

Errors and Remedies in Indirect Reported Speech in High School EFL Learners

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SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU

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ERRORS AND REMEDIES IN INDIRECT REPORTED SPEECH IN HIGH SCHOOL EFL
LEARNERS

Diplomski rad

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Zagreb, 2023.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND.....	2
2.1 Direct and indirect speech	2
2.2 Basic features of indirect reported speech	3
2.3 Changes in indirect reported speech	3
2.3.1 Sequence of tenses.....	4
2.3.2 Pronouns and possessives	6
2.3.3 Time and place references	6
2.4 Sentence patterns	7
2.4.1 Reporting statements	7
2.4.2 Reporting questions	8
2.4.3 Reporting directives.....	8
2.4.4. Reporting exclamations	9
2.5 Difficulties in learning indirect speech and suggested remedies.....	9
3. THE PRESENT STUDY.....	11
3.1 Aim	12
3.2 Sample.....	12
3.3 Materials.....	13
3.4 Procedure.....	14
3.5 Results and discussion	15
3.5.1 The analysis of Task 1: Recognition of indirect speech elements	15
3.5.2 The analysis of Task 2: Converting direct into indirect speech.....	16
3.5.3 The analysis of Task 3: Writing a speech report.....	22
4. CONCLUSION	25
5. APPENDIX 1	27
6. REFERENCES.....	30

Abstract

Direct and indirect reported speech represent primary modes of reporting and make an essential part of speech or writing. Indirect reported speech is a complex syntactic structure that requires language-specific grammatical adjustments. Therefore, its use and understanding often pose a problem for EFL learners. In order to assess the matter in detail, an overview of reported speech constructions from various grammars is presented, as well as existing research on learners' difficulties with indirect speech. The study was conducted with Croatian high school learners to get an insight into how they learn and deal with indirect reported speech in English. This thesis represents an attempt to approach the students' mastery of indirect speech from a holistic perspective.

Keywords: modes of reporting, indirect speech, EFL learners, learners' difficulties

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading a book, an article, listening to the news or participating in a conversation all represent various opportunities abundant with speech reports. The omnipresent linguistic phenomenon can be found in all spheres of human life. Mikhail Bakhtin observes that

“in real life people talk most of all about what others talk about – they transmit, recall, weigh and pass judgement on other people’s words, opinions, assertions, information; people are upset by others’ words, or agree with them, contest them, refer to them and so forth” (1981:338).

Bakhtin (1981) also highlights the significant weight of reported speech in public opinion and claims that the majority of information and opinions is transmitted in an indirect way. Quotations or references to someone’s words, a book, or a document often make an essential part of speech or writing. Therefore, it is not surprising that indirect reported speech received significant attention in the field of linguistics and applied linguistics. Even though speech reports exist in all languages, grammatical rules for indirect speech are language-specific. The use and understanding of indirect reported speech may pose a problem for learners with different language backgrounds. English indirect speech is considered a particularly complex linguistic structure that requires significant grammatical adjustments which do not appear in all languages. It is recognized as “an essential lesson for all learners of English” (Milovanova et al., 2019: 165) and foreign learners very often find it difficult to master. In the recent years, there has been a growing interest in the field of SLA to study the difficulties that foreign learners encounter when dealing with indirect reported speech in English. Analysing common students’ mistakes and potential causes of difficulties would enable the use of more appropriate teaching methods and strategies to overcome the obstacles.

The theoretical part of this thesis is concerned with core features of indirect speech in English and the changes that take place when converting direct into indirect speech. This part also includes an overview of previous research on learners’ difficulties in learning indirect speech and suggested remedies. The study that follows examines the way students learn indirect reported speech, the errors they make in writing tasks, as well as their ability to write a coherent speech report. Moreover, the aim of the study is to rethink the way in which indirect reported speech is presented in the classroom in order to make it more comprehensible for students and resemble the natural language use as much as possible.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Direct and indirect speech

A precise and detailed linguistic analysis must begin with the explanation of the key terms that will be used in the discussion. This thesis relies on the definition of reported speech as a unifying term encompassing direct and indirect speech reports (Quirk et al., 1985). Direct speech and indirect speech as its counterpart exhibit a high level of explicitness. Both linguistic structures contain a reporting clause that may introduce information on the speaker, the act of communication and perhaps also on the recipient, the manner of speaking and other circumstances of the speech act (Quirk et al., 1985). Besides prototypical modes of reporting there are also secondary modes that represent blending of different styles, such as free direct and free indirect speech (Quirk et al., 1985). However, secondary modes of reporting remain outside the scope of this study.

The principal distinction between direct and indirect speech is reflected in content as well as form. Direct speech conveys “the exact words that were said (..), or that we imagine were thought” (Swan, 2005:246). In terms of form direct speech (*oratio directa*) does not require extensive discussion since it is a verbatim copy of the original utterance, enclosed in quotation marks and attributed to its source (Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman, 1999). In contrast, indirect speech (*oratio obliqua*) assumes an array of linguistic choices and rules for converting direct into indirect speech. Indirect speech implies conveying the meaning of the original utterance from a different point of view and in the words of the reporter (Eastwood, 2005). Indirect speech is very often used to transmit the gist of the original utterance without repeating the exact words that were uttered.

In terms of form, meaning and use indirect reported speech differs from its direct counterpart on many levels. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) emphasize that lessons on grammar and vocabulary of reported speech are essential in EFL/ESL classroom. The authors point out that on later educational levels students will need to be able to quote or paraphrase the work of others for the purpose of academic writing. Indirect speech is also an irreplaceable constituent of most discussions and conversations. Students are expected to possess knowledge of grammar, semantics and pragmatics of indirect speech, and the ability to apply it accurately in the appropriate context.

2.2 Basic features of indirect reported speech

Indirect reported speech represents reports of what has been said or written by the original speaker or writer but translated into the words of a subsequent reporter. The very definition of indirect speech implies that *say* and *tell* would be the two most common verbs of reporting in everyday spoken language (Carter, McCarthy, 2006).

As it was already stated, the purpose of indirect reported speech is expressing the meaning of the original utterance rather than the exact words that were spoken (Eastwood, 2005). Therefore, an indirect speech report may include a summary or a paraphrase that does not affect the truthfulness of the original speech act (Quirk et al., 1985). This feature can be observed in the following example provided by Eastwood (2005: 359):

- (1) 'I had a really great time.' ~ She said she had enjoyed herself.

In addition to speech and writing, it is also possible to report thoughts (Eastwood, 2005:359)

- (2) I thought I had plenty of time, but in fact I only just made it.

In the example (2) Eastwood illustrates that the speaker thought 'I've got plenty of time' but the thoughts were not necessarily articulated. *Think* is a verb frequently used to report expressions of opinion (Eastwood, 2005); however, it is also common to use verbs such as *believe, feel, imagine, know, realize, recognize, or suppose* (Quirk et al, 1985: 1026).

Many of these verbs of reporting may be used in combination with passive forms (Eastwood, 2005: 361)

- (3) At that time, it was already known that the Earth orbited the sun.

Such occurrences are less frequent than prototypical instances of indirect reported speech that include their active counterparts.

2.3 Changes in indirect reported speech

Reporting someone's words or thoughts implies an inherent change of situation. The fact that the original utterance may be reported in another place, at a different time and by a different speaker, may account for the differences that arise between direct and indirect speech (Swan, 2005). According to Dancygier (2019), the defining feature of indirect speech is precisely perspectival meaning. In her opinion the viewpoint of the 'represented speaker' becomes embedded in the representation provided by the 'current speaker'.

Considering the change of perspective, Swan (2005) claims that alterations involved in indirect reported speech are primarily natural and logical. When someone's words are reported indirectly, clause structure, tenses and other deictic features change in order to reflect the relationship between the situation of the current report and the original moment of speaking (Carter, McCarthy, 2006).

2.3.1 Sequence of tenses

Indirect speech may be introduced by a reporting verb in the present tense. In this case the tenses in the reported clause stay the same as the original (Eastwood, 2005). Quirk et al. (1985: 1026) list three situations in which a present reporting verb may be used. The most common use of a present reporting verb is for communications in recent past time, as in the following example:

- (4) She says she was too busy to join us last night.

Verbs of cognition in reporting clauses can also be used in the present tense:

- (5) Sylvia thinks Paul went to Lancaster last night.

Finally, the choice of a present reporting verb is possible when referring to statements from famous works or authors that are still valid.

- (6) Chaucer somewhere writes that love is blind.

However, in the majority of cases, reports are introduced by a reporting verb in the past tense. Eastwood (2005) points out that past tense reporting verb could be used regardless of the time that has passed. After past reporting verbs it is common to change the tense in the reported clause. Quirk et al. (1985) explain that this necessity arises when the time reference of the original utterance (or mental activity) no longer applies at the time of reporting the communicative event. Linguists refer to this change of verb forms as back-shift and the resulting agreement between the verb in the reporting clause and the reported clause is known as the sequence of tenses (Quirk et al., 1985).

Swan (2005) claims that there is no need to learn the complex rules for indirect speech construction because it is natural to use different tenses than the original speaker. He uses the following example to prove his point:

(7) Bill (on Saturday evening): I don't like this party. I want to go home now.
(present tenses)

Peter (on Sunday morning): Bill said that he didn't like the party, and he wanted to go home. (past tenses)

The author tried to illustrate how odd it would sound if Peter were to say on Sunday 'Bill said that he doesn't like the party' or 'Bill doesn't like the party yesterday and goes home' (Swan, 2005: 248).

Swan (2005: 248) also provides an extensive list of typical changes in verb forms that occur after past reporting verb:

Simple present →	Simple past
Present progressive →	Past progressive
Present perfect →	Past perfect
Past →	Past perfect
Past perfect	does not change
will →	would
can →	could
may →	might

Still, the majority of grammars also agree that there are exceptions in which both structures are common. According to Quirk et al. (1985), when the time reference of the original utterance is still valid at the time of the reported utterance the speaker may decide whether to retain the original tense or back-shift the verb. This case may be observed in the following example (Quirk et al., 1985: 1027):

(8) Socrates said that nothing can harm a good man.

(could)

The authors point out that the statement may be observed as a universal truth which was true in the time of Socrates and might still be true today. Therefore, in such cases back-shifting is optional and the speaker has the ability to decide on the choice of tense in the reported clause.

Eastwood (2005) includes semantic considerations in the discussion on tenses in indirect speech. He points out that people tend to change the tense in the reported clause when they are not sure of the relevance or accuracy of the statement. Moreover, back-shifting the tense contributes to the objective tone of the report.

2.3.2 Pronouns and possessives

A change of speaker may imply a change of pronouns (Swan, 2005), as well as possessives (Eastwood, 2005). In cases where the speaker and the addressee are not the same in the original and reported utterance, a shift in personal pronouns is necessary (Quirk et al., 1985). Pronoun shift encompasses the change of 1st and 2nd person pronouns to 3rd person pronouns or nouns when people referred to in the original utterance are not present in the reported utterance (Quirk et al., 1985: 1028).

(9) 'I'll behave *myself*,' he promised.

~ *He* promised that he would behave *himself*.

Likewise, 1st and 2nd person pronouns are used in a manner appropriate to the reported situation (Quirk et al., 1985: 1029).

(10) '*You* should be ashamed of *yourself*,' she told me.

~ She told me that *I* should be ashamed of *myself*.

Changes in pronouns are mostly straightforward and do not offer a plurality of options to choose from (Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Therefore, the use of the appropriate pronouns should not cause greater difficulties for foreign speakers of English.

2.3.3 Time and place references

In cases when time relationship has changed between the original and the reported utterance, time references should also be adjusted (Quirk et al., 1985). Expressions denoting time may change according to the time of the reported utterance, for example (Eastwood, 2005: 364):

now	then, at that time, immediately
yesterday	The day before, the previous day, on Monday, etc.
tomorrow	The next day, the following day, on Thursday, etc.
next month	the month after, the following month, in August, etc.

Likewise, place references are also prone to change when places of utterances have changed, for example: *here* may change to *there*, or the places may need to be referred to by name (Quirk et al., 1985). DeCapua (2017)¹ mentions a possibility for spatial expressions to stay the same. This possibility includes situations in which the reference in the reported utterance is a place close to the speaker. The same practice is applicable with the demonstrative *this* if the reference is an object near the speaker (DeCapua, 2017). In general, demonstratives are also prone to change if the relative distancing has changed. This implies changing *this* and *these* to *that* and *those* or vice versa if the relative distance has decreased at the time of reported utterance (Quirk et al., 1985). Even though distancing is more commonplace and therefore expected, the grammar of indirect speech is not a fixed set of rules. It is in fact highly dependable on the spatiotemporal settings of the report.

2.4 Sentence patterns

All the main sentence types may be converted into indirect speech (Quirk et al., 1985). The nature of the original speech act is reflected in the reported clause. The reported clause may be in the form of a that-clause (when reporting statements), a wh-clause (when reporting wh-questions and exclamations), a clause introduced by *if* or *whether* (when reporting yes-no questions) and in the form of an infinitive clause (when reporting directives) (Carter, McCarthy, 2006:804).

2.4.1 Reporting statements

The most basic sentence pattern refers to indirect statements. When reporting statements, a normal declarative word order is applied (DeCapua, 2017). Indirect statements are introduced in the form of a nominal that-clause. In this case, *that* serves as a subordinator

¹ The grammar refers to the use of American English but the differences between British and American English are not the focus of the present thesis

or more specifically a complementizer. However, in informal discourse it is possible to leave out the complementizer *that* after common reporting verbs such as *say* or *tell* (Swan, 2005, Eastwood, 2005, Quirk et al., 1985).

2.4.2 Reporting questions

Indirect questions represent a distinctive pattern introduced by reporting verbs such as *ask*, *inquire*, *want to know* or *wonder* (Eastwood, 2005). Indirect questions refer to reports of real questions as well as hypothetical questions expressing what a person would like to know (Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman, 1999). The formation of indirect questions depends on the type of the original question. Information questions are simpler in form since they are introduced by a *wh*-question word as in the example (11). In the case of yes/no questions, complementizer *if* or *whether* is required to introduce the dependent clause (12) (Swan, 2005: 250).

(11) I asked **where** the President and his wife were staying.

(12) I don't know **if/whether** I can help you.

The most important principle in reporting questions is the change of the initial interrogative word order into a declarative word order (Swan, 2005, Eastwood, 2005 Quirk et al., 1985). Word order in indirect questions is characterised by the regular subject-verb-object pattern. Since there is no inversion in indirect questions, the operator *do* should be omitted (Swan, 2005: 250):

(13) What do I need? ~ She asked what she needed.

Considering that indirect question is merely a report and not a question by itself, question marks are no longer used (Swan, 2005). Indirect interrogatives are followed by a full stop as well as other sentence patterns.

2.4.3 Reporting directives

Directives represent a specific type of sentences that are used to instruct somebody to do something (Quirk et al., 1985). Directives are associated with speech acts such as commands, instructions, warnings, requests, advice, suggestions, permissions (Carter, McCarthy, 2006). One of the possibilities to report a directive involves the use of a *that*-clause, while the other possibility is the use of a *to*-infinitive clause (Quirk et al., 1985: 1030):

(14) 'Tidy up the room at once,' I said to Tom.

~ I insisted that Tom tidy / should tidy up the room at once.

~ I told Tom to tidy up the room.

It is important to note that after mandative subjunctive, putative should and to-infinitive verb forms there is no tense back-shift (Quirk et al., 1985).

2.4.4. Reporting exclamations

In addition to the already mentioned speech acts, exclamations may also be found in indirect speech (Quirk et al., 1985). In general, exclamations or interjections can be classified as acts expressing surprise, dismay, pleasure and similar strong emotions (DeCapua, 2017: 362).

(15) Pam said, 'What a mistake I made!'.
~ Pam realized what a mistake she had made.

Indirect exclamations are introduced by a wh-question word but there are no changes in the word order in the reported clause. Exclamations simply retain the same word order as in the direct form (DeCapua, 2017).

2.5 Difficulties in learning indirect speech and suggested remedies

The extensive list of rules for indirect speech very often represent a source of difficulties for foreign learners of English. It is generally hypothesized that the sequence-of-tenses rule might be problematic for EFL learners with different language backgrounds. In English tense tends to indicate the time of the original utterance, rather than the time when the utterance is being reported (Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman, 1999). This feature cannot be found in many other languages including those that have rich tense systems; therefore, it should be expected that learners would experience difficulties in this aspect of English indirect speech (Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Harman (1990) supports this view based on his personal experience in teaching and believes that the source of problems lies in overgeneralizing the shifting and back-shifting rules. He claims that the adjustment of tenses and the inconsistent change of the three variables of time, place and person between the original and reported utterance, might be the primary source of difficulties for EFL learners and teachers (Harman, 1990). De Capua (2017) claims that learners might have additional problems with reporting

specific sentence patterns such as interrogatives that require changes in the word order alongside.

Many authors studied the difficulties that EFL learners with different language backgrounds encounter when developing linguistic competence related to indirect speech (Harman, 1990; Milovanova et al., 2019; Chen & Caldwell-Harris, 2019). Milovanova et al. (2019) looked into the difficulties that native speakers of Russian who are learning English at the levels A2 to B1 face when introducing indirect reported speech. They emphasize the significance of interference and claim that students “interpret the meaning of the sentence through the filter of their native language” (Milovanova et al., 2019: 165). According to Milovanova et al. (2019) it is necessary to explain the difficulties that learners might experience as native speakers of their mother tongue. If certain syntactic structures appear in the target language, but there is no parallel with their native language, this might confuse students. Chen & Caldwell-Harris (2019) note this dissonance with Chinese learners who use grammatical constructions for reporting speech in their native Mandarin, but their form is different than those used in English. In Mandarin adverbs of time or auxiliary words are used to indicate past tense and this might explain why learners find tense change in English reported speech so difficult. They also emphasize that in EFL classrooms there is a strong emphasis on explicit rules for reporting speech and tests measuring declarative knowledge, but very little research on EFL learners’ written or oral production of this construction. In their opinion indirect speech is a complex and rich grammatical structure where the gap between declarative and procedural knowledge can be best observed. Goodell (1987) points out that error analysis may be a valuable tool that provides the opportunity to study the difficulties that learners encounter but at the same time it may provide a limited one-sided view of the problem.

Moreover, Goodell (1987) advocated that it should also be re-examined how this grammatical construction is presented in the classroom. Many experts give their views on how to present reported speech to EFL learners. Apart from being merely a grammatical issue, Harman (1990) also presents it as a “pedagogical problem”. A skilful teacher and the right teaching techniques can contribute to the comprehension and use of indirect reported speech. There is almost a unique attitude that complex grammatical rules are not enough for learners to be able to use the grammatical structure independently and effectively (Harman, 1990). Goodell (1987) claims that if learners are taught indirect speech based on these mechanical rules alone, they might produce inappropriate utterances which do not convey the

essence of the original words. Moreover, Milovanova et al. (2019) believe that the explicit focus on the application of rules makes indirect speech complicated and learners tend to avoid it. Harman (1990) pointed out that grammatical descriptions should not focus solely on the structural form, rather the emphasis should be on the interdependence of form, meaning and use. He suggested that learners should be encouraged to convert a single direct utterance into a range of indirect utterances that differ on the basis of who is doing the reporting, where and when. This would enable learners to develop awareness of the deictic nature of the reported utterance and grasp the underlying semantic motivation behind the alterations in indirect speech. According to Goodell (1987), the syntactic adjustments serve to situate people, events and processes in relation to the spatiotemporal context of the present act of reporting. Instead of relying on a fixed set of rules, learners should be encouraged to examine the relevance of verb forms, pronouns and adverbs for the present act of reporting (Goodell, 1987). Goodell's approach can be described as more of a context-oriented linguistic approach. Milanova et al. (2019) also proposed activities that ask learners to work with the text and understand the context of it, instead of working with separate sentences.

3. THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study examined the difficulties that high school EFL learners encounter when using indirect reported speech. Based on informal interviews with English teachers, indirect reported speech turned out to be one of the most difficult grammatical structures for Croatian EFL learners. According to the new subject curriculum, the scope of the educational content is chosen in accordance with the developmental age of the students. Indirect reported speech is first introduced at the end of the 8th grade of primary school and at that point many teachers decide to focus on the basic knowledge of indirect speech and prefer to use examples with the reporting verb in the present tense. A small-scale pilot study in the form of simple conversion exercises was conducted in primary school and it showed that learners did not use the present tense by default; rather they combined all sorts of tenses trying to produce indirect reported speech. The full scope of indirect speech with all its salient features is presented in the 2nd grade of high school so the main study focused on this sample of students. The errors that learners made in indirect speech reflect the steps in the process of learning a language and provide a valuable feedback to the teacher. Therefore, this study may contribute to discussions of this growing topic at both linguistics and TEFL departments.

3.1 Aim

The aim of the study was to assess high school EFL learners' ability to deal with indirect reported speech in written tasks. The research was motivated by the following questions:

1. How successful are learners in recognizing indirect reported speech structures?
2. What difficulties do learners demonstrate when changing direct into indirect reported speech?
3. How proficient are Croatian high school EFL learners in writing speech reports?
4. How could the learners' difficulties with indirect reported speech be minimized?

The answers to the first four questions were obtained from the collected data. The last question was envisioned as guidelines for the future, and practical suggestions are offered on how to improve the recognition and production of indirect reported speech among EFL learners who are native speakers of Croatian.

3.2 Sample

The sample consisted of 36 native speakers of Croatian in the 2nd grade of high school. 18 students attended a general grammar school, and the same number of students attended a language-oriented grammar school. Students in both programmes were expected to be at the intermediate level at that point. In terms of demographic structure, 8 students were male and 28 students were female and all participants were between 16 and 17 years old; therefore, in addition to their consent, a written parent consent was obtained.

Table 1. *Participant data*

	Gender		Average age	Average time of learning English (years)
	Male	Female		
General grammar school	5	13	16,22	9,28
Language-oriented grammar school	3	15	16,22	9,83

3.3 Materials

The participants in the study all had *Insight Intermediate Student's Book with eBook* (Wildman et al., 2019) as a textbook in school. This textbook is aimed at learners who are studying at the B1+ level and it is often used in the 1st and 2nd grade of grammar schools, as well as in 4-year vocational school programmes.

Indirect reported speech as a grammatical structure appears in the second half of the textbook. The students encounter indirect speech by listening to a radio news report on a certain topic and reading a related newspaper article. The textbook promotes inductive approach to teaching grammar and encourages students to pay attention to novel grammatical forms that appear in the text. Students are instructed to analyse examples, match direct sentences to their indirect equivalents, and compare the two modes of reporting. In order to highlight the structural aspect, they are required to complete the rules for sequence of tenses.

Compare the sentences in exercise 4 with the parts of the text that you underlined. Then complete the table.

Direct speech	Reported speech
1 present simple	
2 present continuous	
3 past simple	
4 present perfect	
5 past perfect	
6 <i>can</i>	
7 <i>will</i>	

Fig 1. Rules for sequence of tenses in Insight Intermediate Students' book

Additional changes in indirect speech are also listed as a set of universal rules for converting direct into indirect speech without mentioning the different forms they may take depending on the context.

When you change direct speech to reported speech, remember to also change:

- 1 pronouns: *I – he / she; we – they*, etc.
- 2 possessive adjectives: *my – his / her; our – their*, etc.
- 3 time expressions: *today – that day; last week – the week before; yesterday – the day before; tomorrow – the next day*, etc.
- 4 *here – there; this – that; these – those*

Fig 2. Other changes listed in Insight Intermediate Students' book

The lesson incorporates exercises to practice the application of the aforementioned rules and use the novel grammatical structure in productive ways. The exercises include transformation of direct into indirect speech sentences or simply the completion of the text with the correct form of the verbs. The final speaking activity encourages students to carry out an interview.

After the general rules are processed, specific sentence patterns in the form of indirect questions and commands are presented. These sentence patterns require additional changes in the sentence structure which makes them more difficult to master. The students are again required to match direct questions and commands to their indirect equivalents and complete the rules. The rules state that indirect questions are introduced by the appropriate conjunction and characterized by the canonical declarative (S-V) word order. Moreover, indirect commands are said to take the form of a to-infinitive construction that is also used for negative commands. The final activity requires activating all the accumulated knowledge of indirect speech, including statements, questions and commands, and employing it in a communicative task. The students are expected to lead a conversation on a certain topic and later retell it to their friends.

3.4 Procedure

For the purpose of this research a questionnaire consisting of three tasks was created (see Appendix 1.). The basic premise underlying the design of the tasks was context-oriented approach to indirect speech. Indirect speech as a primarily deictic phenomenon should be examined in context in order to understand the students' motivation behind certain linguistic choices. In Task 1 the students were presented with a dialogue written in direct speech and with a template of a newspaper report. The students were required to complete the template by choosing one of the available items. This type of a multiple-choice task served to test the students' linguistic knowledge at the most basic level of recognition. The other two tasks served to examine the students' production skills. In Task 2 the students were presented with three distinctive dialogues containing a total of 17 sentences written in direct speech. They were asked to transform the dialogues into indirect reported speech. In order to avoid ambiguity, the reported speech act was bounded by a specific spatiotemporal frame. Task 3 was a combination of creative, communicative and grammar skills. The students were instructed to get into the roles of a famous person and a reporter, and to conduct an interview. After the interview each student was required to write a report on the conversation from their

personal point of view. Since this task was a free-writing task, it was not bounded by predetermined parameters. The choice of words, sentence structures and the length of the report depended solely on the students' willingness to transmit the message.

3.5 Results and discussion

3.5.1 The analysis of Task 1: Recognition of indirect speech elements

The examples in the first task were chosen to test the knowledge of different rules governing the changes in indirect speech. The sentences were organized as a written report of an interview in order to ensure coherence of the text and to provide a contextual framework.

Table 2. *Results for Task 1*

Item		Total number of answers	The number of incorrect answers
1.	The reporter asked the coach how he <u>was feeling</u> at that moment.	36	3
2.	The coach said that he <u>couldn't</u> even explain.	36	5
3.	The reporter observed that he had been very optimistic <u>the previous day</u> at the conference.	36	2
4.	The coach replied that he <u>had had</u> a feeling they <u>might</u> win.	36	7
		36	15
5.	The reporter then asked <u>if this was</u> the happiest moment in his life.	36	15
6.	The coach replied that the happiest moment in his life was when his son <u>had been born</u> .	36	14
7.	The reporter wanted to know <u>who the man of the match had been</u> .	36	36
8.	The coach replied that <u>their</u> goalkeeper had shown once again why he was number one in the world.	36	3
9.	The reporter asked him where they <u>would</u> celebrate that night.	36	12
10.	The coach said they might just celebrate <u>there</u> with their fans.	36	12
11.	The reporter told him <u>not to forget</u> the crowds in the streets.	36	15

This task presented the lowest level of requirements since it did not involve independent production. The students were expected to recognize and choose the right answer among multiple options. It is interesting to note that this task indeed had the highest level of completion since all the students provided their answers. Examples (1), (2), (4), (6) and (9) contained multiple choice answers aimed at eliciting the recognition of the appropriate tense form of the verb. 25.9% of all student answers to these questions contained the wrong choice of tense. Around one third of the students exhibited difficulties with the choice of the correct form of the modal verbs *might* and *will*. In examples (5) and (7) the students were required to apply the appropriate word order in indirect questions. 70.8% of their answers were incorrect, i.e. they adhered to the interrogative word order that is present in direct interrogatives. In the example that contained a *yes/no* question the majority of students recognized the need for the appropriate conjunction to introduce the nominal clause, but 15 students made an incorrect choice and chose the clause that followed the interrogative word order. In the case of a *wh*-question both options were possible; however, none of the students opted for the nominal clause that followed the canonical declarative word order. Examples (3) and (10) contained time and place references and, in this case, only 19.4% of all answers were incorrect. The choice of the right form of the place adverbial *here* (> *there*) was a bit confusing for a significant number of students since there was only a slight distinction between the available options, and all of them sounded acceptable. On the other hand, the students had no problems with recognizing the right form of the very common time adverbial *yesterday* that changes into *the previous day* in indirect reported discourse. Finally, in example (8) that contained a possessive determiner, only 8.3% of the answers were incorrect. In the example (11) the students were required to recognize the form of a negative command, but 41.7% of their answers were incorrect.

3.5.2 The analysis of Task 2: Converting direct into indirect speech

In order to gain an understanding of how students acquire a foreign language, it is necessary to study it in production. The aim of Task 2 was to examine the students' production in the form of a guided structured response. The students were guided in the use of the specific form and their responses were analysed in order to detect the errors they made and try to explain the potential causes. Student errors were then classified based on the following criteria: tenses, pronouns and possessives, time and place references, demonstratives, indirect questions, indirect directives and punctuation. In order to avoid the potential

oversimplification of indirect reported speech through a mechanical application of rules for conversion, the task included three distinctive communicative situations. They were chosen deliberately to create different contextual frames and test the students' (in)ability to recognize and adjust the use of deictic markers.

The first situation was a dialogue situated outside the current time frame. The introductory sentence of the indirect report indicated the passage of time in order to avoid any possible ambiguity. In this example the students were expected to follow the rules for sequence of tenses and apply necessary changes to other deictic features.

Example 1. *"Why did you decide to apply for this position?" the director wondered. (1)*

"I have always imagined doing research here", Molly replied. (2)

"Do you prefer working on your own or in a team?" the director wanted to know. (3)

"I am more of a team player", she said. (4)

"Can you start next month?" he asked. (5)

She agreed and said, "I will not let you down". (6)

Molly had a job interview in January. The director wondered

The second example was another dialogue that belonged to a past time frame. As in the first example, the introductory sentence of the indirect report indicated the relation of the report to the original dialogue. The students were again expected to apply the rule for sequence of tenses and to change all deictic features accordingly.

Example 2. *"What were you two doing?" the doctor wanted to know. (7)*

"I was making dinner for my wife, but something went wrong", Lucas replied. (8)

"We have been feeling unwell since yesterday", his wife added. (9)

"What do you advise?" Lucas asked the doctor. (10)

"You have food poisoning", the doctor said. (11)

"Drink a lot of water and have some rest", the doctor told them. (12)

He also ordered Lucas, "Don't try this again!" (13)

Lucas and his wife went to the doctor's on Monday. The doctor wanted to know...

The third example was distinctive because it was situated in recent past. It represented a type of immediate reporting that was indicated by the time reference in the introduction to the

report. This was also evident in the use of the present tense form of the reporting verb. Following the principles of immediate reporting, the students were not expected to change tenses or deictic markers. The report is slightly more complex in terms of personal references because it was supposed to be reported from the first-person point of view.

Example 3. *Jack and Sylvie's house has flooded. Jack calls the plumber to fix this....*

The plumber says, "I will be at your house tomorrow morning". (14)

He also says, "It may cost a lot of money". (15)

He tells Jack, "You can replace the old pipes by yourself if you want". (16)

Jack wonders, "Is this really a good idea?" (17)

A moment later Jack reports this to Sylvie. I have called the plumber and he says ...

Table 3. Summary of results for Task 2

Item no.	answers missing	The number of incorrect answers in each of the categories							
		reporting verb	tense in the reported clause	time and place references	pronouns and possessives	demonstratives	indirect questions	indirect directives	punctuation
(1)	3	0	16	-	0	10	15	-	0
(2)	4	0	8	5	0	-	-	-	0
(3)	4	0	16	-	0	-	5	-	0
(4)	3	0	15	-	0	-	-	-	0
(5)	3	0	3	26	1	-	6	-	1
(6)	3	0	12	-	1	-	-	-	1
(7)	4	0	18	-	3	-	19	-	0
(8)	4	0	22	-	0	-	-	-	0
(9)	4	0	8	9	3	-	-	-	0
(10)	4	1	13	-	0	-	23	-	0
(11)	5	1	11	-	0	-	-	-	0
(12)	3	1	-	-	0	-	-	4	0
(13)	3	0	-	-	0	11	-	11	0
(14)	1	1	14	12	12	-	-	-	0
(15)	1	17	16	-	0	-	-	-	1
(16)	1	24	22	-	14	-	-	-	1
(17)	1	15	18	-	0	14	5	-	
Total:		45	212	52	34	35	73	15	4
Percentage of incorrect answers per each category		7.3%	39.2%	36%	5.5%	32.4%	33.8%	20.8%	0.6%

The summative results reveal that the choice of tenses caused the highest number of difficulties in reported speech tasks. Overall, 7.3% of sentences that the students produced were characterized by the incorrect use of tense in the reporting clause, and 39.2% were characterized by the incorrect use of tenses in the reported clause. In the examples where tenses in the reported clause were supposed to be back-shifted (see examples 1-13), there is great intraindividual variability that usually characterizes learner language. This type of variability implies that the same student followed the rule for the sequence of tenses in some sentences but neglected it in others. In the examples where tenses were not supposed to be altered (see examples 14-17), the students likewise made a significant number of incorrect uses of tense by back-shifting the tenses in the reported clause. It appears that the students perceive indirect reported speech as a thing of the past and overgeneralize the back-shifting rule without considering the context of the speech act.

The second criterion involved a shift in deictic markers in the form of time and place references. Out of the total number of sentences that included time and place references (see examples 2, 5, 9, 14), 36 % contained the incorrect use of the adverbial. Half of the total number of mistakes could be attributed to the adverbial of time *next month* that the majority of students left unchanged. The students had less difficulty with the adjustment of the adverbial *yesterday* that is more frequent in use and that appeared in exercises they had for practice. Likewise, one third of the students made a mistake in sentence (14) by overgeneralizing the change of time reference by changing the adverbial *tomorrow morning* although the time frame was still valid at the time of reporting. Moreover, out of the total number of sentences involving demonstrative determiners, 32.6% contained the incorrect use of the demonstrative determiner.

The third criterion involved the use of pronouns and possessives. In general, the students did not have problems with denoting the shift in perspective through the use of appropriate pronouns and possessives. Only 5.5% of the students' sentences contained a mistake in the use of pronouns and possessives. It should be noted that the majority of incorrect answers occurred in the third dialogue that was reported from the 1st-person point of view. For example, the students wrote *He said he will be at your/their/his /her house tomorrow morning*. In the last sentence there were three coreferential pronouns, so they were counted as one instance of incorrect usage of pronouns.

The fourth criterion comprised indirect questions. Out of the total number of sentences that included indirect questions, 33.8% were characterised by a mistake in the indirect question formation. When it comes to reporting *wh*-questions (see examples 1, 7, 10) the students produced 57 indirect questions with incorrect word order. Instead of changing the initial interrogative word order into regular declarative word order, the students would keep the word order that was in the original question. They produced sentences of the following form: *The director wanted to know why had she decided to apply for that position*. Pervan (1994) also noted this as one of the typical mistakes made by native speakers of Croatian. This type of error could be explained through comparison with rules and practices for reporting questions in the Croatian language. In Croatian the original interrogative word order is preserved, which is why students who use the logic of their L1 in acquiring L2 exhibit difficulties in this respect. The initial presumption was that *yes/no* questions would be slightly easier to comprehend by the participants since the word order in such questions appears logical after inserting the proper conjunction (examples 3, 5, 17). This turned out to be true because there were only 16 answers that had a mistake in the word order. A certain number of students failed to insert the appropriate conjunction in each clause and consequently applied the wrong word order. They followed the same line of thought in every sentence and produced structures of the following form: *He asked her could she start next month*. Leaving out the conjunction in the case of indirect questions was also on Pervan's (1994) list of typical mistakes. It is interesting to note that students did not consider indirect speech to be simply a mirror image of direct speech. The students made different lexical choices in the reported utterance to convey the same meaning as the original. For example, in sentence (10) two students avoided the structure of a question and wrote *He asked for advice*, which was grammatically correct, appropriate, and not considered to be a mistake. The very purpose of this task was to get an insight into learners' reasoning and creative solutions, rather than ask for the mechanical transformation of one type of speech into another.

The next criterion was related to the form of indirect directives. In the case of indirect directives, the students were not expected to back-shift the tense, but rather apply the appropriate construction. The students demonstrated an array of different patterns for reporting directives. Even though the majority of students used a *to*-infinitive structure, there were also examples of *that*-clauses followed by modals *should* and *must*. Out of the sentences that included directives, 20.8% contained a mistake in the form of the indirect directive. More than half of the total number of mistakes was traced to sentence (13) that required the

knowledge of the appropriate form for reporting negative commands. In this case the students produced the following forms: *The doctor told him to not try that again*. This type of word order may also be influenced by the characteristic sentence pattern of indirect speech in Croatian. This sentence would follow very similar word order in Croatian, i.e. *Liječnik mu je rekao da ne pokušava to ponovo*.

The last criterion was the use of punctuation and only 0.6% of the sentences contained a mistake associated with the wrong use of punctuation. All four incorrect sentences were produced by the same student and could be explained as a systematic error caused by the incomplete application of rules. The student left the majority of the original sentence structure unchanged and only applied the sequence-of-tenses rule, for example: *He asked: "Could you start next month?"* In general, it may be concluded that students are well aware of the difference in punctuation between direct and indirect reported speech.

3.5.3 The analysis of Task 3: Writing a speech report

The aim of this task was to examine the students' production in a free constructed response. The task was designed to elicit focused samples by inducing learners to use this specific linguistic feature in writing. Even though both Task 2 and Task 3 involve attempts to elicit a specific linguistic feature in learners' production, the basic distinction is that Task 2 is guided and primarily oriented towards form (accuracy), while Task 3 reflects orientation to message conveyance (fluency). The students were told to work in pairs, decide on the roles they wished to take and make a short interview. Afterwards, they were instructed to write a report from their respective point of view. The use and scope of indirect reported speech depended solely on the willingness of the students. They had 15 minutes at their disposal. Out of the 36 students, one student opted for the direct mode of reporting and two students did not fulfil this task at all. Both of these students also left a large part of Tasks 2 and 3 blank.

Table 4. *Fluency in writing an indirect speech report*

	Mean	Sd
Average words per text	68,03	27,35
Average T-units per text	6,36	2,03

In the given time frame the students produced on average 68 words per text. Even though the task was not guided, and it was aimed at eliciting complex linguistic structures of indirect speech, the students were devoted to writing. Out of the 33 participants who completed this task, around half of them produced speech reports whose length was above the average, with the maximal length of 128 words per text. Considering that indirect speech construction inherently includes a reporting clause and a reported clause, taking clause as a unit of measurement would represent a limited and incomplete approach to the subject matter. Therefore, the analysis was performed using a T-unit that stands for minimal terminal unit or independent clause with all dependent clauses, phrases or words attached to it (Larsen-Freeman, 2006).

Table 5. *Complexity in writing an indirect speech report*

	Total	Mean
T-units	204	6,18
Clauses	436	13,2
Clauses per T- unit		2,14

Some speech reports were brief and contained general information questions, while some of them were rich in content and abundant with background information on the report. The level of text complexity was assessed through the number of clauses per T-unit. Using this measure for complexity it turned out that on average the students used 2 clauses per T-unit. It should be noted that a number of participants used extremely long complex-compound sentences that resembled strings of utterances in oral communication. The aforementioned pattern was extracted as a characteristic style of reporting in 14 students. For example:

I interviewed Brad Pitt and I asked him how he was feeling and he answered that he was not feeling well because his wife had cheated on him the day before.

He asked me what movie am I filming at the moment and I have replied that we have been filming movie "Princess Silvia" and that I have been a main character.

The examples illustrate that such reports placed an emphasis on fluency and transferring a load of information in order to fulfil the communicative task. Furthermore, accuracy as the third pillar of the students' proficiency in using a language was also examined. Since this task

was focused on writing a speech report, the criteria involved in the assessment of accuracy were the criteria defined in Task 2.

Table 6 *Accuracy in writing an indirect speech report*

	Total	Mean
T units	204	6,18
Error-free T-units	110	3,33
Percentage of error-free T-units	54%	

The overall results are necessary in generalizing the results of the entire sample. Based on the number of error-free T-units, it is evident that merely half of the total number of T-units the students produced was correct. However, in the linguistic analysis interested in the process of learning and the development of learner language, individual results should also be taken into consideration. Out of the total number of students, four students used all grammatically correct T-units while another four students did not produce any T-units that could be classified as completely correct. The T-units that were denoted as incorrect were examined based on the specific criteria related to indirect reported speech. Minor mistakes that did not hinder understanding, such as misspelling, were not taken into consideration for the purpose of this analysis. It is interesting to note that 79% of students' mistakes in writing an indirect speech report, referred to the use of tenses in the reported clause. The students adopted the approach that is common in informal language and that implies the use of a past reporting verb but preserving the original tense in the reported clause. The remaining mistakes referred to preserving the interrogative word order in indirect questions (21%).

4. CONCLUSION

Indirect speech is justifiably considered to be one of the most complex parts of English grammar. Almost all grammars of English inevitably include a lengthy section on indirect reported speech. However, most textbooks oversimplify the notion of indirect reported speech and reduce the use of indirect speech to mechanical application of rules. There are a lot of different manuals with exercises and drills that may be useful in practicing the application of rules for indirect speech construction. However, education should not content itself with the reproduction of knowledge, it should encourage students to analyse, work independently, build and test their own hypotheses. The development of critical thinking skills is one of the ultimate goals of education. An EFL classroom is a place where students have the opportunity to experiment with language and use it in everyday communication which provides them with enough meaningful input to build their own assumptions of the rules and regulations. Learner language precisely reflects these internal mechanisms of coping with novel forms. By analysing samples of learner language and detecting common mistakes that learners make, teachers are able to recognize the areas in which the learners demonstrate difficulties. Drawing attention to the common difficulties then enables the students to learn from their own experience and to work with authentic examples.

This thesis is an attempt to approach the students' mastery of indirect speech from a holistic perspective. The tasks were constructed to resemble natural language use as much as possible and to provide the necessary contextual framework for each task. Learners' knowledge was assessed at varying levels of difficulty, including recognition of reported speech structures, production in a guided task and writing an independent speech report. In the first task the students demonstrated a solid knowledge of common rules governing indirect speech and the ability to choose the correct structure. The second task tested their performance in producing indirect speech in different contexts. The students demonstrated the highest number of difficulties regarding the sequence of tenses, which might be related to the fact that they do not change the tense when using indirect speech in Croatian as their native language. Another area that appeared problematic was the use of indirect interrogatives where learners frequently preserved the interrogative word order, which is also a feature of their native language. Moreover, they also had difficulties in changing time adverbials that were not commonplace. It is surprising that a majority of learners did not observe the fact that the last situation referred to immediate reporting and that there was no necessity to strictly follow the rules for conversion. They were experimenting with tenses and adverbials in the same way as in other

reporting situations. The point of Task 3 was to get an insight into how students perceive their competence in using indirect reported speech. If they perceived it as a difficult and complex structure, we might assume they would try to avoid it. But on the contrary, students focused on the task of transmitting the message and wrote extensive reports using long complex-compound sentences. They achieved high scores regarding fluency and complexity; however, accuracy still requires some work.

The fact that students demonstrated willingness to use indirect speech on their own and were creative in writing both the given and the independent speech report, is encouraging. The responsibility that is left to the teachers and designers of educational material is to provide them with the opportunity to develop their learner language. Approaching indirect speech from a holistic perspective implies incorporating all instances of indirect speech that may appear in everyday language. It may be useful to draw attention to the deictic motivation behind the changes that usually take place. This would enable learners to focus on the general determinants of the reported situation and apply the rules deliberately, rather than automatically. In addition to emphasizing comprehension and critical thinking, it is important to use contextualized classroom exercises and ask learners to demonstrate their comprehension and use of indirect speech. Finally, it is useful to draw attention to the differences in using indirect speech in Croatian and English. The influence of L1 cannot be disregarded since it has been proven that it is a significant factor shaping the process of acquiring L2. Since it very often interferes with the production of L2, it might be better to discuss the similarities and differences out loud. If learners become aware of the common critical points, they might understand better the differences between the two language systems and try to avoid the mixing of patterns.

5. APPENDIX 1

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

General information

Initials:

Age:

Gender: M F

Total number of years of learning English:

Status of English as a school subject:

1. 1st foreign language
2. 2nd foreign language

- I. Please read the following dialogue and fill in the blanks with the appropriate forms to complete the report.

Reporter: Coach, how are you feeling at the moment?

Coach: I can't even explain.

Reporter: You were pretty optimistic yesterday at the press conference.

Coach: I had a feeling we might win this.

Reporter: Is this the happiest moment in your life?

Coach: Actually, the happiest moment in my life was when my son was born.

Reporter: Who was the player of the match in your opinion?

Coach: Our goalkeeper has shown once again why he is number one in the world.

Reporter: Where will you celebrate tonight?

Coach: We might just celebrate here with our fans.

Reporter: Just don't forget the crowds in the streets!

It was March 14, 2009. The biggest match in the history of football. After the judges whistle everyone rushed to the field. The reporter asked the coach how he _____ at that moment.

- a) is feeling b) has been feeling c) was feeling d) had been feeling

The coach said that he _____ even explain.

- a) can't b) cannot c) couldn't d) couldn't have

The reporter observed that he had been very optimistic _____ at the press conference.

- a) next day b) yesterday c) the previous day d) earlier

The coach replied that he (1) _____ a feeling they (2) _____ win this.

- (1) a) had b) had had c) has had d) was having
(2) a) may b) might c) might have d) should

The reporter then asked _____ the happiest moment in his life.

- a) is this b) whether was this c) if this was d) was this

The coach replied that the happiest moment in his life was when his son _____.

- a) was born b) has been born c) had born d) had been born

The reporter wanted to know who _____.

- a) had been the man of the match b) the man of the match had been c) had the man of the match been d) was the man of the match

The coach confidently replied that _____ goalkeeper had shown once again why he was number one in the world.

- a) our b) his c) their d) ours

The reporter asked him where they _____ celebrate that night.

- a) will b) would have c) would d) will have

The coach said they might just celebrate _____ with their fans.

- a) here b) in this place c) there d) on this location.

The reporter told him _____ the crowds in the streets.

- a) not to forgot b) to not forget c) not to forget d) do not forget

II. Please read the dialogues carefully and write short reports. The beginning of each report is already given.

- a) “Why did you decide to apply for this position?” the director wondered.
“I have always imagined doing research here”, Molly replied.
“Do you prefer working on your own or in a team?” the director wanted to know.
“I am more of a team player”, she said.
“Can you start next month?” he asked.
She agreed and said, “I will not let you down”.

Molly had a job interview in January. The director wondered

- b) “What were you two doing?” the doctor wanted to know.
“I was making dinner for my wife, but something went wrong”, Lucas replied.
“We have been feeling unwell since yesterday”, his wife added.
“What do you advise?” Lucas asked the doctor.
“You have food poisoning”, the doctor said.
“Drink a lot of water and have some rest”, the doctor told them.
He also ordered Lucas, “Don’t try this again!”

Lucas and his wife went to the doctor’s on Monday. The doctor wanted to know....

- c) Jack and Sylvie’s house has flooded. Jack calls the plumber to fix this....
The plumber says, “I will be at your house tomorrow morning”.
He also says, “It may cost a lot of money”.
He tells Jack, “You can replace the old pipes by yourself if you want”.
Jack wonders, “Is this really a good idea?”

(A moment later Jack reports this to Sylvie) I have called the plumber and he says

...

III. This task requires pair work. Imagine one of you is a famous person and the other one is the reporter doing the interview. After the interview, report on the conversation.

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