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## Research Paper

# Pragmatic Markers Used by Arab Postgraduate Students in Classroom Oral Presentations

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## Abstract

The use of pragmatic markers as an aspect of language competence is necessary to present ideas and facts coherently. These markers mainly modify talk so that talk is comprehensible and meaningful, and help the audience follow the sequence of ideas. Failing to use these markers can negatively affect the audience's comprehension of the presentation and consequently affect the student's academic achievement. To this end, this study investigated the pragmatic markers used by Arab students during classroom oral presentations. The study focused on identifying the categories and sub-categories of markers as well as examining their linguistic meaning and pragmatic functions. The data were collected using audio-recordings of students' oral presentations and were analyzed based on Fraser's (1996) classification and functions of pragmatic markers. The findings can inform better oral presentation performance of ESL/EFL learners in general and postgraduate students in particular. They add up to the literature of pragmatic discourses.

**Keywords:** Academic Discourse; Arab Postgraduate Students; Pragmatic Markers, Classroom Oral Presentation, Discourse Analysis.

## 1. Introduction

Oral presentation is adopted in modern classrooms as a method of soft skills learning, which is recommended to be part of the conventional teaching and learning method (Hincks, 2010; Miima et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2013; Young, 2008). Shakir (2009) noted that classroom oral presentation can achieve a number of purposes. First, it gives second or foreign language learners opportunities to practice speaking in the target language and demonstrate levels of self-learning and understanding of the course material. Second, oral presentation is used by professors as an assessment tool to evaluate students' language production and measure their ability to effectively communicate information in the presentation to the audience. Third, presenting orally to an audience enables the audience to easily comprehend the topic being presented. Finally, the use of audio, visual, and textual illustrations in an oral presentation helps a presenter to keep on topic and support the key ideas being presented.

In Malaysian universities, Arab postgraduate students are asked to present their academic work, such as the reviews of articles, summaries of book sections, and proposals of mini or final projects orally in front of their professors and classmates in classrooms (Abdullah & Rahman, 2010). Oral presentations are usually conducted individually, in pairs, or in groups. Each presentation usually lasts for 5 to 10 minutes. During this short period, the students need to demonstrate efficient time management and effective presentation skills in order to communicate the information in the presentation smoothly and coherently. To achieve these objectives, the students usually make use of available technology tools, such as computers and computer programs such as Microsoft PowerPoint to create their slides. The use of these technologies



contributes to better conceptualization of the ideas and facts being presented by the students (Hincks, 2010; Miima et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2013; Young, 2008).

However, the use of technologies during oral presentations is in fact insufficient to produce an effective presentation. In the institutional discourse of the classroom, other linguistic and pragmatic competencies are required to present the information smoothly and coherently, and in close connection to the context of the presentations (Gil-Salom & Benlloch-Dualde, 2016). One way to serve these purposes is through the use of pragmatic markers (henceforth PMs). The use of these markers can achieve several functions in classroom oral presentations. They can be useful tools to make the content of the presentation comprehensible and meaningful and to help audiences understand the speaker's intended meaning. Besides, PMs can help presenters to communicate their voices, persuade the audience, and meet their professors' expectations. However, the use/misuse of these markers might negatively affect the audience's comprehension of the material being presented and consequently affect the students' academic achievement. It is, therefore, necessary to investigate these markers as used by Arab postgraduate students in an attempt to help these students improve their speaking performance in the academic context.

Although oral presentations are the main instrument for learning and teaching in Malaysian universities and probably elsewhere, they are not yet given enough attention in terms of language use in general and the use of PMs in particular. Although very rare, past studies have paid more attention to oral presentation from the perspective of its design (Živković, 2014), identity roles (Zareva, 2013), anxiety (Zumusni et al., 2010), gender (Zareifard & Alinezhad, 2014), presentation skill (Alwi & Sidhu, 2013), self-assessment of oral presentation skills (Gil-Salom & Benlloch-Dualde, 2016), and vocabulary used during oral presentation (Zareva, 2016). The intent of this study was to fill this gap in the literature to pay more attention to the types and functions of the pragmatic markers as used by Arab students while presenting academic tasks orally in front of their classmates and professors.

The general aim of the current study was to examine the use of PMs by Arab postgraduate students to achieve a pragmatically coherent classroom oral presentation. The specific objectives were to identify the occurrences of markers, to determine the pragmatic functions achieved by the use of these markers, and to describe the problematic aspects of usage in the oral presentations of these students. Based on these objectives, the following research questions were asked:

- 1) What are the types and functions of PMs that were used by Arab postgraduate EFL students during their classroom oral presentations?
- 2) What are the problematic aspects of using PMs by Arab postgraduate students during their oral presentations?

## 2. Literature Review

The focus of previous research on PMs (Babanoğlu, 2014; Fernández et al., 2014; Wei, 2011) was to explain the ways these markers can help speakers to communicate meaningful speech that is pragmatically coherent. Nevertheless, there has been controversy among researchers regarding the terminologies, operational definitions, and classification of these markers. Even the process of assigning the functions of these markers was not without issues as the functions of these markers vary based on the context whether social, cultural, or textual (Schleef, 2009). Despite these points of controversy, there is a common agreement on the fact that the misuse of these markers can create misunderstanding of the intended messages of the speakers. In the following sub-sections, the definition, properties, and classification of PMs will be explained.

### 2.1. Definition of PMs

PMs can be defined as lexical words or expressions, such as 'of course', 'anyway', 'ok', 'well', and 'actually', among others that signal pragmatic (contextual) relationships between the segments of speech (Fraser, 1999, p. 931). They derive their meanings from the context in which they occur. Such a context provides an interpretation of their meaning and explains the interpersonal relationships among the participants in the interactions. Although PMs do not interfere with the meaning of the proposition in which they exist, they communicate the message that the speakers would like to convey in such a proposition (Fraser, 2009). In this sense, PMs operate at the interpersonal level of communication to set the relationships among the speech utterances and the interactants beyond the linguistic meaning of the utterances in the discourse. Unlike discourse markers, which help to structure and organize the segments of speech, PMs make the

content of speech comprehensible and meaningful and help the audiences follow the sequence of the ideas and facts easily and smoothly (Aijmer, 2013; Cuenca, 2008; Huddleston & Fairhurst, 2013; Norrick, 2009a, 2009b).

## 2.2. Properties of PMs

In his paper 'An account of Discourse Markers', Fraser (2009, pp. 3-5) looked at PMs such as 'certainly', 'please', and 'indeed' as pragmatic expressions that can serve a number of purposes in conversation, such as achieving semantic relationships, realizing pragmatic functions, and expressing conceptual meanings. Fraser introduced what he considered as a reference framework that can work for analyzing PMs. Based on this framework, PMs are those lexical words and expressions that must be "part of a discourse segment", must not be "part of the propositional content of the message conveyed," "do not contribute to the meaning of the proposition", and "do signal aspects of the message the speaker wishes to convey." Semantically, PMs are free morphemes, which have specific meanings and can stand alone in the sentence without interfering with the meaning of the sentence. Syntactically, they can be located at the sentence initial position. Functionally, they carry an independent pragmatic function. However, the pragmatic function can add additional meaning to the message being communicated in the sentence in which they occur. In (1), the pragmatic marker 'please' meets all the criteria aforementioned. First, it is a free morpheme that has a specific meaning. Second, it is attached to the discourse segment to signal a polite request without interfering with the meaning of the illocutionary act of the next message 'sitting down'. 'Please' in this case can be used with other illocutionary acts such as 'open the door' or 'do your homework' or any other type of message. However, the use of the marker signals the speaker's wish of communicating a polite request. Without the marker 'please', the request will be a direct order that might be taken as impolite behavior. Similarly, in (2), the deference marker 'sir' has the properties of sentence initial, free morpheme, and specific message of respect added to the illocutionary force in the next segment, and achieves the function of showing deference.

(1) *Please*, sit down.

(2) *Sir*, you must listen to me.

## 2.3. Classification of PMs

Based on Fraser (1996), PMs can be classified under three major categories, namely the lexical basic, commentary, and parallel PMs. Under each of these major categories, other 11 sub-categories can be identified. These sub-categories include the performative expression (*I promise, I (hereby) apologize, etc.*), pragmatic idioms (*please, kindly, perhaps, maybe, etc.*) assessment (*hopefully, ideally, importantly, etc.*) manner-of-speaking (*frankly, generally, Y'know, etc.*), evidential (*clearly, possibly, surely, etc.*) consequent-effect (*lastly, to begin, to sum up, etc.*), hearsay (*it appears, it has been claimed, etc.*), mitigation (*If it's not too much trouble, If you don't mind, etc.*) speaker displeasure (*damned, damn well, etc.*), vocatives (*Mr. President, Waiter, etc.*), and solidarity (*My friend, look, etc.*). This classification was adopted in the present study for various reasons. First, Fraser proposed a comprehensive classification that covers a wide range of markers categories and lexical choices. Second, the researcher provides comprehensive and explicit functions of the DMs and PMs including inclusion criteria to verify the DMs and PMs from other non-markers. Third, these frameworks were used in previous discourse studies, such as (Adewibowo, 2018; Adriani, 2017; Gvritishvili, 2020; Quartararo, 2020). These studies based their analysis on the two frameworks.

## 2.4. Review of Past Studies

In recent years, oral presentations have become a necessary component of modern classrooms in the university context (Hincks, 2010; Miima et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2013; Young, 2008). Towards more student-centered classrooms, oral presentations have started to replace the traditional method of teaching in which the teacher is the dominant of the class and the only source of learning. Using these presentations is not, however, an easy task to do. They require students to possess a level of awareness and knowledge of language elements such as the PMs to render an effective presentation. Previous research on the use of PMs in oral presentations, although very rare, was not without limitations. First, previous research was limited to the investigation of certain markers. Zareva (2013), for example, investigated the use of first person singular pronouns 'I' and 'me' and determiner 'my' as communicators of identity during oral academic presentations. By using audio-recording of oral presentations for 20 graduate students during their proposal of final projects, the findings showed that students were greatly affected by their agenda to project their selves during oral

presentations. Despite the long list of markers that can be used in an oral presentation, the investigation was limited to only three linguistic devices. The use of other markers therefore still needs to be further explored.

Second, previous research investigated the use of markers in various academic settings other than classroom oral presentations. Lin (2017) examined the use of pragmatic markers that can reinforce or attenuate the pragmatic force of speech acts as used by six students during their dissertation defenses. The researcher analyzed the modal verbs (would / can / could / might / may / should), adverbial expressions of certainty/uncertainty (really / probably / actually / exactly / certainly / maybe / I think / kind of / sort of / I guess / I thought / in fact / of course / just/seem(s), and colloquial modifiers (I mean / you know). The findings showed that the modifiers were used extensively by the students and committees with the modal verb 'would', the minimizer 'just', and the colloquial 'I mean' being the most frequently used modifiers. The qualitative analysis revealed that the modifiers were used strategically to secure knowledge in the academic encounter and to construct interactive relationships among the interactants. Although this study explored an important academic setting, i.e., the dissertation defense, the use of these markers in a similar academic setting such as the classroom oral presentation still needs to be investigated.

In another academic encounter, Ahmad and Maros (2017) investigated the types and pragmatic functions of 'hedges', as one type of PM, from the politeness point of view in student-supervisor consultations. The focus of the study was on explaining how these markers were used by Arab students to mark their politeness. For this purpose, the two researchers recorded 8 supervisory consultations between the students and their supervisors in a Malaysian university. Using Shengming (2009) as the framework of analysis, the findings showed that the students used high frequencies of the markers with the use of modal shields the most frequently used type. However, the use of the markers was not always appropriate to the linguistic and social context between the students and the supervisor. The findings also showed that the use of the markers by the students signaled a strategic behavior to keep a safe relationship with their supervisors in order to achieve certain academic needs, such as persuading, getting approval, and showing knowledge. Although the study clarified how the Arab students used these markers in their speech with their supervisors, it only covered the use of the markers by the students with their supervisors during supervisory consultations. There is still a need to explore how Arab students use these markers in different academic settings, such as classroom oral presentations. This exploration would yield a better understanding of how these markers are used by students in various academic settings to achieve pragmatic and discourse functions.

Third, a number of past studies conducted on pragmatic markers attempted to highlight the usage issues of these markers in the academic setting without providing a clear picture of the various types and sources of these issues. Yu and Cadman (2009), for example, investigated two types of markers, namely, frame markers (in conclusion/to sum up/let's stop here/thank you) and person markers (I/we/our) as used by 33 female learners in Taiwan during their oral presentations. The data consisted of 40 audio and video-recordings of presentations. The findings revealed two main usage issues of the markers. First, the students used low frequencies of the markers during their presentations. Second, the students were uncertain of the right marker to use which led them to employ inaccurate markers frequently. Although the researchers ascribed the issues to a lack of students' knowledge, the study did not attempt to highlight the real reasons and the sources of erroneous production in the students' speech. In another study by Arya (2020), the researcher investigated the frequencies and functions of discourse markers in classroom discussions of Thai university students. For this purpose, Fung and Carter's framework (2007) was used for the analysis. The findings showed that the students employed 34 devices with 'OK', 'but' and 'so' the most used markers. Besides, these markers served the students to confirm their knowledge, hedge their speech, reformulate their ideas, and repair their talk. Furthermore, the students produced inappropriate markers to the context, the researcher attributed this deficiency of use to the students' limited knowledge and lack of awareness of using such devices. However, the researcher did not point out exactly the aspect of deficiency or the sources of these deficiencies. This gap is filled in the present study by giving further attention to DMs with regard to usage problems in oral presentations.

First language interference is an issue that plays an important role in second language learning. To investigate this issue, Nasser Alsager et al. (2020) aimed at a research that investigated the use of 'but' in English and its equivalent 'lakin' in Arabic as employed by native and non-native speakers of English in writing newspaper articles. By adopting Fraser's (1999) framework to assign the functions and positions of this marker, the findings showed that 'but' is used as a confirmation or addition marker by both native and non-native speakers. However, the Arabic equivalent 'lakin

functions as the primary correction. The findings also showed that Arabic speakers share the same usage of the word despite differences in their dialects.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design

Research design can be defined as the sum of procedures, such as data collection and data analysis that are employed in the research process in order to report the final results (Creswell, 2012). The selection of the research design is typically made based on the needs and objectives of the research (Creswell, 2013; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). The general purpose of this study was to describe and analyze the use of PMs by a group of EFL Arab postgraduate students during their classroom oral presentations. To meet these objectives, it was sought in this study to employ pragmatics as a discourse analysis approach (Creswell, 2012; Dörnyei, 2007). Based on this design, the data were collected in a qualitative method using audio-recording of the actual oral presentations of the students and then transcribed and analyzed using mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative). Combining the qualitative and quantitative methods in determining the functions of PMs in this study was necessary to quantify and describe the use of these markers at the linguistic meaning level as well as to understand the intention of the presenters based on the linguistic and pragmatic contexts (Schiffrin, 1987).

#### 3.2. Subjects

The subjects in this study were 30 Arab postgraduate students (males=9 and females=21). A purposive sampling method with a homogeneity strategy was used in the selection of the subjects (Creswell, 2013, p. 209). The subjects were homogeneous in terms of their first language, their field of study, proficiency level, and the type of classes they attended. The first language of the subjects was Arabic and they study English in the master's program offered at a Malaysian university. Besides, the students attend applied linguistics classes in the second semester of their studies. For their language proficiency level, these students had been enrolled in the faculty after passing a minimum of 6/9 band score in the IELTS as required by the faculty. The selection of 30 students allowed to reach the saturation point for the objectives of the study to be achieved (Bird & Liberman, 2001). The saturation point marks the point during the data collection in which the collected data are enough to confirm the emerged themes, research purpose, and conclusions (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). After obtaining the students' as well as the professors' consent for recording them during the normal classes, the students were recorded by the researcher (first author).

#### 3.3. Data Collection and Procedures

For the purpose of this study in investigating the use of PMs by Arab postgraduate students, the collection of the data involved using audio-recordings to qualitatively obtain actual classroom oral presentations of the students. Audio-recording is an instrument that can collect naturally occurring talk in the form of objective audible material (Creswell, 2012; Dörnyei, 2007). This method helped the researchers to capture the detail of the students' verbal interaction and the use of PMs. It also helped researchers listen to the same talk and repeat a number of times without the need for memorizing. Audio recordings were employed in previous studies that investigated DMs and PMs, such as (Ali & Mahadin, 2015; House, 2013; Laserna et al., 2014; Maschler, 2016; Rabab'ah, 2015). These studies found collecting the data using audio recording a reliable source that can help capture the details of the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of the subject's use of language. As such, thirty oral class presentations were recorded using a SONY LCD digital voice recorder during the second semester of the academic year 2018. Each presentation lasted for 10-20 minutes yielding a total of approximately 4-hour audio-recorded scripts. The audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim to prepare for analysis.

#### 3.4. Data Analysis Procedures

For the data analysis, the collected transcripts of the classroom oral presentations were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis included using descriptive calculations of the frequencies and percentages of the PMs. Following other researchers in similar studies (e.g., Yakubu, 2013), the obtained data were analyzed manually for the possible occurrences of PMs. The manual analysis involved reading the transcription extensively with more attention to the occurrences of the PMs. During the identification process of the markers, Fraser's (1996) taxonomy and criteria were considered. For the qualitative analysis, the expressed linguistic meaning and the realized pragmatic

functions were determined depending on the immediate context of the markers and the context of the oral presentation. To ensure that the identified markers linguistically and pragmatically fit Fraser's (1996) taxonomies and criteria, the following inclusive criteria were applied. A PM should:

- (1) be a free morpheme that carries meaning and stands alone in the sentences,
- (2) signal a message related or unrelated to the message in the next segment,
- (3) be located in initial positions, and
- (3) express semantic or pragmatic functions.

### 3.5. Analytical Framework

In this study, Fraser's (1996) framework was adopted to underpin the identification and functions of PMs as used by Arab postgraduate students in their classroom oral presentations. Based on this framework, PMs were coded into three major categories, namely, the lexical, commentary, and parallel pragmatic markers. Under each of these major categories, a number of sub-types can be identified as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Analytical Framework to Analyze PMs Based on Fraser (1996)*

	Type of marker	Major function	Example of PMs
Lexical Basic PMs	Performative	Specify the speaker's opinion toward the next proposition	<i>I promise/apologize, request, etc.</i>
	Pragmatic idioms	Signal the intended basic message force or the entire basic message	<i>please, kindly, perhaps, maybe, how about, what do you say, etc.</i>
Commentary PMs	Assessment	Signal the speaker's assessment of the world presented in the proposition	<i>amazingly, amusingly, annoyingly, appropriately, etc.</i>
	Manner-of-Speaking	Mark a comment on the manner of conveying the main message	<i>briefly, confidentially, fairly, etc.</i>
	Evidential	Mark the level of confidence held by the speaker towards the truth of the main message	<i>assuredly, certainly, clearly, etc.</i>
	Consequent-effect	Mark a comment on the main message that the following message is to serve as a consequent effect	<i>finally, in general, lastly, etc.</i>
	Hearsay	Mark a comment about the information source	<i>allegedly, I have heard, it appears, it is claimed, it is reported, etc.</i>
	Mitigation	Mark the speaker's intention to save the listener's face as a result of communicating the main message	<i>If it's not too much trouble, If you don't mind, etc.</i>
Parallel PMs	Vocative	Mention the addressee selected to receive the following message	<i>John, Mr. President, Colonel, Mom, Your Honor, etc.</i>
	Solidarity	Signals (un)solidarity or lack of it	<i>My friend, look, as your supervisor</i>
	Speaker displeasure	Reflect the speaker's annoyance	<i>darned, for the sake of God, etc.</i>

The use of Fraser's (1996) framework for the analysis of PMs was adopted for various reasons. First, the framework is comprehensive in its classification of PMs as it covers a wide range of marker categories and lexical choices. Meanwhile, Fraser (1996) provided a comprehensive and explicit list of functions of PMs including inclusion criteria to verify the PMs from other non-markers. Third, these frameworks were used in previous discourse studies, such as (Adewibowo, 2018; Adriani, 2017; Gvritshvili, 2020; Quartararo, 2020).

### 3.6. Coding Procedures and Inter-Rater Agreement

Denzin (2012) maintained that if various voices are heard during the analysis of the same script, data analysis can yield better understanding and interpretation. Inter-rater agreement refers to the process of obtaining external views from an independent panel of experts (Al-Qahtani, 2009). These experts usually sit and negotiate the workability and accuracy of the coding scheme and provide their feedback in the form of (dis)agreement. Their views are then used to arrive at trustworthy and reliability of findings. The independent panel of experts in the present thesis consisted of two researchers who were asked to assess the analytical frameworks and taxonomies adopted in the current study. The two raters were researchers who had published in the field of spoken discourse analysis and were familiar with descriptive and analytical data analysis. They were selected because they had a good experience in discourse analysis and research methods. Upon the completion of data collection and transcription in the present study, two scripts of oral presentations of the subjects were selected randomly to be used in the inter-rater agreement process. The selected transcripts formed

around 10% of the total collected data, which is considered enough for the reliability and agreement process (Hodson, 1999). The selected transcripts formed around 10% of the total collected data, which is considered enough for the reliability and agreement process (Hodson, 1999). The following steps were followed:

First, the initial analysis of the selected scripts was made by the principal researcher based on the adopted taxonomies and the criterion. Second, the two scripts, categories, sub-categories, and functions of the identified markers in the two scripts were printed in an Excel file in the form of columns and rows. Third, the research questions, taxonomies, criteria, and coding scheme were explained and discussed with the two raters. Fourth, the two raters were asked to provide their agreement/disagreement level upon each item in the categorization of the markers and their related linguistic features and functions as analyzed by the researcher. They were asked to scale their level of agreement/disagreement. Lastly, an inter-rater agreement analysis using Cohen's Kappa across the 11 points of comparison was conducted using SPSS (V.21). The findings (Table 2) show that the value of Cohen's Kappa was .895 and the  $p$ -value was  $a = .000$ . According to Mchugh (2012), the value of Kappa which is located between .8-.9 indicates strong similarity. Accordingly, it can be inferred that the Kappa measure in this study indicates that there is significant and strong similarity or agreement between the two raters about the identification of the 11 categories of PMs and their related functions.

Table 2: *Measure of Inter-Rater Agreement*

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	Approx. T <sup>b</sup>	Approx. Sig.
Measure of Agreement	Kappa	.896	.097	8.103	.000
N of Valid Cases		11			

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

In the following subsections, the major findings are reported and discussed in two main sections. In the first section, the types (major and sub-categories of PMs) and their achieved functions are reported and discussed to answer the first research question. In the second section, the problematic aspects of using PMs are reported.

##### 4.1. Types and Functions of PMs

The findings of the PMs used by the Arab students (Table 1) showed that the students used a total of 480 PMs under two main categories: the commentary PMs and the lexical basic PMs. The former was used more frequently (Fig. 1). The findings also showed that the Arab students did not employ any parallel PMs.

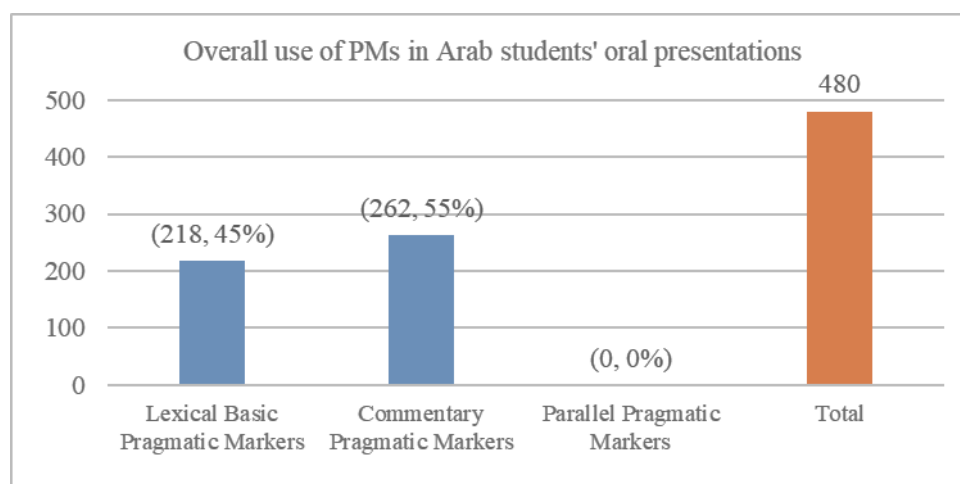


Figure. 1. Overall frequencies of PMs

Further analysis of the sub-categories of these markers (Table 2) showed that the use of these markers operated as message idiom, performative expressions, evidential, hearsay, and manner-of-speaking with the lexical basic message idioms (maybe, right? ok? let's) and the commentary evidential (basically, really, actually) as the most frequently used at 130 (27%) each. The performative expressions (I think / feel) were the second most frequently used PMs (88, 19%) and the hearsay (it is claimed/reported/said that someone said/forecasted/maintained that, according to someone/something, based on someone/something) and manner of speaking markers (generally, simply, you know) were third and fourth in

frequency at 82 (17%) and 50 (10%) respectively. The analysis also showed that the other functions that can be achieved by the use of PMs in oral presentations, such as the commentary consequent-effect, assessment, and mitigation in addition to the parallel markers of all types did not yield any frequencies. In the next section, more light is shed on the functions of PMs as achieved by the Arab students in their oral presentations.

Table 2. Frequencies of the Types of PMs

Major Categories	Function in Oral Presentations	PMs	f	%
Lexical Basic	Message idiom	<i>maybe, right?, ok?, let's</i>	130	27
	Performative expression	<i>I think/feel</i>	88	19
Commentary	Evidential	<i>basically, really, actually</i>	130	27
	Hearsay	<i>it is (claimed/reported/said that), Someone (said/forecasted/maintained) that, according to (someone/something), based on (someone/something)</i>	82	17
	Manner-of-speaking	<i>generally, simply, you know</i>	50	10
	Consequent-effect	Not used	0	0
Parallel	Assessment	Not used	0	0
	Mitigation	Not used	0	0
	Speaker displeasure	Not used	0	0
	Vocative	Not used	0	0
	Solidarity	Not used	0	0
	Total			480

#### 4.1.1. Functions of Lexical Basic PMs in Arab Students' Oral Presentations

Fraser (1996, p. 171) identified the lexical basic markers as expressions or idioms that provide additional information about the basic message and reflect the meaning as intended by the speaker. As illustrated in Table 2, Arab students used two types of lexical basic PMs, namely the message idioms and the performative expressions.

The message idioms are lexical basic markers that can stand alone in speech to modify the basic message in the following or prior utterance or sentence (Fraser, 1996, p. 176). Although pragmatic idioms are numerous in the English language, only four message idioms markers were used by the Arab students in their oral presentations including 'maybe', 'let's', 'right?', and 'ok?', with the last two markers newly discovered ones as used by the Arab students. In Example 1, the presenter explained the communicative frames that govern the student-teacher relationship.

##### Example 1

- 642        *So, the idea here is that the researchers decided that certain frames govern the relationship*  
 643        → *between the supervisor and teachers, **ok?** This relationship is built upon the student and*  
 644        → *supervisor' agenda, **ok?** So your agenda, for example, could be educative which means that you*  
 645        → *think of the methods, you think of how to improve students, **ok?***

In this example, the student noted that these frames are dependent on the interactants' agendas. While students had educational frames, teachers or supervisors had evaluative frames. The presenter used the message idiom 'ok' at the end of an utterance in the form of a question tag as a transition marker to achieve coherence by keeping the discourse ongoing and checking whether the audience was following. Pragmatically, this marker was used to elicit temporary confirmation without expecting a response from the audience. In this case, the student was able to engage the audience and motivate them to be active listeners.

The performative expressions can signal the pragmatic force of the basic message in the following utterance (Fraser, 1996, p. 174-175). These expressions can mainly include the performative expressions '*I (promise, apologize, request, etc.)*'. Although performative idioms are widely used in spoken discourses, none of the markers mentioned by Fraser (1996) were used by Arab students. In fact, the students used other PMs, such as '*I think*' and '*I feel*', which can serve the same functions as performative expressions. These two expressions signal and refine the pragmatic force in the basic message after them to a personal belief or feeling; they are thus considered variations of performative expressions. In Example 2, the Arab student was presenting about the abbreviation process used in online chat.



*Example 2*

233 → *And, **I think** we can say it is electronic dialect. Can we name it as that, Prof.? It is really difficult.*  
 234 *I have been doing games for years but still I cannot understand the way like the way we use*  
 235 *abbreviations.*

In this example, the presenter expressed that the use of abbreviations is widely spread nowadays in social media, so it can be called '*electronic dialect*'. However, the presenter was not sure whether he could label it as such. To reflect his opinion in the basic message '*we can say it is electronic dialect*' with a less level of confidence or certainty, the presenter used the performative expression '*I think*' as sentence-initial. The use of this type of marker specified the basic message force of the presenter's belief. Besides, it reduced the pragmatic force of his opinion, resulting in less imposition being placed on the audience.

The findings in this section are in contrast with the findings reached by Ahmad and Maros (2017), who found Arab students tending to appear less certain in front of their supervisors. In fact, the Arab students in the current study used evidential markers with higher frequencies, which reflected their higher degrees of confidence in front of their professors and classmates. While certain force idioms, such as 'maybe' and 'let's' were used only to express the aforementioned pragmatic functions, the message idioms 'ok?' and 'right?' played dual functions. Pragmatically speaking, they elicited temporary confirmation from the audience and engaged the audience to be active listeners. Linguistically, these message idioms contributed to the discourse coherence by keeping the discourse ongoing and by relating segments of speech together. These findings are in agreement with Rezaee et al. (2014) who found that the use of markers, such as 'ok' and 'you know' by non-native students establish a shared experience, draw students' attention to what went on in the classroom, and encourage students to get involved in the discussions.

**4.1.2. Functions of Commentary PMs in Arab Students' Oral Presentations**

Fraser (1996, p. 179) noted that commentary markers have "representation meaning" in addition to their "propositional meaning". In other words, these markers can provide conceptual information that signals the force of the message in the sentence in addition to its grammatical meaning. In the present study, the Arab students used three sub-categories of the commentary PMs, namely the evidential, hearsay, and manner-of-speaking PMs.

Evidential markers are one type of commentary markers that are syntactically derived from adverbs, such as "*certainly, clearly, definitely, evidently, indeed*", among others (Fraser, 1996, p. 182). These markers can be located at the confidence/lack of confidence scale. Words like '*definitely*' or '*surely*' are located at the top scale of confidence while markers like '*possibly*' or '*likely*' are located at a lower degree of confidence. Except for '*definitely*' and '*indeed*' as listed by Fraser (1996), the analysis of the evidential markers in the present study showed that new devices were typically and extensively used by Arab students. The new devices included the evidential markers '*basically*', '*really*', and '*actually*'. In Example 3, the Arab student wanted to communicate that people confused the meaning of the term 'linguistic features'. First, they think of utterances like '*maybe*' or '*you think*' as 'linguistic features'. Second, they think of 'linguistic features' as examples of '*register, jargon, dialect, [or] slang*'.

*Example 3*

035 → *Ok, so, **basically** when you guys hear the term linguistic features, you might think of linguistic*  
 036 → *features such as 'maybe', 'you think'. You **definitely** think of register, jargon, dialect, slang, but*  
 037 *they are not.*

As shown in the example, the two messages were prefaced by two evidential markers, '*basically*' and '*definitely*'. The use of the two commentary markers reflected the student's high confidence in his personal view in order to persuade the audience of such a view. The markers also prepared and guided the audience psychologically on how they would assess and process the forthcoming explanation of the topic being discussed.

The hearsay PMs was another sub-category of commentary markers used by the Arab students. In his model of PMs, Fraser (1996, p. 183) noted that the hearsay PMs are derived syntactically from adverbs, such as "*allegedly, purportedly, and reportedly*" or syntactic structures such as "*I have heard, it appears, it is/has been claimed/reported/rumored/said, or they say*". The analysis of the Arab students' uses of hearsay markers showed that only the syntactic structure '*it is claimed/reported/said that*' was used by the Arab students. However, the students used new markers functioning as hearsay commentary PMs, such as '*X said/forecasted/maintained that*', '*according to*

someone/something', and 'based on someone/something'. These markers were used in the students' oral presentations as depersonalization or avoidance strategies to shield themselves against any future consequences of their claims in case their claims were wrong or inaccurate. They were also used to reinforce the proposed ideas and facts by providing evidence based on information obtained from third-party sources. In Example 4, the student presented the difference between hedges/mitigators and boosters in terms of their modifications of the illocutionary force of speech acts.

*Example 4*

806 → **Based on Holmes (1984)**, hedges and mitigators are used to attenuate the illocutionary force of  
807 the speech act while boosters are used to reinforce it.

The student in this example reported that hedges are used for attenuation purposes while boosters are used for reinforcement purposes. Before stating this difference, the student used hearsay 'Based on Holmes (1984)'. By ascribing the reported proposition to a third-party source, the student avoided carrying full responsibility for the consequences of his proposition.

The last category of commentary PMs used by the Arab students was the manner-of-speaking type. Fraser (1996, p. 181) maintained that these markers are lexical words that are derived syntactically from adverbs like 'frankly', 'bluntly speaking', 'well', among others. They are also derived from other lexical expressions, such as 'to be honest' and 'Y'know'. Fraser (1996, p. 181) noted that these markers are basically employed by speakers to "signal a comment on the manner in which the basic message is being conveyed". Although there is a wide range of adverbs and expressions that can be used as manner-of-speaking in the English language, the Arab students' uses of this type of PMs in their oral presentations were limited to the use of the lexical expression 'Y'know'. In Example 5, the student discussed the role of computer applications in developing students' communication skills.

*Example 5*

087 So, for article one 'using of CMC' which is computer mediating communication, the students use  
088 a wide range of linguistic choices and functions. So basic computer release things related to  
089 → communication is a modern topic. **You know**, it has a lot of consequences that fall upon linguistic  
090 choices and their functions.  
091

In this example, the student communicated that such technologies can be a fertile environment for students to use the language. The presenter's basic message posited that the use of computers can encourage students to use a variety of linguistic expressions and achieve several language functions. To reinforce this message, the presenter used the commentary manner-of-speaking marker 'you know' at the sentence initial as a textual means to reinforce his proposition by showing his proposition as common knowledge that was shared by his audience. It was also a means to signal a message that requested indirectly the audience to appreciate and be in sympathy with the student's idea (Fraser, 1988).

In a similar setting of oral classroom presentations, Lin (2017) found markers, such as 'really', 'actually', 'I think', and 'maybe' used by students in dissertation defenses with similar frequencies used by the students in the present study. However, the findings in the present study showed that other types of English PMs, such as consequent-effect, assessment, mitigation, speaker displeasure, vocative, and solidarity markers were not used at all by the students. This phenomenon can be attributed either to the nature of academic oral presentations or the lack of these markers in linguistic repertoire of Arab students. By their nature, oral presentations are one-sided talk, which does not allow for one-to-one conversations. In such a semi-talk, mitigation markers, such as 'if I may interrupt you', 'If it's not too much trouble' or 'if you don't mind', among others, which signal the speaker's desire to reduce the face loss of the audience do not fit the context of the presentations. In addition, students conduct their oral presentations based on academic ideas and facts, so assessment markers reflecting strong emotions such as 'sadly' and 'unfortunately' or parallel markers, such as 'damn' or 'look' would not be acceptable. However, the lack of using consequent effect markers, such as 'to clarify', 'to sum up', or 'if I may illustrate the point', etc., which are in the heart of oral presentation organization and coherence can be attributed to the lack of these markers in the lexicon repertoire of the students. Similar findings were reached by Alkhawaja and Paramasivam (2015) who found that there were certain hedges that did not exist in the Arab students' linguistic repertoire.

## 4.2. Problematic Aspects of Using PMs

Although the Arab students were able to use several PMs during their oral presentations, the qualitative analysis revealed that the students faced a number of problems. In the following sub-sections, some light will be shed on these problems in an attempt to determine the aspect of the problems and the possible causes that led to them.

### 4.2.1. Unnecessary Addition of Markers

One of the problems that was noticed during the analysis of the students' presentations was the addition of unnecessary or extra markers in places that did not require them. In Example 6, the student discussed the linguistic features of online communication in social media, such as Facebook. He also listed the possible benefits of using Facebook as a social media network. As can be noticed, the student used the discourse marker 'and' twice in lines 28 and 29. The addition of this marker was unnecessary as it did not carry any procedural or representational meaning that can convey the basic messages that followed them. The reason behind the unnecessary addition of the marker 'and' in '*and particularly*' might be attributed to the first language interference because the Arabic language allows for the combination of 'and' and '*particularly*' (Nasser Alsager et al., 2020). However, the addition of the marker 'and' in line 29 could be attributed to poor grammatical knowledge of the student.

#### Example 6

- 27            *And so, essentially, today, we are focusing on the linguistic features of online communicative*  
 28        → *language **and** particularly on Facebook. So, Facebook, which is a well-known social networking*  
 29        → *website that a lot of people a lot of guys using, **and it** gives the opportunity to, create profiles*  
 30            *upload photos and do a lot of stuff. And, I think a lot of you guys have at least one account or*  
 32            *maybe more than one account, ha?*  
 33

### 4.2.2. Incorrect Use of Markers

The incorrect use of markers is another issue that Arab students face. In Example 7, the student wanted to communicate that having a fake Facebook account that is used to chase girls is considered unethical. To communicate this idea, the student used the inferential marker 'because' in the dependent clause and the inferential marker 'so' in the independent clause. In fact, the use of both markers in the same sentence was incorrect because they create a clash in the intended function. The incorrect use of the markers 'because' and 'so' created a disconnected speech and muddled the speaker's intention. This can be attributed to the student's lack of pragmatic competence as he was not aware of the clash of functions that can be resulted from using two diverse markers in the same utterance.

#### Example 7

- 27        → ***Because** I know there is someone here today like who has two accounts, one with a girl name that*  
 28        → *he uses, you know, to hit on his desperate friends, **so** it is not ethical, **so** stop that.*  
 29        →

### 4.2.3. Excessive Repetition of the Same Marker in the Same Chunk of Talk

The analysis revealed that the students excessively used certain devices in the same chunk of speech. In Example 8, the student used the message idioms 'ok' and 'right' seven times in the same chunk of talk. By the excessive use of these markers, it becomes unknown whether the student meant to achieve certain functions deliberately or they were just used as fillers with no function.

#### Example 8

- 643            *So, the idea here is that the researchers decided that there are certain frames certain frames,*  
 644        → ***ok**, that govern the relationship between the supervisor and teachers, **ok?** This relationship*  
 645        → *is built upon the student and supervisor' agenda, **ok?** So your agenda, for example, could be*  
 646        → *educative that means you think of the methods, you think of how to improve students, **ok?** As.*  
 647        → *a teacher, **right**, what do you think I need my student to be improved, **right?** I need my*  
 648        → *students to participate, **right?** to engage in the discussion in the class*

#### 4.2.4. Lack of Diversity

Another issue that the Arab students face was a lack of diversity in their selection of PMs. Based on the frequency analysis, the lack of diversity took two forms. First, the students overused certain categories of PMs, such as force/message idioms, performative expressions, evidential, hearsay, and manner-of-speaking markers. Even at the sub-category levels of analysis, the students overused certain devices, such as 'right', 'ok', 'basically', 'actually', and 'you know'. Such overuse of certain PMs can be attributed to the nature of oral presentations. The oral presentations were used by the professors as a tool for students' assessment. Having in mind the consequences of poor presentation added some burden on the students and led them to exert efforts to avoid committing mistakes. For this reason, the students possibly tended to use the markers they felt they were familiar and safe with during oral presentations. The use of more familiar markers also helped students obtain much confidence. As it is shown in Example 9, the student used the pragmatic marker 'you know' three times almost in every sentence he produced. The first use in line 29 did not achieve any function except for giving the student some time to formulate his idea. The second and third uses of the marker in line 30 were only to compensate for the student's short memory of the other language skills and the name of the scholars, which he had forgotten.

##### Example 9

27            *Under the direct strategy, we have memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies while indirect*  
 28            *strategies consist of metacognitive, affective, and social. And these strategies have been further,*  
 29        → ***you know**, (.) divided. This taxonomy covers all skills of language acquisition like writing,*  
 30        → *reading, (.) **you know**, all four learning skills. Then, according to, **you know**, scholars. NEXT,*  
 31            *the categorization of language learning strategies is primarily based on two theories, cognitive*  
 32            *and social cognitive theory.*

Second, the students underused important types of PMs, such as the consequent-effect markers (to clarify, to sum up, once again, etc.), assessment markers (un/fortunately), and mitigation markers (If I'm not mistaken/wrong). The underuse of these markers might be ascribed to the students' limited linguistic repertoire of these markers, little knowledge of the possible functions of these markers, and the stressful situation during the oral presentation. During oral presentations, the students were given 10 minutes to present. In such a situation, students mainly think of communicating the facts and ideas explicitly in short or brief ways, and without much interest in showing their feeling either towards the content of their speech or towards the audience. In Example 10, the student reviewed the methodology part in an article. Notice how the student used unnecessary words like 'as' in line 133 and 'and' in line 138. He also used 'in addition to' twice in lines 135 and 139, which had no roles in the sentences. Regardless of the reason that caused these mistakes, the student's outcome was lacking diversity, which made his presentation lack pragmatic coherence.

##### Example 10

132            *Good evening everyone. I'm [Name of student]. I will today, I'm going to present the*  
 133        → *methodology. The first article **as** used qualitative methods to investigate the use of language in*  
 134        → *Facebook in terms of form and content from sociolinguistics perspectives. The data **was** collected*  
 135        → *by interview **as** instruments. **In addition to** the literature has observed the Facebook profiles of*  
 136            *70 Jordanian university and collect 200 messages posts and comments. Based on Bay 2003, data*  
 137        → *was analysed categories which is, abbreviations, code-switching, letter repetition Romanized*  
 138        → *Arabic **and** in the language, ok. <<instructor: slow down, slow down>> **in addition**, 8*  
 139            *participants were interviewed individually to get their opinion about the language used on*  
                  *Facebook.*

Similar problematic aspects were reached by Yu and Cadman (2009) in Taiwanese students who were found lacking the knowledge of how to construct speech in the target language. Yu and Cadman noticed that the students used low frequency of markers during their presentations. Besides, the students were uncertain of the right markers to use, which led them to confuse their uses. In addition, the students used frequent inaccurate markers indicating their lack of knowledge. To compensate for such lack of knowledge, the students ended their presentation with 'thank you' instead of using a concluding frame. The findings in this section are also in partial agreement with Ahmad and Maros (2017), who found the use of the markers by the Arab students was not always appropriate to the linguistic and social context between the students and their supervisors.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the use of PMs by a group of Arab postgraduate students in their academic settings. It was important to provide a comprehensive analysis of the types, pragmatic functions, and usage issues of these markers during these students' classroom oral presentations. The identification of the types and functions of these markers revealed that the Arab students used high frequencies of the PMs in this study indicating that these markers exist in their pragmatic repertoire. However, these students, who study English as a Lingua Franca, most of the time, used patterns of PMs that were different from those proposed by Fraser (1996). In fact, they used certain markers that could serve their purposes during the presentations and avoided using other markers that did not serve their needs. It seems that the students developed their use of these markers to adapt to their needs during the classroom oral presentations, such as for obtaining confidence, compensating their memory loss, and gaining time to formulate their talk. It was also noticed that the students used the markers based on their cultural interpretation of the functions of the markers which yielded patterns of use different from those proposed by Fraser (1996). This finding supports previous research on the use of the markers that assigned a role to the speaker's cultural background in determining the frequencies and use of the pragmatic markers (Hum et al., 2014). These findings imply a need to consider the role of culture in ESL and EFL learning (Makhmudov, 2020).

The findings about the problematic aspects of using the PMs, on the other hand, revealed that the students face a number of usage problems, such as the addition of unnecessary or extra markers in places that did not require them, the use of markers incorrectly, the excessive use of certain markers in the same chunk of talk, and lack of diversity in the use of markers. These problems might be attributed to the interference of the students' first language, students' poor grammatical knowledge of the markers, lack of the students' pragmatic competence, or the stressful situation of the classroom oral presentation. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that Arab students still need to be aware of the various meanings and functions of PMs in order to produce a pragmatically coherent and effective oral presentation. This implies a need to increase the amount of the students' pragmatic lexicon and level of awareness towards the meaning and functions of these markers, so they can perform more effectively in their academic speech. Specifying sources of learning about these markers in students' course material in schools before joining universities and conducting classroom oral presentations in schools would be a solution (Alraddadi, 2016).

Since classroom oral presentation is a primary method of teaching and learning in modern universities, the findings of this study imply that Arab postgraduate students, and probably other EFL learners, should receive instruction, training or awareness raising before or within their graduate studies to help them improve their presentation skills. According to Jalilifar et al. (2011), Heidari Tabrizi (2017) and Kalanzadeh et al. (2018), awareness raising and explicit instruction of metadiscourse and discourse markers such as hedges and conjunctive adverbs can be effective in raising language skills and proficiency of university students. Thus, training courses could be designed to provide Arab learners with pragmatic awareness on conducting oral presentations, the use of PMs, and managing time in oral presentations. It would be good for such training courses to be regularly researched in future studies so that they are designed to continually address students' needs and problematic aspects of their use of PMs.

This study was limited in two aspects. First, it only involved an analysis of the student's speech production without considering the analysis of the professors' or classmates' comments during the oral presentations. Including into the analysis comments made by the listening audience would yield more contextual interpretations of the use of PMs during the oral presentations. Second, the analysis in this study was also limited to the lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic components of the PMs. Other components, such as phonology and phonetics might be considered in future studies. Although this study analyzed the use of PMs against a well-known taxonomy proposed by Fraser (1996), it would be imperative that future studies compare the use of these markers by Arab students vis-a-vis native-speakers' use of these markers in similar learning contexts. This would clarify whether learners' cultural background would yield differences in the use of these markers.

### Note

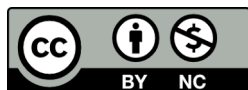
<sup>1</sup> The present study is based on the findings of the first author's PhD dissertation. His co-authors are members of his supervisory committee. The research did not receive grant funding and the authors declare no conflict in interest.

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