

DISCOURSE MARKERS

“[S]mall words and phrases, occurring with high frequency in the spoken language, that help to keep your speech flowing, yet do not contribute essentially to the message itself.”

(Hasselgren 2002: 150)

DISCOURSE MARKERS AND LEARNER LANGUAGE

“Spontaneous, unplanned speaking is considered as an essential and yet often the most challenging skill in acquiring a foreign language[.]” Rosen (2019: 219)

“Learning to speak in a second language involves increasing the ability to use [discourse markers] in order to produce spoken language in a fluent, accurate and socially appropriate way.” Goh & Burns (2012: 167)

Yet, a closer look at the *Bildungsplan* and other research findings shows:

- **Discourse markers are not explicitly taught in the classroom!**
- **Based on this, the aim of the project was to investigate the use of discourse markers in spontaneous speech among German language learners**

HOW ARE DISCOURSE MARKERS USED BY 9TH GRADE STUDENTS IN SPONTANEOUS SPEECH?

The analyzed data consist of audio recordings and transcripts of eight interviews with seventeen 9th grade students from two different secondary schools (Gymnasien) in Freiburg. Each interview was conducted with two students, one interview was conducted with three students. For half of the interview the students talked about their school and for the other half they were asked to talk about Freiburg. The length of the interviews varies between 2:14 min and 5:37 min.

How many discourse markers do they use?

Overall, the students used between 7 and 61 discourse markers, depending on the length of their utterances. The longer the utterances were, the more discourse markers were used. Yet, the use of more discourse markers in general does not predict the use of a greater variety of discourse markers. Furthermore, longer passages of talking do not predict the use of a greater variety of discourse markers.

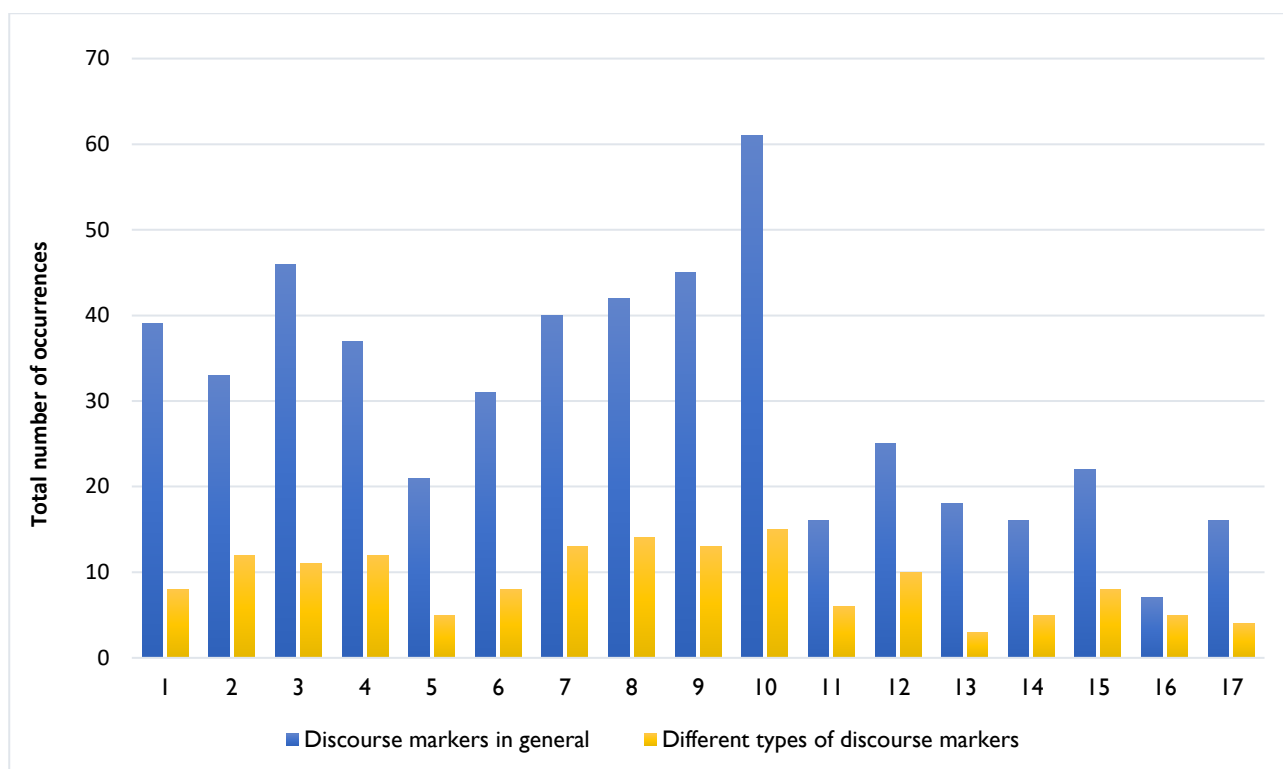


Fig. 1: General use of discourse markers and the use of different types of discourse markers by each student (abs. figures)

Which discourse markers do they use?

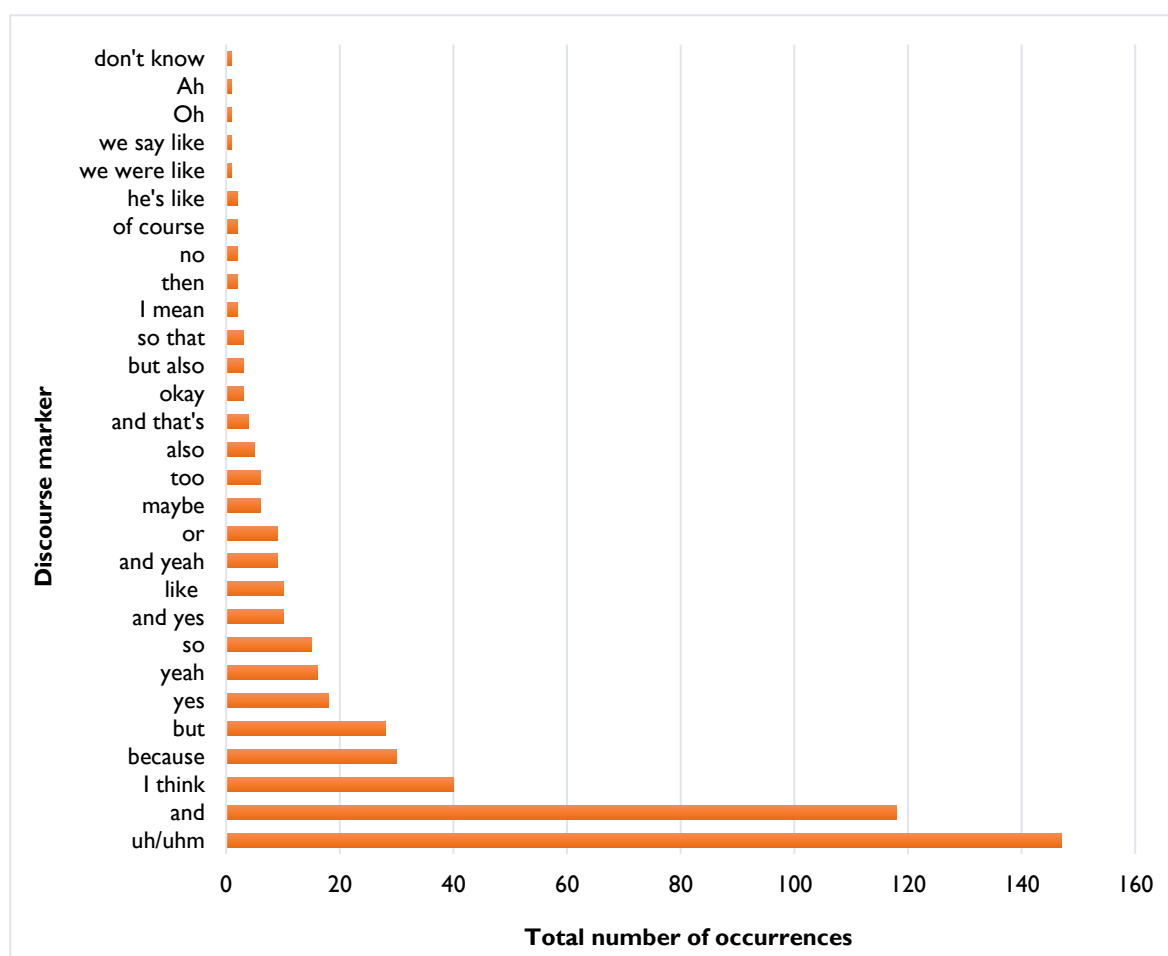


Fig. 2: Types of discourse markers used by the students (abs. figures)

Which discourse markers do they use the most?

- *Uh* or *uhm*, and *I think*

Are these discourse markers used effectively to keep the flow of speech?

- Yes and no, depending on the frequency of usage
- Overuse disrupts the flow of speech, especially *uh* or *uhm*

ON TOP OF THAT...

Discourse marker *yes*

Striking use of *yes*

→ German *ja*?

Example:

[<L1> I think a good teacher is *uhm yes* he's strict, but he's not too strict so ... **yes** he *uhm* the class is silence [sic!] but ... uh ... we don't uh **yes** ...]

In German, “[*ja*] is not affirmative, but sequence structuring and action projecting, and thus functions as a discourse marker.” Betz (2017: 183)

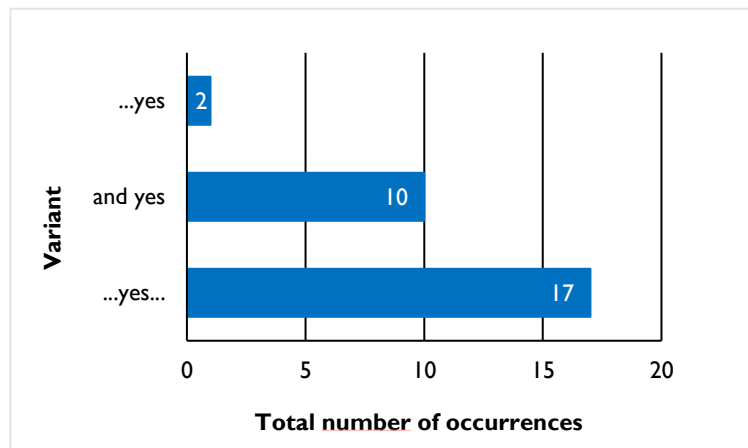


Fig. 3: Use of *yes* among the students

→ *Yes* as a discourse marker in English does not sound natural

Discourse marker *like*

Only one student used *like*.

“*Like* [is] quite heavily underused, being three and a half times less common among learners than among native speakers.” Gilquin (2016: 228)

“*Like* as a marker of teenage speech” Schweinberger (2015: 356)

- *Like* as a common discourse marker among native speakers, particularly younger speakers
- Use of *like* very effective for keeping the flow of speech, although overuse could be frowned upon

CONCLUSION

The results of the project are consistent with other research findings in this area. The tendency to overuse *uh* or *uhm* and *yes* and to underuse *like* among the students of the sample supports the claim that discourse markers need to be integrated more into the classroom. Consequently...

...“[t]eaching in this area needs to be made more efficient.” Rosen (2019: 219)

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