only found on two occasions. I will come back to discuss the discrepancy between the year groups. To evaluate the results of the use of the discourse marker *well* in the essays of year 9 and 12, a comparison along examples of DMs and their pragmatic functions, as formulated by Biber et al. (1999) is presented below. The examples of the current study are then evaluated.

(1) A: *You are always hungry!*

B: **Well, I’m not now**

(*Well marks continuation and contrast)*

(2) *The boss and the secretary work late all night, well, not all night but late into the night*

(*Well as used in the middle of an utterance as a signal of self-correction or deliberation over the choice of expression)*

(3) A: *we were talking about walking last night.*

B: *Yeah, well, I used to walk a lot, but now all I do is eat.*

(*The response well follows an agreement marker, yeah. It is also a pre-closing device* (Biber et al., 1999:1087)

I will come back to further discussions in connection to theories by Hellermann & Vergun (2006) in the concluding analysis, since they support my initial hypothesis that students gradually replace DMs representative of spoken language with corresponding formal ones.

6. Results and discussion

In this section I will discuss discourse markers, which are the main focus in my study and I will particularly deal with *well and like*.

6.1 Discourse markers

We now turn to the DMs of the essays of year 9 and year 12. They will be discussed in terms of level of formality, frequency and pragmatic uses. I have chosen to focus more closely on the
marker *well*, which was common in both year groups. The pragmatic uses of the marker *well* will be compared to find out if there are differences between the two grades.

Out of the year groups combined, a total of 66 DMs was found. Informal DMs, characteristic of face-to-face, everyday speech, were more common and was found 52 times whilst the formal DMs summed up to 14. A total of 22 different expressions were used by the students.

### 6.2 The use of discourse markers in year 9

A total of 34 DMs was found in the 20 essays (4,000 words) of grade 9, distributed over 13 different expressions of which 2 expressions are considered formal; *after all* and *for that matter*. The remaining 32 are characteristic of face-to-face, everyday speech, i.e. informal DMs.

*Table 1. DMs found in year 9 essays*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DM</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Really</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I mean</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I guess</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okay</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh (interjection)</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basically</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The thing is</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After all</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For that matter</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 6.3 The use of discourse markers in year 12

A total of 23 discourse markers were found in the 20 essays (4,000 words) of year 12, distributed over 12 different expressions of which six expressions are considered formal, according to the definitions in Biber et al. (1999), 12 out of the 23 markers counted as formal, whereas the remaining 11 are considered informal.
Table 2. DMs found in year 12 essays

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DM</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okay</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In contrast to</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In conclusion</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One can argue that</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moreover</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therefore</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>However</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>23</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.4 The discourse marker well

The first example of a discourse marker to be discussed in more detail is *well*. This versatile marker was shown to be the most commonly used in both year groups combined, used 11 times. The difference between the two groups was large as the word was found nine times in year 9 but only twice in year 12. In one of the 9th grade essays the discourse marker well was used twice. *Well* can take any position within a clause.

6.5 The discourse marker well in year 9

Some of the markers seem more redundant than others and can be excluded in writing without affecting the message. In spoken face-to-face conversation, *well* it is commonly used, as it fulfills the function of thinking pauses or *holding the floor*, which means that someone prolongs a sentence or adds an extra word to avoid that someone stops them from continuing to speak. Knowing that such use is common in oral conversation and to what purposes, it should be clear that the students mimic spoken language in their texts by using *well* in such a way, and that it does not seem to be included in the texts for any specific purposes.

In examples (4) and (5) the writer uses *well* to mark continuation and contrast, as described by Biber et al. (1999) in example (1).
(4) I think that ghosts i real, it’s just that maybe you imagine them for yourself so nobody can see it, it’s just you. and that’s why they don’t believe in ghost. Well, it’s kind of hard to understand if you haven’t seen it by yourself.

(male student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

(5) A soul that got something still to do, before they can rest in peace. Well, that’s what I think, but that’s just my opinion, everyone got there own.

(Female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

In examples (6)-(8) the writers adopt the interactional use of well, typical of spoken conversation. Examples (6)-(8) also primarily carry pragmatic functions in speech acts and correspondingly tend to be pragmatically redundant in writing. The students clearly imitate spoken language.

(6) Do I believe in ghosts? Well I think that ghosts, or whatever it is, exist.

(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

In example (7) the use of well is also of the initiating kind.

(7) So, the main question is, do I believe in ghosts? Well, ofcourse I do! I’ve watched “paranormal activity” and I was so scared!

(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

In example (8) the writer uses well as a delay marker, typical to spoken language without no relevance in written context.

(8) Well...I don’t believe in ghosts! That’s because, they don’t exists.

(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

In example (9) the writer uses well as a sort of thinking pause. It may add to the text in a pragmatic sense of building up interest through using an immediate voice.

(9) Do I believe in ghosts? Well, to answer that question you would have to define “ghost”.

(male student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

In example (10), as opposed to the other examples, well initiates a full discourse sequence, i.e. a new sentence and refers back to the prior utterance, to reinforce what has been said and develop the topic further.
Both examples (10) and (11) clearly show how the writers imitate spoken conversation. In writing, the pragmatic use of *well* as a “deliberation signal” (Biber et al., 1999:1087) which by no means is obligatory for the reader to understand the text. Cohesion is still maintained and may even be distracted by the use of *well* in this example.

(10) *I don’t believe in ghosts. Well practically I don’t believe in anything supernatural.*

(male student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

In example (11) *well* reinforces the message of the writer and is followed by a rhetorical question.

(11) *We are probably so interested in this that we are making things up and letting paranoia take over our mind. Or maybe they are telling the truth? Well, someone has to be the one who finds out the truth, right?*

(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

Example (12) resembles example (2) of Biber et al. (1999). The DM is used in the middle of an utterance as a signal of self-correction or deliberation over the choice of expression.

(12) *Sometimes I get scared of ghosts even though I know they don’t exist. Well, I don’t actually know, but I am pretty sure that I am right.*

(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

6.6 The discourse marker *well* in year 12

*Well* does not fill any specific purpose in creating cohesion in the essays. It is used by writers of both 9th and 12th graders, but more frequently by the students of grade 9. There could indeed be an intentional choice by the writers to create some sort of closeness between reader and writer. Considering the topic of the essays, “Do you believe in ghosts”? There is no specific formal equivalent to the informal marker which is not as casual as others, such as *like*. Consequently, there is a possibility that it could be interpreted as more relevant to use school essays. However, it is more likely that the writers simply use phrases that they would also use in speaking without a specific purpose. *Well* was only found on two occasions in year 12 as opposed to in year 9 where it occurred nine times.

In example (13) the writer uses *well* as a delay marker. In speech *well* fills a common function of a thinking pause, or at times as an accentuated marker for various pragmatic reasons, such as an initial word to put emphasis on what is to come. Pragmatically it can very well be interpreted as
accentuating that the writer is thinking about the answer and carefully reflecting upon which
different answers there might be. However, the discourse marker as used in this case, makes the
reader follow an ongoing way of thoughts. Well in this specific written context is superfluous. It
does not require a thinking pause, nor a hedge to “hold the floor”.

(13) Why do we believe in something that is unseen? Well there are many causes behind the
superstition among people.

(female student, aged 18, high school, year 12)

In example (14) well is a continuation marker and expresses hesitation. It precedes a sort of
justification to the previous statement about what a ghost is. The writer does not want to come
across as overly assertive. There is a possibility that the student deliberately uses the above
presented type of hesitant well typical of spoken language, with an intention to create a certain
voice or style to the text. However, this is not likely considering that the rest of the examples
also solely fulfil pragmatic functions in speech.

(14) You might be thinking to yourself how it comes that a seventeen year old believe in
ghosts. Well, it’s really simple. Because I have seen them.

(male student, aged 17, high school, year 12)

6.7 The discourse marker like
Like was found on one occasion in year 9, whereas it was not found in year 12. Hence, it is used
sparsely in both year groups. It is perhaps so, that the 9th graders’ do not use informal language
to such an extent that they include like, which is categorized as one of the most informal DMs.
Like may be one of the DMs that is informal to the extent that it actually almost exclusively occurs
in face-to-face, spoken communication. Hence, the subjects of this study may not be exposed to
the DM like, on a daily basis. As a consequence, they will not acquire and use this particular
expression.

The word like can fill functions other than DMs. On several occasions, in the 9th grade essays it was
used as a preposition, meaning “similar to” and conjunctions, replacing the word as. In the 12th
graders’ essays like was omitted. For more information on like as a discourse marker in learner

In example (15), like is possible to exclude without making the sentence incomprehensible.
Thereby, we can conclude that it as a DM. It is uncertain if it has any formal equivalent, but the
purpose and concrete meaning of like in this case is probably the writer’s intention of elaborating and enforcing the fact that he thinks that believing in ghosts is ridiculous, and adds that he even rolls on the floor and laughs. Like links his thoughts together but does not really change the message. The abbreviation rotfl, “rolling on the floor laughing”, contributes to the informal style which is more accepted in oral communication.

(15) its just weird and redicilus. And Im like.....rotfl...

(male student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

The fact that the DM like was only found on one occasion in year 9 and 12 combined is important to highlight in this study. In a sense, it points to the 9th graders being on their way to distinguish formal markers from informal markers.

9. Concluding discussion

It seems that the students acquire how to separate informal language from formal language, which would support the theory that the 9th graders use more informal language than the 12th graders. It does not only show that there is a difference in formality, but also that the discrepancy is significant when it comes to frequency. As expected, it seems that informal DMs are replaced with formal DMs in 12th grade. This is due to the students acquiring knowledge of informal language in the classroom, through the reading of more formal or complex texts. There may also be a possibility that acquisition of informal language through sources, such as the internet, is helping the acquisition of skills in separating the contexts in which formal versus informal language is preferred.

Although year 9 students are 48% more likely to use DMs than the 12th grade students, the lack of formal DMs is significant where the use of informal DMs was in year 9 was 94% while the use of informal DMs in year 12 was less than half of the total DMs used.

The increasing number of formal DMs in year 12, and their function as connectors indicate expected progress due to 3 more years of school tuition. However, the decrease of the total use of DMs in 12th grade was not as expected and should be relevant to bring up to discussion. How come the students of year 12 have reduced the total number of DMs with 50%? One possible explanation may be that 12th graders, due to increased L2 exposure, not only use more formal DMs, but also have developed an awareness of the grammatical norms which separate spoken from written contexts.
Perhaps an ambition towards accuracy and consistency within the genre of formal essay writing among the 12th graders makes them avoid informal markers as well as markers that they suspect are informal. The 12th graders recognize that the writing of school essays fit in a formal setting. Furthermore, the pragmatic skills among the 12th graders seem somewhat higher than those of the 9th graders, since they intend to avoid using DMs that do not fill any actual purpose in formal writing. The comparatively sparse use of DMs found in year 12 compared to year 9 rather indicates that the 9th graders use DMs in excess. Hence, the observed drop of DMs between grade 9 and year 12 is not necessarily a sign of dropped skills on behalf of the 12th graders. On the contrary, it indicates an acquired skill of capability to use DMs only when there is a pragmatic purpose. The formal DMs in year 12 consist of linking words or phrases which make the texts cohesive. They do not only show that they know the linking words and phrases per se, but also that they are aware of in which particular context to use them. These observations support the previously discussed theories of Saville-Troike & Barto (2005) according to whom pragmatic skills increase with age. L2 tuition is one factor, but Saville-Troike & Barto (2005) also refer to the impact of developed skills of the L1 on behalf of the learners.

Furthermore, Saville-Troike & Barto (2005) claim that young learners are “...more likely to receive simplified language input from others, which might facilitate their learning” (ibid. 2017:90). Teachers’ approach towards younger learners in terms of how they use the L2 in the classroom, orally as well as textually, is naturally likely to be more colloquial and gradually advanced as the students acquires higher skills. Linking words and phrases might not be introduced to the students until 8th or 9th grade. However, the approach of the teacher cannot fully explain the 9th graders’ heavy use of informal language in the essays, since the informal expressions found in the essays of grade 9 are not very likely to have been taught to the students by a teacher. Neither is it credible that the average teacher would use the specific type of informal language in class that are found in the essays. Extramural English in the Media is probably one of the main sources of simplified language in the life of teens and this is evident in the 9th graders’ essays.

One of the aims of this study has been to examine whether the findings of discrepancies in level of formality and frequency of DMs between the year groups is connected to online activity and social media habits (see Sundqvist & Sylvén 2012).

In today’s society English knowledge is a crucial key to communication and interaction between world citizens. It is a gateway to education and employment as well as it has become a natural part of ordinary life in many parts of the world. Communication has expanded beyond local speech
communities, which has been made possible by several technical inventions, amongst the World Wide Web is one of the most influential. The tremendous change in how we live our lives in the era of technology has of course attracted research about how it has affected human conditions and culture. In fact, Swedish adolescents acquire ample skills of English through the consuming of media and casual conversation online. The research interest within SLA from the perspective of the information society grows, but has not yet caught up with the rapid digital development and all of its effects on language acquisition on behalf of young L2 learners. Studies have issued beneficial SLA impacts of video games (see Sundqvist & Sylvén 2012; Spector & Ross 2008; Ranalli 2008). Yet other studies debate L2 adolescents’ internet habits and how those affect language acquisition (Sundqvist 2009, Persson 2011, Olsson 2011).

As explained by Hägglund (2015) and Sundqvist (2009), Extramural English, referred to as EE, includes all exposure to L2 taking place outside of formal contexts, such as the classroom. Saville-Troike & Barto (2005) argue that adolescents are more likely than adults to successfully acquire L2 in informal and naturalistic settings. It is possible that media input and social interaction online is a forum that is particularly effective as a learning tool to adolescents, which in turn is one of the reasons that informal language is adopted at such rapid pace. As shown in this study, informal language tends to be acquired before informal grammar elements such as DMs. Everything points to informal language gradually being replaced by formal language in the essays. The use of DMs among the 9th graders and the students in year 12 is proof of this tendency.

The fact that Swedish adolescents are exposed to EE on daily basis, may reflect in their writing in so far that spoken language of a casual nature is imitated and used in written texts. This is also the case in contexts in which formal language is preferable, or even expected. One important clue to the latter claim is found in student essays in which writing tends to be expressed through the use of language that indeed may be referred to as casual and informal.

The various impacts of extramural English are important to assess in order to raise awareness among teachers and improve their pedagogical methods and choices of teaching materials. In this comparative study I have provided results that may be useful to such assessment, through examining whether, and to what extent informal grammar, i.e. grammar that typically reflects traits of spoken language is used in argumentative essays produced by Swedish high school students of year 9 and year 12. However, a factor that most likely affects the students’ selection of DMs is the topic of the essay. The assignment requires personal reflections and arguments as to whether or not they believe in ghosts.
By interpreting the pragmatics behind DMs such as you know, well and like among adult learners of English in a beginner´s class in which DMs were not explicitly taught, Hellermann & Vergun (2006) discovered that language learners use DMs considerably less often than native speakers. They also found that students who had some type of connection to English or American culture were more likely to use DMs in conversation. Teenagers of today have a close connection to English and American culture through their frequent activity on the internet and social media.

Future research will be needed to establish explanations to L2 acquisition progress on behalf of Swedish adolescents. Whether it is solely a result of more practicing and exposure to English in a formal setting like the classroom, or whether it is also connected to the learners´ maturity and reflects inner learning steps conditioned by SLA processes. Considering the results of the present study, there is a great possibility that it is a combination of the above factors and yet others. The present study is only scratching the surface. However, it may serve as an inspiration or background to teacher´s assessment of learners, something that constantly needs to be adapted to societal changes, in our global era of technology.
References


Fraser, B. (1999). *What are DMs?* Journal of Pragmatics. 31(7), 931-952


