

## Conference Paper

# Students' Discourse Strategies in a Classroom Debate Performance

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## Abstract

Conducting a debate as one activity in a speaking class might provide opportunities for students to practice their exploratory talk as the benefits of performing this activity include developing an objectivity toward controversial questions and the ability to reason logically. In order to achieve its goals, students need to own communicative competences, which are categorized into grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. This study concerns with the students' use of discourse strategies as this shows their ability in connecting sentences or utterances to produce meaningful units of utterances. In addition, this strategy is required to deliver thought and comprehend ideas as it would require complete thought happening before and after the utterances to gain meaningful representation of the message. Therefore, the focus of this study is to find out types of discourse strategies the students employ during their debate performance in Speaking for Academic Purposes subject offered at the Department of English in a state university at East Java.

**Keywords:** communicative competence, discourse strategies, debate

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## 1. Introduction

A competent language user is bound to deliver and interpret messages according to certain contexts which require strategies to produce the language either spoken or written. As Brown (2007) notes, in producing spoken language, the speaker's discourse is marked by exchanges with another person or several persons. To understand the meanings within the stretches of discourse, we need to grasp the meanings not only from its single sentences, but also from referents in both the previous sentences and following sentences. This strategy may indicate the speaker's communicative competence, which, based on Canale's (1983) categories, comprises of four subcategories: (1) grammatical competence, (2) discourse competence, (3) sociolinguistic competence, and (4) strategic

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competence. Of the four categories, discourse competence shows the ability in connecting sentences or utterances in stretches of discourse to produce meaningful units of utterances.

Having discourse competence means that the speakers have discourse strategies which are worked about in the process of communication. Discourse strategies refer to strategies employed during their conversation as an attempt to understand each other in that particular context of the conversation (Gumperz, 1982). To understand each other's utterances, there should be a well-arranged structure made by the speakers. The structure should be arranged by considering communicative functions, such as to mark cohesion, topic relationship and continuity, and also stance. Previous studies on discourse strategies have been done not only in classroom settings but also in professional communication (Michaels & Cook-Gumperz, 1979; Micheau & Billmyer, 1987; O'Connor & Michaels, 1993; Aman, Awal, & Jaafar, 2014; Skovholt, 2016; and Besedina, Dudkina, Kopylovskaya, 2017).

An early study on discourse strategies was conducted by Michaels, et al. in 1979. They analyzed the discourse style used by the children when they were telling story. The result showed that the discourse was managed into two types; topic-centered and topic chaining style. Micheau and Billmyer (1987) reported research findings on discourse strategies used by native speakers compared to non-native speakers at a graduate business school. In more recent years, a research project on discourse study is conducted by Aman, et al (2014). They discuss the discourse strategy written in science and technology academic texts in Malay language published in high-impact journals. In addition, Besedina, et al. (2017) conducted a study by describing the use of discourse strategies in publicly open interviews on TV whose results are used to bridge the gap between the theory and the teaching practices.

Those previous research and its findings indicate the importance of having discourse strategies to deliver thoughts and comprehend ideas wholly as it would require complete thought happening before and after the utterances to gain meaningful representation of the message. Therefore, in this research, we are concerned with the types of discourse strategies produced during speech events. Unlike previous studies mentioned, the discussion of types of discourse strategies in this study centers around the students' utterances in their debate performances. In classroom settings, students' talk is paramount in classroom discourse. They are required to have active participation to construct knowledge as it shows their cognitive potential.

To the best of our knowledge, there are two previous research projects conducted to find out discourse strategies in classroom settings, that is, those by O'Connor and

Michaels (1993), and Skovholt (2016). The former has focused on the use of language as a resource for control and socialization. The other project, conducted by Skovholt (2016), is a case study to find out how scientific discourse is established through conversational turn in teacher education institution in Norway. The study has addressed the teacher-students' interaction during a student-led discussion which results in the tension between "mundane talk" and "scientific talk" (p.1). Mundane talk occurs when the students' talk refers to their personal domain shown in their claim, while scientific talk relates to their reference to a shared scientific domain. The result of this research is important to the teaching of language, as it shows that the students' performance and/or the tension between mundane talk and scientific talk happens due to the teachers' roles in facilitating the classroom.

Within the context of our research in the Department of English in an Indonesian university, the students' opportunities to talk as a means of showing their participation and active learning are offered in all courses in the Department. Our observations have shown that in the teaching and learning activities, the lecturers provide ample time for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills on subject matters by producing either written or spoken outputs. However, one specific course that equips the students with language functions and expressions for them to practice in conducting debate performances is that of Speaking for Academic Purposes (Department of English Catalogue, 2017). As formulated in the course description, this course is designed to develop students' ability at an advanced level and to enhance their ability in conducting presentation, panel discussion, and debate. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe the students' discourse strategies during their debate performances. By adopting previous research done by Skovholt (2016), this study is focused on the students' scientific and mundane discourse from their debate performances.

## 2. Research Method

This study is a corpus linguistic study which applies both quantitative and qualitative techniques as has been outlined by Conrad (2002) and Baker (2006). Conrad (2002) further elaborates the combination of both techniques by emphasizing the use of both due to each advantage. A quantitative assessment enables researchers to recognize patterns of language use whether a phenomenon is common or unusual. However, numbers provide little insight about language. Therefore, the use of qualitative techniques is tied to functional interpretations of language patterns to have deepened understanding of the language phenomena. Quantitative data are used to identify discourse strategies

TABLE 1: UMSpEAKs Profile.

No	Types of Speech Events	The number of speech events	The number of words
1	Classroom Discussion	23	7,018
2	Group Discussion	14	20,874
3	Group Presentation	10	24,897
4	Debate	2	8,349
	Total	46	61,138

of the spoken texts produced by Department of English students. Meanwhile, qualitative approach is used to analyze the quantitative data and its representation of discourse strategies and the reasons why students employ certain discourse strategies used by the students during their exploratory talks.

The data in this study were collected from the students at the Department of English, Faculty of Letters, Universitas Negeri Malang. The data are in the forms of utterances from the students recorded during their debate performances in conducting Speaking for Academic Purposes' assignments. Moreover, the students' utterances during their exploratory talk contribute to corpus building of UMSpEAKs as part of collection of naturally occurring spoken texts in Universitas Negeri Malang.

In gathering the data, the students are asked to perform a debate during their Speaking for Academic Purposes classes. The performance is recorded so that every utterance is ready to be transcribed. Then, the results of the students' recordings during their debate are transcribed and tabulated to find out the corpora of the students' utterances. We are aware that the recording process will impact on the students' unnatural behavior. Therefore, the recording process is done habitually, as an attempt to diminish the students' unnatural behavior. By doing so, the researchers might get reliable data on the students. As this is a qualitative research, the process of getting the sampling is considered as an interactive and purposive process where participants may be defined through ongoing data analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Morse, 1994). Therefore, we are able to define which participants to be analyzed in this study.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

This part describes and elaborates the result of the research on the students' spoken utterances when they are taking Speaking for Academic Purpose classes. The transcribed data are part of UMSpEAKs corpus with the following profile:

From Table 1, it can be seen that the total words from the students' utterances are 61,138 from 46 speech events including classroom discussion, group discussion, group presentation and debate. However, this study focuses on the students' utterances when they are conducting a debate and find out the discourse strategies.

As has been mentioned previously, Speaking for Academic Purposes course intends to develop the students' ability in advanced level by employing important language functions in presenting current issues, panel discussions and debates. Thus, the course learning outcomes are formulated as follows:

1. the students are able to employ appropriate language functions in conducting a seminar
2. the students are able to conduct a seminar by demonstrating the responsibilities of people involved
3. the students are able to organize a panel discussion based on the dynamic characteristics of panel discussion
4. the students are able to conduct a panel discussion based on the responsibilities of people involved
5. the students are able to employ appropriate language functions in conducting a debate
6. the students are able to prepare and conduct a debate.

Based on the formulation of the course learning outcomes, it shows that the students are basically performing exploratory talks in the way that they have opportunities to experiment with the language they are learning. Mercer (2008) has pointed out some important characteristics of having exploratory talks which are most probably happening during the teaching and learning processes in Speaking for Academic Purpose classes. One characteristic in exploratory talks is related to the agreement seeking for joint decision which might be from the way that students share relevant information and listens actively to each other. In order to have joint decision, students need to have communication strategies to narrate, scaffold, explain, paraphrase, repeat, question, borrow and many other things (Tarone, 1978; Cegala, 1988; Van der Stuyf, 2002; and Dalton-Puffer, 2009). Therefore, this research is conducted in order to find out the students' discourse strategies during their debate performances in the way they connect their utterances either by using coordinating conjunctions or subordinate conjunctions

As one of speech events, conducting a debate might provide students some opportunities to practice their exploratory talks, to develop objectivity toward controversial questions, and to develop their ability to reason logically.

The following is an excerpt from one of the students during their debate performance in Speaking for Academic Purposes class:

**So**, well for my point of view those kind of transplanted is should be considered as a serious and risky thing. Especially for children, well, being a normal person, **I mean** normal is be born with complete organs. Your body is complete is everyone dreamed especially for, for parents. Parents always want to give the best everything, everything for their child **and** make sure that their child have a perfect luck. **So**, one here for example when their, their child have lost their fingers, **so** maybe transplanted is one of the, the way that doctor can be offered to the parents, **but** here first **I stated** that transplanted surgery needs more money. **Of** course, every, every issues, every problems usually started with financial problem. **So, as we know**, transplanted is one of surgery, one of surgery, one of big surgery **I mean so**, indeed surgery needs money and that's, that's actually the classic problem in every basic problem in every issues. **So**, here, ... needs money **I mean** here not only for the surgery. Usually, patient, every people or patient that have got transplanted organs in everywhere especially here the case is in fingers have to set **a kind of** therapy. That's also cost money of course. **So**, the parents should provide money not only for the surgery itself, but also the money for the therapy.

The students' excerpt show that the talk consists of some discourse strategies to connect the ideas between one sentence to another. Those strategies are in the form of:

1. The use of discourse markers

Discourse markers or might be called as pragmatic markers help bridge switches from one section to another which may include the use of coordinate conjunctions, subordinate conjunctions, adverbials, prepositional phrases, and prepositions. Other examples might include gambits, aspects of conversational organization, such as turn taking patterns, interruptions, adjacency pairs, and repairs (Keller, 1981). The bold phrases found from the excerpt such as **I mean, I stated** become the markers to relate the sentences when the speaker was explaining her point and her opinion on the topic. Even though debate performance provides opportunities for students to give reasons, the use of those phrases, especially

when it becomes repetitive, shows the speaker's subjectivity as the explanation comes from her own opinion. At times, it is nice to give students some ample time to use the language by giving their opinion, but they need to practice to provide more scientific talk to support what they have in their mind. It is also in line with the result of previous studies done by Skovholt, (2016) that within Scandinavian educational research, in conducting group discussions and classroom interaction, students' scientific language in their production is quite a few.

## 2. The use of coordinator conjunction **and, but, so**

The use of connector "and" comes in quite various ways as it might indicate to connect sentences and form a compound sentence with the function of giving additional information. The word "but" is used to connect sentences indicating contrast. One idea in the sentence would be in contrast with another idea within one sentence. Then, the word "so" is used to connect sentences showing result.

The students' excerpt indicates the use of those coordinator conjunctions to connect one sentence to another. However, its use is basically to relate her idea as her own personal domain in asserting her claims, ideas and opinions. The excerpt does not indicate her attempt to relate her ideas and opinions to more scientific talk to in terms of relating to objective evidence to explain the topic.

## 4. Conclusions and Suggestions

Though it is still early to conclude that the students taking Speaking for Academic Purposes produce more mundane talk than scientific talk, this study shows that most students are inclined to assert their opinions and ideas for the proposed topic. It does not mean that they are on the wrong foot, but as the purpose of the course is to prepare them use the language in academic contexts, the students need to focus more on how to relate their opinions and ideas with relevant and related evidences to be more objective and scientific.

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