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FOCUS GROUPS FOR INVESTIGATING DISCOURSE MARKERS: A CASE STUDY OF CZECH AND SLOVAK LEARNERS OF L2 ITALIAN

Abstract. What would our conversations be like without all those little elements (*well*, *allora*, *jo*) that make speech fluent, effective and, above all, natural? These are discourse markers (DMs), widely studied in both native (L1) and second language (L2) contexts. In the latter, various standard methods of collecting spoken L2 data have been employed, including role-plays, interviews, narratives and others. However, focus groups (FGs)—structured discussion on a specific topic— have not yet been used for this purpose. This study investigates the potential of FGs as a natural method for studying DMs in the interlanguage of Slavic learners of L2 Italian. By comparing data obtained from traditional methods (role-play, personal narratives, etc.) with that collected from FGs, the research shows how interlanguages exhibit DMs with various functions. This comparison highlights not only different uses of DMs but also the value of FGs in providing more authentic insights into their use in naturalistic settings.

Keywords: focus groups; discourse markers; L2 Italian

GRUPY FOKUSOWE JAKO NARZĘDZIE BADANIA MARKERÓW DYSKURSU: STUDIUM PRZYPADKU CZESKICH I SŁOWACKICH UCZNIÓW UCZĄCYCH SIĘ WŁOSKIEGO JAKO DRUGIEGO JĘZYKA

Abstrakt. Czym byłaby nasza rozmowa bez tych wszystkich małych elementów (*well, allora, jo*), które sprawiają, że nasze wypowiedzi są płynne, skuteczne i przede wszystkim naturalne? Te elementy to markery dyskursu (DMs), szeroko badane w języku natywnym (L1) i języku drugim (L2). W przypadku L2 zastosowano różne metody standardowe w celu uzyskania danych z języka mówionego L2, takich jak odgrywanie ról, wywiady, opowiadania, itp. Jednakże grupy fokusowe (FGs),

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które bazują na ukierunkowanej dyskusji na określony temat, nie były jeszcze wykorzystywane w tym celu. Niniejsze studium bada potencjał grup fokusowych jako naturalnej metody analizy markerów dyskursu w języku czeskich i słowackich uczniów uczących się włoskiego jako języka drugiego. Porównanie danych zebranych metodami tradycyjnymi (odgrywanie ról, własne opowieści itd.) i tych zebranych dzięki grupom fokusowym wskazuje, że języki uczestników zawierają markery dyskursu o różnych funkcjach. To porównanie podkreśla nie tylko inne użycie markerów, lecz również wartość grup fokusowych dla uzyskania bardziej autentycznego wglądu w użycie markerów w bardziej naturalnych warunkach.

Słowa kluczowe: grupy fokusowe; markery dyskursu; włoski jako L2

INTRODUCTION

The focus group technique (FG), developed in the late 1930s as an alternative to the traditional individual interviews, was pioneered by sociologist Robert K. Merton. Over the years, it has become a widely used qualitative research method in many areas with a variety of approaches, including market research, academia, public-nonprofit sectors and participatory studies (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Although this method has already received considerable attention, it remains under-explored in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (apart from recent implementations in SLA; see Ho, 2006; Lorenzova, 2023), particularly in the context of spoken L2 and, more specifically, discourse markers (DMs). This paper is a study of whether FGs are a promising method for examining DMs. The analysis is based on a corpus of L2 Italian spoken by Slavic students at Masaryk University, composed by using different methods of data collection: from what is here considered standard methods (role-play, interviews, storytelling, etc.) to less traditional ones (FGs).[1] The different methods will be compared to explore their value in capturing and analysing the use of DMs within the interlanguage under study.

In the light of the theoretical-methodological background, the study shows that the interlanguages are characterised by the presence of DMs fulfilling a variety of functions obtained through FGs. This method can offer a new approach to collecting data on DMs, as it brings students closer to spontaneity,

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[1] The labels "traditional" and "non-traditional" (methods) are intended here as operative, as used in the reviewed literature on DMs. The former reflects their wide usability in DM data collection (*inter alia*): interviews (e.g. Schiffrin, 1987; Nigoević & Sučić, 2011; Jafrancesco, 2015; Pauletto & Bardel, 2016), roleplay (Borreguero et al., 2017; Borreguero & Ferroni, 2020; Di Stefano, 2019; De Marco, 2021), map task (Andorno & Rosi, 2016; De Cristofaro & Badan, 2021) and bag task (Bonvino et al., 2027).

improves their communications skills by building a sense of community, and creates a welcoming environment that encourages open discussion.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 1 lays the theoretical foundation for the topic of the present study, introducing focus groups, their participants, and the methodology used to their conduction, focusing specifically on the interlanguage background. Section 2 describes the methodology employed in constructing the corpus. The core of the study is given in Section 3, which provides an analysis of DMs based on the data obtained from non-standard and standard data collection methods and presents responses to the research questions. Concluding remarks and illustration of the possible perspectives of the research are stated at the end.

1. THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

1.1 WHAT ARE FOCUS GROUPS?

"A focus group isn't just getting a bunch of people together to talk. A focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures" (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 26).

FG emerged in the late 1930s as an alternative to traditional individual interviews. During the Second World War, Robert Merton pioneered the approach with group interviews, showing that people shared more openly in group settings. His 1956 work, *The Focused Interview*, laid the foundation for modern FG methods. Although initially overlooked by academia due to the dominance of quantitative research, FGs gained traction in market research in the late 1950s and were reintroduced into academic contexts in the 1980s. Since then, various approaches to FGs have emerged (Bloor et al., 2002; Krueger & Casey, 2015).

FGs, in this sense, are structured discussions where participants share their opinions, ideas and feelings on a focused topic. But how can we ensure the willingness to share? While self-disclosure may come easily to someone, for others it requires trust and time. One thing is clear: people are most likely to disclose when they are in a safe environment where they feel comfortable, respected and share some common characteristics with others. And what to do when participants are reluctant to talk? In this case, strategies can include calling on individuals, going around the group to ask each person to contribute, using pauses and probes, let them work individually or in small groups,

or just simply taking a break. Other methods, such as listing, rating, drawing, paper and think-per-share methods or imagining scenarios have also the potential to encourage discussion (see Krueger & Casey, 2015).

1.2 PARTICIPANTS

FGs involve three main roles: moderator, observer and participants.
The role of the moderator (here a native Italian speaker[2]) is essential both in terms of input (Pallotti, 1998) and in managing group dynamics and creating a comfortable, non-judgmental atmosphere (Migliorini & Rania, 2001).

The observer (here a researcher) handles primarily logistics and recording of the session. In our scenario, however, the researcher tends to also (semi-) participate in interactions to reduce the discomfort of having someone merely observing (see Duranti, 1997; Pallotti, 1999).

Participants are the main protagonists of the discussion (in this case learners of L2 Italian). They might be strangers or acquaintances, with social homogeneity or heterogeneity depending on their experience with the topic. Group size usually ranges from six to ten participants, but can also vary from four and twelve, depending on topic complexity (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

1.3 CONDUCTION OF A FOCUS GROUP

Although there are different methods of conducting FG, the one adopted in this paper is inspired by the Krueger & Casey (2015) and Migliorini & Rania (2001) studies. It includes five individual phases as illustrated in Figure 1.

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[2] The label "native speaker" is used here in a broad sense to refer to speakers of different varieties of Italian (Berruto, 2003).

Figure 1. Main phases of focus group conduct
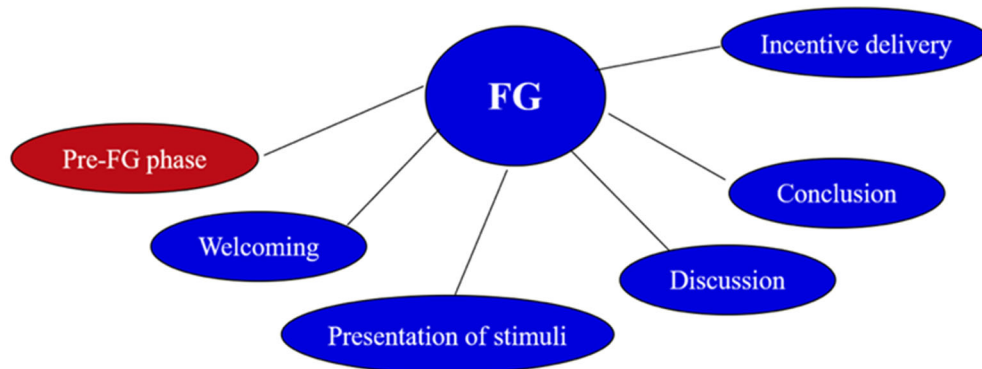
During the *welcome phase*, the moderator presents her/himself and explains the main objectives. The participants are asked to take any place in the circle, usually prepared in advance. The initial moment, including the *pre-FG phase* (before the session), when the moderator and observer greet each participant to create a welcoming environment, fosters trust and ease. The participants are asked to introduce themselves, using name tags for personalization. If they and the moderator already know each other (for instance, from previous sessions), it is highly recommended to fill this space with casual conversation or some ice-breaking activities (e.g. two truths and one lie; questions, etc.).

In the next phase, the moderator presents the discussion topic, using visual or verbal *stimuli* to encourage reflection on past experiences (images, videos, photographs, concrete objects, etc.).

During the *discussion*, the moderator (based on pre-prepared questions, usually around a dozen) can ask for verbal responses or use the paper method, where people write down their thoughts. The latter technique is particularly helpful for shy individuals, as it allows them to express themselves without the pressure of speaking in front of the group and reduces the influence of dominant voices. It is also important to highlight some of the "ground rules", such as "there are no wrong answers, and everyone should feel free to share their point of view" (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 274; adapted). As the discussion progresses, the figure of the moderator gradually recedes into the background, focusing mainly on asking questions, listening and ensuring that everyone has a chance to share.

The session ends with feedback, summary of the main points together with reflection, and thanks, often—but not necessarily—including a gift. FGs usually last one to three hours.

2. RESEARCH ORGANIZATION: TOOLS AND METHODOLOGY

This analysis is based on a corpus of L2 Italian spoken by Slavic students at Masaryk University, and in particular Czech (CZ) and Slovak (SL) learners. Data were collected through tasks designed to elicit natural language use, prioritizing meaning over form (Ellis, 2003; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). The study compares what I consider to be standard elicitation methods, such as role-plays, oral narratives and interviews, which are commonly used in other studies on DMs (e.g. Borreguero et al., 2017; Jafrancesco, 2015, 2018; De Cristofaro & Badan, 2019; among others) with FGs, highlighting the value of the latter as a non-standard method for studying DMs in the interlanguage.

2.1 DATA COLLECTION: PARTICIPANTS AND METHOD

This analysis is based on two corpora:

1. TESI: 12 learners (9 CZ and 3 SL) with intermediate (9) to advanced level (3) (B1–B2, B2–C1). The corpus consists of 4 hours and 30 minutes of conversation gathered through two FGs, conducted by two native speakers with the researcher in the role of observer and semi-participant, and semi-guided interviews, led only by the researcher.

2. FIRST YEAR: 13 learners (5 CZ and 8 SL) with beginner level (A1–A2). The corpus consists of 4 hours and 41 minutes of conversation obtained through FGs (two groups), a bag test (Bonvino et al., 2017), personal narration (own experience based on a visual *stimuli*: personal photo), symmetrical role-plays and linguistic autobiographies (Busch, 2012; 2017), all guided by two native speakers along with the researcher.

Participants were selected based on their year of study of the Bachelor programme, and therefore, their language proficiency (according to CEFR levels, Council of Europe 2020)[3] and sociolinguistic questionnaires administered at the beginning of each academic year.

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[3] Students progress from A1 to C1 over the three-year Bachelor programme.

Table 1 presents the types of tasks along with their respective durations, categorized according to the corpus.

Table 1. Methodological choices of TESI and FIRST-YEAR corpora

Corpus	Task	Duration	Total duration
TESI	Focus group 1	1 h 15 min	2 h 30 min
	Focus group 2	1 h 15 min	
	Semi-guided interview	2 h	2 h
FIRST YEAR	Focus group 1a	1 h 23 min	2 h 16 min
	Focus group 1b	53 min	
	Bag test	16 min	2 h 25 min
	Personal narration	45 min	
	Linguistic autobiography	1 h	
	Symmetrical role-play	24 min	

All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed (according to the adapted transcription conventions of Jefferson, 2004; see the Appendix for further details) and subsequently examined.

2.2 METHODOLOGICAL OPTIONS

Data collection and subsequent analysis were based on the following research questions (RQ):

1. How many and what functions do DMs perform within the corpus?

2. Are there differences in the frequency of use of DMs depending on the method of data elicitation?

To answer these RQs, I adopted Borreguero's (2015; Borreguero et al., 2017) functional classification of DMs into three macrocategories: *interactional* (managing speaker–interlocutor relations), *metadiscursive* (discursive planning) and *cognitive* (linking semantic content of utterances). This tripartite framework, stemming from Bazzanella's work (2001[1995]), has been widely used, including by Borreguero et al. (2017) (Table 2), who applied it to the study of DM acquisition in Italian and Spanish L2 learners, thus providing the

most immediate framework for this research. However, the corpus analysis suggested extending this classification model with some other specific micro-functions (shown in italics), in accordance with the findings of Jafrancesco (2015, 2018) and Bazzanella (2001[1995]).

Table 2. Functional model of discourse functions

Discursive macrofunctions	Types of functions	Some subtypes of functions
Interactional	Conversational control	Taking, keeping and leaving the floor
		Request for attention, reception control, request for confirmation + *request for metalinguistic agreement and/or confirmation* + *explicit request for metalinguistic help*
		Mitigation, intensification
	Conversational contact	Phatic function, expression of emotions and attitudes
	Reaction	Collaborative answer, reactive answer, request for explanation + *metalinguistic agreement/confirmation/ reinforcement*
Metadiscursive	Information organization	Information ordering, marking out discursive topics (topic change, digression, recovering, summing-up), focusing, adding a comment on a settled topic
	Linguistic formulation	Online planning +*indicate an uncertainty* Indicate a self-confirmation Reformulation +*indicate a paraphrase* +*indicate a correction* +*indicate an example* Approximation
Cognitive	Logic-argumentative connection	Argumentative co-orientation Argumentative anti-orientation
	Inferential connection	
	Utterance modal values	Engagement or distance from utterance content Epistemic/doxastic modality Indicating the source of information (evidentiality)

Note. Adapted from Borreguero 2015; Borreguero et al., 2017; with functions from Jafrancesco, 2015, 2018; Bazzanella 2001[1995].

Table 2 outlines three macrofunctions: *interactional*, *metadiscursive* and *cognitive* (first column). Each is divided into other functions (second column), which are further articulated into subfunctions (third column).

The *interactional* macrofunction includes *conversation control* with functions performed by the speaker who has the floor, namely *taking/keeping /leaving the floor*, *requesting attention* and additional two subfunctions: *request for metalinguistic agreement* (asking for confirmation on language use) and *explicit request for metalinguistic help* (asking for help with language difficulties). *Conversational contact* includes functions performed by speaker who has no intention to take the floor, but who expresses his emotions or attitudes. *Reaction* encompasses functions performed by listener, who wants to take the floor and reacts to what has been said, for example *reactive answer* and *request for explanation*, with additional *metalinguistic agreement* (agreement of lexical help from the interlocutor) (Jafrancesco, 2018).

The *metadiscursive* macrofunction comprises *information organisation* (managing discourse structure through, for example, topic shifts or digression) and *linguistic formulation* which reflects the spontaneous nature of speech, including o*nline planning*, i.e. giving oneself time to think without interrupting the discourse, further subdivided into *indicating uncertainty*; *indicate a self-confirmation* and *reformulation*, which includes *paraphrasing, correcting and exemplifying*; and *approximation*, intended here as a strategic use of language in response to lexical gaps or planning difficulties (Voghera & Borges, 2017).

The *cognitive* macrofunction includes *logic-argumentative connection* and *inferential connection*, which link the utterances semantically and reflect logic relations, and *utterance modal values*, which express functions related to the conveying of modal values (Bazzanella, 2001 [1995]; Borreguero 2015; Jafrancesco, 2015, 2018).

For the purposes of this paper, the analysis will focus on two macrofunctions, *interactional* (FIRST-YEAR corpus) and *metadiscursive* (TESI corpus).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 FIRST-YEAR CORPUS, INTERACTIONAL MACROFUNCTION

Taking up the RQ formulated, I will now try to find answers based on the analysis of the available data for the FIRST-YEAR corpus, beginning with the first RQ:

RQ 1. How many and what functions do DMs perform within the corpus?

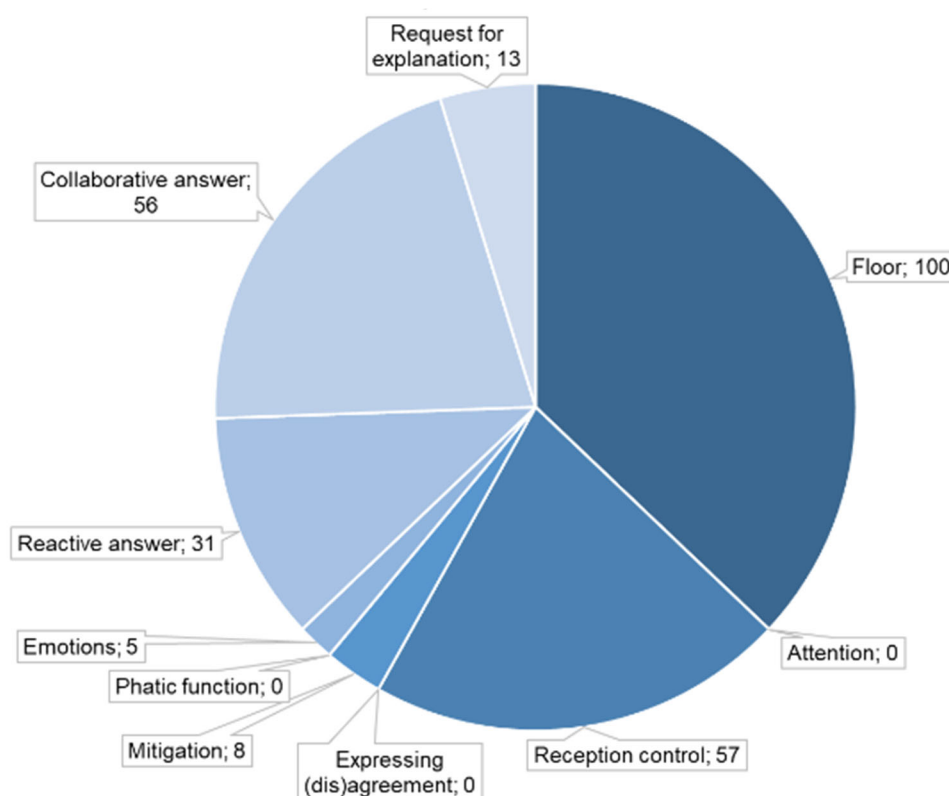Figure 2. Interactional functions in the FIRST-YEAR corpus

Figure 2 shows that the most common interactional sub-function among beginners is related to the *management of floors* (100 tokens), especially holding the floor, using DM such as *non so* 'I don't know', which help learners gain time due to limited competence. Similar findings appear in Nigoević and Sučić (2011), where *non (lo) so* was the most common floor-holder among

Croatian learners of Italian, and in Jafrancesco (2015), where floor-holders accounted for 75.2% of the corpus with learners with L1 Spanish and German.

The second most frequent function is *collaborative answer* (56 tokens), where learners seek confirmation from native speakers or researchers to ensure that their message is understood.

On the other hand, microfunctions like *(dis)agreement* and *requests for attention* are absent.

RQ 2. Are there differences in the frequency of use of DMs depending on the method of data elicitation?

The data underpinning the analysis for the second RQ are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Total number of tokens of interactional functions, in non-standard tasks

Functions	Subtypes	FG	BT	PN	LA	RP
Conversation control	Taking, keeping and leaving the floor	26	1	32	26	15
	Request for attention	0	0	0	0	0
	Reception control (request for confirmation, monitor attention) *+ request for metalinguistic agreement and/or confirmation + explicit request for metalinguistic help*	33	7	9	5	3
	Expressing (dis)agreement	0	0	0	0	0
	Mitigation, intensification	4	1	2	1	0
Conversational contact	Phatic function	0	0	0	0	0
	Expression of emotions and attitudes	5	0	0	0	0
Reaction	Reactive answer	12	1	5	4	9
	Collaborative answer *+ metalinguistic agreement/confirmation/reinforcement*	26	2	11	3	14
	Request for explanation	5	6	1	1	0
Total		**111**		**159**		

Note. FG = focus group, BT = bag task, PN = personal narrative; LA = linguistic autobiography, RP = roleplay

Table 3 shows the number of DMs for each sub-function, with 111 tokens in FGs and 159 in standard methods, indicating a relatively close result.

Interestingly, only two functions predominate in FGs: *expressing emotions* (5) and *reception control* (33), the latter reflects learners' need for confirma-

tion before proceeding. For this function, both FGs and standard methods include DMs in both the learners' L1 (Czech/Slovak)[4] and Italian, such as *nie* 'no', *o* 'or', and *cosa dici* 'what are you saying', among others. Examples (1) and (2) illustrate this use.

(1) FG	(1) FG translation
PV1: difficile **no** perché ci sono tante studenti **no**?	PV1: difficult **no** because there are many students **no**?
PN3: sì ma ormai è tutto digitale tutto informatico (.) quindi è più veloce (.) in una giornata sanno quanti soldi ho e quanto devo pagare	PN3: yes but now everything is digital everything is informatic (.) so it's faster (.) in one day they know how much money I have and how much I have to pay

The first instance (1) from the FG illustrates the learner's (PV1) double request for confirmation from the native speaker (PN3), employing the DM *no* 'no' (paraphrasable as 'right'), to ask about the difficulty of dealing with university tuition fees.

   In the second example (2), from the bag task, the learner (SF1) prompts the native speaker (PN3) with *o* 'or' and *no* 'no' to confirm whether the object identified is cream. In the final turn, the DM conveys the same function as previously, this time, however, to know whether the information provided is sufficient.

(2) Bag task	(2) Bag task translation
SF1: mmh: anche la crema per qualcosa **o**? **no**?	SF1: mmh: also the cream for something **or**? **no**?
PN3: sì	PN3: yes
SF1: per faccia	SF1: for face
PN3: no	PN3: no
RE: sì	RE: yes
PN3: sì è per la faccia.	PN3: yes it is for face.
SF1: bene **o**?	SF1: right **or?**

The DM *o* 'or' with interactional functions remains underexplored in the literature. Its use as a confirmation-seeking device is contextually motivated

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[4] Including L1 DMs offers a fuller understanding of interlanguages, as L1 can serve as a psychological and cognitive support tool (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003).

(given also the final position and rising intonation) and is also present in L1 Italian,[5] albeit less frequently than other DMs, such as *no* 'no', *vero* 'right'. Additionally, given the polyfunctionality of DMs, it may function as non-exhaustive marker (Mauri et al., 2019; Mauri, 2023). However, further research is needed to assess whether this reflects L1 transfer, as CZ/SL equivalents (*alebo, nebo*) can convey the same function.

Another frequent function in FGs is *metalinguistic agreement*, with DMs like *ah sì* 'ah yes', and *ah okey* occurring more often than in standard methods which show limited responses (x + *yeah* or *sì*). Examples (3) and (4) illustrate this function, including DM chains like *okey okey yeah sì* in FGs (as a case of code switching) and *sì* 'yes' in the bag task, showing the so-called triadic structure of error treatment (see Borreguero, 2020):

(3) FG
EV1: cosa significa bosco?
PN3: bosco è #forest
EV1: **#okey#okey #yeah sì**

(3) FG translation
EV1: what does #bosco mean?
PN3: #bosco is forest
EV1: **okay okay yeah yes**

(4) Bag task
PN3: la matita
VP1: como?
PN3: matita
VP1: matita sì

(4) Bag task translation
PN3: a pencil
VP1: how/what?
PN3: pencil
VP1: pencil yes

The greater variability and frequency of metalinguistic agreement DMs in FGs likely result from the broader topic range and collaborative nature of discussion, prompting more clarification and agreement on terms than in structured methods.

3.2 TESI CORPUS, METADISCURSIVE FUNCTION

3.2.1 How many and what functions do DMs perform within the corpus?

Figure 3 answers the first RQ for TESI corpus, showing token counts for each metadiscursive subfunction from FGs and semi-guided interviews.

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[5] In the KIParla corpus (Mauri et al., 2019), a fundamental resource of present day spoken L1 Italian, 58 occurrences were identified.

Figure 3. Metadiscursive functions in TESI corpus
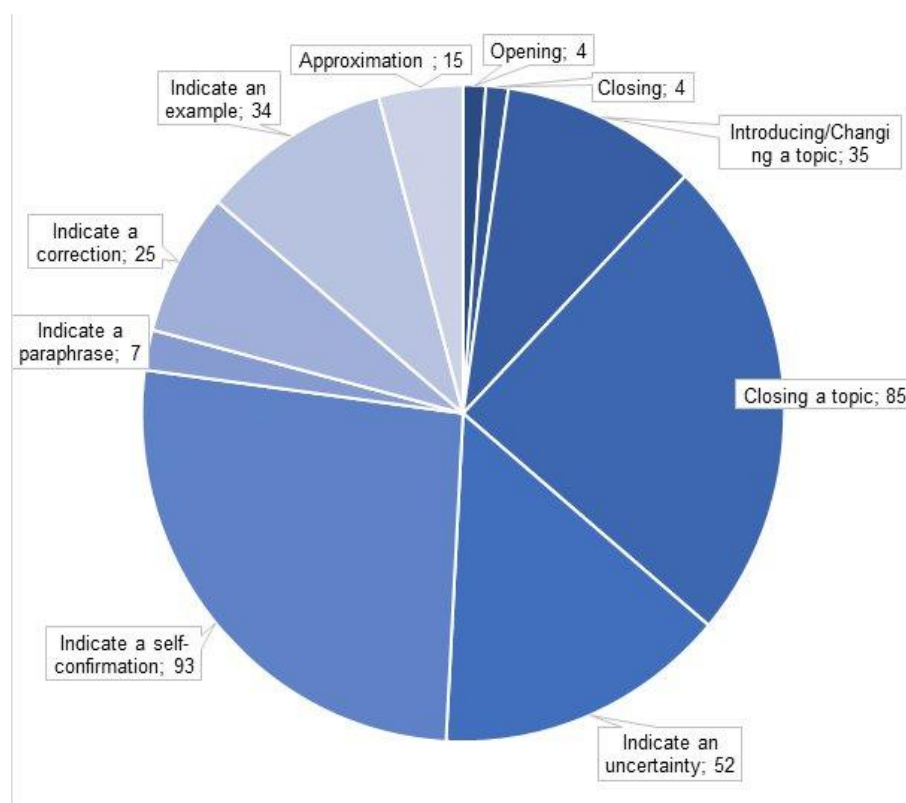
The sub-function of *self-confirmation* is the most frequent with 93 occur-rences, reflecting the need of learners, especially at B1–B2 levels, to confirm the clarity of their own messages (86 vs. 7 for B2–C1).

One of the frequent markers fulfilling this function is *sì* 'yes', which can be used to evaluate both previous (as illustrated in 5) and upcoming statements (as shown in 6):

(5) Semi-guided interview	(5) Semi-guided interview translation
10SB: ma: (.) ma: (.) mmh: (.) nel mio regione (.) mmh: ovest di slovacchia (.) sì (.) ovest di slovacchia mmh: (.) è molto tipico mangiare | di mangiare questo e anche è tipico per russini	10SB: but: (.) but: (.) mmh: (.) in my region (.) mmh: west of slovakia (.) yes (.) west of slovakia mmh: (.) it is very typical to eat | to eat this and also it is typical for rusyns

(6) Semi-guided interview

(6) Semi-guided interview translation

INT: dipende (.) quindi cosa hai indossato per esempio (.) °hai messo°

INT: it depends (.) so what did you wear for example (.) °you wore°

02CB: mmh: io ho indossato i pantaloni e mmh: (.) sì una maglietta

02CB: mmh: i wore trousers and mmh: (.) yes a t-shirt

In contrast, the least frequently used microfunctions are *opening interaction* (e.g. *mmh* 'okay') and *closing interaction* (e.g. *quindi* 'therefore'), each occurring only four times. This is likely because moderators typically concluded FGs, and learners were recorded in interviews only after initial greetings.

3.2.2 Are there differences in the frequency of use of DMs depending on the method of data elicitation?

The data supporting the analysis for the second RQ are provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Total number of tokens of metadiscursive functions, in FGs and Interviews (IN)

Types of functions	Some subtypes of functions	FG		IN	
		Level B1–B2	Level B2–C1	Level B1–B2	Level B2–C1
Information organization	Opening interaction[6]	1	1	1	1
	Closing interaction	0	0	3	1
	Introducing/Changing a topic	11	12	7	5
	Closing a topic	18	11	34	22
Linguistic formulation	Indicate an uncertainty	8	1	33	10
	Indicate a self-confirmation	28	4	58	3
	Indicate a paraphrase	1	1	3	2
	Indicate a correction	6	0	19	0
	Indicate an example	14	5	7	8
	Approximation	3	4	2	6
Total		129		225	

Table 4 shows more DMs in interviews (225) than in FGs (129), reflecting differences in task nature: FGs ask for higher cognitive demands and allow

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[6] Opening and closing interaction differ from taking and leaving the floor. The former signal discourse structure and topic relationships, while the latter reflect speaker relationships and manage turn-taking (Borreguero et al., 2017).

for more voluntary contributions, while interviews require learners to respond to each question (see the Conclusions).

Two types of DMs—those for *introducing/changing topic*s and for *indicating exemplification*—are more common in FGs, probably due to their collaborative nature. For instance, the DM *e* 'and' appears 24 times in both levels with the former function, often with pauses or additional expressions, as summarised in the Table 5.

	FG		Conversation	
	B1–B2	**B2–C1**	**B1–B2**	**B2–C1**
Introduce/ Change the discursive topic	Allora; e; e poi; (e) sì; ma	E; e: ma; ma; no; per quanto riguarda; però	E; (e) sì; ma; non lo so; quindi	E; e poi; per quanto riguarda
	So; and; and the; (and) yes; but	And; and: but; no; As far as; however	And; (and) yes; but; don't know; therefore	And; and then; as far as

Table 5. Use of metadiscursive MDs in FG and interview: summary framework (Introduce/Change the discursive topic)

	FG		Semi-guided interview	
	B1–B2	**B2–C1**	**B1–B2**	**B2–C1**
Introduce/ Change the discursive topic	*allora; e; e poi; (e) sì; ma*	*e; e: ma; ma; no; per quanto riguarda; però*	*e; (e) sì; ma; non lo so; quindi*	*e; e poi; per quanto riguarda*
	so; and; and the; (and) yes; but	and; and: but; but; no; as regards; however	and; (and) yes; but; don't know; therefore	and; and then; as far as

Examples (7) and (8) illustrate this function:

(7) FG
05CB: io vorrei continuare con storia dell'arte e fare ricerca e in genera- | in genera- | in generale le lingue sono molto importanti (.) perché molti testi

(7) FG translation
05CB: i would like to continue with art history and do research **and** in genera- | in genera- | in general languages are very important (.) because many origi-

originali sono in altre lingue in italiano (.) e italia è una mecca per l'arte sì.

nal texts are in other languages in italian (.) and italy is a mecca for art yes.

(8) Semi-guided interview
10SB: mmh: (.) devo dire che prima di natale sono andato in italia (.) sono stato con (.) i mie amiche (.) a padova e anche siamo visitati (.) mmh: verona (.) e (.) venezia sono (.) città (.) città | citte | città molto bellissime (.) e: poi siamo tornati a casa ma durante il natale ero malato (.) e quindi dovevo stare (.) su letto (.) **e: poi** (.) **non lo so** (.) la mia famiglia è grande ho cinque fratelli (.) e (.) e quindi l'atmosfera era felice felice oppure allegro (.) e sì […]

(8) Semi-guided interview translation
10SB: mmh: (.) i must say that before christmas i went to i taly (.) i was with (.) my friends (.) in padua and we also visited (.) mmh: verona (.) and (.) venice are (.) cities (.) cities | cities | very beautiful cities (.) and: then we went back home during christmas and i was sick (.) so i had to stay (.) on bed (.) **and: then** (.) **i don't know** (.) my family is big i have five brothers (.) and (.) so the atmosphere was happy (.) joyful (.) and yes […]

During the FG, student (05CB) shared her/his plans regarding the Italian language and expressed willingness to continue with Art History; afterwards, s/he suddenly shifted to the next topic, pointing out that languages, in general, play a crucial role.

A similar situation occurs in semi-guided interview (8), where learner (10SB) began by discussing sightseeing in Italian cities before Christmas. S/he briefly touches on the topic about Christmas itself before abruptly shifting to talk about her/his family situation.

CONCLUSIONS

The study explored whether FGs are a valuable method for investigating DMs. After a brief historical overview, the selection criteria for participants and the five phases of FGs used in this research were outlined.

Subsequently, I presented two corpora, including participant profiles and data collection methods. Analysis was led by two RQs, relative to 1) the total number and type of functions performed by DMs and 2) whether there are any differences in the frequency of use of DMs depending on the method of data elicitation (non-standard and standard). To answer these questions, the functional classification based on Borreguero (2015; Borreguero et al., 2017) was

employed, expanded with some other sub-functions, from other research (Bazzanella, 2001[1995]; Jafrancesco, 2015, 2018).

The analysis revealed that the number of DMs with interactional functions in the FIRST-YEAR corpus in FGs is slightly lower compared to what emerged through other data collection tools (111 vs. 159). Similarly, in the TESI corpus, metadiscursive DMs in FGs is lower than in semi-guided interviews (129 vs. 225).[7] Several factors may contribute to this discrepancy.

First, group dynamics play a crucial role. The conversation in FGs can often be dominated by just a few participants, which reduces the overall token count as not all participants contribute equally. This is closely connected with the moderator's role in managing the flow of conversation, thereby providing all participants with the opportunity to speak. In both corpora, there were different native speakers, and although all moderators received guidance, their ability to manage FGs varied. So called traditional methods, on the other hand, ensure that every participant speaks, resulting in a higher total number, albeit in less spontaneous and natural productions.

Second, the proficiency level of participants can play a significant role in FGs: more advanced learners tend to feel more confident and are thus more willing to engage in conversation, which can lead to a higher frequency of DMs (TESI corpus).

Moreover, the open nature of FGs often leads to shorter and less structured responses (especially among beginners) resulting in fewer tokens.

Lastly, the number of participants in FGs can either exclude some individuals from speaking or make interaction challenging, thereby affecting the token count. While smaller groups are generally preferred, larger ones may work if well supported, though this is harder to manage in classroom settings. Complementary methods (e.g. paper method or think-per-share) can help, especially with beginners. Internal factors such as motivation, attitude and awareness need to be considered as well (Pallotti, 1998).

Despite potential challenges, including technical ones, I argue that FGs encourage spontaneous speech and create a comfortable space for open dialogue, leading to more authentic use of discourse markers. Exposure to input from native speakers may positively influence DMs acquisition. This happens primarily through contact with the target language (and its varieties), which may trigger a mirror effect, where learners can imitate native speakers and integrate these elements into their own interlanguages (Borreguero, 2020).

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[7] However, beyond these numbers, it is the function of DMs, not just their form, that matters most in understanding their role in learner interactions.

I propose that combining both traditional and non-traditional methods offers an ideal choice, as each reveals different aspects of learners' interlanguage and provides a fuller understanding of its complexity.

This study is a first step toward a fuller understanding of methods and techniques for data collection. Future research following this line could look how FGs can be effectively integrated into teaching and research contexts.

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APPENDIX
Table 6. Transcription conventions, adapted from Jefferson (2004)

SIGN	MEANING
: , :: , :::	Final vowel or consonant lengthening
|	Change in the morphosyntactic project, self-correction
"ciao"	Direct speech
CIAO	Syllables or words louder than surrounding speech by the same speaker
mmh, ah	Hesitations, interjections
!	Exclamation
°ciao°	Syllables or words distinctly quieter than surrounding speech by the same speaker
((laugh))	Non-verbal behaviour
?	Sharp rising intonation
[…]	Omissions
abcd-	Interrupted segment
(xxx)	Inaudible syllables or words
#hey	Transcription unit containing at least one word in another language
(.)	Brief pause