DISCOURSE MARKERS IN ORAL ACADEMIC PRESENTATIONS AMONG ESL STUDENTS WITH LOW ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

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Abstract*: Discourse markers significantly enhance clarity and coherence in oral academic presentations. Despite their importance, few studies specifically explore their usage among students with low English proficiency at the polytechnic level. This corpus-based study aims to identify the types and functions of discourse markers used by students during academic presentations, determine the contexts of their usage, and examine common difficulties faced by these students. Data were collected from 20 oral group presentations by semester three and five students at Politeknik Besut Terengganu. The presentations were recorded, transcribed manually, and analyzed using AntConc software (version 3.2.4w). Findings revealed that students predominantly utilized five categories of discourse markers: enumeration and addition, apposition, result or inference, contrast or concession, and summation. The preference for simpler, single-word markers reflected challenges associated with memorization and pronunciation. Common difficulties included improper usage and avoidance of complex markers due to linguistic constraints. Recommendations include explicit instructional guidance and scaffolding strategies to improve students' use of discourse markers.*

Keywords*: Discourse Markers, ESL learners, Oral Academic Presentations, Corpus-based Analysis, Low English Proficiency.*

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Introduction

Effective oral communication skills are increasingly vital in higher education contexts, particularly in Malaysia, where proficiency in English greatly impacts students' academic success and career prospects. Malaysian students receive extensive English education from primary through tertiary levels; nevertheless, substantial deficiencies persist in their oral communication capabilities, especially within polytechnic institutions such as Politeknik Besut Terengganu, which emphasizes technical and vocational skills for workforce readiness. Employers consistently stress the importance of strong communication skills, highlighting the crucial role English proficiency plays in employability (Stewart, 2020; Okolie et al., 2019; S.F., 2018; Otache, 2021).

Research consistently identifies significant challenges faced by polytechnic students in their oral communication skills, notably their difficulties in effectively structuring presentations and clearly articulating ideas (S.F., 2018; Otache, 2021; Ting et al., 2017; Grapragasem et al., 2014). Specifically, students frequently struggle to utilize discourse markers appropriately, which are essential for guiding audiences through logical transitions, thus ensuring coherence and clarity of speech (Rahman & Maarof, 2018; Aeni et al., 2021). Discourse markers are vital linguistic tools that indicate relationships between different parts of speech, enhance comprehension, and reduce misunderstandings in oral interactions (Bell, 2010; Aijmer, 2011). However, the proficiency in using these markers among Malaysian polytechnic students remains significantly underexplored (Aşık & Cephe, 2013; Nasir, 2021).

Addressing these challenges requires specific educational strategies aimed at enhancing students' communicative competencies. Interactive approaches such as role-play and simulations have proven effective in fostering student confidence and improving oral communication skills (Rahman & Maarof, 2018; Aeni et al., 2021). It is also imperative to explicitly integrate discourse marker instruction into curricula, providing students with necessary linguistic scaffolding to enhance their ability to structure and deliver coherent presentations (Kandagor & Rotumoi, 2018).

Given the lack of targeted research on discourse marker usage within the Malaysian polytechnic context, this study specifically investigates students' practical application of discourse markers in oral presentations at Politeknik Besut Terengganu. It aims to identify the types of markers most frequently used, analyze the contexts and purposes behind their usage, and uncover the specific challenges students encounter. Findings from this research will offer valuable insights, directly informing instructional strategies and curriculum design aimed at enhancing students' communicative effectiveness and professional readiness (Kanamitie et al., 2023). Ultimately, improving understanding and application of discourse markers through targeted research and pedagogical interventions will significantly impact polytechnic students' employability, equipping them more effectively to meet the demands of Malaysia's competitive job market.

Problem Statement

Successful oral academic presentations necessitate a structured approach to speech delivery, ensuring coherent connections between ideas, clear signalling of transitions, and effective communication of the intended message. However, students with low English proficiency often face significant challenges in these areas, leading to presentations that may be marked by disconnected thoughts, grammatical inaccuracies, and ultimately unclear delivery of messages

(Ekmekçi, 2018; Xing & Bolden, 2019). The root of these challenges typically lies in inadequate linguistic scaffolding, a lack of exposure to explicit instruction on discourse markers, and insufficient opportunities to practice in authentic communicative contexts (Xing & Bolden, 2019; Tian & Mahmud, 2018).

Specifically, students engaged in academic oral presentations may default to simplistic language strategies, thereby avoiding more complex linguistic structures that are essential for effective communication (Jager & Evans, 2013). Such tendencies can hinder their ability to present ideas logically, which is vital for meeting the expectations of both academic audiences and potential employers. Research highlights that discourse markers, critical for organizing speech and facilitating coherence, are frequently underutilized by students with limited English proficiency; this suggests an urgent need for targeted instructional interventions (Ekmekçi, 2018; Horverak, 2016).

To address these challenges effectively, an in-depth exploration of students' current discourse marker usage patterns is necessary. This includes identifying specific gaps in their knowledge and understanding, as well as the contexts in which they struggle to apply these markers accurately (Cha & Goldenberg, 2015). Such an exploration will help educators to develop instructional strategies that explicitly teach the use of discourse markers, thereby enhancing students' presentation skills and boosting their confidence in public speaking (Xing & Bolden, 2019; Tian & Mahmud, 2018). Targeted interventions, such as practice sessions complemented by feedback on performance, can significantly aid in building the necessary skills for coherent and persuasive oral presentations (Xing & Bolden, 2019; Rusli et al., 2024).

In conclusion, it is imperative for academic institutions, particularly those in Malaysia, to recognize and address the oral communication deficits present among students, especially those with low English proficiency. By focusing on the effective use of discourse markers and providing ample opportunities for practice, educators can foster significant improvements in students' oral presentation capabilities, which will ultimately lead to better academic outcomes and prepare them for professional demands in the globalized job market. The primary objectives of this research are:
a) To identify and categorize the types of discourse markers employed by students with low English proficiency during academic presentations.
b) To analyse the contexts in which discourse markers are used and determine their functional purposes.
c) To investigate specific challenges that students encounter when using discourse markers in oral academic contexts.

Literature Review

Academic Oral Presentations and ESL Challenges
Oral presentations are integral in tertiary education, particularly for ESL learners who must demonstrate both content mastery and communicative competence (Dumlao & Wilang, 2019). However, numerous studies emphasize persistent challenges faced by students with lower English proficiency, including high anxiety levels, limited vocabulary, and difficulty maintaining coherence (Alghorbany & Hamzah, 2020; Yasmin, 2021). In the Malaysian context, these issues are compounded by the mismatch between communicative demands and current pedagogical approaches (Grapragasem et al., 2014; S.F., 2018). Despite these known

struggles, instruction on discourse markers, a key tool for ensuring fluency and structure, is often implicit and underexplored in curriculum delivery (Rahman & Maarof, 2018; Yasmin, 2021).

Role of Discourse Markers in Structuring Speech

Discourse markers are crucial linguistic tools that aid in organizing ideas, signaling transitions, and ensuring coherence in oral communication (Bell, 2010; Aijmer, 2011). Several international studies (e.g., Khameneh & Faruji, 2020; Johnson, 2015) have shown that explicit training in discourse markers significantly enhances students' clarity and persuasiveness in speech. In Malaysia, however, research tends to focus more on written discourse or general communicative skills, rather than the nuanced application of markers in spoken academic settings (Nasir, 2021; Zainuddin, 2012). This research attempts to address that gap by centering on the underrepresented polytechnic ESL learners, who often lack both exposure and scaffolding to use these linguistic features effectively.

Corpus Studies and Local Relevance

While corpora have long been used to understand authentic language use, much of the research involves native speaker contexts or written English (Biber et al., 1999; LaCosse et al., 2020). In Malaysia, corpus-based analyses of spoken academic English especially among polytechnic students are scarce. Zainuddin (2012) identified a clear need for targeted instruction in technical and spoken English for ICT students, while S.F. Isnin (2018) highlighted polytechnic engineering students' difficulties in applying language structures during presentations. By building a spoken corpus grounded in local context, this study contributes not only to the global understanding of discourse markers but also informs context-specific ESL instruction.

Towards Contextualized Pedagogy

Effective incorporation of discourse markers in teaching requires a shift from incidental to intentional pedagogy. Yasmin (2021) and Nur et al. (2023) argue that students with low proficiency benefit most from scaffolded, explicit instruction paired with practice in real contexts such as presentations or debates. Within Malaysia, Rahman and Maarof (2018) advocate for simulation and role-play techniques to help students gain confidence and apply linguistic devices in meaningful ways. The current study builds on these recommendations by linking corpus analysis with pedagogical implications tailored to the needs of polytechnic ESL learners.

Methodology

Corpus Compilation and Course Selection Rationale

This corpus-based study involved the systematic collection of authentic spoken data from ESL students enrolled in two English courses: DUE30022 (Communicative English 2) and DUE50032 (Communicative English 3), offered at Politeknik Besut Terengganu. These courses were purposefully selected due to their distinct focus on structured oral presentations, with increasing complexity in content and language demands across levels. DUE30022 requires students to deliver process-based presentations, while DUE50032 focuses on data interpretation and analytical discussions, which naturally involve more complex linguistic constructs and hence a broader use of discourse markers.

A total of 75 students participated in the study, organized into 20 presentation groups comprising two to five members. The tasks provided were designed to reflect authentic academic speaking contexts, offering insight into natural usage of discourse markers across varying proficiency levels. The summary of participants and presentation overview are as below:

Table 1: Participants and Presentation Overview

Course	No. of Students	No. of Groups	Presentation Focus	Proficiency Level
DUE30022	40	10	Process description (e.g., steps, how-to topics)	Low to lower-intermediate
DUE50032	35	10	Graph/ chart explanation, cause-effect relationships	Lower-intermediate

Data Collection and Transcription

Presentations were audio-recorded with consent and lasted between 15–20 minutes each. Recordings were then manually transcribed verbatim, adhering to standard linguistic conventions. Each transcript was labeled using group and speaker codes to facilitate structured analysis.

Data Analysis using AntConc

The cleaned transcripts were converted to plain-text files and analyzed using AntConc 3.2.4w, a corpus analysis tool. This software provided comprehensive frequency counts and assisted in the identification and categorization of discourse markers, following the classification by Biber et al. (1999), which includes categories such as enumeration and addition, apposition, result or inference, contrast or concession, and summation markers.

The analysis focused on several dimensions which are the frequency of occurrence of each discourse marker, the contexts in which they were used, their positional tendencies within utterances, and any recurring linguistic patterns. In addition to quantitative frequency data, detailed qualitative analyses were conducted to unveil deeper insights into students' practical use of discourse markers, their functional preferences, and the specific linguistic challenges they faced during their presentations.

Results

The corpus analysis identified a total of 38 distinct discourse markers used across 20 student group presentations. The frequency distribution by category is as follows:

Table 2: Frequency of Discourse Marker Categories

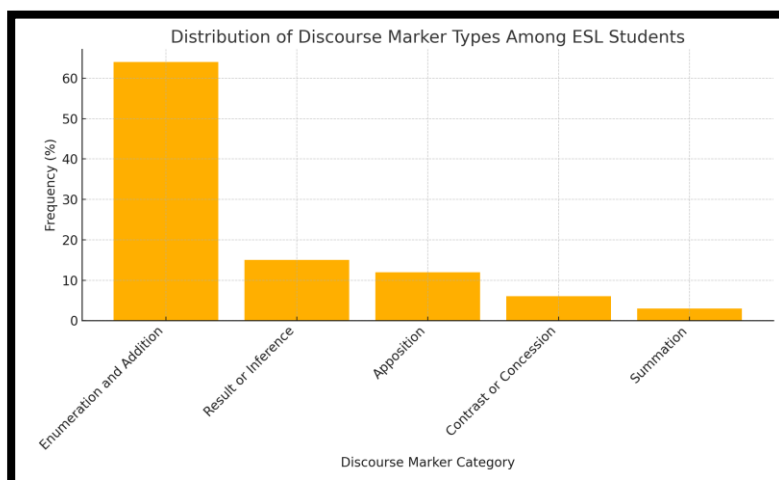| Discourse Marker Category	Examples	Frequency (%)
Enumeration and Addition	*first*, *next*, *and*, *then*	64%
Result or Inference	*so*, *therefore*, *as a result*	15%
Apposition	*for example*, *in other words*	12%
Contrast or Concession	*but*, *however*, *although*	6%
Summation	*in conclusion*, *to sum up*	3%

Figure 1: Distribution of Discourse Marker Types

Discussion

The results indicate a heavy reliance on enumeration and addition markers (64%), which were used to maintain sequential clarity in procedural presentations. Common markers such as 'first', 'then', and 'next' were prominently placed at the beginning of sentences, showing students' dependence on a rigid, linear speaking structure.

Markers from more cognitively demanding categories like contrast or summation were used far less frequently. This imbalance suggests that students with low English proficiency may lack the linguistic and cognitive confidence to vary their discourse structures. Apposition markers, while moderately present, were often limited to a few expressions ('for example', 'like') and did not reflect nuanced understanding of contextual usage.

Additionally, some markers were used incorrectly or redundantly, indicating gaps in both knowledge and practical application. For example, phrases like 'and, then, after that, next' illustrate overreliance and lack of syntactic control.

These findings support earlier literature (Yasmin, 2021; Khameneh & Faruji, 2020), which emphasizes the need for explicit instruction on discourse markers to promote fluent, coherent oral expression. The progression from DUE30022 to DUE50032 also revealed slight improvements in marker variety yet, this improvement was not consistent, underlining the need for more structured pedagogical interventions.

Conclusion

This corpus-based analysis presents significant insights regarding the use of discourse markers by ESL students with low English proficiency during academic presentations at Politeknik Besut Terengganu. Key findings reveal that students primarily employed simple enumeration markers, which serves to showcase their limited linguistic proficiency and insufficient instructional support. Noteworthy challenges include frequent misuse, avoidance of complex markers, and repetitive reliance on basic linguistic structures. These results highlight the critical need for explicit instruction and structured scaffolding aimed at enhancing discourse marker proficiency among ESL students. Future research should aim to expand the corpus size

and diversity, incorporating longitudinal studies to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional interventions and their generalizability across broader contexts within polytechnic education.

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