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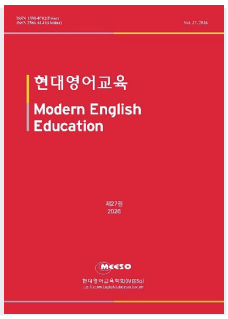

How Task Type Shapes Discourse Marker Functionality in L2 Interaction: A Comparison of Spot-the-Difference and Decision-Making Tasks

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Abstract

This study examines how task type influences the distribution and functional use of discourse markers (DMs) in Korean university EFL learner interaction. Two task-based activities were compared: a structured Spot-the-Difference (SPOT) task and an open-ended Decision-Making (DEC) task. Based on Fung and Carter's (2007) multi-functional framework, five DM categories—response tokens, interpersonal, referential, structural, and cognitive—were analyzed across dyadic interactions. Contrary to expectations, overall DM frequencies were comparable across the two task types; however, functional analysis revealed distinct interactional profiles for each. Specifically, the results showed clear functional differentiation: SPOT elicited substantially more response tokens, reflecting an interactional orientation toward maintaining conversational flow, tied to its convergent, visually supported design. In contrast, DEC elicited higher frequencies of interpersonal, structural, and referential DMs, suggesting a greater reliance on reasoning, negotiation, and collaborative meaning-making. A chi-square test of independence confirmed a significant association between task type and DM distribution. These findings support claims that task complexity and communicative purpose shape learners' discourse behavior and DM deployment (Tavakoli & Foster, 2008). Pedagogically, the study highlights the value of selecting tasks strategically to promote targeted DM functions, suggesting that more complex, open-ended tasks foster richer pragmatic engagement. Directions for future research are also proposed.

INTRODUCTION

Discourse markers (DMs) are central to spoken fluency and pragmatic competence. They signal relationships between discourse units, aid coherence, and provide interactional support. Far from being semantically empty, DMs play multiple pragmatic and discourse-organizing roles: they help speakers manage turn-taking, mark stance and epistemic position, indicate planning or hesitation, and maintain interpersonal alignment (Fraser, 1999). Because they frequently occur in turn-

initial or turn-medial positions and often orchestrate the rhythm of interaction, DMs are central to what listeners perceive as fluent, coherent, and socially competent speech. Discourse-pragmatic studies emphasize their co-constructive function: speakers deploy DMs not only to structure their own turns but also to create "confluence", the coordinated flow of meaning across turns through mutual signaling and uptake (McCarthy, 2009).

In second language (L2) contexts, however, DM usage is often underdeveloped. Particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environments, where exposure is classroom-bound, learners typically acquire only a limited repertoire of DMs. Prior research has emphasized that Korean learners of English, for example, rely heavily on a small set of DMs, frequently *and, but*, or *so*, while less common markers such as *you know, I mean*, or *well* are used infrequently or not at all (Park, 2009; Young & Lee, 2004). This restricted repertoire is partly the result of pragmatic transfer from Korean discourse norms, where backchannels and reactive tokens are more salient than elaborative or stance-taking markers. It also reflects classroom conditions: textbooks and lesson activities prioritize grammar, vocabulary, and content coverage, leaving little space for instruction in pragmatic routines such as DMs (Namaziandost et al., 2019). Consequently, learners may not gain sufficient exposure to the informal, spontaneous interactions in which a wide range of DMs is typically acquired.

The underdevelopment of DMs in EFL speech has clear pedagogical implications. Since DMs directly contribute to discourse cohesion, coherence, and interpersonal alignment, their limited or infrequent use can make learner speech sound abrupt, disjointed, or overly formal. Moreover, fluency judgments in oral proficiency assessment are strongly linked to the presence of turn-initial markers and response tokens. As a result, DM underuse can negatively influence teachers' and raters' perceptions of learners' competence.

For these reasons, the study of DM usage in Korean EFL contexts has both theoretical and practical significance. It provides insight into how interlanguage pragmatics develops under limited exposure conditions, and it highlights areas where pedagogical intervention might enhance learners' fluency and interactional competence. J. Y. Jung (2009), for example, in comparing *well* and *but* in disagreement speech acts, found Korean speakers overused *but*, which lacks the mitigating function of *well*, leading to speech that may be perceived as blunt or overly direct. Investigating how learners use, or fail to use, DMs in different classroom tasks can therefore illuminate broader questions about the relationship between pragmatic development, fluency, and task design in instructed second language acquisition.

To achieve this, task-based language teaching (TBLT) situates language learning in meaningful communicative tasks. Within this framework, the type of task performed can shape learners' discourse choices. Tasks vary in their complexity and interactional requirements, and these differences may affect the frequency and types of DMs that learners employ. This study narrows its focus to one learner group (Korean university EFL learners with no abroad acculturalization), and two tasks: a Spot-the-difference task and a Decision-making task. By considering task complexity frameworks (Skehan, 2013), the study examines how task demands shape DM frequency and function, as the research extends recent investigations of DM use in L2 spoken interaction.

The rationale for narrowing the focus to this group is twofold. First, this group represents a substantial proportion of Korean university learners of English who have reached relatively high levels of proficiency through school-based instruction, test preparation, and academic study. Their proficiency allows them to complete cognitively demanding communicative tasks without frequent breakdowns in grammar or vocabulary. At the same time, their lack of immersion experience in English-speaking contexts means that they have not undergone the process of pragmatic acculturation that often shapes the development of interactional routines (Romero Trillo, 2002). Studying this group therefore provides insight into how classroom-based learners employ DMs in the absence of extended socialization in L2 environments. It also removes the confounding variable of overseas immersion, allowing clearer observation of the relationship between task type and DM usage.

The two tasks under examination, a Spot-the-Difference (SPOT) task and a Decision-Making (DEC) task, are designed to contrast in complexity and interactional demand. The SPOT task is primarily descriptive, requiring learners to identify visual differences with limited reasoning and predictable discourse. In contrast, the DEC task involves collaborative problem solving, negotiation, and justification, placing greater cognitive and interactional demands. From a task-complexity perspective, SPOT is less complex and more fluency-oriented, whereas DEC requires greater attention to structuring and reasoning. Studying DM use across tasks of different complexity can therefore shed light on how classroom interaction approximates and prepares learners for a wider range of communicative demands beyond the classroom.

Previous task-based interaction research has largely focused on outcomes such as turn-taking behavior, negotiation of meaning, fluency, and accuracy, with less attention paid to the functional distribution of DMs across task types. Fung and Carter's (2007) framework categorizes discourse markers into four functional domains (interpersonal, referential, structural, and cognitive), providing a comprehensive model for examining how speakers manage interaction, organize discourse, and express stance in spoken communication. By applying their multi-functional framework to dyadic task interaction, the present study extends the examination beyond general classroom discourse, demonstrating how task-specific cognitive and interactional demands shape learners' deployment of discourse marker functions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Discourse Markers in EFL Discourse

Discourse markers (DMs) are a class of small lexical items and phrases that perform crucial pragmatic and discourse-organizing functions in spoken interaction. Schiffrin (1987) famously characterized DMs as sequentially dependent elements that signal how an utterance relates to prior talk, thereby guiding listeners through the evolving structure of discourse. Fraser (1999) elaborated this view by arguing that DMs operate as pragmatic formatives that help speakers manage turn structure, signal inferential relations, and express stance or modality. Together these definitions foreground two features that are important for L2 research. First, DMs are interactionally sensitive: their meaning often depends on sequential position, prosody, and response by interlocutors. Second, DMs are multifunctional: the same lexical item can serve discourse-structuring, interpersonal, or cognitive functions in different contexts.

Building on these theoretical foundations, early descriptive and corpus studies found that learners generally exhibit a narrower DM repertoire than native speakers and often deploy markers in different proportions across functional categories (Hellermann & Vergun, 2007). Fung and Carter's (2007) influential interactional analysis is particularly important for the present study. They treat DMs as both textual and interactional devices and provide a functional typology that includes continuers and response tokens, referential/connective markers, structuring markers, and markers associated with planning and stance (see Table 1 below). Fung and Carter's attention to sequential examples and to the pedagogy of classroom talk makes their framework well suited to analyzing task-based learner interaction (e.g. Lin, 2016), and their categories are adopted and adapted in the present study in order to interpret multi-functionality in learner talk.

TABLE 1
Fung and Carter's Multi-categorially Framework for DMs (2007)

Interpersonal	Referential	Structural	Cognitive
Marking shared knowledge: *see, you see, you know, listen*	Cause: because, cos	Opening and closing of topics: *now, OK/okay, right/alright, well, let's start, let's discuss, let me conclude the discussion*	Denoting thinking process: *well, I think, I see, and*
Indicating attitudes: *well, really, I think, obviously, absolutely, basically, actually, exactly, sort of, kind of, like, to be frank, to be honest, just, oh*	Contrast: but, and, yet, however, nevertheless	Sequence: *first, firstly, second, secondly, next, then, finally*	Reformulation/Self-correction: *I mean, that is, in other words, what I mean is, to put it another way*
Showing responses: *OK/okay, right/alright, yeah, yes, I see, great, oh great, sure, yeah*	Coordination: and	Topic shifts: *so, now, well, and what about, how about*	Elaboration: *like, I mean*
	Disjunction: or	Summarizing opinions: *so*	Hesitation: *well, sort of*
	Consequence: so	Continuation of topics: *yeah, and, cos, so*	Assessment of the listener's knowledge about the utterances: *you know*
	Digression: anyway		
	Comparison: likewise, similarly		

Research on L2 DM production has converged on several recurring findings. Learners often overuse a small set of high-frequency markers (for example *mmhmm*, *and, so, yeah*) while underusing markers that perform more nuanced interpersonal or evaluative functions (for example *you know, I mean*). A general insufficiency in overall DM use is evident (Arya, 2020). Learners' DM use also varies by task and genre: description tasks tend to elicit more response tokens and continuers while negotiation or decision tasks invite structuring, referential, and cognitive markers (Farahani & Ghane, 2022). These patterns have been reported across learner populations and supported by both experimental task studies and corpus analyses (see review in Dailey-O'Cain & Liebscher, 2006).

Korean EFL learners feature prominently in this literature because their classroom-based learning environments and L1 discourse norms shape distinctive DM patterns. Several empirical studies document these tendencies. An early investigation by Tyler et al. (1988) examined Korean and Chinese speakers of English, focusing on how their use of DMs affected listeners' perceptions of coherence. The study found that Korean speakers, in particular, encountered four notable difficulties with DM use. First, substitution occurred when a single DM was used in place of a fuller clause, weakening clarity. Second,

overuse of DMs beyond typical native norms resulted in a "choppy" and disjointed speaking style. Third, some learners relied almost exclusively on one or two markers, most often *and*, to connect multiple clauses within extended turns. Tyler et al. argue that this strategy created discourse that appeared "flat" and amorphous, obscuring the complex relationships among ideas (pp. 108–109). Fourth, DMs were frequently used to signal false starts, often highlighting rather than smoothing over disfluencies. Together, these findings show how L2 learners' restricted or inappropriate deployment of DMs can undermine coherence and listener comprehension.

Young and Lee (2004) examined Korean bilinguals' use of English reactive tokens, which function to signal active listenership in conversation. They found that Korean speakers produced such responses more frequently than their American interlocutors, favoring tokens like *mhm*, *uh*, and *uhuh*, while Americans used *okay* and *really?* more often. Both groups produced *yeah* at similar rates. The researchers attributed the Koreans' higher frequency of reactive tokens to L1 pragmatic transfer, noting that in Korean, listener responses are often elicited by the speaker and socially expected during conversation. This pattern suggests a culturally influenced orientation toward cooperative and engaged listenership.

Seo (2009) reports pervasive use of *so* as a multifunctional device in Korean learners' spoken English, suggesting it serves as a strategy to signal coherence and manage the interactional floor. W. H. Jung (2008) finds pragmatic mismatches in the use of *okay*, showing that learners extend its functions inappropriately across contexts. H. K. Ryoo (2011) highlights how inter-turn gaps and hesitation tokens function as interactional strategies rather than mere disfluencies. J. Y. Jung (2008) documents cross-cultural divergences in marker use in mediated conversation. White (2014) compares Korean EFL learners with native speakers in task settings and notes differences in both frequency and functional deployment of DMs, arguing that task orientation and classroom norms shape learners' pragmatic choices. Han (2021) provides an analysis of DMs in short presentation tasks by first-year Korean university students, and reports low overall DM use and dominance of referential/structural markers. These Korea-focused studies together suggest a pattern of L1 transfer, over-reliance on a restricted set of markers, and context-sensitive pragmatic mismatches, in addition to learner–native contrasts in DM range and functioning.

Pedagogical Tasks

Research suggests that DMs are best captured in naturally occurring exchanges, acknowledging it is difficult to fully replicate real-world communicative contexts in the classroom (Döpke, 2000). Pedagogical tasks, however, provide a widely used mechanism to approximate such conditions. Ellis (2003) defines a task as a goal-oriented activity that engages learners in meaningful, real-world processes of language use and cognition. Over the last three decades, task-based language teaching has become a central means through which learners engage in language functions and develop fluency (see Qiu, 2020) for a scoping review of current trends and findings of task engagement research). By manipulating task type, researchers have examined key features of learner output such as accuracy, complexity, and fluency (Robinson, 2001; Skehan, 2013). Table 2 summarizes common task types in TBLT, outlining their definitions, key features, and illustrative examples.

Task complexity has been one of the most influential constructs in TBLT research, as it directly shapes the nature of learner performance. Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) point out that tasks with greater cognitive demands push learners to prioritize certain aspects of language over others. Skehan (2013) frames this dynamic within his Trade-off Model, which emphasizes the limited attentional resources available to L2 learners. When task complexity increases, learners must allocate their attention selectively, leading to a trade-off among complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Conversely, simpler tasks reduce processing load and allow learners to devote more resources to accuracy (Tavakoli & Foster, 2008).

Recent studies have shown the contrasting complexity and interactional demands of various task types provide a pedagogic condition for examining DM use. For example, Youn (2023) conducted a study of 102 L2 English test-takers, examining the use of diverse DMs (e.g. *but, and, actually, you know, yeah, well, ok*) across monologic and interactive role-play assessment tasks. Results showed that the frequency and predictive value of markers differed according to task type, reflecting the pragmatic and interactional demands involved. The study showed that DM patterns are closely tied to the pragmatic roles and interactional conditions of different task types. Qiu and Cheng (2022) conducted a study examining 20 EFL learners compared oral performance on opinion-exchange and storytelling tasks in terms of complexity, accuracy, fluency, and engagement in L2 use. Learners completed two tasks of each type. Analysis showed that storytelling tasks elicited longer speaking time, more turn-taking, and greater negotiation of language-related issues than opinion-exchange tasks. On the other hand, Neary-Sundquist (2013) found no direct relationship between task structure and pragmatic marker use; however, task type itself emerged as a significant factor influencing usage rates. This suggests that while the nature of the task affects pragmatic marker use, the degree of structural control within the task does not.

As this review has outlined, prior research has highlighted that differences in task structure and reasoning requirements are expected to shape DM frequency, type, and function, making the task type variable particularly suitable for comparative

analysis. This rationale is further explained in the Methods section below.

TABLE 2
Common Task Types in Task-Based Language Teaching (adapted from Nunan, 2004)

Task Type	Definition	Features and Complexity	Example
Information-gap	Learners exchange information to complete a task, since each holds different pieces of information.	High structure; convergent outcome; promotes negotiation of meaning. Low complexity.	Spot-the-difference activity.
Reasoning-gap	Learners derive new information through inference or deduction from given data.	Moderate structure; requires reasoning; convergent outcome. Medium complexity.	Planning a journey from a timetable.
Opinion-gap	Learners share and compare personal opinions or preferences.	Open-ended; divergent outcomes; encourages expression and negotiation. Medium complexity.	Discussing favorite films or books.
Decision-making	Learners evaluate alternatives, negotiate, and reach one agreed option.	High reasoning demand; less structured; open-ended. High complexity.	Choosing survival items on a desert island.
Problem-solving	Learners collaborate to find a solution to a given problem.	High reasoning demand; convergent outcome; promotes collaboration. High complexity.	Solving a puzzle or logic problem.
Jigsaw	Learners combine different pieces of information to complete a whole.	Strong interdependence; convergent outcome; negotiation-rich. Low complexity.	Reconstructing a story with missing parts.

The Present Study

Building on the research reviewed, the present study examines how Korean EFL learners with no study-abroad experience employ DMs across two distinct spoken task types: a spot-the-difference task and a decision-making task. Previous studies have shown that learner DM use is shaped both by pragmatic development and by the cognitive and interactional demands of task design. By narrowing the focus to the one group, whose proficiency is relatively advanced yet whose pragmatic resources have developed solely in classroom contexts, the study provides a clear view of how task complexity and structure influence DM frequency (RQ1). Following Fung and Carter's (2007) framework, the study also compares learners' use of interpersonal, referential, structural, and cognitive markers across the two tasks to highlight DM functionality (RQ2). The interactional and pedagogical significance of DM variation across the two tasks will be discussed (RQ3).

1) How does DM frequency differ between SPOT and DEC tasks for Korean EFL learners?
2) How does DM functioning differ across the two tasks?
3) How do task complexity and interactional demands shape DM usage in the learners group?

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were 30 Korean university students, defined as high-proficiency English learners who had never lived abroad. Proficiency was determined by TOEIC scores ranging from 800 to 990, with a mean score of 875. According to the Waikato Institute of Education (n.d.) TOEIC conversation scale, scores between 785 and 900 indicate "Working Proficiency Plus," meaning the ability to meet most professional requirements, while scores between 905 and 990 correspond to "International Professional Proficiency," defined as effective communication in any situation. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 25 years, with a mean age of 23. Although a few participants had visited English-speaking countries briefly (e.g., two-week vacations), such experiences were deemed too limited to influence the current study's results. All

participants were enrolled at various Korean universities at the time of data collection and had studied English formally in Korea, reporting regular classroom exposure but limited authentic interaction opportunities.

The group comprised 10 males and 20 females. Although the sample included more female than male dyads, gender was not analyzed in this study, and any potential influence on discourse marker use remains unexamined. Participants were paired into same-sex dyads and reported familiarity and comfort with their partners prior to the tasks. This design controlled for social variables known to shape speech-act production, prioritizing familiarity because pragmatic markers occur more often among friends than strangers, reflecting relational intimacy (Jucker & Smith, 2011). Same-sex, acquainted dyads thus allowed clearer task-based DM analysis.

Tasks

Two pedagogical tasks were implemented: the Spot-the-Difference (SPOT) task and the Decision-Making (DEC) task. According to Skehan's (2013) task complexity framework, SPOT represents a less complex task with greater fluency potential, while DEC represents a more complex task requiring structural and cognitive resources.

The SPOT task involved describing visual differences collaboratively, requiring attention to detail but relatively low reasoning demand. It is a problem-solving information gap activity with a convergent goal and outcome. These tasks are highly structured, require little complex reasoning, and place emphasis on completeness and accuracy. In the current study, each member of the dyad was given a picture of the multiple rooms of a house, with multiple activities occurring within. The two dyad members' pictures (available as Appendix A were different in many ways, and through spoken interaction they were to locate those differences.

By contrast, the DEC task involved collaborative problem-solving and negotiation, placing higher demands on reasoning and interactional alignment. It involves presenting participants with a problem that allows for multiple possible solutions. Learners must discuss options, justify choices, and negotiate agreement. Unlike information-gap activities, decision-making tasks are less convergent, less structured, and demand higher reasoning skills. They are more open-ended and designed to foster extended conversational exchanges. Empirical evidence shows that decision-making tasks are generally less conducive to fluency than procedural tasks, but they elicit richer negotiation and varied pragmatic resources. In the current study, the dyad was told that they had hypothetically been shipwrecked on a deserted island and would be left there for five years. They were then to discuss and decide upon what five items they would be able to have with them on the island.

Procedure

All dyads were recorded performing the two tasks in a classroom setting at various universities in Korea, by one researcher. The participants first filled out a short questionnaire concerning their age, TOEIC score, and time spent living abroad (if any) in an English speaking country. It was confirmed that the TOIEC score 800-990 was obtained, along with having no prior living experience abroad. Participants then formed dyads and sat across from each other in desks. It was confirmed that the participants were familiar and comfortable speaking with each other, while care was taken to create same-sex dyads. Although the tasks were not conducted as part of regular class instruction, participants were classmates enrolled in the same program and completed the tasks after class during scheduled research appointments. Data collection took place across multiple sessions rather than within a single class meeting, and participation was voluntary and separate from course assessment.

The first task administered was the SPOT task. Each participant received a picture of a house with multiple rooms and activities, which differed from their partner's picture in several ways. Without viewing each other's picture, they were instructed to discuss and identify the differences. After 30 seconds of silent preparation, participants' five minutes of spoken interaction was recorded.

Immediately following the SPOT task the DEC task was performed. Participants were first told that this conversation would be more "free-talking". The scenario for performing this task was then explained, which can be seen here in basic form: "Unfortunately, you and your partner have been shipwrecked on a deserted island. You will be on this island for five years, at which time you will be rescued. On this island there is a fresh water stream and some banana trees; so you have water to drink and some food. You and your partner are allowed to bring five items with you. They can be for survival, enjoyment, killing time, or whatever. You must share these 5 items, so you should discuss with your partner what five things you would like to bring. Please talk for five minutes, at which time you should be able to tell me your five items. Please begin." After answering any questions the participants might have had concerning the scenario and procedure, five minutes of task interaction was recorded. Because the SPOT task was consistently administered before the DEC task, potential task-

order effects such as increased familiarity with the interactional setting or reduced initial anxiety cannot be ruled out and are addressed as a limitation.

Data Collection and Analysis

The 15 dyads produced a total of 150 minutes (2 1/2 hours) of spoken task interaction for analysis. This consisted of 75 minutes for the SPOT task and 75 minutes for the DEC task. Each DM instance was coded for form, position, and function according to contextual cues within the turn. This is described in detail below.

This study analyzed DMs in turn-initial position, as these mark transitional points and signal turn-taking in spoken interaction. Although turn-embedded and turn-final DMs also convey meaning, turn-initial markers were prioritized because they provide key contextualization cues and strongly influence conversational flow and coherence (Norrick, 2007). The current study adopted the multi-categorical framework of Fung and Carter (2007) to functionally code turn-initial DMs across four categories: interpersonal, referential, structural, and cognitive (see Table 1). A fifth category, response tokens (RTs), was added following Dushku (2010) and McCarthy (2003). As McCarthy (2003, p. 4) defines them, RTs are "high-frequency turn-initial lexical items which occur in responses in everyday spoken genres" and signal listeners' interactional engagement. In this study, the RTs analyzed were *uhh, mmhmm, oh, ahh, mmm, umm,* and *uhuh*. Although RTs overlap functionally with some interpersonal DMs in marking agreement, confirmation, and acknowledgment, they operate differently in interaction, particularly by supporting the current speaker without taking the turn. For this reason, RTs were treated as a distinct and more precise coding category in the present study.

Because many DMs are multifunctional and can serve overlapping pragmatic roles, coding decisions were made using a context-driven approach rather than a form-driven one. Each DM token was assigned a single functional category based on its primary interactional function in context, taking into account its sequential position, co-text, and the speaker's communicative intent at that moment in the interaction. For example, *so* was coded as structural when it signaled topic transition or discourse organization (e.g., "*So, let's talk about the kitchen*"), but as referential when it marked cause–effect relations or inferential meaning (e.g., "*It was raining, so we stayed inside*"). Similarly, *like* was coded as cognitive when used to signal hesitation, approximation, or on-line formulation (e.g., "*It's like… uh… maybe over there*"), rather than as a quotative or exemplifier. In cases of ambiguity, the coding followed an explicit hierarchy: (1) sequential function at turn onset, (2) contribution to discourse organization versus propositional content, and (3) interactional orientation toward the interlocutor. Although a single token may theoretically realize multiple functions, only one primary function was assigned per token to maintain analytical consistency and allow quantitative comparison across tasks and groups. This procedure aligns with prior discourse-marker coding practices in functional and corpus-based pragmatics research (Fung & Carter, 2007; McCarthy, 2003). The examples below, taken from the study's transcripts, illustrates both the multifunctional nature of DMs and the challenges involved in their coding (see also Appendix B for transcription conventions).

A: *yeah* **(I)** *actually* **(I)** *yeah* **(I)** [*that's true* **(I)**]
B: [*yeah* **(I)**]
A: *that's true* **(I)** *ok* **(S)** *so* **(S)** *maybe* **(I)** *instead of* **(R)** the propane tank uuh--
B: a whole bunch
A: [*yeah* **(I)**]
B: [*like* **(C)**] unlimited amount of matches

A: *yes* **(I)** we don't know what when [we'll be there]
B: [*ahh* **(RT)** how]
A: =if we go there we don't [know]
B: [*mmm* **(RT)**]
A: =[date]
B: [*yeah* **(I)** *so* **(R)**]
A: =*or* **(R)** time so we need

As illustrated in the above excerpts, tokens such as *yeah* were coded as I DMs when they occurred within a speaker's turn and functioned to signal agreement or stance. In contrast, brief listener acknowledgements such as *ahh* or *uuh* that occurred during another speaker's turn and served primarily as backchannel signals were coded as RT.

All dyad interactions were transcribed using Otter.ai. The transcriptions were then imported into CLAN (Computerized Language Analysis) software for quantitative coding and analysis. Within CLAN, DMs were identified, coded, and

categorized according to their functions, allowing for systematic frequency counts across participants and tasks. Transcription and coding reliability were established through collaboration with two native English speakers uninvolved in the original data collection. They independently reviewed randomly selected transcript sections, identifying discrepancies in turn-taking and turn-initial DM transcription. Inter-rater reliability for the initial DM identification and categorization was calculated using Cohen's kappa and showed strong agreement ($\kappa = .86$). All inconsistencies were discussed and resolved collaboratively. The same raters later verified DM coding accuracy according to the established framework, achieving a high level of interrater agreement following review and consensus with the primary researcher. A chi-square test of independence was then conducted to examine whether DM usage differed by task type.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Frequency of DMs across Two Tasks

A total of 2842 turns were taken by the participants. Analysis of turn-taking revealed subtle yet meaningful differences between the two task types. A total of 1,408 turns were recorded in the SPOT task and 1,434 in the DEC task. Although the difference is modest, it suggests that the decision-making task encouraged a more interactionally dynamic discourse style. The DEC task required participants to evaluate alternatives and negotiate agreement, prompting shorter turns and greater listener involvement. In contrast, the SPOT task elicited longer, information-focused turns centered on description and verification. This pattern aligns with Skehan's (2013) task complexity framework, indicating that tasks with higher cognitive and reasoning demands foster increased interactional negotiation and more frequent turn transitions, reflecting greater engagement in the co-construction of discourse. In short, this data supports the interpretation that task type influences interactional structure. While both tasks produced a near-even overall distribution of DMs (approximately 50% each), this descriptive equality does not imply interactional equivalence in the learners' pragmatic behavior. Rather, it suggests that both task types provided a comparable floor for engagement, with the underlying interactional dynamics only becoming apparent through the functional differentiation of the markers used. These results align with the 'Trade-off Model' (Skehan, 2013), where similar quantitative output can mask a shift in cognitive and interactional focus between procedural and reasoning-based demands.

Of these 2842 turns, 1839 turns contained a turn-initial DM or multiple DMs, as seen in Table 3 below. In other words, across both tasks 64.7% of speaker turns were fronted with a DM. There was a 67.2% rate of DM provision in the SPOT task, and a 62.3% rate of DM provision in the DEC task.

TABLE 3
Speaker Turns and Turn-initial DM Provision

Task Type	Turns	Turns with Turn-initial DMs	%
SPOT	1408	946	67.2
DEC	1434	893	62.3
Total	2842	1839	64.7

Note. SPOT = Spot-the-Difference task. DEC = Decision-Making task.

This illustrates that DMs are a central feature of learner talk even in classroom-based task interaction. The prevalence of DMs in turn-initial position suggests that even in constrained EFL contexts, learners rely heavily on markers to scaffold interaction and maintain fluency, influencing conversational flow and coherence.

As shown, the frequency of turns with turn-initial DMs differed only slightly between the two task types. Yet it reflects how task structure and interactional demands influence the frequency of turn-initial discourse marking in learner talk. The SPOT task exhibited a higher rate of turns with turn initial DMs compared with the DEC task. This suggests that the procedural, step-by-step structure of the SPOT task encouraged participants to create more turns, and shorter turns, to manage sequencing and maintain interactional flow. This can be seen in the following SPOT example:

A: there is a girl who is wearing socks
B: *mmhmm*=
A: =while listening to the radio
B: *mmhmm*=

A: =and down the man's room- there is a man eating breakfast with his cat
B: [*AHH*]
A: [and] left side - there is a man
B: *mmhmm*

In contrast, the DEC task, requiring extended reasoning and negotiation, involved fewer transitions, and longer turns, as seen in the DEC example below:

A: *yeah but but* in the book - there is very important living skill
B: *uhuh. uhuh*=
A: =*yeah so - and* when I while I am reading a book and I can find the - some tips to live the deserted island
B: *ohh?*
A: *yeah because* I have no knowledge [about] -
B: [*uhh*] deserted=
A: =that yeah living skills so it will be helpful

A total of 2405 DMs were elicited, with a range of 24 DMs to 128 DMs per five minute task. In other words, the 15 dyads averaged 80 turn-initial DMs per task. To address RQ1 1, there was a total of 1210 DMs elicited in the SPOT task and 1195 DMs elicited in the DEC task. An average of 80.7 DMs were elicited in the SPOT task, and an average of 79.7 DMs were elicited in the DEC task. Interestingly, DM totals among the two tasks were nearly split at 50% each. This near-even distribution suggests that, despite differences in task structure and interactional demands, both tasks elicited comparable overall levels of discourse marking. It indicates that participants maintained a consistent tendency to use DMs across contexts, adapting their use to suit each task's communicative requirements rather than increasing or decreasing overall frequency. The DEC task imposed greater cognitive demands yet yielded nearly the same level of DM production as the more structured SPOT task, suggesting that increased task complexity did not diminish participants' tendency to use DMs during negotiation. These results support those found in Neary-Sundquist (2013), who didn't find any consistent relationship between task structure and pragmatic marker frequency. Such stability in DM use challenges the views of other researchers, such as Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) who argue that tasks with more cognitive demands push L2 learners to perform tasks in certain ways, prioritizing one or another aspect of language.

Functioning of DMs across Two Tasks

In addressing RQ2, Table 4 below presents an overview of the total frequency and proportional distribution of DMs across the five functional categories identified in the current study. The table summarizes aggregate counts from both SPOT and DEC task types, providing a general picture of how DMs were used. This overview highlights the relative unbalance among the five functions and establishes a baseline for comparing how task type influenced the distribution and use of these markers in subsequent analyses.

TABLE 4
DM Functioning across Two Tasks

Task Type	RT	I	R	S	C	Total
SPOT	492 (63%)	356 (44%)	134 (47%)	210 (44%)	18 (32%)	1210 (50%)
DEC	285 (37%)	455 (56%)	154 (53%)	263 (56%)	38 (68%)	1195 (50%)
Total	777 (32%)	811 (34%)	288 (12%)	473 (20%)	56 (2%)	2405 (100%)

Note. SPOT = Spot-the-Difference task. DEC = Decision-Making task. RT = response tokens. I = interpersonal. R = referential. S = structural. C = cognitive.

As mentioned, the two tasks elicited near identical totals of DMS, at 50%. However, SPOT elicited more response tokens (63%) than DEC (37%). This pattern reflects active listenership associated with lower task complexity, and supports a keep-

the-ball-rolling approach typical of procedurally structured, visually supported tasks. One speaker maintains the conversational momentum while examining the differing pictures, and the partner contributes minimal affirming or denying responses as both work collaboratively toward task completion. In contrast, DEC involved higher frequencies of interpersonal (56%), referential (53%), structural (56%), and cognitive (68%) markers. This suggests that more cognitively demanding tasks elicit greater reliance on structuring and reasoning markers, as well as pragmatic negotiation. The findings align with others (Ebrahimi & Xodabande, 2023; Farahani & Ghane, 2022), who note that functional variation in DM use emerges in response to interactional pressures of the task.

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine whether DM usage differed by task type (SPOT vs. DEC). The assumptions for the test were met, with 100% of cells having an expected count greater than 5 and all observations being independent. The association between task type and DM category was significant, χ^2 (4, N = 2,405) = 81.61, p < .001. To measure the strength of this association, Cramer's V was calculated, yielding a value of 0.18. This indicates a small-to-medium effect size, showing that task type has a meaningful impact on the functional distribution of DMs. DEC tasks elicited proportionally more I, S, R, and C DMs, whereas SPOT tasks produced substantially more RTs, indicating that task demands strongly influenced functional DM distribution. The following subsections will go into depth on answering RQ2: how does DM functioning differ across the two tasks?

Response Tokens

A total of 777 DMs out of the 2,405 DMs provided were of RT functioning (a 32% rate of RT DM provision). This is the second most frequent DM category appearing in the current study. A breakdown of the provisions across the seven RT DMs between the two tasks is seen in Table 5 below:

TABLE 5

Provision of Response Token DMs

Task Type	*uhh*	*mmhmm*	*oh*	*ahh*	*mmm*	*umm*	*uhuh*	Total
SPOT	25	77	85	108	143	19	35	492
	42%	87%	73%	50%	66%	68%	69%	63%
DEC	35	12	31	107	75	9	16	285
	58%	13%	27%	50%	34%	32%	31%	37%
Total	60	89	116	215	218	28	51	777
	8%	11%	15%	28%	28%	4%	7%	100%

Note. SPOT = Spot-the-Difference task. DEC = Decision-Making task.

This category includes DMs that signal listeners' interactional engagement. *Ahh,* which indicates the need to indicate surprise in interactional achievement (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006) and *mmm*, as a weak acknowledgement token (Gardner, 1997) were the most preferred RT markers across the two tasks. Arguably *mmm* can be considered one of the most minimal of minimal RT DMs, with little functional content other than acknowledgment as a listener response, as seen in the following SPOT interaction (DMs of interest are shown in bold).

A: I can [see]
B: [***mmm***]
A: first [floor]
B: [***mmm***]
A: in [outside]
B: [***mmm***]
A: outside=
B: ***mmm***
A: five people=
B: ***mmm***.

Interestingly, the token *mmm* is a common Korean continuer used to signal attentive listening. Young and Lee (2004) found that Koreans use *mmm* more often than English speakers in comparable interactions, explaining, in addition to displaying active listenership, it also provides "overt support" for the speaker's turn, and an obligation as an "interactional

burden" on the listener (p. 402). Y. K. Kim (2010) goes on to say this transfer of L1 vocalic forms by Korean EFL learners can appear as English backchanneling. These findings suggest that the Korean EFL learners' RT use may reflect L1-based interactional strategies transferred into L2 discourse.

The SPOT task produced a markedly higher frequency of RT DM functioning compared with the DEC task (63% to 37%). This indicates that the procedural, information-exchange nature of the SPOT task elicited more instances of listener acknowledgment and real-time feedback. Continuers such as *mmhmm (*noticeably similar to *mmm* discussed above), and *uhuh*, and the convergence token *oh* occurred substantially more often, reflecting participants' engagement in confirming details and maintaining joint attention during the more procedural task progression. As seen in the above dialogue, the SPOT task can promote a checklist-like scan around the pictures they have, as they look for differences. These RTs served to signal active listenership and mutual understanding, features that were less frequent in the more reasoning-oriented, turn-extended interactions of the DEC task.

Interpersonal DMs

A total of 811 DMs out of the 2,405 DMs provided were of I functioning (a 34% rate of I DM provision). This category of DMs was the most utilized among the learners in this study. A breakdown of the provisions across the top ten I DMs (742 DMs total) between the two tasks is seen in Table 6 below:

TABLE 6

Provision of Interpersonal DMs

Task Type	*yeah*	*yes*	*I think*	*ok*	*no*	*maybe*	*really*	*me too*	*just*	*right*	Total
SPOT	101	76	31	29	43	10	16	21	5	4	336
	38%	52%	35%	44%	72%	23%	84%	91%	33%	33%	45%
DEC	167	71	57	37	17	34	3	2	10	8	406
	62%	48%	65%	56%	28%	77%	16%	9%	67%	67%	55%
Total	268	147	88	66	60	44	19	23	15	12	742
	36%	20%	12%	9%	8%	6%	3%	3%	2%	2%	100%

Note. SPOT = Spot-the-Difference task. DEC = Decision-Making task.

This category includes DMs that hold the social functions of spoken grammar. *Yeah*, followed by *yes*, were the most frequent I DMs across both tasks, together accounting for nearly 60% of all I markers. *Yeah* is a well-established backchannel, labeled as continuer, signaling active listenership without claiming the turn. Its high frequency also aligns with its prominence in the CANCODE pedagogic sub-corpus of native spoken English. In the Interpersonal category, *yeah* can also mark acknowledgement (Fung & Carter, 2007), and confirm understanding. McCarthy (2003) categorizes *yeah* as doing more than just acknowledge or confirm receipt of incoming talk. These "yes-plus" words have a meaning much like "yes" or "no" but have more engaging interactional implications (p. 35). This functioning is illustrated in the following DEC data (DMs of interest are shown in bold).

A: we need to prepare for going outside of island - it means after five years later after five years later anyways we need to leave go [back]
B: [***yeah***] maybe we should just take a whole box [of]
A: [***yeah***]
B: Korean snacks because there was an experiment making a boat out of Korean snacks - remember
A: ***yeah*** maybe we could stay from this island [but I think this is not the point of this]
B: [***yeah***]

The I DMs *me too* and *really* occurred far more frequently in the SPOT task than in the DEC task, reflecting differences in the interactional demands of each activity. In the SPOT task, participants were engaged in confirming specific details within their partner's picture, prompting repeated expressions of alignment and shared discovery through responses such as *me too*. Similarly, *really* was often used to display immediate reaction or mild surprise, signaling attentiveness and emotional engagement during detail confirmation.

In contrast, the DEC task required extended reasoning and opinion exchange, offering fewer opportunities for these quick, responsive markers to emerge within longer, negotiation-oriented turns. The DEC task, therefore, showed the DM *maybe*

occurred most frequently. *Maybe* functions as a speaker-oriented downtoner, expressing uncertainty or reservation toward the upcoming proposition. Such use is characteristic of open-ended opinion exchanges, where participants tentatively propose ideas (such as selecting items to bring to the island) while maintaining interpersonal harmony and allowing space for negotiation.

Referential DMs

A total of 288 DMs out of the 2,405 DMs provided were of R functioning (a 12% rate of R DM provision). It is thus the second least produced of the five DM categories in this study. A breakdown of the provisions across the top five R DMs (256 DMs total) between the two tasks is seen in Table 7 below:

TABLE 7
Provision of Referential DMs

Task Type	*and*	*but*	*because*	*or*	*so*	Total
SPOT	86	23	11	1	3	124
	68%	43%	29%	5%	19%	48%
DEC	41	30	27	21	13	132
	32%	57%	71%	95%	81%	52%
Total	127	53	38	22	16	256
	50%	21%	15%	9%	6%	100%

Note. SPOT = Spot-the Difference task. DEC = Decision-Making task.

This category of DMs operate on a textual level, as linking signals between topics (similar to DMs used in written discourse).The results show a clear preference for the DM *and*, which accounted for roughly 50% of all R DMs across both tasks. This reliance suggests that participants focused on maintaining task progression and coherence, a common feature of classroom-based communicative tasks. Similar to Castro and Marcela's (2009) findings, learners primarily used *and* to introduce new information and signal continuity. This pattern often reflected a semi-narrative dynamic, where one speaker advanced the discourse while the other provided brief listener feedback, with *and* functioning as a coordinating link that sustained the flow of information. This turn-taking dynamic of 'keeping the ball rolling' towards task-completion with *and* is especially noticeable in the SPOT task, with its need to locate and confirm specific details. The extremely long, run-on turn by Speaker A is highly characteristic of L2 learners under the pressure of describing multiple differences quickly, often ignoring grammatical boundaries for fluency. This strategy is illustrated in the following SPOT example (DMs of interest are shown in bold).

A: ***and*** in the living room - at the middle of the living room - there is a soccer ball - a soccer ball ***and*** window is broken because of the soccer ball ***and*** no one - actually there is a dog in the living room sitting on the sofa ***and*** in the kitchen there is a cat ***and*** milk is spilled from the table to the floor ***and*** cat is drinking milk and stove is on fire I think - ***and*** black black smoke is coming out of the stove ***and*** on the top top left it's a girl's room - empty girl's room with a bed ***and*** a computer ***and*** on the top right it's a bathroom
B: [*yes*]
A: [***and***] no one is inside the house - ***and*** the time is eight oh five
B: in my picture time is seven fifty five
A: *ahh?*

The R DMs *or* and *so* appeared far more frequently in the DEC task, reflecting the greater need for negotiation and opinion sharing between participants. Their use is characteristic of decision-making discourse, where speakers engage in higher-level reasoning to evaluate options (in the case of *or,* a choice-presenting marker) and justify their choices collaboratively. Bolden (2006) discusses *so* as functioning as sequence initial, in that it signals what is to come next, as been "'on the speaker's mind' or 'on the speaker's agenda' for some time, rather than has just occurred to him/her" (p. 663). *So* appears, thus, as a means of pushing the discourse forward, signaling a speaker's attempt to summarize prior talk and transition toward a decision or next stage of reasoning within the collaborative exchange, all elements required in the DEC task interaction.

Structural DMs

A total of 473 DMs out of the 2,405 DMs provided were of the S functioning (a 20% rate of S DM provision). A breakdown of the provisions across the top five S DMs (358 DMs total) between the two tasks is seen in Table 8 below:

TABLE 8
Provision of Structural DMs (Top 5 DM)

Task Type	*and*	*so*	*ok*	*yeah*	*how about*	Total
SPOT	82	19	28	25	9	163
	65%	24%	41%	44%	31%	46%
DEC	44	59	40	32	20	195
	35%	76%	59%	56%	69%	54%
Total	126	78	68	57	29	358
	35%	22%	19%	16%	8%	100%

Note. SPOT = Spot-the-Difference task. DEC = Decision-Making task.

This category of DMs signals links, signposting and transitions between topics, at either the textual or interactional level. The most preferred S DM was overwhelmingly *and*, followed by *so*. Combined they represented close to 60% of all S DMs used during task interaction. What is noticeable is the high rate of the DM *and* functioning in the structural sense in the SPOT task activity (at 65%). As a continuation of topics, an S functioning DM *and* can be exploited as a 'staller' to take, hold and yield a turn (Stenstrom, 1994, p. 76), especially when there is no current opposition from the other speaker to take over the turn at talk; in other words, one who is content being an active listener. This common strategy can be seen in the following SPOT example below, with *and* operating with other S DMs to hold the floor as a continuer as well as help control topic shifting during the highly structure task interaction (DMs of interest are shown in bold).

A: *yeah yeah yeah yes*
B: *oh*
A: =***and*** *let's move on* to second floor
B: *yeah*
A: =***and*** *I don't know - yeah* second floor there are room
B: *yeah*
A: =five room and a bathroom?
B: *yes* same

In the first instances of *and*, it is paired with *let's move on*. *And* functions to first hold the floor as a continuer, followed by the more explicit *let's move on* to close one topic in the SPOT task activity and move on to the next, marking a discourse boundary. In the second instance, *and* again functions as a continuer, followed by the cognitive DM *I don't know*, suggesting a false start, being picked up again with another S DM continuer *yeah* to hold the floor.

Looking at the DEC task, learners strongly favored *so* (76%) and *how about* (69%) because decision-making requires proposing options, shifting direction, and guiding the group toward agreement. *So* helps frame conclusions or move the discussion forward, while *how about* serves as a collaborative proposal marker, essential for negotiating choices and evaluating alternatives, as brought out in DEC task interaction seen below (DMs of interest are shown in bold).

A: from the stream
B: *uhuh*=
A: =***so*** *I think* we can - we need some knife
B: knife?
A: *or* arrow or something like that
B: ***so*** *like* there's a umm - what do I say - multi multi use knife
A: *yeah* that could be good

Speaker B uses *so* to both link their response to A's idea and advance the proposal. The first *so* introduces an aligned contribution, showing uptake and refinement. It signals logical continuation, helps reframe the item more specifically, and

effectively moves the group toward a clearer decision. Along with *I think*, this clearly demonstrates the structural/cognitive functions of this DM pair. The second *so* again signals uptake but now functions as a problem-solving pivot**.** B uses it to strengthen A's suggestion. It frames the contribution as a logical next step, steering the group from brainstorming toward specifying and selecting an option, towards a transitional end.

Cognitive DMs

A total of 56 DMs out of the 2,405 DMs provided were of the C functioning (a 2% rate of C DM provision). This was the most underrepresented category of DM functioning. A breakdown of the provisions across the top five C DMs (41 DMs total) between the two tasks is seen in Table 9 below:

TABLE 9
Provision of Cognitive DMs (Top 5 DMs)

Task Type	like	I don't know	you mean	for example	maybe	well	I mean	Total
SPOT	3	6	2	0	0	0	1	12
	17%	60%	50%	0%	0%	0%	50%	29%
DEC	15	4	2	3	2	2	1	29
	83%	40%	50%	100%	100%	100%	50%	71%
Total	18	10	4	3	2	2	2	41
	44%	24%	10%	7%	5%	5%	5%	100%

Note. SPOT = Spot-the Difference task. DEC = Decision-Making task.

This category of DMs signal speakers' mental processes. The most preferred C DM used was overwhelmingly *like*, followed by *I don't know*. Combined they represented close to 70% of all C DMs used during task interaction. This preference was shown in the DEC task, at 83%. Because DEC tasks require proposing options, evaluating alternatives, and negotiating meaning**,** learners rely more on C markers like *like* to manage uncertainty and refine ideas. In DEC, *like* helps approximate quantities, introduce examples, hedge suggestions, and search for precise wording, all essential in collaborative problem-solving. This is seen in the following (DMs of interest are shown in bold):

A: *and* ***like*** rather than saying food in total - it would be like uhh boat - and uhh like speak
B: ahh ahh=
A: =***like*** *yeah* spear to to
B: catch=
A: =*yeah* catch

Here, *like* marks hesitation and searches for precise wording, helping Speaker A approximate ideas while co-constructing meaning with the listener. SPOT's fixed, picture-based narrative, however, gives fewer opportunities for such exploratory, cognitively loaded functions, resulting in far less use of *like*. *Like* is not explicitly taught in the classroom, thus contact with the target language culture will initiate its use. In examining *like* frequency, Rüdiger (2021) found effects of time spent in an English-speaking country, while Lorenz (2022) claims that *like* is a prominent DM in the repertoire of multicultural learners. Because of limited exposure to English-speaking environments, the subjects in the current study have not experienced the pragmatic socialization that typically shapes interactional norms and routine DM use (Romero Trillo, 2002). This, along with personal preference, might also help explain the low provision rate of C DMs, and specifically *like*, across the two tasks. Arya (2020), in examining Thai university EFL students' conversation, also found that C DM were the most underrepresented of categories "may imply a lack of awareness of the forms and functions available, the inability to retrieve them in time of need, or simply the lack of necessity." (p. 261). However, the overall frequency of C DMs in the dataset was very low (n = 56), and the task comparison therefore reflects only a small subset of tokens. Accordingly, the difference observed between SPOT and DEC should be interpreted as a relative tendency within this limited subset rather than as strong evidence that DEC tasks substantially increase C DM use.

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the current study offer several pedagogical insights for teachers seeking to design effective task-based instruction that develops learners' DM use and overall communicative competence. First, the clear differences in DM distribution between the SPOT and DEC tasks demonstrate that task type directly shapes the functional demands placed on learners, supporting earlier claims by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), Youn (2023) and others, that cognitive and interactional complexity influence linguistic output during task interaction. SPOT tasks, being highly structured, visually supported, and convergent, elicited more RTs and fewer I markers, suggesting that learners were focused on accuracy, detail, and information exchange rather than social functions of spoken grammar. This shows a listener-oriented interactional pattern in which learners prioritize confirmation and acknowledgment to maintain task progress. DEC tasks, by contrast, generated higher use of I and S DMs, indicating that learners were pushed to justify opinions and manage turns. Neither task supported C DMs, implying learners did not show interest, or were unable, mark their thinking process during task interaction. A chi-square test of independence confirmed a significant association between task type and DM distribution, and indicates that task complexity plays a role in shaping this aspect of learners' discourse behavior.

The findings also align with previous research suggesting that EFL learners often display imbalanced DM usage, including the overuse of familiar markers and the underuse of others depending on the communicative demands of a task (Han, 2021). In the present study, differences across task types suggest that learners may rely on a limited set of markers when managing varying interactional demands. Such patterns support earlier observations that learners' DM repertoires are often restricted and unevenly distributed across communicative contexts.

For teachers, this distinction is crucial. Incorporating DMs into speaking instruction is essential, as extensive research confirms the teachability of pragmatics (of which DMs are a key component) and highlights their central role in shaping effective conversational behavior (e.g. Culpeper et al., 2018). If the instructional goal is to develop interactive fluency and pragmatic negotiation, then tasks resembling the DEC format should be incorporated into lessons. Such tasks create communicative pressure that encourages learners to deploy a wider range of DMs, particularly those signaling stance, hesitation, exemplification, approximation, or reasoning. Conversely, if the focus is on accuracy, descriptive language, or noticing, SPOT-style tasks are more appropriate, as their structured, step-by-step nature lets teachers highlight local discourse features and scaffold specific DM categories such as sequencing or clarification markers (see, for example, Alraddadi (2016) and the explicit teaching of structural DMs with the TBL method).

The functional differentiation observed in this study provides a roadmap for matching specific task types to desired pragmatic outcomes. Since the SPOT task (a closed, information-gap activity) naturally elicited a high frequency of RTs (e.g., *mhm, okay, I see*), it serves as an ideal environment for 'interactional warm-ups.' Teachers can design 'listen-and-signal' drills where students are rewarded for maintaining the conversational floor using only reactive language while their partner describes a picture. This stabilizes 'reactive' language, a crucial but often overlooked component of fluency, before students are asked to produce complex arguments. In contrast, the DEC task (an open-ended, reasoning-based activity) acts as a catalyst for I and S DMs (e.g., *I think, actually, well, anyway*). To move beyond treating DMs as a static vocabulary list, instructors should implement 'functional role-play' within these decision-making frameworks. For example, in a DEC task deciding which items to take to a deserted island, students could be assigned specific functional goals, such as using *actually* to politely disagree or *well* to signal a shift in the group's focus. Ultimately, these findings support a TBLT sequencing approach: teachers should begin with low-complexity, closed tasks (like SPOT) to build confidence in basic conversational tracking, then progress to high-complexity, open tasks (like DEC) to challenge learners to use higher-order markers for stance-taking and negotiation. By intentionally pairing task demands with DM categories, educators can move from teaching 'what' a DM is to showing students 'when' and 'why' it is strategically necessary.

Future research could extend this work by examining a wider range of task types with differing cognitive demands, incorporating more diverse learner groups and proficiency levels, and tracking DM use over time with longitudinal studies. Since the present study focused primarily on turn-initial markers, further studies can investigate DM clusters as well as turn-embedded and turn-final DM usage.

Several limitations in the current study should be noted, however. First is the small sample size and limited generalizability. As the study involved only 30 subjects (15 dyads) of high English proficiency who had never lived abroad, the findings may not generalize to broader learner populations. As mentioned, DM use is highly sensitive to individual speaking styles, proficiency levels, and interpersonal dynamics, so a larger, more diverse sample would strengthen reliability. Second was the implementation of only two task types. Although SPOT and DEC tasks provide valuable contrasts, relying on just two task types provides a focused but restrictive view in determining whether the observed DM patterns result from task type, task complexity, or task purpose. Including additional task types (e.g., narrative, jigsaw, problem-solving) would help isolate

which task features most influence DM categories. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not account for long-term pragmatic development. The current study captured DM use at a single point in time. Without pre/post measures or instructional scaffolding, it is difficult to determine whether learners' DM patterns are task-specific or stable features of their interlanguage. A longitudinal or pedagogical intervention design would better reveal how DM use develops and responds to teaching. Fourth, the classroom setting may have introduced formality effects, potentially influencing the naturalness of the participants' DM usage. Because all data were collected in a classroom setting, learners may have adjusted their speech to sound more "correct" or formal. The awareness of being observed for an academic task can lead students to self-monitor more closely (for example, suppressing minimal responses and natural hesitation markers found the C category, and other informal DMs such as *like* and *you know*), or spontaneous interactional features that would otherwise appear in less monitored, more authentic contexts.

Despite these limitations, the study demonstrates that task type and complexity significantly shape Korean EFL learners' DM use, revealing distinct functional patterns across SPOT and DEC tasks. These findings suggest the potential pedagogical value of task design in establishing the conditions for pragmatic development and offer practical insights for integrating DM-focused instruction into communicative classrooms.

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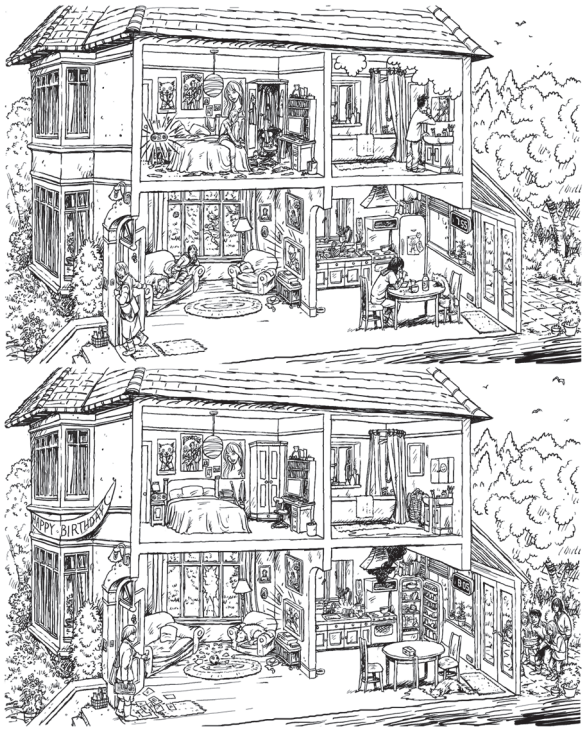
Appendix A

Two different pictures given to dyad participants for Spot-the-Difference (SPOT) task



Appendix B

Transcription conventions (Adapted from Tsui, 1994)

=	A second utterance latched immediately to the first utterance with no overlap
[ ]	Overlapping utterances
-	Short untimed pause within an utterance. More for longer pauses (--).
.	Falling intonation.
?	Rising intonation. Not necessarily a question.
:	Lengthened vowels. More for longer vowel sounds (:::).
CAPITAL	Emphatic expression
...	Utterances which have been removed
Bold	Discourse markers of interest
( )	Transcribers comments

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