Pragmatic Markers Used by Saudi Undergraduate EFL Learners in Oral Classroom Presentations at Albaha University

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How to cite:
 Alzahrani, S. A. (2023). Pragmatic Markers Used by Saudi Undergraduate EFL Learners in Oral Classroom Presentations at Albaha University. *International Journal of Linguistics and Translation Studies 4*(4).34-45. https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlts.v4i4.380

Abstract

The current study investigated the use of pragmatic markers during oral classroom presentations by Saudi Arabian undergraduate EFL learners at Albaha University, Saudi Arabia. The use of pragmatic markers in academic contexts such as presentations is significant as failure to use these markers can cause poor comprehension by audience members and instructors who are tasked with grading such work. The method involved categorising and sub-categorising the pragmatic markers used as well as the linguistic meanings and pragmatic functions of these markers. The data were collected using audio recordings of students' oral presentations and were analysed based on Fraser's (1996) classification and functions of pragmatic markers. A sample (n=20) of Saudi undergraduate EFL learners participated in this study (males: n=10; females: n=10). The results show that in their oral presentations, Saudi EFL undergraduate students tend to use deference and paraphrase markers most frequently, which may reflect Saudi religious and cultural conventions. However, the students' use of interjections, pausing, and cohesion in their presentations was poor. There is a need to help Saudi Arabian undergraduate EFL learners improve their knowledge and use of pragmatic markers so they can make better oral presentations both at university and in their future careers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Achieving pragmatic competence in a second language (L2) is a crucial part of teaching or using a L2; gaining pragmatic competence requires gaining a good understanding of the relevant cultural-social complexities of the target L2 (Al-Kahtani, 2005; Krasner, 1999).

Pragmatic markers, also known as discourse markers, are an essential aspect of achieving pragmatic competence; these devices serve as cues for a listener to interpret a speaker or writer's intended meaning, indicate the speaker's attitude, mark transitions between ideas, and signpost the organisation of the discourse (Schiffrin, 1987). Pragmatic markers often take the form of short words or phrases that provide information about a speaker's attitude, emphasis, or stance on a particular topic. In academic presentations, pragmatic markers play a crucial role in structuring the content and guiding the audience through the presentation. Pragmatic markers can be used to signpost transitions between different parts of the presentation, highlight key points or concepts, and convey the speaker's opinion or stance on the topic in question (Schiffrin, 1987). Given the importance of clear communication in academic settings, the effective use of pragmatic markers can greatly enhance the coherence and clarity of a presentation (Fraser, 2009). By signalling the speaker's intended meaning and emphasising key points, pragmatic markers help to keep the audience engaged and focused on the central ideas of a presentation. Therefore, understanding and using pragmatic markers effectively are invaluable requirements for any academic presenter.

The use of pragmatic markers is strongly associated with effective communication and is essential in achieving coherence and cohesion in discourse (Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 1999). In academic settings, pragmatic markers contribute to the clarity and organisation of presentations (Yuan, 2006). By using pragmatic markers, presenters can guide their audience through their presentation, highlight key points, and facilitate understanding. The use of pragmatic markers is an essential skill for effective communication in academic contexts. In conclusion, as the use of pragmatic markers plays a critical role in facilitating effective communication in academic presentations, the researcher sought to investigate this topic among Saudi undergraduate EFL students enrolled at Albaha University, Saudi Arabia by addressing the following research questions (RQs):

1. What pragmatic markers are used by Saudi undergraduate EFL learners during their oral classroom presentations?

2. What are the categories and sub-categories of the pragmatic markers used by Saudi undergraduate EFL learners during their oral classroom presentations?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores the importance and use of pragmatic markers in academic presentations, drawing on relevant academic sources. Pragmatic markers, or discourse markers, are a fundamental aspect of spoken and written communication; they play an essential role in structuring and organising discourse and facilitating effective communication in various contexts, including academic presentations.

Pragmatic markers serve many functions in discourse: marking transitions, indicating the speaker's attitude, and signalling the organisation of discourse (Schiffrin, 1987; Hazhar et al,2021). In academic presentations, pragmatic markers are particularly important as they help presenters guide their audience through complex concepts and ideas, highlight important points, and make connections between ideas (Yuan, 2006). Using pragmatic markers is strongly correlated with effective communication and is essential in making discourse coherent and cohesive in discourse (Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 1999). The use of pragmatic markers can improve the clarity and organisation of academic presentations (Yuan, 2006; Fraser, 2009). For example, Yuan (2006) found that the use of discourse markers such as *firstly, secondly,* and *finally* in academic presentations helped audiences coherently and clearly understand the content.

The use of pragmatic markers can influence the audience's perception of the presenter's competence and credibility. Fraser (2009) found that the use of discourse markers such as *however, in contrast, and nevertheless* in academic presentations contributed to better

perceptions of the presenter's competence and expertise. However, it is essential to note that the appropriate use of pragmatic markers depends on the context and audience. The overuse or inappropriate use of pragmatic markers can lead to confusion and decrease the audience's comprehension of the content (Schiffrin, 1987).

In summary, pragmatic markers play a crucial role in facilitating effective communication in academic presentations. Their use contributes to the coherence, clarity, and organisation of the content, and influences an audience's perception of the presenter's competence and credibility. However, presenters must use pragmatic markers appropriately, by considering the context and audience

3. METHOD

Research design can be defined as the sum of procedures, such as data collection and data analysis, that are employed in the research process to obtain results (Creswell, 2012). The general purpose of this study was to describe and analyse the use of pragmatics markers by Saudi EFL undergraduates during their classroom oral presentations. To achieve these objectives, the researcher sought to employ pragmatics as a discourse analysis (DA) approach (Creswell, 2012; Dörnyei, 2007). Based on this design, the data were collected qualitatively using audio-recordings of the students' oral presentations, which were then transcribed and analysed using a mixed-method approach (quantitative and qualitative data analysis). Combining qualitative and quantitative methods in determining the functions of pragmatic markers was necessary to quantify and describe the use of these markers in terms of their linguistic meanings as well as to understand the probable intentions of the presenters in using these pragmatic markers based on the linguistic and pragmatic contexts (Schiffrin, 1987).

3.1. Participants

A sample of Saudi undergraduate EFL learners ($N=20$; males: $n=10$; females: $n=10$)

studying at Albaha University was recruited for this study. A purposive sampling method combined with a homogeneity strategy was used to select suitable subjects (Creswell, 2012). The subjects were homogeneous in terms of their L1 (Arabic), their field of study, proficiency level, and the type of classes they attended. The subjects were all studying English on the bachelor's degree program offered at a Malaysian university. Besides, the students were attending classes in applied linguistics in the second semester of their studies. In terms of the subjects' language proficiency level, they had been enrolled at the University after achieving a minimum IELTS band score of 6–9, as required by the university. The selection of 30 students allowed the researcher to attain an adequate saturation point to allow the objectives of the study to be achieved (Bird & Liberman, 2001). The saturation point marks the point during the data collection at which the collected data are enough to confirm the themes that have emerged, the research purpose, and the conclusions (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). After obtaining the students' and professors' consent to record them during classes, the students' academic classroom presentations were recorded by the researcher.

3.2.Procedures

To investigate Saudi undergraduate EFL learners' use of pragmatics markers in academic classroom presentations, data collection involved making audio recordings of the spoken content of these presentations. Audio recording enabled the researcher to collect naturally occurring speech data in the form of objective audible material (Creswell, 2012; Dörnyei, 2007). This method helped the researcher to capture a detailed account of the students' speech in terms of their use of pragmatic markers. This approach also enabled the researcher to listen to the presentations multiple times to conduct an in-depth analysis and capture fine-grained details of the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of the subject's language use. As such, 20 oral presentations were recorded using the iPhone mobile voice recorder application during the third semester at Albaha University in 2023. Each presentation lasted between 5–10 minutes. The

audio recordings were then transcribed to allow the researcher to analyse the presenters' use of discourse markers. The researcher opted to investigate the use of pragmatic markers in oral presentations because they provide an ideal setting for the use of a variety of pragmatic markers by the target students.

3.3.Data Analysis

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach featuring both quantitative and qualitative methods for data analysis. Quantitative procedures were used to analyse the data to produce descriptive statistics. These measurements included central tendency statistics which included mean and dispersion, which included standard deviation, variance, minimum, and maximum values. Meanwhile, a qualitative approach was used to analyse the oral discourse (recordings of the students' presentations). The presentations were expected to feature different types of pragmatic markers used by the students during their oral presentations. When analysing discourse of this type and genre, verbal description represents a major tool used by the researcher to present, analyse, and interpret the data. Using a mixed-methods approach provides data gathered from different perspectives and may enable the researcher to identify commonalities among the qualitative and quantitative data and results. In terms of the use of DA, the researcher adopted the analytical approach proposed by Alkhawaja (2023) and Fraser (1996) which includes three major types of pragmatic markers: (i) lexical, (ii) commentary, and (iii) parallel markers. Pragmatic interjections also represent robust pragmatic markers which are used to communicate emotions. Interjections are used to precisely convey the exact meaning of a speaker's feelings (Norrick 2009).

4. RESULTS

The present study employed a sample of ten Saudi EFL university students; their respective academic class presentations were recorded and subjected to DA to identify their use of pragmatic markers.
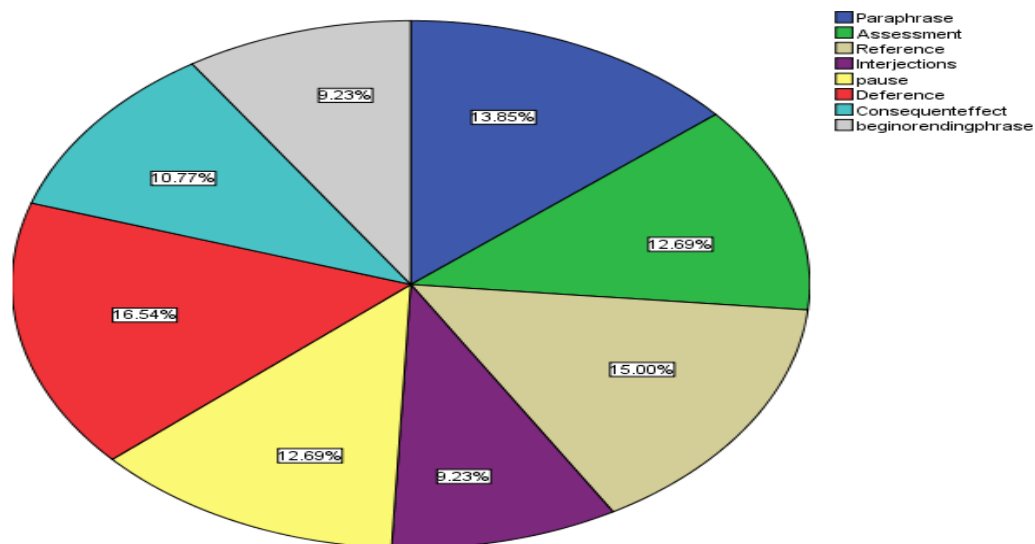
Figure 1. *Total mean averages of students' use of pragmatic markers in oral presentations*

As Figure 1 shows, the students' use of pragmatic markers differed in prevalence. Deference markers (i.e., thanks, appreciate it, welcome, etc.) were the most frequently used pragmatic markers (16.54%) followed by reference (cohesiveness), paraphrasing, assessment and pausing markers (15%, 13.85%, 12.69%, and 12.69%, respectively). In addition, the total mean of students using consequence markers like (firstly, secondly/ first, after that, etc.) was just 10.77%. Finally, the total mean of interjections (yeah, ok, oh, etc.) used by students and beginning/ending markers was 9.23% for both.

4.1. Central Tendency

Table 1 (below) provides statistics about the results of the Saudi University students' use of pragmatic markers in oral presentations.

Table 1. *Central tendency statistics*

	Paraphrase	Assessment	Reference	Interjection	Pause	Deference	Consequent effect	Beginning/ ending phrase
Mean	3.60	3.30	3.90	2.40	3.30	4.30	2.80	2.40
Median	4.00	4.00	4.00	2.00	3.00	4.50	3.00	2.00
Mode	4	1	3[a]	1	3	2[a]	3	2

Table 1 (above) provides detailed statistics on central tendency (mean, mode, and medians) across the use of pragmatic markers used by all students involved in the study. The highest mean score (4.30) was observed for *deference markers.* Students scored higher mean scores in their use of *reference* and *paraphrase* markers (3.90 and 3.60, respectively). The mode for these data was *paraphrase markers* (value = 4) which suggests that it is the most frequently used pragmatic marker.

4.2.Qui-square

Table 2 (below) tabulates the Chi-square test procedure variables into categories and compares the observed and expected frequencies across categories.

Table 2. *Chi-square tests*

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)	Point Probability
Pearson Chi-Square	30.000[a]	27	.314	1.000		
Fisher's Exact Test	28.680			1.000		
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.056[b]	1	.152	.181	.091	.018
N of Valid Cases	10					

a. 40 cells (100.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is .20.

b. The standardised statistic is 1.434.

There was a significant association between the use/selection of pragmatic markers by category across the students' performance: degree of freedom (df) = 27 = 40.11, p < .05. Similarly, linear computation shows a significant association where the degree of freedom is (1) = 3.84, p < .05. These results appear to suggest that the students used a similar range of pragmatic markers when making their oral presentations.

5. DISCUSSION

The results discussed above suggest that Saudi students use a range of different pragmatic markers when presenting their oral presentations. These pragmatic markers are commonly used by speakers in oral communications (Fraser, 2009). This fact implies that the students opt for using pragmatic markers to add cohesion and structure to their oral presentations. Interestingly, the students tended to use deference (thanks, thank you, nice, ok, welcome, etc.) more frequently than any other type, which suggests that they are very concerned about being appreciated by the audience. This is likely because, in Arab cultures, which are strongly

collectivist, there is an emphasis on retaining positive face and establishing connectedness with others (Danielewicz-Betz & Mamidi, 2009; Al-Khatib, 2006). For Feghali (1998) social life in Arab regions can be characterised as situation-centred where loyalty to the wider group (in this context, the students' audience) is more important than individual considerations.

Moreover, the frequency of use of beginning and ending markers was similar to that of the use of deference markers, suggesting an element of overlap between these two categories of pragmatic markers in terms of their usage. For example, students tended to use deference markers such as "thank you, ok," or "nice" as ending or closing pragmatic markers. However, in terms of other aspects of the oral-presentation-based discourses of the Saudi students in this study, the use of paraphrase markers was also very common. The use of paraphrase markers indicates that students may have a problem selecting the appropriate lexical expression to express their desired meaning at certain points in their oral presentations. This fact appears clear when we consider the high total mean use of pause markers used by the students, which likely indicates a lack of confidence to proceed or protracted thinking time. One more interesting finding is that students used few reference markers in their presentations and resorted to using interjections (yes, ok, no, yeah, etc.) to compensate. Alkhawaja et al. (2023) found similar results when they observed that students excessively repeated the same pragmatic markers in the same parts of their presentations. This use of interjections in the current study may indicate that students could be using these pragmatic markers as fillers to compensate for any periods of silence that may have occurred during the delivery of their presentations. The low scores for the use of reference and interjection markers point to a problem with the students' understanding of the use of these pragmatic markers, which is probably due to the generally poor knowledge of pragmatic markers in English among Saudi students, at least in this study. The students scarcely used interjection markers to indicate turn imitators, ending markers, or gesture indicators. Norrick (2009) reported that a great deal of the interactional meaning of pragmatic interjections derives from their characteristic position as turn initiators. Indeed, when standing at the beginning of a turn, pragmatic interjections appear to serve as points of reference, indicating how the following utterance is intended to be understood

6. CONCLUSION

The Saudi EFL undergraduate students in this study tended to use deference and paraphrase markers most frequently in their oral presentations. This probably suggests their interest in showing respect to the audience and ensuring their positive face/self-esteem (Brown,

2006 Sifianou, 2011) which reflects some important elements of Saudi religious and cultural conventions. However, Saudi students need to improve their knowledge of how to use pragmatic markers such as interjections, pausing, and cohesion as their poor performance in these aspects implies that Saudi students need to be better trained in the use of such pragmatic markers when making oral presentations as a crucial language learning point at the university level.

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Appendices
Appendix 1
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
St1	8	1	6	3.75	1.832	3.357
St2	8	1	6	3.88	1.885	3.554
St3	8	1	6	4.00	1.852	3.429
St4	8	1	4	2.75	1.488	2.214
St5	8	1	6	3.62	1.847	3.411
St6	8	2	7	4.50	1.927	3.714
St7	8	1	4	2.75	1.035	1.071
St8	8	1	3	2.00	.756	.571
St9	8	1	4	2.38	1.302	1.696
St10	8	1	4	2.87	1.246	1.554
Valid N (listwise)	8					

Appendix 2

Distribution of the use of pragmatic markers in the students' oral presentations by type and by student (anonymised with numbers)