

LINKING ADVERBIALS IN SPOKEN ACADEMIC PRESENTATIONS AMONG  
LOW ENGLISH PROFICIENCY STUDENTS

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*To my beloved parents, husband and children  
for their Love, Prayers and Support*

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## ABSTRACT

Linking Adverbials play an important role to create cohesion and ensure the logical and persuasive flow of an oral academic presentation. However, there were very few studies focusing on the students' spoken corpus of oral academic presentation especially when dealing with low English proficiency students in Polytechnic level. The overall goal of this study was to investigate the use of linking adverbials in oral academic presentations among POLISAS students. This study aims to examine the kind of adverbials used by the students, when they use them and for what purposes and lastly, what problems do the students face in using adverbials in oral academic presentations. This study is a corpus-based study consisting of 20 academic group presentations that were audio-taped and transcribed manually, and analyzed using Antconc software version 3.2.4w. The recordings were based on the presentations of the students from semester three and five. Results had indicated that the students only employed five different categories of linking adverbials which are enumerations and additions, apposition, result or inference, contrast or concession and summation adverbials. The analysis also revealed that the students tend to use simple and single-word adverbials as it was easier to memorize and pronounce. The students used these five types of adverbials to fulfill different functions such as to start and end the presentation, to give further elaboration and instances, to signal the next step to the audience, to show contrast and also, to sum up the presentations. It also identifies some problems such as avoidance of using adverbials and wrong use of adverbials due to the linguistic difficulties commonly faced by students of low English proficiency level. This study suggests teachers provide scaffold to students and give sufficient guidelines on the functions of linking adverbials in oral academic presentations to the students so as to help the low English proficiency students to improve their presentation skills.

## ABSTRAK

*Linking Adverbials* memainkan peranan penting untuk mewujudkan turutan yang logik dan munasabah untuk digunakan dalam pembentangan akademik secara lisan. Matlamat kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji tentang penggunaan *linking adverbials* dalam pembentangan akademik secara lisan di kalangan pelajar-pelajar POLISAS. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneliti apakah jenis *adverbials* yang digunakan oleh para pelajar apabila mereka membentangi dan tujuan penggunaannya, dan akhir sekali, apakah masalah yang pelajar hadapi dalam menggunakan *adverbials* dalam pembentangan akademik. Kajian ini adalah kajian berasaskan korpus yang terdiri daripada 20 kumpulan pembentangan yang telah dirakam secara audio dan ditaip secara manual, dan kemudiannya dianalisis menggunakan perisian Antconc versi 3.2.4w. Rakaman adalah berdasarkan pembentangan pelajar dari semester tiga dan semester lima. Dapatan kajian telah menunjukkan bahawa pelajar-pelajar telah menggunakan lima kategori *adverbials* iaitu *enumerations and additions*, *apposition*, *result/inference*, *contrast/concession* dan *summation adverbials*. Ia juga mendedahkan bahawa pelajar-pelajar tersebut, yang terdiri daripada latar belakang kemahiran bahasa Inggeris yang lemah, cenderung untuk menggunakan *adverbials* mudah dan terdiri daripada satu perkataan kerana ia lebih mudah dihafal dan digunakan. Para pelajar menggunakan kelima-lima *adverbials* tersebut dengan tujuan yang berbeza seperti memulakan dan mengakhiri pembentangan, untuk menghuraikan dengan lebih lanjut dan memberi contoh, untuk memberitahu orang ramai tentang apa yang akan dilakukan, menunjukkan perbezaan dan meringkaskan pembentangan mereka. Ia juga mengenalpasti masalah seperti penggunaan *adverbials* yang dielakkan dan penggunaan *adverbials* yang salah. Ini kerana, pelajar-pelajar terdiri daripada pelajar yang lemah dari segi bahasa dan untuk itu, pensyarah perlu memberi pendedahan dan garis panduan yang cukup tentang fungsi-fungsi *linking adverbials* dalam pembentangan akademik secara lisan kepada para pelajar demi membantu pelajar-pelajar yang lemah dalam Bahasa Inggeris untuk meningkatkan kemahiran pembentangan mereka.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NO.	SHORT FORM	FULL NAME
1	POLISAS	Politeknik Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah
2	L1	First Language Learner
3	L2	Second Language Learner
4	ESL	English as a Second Language
5	OAP	Oral Academic Presentation
6	MOHE	Ministry of Higher Education
7	UM	Universiti Malaya
8	UPM	Universiti Putra Malaysia
9	UNIMAS	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
10	UMS	Universiti Malaysia Sabah
11	AE101	Communicative English 1
12	AE301	Communicative English 2
13	AE501	Communicative English 3
14	EMAS Corpus	Corpus of English language of Malaysian School Students
15	MACLE Corpus	Malaysian Corpus of Learner English
16	COMEL Corpus	Corpus of Malaysian English
17	CALES Corpus	Corpus Archive of Learner English Sabah and Sarawak
18	LEP	Low English Proficiency
19	LA	Linking Adverbials
20	TTR	Type Token Ratio

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

This opening chapter will first describe the background and then the problem statement of this study. Apart from that, it will also outline the purposes, explain the objectives of the study, the study's research questions, the significance of the study, the scope and limitation of the study, and finally, it will present the operational definition of key terms used in the study.

#### **1.1 Background of the Study**

Malaysian students have been exposed to the English Language since young. English is first introduced in primary levels and used extensively as medium of instruction at pre-university levels or polytechnics. This has been supported by Lin (2010) who stated that not only younger learners are taught the English Language, but they have been taught the language extensively all the way to tertiary levels or in higher institutions.

At polytechnic or pre-university levels, the English courses are skill-based and designed to prepare students for the use of English Language at the workplace. The emphases are on the common language skills namely listening, speaking, reading, writing and communicative ability (Rajaretnam & Nalliah, 1999). Despite extensive exposure to English in the education system, students still have yet to master the language, as their language is full of errors especially when it comes to speaking.

Littlewood (1981) stated that speaking is the most vital skill in all communicative activities and the criterion for success in communicative activities is to be able to convey the meaning effectively. However, humans are only born with the ability to vocalize, but not with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that define communication competence (Morreale et al, 2000). The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately is learned and must be taught.

In Malaysian Polytechnic Education System, students need to take English for Communicative Purposes (AE) for three semesters to get a Diploma. The contents of the three courses emphasize on the communicative activities. The details of the courses shown in the table below:

**Table 1.1:** English for Communicative Purposes (AE) in Polytechnics Malaysia

No	Level	Course Name	Course Code	Prerequisite Course	Semester
1	Level 1	Communicative English 1	AE101	None	One
2	Level 2	Communicative English 2	AE301	AE101	Three
3	Level 3	Communicative English 3	AE501	AE301	Five

Even though the focus of the three courses is the same, which is communicative skills, the contents are different. Semester one students must take Communicative English 1 (Level 1) which focuses more on general knowledge such as study skills, information-processing skills, reading skills, and individual oral presentation skills. In contrast, semester three students will have to enroll in Communicative English 2 (Level 2), which focuses more on group oral presentations about product and services, process and procedures and role-play of complaints. Finally, students must pass Communicative English 3 (Level 3) when they are in semester five, where it focuses more on report writing skills, and the academic oral presentations using graphs and charts (in groups), and individual mock job-interview. In brief, the students must pass all of these three English levels in order to graduate from polytechnics.

Since the courses focus on Communicative English, most of the assessments test on the students' speaking ability (oral presentations). For instance, one of the assessments for Communicative English 1 (AE101) is individual presentation that carries 30 percent of the overall marks. As for Communicative English 2 (AE301), the demand of presentation skills needed is higher where the students need to do three different presentations such as presentation about their products or services (30%); presentation about process and procedures (30%) and lastly, they have to present a role play which carries another 20 percent of the overall marks. Therefore, overall 80 percent is from the presentation skills and if the students do not know how to present, they will just risk 80 percent of their overall marks (please refer to Appendix A for the course outline of AE301). Lastly, for Communicative English 3 (AE501), the students will also need to do one academic presentation about graphs and charts (30%) and attend a mock-job interview (20%) which carries a total of 50 percent of the continuous assessment marks (please refer to Appendix B for the course outline of AE501).

In addition to the above, the students faced a daunting task to do other presentations in other courses using the English Language as well. Therefore, in brief, skills in making oral presentations in English are highly required among

polytechnic students since they are graded heavily on it. Moreover, it is the major skill tested in English classes in the Malaysian Polytechnic system.

The rationale of the Polytechnics emphasizing more heavily on communicative skills are based on the vision and mission of the Department of Polytechnic Malaysia. The vision of the Polytechnic is to break the boundaries for the creation of transformative and creative learning environment for an innovation-led economy by producing more semi-professionals graduates. Thus, the mission of Polytechnic is to be Malaysia's number one provider of innovative human capital through transformational education and training for the global workforce by 2015. Apart from that, the polytechnics aim that 80 percent of its graduates to either secure a job or continue their studies within six months upon graduation (MOHE, 2008). The graduates are targeted to become semi-professionals who have to communicate with their organization workforce to perform their duties. As a result, polytechnic students need to focus more on their communication skills in English.

Therefore, this study focuses on the Communicative Ability (CA) in depth conducted at Politeknik Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah (POLISAS), Kuantan, Pahang. To be specific, the purpose of this study is to investigate the spoken academic presentations of polytechnic students in terms of the use of linking adverbials. I believe by identifying the problem areas concerned and with adequate preparation for the students, their attainment in English language course as well as the other courses will be better.



## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

In Polytechnics, students' major assessments for the Communicative English 2 and Communicative English 3 courses are mostly based on the students' oral presentations. At the same time, the students need to do presentations in English for other courses too. Therefore, the students need to have good oral presentation skills but the problem is that the students have limited English proficiency. They struggle to make basic sentence structures and they have difficulties to show how ideas are connected. It becomes very difficult especially when they have to speak spontaneously in oral academic presentations.

The presentations done by the students were not only full of grammatical mistakes but also, they lack the knowledge on how to connect their ideas or points and they do not know how to link or arrange their ideas cohesively even though they have good ideas. This might be because students are easily confused on the appropriate usage of numerous adverbials and they are not given enough scaffolds on the micro-organizing skills.

For instance, the syllabus of the two courses AE301 and AE501 do not put much emphasis on the linguistic aspects, specifically. These caused English lecturers to not focus much on the linguistic aspects in their teaching. Basically, the syllabus has overlooked this aspect entirely and this has somehow made the students to resort to memorizing their oral presentation texts.

Although there are guidelines on how to deliver a presentation in the modules, the input are still not enough. The students still need to rely on the lecturers to provide them with the necessary linguistic inputs because the modules only touch on the minimum exposure of the presentation skills.

Majority of polytechnic students who were assigned to give oral presentations reported that they lack training in giving presentations and or lack explicit discussion of the presentation evaluation criteria which may give them ideas on how to do the presentation in a proper way. Zareva (2009) stated that many lecturers or instructors seem to assume that students simply ‘know’ how to put together a presentation either based on their previous experience or by modelling their presentations after the lectures and presentations of more experienced presenters such as their instructors.

For the purpose of this study, I look specifically into the Communicative English 2 and Communicative English 3 courses. This problem has become my main concern since the students really need the linguistic input from the lecturers before embarking on making oral academic presentations. This is due to the fact that much attention has been given to the ability of having good oral presentation skills in recent years and both educational institutions and employers agree that good oral presentation skills are essential to the professional training of college students across all disciplines (Zareva, 2011). This has led to the sudden inclusion of presentation skills as a graded component in many undergraduate and graduate courses syllabus.

In conclusion, lecturers find it difficult to teach the language due to factors such as varied students’ competencies in the language, lack of linguistic input in the syllabus, and not much of language preparation given in the module. These factors have hampered the teaching and learning process of the language. Eventually, all of these problems have triggered the interest to examine the communicative activities in term of the use of linking adverbials in oral academic presentations among POLISAS students.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

The objective of this study is to investigate the nature and problems on the use of linking adverbials in spoken academic presentations among polytechnic students. So, for the purpose of this study, there are few objectives that should be achieved. The aims of this study are to:

- i. Investigate the kind of adverbials used in academic presentations among students in POLISAS.
- ii. Examine when do students use adverbials and the purposes of using them in academic presentations.
- iii. Investigate the problems students face in using adverbials in academic presentations.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

In view of the objectives mentioned above, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- i. What kind of adverbials do students use in academic presentations?
- ii. When do students use adverbials and for what purposes they use them in academic presentations?
- iii. What problems do students face in using adverbials in academic presentations?

## 1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is considered unique and important for several reasons. Firstly, there are very few studies collecting spoken corpus in Malaysia. If they have been created, they are not easily available to the public (Menon, 2009). The previous Malaysian-based studies available such as MACLE Corpus (Knowles and Zuraidah, 2004), Textbook Corpus (Mukundan and Anealka Aziz, 2007), and CALES Corpus (Botley et al, 2004), had only focused much on the written corpus.

Besides, there are very few studies done which have looked into the polytechnic students as a major focus. As to date, the focus of research and discussions had been either on the students at the university or at the secondary school levels leaving a gap at the polytechnic levels. There is a study done by Ahmad et al. (2010) that focused on the polytechnic students but it emphasizes on the general English proficiency of Civil Engineering students.

Apart from that, there is a need to study on the performance of the low proficiency students since majority of the students in polytechnic consist of low English proficiency students. So, the result of this study can be the representative for other polytechnics to show the needs of the low English proficiency students and the findings of this study will provide a clearer picture of the problems faced by them. It can also be a good source or device for future teaching material preparations to teach the students about the use of linking adverbials in oral academic presentations.

Finally, although this study is a case study of POLISAS students, it is hoped that the findings could also provide insights into the teaching and learning of English in Malaysia or elsewhere.

## 1.6 Scope of the Study

This study was conducted at Politeknik Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah (POLISAS), Kuantan, Pahang, and obviously this study only involved students from POLISAS. This is a Malaysian-based study and it involves the non-native speakers or Second Language (L2) students in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom.

Majority of the students were from the low English proficiency background who are not very competent in the English Language and need to learn more to improve their proficiency. Most of them received low grades during their SPM examination and some of them did not pass English. The analysis done by the Student Affairs Department of Politeknik Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah shows the following:

**Table 1.2:** English Examination Results in SPM among POLISAS students  
(Intake Session: June 2013)

Grade	Number of students
A+	1
A	28
A-	49
B+	87
B	148
C+	209
C	190
D	520
E	234
F	10
<b>Total number of students</b>	<b>1476</b>

*Source: Taken from Department of Students' Affairs  
(Jabatan Hal Ehwal Pelajar- HEP)  
Politeknik Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah, Kuantan, Pahang.*

This study was conducted based on the learner corpora based on the students' academic presentations in English classes in POLISAS and it would not differentiate gender. As for the purpose of this study, there were two semesters involved which are the final two English level classes (semester three and semester five students) and all the presentations must be done in group (three to four per group).

### **1.7 Limitations of the Study**

For the purposes of this study, there were few limitations that cannot be avoided. Firstly, this study only involved a small group of students who studied at Politeknik Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah (POLISAS), in Kuantan, Pahang. A total number of 20 academic group presentations had been recorded. This study involves 75 students with a total of 243 minutes of presentations.

Secondly, since the study is intended to investigate the use of linking adverbials in academic presentations, so the analysis will only focus on the use of linking adverbials in the presentations. This study does not look at the discourse or grammatical features commonly found in oral academic presentations. The participants involved in this study are also of low English proficiency (LEP) students.

Besides, this study is based on a corpus of oral academic presentations done in groups. So, this kind of group presentations did not allow me to see the full spectrum of each student as an individual. This is because, the students divided the tasks among all the group members and they had limited chance to discuss due to the time constraint.

Apart from that, another limitation in this study is that half of the corpus collected (10 groups from semester three) was recorded by the students themselves. The students may have practiced the presentations as many times as possible to get the best recording before submitting them to be graded.

Lastly, this study is not a discipline-based study as it only focuses on the general English Proficiency English class where the students do oral presentations in English. In brief, this study is not according to the students' discipline thus, disciplinary variations are not considered.

## **1.8 Definition of Terms**

Before describing the study properly, it is necessary to firstly outline the definitions of a few important terms that will contribute to this study. For the purpose of this study, there are four important terms that need to be defined clearly. The words and the definitions are as the following.

### 1.8.1 Corpus

The term corpus can be defined as any collection of more than one text and is simply the Latin for ‘body’, therefore a corpus is defined as any body of a text (McEnery and Wilson, 2004) and the plural form of corpus is corpora.

Sinclair (1997) defined corpus linguistics as the study of language through corpus-based study and this is in line with Conrad (1998), who explained that a corpus-based research will have three important characteristics. Firstly, a corpus-based study will collect a naturally-occurring text which means the data will be authentic because it is taken from the natural occurrence of the real one. Secondly, they will have to use computers for analyses because there are some of the large corpora are impossible to be analysed without the help of a computer. Lastly, a corpus-based study will include both quantitative analyses and functional interpretations of the language use whereby it means that the more frequent the pattern occurred, the more functional interpretations that we can describe about the communicative functions of it.

In this study, corpus refers to the twenty recorded oral academic presentations that had been manually transcribed and in my case, I have used the Antconc software (Anthony, 2005) version 3.2.4<sub>w</sub> to analyse the data.



### 1.8.2 Learner-Corpus

Learner-corpus is a collection of data that involve students' language use, and it is a computerized textual database produced by the foreign language learners (Leech, 1998). There are two types of learner corpora which are native speaker corpora and learner corpora. Granger (2003) defined learner corpora as an inter-language or L2 Corpora which refers to second language learners of a language.

For the purpose of this study, the learner corpora is very important because the students' presentations in an English Second Language (ESL) class were compiled and then, transcribed manually in order to get the data in the form of computerized textual database. Granger (2008) stated that the purpose of compiling a learner corpus is mainly to gather objective data that can be used to assist in describing learner language.

In this study, learner corpus refers to the students' academic oral presentations and it is vital to note that the students involved in this study were from limited English proficiency background. The students must deliver a group presentation on the topic of Process and Procedures (AE301) for semester three students and Mini Project consists of Graph and Charts (AE501) for semester five students.

### **1.8.3 Academic Presentations**

Academic presentation in this study refers to the typical mode assessment in POLISAS whereby the students need to do a group presentation which consists of three to four students in a group. The overall task of the presentation is based on the English course they have to take in their current semester.

In terms of the topic of the presentation, they are free to choose their own topic that they would like to present. The presentations then will be assessed by the respective lecturers of the English course and the students need to do well in the presentation since the weightage for the presentations is heavy resulting for 30 percent of the overall grade.

### **1.8.4 Linking Adverbials**

First, it is necessary to clarify the term linking adverbial. The definition derives from the term itself that it is a kind of an adverbial. Liu (2008) defined linking adverbial as an instrument to provide cohesion in both speaking and writing. Meanwhile, Conrad (1999) defined linking adverbials as the words that serve to connect two stretches of discourse sometimes referred to as ‘connecting words’. There are other names given to the linking adverbials by the other scholars. For example, there are also previous scholars who calls them as ‘linking expressions’ (Raimes, 1987), ‘transitions’ (Greenberg, 1992), and also ‘connective adjuncts’ (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002: 775). After all, students are encouraged to use linking adverbials in their presentations to signal clear connections between their ideas.

Apart from that, there are also other definitions given by the other scholars in the same field. Biber et al. (2000: 762) defined adverbials as clause elements with three functions such as to add circumstantial information about the proposition in the clause, to express speakers' stance towards the clause and also, to link certain part of clause to some other units of discourse. Thus, based on the terminology and classification, Biber et al. (2000) has divided the adverbials into three major classes based on their functions which are 'circumstance adverbials', 'stance adverbials' and lastly, 'linking adverbials'. For the purpose of this study, I will only emphasize the adverbials that fulfil the third function called 'linking adverbials'.

In this study, linking adverbials (LAs) refer exactly on the typology as what has been proposed by Biber et al. (1999) which consist of six semantic categories such as enumeration and addition adverbials, apposition adverbials, result or inference adverbials, contrast or concession adverbials, summation adverbials and lastly, transition adverbials.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced this study by outlining the background and stating the problems of this study. Subsequently, this chapter articulated the general purposes of carrying out this study and listed the objectives of the study and research questions. It has also revealed the significance, the scope and the limitations in this study. Lastly, this chapter defined the four important key terms used in this study which are corpus, learner-corpus, academic presentation and linking adverbials. The next chapter presents the review of literature about academic presentations, then it narrows down to the corpus of academic English and finally, it addresses some literature reviews about linking adverbials from previous studies.

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