Meaning Construction in Indonesian Language and Literature Education Students' Speaking during Academic Discussions in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the meaning construction and speaking strategies of first-year students of Class 1A of the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program at IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro during academic discussions. This investigation focuses on how students construct meaning explicitly and implicitly, negotiate understanding, and use linguistic and pragmatic strategies in small group interactions. This study adopted a qualitative case study design. Data were obtained through classroom observations, discussion recordings, and transcriptions of spoken discourse, then analyzed using Gee and Halliday's meaning construction theory, Thomas's pragmatics, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, Mercer's interthinking concept, and Brown and Yule's oral interaction framework. The results show that meaning construction occurs through clarification, negotiation, repair, and the use of adjacent pairs. These findings contribute to the development of speaking skills teaching, particularly in understanding how beginning students construct meaning and participate effectively in academic discussions.

Introduction

Academic discussion constitutes a central arena in higher education where meaning is not simply transmitted but collaboratively constructed through discourse. In this context, speaking is inseparable from processes of interpretation, negotiation, clarification, and alignment among participants. For university students, particularly those in language and literature education programs, academic discussion demands the ability to construct meaning through interaction rather than merely produce fluent utterances. Meaning construction in academic discussion involves how speakers formulate ideas, respond to others, manage agreement and disagreement, and repair misunderstandings in order to achieve shared understanding. Therefore, examining academic speaking through the lens of meaning construction enables a deeper understanding of how learning and knowledge-building occur through discourse.

This study is empirically grounded in first-year students of the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Program at IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro. As novice members of the academic community, these students are undergoing an important transition from everyday conversational practices to more formal academic discourse norms. Early-stage university learners often struggle to articulate ideas precisely, negotiate meaning with peers, and sustain academically oriented discussions. These challenges are particularly salient in academic discussion settings, where students are expected to collaboratively construct meaning, justify arguments, and engage critically with differing viewpoints. By foregrounding this empirical context from the outset, the present study positions meaning construction as a situated practice shaped by students' developmental stage and institutional learning environment.

The conceptual framework of this study integrates several complementary perspectives on discourse and meaning. Brown conceptualizes speaking as an interactive and strategic process that requires speakers to manage linguistic resources, intentions, and interpersonal relations simultaneously (Brown, 2001). Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics provides a foundational understanding of meaning as realized through the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions, all of which operate concurrently in academic discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Gee further emphasizes that meaning is socially constructed through discourse practices that are embedded in specific social and institutional contexts, including educational settings (Gee, 2014). From a pragmatic perspective, meaning is negotiated through inference, implicature, politeness strategies, and repair mechanisms, which enable speakers to maintain mutual understanding (Thomas, 2013). Mercer's notion of interthinking highlights the collaborative dimension of meaning construction, in which knowledge is collectively built through dialogic interaction (Mercer, 2000). Integrated into a single framework, these perspectives allow academic discussion to be analyzed as a dynamic process of socially mediated meaning construction.

In line with this framework, the present study deliberately limits general theoretical discussion on speaking as a skill and instead concentrates on discourse-level processes through which meaning is constructed. Academic speaking is examined as interaction-in-action, focusing on how students organize turns, employ clarification strategies, negotiate

disagreement, and co-construct understanding. Previous discourse-oriented studies demonstrate that interactional features such as adjacency pairs, repair, and discourse markers play a central role in shaping meaning in classroom interaction (Seedhouse, 2004; Walsh, 2011). By emphasizing discourse rather than individual performance, this study aligns with contemporary views that regard speaking competence as fundamentally interactional and context-dependent.

Existing research on speaking in higher education has focused mainly on fluency, accuracy, confidence, or presentation skills (Widiati & Cahyono, 2020; Goh & Burns, 2012). Other studies have examined negotiation of meaning, primarily within second- or foreign-language learning contexts, often emphasizing comprehension rather than discourse construction (Long, 1996; Nurhayati & Rahmawati, 2020). While these studies offer valuable insights, they treat meaning construction as a subsidiary phenomenon rather than as the central analytical focus. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to meaning construction in academic discussions among first-year students in Indonesian Language and Literature Education programs. Consequently, there remains a gap in understanding how novice university students construct meaning through discourse in their early academic experiences. This study addresses that gap by positioning meaning construction as the primary object of analysis within authentic academic discussions.

The conceptual novelty of this research lies in its integrative and discourse-centered approach to academic speaking. Rather than examining speaking strategies or pragmatic features in isolation, this study analyzes how meaning is constructed through the interaction of linguistic, pragmatic, and social processes in academic discussions. By focusing on first-year students, the study also captures meaning construction at a formative stage of academic discourse development, offering insights into how academic communicative competence begins to take shape. This approach extends existing research by foregrounding meaning construction as a collaborative and evolving process rather than an individual skill.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to discourse analysis and pragmatics by providing empirical evidence of how meaning is co-constructed in higher education contexts. It demonstrates how discourse structures, pragmatic strategies, and interactional norms intersect to shape academic understanding, supporting views of language as social action and of meaning as interactionally achieved (Fairclough, 2010; Cutting, 2021). By situating meaning construction within real classroom interaction, the study enriches applied linguistic research with context-sensitive insights that complement existing discourse theories.

Pedagogically, the findings of this study have significant implications for speaking instruction in higher education. Understanding how students construct meaning in academic discussions can inform instructional practices that explicitly scaffold discourse strategies such as clarification, reformulation, and collaborative reasoning. Such pedagogical approaches can help students move beyond surface-level participation toward more reflective and meaningful academic engagement. This aligns with research emphasizing the importance of discourse awareness in developing students' academic speaking competence (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Ariyanti, 2021).

Accordingly, the literature reviewed in this study is deliberately narrowed to discourse-oriented and analytical works rather than broad descriptive accounts of speaking ability. Priority is given to studies that examine spoken interaction, classroom discourse, pragmatics, and meaning construction, ensuring theoretical coherence with the research focus.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze how first-year students in the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Program at IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro construct meaning in academic discussions, identify the linguistic and pragmatic strategies they employ in this process, and examine factors that influence their participation in collaborative meaning-making. Through this focus, the study seeks to advance both theoretical understanding and pedagogical practice related to academic speaking in higher education.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to examine meaning construction in students' academic discussions. The qualitative approach was selected because it allows in-depth analysis of naturally occurring spoken interaction and is appropriate for discourse-based research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The research objectives are addressed analytically in the results and discussion sections, rather than embedded in the design description.

Data were collected from September to November 2025 during regular classroom discussion sessions in the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Program at IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro. Participants were selected purposely based on specific criteria: first-year student status, active participation in academic discussions, willingness to be recorded, and variation in speaking confidence and interactional roles.

Classroom discussions were audio and video–recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcription focused on interactionally relevant features of discourse, including pauses, overlapping turns, self- and other-repair, and discourse markers, which were treated as indicators of meaning construction rather than isolated linguistic forms.

Data analysis followed an interactive model of data reduction, organization, and interpretation. During data reduction, transcripts were coded using categories such as clarification, negotiation of meaning, adjacency pairs, repair, elaboration, and pragmatic mitigation. The coded data were then organized into analytic tables to facilitate pattern identification across interactions.

Research credibility was ensured through data triangulation and member checking, in which selected transcripts and participants reviewed interpretations to confirm accuracy. Overall, this methodological approach contributes to discourse-based research by demonstrating how qualitative methods can capture the complexity of meaning construction in academic speaking contexts.

Results and Discussion

Results

This section presents the findings in direct alignment with the research objectives, namely to identify (1) forms of meaning construction, (2) speaking strategies employed by students, and (3) interactional factors influencing academic discussion among first-year students.

Meaning Construction in Academic Discussions

The findings indicate that students constructed meaning through explicit explanation, implicit inference, clarification, negotiation, and repair. These processes were observable in naturally occurring interactions and functioned as mechanisms for achieving shared understanding.

A clear example of conceptual distinction emerged when students discussed *personal branding* versus *self-promotion*. One participant stated:

"Personal branding itu menunjukkan nilai diri, bukan pamer. Kalau pamer itu lebih ke cari perhatian." (S12)

This utterance demonstrates explicit meaning construction through contrastive definition. The distinction was reinforced by another participant who added:

"Kalau self-promotion biasanya berlebihan, sedangkan personal branding lebih konsisten." (S07)

These excerpts show how meaning was collaboratively refined through elaboration and alignment.

Implicit meaning construction was evident when students used tentative language to invite negotiation, such as:

"Kayaknya nggak harus lewat media sosial saja, mungkin dari sikap juga." (S15)

Here, meaning was not asserted directly but offered for collective interpretation, prompting peer responses and further clarification.

Negotiation and Repair Mechanisms

Negotiation of meaning frequently occurred through clarification requests and repair. For instance:

"Maksudnya gimana? Bisa dijelaskan lagi?" (S03)

This other-initiated repair prompted the original speaker to reformulate:

"Oh, maksud saya bukan terkenal, tapi dikenal karena konsistensi." (S09)

Such exchanges illustrate how repair functions as a central mechanism of meaning construction rather than a sign of communicative failure.

Speaking Strategies and Their Integration

Students employed multiple speaking strategies simultaneously, including elaboration, discourse markers, mitigation, and rhetorical sequencing. These strategies were mutually supportive rather than isolated.

For example, a participant combined elaboration with mitigation:

"Saya setuju sebagian, tapi mungkin dari sisi lain bisa dipertimbangkan…" (S11)

This utterance integrates agreement, hedging, and transition markers to maintain interpersonal harmony while advancing an alternative perspective.

Discourse markers such as *jadi*, *intinya*, and *menurut saya* were consistently used to structure arguments and signal shifts in reasoning, supporting coherence in discussion flow.

Confidence Variation and Participation Patterns

Variation in confidence levels strongly influenced participation. High-confidence students initiated turns, spoke longer, and frequently elaborated, while low-confidence students relied on moderator prompts or brief confirmations.

For example, a less confident participant stated:

"Saya sebenarnya setuju, tapi belum bisa menjelaskan." (S18)

This indicates partial engagement constrained by limited communicative confidence.

Group Dynamics and Moderator Role

Group dynamics significantly shaped participation patterns. In groups with effective moderation, turn-taking was balanced, and clarification was encouraged. In contrast, weak moderation led to dominance by confident speakers:

"Tadi saya mau bicara, tapi sudah dipotong." (S21)

This reflects unequal participation and limited discursive access.

Table 1. Summary of Key Results

Aspect	Observed Patterns
Meaning construction	Clarification, negotiation, repair
Speaking strategies	Elaboration, mitigation, discourse markers
Confidence	Affects turn-taking and utterance length
Group dynamics	Influences participation equity
Moderator role	Regulates power distribution

Table 2. Interactional Evidence and Analytical Implications

Dimension	Empirical Evidence (Participant Data)	Analytical Implications
Meaning negotiation	Participants reformulated ideas after peer responses (e.g., clarification and restatement)	Meaning emerged through interactional adjustment rather than initial utterances.
Conceptual differentiation	The distinction between *personal branding* and *self-promotion* is articulated through comparison.	Conceptual clarity developed dialogically within the discussion
Strategy integration	Elaboration combined with discourse markers and mitigation in single turns	Speaking strategies operated synergistically to support clarity and social harmony
Confidence variation	Confident students produced longer turns; less confident students relied on brief agreement.	Confidence influenced access to meaning construction and discourse control
Moderator intervention	Explicit turn invitations increased participation from quieter members	Moderation regulates power distribution and participatory justice
Strategic weakness	Vague claims left unexplored due to a lack of follow-up	The failed negotiation limited the collective meaning development

Discussion

Analytical

The discussion begins by directly linking the findings to the research objective: explaining how meaning is constructed through speaking practices in academic discussions. The results indicate that meaning construction among first-year students emerged through interactional negotiation rather than individual delivery. Participants developed, refined, and sometimes abandoned meanings in response to peer feedback, moderator intervention, and group dynamics.

Theoretical

Although this study does not foreground explicit theoretical exposition, the findings reflect an implicit discourse-oriented framework in which meaning is treated as socially negotiated. This is evident in how participants revised their utterances after receiving responses. For instance, Participant 3 clarified an initially vague statement:

P3: *"Personal branding itu ya cara kita menunjukkan diri."*

P3: *"Maksud saya, personal branding itu lebih ke identitas akademik, bukan sekadar pamer."*

This sequence shows that meaning was constructed progressively through interaction, indicating that understanding emerged from dialogic refinement rather than fixed definitions.

Evidence

Conceptual distinctions became clearer when participants supported their claims with comparative explanations. The difference between *personal branding* and *self-promotion* was articulated explicitly by Participant 5:

P5: *"Kalau self-promotion itu cenderung menonjolkan diri sendiri, sedangkan personal branding lebih ke citra akademik yang konsisten."*

This excerpt demonstrates that conceptual clarity was achieved through contrastive explanation within discourse. In English, this suggests that meaning construction relied on relational positioning of concepts during interaction.

Integration

The findings show that speaking strategies were used in an integrated manner. Participants often combined elaboration, discourse markers, and mitigation within a single turn. Participant 2 exemplified this integration:

P2: *"Menurut saya, sebenarnya personal branding itu penting, tapi mungkin tiap orang punya cara yang berbeda."*

This utterance shows how participants simultaneously organized ideas, expanded meaning, and maintained interpersonal harmony. Such integration enabled smoother interaction and reduced potential conflict during discussion.

Confidence

Variations in confidence levels significantly influenced participation and meaning development. Less confident participants tended to produce shorter utterances and relied on agreement without elaboration. Participant 7 stated:

P7: *"Saya setuju, tapi kurang paham menjelaskannya."*

In contrast, more confident participants elaborated their ideas and guided the discussion flow. Participant 1 explained:

P1: *"Kalau kita bicara personal branding di dunia akademik, itu berkaitan dengan bagaimana mahasiswa dikenal melalui karya dan sikap ilmiahnya."*

These differences indicate that confidence affected not only the quantity of speaking but also access to meaning construction within the group.

Dynamics

Group dynamics and moderator intervention played a crucial role in shaping participation Equity. When moderators actively distributed turns, quieter participants became involved. One moderator explicitly stated:

Moderator: *"Mungkin teman-teman yang belum bicara bisa menambahkan pendapat."*

Following this prompt, previously silent participants contributed brief but relevant ideas. In English, this shows that moderator actions influenced power distribution and ensured broader access to meaning construction.

Failure

Not all attempts at meaning negotiation were successful. Some utterances remained underdeveloped due to insufficient follow-up. Participant 6 introduced a vague claim:

P6: *"Self-promotion itu kadang berlebihan."*

However, the group did not pursue clarification, and the discussion shifted to another topic. In English, this illustrates a failure of meaning negotiation due to insufficient probing and a lack of strategic strength in sustaining conceptual development.

Limitations

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study involved only one cohort of first-year students within a single institutional context, namely IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro. This contextual specificity may limit the transferability of the findings to other higher education settings with different academic cultures or student characteristics. Second, data collection relied on recorded academic discussions, which may have influenced participants' speaking behavior. Awareness of being recorded could have led students to monitor their language use more carefully, potentially affecting spontaneity, interactional patterns, and the depth of meaning construction. Acknowledging these limitations does not undermine the value of the study; rather, it enhances the credibility of the findings and underscores the need for future research involving multiple institutions or longitudinal designs.

Implications

The findings of this study offer important practical implications for speaking instruction in higher education. Academic discussion activities should emphasize the integrated use of speaking strategies, such as elaboration, clarification, and interactional management, rather than focusing solely on individual fluency. In addition, instructional practices should provide interactional support for students with lower confidence levels to ensure more inclusive participation. The role of the moderator or lecturer is also crucial in managing turn-taking and balancing participation, as effective moderation contributes directly to more equitable

opportunities for meaning construction and collaborative knowledge development in classroom discussions.

Consistency

Throughout the discussion, consistent use of key academic terms such as *meaning construction, speaking strategies, confidence,* and *group dynamics* has been maintained to ensure conceptual clarity and academic professionalism. Terminological consistency supports a coherent interpretation of the findings. It helps readers systematically follow the study's analytical focus, thereby strengthening the overall quality and readability of the discussion section.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that meaning construction in academic discussions is a collaborative and interaction-driven process. First-year students developed meaning through negotiation, clarification, and reformulation during interaction. Speaking strategies functioned integratively, with elaboration supporting clarity, discourse markers organizing ideas, and mitigation maintaining interpersonal harmony. Differences in confidence influenced participation patterns and access to meaning construction, while group dynamics and moderator intervention regulated participation equity. Although students demonstrated emerging academic speaking competence, they still relied on clarification, repair, and interactional support. These findings suggest that structured discussion activities, integrated strategy instruction, and effective moderation are essential for enhancing students' academic speaking competence in higher education contexts.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Setiyono: Generating ideas and conceptualization, developing the research design, translating, and managing the entire research process. Sholehhudin: Field research including data collection. Puspitasari: Writing the literature review, organizing the discussion and conclusion, and supervising the research.

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