

## The Use of Discourse Marker ‘so’ in the Malaysian ESL Job Interviews

Syamimi Turiman\*

Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.

**ABSTRACT** – The discourse marker ‘so’ has been identified as being typically high in spoken discourse, but previous studies have been focusing on its use in the oral production of native speakers. This paper explores the use of ‘so’, concentrating on job interview speech in the Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) context. It aims to explicate the multifunctional uses of ‘so’ in a self-developed corpus made up of 16 actual job interviews conducted in English, comprising job interviews in two different organizations in Malaysia. In the corpus, ‘so’ is identified as the tenth most frequent word, which also makes it the most-used discourse marker in the job interview speech. The results suggest that ‘so’ in the corpus serves five main functions, namely 1) to introduce summary; 2) to continue previous speaker’s topic; 3) to mark sequential relations; 4) to hold the floor; and 5) to introduce elaboration to justify a prior statement. Interestingly, when ‘so’ is used in turn-initials, it points to a specific function which is 6) to introduce new information. However, it was also found that the high frequency of ‘so’ in the corpus is associated with ‘pseudo-bridging’ whereby ‘so’ is simply used to 7) add new information and making speech seem coherent. The study implies that the teaching of discourse markers in speech, specifically the use of ‘so’ should focus more on the pragmatic functions than on semantic meanings per se, to avoid the inappropriate or overuse of this particular linguistic element.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Revised: 27 August 2020

Accepted: 9 Sept 2020

### KEYWORDS

*Discourse markers*  
*Conversation analysis*  
*ESL speakers*  
*Job interviews*  
*Spoken discourse*

## INTRODUCTION

In the teaching and learning of English to non-native speakers, grammar and vocabulary are typically focused on, leaving a minimal opportunity for pragmatic features to be introduced to the learners (Pawlak, 2010). Among these pragmatic features are discourse markers, which are small words that do not carry propositional weight but modify the message in various subtle ways (Buysse, 2011). Discourse markers have been extensively researched in pragmatics, which include studies of various discourse markers on native speakers’ oral production. In recent years, the focus has been broadened to include non-native speaker discourse (e.g. Ahn, 2015; Arya, 2020; Buysse, 2009; 2011; Diskin, 2017).

Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) mentioned that the “learners’ distribution patterns of [pragmatic] strategies have been shown to vary from those of native speakers” (p. 7), in terms of the quality and range of linguistic forms. The non-native speakers have more restricted and less complex inventory of pragmatic items. At the same time, it was also discovered that the non-native speakers - especially those at an intermediate stage of language acquisition - are sometimes found to “engage in more speech activity than native speakers” (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993, p. 9). Although native and non-native speakers’ comparisons on the use of ‘so’ is not the focus of the present study, these interesting findings have gauged the interest to study the use of discourse markers, specifically ‘so’, in the oral production of non-native speakers in the Malaysian ESL job interview discourse. Specifically, the present study aims to explore the extent to which ‘so’ are used by Malaysian ESL speakers in job interviews. The research questions that guided the study are:

1. What is the frequency of ‘so’ in the Malaysian ESL job interviews?
2. What are the prevailing functions of ‘so’ employed by speakers in the job interviews?

The next section will present a brief literature review on ‘so’ as discourse markers, followed by the methodology of the study. The results are then presented and discussed before the implications and conclusions are finally drawn.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### ‘So’ as Discourse Markers

Discourse markers are a class of linguistic devices that include words and expressions such as ‘but’, ‘anyway’, ‘like’, among many others (Buysse, 2011; Schiffrin, 1987). Discourse markers have been widely researched because of the role it plays in establishing discourse connections and marking of social relationship. Previous researches (e.g. Arya, 2020; Lee, 2019; Vickov & Jakupčević, 2017) have identified that the use of discourse markers in many languages were able to reveal alignment and disalignment between speakers. In addition, Bolden (2003; 2006) and Fuller (2003) noted that discourse markers are involved in building various social and situational identities.

'So' as a discourse marker has received attention from researchers, since it is a frequently used word which carries multiple functions and meaning that are used differently in spoken and written texts. In the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009), 'so' is first described as an adverb, which indicates manner (i.e. in this/ that way). One of its adverbial uses is like that of 'thus' and 'therefore', which are used in a more formal context as compared to 'so'. Secondly, 'so' serves as a conjunction to connect two clauses, as the outcome of reasoning. 'So' is found to be the most common discourse marker that occur "over 100 times per million words in spoken discourse" (Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2012, p. 393), averaging over 1000 occurrences per million words. In spoken English, the position of 'so' shifts to sentence-initial, indicating a linking between utterances. Some common uses of 'so' in the spoken discourse are: 1) getting someone's attention; 2) asking a question about what someone has just said; 3) showing that the speaker has understood something, among others.

This means that 'so' has shifted from its original semantic meaning, and becomes a discourse marker, as described by prior research such as Schiffrin (1987). Schiffrin (1987) noted that 'so' has the basic meaning of result (at the discourse level of facts), inference (at the level of knowledge) and actions (as opposed to motives). She also mentioned that in informal conversation, 'so' may indicate "a speaker's readiness to relinquish a turn" and be used to compel a hearer to assume speakership (p. 218). Bolden (2009) mentioned that the functions of 'so' are not limited to these, as observed in recordings of everyday talk. However, Aijmer (2002) asserted that non-native speakers have the tendency to use discourse markers incorrectly, and often underuse certain types of discourse markers. In turn, misunderstanding may occur. Although the use of 'so' used by ESL speakers is less studied than some other discourse markers such as 'like', 'well' and 'you know', there have been attempts to explicate the use of 'so'. For example, Buysse (2011) study showed that Dutch speakers of English used 'so' at a much higher rate than native speakers of English.

Meanwhile, Müller (2005) explored the functions and use of the discourse markers 'so', 'well', 'you know' and 'like' by native speakers and non-native speakers of English. The data was taken from the Giessen-Long Beach Chaplin Corpus. She discovered that within each discourse marker, some functions were employed by only the German participants, while some others were only employed by the native speakers. With regards to the use of 'so', the German participants were found to mark result, summarize, or reword less frequently than the native English speakers. She concluded that the non-native speakers used fewer types of discourse markers and with a lower frequency. Along the same line, Fung and Carter (2007) also found that discourse markers that were common in the British corpus, such as 'right', 'well', 'so', 'you know', 'actually' and 'see' occurred much less frequently in their Hong Kong data. The English learners displayed "a very restricted use of markers to mark shared knowledge and to signpost attitudes and responses" (Fung & Carter, 2007, p. 436).

Additionally, the use of discourse markers is significant especially in the professional context when language becomes the tool to unfold one's personal stance and attitude for example, in presidential speeches (Banguis-Bantawig, 2019), political interviews, (Zand-Moghadam & Bikineh, 2015) and radio interviews (Nor, 2012). Another example includes discourse markers function to make a discourse cohesive and unified that entice readers or hearers to react or engage (Hyland & Tse, 2004). Such claim is supported especially when Biber, Conrad and Leech (2012) noted that discourse markers signal interactively how the speaker plans to steer the dialogue. Hence, this paper was built upon existing literature to describe the use of 'so' in spoken discourse and explicate its functions when used in speech within professional contexts, specifically job interviews in the Malaysian ESL environment.

## METHODOLOGY

### Data

This study employed the conversation analysis methods, and the quantitative and qualitative data of this paper were interpreted using statistical and interpretive analysis, respectively. The corpus analysed in the current study is the Malaysian ESL Job Intervkaniew Corpus (MEJIC), a self-developed and self-compiled corpus of 16 actual job interviews in two disciplines, namely technical and non-technical. Out of the 16, ten interviews were technical job interviews, which were interviews for the post of Plant Operation Engineer in a Malaysian-based multinational company. The other six interviews were interviews for a full-time position as an English lecturer in a Malaysian public university. Both interviews were first-stage interviews at entry level. A total of 16 job candidates were involved in the study (14 female and 2 male candidates). They were all the same ethnicity.

The interviews were conducted by four interviewers who were all female, and of homogeneous ethnicity. For the technical job interviews, the interviewer was the Human Resource Manager with six years of experience in interviewing candidates for various positions and departments in the company. She normally attends first stage interviews to pose questions related to the job candidates' non-technical qualifications, such as their work attitude, job expectations, etc. The interviewers for the non-technical discipline, which was a panel interview, comprised of three senior lecturers from the same department in the faculty. They all have more than ten years of experience in teaching, doing research and conducting job interviews. Considering the sensitive nature of the data and ethical considerations, consent from the respective organisations, interviewers and interviewees were obtained prior to the recording. Identities of the speakers were anonymous, and in the corpus, they were assigned with specific codes. Job candidates are T (for technical job interview) or NT (for non-technical job interview) followed by the number (i.e. T1, NT1, etc.). Meanwhile, the interviewer in the technical job interview is IV, and IV1, IV2 and IV3 in the non-technical job interview. Audio-recordings of the job interviews were transcribed and checked for the accuracy and were kept with the researcher and shared with a second rater only for data analysis purposes.

Each interview followed a similar pattern, which happens in three main stages, namely the opening, main interview, and closing (Lipovsky, 2010). The format of interaction is question-and-answer sequences, where most of the time, the interviewers will be the ones asking the questions, and deciding on the topics to be discussed. However, there is an exception to the last question for the candidates “Do you have any questions?” which provided the opportunity for the candidates to raise their own topics.

In total, the corpus comprises almost four hours of recordings and a total word count of 27,149. The ten interviews in the technical discipline lasted about eight to fifteen minutes, with a total duration of 1 hour 56 minutes and 17 seconds (total word count: 13,595). The duration of the six interviews in the non-technical discipline ranged from fourteen to nineteen minutes (total of 1 hour 35 minutes and 36 seconds of speech) and a total of 13,554 word count. It is worth noting that despite the differences in the number of interviews (i.e. ten technical job interviews vs. six non-technical job interviews), the total length of the interviews as well as the total number of words spoken in both categories were approximately the same.

### Data Analysis

For comparative purposes, all the quantitative data are normalised to a relative frequency expressed in number of tokens per 1,000 words. Observed differences in frequency between the sub-corpora are measured with the Mann-Whitney U-test (henceforth MWU) to gauge their statistical significance (Kan, 2016; Moghadam, 2017). Following the methodology of conversation analysis, the qualitative and quantitative data of this paper were analysed and interpreted using interpretive and statistical analysis, respectively.

Conversation Analysis maintains that turns at talk relate to neighbouring turns in systematically organised sequences. This means that a chain of turns constitutes a sequence organization in a logical and meaningful manner to achieve communicative intents. Since the present study looks at the occurrences of ‘so’ within an ongoing discourse, it is important to closely examine the multifunctional use of this discourse marker and the sequential organisation of turns in spoken discourse. Conversational analysis is a useful tool to identify a variety of functions of the discourse marker ‘so’, and to illustrate how it fulfils particular functions in specific contexts of the conversation.

The identification of ‘so’ as discourse markers can be described based on Schourup’s (1999) key descriptions: a discourse marker fulfils a connective function, and it does not contribute to propositional meaning. Any occurrence of ‘so’ which do not function as discourse markers were manually filtered out, and not included in the frequency count. The non-discourse marker functions are beyond the scope of the study, which may include the following examples: ‘so’ as a part of fixed phrases (e.g. and so on, thank you so much); as an adverb of degree or manner (e.g. there are so many things), and as a pro-form (e.g. I think so).

## FINDINGS

### Frequency of ‘so’ in Malaysian ESL Job Interviews

The corpus under investigation contains 370 tokens of ‘so’, with 352 tokens fulfilling a discourse marker function. It was found that the technical interview (TI) has 9.35 tokens of ‘so’ functioning as a discourse marker per 1,000 words (n=145), and ‘so’ is found to occur higher in the non-technical interviews (NTI), with 9.5 tokens per 1,000 words (n=207). Hence, it was found that the speakers in the non-technical job interview use ‘so’ considerably more often than their technical job interview counterparts. The difference between TI and NTI achieves statistical significance at  $p < .034$ , based on the MWU test, with  $z = -2.115$ . All speakers in the MEJIC corpus were found to use ‘so’ at least 1.39 times per 1,000 words.

### Prevailing Functions of ‘so’ in Malaysian ESL Job Interviews

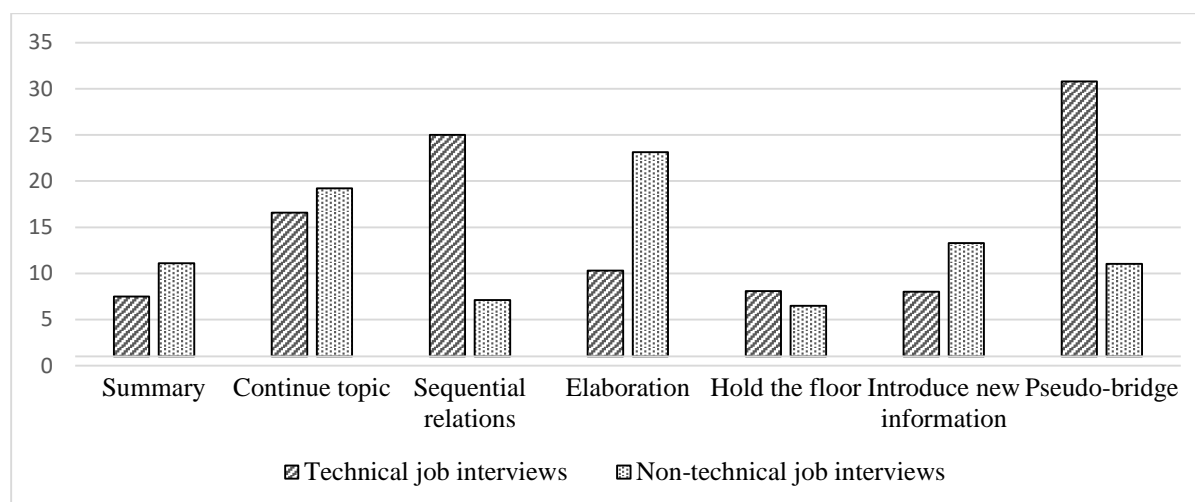
The results suggest that there were five main functions of ‘so’, which are; 1) to introduce summary; 2) to continue previous speaker’s topic; 3) to mark sequential relations, 4) to hold the floor; and 5) to introduce elaboration to justify a prior statement. Fuji (2000) noted that discourse markers are syntactically flexible, in the sense that they may appear in the beginning, in the middle or at the end of an utterance, which in turn lead to their many functions and high frequency in discourse.

An interesting finding from the present study is that when ‘so’ is used as turn-initials, it serves a specific function which is; 6) to introduce new information. However, it was also found that the high frequency of ‘so’ in the corpus is associated with ‘pseudo-bridging’ where ‘so’ is simply used to add new information and making speech seems coherent.

**Table 1.** Functions of ‘so’ in the MEJIC Corpus

Category	Function
<i>so</i>	Introduce summary
	Continue previous speaker’s topic
	Mark sequential relations
	Introduce elaboration to justify a prior statement
	Hold the floor
Turn-initial <i>so</i>	Introduce new information

To illustrate further, the distributions of functions found in the corpus is presented in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1.** Distributions of ‘so’ in the MEJIC corpus based on its functions

Based on Figure 1, the frequency of ‘so’ in the non-technical job interviews (NTI) is consistently higher across the functions of ‘so’ in the MEJIC corpus as compared to the technical job interviews (TI), except for one function (i.e. to mark sequential relations). ‘So’ is mostly used in the corpus to continue previous speaker’s topic in the conversation. ‘So’ in the corpus mainly serves this function, which means that the Malaysian ESL speakers in the job interviews prefer to use ‘so’ to keep the conversation going. This is followed using ‘so’ to indicate sequential relations in speech. Interestingly, this function appears relatively higher in the TI with a mean frequency of 25, as compared to a mere 7.13 in the NTI. A possible reason which leads to this is that the nature of the technical job interviews involves a lot of explanation of procedures and steps in their line of work.

On the other hand, another function of ‘so’ which is to introduce elaboration to justify a prior statement is higher in the speech of NTI speakers (mean frequency= 23.12), compared to the speakers in the TI (mean frequency=10.3). This means that the NTI speakers were involved in a lot of justifying and explaining of their statements in the job interviews. In the following subsections, the specific functions will be discussed in detail.

### ‘So’ to Introduce Summary

According to Buysse (2010), in introducing a summary, the speaker reiterates the main argument(s), followed by a conclusion. In the following excerpt, Candidate T7 explains her personal attribute, which is her weakness, and mentions that the weakness can be viewed as “a good thing” (line 67). At the end of her turn, she concludes her point by employing ‘so’ in line 68, where she reiterates the core elements of her preceding explanation, and finally generalizes her claims about completing a task with an inclusive pronoun *we* as in “if we do something, we must finish it” (line 70).

Excerpt 1 (a):

63 IV: Okay now... what is your weakness? And how do you overcome  
64 your weakness?  
65 T7: My weakness is that... I... I never feel comfortable until I get  
66 my work finished. My work done [sic]. I think... to overcome  
67 that... I think it is slightly a good thing... even though it  
68 bothered me. So... I will... I’ll just finish my work because I  
69 think that is the thing that needs to be done. If we do  
70 something, we must finish it. So... yeah.

(Technical Job Interview – 7)

Meanwhile, Excerpt 1 (b) illustrates the use of ‘so’ prefacing a summary of Candidate T1’s experience when she went for her practical training (line 44) as an intern in a waste water treatment research. In this excerpt, ‘so’ when used as a summary is preceded by the adverb *basically*.

Excerpt 1 (b):

39 IV: Okay. Can you tell me more about the waste water treatment?  
40 T1: Okay... so for my research... we deal with batik waste water...  
41 from the batik industry. So basically... I’m going to treat

42 the... the focus is on the COD removal. So in the COD removal  
 43 I used banana stems as activated carbon to treat the waste  
 44 water. So basically the objective is to lower the COD  
 45 reading.

(Technical Job Interview – 1)

Similarly, in Excerpt 1 (c) below, ‘so’+ *basically* was employed by the speaker to serve the summative function (line 34). Here, the job candidate’s choice of topic for her mock teaching (i.e. Punctuations in Essay Writing) was questioned when Interviewer IV3 commented that “I think that this is *like* very basic” (lines 21-22). The interviewer further adds that “the basic of punctuations should be taught indirectly”, leading up to conforming the candidate’s knowledge on other courses. In response, Candidate NT3 begins to elaborate on her previous teaching and learning experiences. The use of ‘so’ (line 31) in this excerpt prefaces the summary of how the course was taught.

Excerpt 1 (c):

20 IV3: Yeah... in preparation for MUET... preparation for you know...  
 21 university level. But I think that this is like very basic  
 22 if I may say so. No doubt that it is important aaa... the  
 23 basic of punctuations etcetera aaa... it should be taught...  
 24 you know... indirectly in the teaching of other things. But  
 25 I’m asking about your preparation for more courses like  
 26 critical thinking classes umm... do you have any kind of  
 27 experience in teaching this kind of codes?  
 28 NT3: Critical thinking... aaa... To be honest I don’t have any  
 29 experience teaching critical thinking... but I have a bit of  
 30 background of learning the critical thinking during my  
 31 Masters. So it’s like *basically*... for us... what they taught  
 32 us is they give us one paragraph and identify the thesis  
 33 sentence... something like that and then using the mind map...  
 34 how you elaborate certain topics or ideas like that [sic]...  
 35 to expand it to write up...

(Non-technical Job Interview – 3)

As discussed, the use of ‘so’ to introduce summary in Excerpts 1 (a), (b) and (c) are seen to concur with the findings of Torres and Potowski (2008) who proposed that ‘so’ as a summary-marking function “occur[s] at the end of a turn” and that the use of discourse markers in this instance “offer a concluding marker” (p. 270). This means that ‘so’ can be used to sum up the preceding propositions in a conversation turn.

### **‘So’ used to continue previous speaker’s topic**

In the corpus, ‘so’ is mostly also used as a means of continuing the previous speakers’ topic, as seen in Excerpt 2 below:

Excerpt 2:

116 IV2: Okay. Looking at the overall... you do not have any education  
 117 background in terms of pedagogy. So how would you... what  
 118 would be the ways that you’re going to work on... to ensure  
 119 that when you get into the classroom you have all these  
 120 pedagogical aspects of teaching?  
 121 NT1: Okay. Talking about pedagogical... aaa... training...  
 122 IV2: Ya...  
 123 NT1: Actually I’m supposed to go for a training... pedagogical  
 124 training... but I’m still in confinement. I’m still on  
 125 maternity leave. So I believe that while I’m still in the  
 126 education line... I’m sure there are platforms for me to  
 127 improve and there are trainings that can be provided for...  
 128 someone like me. And I also believe that throughout the  
 129 process of teaching... I’ll also learn how to... the...  
 130 theoretical aspects of teaching as well.  
 131 IV1: So NT 1f... you said that... you have worked in Cyberjaya with  
 132 all these fast-paced... you know... So why teach? I know that

133           you've explained that... what you call that... observed that  
 134           perhaps you want to contribute to aaa... contribute to our  
 135           society but you know... why teaching? You've been there for  
 136           a while. Why not like... be in the corporate world and then...  
 137           well... you can do it. Why teach?

(Non-technical Job Interview -1)

In Excerpt 2, IV1's utterance in line 116 brings the conversation back to the earlier parts of the job interview. When introducing herself, NT1 has explained that she was from a corporate background but decided to change her career path to teaching English. This leads to the question posed by IV2 (lines 117-120), who wanted NT4 to clarify how she would keep up with the pedagogical aspects of teaching since she has no background of that. After her explanation, IV1 decides to pick up from the topic introduced by IV2, by asking NT4 to elaborate further on the reason for her career change.

Hence, 'so' serving this function of continuing the previous speaker's topic does not necessarily happen when the topic was prompted by the immediately foregoing talk, "but by some outstanding conversational agenda" (Bolden, 2009, p. 977). In other words, 'so' used here is to resume a talk that has been "delayed, and therefore, pending" (p. 977).

### 'So' as Marker of Sequential Relations

'So' in the corpus also functions to mark sequential relations, which is consistent with the findings of Redeker (1990) who mentioned that 'so' relates between consecutive elements described in a series of events. This means that 'so' conveys important contingency relations among states and events (Goldman & Murray, 1992). Müller (2005) also found a similar phenomenon in the narrative parts of her corpus. In the present corpus, there exist narrative-like speech, which revealed the use of 'so' by the Malaysian ESL speakers in the job interviews in introducing sequence to describe an event or situation, as seen in Excerpt 3 below:

Excerpt 3:

60       T3: Yes... valve leak test. So... I have to go to KMB... [Company  
 61       4]... with the engineers. To be... as a witness... to see the  
 62       valve being test. So before the fabrication... which we  
 63       must test the valve to... to ensure... that there is no  
 64       leaking. So... I believe that it is related in  
 65       engineering... where we... we see how the test being test...  
 66       you know... put with the pressure *pump... pump... pump...* like  
 67       that. If it leaks, the pressure will drop. If doesn't  
 68       any leak [sic]... the pressure will stay. So... aaa. And  
 69       then the second is do the calculation [sic] for liquid  
 70       casing port. I already state at there [sic]. I... to make  
 71       a fabrication...[sic] *we cannot just fabricate. We must*  
 72       provide the calculation. So... for the calculation of  
 73       liquid casing (port). So... they just ask us... they want  
 74       liquid casing (port)... but of course the calculation is  
 75       from us. I have to search how to do it and it took two  
 76       to three days. Alright. I think that's all what I learned  
 77       [sic]. There's many more but...

(Candidate T3, Technical Job Interview)

In this excerpt, Candidate T3 had to explain on the engineering-related tasks he was assigned with when he did his practical training. Prior to this anecdote, he mentioned that he handled various documents, data sheets, and invoices. The interviewer then asked, "Anything related to chemical (engineering)?" and Excerpt 3 was his response. Before explaining the specific procedures (i.e. valve test before fabrication), he justified by saying that "So... I believe that it is related in engineering" in line 64, before explaining the whole process. The use of 'so' in the excerpt above reflects the narrative structure to signal important parts in describing the process.

### 'So' to Introduce Elaboration to Justify a Prior Statement

It was also found that 'so' was employed by the speakers in the present corpus to introduce elaboration to justify a prior statement. Halliday (2004) mentioned that elaboration happens when "one clause elaborates on meaning of another by further specifying or describing it" (p. 396). In Excerpt 4 (a), a 'so'-prefaced clause in line 51 supports the earlier information mentioned by the speaker. Here, Candidate NT5 used 'so' to justify the relevance of using the material (i.e. simplified notes based on contents of a specific book) in her class. 'So' in this example, was used before the justification of her earlier statement when she mentioned 'we have to use this type of notes' (lines 41-42).

## Excerpt 4 (a):

198 IV1: So now you have had the experience when you present your  
 199 Powerpoint... do... do you think that you did well?  
 200 NT6: No.  
 201 IV1: So what do you do... you improve on it. Believe in yourself  
 202 and improve whatever you think... that... you know... needs  
 203 improvement. And in terms of what you call that...  
 204 delivery... improve on that. Well... you know... you performed  
 205 not well. ... Right? So whatever the outcome is... let this  
 206 be... you know... let it... like... you get something out of it.  
 207 Get something... so that you can use it next time. Right...  
 208 and then be good at it. Yeah?

(Non-technical Job Interview – 6)

Schiffirin (1987) has provided some explanation to elaborate further on the function of ‘so’ prefacing clauses to elaborate justifications. She mentioned that “‘so’ brings out a hypotactic relation between segments, which gives ‘support’ to prior information” (p. 223). This means that when a speaker feels that an information requires additional support, the use of ‘so’ gives the impression to the hearer that the justification follows from an earlier-mentioned information.

**‘So’ to Hold the Floor**

As mentioned earlier, the MEJIC corpus revealed that there are instances of narrative-like speech in the job interview. Bolden (2006) found that ‘so’ may preface utterances that accomplish actions projected by some prior talk, and therefore, anticipated by the speakers. He further illustrates the use of ‘so’ serving this function as when telling a story, speakers often use ‘so’-prefaced utterances to resume a temporarily interrupted line. ‘So’ is then used to return to a story by repeating the utterance that preceded the part where the speech was interrupted by the other speaker. An example from the corpus is shown in Excerpt 5 below:

## Excerpt 5:

126 IV1: Okay... about the PowerPoint... I can’t really see it  
 127 because of the background colour and things like that.  
 128 NT4: Oh... colour. Okay.  
 129 IV1: So you know... in terms of presentation of the  
 130 PowerPoint... I think... perhaps you should improve on  
 131 that. Because the bold colour that you use... especially  
 132 as the background of the slides...  
 133 NT4: =I think it’s okay. Normally in my class it is all  
 134 right. I’ll switch off the front light.  
 135 IV1: So anyway... in terms of colours for a presentation...  
 136 there should be a contrast between the background and  
 137 font colours.

(Non-technical Job Interview – 4)

As seen in the excerpt above, IV1 commented that she was having difficulty viewing the content of the PowerPoint slides, due to the background colour used in the slides. This elicits NT4 to respond to the remark given, but NT4 was not in agreement with IV1. In line 130, IV1 attempts to make it clear to NT4 that the colour does not work well as the background to the slides. NT4 overlaps the speech of IV1 by mentioning that the same background colour normally works fine in her classes. This utterance interrupts IV1’s speech and NT4 is seen as trying to end the topic. To bring the talk back on track, IV1 used ‘so’ in line 135 followed by “anyway”, and she returned to the ‘unfinished business’ by mentioning that “there should be a contrast between the background and font colours”.

When the topic was left after the interruption (lines 133-134), the use of ‘so’ in line 135 supports IV1’s utterance because NT4 is pre-prepared from her statements in lines 126 and 129. Hence, the use of ‘so’ in this example is used to “resume [the] interrupted action trajectory” (Bolden, 2009, p. 982).

**Turn-initial ‘so’ to Introduce New Information**

In the corpus, it was found that turn-initial ‘so’ is specifically used as a discourse organizer to initiate an utterance within a turn or to initiate a turn at a turn transaction boundary, i.e., when the second speaker takes a turn from the current

speaker with a purpose to introduce new information. There were instances whereby the questions posed by the interviewers in both technical and non-technical texts were prefaced by 'so', which fulfil this particular function as in the following examples:

Okay. So aaa... may I know... when will I know the result for the... interview?

(Candidate T4, Technical Job Interview)

mhm... so... when... how long is the process to review my application?

(Candidate T5, Technical Job Interview)

So... I want to know the... how the working [sic]... in [Company A]

(Candidate T6, Technical Job Interview)

In these examples, 'so' were mostly employed by the candidates in the technical job interviews when they were prompted with this question: "Do you have any questions (to ask)?" This had given the job candidates an opportunity to respond with a topic that they want to address, usually those which have not been discussed in the previous sections in the job interview. In other words, when 'so' is used to preface an utterance as turn-initials, some interactional agendas which are evidently and manifestly pending can be used to advance them (Bolden, 2009). Therefore, as seen in the examples here, 'so' precedes the job candidate's responses before they start a new topic as a marker to build on what the interviewer had said. This function of 'so' is consistent with Rennie, Lunsford and Heeman's (2016) description of 'so', to introduce a separate message with its propositional content, and its primary function is more pragmatic than semantic.

### Pseudo-bridge: Overuse of 'so' in ESL Job Interview Speech

According to Goldman and Murray (1992), conversational English may contribute to the development of an imprecise understanding of causal connectors such as 'so' and 'because'. In turn, they may serve as 'pseudo-bridges' rather than as true causals. This may suggest that the high occurrence of 'so' in the corpus results from an overuse of 'so'. A closer analysis on 'so' in the present corpus revealed that 'so' is indeed overused for chaining or simply adding new information. This finding is consistent with Latawiec (2012) and Latawiec, Anderson, Ma and Nguyen (2016) who noted that this is bound to happen and common among English language learners. The following excerpts illustrate instances where 'so' are used as pseudo-bridges:

Excerpt 6 (a):

69 T5: So... during the industrial training... aaa... I was in-charge...  
70 to assist the plant manager to manage the plant operation.  
71 So... we are... the company is... aaa... provide aaa... the site...  
72 construction site with the mix... mix... ready-mix concrete.  
73 So... aaa... the production is based on the daily order. So  
74 I assist in the plant operation by... by doing the control  
75 system... aaa... to mix all the ingredients... aaa... such as  
76 GGBS... OGB... and other ingredients including the chemicals...  
77 to aaa... to get the... aaa... concrete as satisfied [sic] by  
78 the customer. *Besides that*... I also do... I also did safety...  
79 safety... plant safety... checklist every day. So... it is  
80 included safety [sic] on the equipment... and also... plant  
81 truck... mixing truck.

(Candidate T5, Technical Job Interview)

Excerpt 6 (b):

45 NT3: Okay. Now I'm teaching at [College 2]. I'm also teaching  
46 Degree students... English for Business. So for that... aaa...  
47 the syllabus is more to... one or two weeks is for grammar...  
48 parts of speech... and so on. So the first one or two weeks  
49 I concentrate on grammar and then I move on to writing  
50 like writing business letters writing memos writing  
51 argumentative essays something like that. So it's the one  
52 or two weeks... aaa... the first one or two weeks is more to  
53 grammar. It's... for Diploma is also same... [sic] for Degree  
54 level also same [sic]. So I think this is the basic they  
55 need when they write because I learn also [sic] so I know



56 about it... *and* prepare students for placement examination  
 57 that is equal to IELTS... so they have to do writing also.  
 58 So I see according to my students there... [sic] they are  
 59 lacking in grammar... grammatical errors something like  
 60 that [sic].

(Candidate NT3, Non-technical Job Interview)

While ‘so’ is found to be highly frequent in the speech of English learners (e.g. Hellermann & Vergun, 2007; Romero-Trillo, 2008), the present study has revealed the same patterns, where ‘so’ was frequently used by the ESL speakers as a strategy to ‘a cover-up’, masking their imperfection of their speech in the ways that they present information and communicate ideas (Buysse, 2011). Since ‘so’ generally indicates a logical step in a reasoning, or link previous information, the use of ‘so’ allows speakers to make their speech seem coherent. However, since some of their uses do not reflect the six functions discussed in the previous sections, and identified it as inappropriate and overly-used, some occurrences of ‘so’ in the corpus were categorized as pseudo-bridges.

## DISCUSSION

### Difference in the Use of ‘so’ Across Disciplines

In general, there was a significant difference between the technical and non-technical texts in the use of ‘so’. When compared to previous studies, ‘so’ in the Malaysian ESL job interviews were employed in similar positions and functions (e.g. Schiffrin, 1987; Fuller, 2003; Bolden, 2009; 2006). It was also revealed that the high occurrences of ‘so’ in the technical texts are found to be used as pseudo-bridges. The range of functions across the two disciplines were similar, considering that the six functions identified in the texts were employed.

However, in terms of distribution, it was found that the speakers in the non-technical job interviews consistently employed higher frequencies in five functions, namely; 1) to introduce summary; 2) to continue previous speaker’s topic; 3) to hold the floor; 4) to introduce elaboration to justify a prior statement; and 5) to introduce new information. The only function with a higher frequency in the technical texts is; 6) to mark sequential relations. It was also found that when ‘so’ is used as turn-initials, it functions to introduce new information.

The results of the data in the present study could be attributable to a variety of factors. First, the higher use of ‘so’ in the non-technical texts may imply that speakers of different disciplines employ ‘so’ differently. According to Hyland (2005), “the soft knowledge fields are typically more interpretive than hard sciences and in their form of their arguments” (p. 145).

Secondly, although proficiency in the English language is not the focus of the present study, it is suggested that the results are influenced by language proficiency of the speakers in the Malaysian ESL job interviews. The speakers in the non-technical interviews are considered as the more proficient group, since all of them are English language lecturers, hence they were more comfortable communicating in English in job interviews as compared to the speakers in the technical job interviews.

Thirdly, a conceivable reason for the high occurrence of ‘so’ as pseudo-bridge among the Malaysian ESL speakers is due to the speakers’ inclination to employ the language devices they feel most comfortable with, repetitively. This seems consistent with the findings of Rui and Xin (2009), who found out that the limited use of discourse markers (in types and frequency) among Chinese EFL speakers is due to lack of awareness on discourse markers.

### Implications

An explanation on the reason why ‘so’ is more frequent in spoken discourse is provided by Tottie (1986), who asserted that “when an interlocutor is present, we are simply more solicitous of providing explanation, reasons, and causes. We are anxious to justify not only our speech acts but any kinds of statement we make concerning actions, thoughts, etc.” (p.112). Additionally, White (1994) agreed that this is especially true in the job interview discourse, since the job candidates want the interviewers to put the best possible construction on everything that is said. The findings of the present study revealed that ‘so’ have assisted the ESL speakers in explaining and justifying a propositional content.

However, it was also revealed that ‘so’ was used as pseudo-bridges – an inappropriate use of ‘so’, which may impede the flow of communication. Crismore (1983) mentioned that discourse markers can assist in one’s understanding of a text, but it can also serve to impede understanding if used excessively and inappropriately. The excessive use of ‘so’ should not be taken lightly, as Stainton (1996) mentioned “if an appropriate type of discourse marker is used then the readers react negatively towards it” (p. 32). This carries important implications on the teaching and learning of ‘so’ in teaching speaking in the ESL context.

The study implies that the teaching of discourse markers in speech, specifically the use of ‘so’ should focus more on the pragmatic functions than on semantic meanings per se, to avoid from inappropriate or overuse of this linguistic element. The use of discourse markers in speech is associated with enhanced speaking ability (e.g. Ahour & Maleki, 2014; Taguchi, 2015) and learners who had direct teaching of discourse markers in their speaking skills are found to perform better than those who had not. Willis (2003) suggested that consciousness-raising activities are the best approach especially when learners are supplemented with naturally occurring or authentic data.

A suggested activity in the teaching and learning of discourse markers is by raising students’ awareness on the uses of discourse markers in naturally occurring speech. There are a lot of readily available spoken discourse resources to be

downloaded and transcribed, such as online podcasts and talk shows. Hellermann and Vergun (2007) proposed that the more contact the English learners had with authentic English speech and its culture, the more appropriately they incorporate discourse markers in their speech. These authentic resources will expose the learners to how discourse markers are used in authentic interactions, and they will learn how to use appropriate language in a particular setting, and to particular audience and genre. In turn, they will learn how and when to use discourse markers when responding to others in a conversation.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has investigated the multifunctionality of the discourse marker 'so' found in the Malaysian ESL speaker's speech in the job interview context. For this purpose, various functions of 'so' employed by the speakers were examined. The results revealed the frequencies and functions of discourse marker 'so' employed by Malaysian ESL speakers in job interviews of two disciplines, namely technical and non-technical. It has also specified the five functions of 'so' in English conversation in the ESL job interview context, which are; 1) to introduce summary; 2) to continue previous speaker's topic; 3) to mark sequential relations, 4) to hold the floor; and 5) to introduce elaboration to justify a prior statement. When 'so' is used in turn-initials, it points to a specific function which is 6) to introduce new information. Nevertheless, it was also found that the high frequency of 'so' in the corpus is associated with 'pseudo-bridging' whereby 'so' is simply used to 7) add new information and making speech seem coherent. This means that some uses of 'so' in the corpus are overused and may impede speech.

Overall, this study adds to existing literature on the discourse marker 'so' since the specific functions are explicated in the context of Malaysian ESL job interviews. This also extends the common description of 'so', which is commonly described as indexing inferential or causal connections. Through conversational analysis procedures, the present study revealed that 'so' is a useful discourse marker, especially in establishing discourse coherence to assist speakers in delivering their communicative intents.

Future research should include an investigation on other discourse markers in speech, such as 'well', 'okay', among others, involving a larger group of Malaysian ESL speakers in the job interview setting. This may clarify the roles and functions of discourse markers and how they can assist or impede one's speech. Other than that, it is worth investigating the effects of implicit and explicit instruction of discourse markers to establish the benefits of formal instruction of discourse markers and its need in assisting ESL learners in the job interview discourse.

## REFERENCES

- Ahour, T., & Maleki, S. E. (2014). The effect of metadiscourse instruction on Iranian EFL learner's speaking ability. *English Language Teaching*, 7(10), 69–75.
- Ahn, S, J. (2015). So as a multifunctional discourse marker used by Korean speakers in English conversation. *The Journal of Linguistic Science* 75a, 169-188.
- Aijmer, K. (2002). *English discourse particles. Evidence from a corpus*. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Arya, T. (2020). Exploring discourse marker use in Thai university students' conversation. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network Journal*, 13(1), 247 – 267.
- Banguis-Bantawig, R. (2019). The role of discourse markers in the speeches of selected Asian Presidents. *Heliyon* 5. doi: 10.1016/j.heliyon.2019.e01298
- Biber, D., Conrad, S., & Leech, G. (2012). *Longman Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.
- Bolden, G.B. (2003). *Multiple modalities in collaborative turn sequences*. *Gesture*, 3, 187–212.
- Bolden, G.B. (2006). Little words that matter: Discourse markers 'so' and 'oh' and the doing of other-attentiveness in social interaction. *Journal of Communication*, 56(4), 661-688.
- Bolden, G.B. (2009). Implementing incipient actions: The discourse marker in English conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 41, 974 – 998.
- Buysse, L. (2009). So as a marker of elaboration in native and non-native speech. In S. Slembrouck, M. Taverniers & M. Van Herreweghe (eds.). *From will to well: Studies in Linguistics offered to Anne-Marie Simon-Vandenberghe* (79–91). Gent: Academia Press.
- Buysse, L. (2010). Discourse Marker So in Native and Non-native Spoken English. *Pragmatics Perspectives on Language and Linguistics, Vol. 1: Speech Actions in Theory and Applied Linguistics*, 461 – 484.
- Buysse, L (2011). The business of pragmatics. The case of discourse markers in the speech of students of business English and English linguistics. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 161(1), 10–30.
- Crismore, A. (1983). *Metadiscourse: What it is and how it is used in school and non-school social sciences text*. Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois.
- Diskin, C. (2017). The use of the discourse-pragmatic marker 'like' by native and non-native speakers of English in Ireland. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 120, 144 – 157.
- Fuji, S. (2000). Incipient decategorization of mono and grammaticalization of speaker attitude in Japanese discourse. In G. Andersen and T. Fretheim (eds.), *Pragmatic Markers and Propositional Attitude* (pp. 85–118). Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Fuller, J. M. (2003). Use of the discourse marker like in interviews. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 7(3), 365–377.

- Fung, L., & Carter, R. (2007). Discourse markers and spoken English: Native and learner use in pedagogic settings. *Applied Linguistics*, 28(3), 410–439.
- Goldman, S. R. & Murray, J. (1992). Knowledge connectors as cohesion devices in text: A comparative study of native-English and English-as-a-second-language speakers. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 84(4), 504–519.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (2004). *An introduction to functional grammar*. London: Arnold.
- Hellermann, J., & Vergun, A. (2007). Language which is not taught: The discourse marker use of beginning adult learners of English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39(1), 157–179.
- Hyland, K. (2005). *Metadiscourse: Exploring interaction in writing*. New York: Continuum.
- Hyland, K. & Tse, P. (2004). Metadiscourse in academic writing: A reappraisal. *Applied Linguistics*, 25(2), 156–177
- Kan, M.O. (2016). The use of interactional metadiscourse: A comparison of articles on Turkish education and literature. *Kuram ve Uygulamada Egitim Bilimleri*, 16(5), 1639–1648.
- Kasper, G., & Blum-Kulka, S. (1993). *Interlanguage pragmatics*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.
- Latawiec, B.M. (2012). *Metadiscourse in oral discussions and persuasive essays of children participating in collaborative reasoning*. [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/42302>
- Latawiec, B. M., Anderson, R. C., Ma, S., & Nguyen-Jahiel, K. (2016). Influence of collaborative reasoning discussions on metadiscourse in children's essays. *Text & Talk*, 36(1), 23–46.
- Lee, J. (2019). Functional spectrum of a discourse marker so in Korean EFL teacher talk. *Korean Journal of English Language and Linguistics*, 19(3), 371 – 406.
- Lipovsky, C. (2010). *Negotiating solidarity: A social-linguistic approach to job interviews*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (Fifth edition). (2009). Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Müller, S. (2005). *Discourse markers in native and non-native English discourse*. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Moghadam, F. D. (2017). Persuasion in journalism: A study of metadiscourse in texts by native speakers of English and Iranian EFL writers. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 7(6), 483–495.
- Nor, S. (2012). Discourse markers in turn-initial positions in interruptive speech in a Malaysian radio discourse. *Multilingua*, 31(1), 113-133. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/mult.2012.005>
- Pawlak, M. (2010). Teaching and learning pragmatic features in the foreign language classroom: Interfaces between research and pedagogy. In I. Witzcak-Plisiecka (Ed.), *Pragmatic perspectives on language and linguistics. Volume 1: Speech actions in theory and applied studies* (pp. 439–460). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Publishing.
- Redeker, G. (1990). Ideational and pragmatic markers of discourse structure. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14(3), 367–381.
- Rennie, E., Lunsford, R., & Heeman, P. A. (2016). The discourse marker “so” in turn-taking and turn-releasing behavior. *Interspeech 2016*, 1280-1284.
- Romero-Trillo, J. (2008). Adaptive management in discourse: The case of involvement discourse markers in Spanish conversations. *Catalan Journal of Linguistics*, 6, 81–94.
- Rui, K., & Xin, X. (2009). Empirical study on metadiscourse in Chinese EFL learners' oral communication. *China English Language Education Association (CELEA) Journal*, 32(1), 52–64.
- Schiffrin, D. (1987). *Discourse markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schourup, L. (1999). Discourse markers. *Lingua*, 107, 227–265.
- Stanton, C. (1996). *Metadiscourse: The rhetorical plane of text*. Nottingham: Department of English Studies (Nottingham Working Papers).
- Taguchi, N. (2015). Instructed pragmatics at a glance: Where instructional studies were, are, and should be going. *Language Teaching*, 48(1), 1-50.
- Torres, L., & Potowski, K. (2008). A comparative study of bilingual discourse markers in Chicago Mexican, Puerto Rican, and MexiRican Spanish. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 12(4), 263–279.
- Tottie, G. (1986). The importance of being adverbial: Adverbials of focusing and contingency in spoken and written English. In G. Tottie and I. Backlund (eds.), *English in speech and writing: A symposium*. Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia 60, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 93–118.
- Vickov, G. & Jakupčević, E. (2017). Discourse markers in non-native EFL teacher talk. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 7(4), 649 – 671.
- White, M. (1994). *Language in job interview: Differences relating to success and socioeconomic variables*. Northern Arizona University.
- Willis, D. (2003). *Rules, patterns, and words: Grammar and lexis in English language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zand-Moghadam, A. & Bikineh, L. (2015). Discourse Markers in Political Interviews: A Contrastive Study of Persian and English. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language*, 3(1), 47 – 61.