

# **Trabajo Fin de Grado**

Main problems of Spanish secondary education students in understanding written English: Analysis of the use of contrastive discourse markers.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 The gaining importance of English in the Spanish context**

English and Spanish are both positioned at the top of the most widely spoken languages around the world and have continued gaining importance over the last decades. Whilst in 2005 English occupied the third position in the list of the world's most spoken languages, English has continued reinforcing its importance around the globe. Thus, according to a research carried out by *Ethnologue* (2021), English is nowadays the most spoken language in the world, with a number of 1,269 million speakers, including both native and non-native. A large number of studies focus on the specific role of English as a second language. According to Crystal (2003), 25% of the world's population uses English, and this number is bound to increase in the near future. Moreover, during the last decades English has become the international *lingua franca*, becoming gradually the language of business, technology, and education (Chew, 1999). It is interesting to take into account the study of Mauranen (2003), in which she explores some of the reasons which have led English to become the international language, such as British colonialism and later on the cultural and political power of the country. In her research, Mauranen (2003), acknowledges that the proportion of ESL speakers has outnumbered that of native speakers, increasing English worldwide influence. The predominance of English in many fields has also reached education, and some scholars study the increasing presence of English in the European educational systems (Phillipson, 2003; Seidlhofer, Breiteneder, & Pitzl, 2006), making emphasis on the high number of European students of English as a second language.

Alternatively, Spanish remains the fourth most spoken language in the world with around 540 million speakers. In this case, the number of native speakers is much greater than the total of non-native speakers. Although Spanish is a worldwide language, the impact of ELF (English as a foreign language) has also reached Spanish speakers. In his research, Caraker, (2016) examines the impact of English in the Spanish educational system and states that "Spain is among the European countries in which English is taught earliest in their education." (p. 27) As he states, Spain has committed to the policies of the European Union, aiming to achieve multiculturalism and multilingualism.

In order to analyze the role of English within the Spanish context, it is interesting to provide an overview of the Spanish educational system. Education in Spain is currently regulated by the OLAOLE (Organic Law Amending the Organic Law of Education), which was passed in January, 2021. The central administration called Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deportes is responsible for making decisions as regards the development and implementation of the Spanish curriculum, as well as funding and other educational tasks. (Caraker, 2016). After primary school, Spanish students attend secondary education (*Educación Secundaria Obligatoria* or ESO), that consists of free compulsory education from years 12 to 16 (four years), and also vocational training (FP) and *bachillerato* (which serves as a college preparation). According to Caraker (2016), “admission to the Spanish university system is determined by the *nota de corte* (cutoff grade) that is achieved at the end of the two-year *bachillerato*.” (pp.25- 26)

The Spanish educational system has adopted the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which distinguishes several levels associated with certain years of education. According to David Little, linguistic scholar interested in this system, CEFR is a descriptive scheme that might be used to examine the needs of second language learners, as well as to specify their aims, guide them with learning activities and facilitate their assessment. (Little, 2006, p. 167). The CEFR is divided into six different levels on a global scale; namely, A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2 (being A1 the lowest level and C2 the highest one). Each of these levels are subdivided into four categories or skills that learners of English as a second language must overcome; namely, *speaking*, *listening*, *reading*, and *writing*. According to the CEFR self-assessment grid, a student of A1/A2 levels (also called *basic user* levels) should be able to understand and use familiar words and very basic sentences concerning easy topics, as well as to interact in a simple conversation.

Students of *Bachillerato* are required to have a B2 level by the time they obtain the title according to the CEFR. However, the students that participated in this study were still in their first year of *bachillerato*. Therefore, their level might range from B1 to B2 levels. A student situated between B1 and B2 levels should face a higher difficulty; B1 level requires understanding of the main points of a clear speech as well as comprehension of radio or television programs. In this level students are required to manage with texts that deal with job-related language, description of events, and feelings. Regarding *writing*, they should be able to write simple connected texts on a certain topic and personal letters. For these purposes, L2 learners should have quite a wide range of vocabulary and some knowledge of discourse markers. In B2 level students are expected to understand

extended speech and lectures, and follow complex lines of arguments. Moreover, they are expected to read dense articles and adopt different points of view. Finally, they have to interact with certain fluency and be able to write reports, essays, and so on, on a wide range of topics. Focusing on our specific topic, the individuals who participated in the study should be able to be familiar with the discourse markers that have been chosen for this research (see. Section 1.3), as most of them do not present a great level of difficulty, whilst others might be harder to recognize, as shall be seen.

## **1.2 Definition of Discourse Markers. Review of previous literature**

During the past decades, several names have been proposed to define discourse markers (DM); some of the proposals given by various researchers differ among them, as we shall see. Blakemore (1987) labeled DMs as *discourse connectives*; however, in her later study, the scholar already names these as *discourse markers* (2002). Another definition is that of Redeker (1991) who refers to them as *discourse operators* to signal those words “whose main function is to signal a particular linkage an utterance to its context.” (p.251) *Pragmatic expression* is another popular term among some researchers (Ariel, 1994; Overstreet, 2005). Subsequently, Knott and Dale (1994) referred to DMs as *cue phrases*, which are, according to their study, elements that signal “implicit relations between the sentences of a text, so that the sentence might provide elaboration, circumstances, or explanation for the content of another.” (p.5) In order to follow a previous model these items elements will be referred to as *connectors* or *discourse markers* in this paper, following the nomenclature given by Fraser (1995, 2015). Bruce Fraser is an important scholar in the field of linguistics, who has focused on the topic of DM in several articles. Starting in 1995, Fraser was one of the first scholars who provided a comparison of DMs used in English and Spanish. This work had a great relevance, and in 2015 Fraser published a new research paper focused on Contrastive Discourse Markers in English. In his research, he offered a detailed analysis on the classification of DMs and further analysis of them into sub-categories. His research articles are very useful as the information is clearly organized and detailed; moreover, his proposal on the classification and analysis of these DMs seems to be the most complete.

These are just some of the traditional names received by DMs. As has been observed, there is no agreement on the label which should be used, but there is neither agreement on the concrete definition of these terms. Quirk et al. (1985) stated that: “Adverbial connectors conjoin linguistic

units, such as sentences, paragraphs and even larger parts of a text.” (pp. 631-632) Some scholars as Schiffrin, (1987) suggest that DMs have an integrative function in the text “add to discourse coherence,” (p. 326) and provide context for an utterance. However, according to this scholar, discourse markers do not fit in any particular linguistic class. Furthermore, she states that even gestures could be labeled as DMs. However, Redeker (1991), questions this view and asserts that discourse markers have not been clearly defined and therefore a definition would be necessary. According to her, a *discourse operator* (as she refers to DMs) is:

A word or phrase that is uttered with the primary function of bringing to the listener’s attention a particular kind of linkage of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context. (p.1168)

The present research paper on contrastive discourse markers will be based on the definition and classification given by Bruce Fraser. In his previous study Fraser (1999) defined discourse markers as:

[...] a class of lexical expressions drawn primarily from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases. With certain exceptions, they signal a relationship between the interpretation of the segment they introduce, S2, and the prior segment, S1. (p. 937)

In his latest research of discourse markers, Fraser (2015) asserts that: “Discourse Markers are usually discussed as terms which signal the relationship between two contiguous sentences.” (p. 381) He adds that DMs: “function like a two-place relation, one argument lying in the segment they introduce, the other lying in the prior discourse.” (p. 938) He represents this form as <S1. DM + S2>.

This paper is going to deal with a detailed analysis of the use of contrastive discourse markers by secondary school students of *bachillerato*. These students are currently taking the two-year program that will be referred to as *bachillerato*, taking into account that there is not a direct equivalent in English education.

### **1.3 Classification of Discourse Markers**

Different classifications have been provided as regards discourse markers. For example, Quirk et al. (1985) classify connectors into the following groups: listing connectors (*firstly, secondly*); summative connectors (*(all) in all, in conclusion*); appositive connectors (*for example, that is*); resultive connectors (*hence, in consequence*); inferential connectors (*in that case, otherwise*);

contrastive connectors ( *however, on the other hand*); and transitional connectors ( *by the way, in the meantime*).

Another classification is that of Halliday & Hasan (1976), who propose a classification of connective devices like the following: additive (*and, or also, in addition, furthermore, besides, similarly, likewise, by contrast, for instance*); adversative (*but, yet, however, instead, on the other hand, nevertheless at any rate, as a matter of fact*); causal (*so, consequently, it follows, for, because, under the circumstances, for this reason*); and continuatives (*now, of course, well, anyway, surely, after all*).

As mentioned above, in this paper we will focus on the classification given by Fraser (2015). In his study, Fraser offers a wider range of categories and classifies Discourse Markers into three categories: Contrastive DMs, Elaborative DMs, and Implicative DMs. This division seems to be highly accurate, since there is a great number of DMs and this specification simplifies their analysis. Among the Implicative DMs, Fraser includes: *so, therefore, thus, then, given that, as a result, as a consequence, consequently, as a conclusion, all in all, accordingly, hence, for that reason*. Among the Elaborative DMs, we find: *and, also besides, better yet, furthermore, in addition, moreover, namely*, among others. In this paper, however, we will focus on the contrastive ones. This group has been chosen for having a great variety of DMs to choose from, in terms of their difficulty and characteristics (namely: position, meaning, grammatical structure, etc.)

#### **1.4 Definition of Contrastive Discourse Markers:**

Among his classification of groups and subgroups of Discourse Markers, Fraser (2015) focuses specifically on the classification and enumeration of Contrastive DMs; As Fraser states, “Each CDM signals a different contrastive relationship between adjacent discourse segments.” (p.318)

According to this scholar, the group of Contrastive DMs includes the following elements: *alternatively, although, but, contrary to expectations, conversely, even though, except, however, in comparison (with), in contrast (to), instead (of), nevertheless, notwithstanding, only, on the contrary, on the other hand, rather (than), still, though, whereas, while, yet*.

Firstly, Fraser (2015) distinguishes between two kind of contrastive discourse markers; those which signal a General Contrastive relationship (GC) between S1 and S2, and those indicating a Specific Contrastive relationship (SC) between S1 and S2. Some of the GC discourse markers are: *but, although, however, yet, still, nevertheless, only, except*. He includes as SC discourse makers the

following: *on the other hand, instead, conversely, in contrast, rather, on the contrary, alternatively*. Among the first group, General Contrastive DMs, Fraser (2015), states that the most general of them is *but*, which may involve different meanings depending on the context (as shall be seen). Subsequently, *however* has a more limited use, according to the researcher, and it only occurs expressing contrast or contradiction. Furthermore, “The remaining three GC DMs, *yet, still, and nevertheless*, presume the truth/validity of the S1 that preceded them.” (p.324) To illustrate the different uses of GC Discourse Markers, Fraser (2015) includes a table (see Table 1. Annex)

The second group of CDM is that of Specific Contrastive DM and it consists of some individual DMs, such as *on the other hand, instead, conversely, in contrast, rather, on the contrary, and alternative*. Each of them signal a specific relationship between S1 and S2, as will be mentioned later on.

In his research, he gives instructions regarding the position and use of Contrastive Discourse Markers (CDM). As Fraser claims, some of them should only occur in initial position, whereas others are more widely used in medial or final position, as we shall see in the subsequent analysis.

### **1.5 Aim of the study**

The main aim of this research is to investigate and analyze the attitudes and perceptions of Spanish secondary education students towards Contrastive Discourse Markers, as well as the main errors they make when using English as foreign language. For this, an analysis of each CDM will be made, followed by the obtained results of the tests. Finally, this study will focus on different alternative sample exercises in order to achieve a better understanding of DMs.

## **2. Methodology**

An anonymous test was chosen as the investigation method, since it might well reflect the students understanding of these DMs. The test was performed during school hours and students were not informed in advance about it, so that they results reflected what they truly knew or had internalized. Taking into account the possibilities of random answers at a multiple-choice test, it can be a stress-free method to analyze the use and understanding of these words by students of *bachillerato*.



## 2.1 Participants

The subjects who participated in this study were 55 sixteen and seventeen year-old students of English as a foreign language at I.E.S Mar de Aragón, a public high school situated in Caspe, Zaragoza (Spain).

## 2.2 Material

The data for this study was gathered through tests or questionnaires administered to secondary education students on the first year of *bachillerato*, which is a non-compulsory two-year program that serves as preparation for university. All the tests were provided in English<sup>1</sup>. A total of 55 samples were provided to an English teacher in this high school, who was responsible for delivering the sample tests to each student and making sure these were anonymous and completed individually. All tests were formulated so that they could be easily understood and did not interfere with the results of the study. The research material used included 55 copies of a sample survey or test that contains a practical part and a theoretical one. The practical section included a total of ten multiple-choice questions in which students were put into test with a selection of ten different contrastive discourse markers that will be analyzed further on (see Section 2.4). In these questions, in which the naturally occurring contrastive markers had been removed, students had to choose only one correct answer among the three options (a, b, c) that were provided, according to which one best fits the meaning, position and grammar of the sentence. The theoretical section includes multiple choice question in which students need to tag any contrastive connectors they are able to identify out of the six options given (a, b, c, d, e, f). In this case, only three of them are correct, and should be selected according to their contrastive meaning. (See Annex. Table 2)

## 2.3 Method

Each students was provided with one copy of the multiple-choice test<sup>2</sup> and the practical question. They were asked to complete the ten practical questions and the theoretical part within ten minutes (they had an allocated time of about 10 minutes at the beginning of the class). In the first section, they were asked to circle the option that best fitted each sentence. In the second section, they were asked to circle the DMs that had a contrasting nature, which required higher level of theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> None of the participants that took part in this research were native speakers of English.

<sup>2</sup> These tests were provided in paper copies of a computer-generated multiple-choice test.

knowledge. The use of contrastive discourse markers among these students will be analyzed from the results of each sample test.

## 2.4 Selection of Discourse Makers

I will draw for my research on the following list of discourse markers put forward by Fraser (2015: 322). Based on his classification, ten different examples have been selected so as to explain the uses of each contrastive discourse marker<sup>3</sup>. In this section a detailed analysis of the examples will be elaborated, taking into account the position of each DM, together with their meaning. In the overall results of the study, this section will be taken into consideration in order to analyze the main errors in the understanding of CDM among secondary education students.

Example 1.

Three is a prime number, ..... four is not.

a) besides                      b) also                      c) **but**

*But* is the most general CDM. According to Fraser (2015) “*But* signals that the message conveyed by S2 sets up at least one semantic contrast with the message of S1, with the remainder of the two sentences being roughly similar.” (p. 323) It expresses a contrasting relationship between sentence 1 and sentence 2. However, *but* can express different modalities, depending on the linguistic and cognitive context (Fraser, 2015, p.319). When it is used by itself, it can express: contrast (see example 1), contradiction and elimination, challenge, topic change, or to be apologetic. In this case (Example 1), *but* is signalling a clear contrast between number three and number four in terms of being prime numbers; as we see, there is a contrast in both, expressed by *but*. See below the different examples on the alternative uses of *but* that Fraser (2015) provides in his article:

- **Contradiction and elimination:** According to the scholar, “*But* signals that the message conveyed by S2 contradicts an assumption of S1/or the discourse context, and eliminates it.” (p.323).

Example: We started late. **But** we arrived on time.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that this numeration will be classified according to each DM's degree of difficulty, starting by the most common one (*but*) and adding more increasing difficulty as the examples advance.

**-Challenge:** In this case, the message conveyed by S2 challenges some implication of S1, but it does not eliminate it as in the previous case.

Example: : John killed the dog. B: **But** the dog is not dead!

**-Change of topic:** In this case *but* signals that the message introduced in S2 is a change of topic regarding S1.

Example: It's good seeing you so happy. **But** I've come to give you bad news.

**-Apologetic:** But conveys an apology or justification in S1 regarding the message that follows in S2.

Example: Excuse me. **But** you're standing in my way.

*But* is preceded by a comma or a full stop, and it is usually positioned at the beginning of a sentence. However, it is not followed by one. In contrast, other contrastive connectors such as *however* (option 2) and *instead* need a comma just after them, as we shall see.

The connector *but* is expected to have a major rate of right answers among secondary students since it is very common in everyday speech and widely used in written essays from a basic level of English. The main aim of this example is for the students to take into consideration that this sentence is expressing a contrast relationship between S1 and S2. In terms of position (at the beginning) the alternatives presented would be acceptable. However, the main difference lays in their meaning. Both *besides* and *also* are additive or summative connectors, and their meaning is not suitable for this example.

Example 2.

We started late. .... ,we arrived on time.

a) But

b) While

c) **However**

The connector *however* has a more limited meaning than *but*, and both are included among the General Contrastive Discourse Markers, according to Fraser (2015). As stated by this scholar, *however* can acquire the first two uses of *but*: (1) contrast and (2) contradiction and elimination. In this example, *however* expresses concretely a relationship of contradiction and elimination; S2

contradicts and eliminates what has been said in S1. As we see, it does not matter the fact that they started late, since S2 expresses that, despite this, they arrived on time. The other alternative use of *however* could be expressing contrast, as is shown in the next example:

Example: Three is a prime number. **However**, four is not.

This example is very similar in shape and meaning to Example 1. The only difference is that in this case, *however* is followed by a comma, whilst in the first example there are no punctuation marks after *but*. As an alternative, *however* could also be used as a focus marker, as in the following example (Fraser, 2015, p.324) :

Example: Most people can go. Mary, **however**, must stay.

In this concrete example *however* is located in middle position within the sentence, but it is an explanatory element. It is conveying that everyone can go, with the exception of Mary.

As has been mentioned, *however* is necessarily followed by a comma, and it is mostly presented in initial position. It could not be substituted by any of the alternative answers: Firstly, *but* does not fit because of the position of the comma; neither *while*, since, firstly, it is not a contrastive connector but and it does not fit the sentence in terms of meaning either, and secondly it is never followed by a comma. This comma could be helpful to identify the DM.

Example 3.

New York used to be a great place to visit. .... , today it's scary.

a) Yet

b) Still

c) Moreover

*Yet*, together with *still* and *nevertheless* are the rest of the General Contrastive DM. In his research, Fraser (2015) points that “The remaining three GC CDMs [...] presume the truth/validity of the S1 that preceded them, and have different aspects of signaling.” (p.324) As defined by him, *yet* introduces a message relevant to S1, but that might be known by the speaker and not by the hearer. This DM seems to be challenging to secondary education students, since it has got many usages and meanings and this might lead to a misunderstanding (i.e. its use in the present perfect tense.) *Yet* as a connector must occur only in an initial position, and it is similar in meaning to *but* and *however*. Moreover, the sentence can also be reversed, as in the following example: “Today is scary. Yet, New York used to be a great place to visit”.

*Still* has been given as a wrong option, since the meaning deviates from the contrast presented here; it can occur in medial and final position but it usually has the meaning of ongoing. The second wrong option is the summative connector *moreover*, which is usually used to add something to a sentence, and not as a contrastive discourse marker.

Example 4.

On the one hand, we could take a vacation in Jamaica. .... , we could just stay home.

a) Furthermore      b) In comparison      c) **On the other hand**

*On the other hand* is one of the Specific Contrastive DM, together with *instead*, *conversely*, *in contrast*, *rather*, *on the contrary*, and *alternatively*. SCDMs indicate a specific contrastive relationship between S1 and S2. *On the other hand* can have two different roles. Firstly, it can function where there is no initial *On the one hand*, when the speaker gives a second use (used similarly to yet): “Firecrackers are great fun to light on July 4th. **On the other hand**, you have to be careful.” (Fraser, 2015, p.326). The second role is the one presented in Example 4. The function of *on the other hand* in this sentence involves the use of symmetrical forms. Whenever we see *on the one hand*, a second discourse marker might be following, expressing another point of view. With this connector, two aspects of the same action or object are being compared (Fraser, 2015). As the first sentence starts with *on the one hand*, the most logical and suitable connector is *on the other hand*, as both DMs have symmetry.

The alternatives presented are *furthermore* and *in comparison*. *Furthermore* does not suit this example since it has an additive use, not a contrastive one. *In comparison* is neither suitable, since it would be preferable to keep a fixed structure with both *on the one* and *on the other hand*. This example appears to be quite unchallenging. Despite the fact that it seems very obvious, it might cause some difficulties among students.

Example 5.

He hasn't gone to school for several weeks now. .... , he has been going to the video arcade.

a) Thus      b) **Instead**      c) Unless

*Instead* is another Specific contrastive DM that conveys that the message introduced in S2 replaces the previous message of S1, where S1 conveys something that didn't happen while S2 conveys something that did occur. (Fraser, 2015, p. 326 ). In this example *instead* could be reversed as the following: “*He has been going to the video arcade **instead of** going to school.*” This is another form that can take this DM, followed by the preposition “of” + an “-ing” clause (gerund).

Regarding the alternative responses, *thus* is a cause-and-effect connector, which does not fit this sentence, since S2 actually replaces S1's meaning, but it is not a cause of it. Moreover, *unless* should not be followed by a comma, and it expresses some kind of condition which is not suitable in this example.

Example 6.

This activity is not a competition. .... , it is a challenge.

a) **Rather**                      b) Besides                      c) Moreover

In his previous research, Fraser (1995) had already mentioned that the specific contrastive DM *rather* and *instead* (which are similar in use and meaning) signal that S1 should be interpreted as being contrastive towards the statement of S1. *Rather* is usually presented in an initial position, in order to establish a contrast between S1 and S2. However, it might also be reversed in place, as happens with *instead*. See the following example: *This activity is a challenge rather than being a competition.* In this case, the DM also follows the structure of: DM + preposition *than* + gerund.

Both wrong answers presented (*besides* and *moreover*) have summative or additive characteristics, rather than the contrast we are looking for. Thus, they could not be selected in this example.

Example 7.

..... to last year, very few football games have been on tv.

a) In spite                      b) **In comparison**                      c) Instead

*In comparison to* is another specific CDM that “signals that one aspect of a quantifiable action/ content on a continuum (height, age, intelligence) of S2 is to be compared or contrasted with the similar aspect of S1.” (Fraser, 2015, p. 327).

The main problem of this example lays in the difficulty of the preposition. Some studies have aimed to analyze the differences between Spanish and English usage of prepositions, as shall be mentioned.

Another alternative of this CDM is *in comparison with* which has practically the same meaning and usage. However, in this example, I have selected *in comparison to* since it differs from the direct Spanish translation “en comparación con”. Carrillo and Ferreira (2020), research on the most frequent mistakes made by Spanish speakers regarding prepositions in English, and claim that these errors occur due to a negative linguistic transference. It is also interesting the term “linguistic transference” which is associated with the tendency of learners to transfer features from their mother tongue (Spanish) to the target language (English), namely, phonetic, morphological, syntactic, lexical, and pragmatic features) (Galindo, 2005). This could explain a higher tendency among Spanish secondary students to recognize and use more frequently *in comparison with* than *in comparison to*. Linguistic transference as regards prepositions is also very present in some of the other examples (see. *Instead of*, *rather than*, and *in contrast to*) as they all require to be followed certain prepositions that Spanish speakers might not easily recognize.

In this case, the preposition is also the main difficulty, as mentioned above. The first wrong answer is *instead*, which is usually followed by the preposition “of”, but not by “to”. Something similar happens with *in spite*, which is followed by “of” ( + gerund or + NP). Although both have a contrastive meaning, neither of these two connectors would be suitable in this position, followed by the preposition *with*.

Example 8.

I am not hungry. .... , I am quite full.

- a) Nevertheless      b) But      c) **On the contrary**

*On the contrary* is another Specific CDM that “signals that S2 challenges or denies the message of S1, which is often expressed as a negative, and provides a correct interpretation in S2.” (Fraser, 2015, p.327) It moves from one meaning to the other extreme (being hungry vs. being full), opposing two contrary things. The general meaning of the sentence, including the antonyms *hungry* and *full*, might have led students to misunderstand the contrastive nature between S1 and S2 (this might be caused by a lack of vocabulary.) Furthermore, Fraser also agreed that the similarity between *on the contrary* and *in contrast to* might be a problematic factor for the understanding of these. As Fraser (1995) claimed, *on the contrary* seems to be related or similar to *in contrast to*, but the former does not occur where the latter does; *in contrast to* introduces a proposition that compares to S1, while *on the contrary* introduces a proposition that denies or cancels the previous one. (p. 17). Moreover, *in contrast to* should be followed by a gerund or noun phrase, while *on the contrary* is followed by a comma and a full clause.

*Nevertheless* does not have a meaning in this sentence, since it has a similar use to *however* and expresses a lesser contrast. *But* has a simpler meaning and it is usually followed by the sentence with no commas. Therefore, neither of these DMs would be suitable for this position.

Example 9.

I really love cycling in nature ..... reading literary books.

a) **in contrast to**    b) in comparison for    c) despite

This DM is very similar in meaning and usage to *in comparison to* (see example 7). It also compares or contrasts some differences in S1 and S1. In this case, the speaker compares cycling in nature and reading literary books and expresses his/her preference for the former. *In contrast to* is positioned in middle position of the sentence. However, it could also occupy an initial position: *In contrast to reading books, I really love cycling in nature.*

*In contrast to* is always followed by a gerund, and has been given as an option, including the preposition, since the main difficulty lies on the gerund which follows the connector. This is a big challenge, since the preposition “to” is hardly ever followed by an *-ing* clause, and this might cause confusion.



As regards the alternatives, *In comparison for* is written with a grammatical mistake, since *in comparison* should be followed by the preposition “to” or “with”, but not “for” (Again, we find a matter of prepositions.) Therefore, this option should be discarded immediately. Nevertheless, *despite* suits regarding syntactical issues, since it also can be followed by a gerund. The difficulty of this second wrong option lays in the fact that the meaning of *despite* (that expresses that S1 is not affected by S2) is not appropriate for this sentence; this DM is usually a challenge for students: both *despite* and *in spite of* are very similar structures that need to be followed by either a gerund, a noun phrase or by the structure “the fact that”. Again, linguistic transference is a key factor for the lack of understanding of these DMs, since “a pesar de”, which would be the Spanish equivalent, has a different usage.

This example is expected to have a minor rate of accuracy than the previous ones since different factors mix in order to cause problems to secondary education students of ESL.

Example 10.

James loves steak ;..... , her husband is a vegetarian.

a) **conversely**                      b) similarly                      c) also

The last example has been used to illustrate the usage of *conversely*. *Conversely* expresses a contrastive relationship between S1 and S2, in which S2 has absolute opposite meaning to S1; it reverses its implications. According to Fraser (2015), “This CDM is used to signal two positions on two different aspects of the topic being discussed.” (p. 328) In this case, the topic is dietary preferences and *conversely* is used to express the contrast between James loving to eat meat and her husband being a vegetarian. It is usually followed by a comma and positioned in an initial position in the sentence, and this might be challenging factor for the use of this DM.

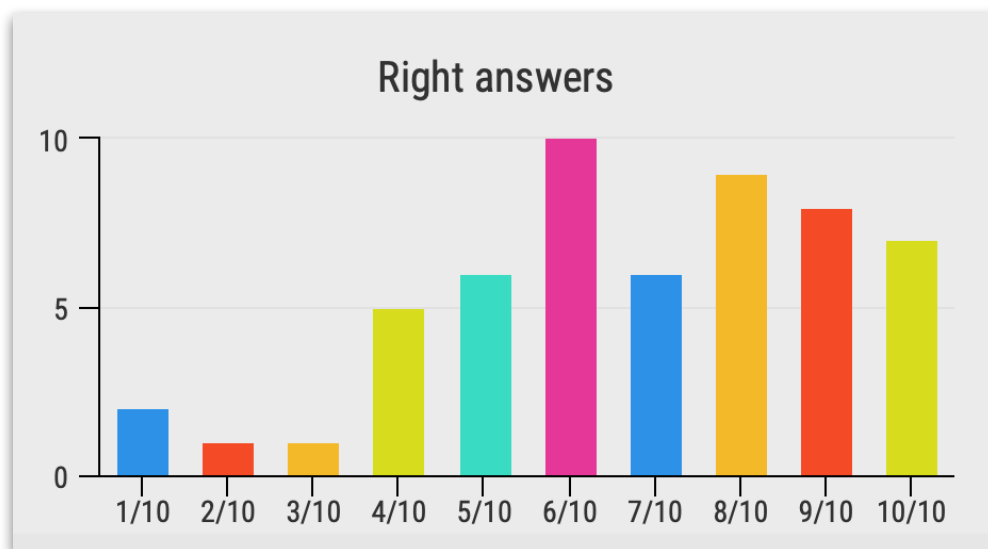
Regarding the two alternatives presented, *similarly* has an opposite meaning to *conversely*, they are antonyms. and it has been added as a wrong example in order to prove the students’ understanding of the contrastive meaning of the whole. *Also* has an additive meaning that is not suitable for this bracket. The main difficulty of this DM lays in the recognition of the contrastive characteristics.

### 3. Results and Analysis

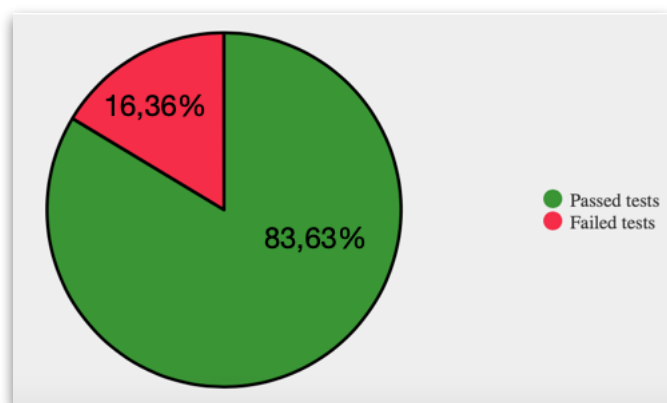
#### 3.1 Overall results

The test was administered to a sample of 55 students of secondary education (1st year baccalaureate.) Regarding the multiple-choice questions in the practical part, this graphic shows the results obtained by the students in terms of right answers:

As can be observed, 2 students obtained a total of only 1 correct answer out of 10 (total questions). Subsequently, only one student obtained a punctuation of 2/10, and another one got 3/10. As can be seen, the most common punctuation among these students was 6/10, with a total of 10 samples. High punctuations, such as 8, 9, and 10/10 were quite common, with a total of 9, 8 and 7 students obtaining these punctuations, respectively. This shows that there are various overall results, varying from students with a very low level on DMs to those seven students who obtained a 10/10 overall score. In general, the average percentage of right answers in the practical section is 67,81% of the total (since there is a total of 373 right answers out of 550 possible ones; ten per sample test multiplied by 55 students.) Therefore, we can conclude that the general knowledge shown by students in this practical part is good.



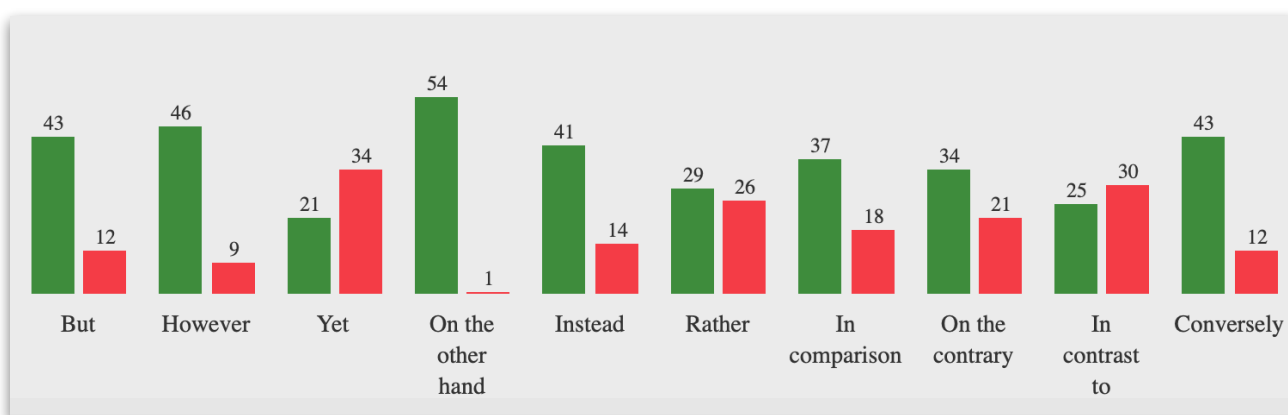
The next chart presents us with the proportions of passed vs. failed tests (less or more than five, respectively). As can be clearly seen, there is a higher number of samples with five or more accurate answers than those who have less than five right answers: In this case, it is interesting that only nine



tests had a punctuation lower than 5/10, whilst the remaining 46 tests had a higher punctuation. This represents a 83,63% of passed samples against 16,36 % of failed ones. These results show a relatively good knowledge and understanding of contrastive discourse markers in written English. The numbers are not too low but there is still lack of understanding of these

DMs; remedial work on these elements could improve their reading comprehension, as will be mentioned. (See section 3.2)

The following is an overall graphic corresponding to the ten practical questions that shows the number of right and wrong answers (represented in green and red, respectively) in every specific CDM, out of a total of 55 sample tests. As can be seen, the most well-known discourse markers for these students are: *On the other hand, however, but, conversely, instead, in comparison, on the contrary, rather, in contrast to, and yet, respectively.*



But was expected to have the higher number of right answers. As Fraser (1995) stated:

*But* is by far the most general of the contrastive discourse markers [...] it can occur in some slots where no other contrastive discourse marker is permitted, and can occur in nearly every context in which another marker can occur. (p. 4)

However, *but* occupies the third position in the list of correct answers (with only twelve mistaken answers). This is an unexpected result that might have been caused by a lack of recognition of the sentence's contrastive context (as the two alternatives were *also* and *besides*, widely known Elaborative DMs). The students might have misunderstood the general meaning of the sentence in

Example 1, since the difference between three being a *prime number* and not four might have not been recognized; it is a basic mathematical concept that might have led to misunderstanding.

The most widely recognized DM has been *on the other hand*: As the graphic shows, the symmetry between the structures *on the one hand* and *on the other hand* seems to have achieved the highest level of accuracy among all CDMs, with just one wrong answer out of 55. It is interesting to take into account that the right answers on *on the other hand* have doubled those on *yet*, which has been the one with the highest number of wrong answers (34). This might have been caused by a lack of similitude to Spanish; *yet* could be translated as *sin embargo*, but it also has many other translations. Students of secondary education might be used to locating *yet* in Present Perfect sentences, meaning *aún*, or *ya*. The fact that *on the other hand* has a symmetrical structure and almost a literal translation in Spanish makes it very recognizable among students.

In the second place we find *however*, with only nine wrong answers. *However* and *but* are usually given the most importance in the class, therefore they might be widely known for students of this level. In contrast, *yet* is not so widely used in secondary education, and this is clearly seen at the results. *In contrast to* has also had a high number of wrong answers; this might have been primarily caused by the preposition that follows this DM, since students might have been confused by the alternatives (i.e. *in comparison for, despite*.)

The theoretical question was included to test if students could identify contrastive DM as members of a category with a common function. There were three correct options (*conversely, nevertheless, however*) among six of them (wrong options; *also, moreover, furthermore*). Overall, the average percentage of right answers in this theoretical part is 67,27 %. Out of 165 possible right answers (three per sample test), students got a total of 111. The most recognized CDM was *however* with a total of 43 right answers. Subsequently, *conversely* obtained 39 correct answers. The less recognized contrastive DM was *nevertheless*, since only 29 students circled it. Other options included wrong options and four participants did not complete the theoretical question.

This table presents us with the different 55 sample tests and their total right answers; the number on the left corresponds to the practical part, whilst the one on the right refers to the total of right answers in the theoretical question (i.e. the first square on the left top **10-3**, corresponds to a test with 10/10 right answers in the practice and 3/3 in the theory).

10-3	10-2	4-1	7-2	6-3	8-3	4-3
4-0	7-1	6-1	8-3	3-1	1-1	8-2
6-2	9-3	5-2	9-3	7-3	8-3	6-2
10-3	9-3	9-3	10-3	7-2	9-3	5-2
4-1	5-2	9-3	10-2	8-2	8-2	6-3
5-0	6-1	4-0	6-0	8-2	5-1	7-2
9-3	5-1	6-3	8-3	10-3	6-2	9-2
7-2	6-1	1-1	8-2	10-3	2-1	

As can be observed in the chart, those who obtained 100% of right answers in the practice had an average of 90,4% of accuracy in the theory. Similarly, those with 90% in the practice achieved 95,8% in the theory, and so on. Likewise, the ones who obtained a lower mark than 50% in the practical test also had a high number of wrong answers in the theoretical part (only a 33,33% of right answers). There was only one sample that obtained a total of 4/10 in the first part and latter

demonstrated domain of the theory (3/3 in this second part). However, chance, discarded alternative options, and other external factors also need to be taken into account. In general, there is a correlation between their identification as a category with a common function and their correct use.

### 3.2 Discussion and pedagogical applications

Overall, the secondary students who participated in this research obtained a total average of 67,54% of right answers (including both practice and theory.) This signals a good understanding of written English when dealing with contrastive connectors. In general, some DMs have been widely recognized by these students, as is the case of *however*, *on the other hand*, *but*, and *conversely*. However, some of these DM have posed a challenge for the students, maybe due to the lack of recognition caused by a lack of a direct correlation in Spanish or the lack of previous preparation. *Yet*, *in contrast to*, and *rather* are examples of the later.

There seems to be a tendency to overuse some DMs, as has been mentioned above, and there might be little understanding of some others. The use of prepositions appears to be highly problematic when understanding written English, and this is also seen in the participants in this study. Apart from *on the other hand*, clearly recognized by this pattern of symmetrical structures, *however* has been the DM most widely known among Spanish secondary education students. This might have happened because *however* is the most common contrastive DM in the Spanish university entrance examination (*selectividad*), specifically in rephrasing exercises, and thus, students are supposed to have been training during the whole academic year based on this examination, as this will determine which university degrees these students are able to enroll on.

The relationship between the propositions of a text is a very important element in the understanding of it; because of this, students should be trained and instructed on the specific use and meaning of each DM. For this purpose, the detailed classification of Fraser (2015) could be useful, since he clearly distinguished three main categories of DMs according to their meaning together with subcategories (see section 1.3). In general, the participants of this study have been able to recognize the majority of contrastive discourse markers (some of them more than others), but there is still some problems that need to be solved in order to achieve a greater understanding of written English; the positive correlation between theoretical knowledge of the category and practical use supports this hypothesis.

A solution proposed to this problem could be that students of English as a second language should be instructed on the theoretical aspects of DMs first. Subsequently, an intensive practice through different kinds of exercises should be necessary in order to improve the accurate understanding on the use of these. Thus, a proposal of exercises suggested for this purpose has been included as an Annex to this study. They consist of an Open Cloze and Rephrasing exercises.

The major advantage of Open Close practice is that students are allowed to propose any DM as long as it is suitable for the syntax and meaning of the sentence, thus, it admits many different right answers. This might bring versatility to the students when writing or speaking (not only in comprehension skills), since they need to find a synonym among many.

The rephrasing exercise proposed might be a great tool when learning the functioning of DMs, since students should be able to master the use of prepositions, infinitives and gerund forms, and other complex aspects of the English grammar. This is a more complex exercise than the previous one, because students must be able to recognize the meaning and use of each required DM and use it appropriately within a new sentence which has a similar meaning to the previous one. This exercise rises the student's capacity to identify syntactical structures within a text, as well as to clearly identify each of their elements.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, some DMs are variable in their shape (prepositions and gerunds which follow), position (initial and medial position mostly) and meaning (see the uses of *but*). In general, those students with high knowledge of these discourse markers might have a greater reading

comprehension, since DM are specially important to shape the meaning of a sentence and might have relevant connotations in the message, as has been shown in the study. Previous studies pointed to this idea; Khatib (2011) already stated that DMs tend to facilitate reading comprehension at a global level. According to him, “the subjects’ comprehension (or lack of comprehension) of the reading texts could be partly due to their comprehension of DMs in the texts and accordingly to their knowledge of DMs” (Khatib, 2011, p. 247). Nunan (1999) also claimed that the “background knowledge was a more important factor than grammatical complexity in the ability of the readers to comprehend the cohesive relations in the texts” (p. 260). Thus, cohesive relations among sentences, together with a general understanding of the text, are key elements for the comprehension on written English. Our overall results in the practical and theoretical questions are very similar (67,81% and 67,27%, respectively) and are consistent with this study; a correlation has been found between previous theoretical knowledge and further application. As has been seen, those students with high marks in the theoretical question tend to also have good skills in the practical one; conversely, those who could not distinguish the three contrastive DM in the theory, were bound to fail the test, or obtain very low marks.

Overall, this study has dealt with the main problems and difficulties in the understanding of written English by secondary education students; on the one hand, some specific problems or challenges concerning each CDM have been found (see Section 2.4), such as the specific use of prepositions, sentence position of the DM, commas and full stops that precede them or not, grammatical structures followed by gerunds, and asymmetries between English and Spanish form and usage (linguistic transference). On the other hand, it has also been observed that the greater theoretical knowledge the greater success in the practice.

Even though the overall usage of DMs is good, there is still work to be done in terms of understanding them. The main obstacles that have led students to make mistakes should be addressed by putting more emphasis on these linking elements. Therefore, more attention should be paid to DMs when learning English as a second language, especially in the academic context. As mentioned, linking words and discourse markers have a great impact on the pragmatics of a sentence, and might change completely the meaning of an utterance. English language teaching focused on the mastery of DMs and cohesive relations could ensure a better general understanding of written English, as texts are built upon the way their propositions are linked. This also leads to an general ability to develop other skills such as listening, reading comprehension, and speaking.

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## 5.1 Annex

**Table 1.** Examples of the right and the wrong uses of each GC connector. *B* for *but*, *H* for *however*, *Y* for *yet*, *S* for *still*, *N* for *nevertheless*. (Frazer, 2015, p. 325)

Table 1. Difference in meaning among the GCs.					
B	H	Y	S	N	Examples
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Tulips are hard to grow. DM, I keep trying. I don't want to give a speech. DM, I'm aware of my political obligations. She is very intelligent. DM, nobody likes her. We're leaving now. DM, we shall return.
✓	✓	✓	✓	*	Amanda is a wonderful pianist. DM, she can't sing on key. He speaks either French or German. DM, I don't know which one. John intends to go today. DM, I don't see what his rush is.
✓	✓	✓	*	*	I like your project. DM, I don't know your name. I could give you an example. DM I won't because I'm in a hurry. NY used to be a great place to visit. DM, today it's scary.
✓	✓	*	*	*	I would give you a drink. DM, your father would probably kill me. John is mean and sadistic. DM, maybe I shouldn't put it that way. I like you. DM, I know you're an alcoholic.
✓	*	*	*	*	A: I apologize for the noise. B: DM, you have nothing to apologize for. [On being handed a drink] DM, I don't drink.

**Table 2. Sample test.** Sample test provided to students.

<p><i>Main problems in the understanding of written English in Spanish secondary education students: an analysis of the use of Contrastive Discourse Markers.</i></p> <p><b>PRACTICE: Multiple-choice question</b> [One correct answer]</p> <p><b>1. Three is a prime number, ..... four is not.</b></p> <p>a) besides                      b) also                      c) but</p> <p><b>2. We started late. .... , we arrived on time.</b></p> <p>a) But                      b) While                      c) However</p> <p><b>3. New York used to be a great place to visit. .... , today it's scary.</b></p> <p>a) Yet                      b) Still                      c) Moreover</p> <p><b>4. On the one hand, we could take a vacation in Jamaica. .... , we could just stay home.</b></p> <p>a) Furthermore                      b) In comparison                      c) On the other hand</p> <p><b>5. He hasn't gone to school for several weeks now. .... , he has been going to the video arcade.</b></p> <p>a) Thus                      b) Instead                      c) Unless</p> <p><b>6. This activity is not a competition. .... , it is a challenge.</b></p> <p>a) Rather                      b) Besides                      c) Moreover</p> <p><b>7. .... to last year, very few football games have been on tv.</b></p> <p>a) In spite                      b) In comparison                      c) Instead</p> <p><b>8. I am not hungry. .... , I am quite full.</b></p> <p>a) Nevertheless                      b) But                      c) On the contrary</p> <p><b>9. I really love cycling in nature ..... reading literary books.</b></p> <p>a) in contrast to                      b) in comparison for                      c) despite</p> <p><b>10. James loves steak ;..... , her husband is a vegetarian.</b></p> <p>a) conversely                      b) similarly                      c) also</p>		
<p>Can you find any <b>contrastive connectors</b> among the following? Circle them. [you can choose more than one item]</p> <p>a) Also                      b) Moreover                      c) Conversely</p> <p>d) Nevertheless                      e) Furthermore                      f) However</p>		

**Table 3. Open Cloze sample exercise.** Proposed exercise for a better understanding of written English by means of Discourse Markers<sup>4</sup>.

<p><b>Open Cloze sample exercise</b></p> <p>New York is one of the greatest cities of the United States, ... (1)..... it has been recently discover that it might not be the paradise everyone thinks. ....(2)..... , its streets and people seem to be full of energy and happiness; on the other hand, it has been claimed that 40% of the population of New York has been diagnosed with depression or a similar illness. With lots of choice of foods, ....(3)... not to much local variety, this city is the great representative of multiculturalism. .... (4)..... to London, New York offers a snowy landscape in the winter, and ... (5)...., quite a hot atmosphere in summer time. ... (6)..... having a great amount of parks and pubs, New Yorkers admit having a cold personality, ....(7)..... of living cheerfully like their southerners compatriots.</p> <p><b>Answer proposal:</b></p> <p>(1) But, although  (2) On the one hand  (3) Yet, but, although  (4) In comparison, in contrast  (5) Conversely, in contrast  (6) Despite, in spite of  (7) Instead</p>
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**Table 4. Rephrasing sample exercise.** Proposed exercise for a full capacity of understanding the use, meaning and syntax of each specific DM<sup>5</sup>.

<p><b>Rephrasing sample exercise</b></p> <p>1. She was full of energy, but her mother wasn't. (however)</p> <p>2. New York used to be very safe. However, today is scary. (On the contrary)</p> <p>3. We could take the bus or we could call for a taxi. (On the one hand, on the other hand)</p> <p>4. Tom is taller than me. (In comparison)</p> <p>5. I was very late, however, I still made an effort to arrive. (Despite)</p> <p>6. In spite of being afraid, Sarah still kept her head up. (Although)</p> <p>7. I love meat, but my husband is a vegetarian. (conversely)</p> <p>8. I preferred to stay at home and not go to the party (instead)</p> <p>1. <i>She was full of energy, <u>however</u>, her mother wasn't.</i></p> <p>2. <i>New York used to be very safe. <u>On the contrary</u>, today is scary</i></p> <p>3. <i><u>On the one hand</u>, we could take the bus; <u>on the other hand</u>, we could ask for a taxi.</i></p> <p>4. <i><u>In comparison with</u> Tom, I am not as tall/very tall.</i></p> <p>5. <i><u>Despite being</u> very late, I still made an effort to arrive.</i></p> <p>6. <i><u>Although</u> Sarah was afraid, she still kept her head up</i></p> <p>7. <i>I love meat; <u>conversely</u>, my husband is a vegetarian.</i></p> <p>8. <i>I preferred to stay at home <u>instead of</u> going to the party</i></p>
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<sup>4</sup>These exercises have been created specifically for this research, based on the studied contrastive discourse markers. These sample exercises could be also adapted to any kind of DM (i.e. *contrastive*, *elaborative*, *implicative*) in order to prepare the students for a better understanding of these.

<sup>5</sup> Note that in most of the sentences in the Rephrasing sample exercise S1 and S2 can be reversed (sentence 4, 5, 6 and 7), as long as the correct place of the DM is maintained