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Applying the File-Card Model in Teaching and Learning English Speaking Skills for English-Majored Students

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Abstract

This study examines how effectively the File-Card Model (Erteschik-Shir, 2007, 2016) can be applied to teaching and learning advanced English speaking skills among third-year English-major students in Vietnam. The reserachers conducted a quasi-experimental study with 30 participants divided into an experimental and a control group over eight weeks. The experimental group received explicit instruction through five stages, including topic mapping, focus marking, topic chaining, counterargument retrieval, and closing summary. The the control group, in contrast, followed the standard Speaking four syllabus. Data from pre- and post-test pair debates were analyzed using quantitative (t-tests) and qualitative discourse analysis, focusing on two indices: Topic Chaining Index (TCI) and Focus Shift Effectiveness (FSE). Results indicated significant improvements in the experimental group (TCI +23.1%, FSE +21.4%, $p < .001$). Students displayed smoother topic transitions, more explicit focus signaling, and stronger argumentative coherence. The study contributes theoretically by supporting the topic–focus interface in information structure and pedagogically by demonstrating that the File-Card Model provides a cognitive-linguistic framework to enhance coherence, fluency, and persuasiveness in EFL speaking. It also proposes TCI and FSE as effective discourse-level measures for evaluating oral proficiency in academic speaking training contexts.

***Keywords**:* debate pedagogy, discourse coherence, English-majored students, file-Card Model, Vietnam

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Introduction

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most challenging skills to master in second language acquisition, especially at advanced levels, where learners are expected to manage complex discourse, construct coherent arguments, and sustain meaningful interaction. These demands require learners to develop four specific abilities that make their oral communication more explicit and effective (Luoma, 2004; Thornbury, 2005). In English for Academic Purposes programs, the ability to maintain coherent, persuasive, and extended spoken interaction is a key indicator of communicative competence, especially for learners preparing for academic and professional contexts (Hyland, 2019). Despite extensive exposure to English throughout their undergraduate studies, many advanced learners still struggle to maintain topic continuity, transition smoothly between ideas, and construct persuasive arguments during extended speaking tasks.. Recent studies further confirm these challenges in contemporary EFL contexts. For example, Elisathusilawani (2023) found that EFL students face persistent difficulties in maintaining fluency, coherence, and interactive competence in extended speaking tasks. Karim et al. (2023) demonstrated that digital-assisted learning tools can enhance students' oral performance but do not fully resolve discourse management issues. Moreover, Akhter et al. (2025) highlighted that advanced learners often require structured pedagogical frameworks to improve argumentation and focus management in academic speaking.

This issue is particularly salient in Speaking four, the final speaking course in the undergraduate English Language Studies program at a Vietnamese university. The course, designed for 30 third-year English-major students with proficiency levels ranging from B2+ to C1 on the CEFR scale, requires learners to participate in 5- to 7-minute pair debates, during which they are expected to present arguments that are logically organized and persuasive. Although students at this level typically demonstrate broad lexical and grammatical control, they often lack systematic strategies for topic chaining and focus management, which can lead to occasional loss of coherence, abrupt shifts in focus, and repetitive content that weakens the overall persuasiveness of their debates.

While reserachers widely use debate and argumentation to enhance critical thinking and oral fluency, most pedagogical approaches rely on rhetorical templates or memorized argumentative outlines rather than discourse-based frameworks. As a result, advanced learners may produce valid ideas but truggle to connect them coherently across turns or sustain topic development throughout interactions. In the Vietnamese academic oral context, researchers have paid limited attention to information structure, especially to how topics and foci interact dynamically to shape discourse. Thus, a pedagogical and theoretical gap remains in applying a linguistically informed model that explicitly teaches how to manage topic continuity and shifts in focus during extended speaking tasks such as debates.

To address this gap, the present study applies the File-Card Model (Erteschik-Shir, 2007, 2016) to the teaching and learning of advanced speaking skills. The model conceptualizes discourse as a dynamic set of "file cards," each representing a topic that can be updated, chained, or replaced as the conversation unfolds. A central insight of this model is its treatment of topic-focus relations, which, as Lambrecht (1994) notes, form the backbone of discourse organization by distinguishing between what is given (topic) and what is new or contrastive (focus). By raising learners' awareness of how topics are introduced, maintained, and shifted, and as well as how focus elements highlight new or contrastive information, the model provides a theoretically grounded means of improving the coherence, flow, and persuasiveness of spoken discourse.

The pedagogical significance of this study extends beyond classroom speaking performance. Developing argumentation and debate competence equips English majors with transferable skills that are essential for academic and professional success. Recent research confirms that structured debate activities enhance students' critical thinking, oral fluency, and confidence in presenting arguments (Ban, Pang & Em, 2023). Moreover, the ability to communicate persuasively in English has been linked to improved employability and professional readiness among university graduates (Alkooheji & Al-Hittami, 2024) . In educational settings, the ability to argue logically and respond critically to counterarguments fosters higher-order thinking and deeper disciplinary engagement (Kuhn, 2019). In professional contexts, persuasive speaking underpins effective communication in negotiations, presentations, and decision-making (Andrews, 2015; Robles, 2012). Hence, strengthening students' debate competence in Speaking four contributes both to immediate academic performance and to their long-term employability and communicative confidence. Theoretically, this research also provides empirical evidence for extending the File-Card Model into applied EFL pedagogy, linking information structure theory with oral argumentation training.

Accordingly, this study pursues three interrelated objectives. First, it seeks to apply the File-Card Model systematically in advanced speaking instruction to enhance discourse management and argument development. Second, it aims to examine the model's impact on learners' ability to maintain topic continuity, manage shifts in focus, and organize arguments coherently during pair debates. Finally, it evaluates whether such training leads to measurable improvements in coherence, fluency, and persuasiveness in students' spoken discourse. Together, these objectives create a clear link between theoretical rationale, pedagogical intervention, and empirical evaluation.

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses two guiding questions:

(1) How does applying the File-Card Model influence third-year English majors' ability to maintain topic continuity and coherence in extended debates?

(2) In what ways does the model affect the organization and persuasiveness of students' arguments in Speaking four pair debates?

By exploring these questions, the research aims to demonstrate how a linguistically motivated, cognitively transparent framework can strengthen learners' discourse competence in advanced speaking skills.

Literature review

The File-Card Model and Focus Structure

Focus Structure

Focus structure is a central mechanism in discourse that governs how information is presented and interpreted. It divides an utterance into two complementary parts: the topic, which anchors the sentence to already established knowledge, and the focus, which conveys new, contrastive, or emphasized information (Krifka, 2008; Vallduví & Engdahl, 1996). This distinction allows speakers to highlight what is important at a given moment while ensuring that their message links to the ongoing discourse. Focus can be realized in multiple ways: syntactically, through cleft or pseudo-cleft constructions (e.g., "*What we need to focus on is …*"); prosodically, through stress and intonation patterns that mark emphasis; and lexically, by inserting focus-sensitive markers such as *especially* or *in particular* (Gussenhoven, 2007; Féry, 2013). Beyond simple emphasis,

focus plays a key role in information packaging, guiding listeners in distinguishing between background information and the speaker's central message.

The File-Card Model and Its Relation to Focus Structure

The File-Card Model (Erteschik-Shir, 2007, 2016) conceptualizes discourse as a dynamic network of "file cards," each representing a topic that can be activated, updated, or replaced as the conversation unfolds. Within this model, focus structure functions as the updating mechanism. Whenever a speaker introduces new information, that focus is either attached to the currently active card or initiates the creation of a new, related card. In this way, focus not only marks what is informationally salient but also drives discourse progression, ensuring that communication remains both coherent and incremental.

This relationship between topic and focus is particularly critical in extended speaking tasks such as academic debates, where speakers must continuously balance anchoring their contributions to the established topic and advancing the argument through new focal information (Büring, 2016). Successful discourse, therefore, depends on maintaining this balance, keeping the thread of continuity while introducing contrastive or elaborative information that propels the discussion forward.

Building on this conceptual foundation, we can describe the File-Card-Focus Interaction as a three-stage cyclical process that explains how coherent and connected discourse develops in real time.

First, *Topic Identification*, the speaker determines which file card the current utterance is associated with. This stage involves activating the relevant card representing the ongoing topic. For example, in a debate on climate change, when a speaker states, "One major effect of global warming is rising sea levels.", the file card labeled *"effects of climate change"* becomes active.

Second, *Focus Integration*, the speaker then updates the selected file card by incorporating the new information introduced through focus. For example, the phrase *'rising sea levels'* serves as the focus, adding new and salient information to the existing card on *'effects of climate change"*. This process ensures that discourse progresses meaningfully without breaking topical coherence.

Third, *Topic Chaining*, when a focus naturally leads to a related subtopic, a new file card is created and linked to the preceding one, forming a chain of connected ideas. For example, The mention of *"rising sea levels"* may lead to a new card labeled *"impact on coastal communities."*

This chaining mechanism allows speakers to expand their arguments logically and persuasively while staying connected to the overarching theme (Erteschik-Shir, 2007; Ariel, 2010).

Through this cyclical process, discourse unfolds as a sequence of interconnected topics and foci, providing both cohesion and progression. In academic debates, this interactional mechanism enables speakers to organize their arguments hierarchically: they anchor statements to established topics, integrate new focal elements to add evidence or contrast, and chain these elements to subtopics that deepen the argument. For instance, a debater might begin with a file card on *"economic benefits of renewable energy,"* integrate the focus *"job creation,"* and subsequently chain it to a new card on *"long-term employment sustainability."* This layered progression exemplifies how the File-Card-Focus Interaction ensures logical continuity, rhetorical persuasiveness, and cognitive clarity in advanced spoken discourse. Recent studies show that mapping prosodic cues to focus remains challenging for L2 speakers, highlighting the cognitive load of updating discourse units (Yan, Warren & Calhoun, 2022). Cross-linguistic evidence further indicates that focus-to-prosody mappings differ between Mandarin and English, suggesting the

"Focus Integration" stage in the File-Card Model must account for language-specific realization of focus (Zhang, Clayards & Wagner, 2024).

File-Card Operation in Topic-Based Argumentation

Pair debates in the Speaking Four course clearly illustrate the File-Card Operation in topic-based argumentation. .The debate begins with the opening, where the speaker introduces the main topic, thereby creating the initial file card; for example, "Today, we argue that university education should be free" activates a topic card labeled University education policy.The first argument provides a claim and a corresponding focus to update the file card, such as "One key benefit is improved social equity" (focus = improved social equity). The evidence stage adds supporting information, further enriching the same file card, as in "Studies show that countries with free tuition have higher graduation rates among low-income students" (OECD, 2021). The speaker may then proceed to chaining to a related argument, which involves shifting to a new but thematically connected file card—for instance, "Beyond fairness, free education also boosts the economy," creating a new card titled Economic impact of free education linked to the original policy card (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). At the counterargument and refutation stage, the speaker retrieves the relevant file card and introduces a contrasting focus, as in "Some argue it would strain government budgets, but research indicates long-term tax revenues outweigh initial costs" (Barr, 2014). Finally, the closing summarizes the updates across all file cards to reinforce the central thesis. By following this structured process, speakers maintain topic coherence, ensure that each new focus logically connects to an active file card, and construct persuasive, logically progressive arguments without losing the audience's attention. Recent research shows that structured topic-focus operations in debates improve discourse coherence and persuasiveness for advanced L2 learners (Li & Chen, 2023; Ahmad, 2022).

Pedagogical Applications of the File-Card Model in Speaking Instruction

Although researchers have primarily discussed the file-card model within theoretical linguistics, it offers substantial pedagogical potential for speaking instruction, particularly in contexts that demand sustained, coherent, and persuasive oral performance. In *Speaking four*-the final speaking course for third-year English-majored students, students perform pair debates lasting 5-7 minutes, aiming at C1-level fluency and discourse control. At this stage, many learners continue to face challenges in maintaining topic coherence, achieving smooth transitions, and organizing arguments logically. The file-card model can address these challenges by providing a clear cognitive framework for topic and focus management. To operationalize the model in the classroom, instructors can integrate specific activities targeting each stage of file-card operation, from topic introduction to closing summaries. These activities not only raise learners' metalinguistic awareness of discourse structure but also provide repeated, scaffolded practice in applying the model during real-time interaction.

The table below outlines suggested classroom activities aligned with the file-card model for debate preparation and delivery in Speaking four. These activities target different stages of file-card operation, from topic introduction to closing summaries.

Table 1. *Classroom activities aligned with the File-Card Model*

Stage in File-Card Model	Classroom Activity	Objective	Example in Speaking 4 Debate
Topic Identification & Mapping	Topic mapping exercise	Help students identify main and subtopics, assign file-card labels	Students brainstorm subtopics for "Free university education" (e.g., social equity, economy, quality assurance)
Focus Highlighting	Focus marking drills	Practice signaling new or critical information syntactically, prosodically, and lexically	Rewriting sentences with cleft structures ('What we need to focus on is…') and practicing stress patterns
Topic Chaining	Chaining expansion task	Develop ability to extend a topic with related arguments before shifting	Students add 2–3 linked arguments to "social equity" before moving to "economic benefits"
Controlled Topic Shifting	Transition marker practice	Ensure smooth and precise topic shifts	Using phrases like 'Turning now to…', 'Another key point is…' to introduce a new file card
Counterargument & Refutation	Argument retrieval & contrast exercise	Train students to recall and reframe existing file cards to respond to opposing points	Retrieving the "economic benefits" card to counter "government budget strain" the argument
Closing & Summary	File-card recap activity	Consolidate all updated file cards and reinforce the thesis	Summarizing each topic card with its focus updates to form a final speech

Criteria for Coherent and Persuasive Oral Argumentation

To effectively engage in academic debate and persuasive argumentation, learners must develop a range of discourse-level competencies beyond lexical and grammatical accuracy. First, clear topic identification and logical organization are essential, as they enable speakers to structure arguments coherently around a central thesis and its supporting subtopics (Nation & Newton, 2021). The use of topic mapping in the File-Card Model helps students visualize the overall argumentative structure more effectively.

Second, the ability to highlight focus plays a crucial rhetorical role. Strategic focus marking-through cleft constructions (e.g., "What we need to focus on is…"), lexical signals (e.g., "especially", "in particular"), and prosodic emphasis enhances the clarity and salience of new or contrastive information, thus increasing the persuasive force of the speaker's message (Gussenhoven, 2007; Féry, 2013).

Third, successful debating requires smooth transitions between arguments. Topic chaining achieves this by ensuring that each new point logically builds upon the preceding one. Transition markers such as "Building on that point" or "Another key issue is" serve to maintain discourse cohesion and thematic continuity (Erteschik-Shir, 2007; Ariel, 2010).

Fourth, speakers must anticipate and respond to counterarguments. The retrieval of previously established file cards and the strategic framing of rebuttals are essential for defending one's position and demonstrating critical thinking (Barr, 2014). Finally, persuasive delivery also depends on audience awareness. Intonation, stress, and structured signaling of key points contribute to more compelling and listener-friendly communication (Chafe, 1994; Wennerstrom, 2001).

These discourse strategies, when integrated through the File-Card framework, support not only argument development and coherence but also rhetorical impact and communicative confidence in academic speaking contexts.

Although the File-Card Model has been widely discussed in theoretical linguistics and has informed studies of discourse coherence and information structure (Erteschik-Shir, 2007, 2016; Büring, 2016), its pedagogical application in second language speaking instruction remains underdeveloped. Previous studies have primarily examined written discourse and theoretical models of topic–focus relations, but few have explored ways to operationalize the model in classroom contexts. . Recent studies have further emphasized the importance of structured argumentative practice and coherence in L2 academic speaking. Tsunemoto & Trofimovich (2024) found that improved logical ordering of ideas significantly enhanced perceived coherence and comprehensibility in advanced L2 academic speaking tasks. Additionally, research on parliamentary debate pedagogy (Smith & Lee, 2024) demonstrated that participation in structured debate improves learners' argumentation skills and overall persuasive performance. In the context of English advanced speaking instruction, studies have emphasized the importance of argumentation and debate (Hyland, 2019; Kuhn, 2019), but few have provided concrete discourse-based frameworks to support learners in managing topic continuity and focus integration during extended oral tasks. Moreover, within the Vietnamese advanced speaking settings of teaching and learning, there is a notable lack of empirical research investigating how structured models such as the File-Card approach can enhance debate performance and argumentative competence among advanced learners. This gap highlights the need for studies that not only test the effectiveness of the File-Card Model in teaching speaking but also explore how it influences learners' ability to sustain coherence, manage shifts in focus, and improve persuasiveness in academic debates.

Methodology

Research design

This study employs a quasi-experimental design to investigate the effects of applying the File-Card Model on the speaking performance of third-year English-major students enrolled in the Speaking four course.. The quasi-experimental approach was selected because the intact class could not be randomly reassigned to different conditions, yet a control group and an experimental group were available for comparison (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Dörnyei, 2007). The experimental group received explicit instruction and guided practice in applying the file-card model for topic-based argumentation, whereas the control group followed the standard Speaking four curriculum without specific reference to the model. The study employed a pre-test/post-test control group design (Creswell, 2014), in which both groups completed the same debate tasks at the beginning (pre-test) and end (post-test) of a nine-week intervention period. This design enabled the measurement of students' gains in topic management and argument development.

Participants

The participants were 30 third-year English-major students enrolled in the *Speaking four* course at a Vietnamese university. Their ages ranged from 20 to 22 years old, including 9 males and 21 females. The participants represented an intact class selected for convenience and consistency in instructional context. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection.

All participants had completed prerequisite courses in Academic Speaking and Discourse Analysis, ensuring comparable linguistic and analytical proficiency. Their English proficiency levels ranged from B2+ to C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), as verified by the university's placement testing system.

To ensure the suitability of task materials for this learner profile, the debate topics and task prompts were reviewed and pilot-tested before implementation to confirm appropriate linguistic and cognitive demands.

Research instruments

The instructional intervention for the experimental group lasted eight weeks, integrating the file-card model into both debate preparation and delivery. Each week consisted of one 100-minute session of instruction and one 30-minute practice session. The instructor provided 16 hours of instruction and 8 hours of practice in total. The intervention focused on five key components: 1) Topic Mapping (Week 1-2): 2) Students identified and organized main and subtopics for debates; 3) Focus Marking (Week 3-4): 4) They practiced using syntactic, prosodic, and lexical signals to highlight new or essential information; 5) Topic Chaining (Week 5-6): Students extended ideas before introducing new subtopics, ensuring logical flow. Counterargument Retrieval (Week 7): They learned to retrieve and refute arguments using established file cards. Closing Summary (Week 8): Students summarized and consolidated all updated file cards, reinforcing key arguments. These activities were adapted from speaking pedagogy frameworks (Nation & Newton, 2021; Richards, 2015) and the file-card-based discourse structure outlined by Erteschik-Shir (2007, 2016). This ensured that students developed an awareness of how topics and foci interact dynamically in extended discourse.

The instructional intervention for the experimental group was delivered over an eight-week period, integrating the file-card model into both debate preparation and delivery. The training sequence consisted of five key components: (1) topic mapping to identify main and subtopics for debates; (2) focus marking using syntactic, prosodic, and lexical signals; (3) topic chaining drills to extend ideas before introducing a new topic; (4) counterargument retrieval activities using previously established file cards; and (5) closing summary tasks consolidating all updated file cards. These activities were adapted from previous speaking pedagogy frameworks (Nation & Newton, 2021; Richards, 2015) and from the file-card-based discourse structure outlined by Erteschik-Shir (2007, 2016), ensuring that students developed an awareness of how topics and foci interact dynamically in extended discourse.

Speaking tasks (Pre- and Post-test)

Both the pre-test and post-test employed a pair debate format lasting between five and seven minutes per pair, following the principles of task-based speaking assessment (Fulcher, 2015; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). Each debate followed a fixed structure, consisting of an opening statement and topic introduction, a first argument supported by evidence, a second argument incorporating topic chaining, a counterargument with refutation, and a closing statement. Topics for the pre- and post-tests were matched in terms of familiarity, complexity, and potential for balanced argumentation, with examples including 'University education should be free' and 'Social media does more harm than good'. This parallel design ensured that improvements in performance could be attributed to the instructional intervention rather than to topic-specific advantages (Bachman & Palmer, 2010).

Data collection and coding

Recording and transcription

All debates were video-recorded and transcribed verbatim to facilitate detailed discourse analysis, in line with best practices in spoken language research (Markee, 2015).

Measurement of topic chaining

Topic chaining was operationalized as the number of coherent topic transitions linking a newly introduced topic card to an existing one in a semantically and logically connected manner, following definitions in discourse coherence studies (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; McCarthy, 1991). A valid chain was coded only when the new topic was explicitly linked to the preceding focus and signaled by a clear transition marker such as 'Building on that point' or 'Another benefit is'. The Topic Chaining Index (TCI) was calculated as: TCI = (Number of valid topic chains / Total number of topic shifts) × 100 (adapted from McCarthy & Carter, 1994).

Measurement of focus shifts

Focus shifts were identified whenever new information relevant to the active file card was introduced. Each shift was coded for its type—syntactic (e.g., cleft sentences), prosodic (intonation and stress), or lexical (focus markers)—and for clarity on a scale from 0 to 2 (0 = unclear, 1 = partially clear, 2 = fully clear), drawing on criteria from discourse-pragmatic research (Gussenhoven, 2007; Féry, 2013). The Focus Shift Effectiveness (FSE) score was computed as: FSE = (Sum of clarity scores for all focus shifts / Maximum possible clarity score) × 100.

Data analysis

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitatively, paired-sample t-tests were used to compare pre-test and post-test scores within each group. In constrast, independent-sample t-tests compared the gains between the experimental and control groups for both TCI and FSE (Field, 2018). Qualitatively, discourse analysis was conducted on selected transcripts to illustrate how file-card operations were employed in real-time debates (Gee, 2014; Schiffrin et al., 2015). These excerpts provided evidence of how topic chaining and focus shifts contributed to sustained, coherent, and persuasive argumentation.

Ethical considerations

During the study period, ethical principles were carefully implemented. First, the researchers ensured the participants' welfare and treated them with humanity not only while deciding on the research question but also throughout the study. Second, participants' privacy and confidentiality were protected. Although the researchers knew who the participants were, they removed all identifying information from the report. Participants' personal data, such as names, phone numbers, email addresses, physical characteristics, and photos, were protected because all participants had a right to privacy. Finally, this article has never been submitted to or approved for consideration for another degree at another institution.

Results

Quantitative findings

The analysis revealed significant improvements in both Topic Chaining Index (TCI) and Focus Shift Effectiveness (FSE) for the experimental group compared to the control group. After eight weeks of instruction, the experimental group achieved a mean TCI of 78.4% (SD = 6.2), an increase of 23.1 percentage points from the pre-test. In contrast, the control group reached a mean TCI of 62.7% (SD = 7.5), showing only a 7.8-point increase.

For FSE, the experimental group recorded a mean score of 82.6% (SD = 5.9), up by 21.4 percentage points, whereas the control group averaged 68.9% (SD = 6.4), with a gain of just 8.2 points. Paired-sample t-tests indicated that both improvements in the experimental group were statistically significant ($p < .001$). In constract, independent-sample t-tests confirmed that the post-test differences between groups were also important ($p < .01$).

These results indicate that the experimental group showed significantly greater improvement in TCI than the control group, suggesting that the File-Card Model effectively enhanced their ability to maintain coherent topic shifts and logical progression during debates.. Example from Transcript (Topic Chaining): Experimental Group: Building on that point, free university education can reduce income inequality by offering more opportunities for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Control Group: "Free education is a right... uh, people should have the right to education no matter their background".

Table 2. *Pre-test and post-test results with p-value*

Measurement	Group	Pre-Test Mean (%)	Post-Test Mean (%)	Gain (%)	p-value for within-group comparisons (paired-sample t-test)
TCI	Experimental	55.3 (SD=7.1)	78.4 (SD=6.2)	+23.1	< .001
TCI	Control	54.9 (SD=6.8)	62.7 (SD=7.5)	+7.8	.072
FSE	Experimental	61.2 (SD=6.5)	82.6 (SD=5.9)	+21.4	< .001
FSE	Control	60.7 (SD=6.3)	68.9 (SD=6.4)	+8.2	.054

Note: p-values reported for within-group comparisons (paired-sample t-test).

Qualitative observations

Discourse analysis of the debate transcripts provided further insights into how the file-card model influenced students' speaking performance. In the experimental group, topic chaining was more frequently accompanied by explicit transition markers, ensuring smooth thematic progression. For example, a student debating free university education transitioned from "It promotes equal opportunities" to "Moreover, it helps the economy grow" using the linking phrase "Building on that point", thereby maintaining logical cohesion.

Similarly, focus shifts in the experimental group were frequently signaled syntactically (e.g., through cleft sentences such as "What we must consider is…"), prosodically (with clear stress on new information), and lexically (using markers such as *especially* or *in particular*). In contrast, the control group showed more abrupt topic changes and less consistent signaling of focus, which leading to occasional caused lapses in coherence.

Analysis of the debate transcripts further highlighted how the file-card model influenced students' speaking behavior. In the experimental group, topic shifts were more frequently accompanied by explicit transition markers, ensuring smooth thematic progression. For example, during a debate on free university education, a student transitioned from "It promotes equal

opportunities" to "Moreover, it helps the economy grow" using the phrase "Building on that point", maintaining logical coherence. Example from Transcript (Focus Shifting): Experimental Group: "What we must focus on now is the social equity of free education. Especially for low-income families, it can be a game-changer. Control Group: "Uh, free education could be good... but what about the costs? It's hard to make it work.

Student interview findings

To enrich the qualitative analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 students from the experimental group. The objective was to explore their perceptions regarding how the file-card model influenced their speaking performance in Speaking 4. The interviews were approximately 20 minutes in length and focused on three dimensions: (1) discourse organization, (2) focus marking, and (3) learner confidence.

A dominant theme was improved discourse coherence and strategic planning. Nine out of ten students reported that file cards helped them "see the whole argument" and organize their speech more effectively. One student stated, *"Before, I just said what came to my mind. But with file cards, I could arrange points in advance. For example, in the debate about social media, I had a card for privacy, a card for addiction, and a card for mental health. I just followed the cards, and it made my speaking more logical."*

Another participant elaborated on how the cards helped avoid repetition: *"I used to repeat the same idea because I forgot what I said before. With file cards, I had a clear list, so I didn't go in circles anymore."* This reflects the theoretical function of topic chaining and supports the observed gains in the Topic Chaining Index (TCI).

In terms of transitions and focus highlighting, students noted the helpfulness of having practiced specific discourse markers and focus structures. As one explained: *"Using phrases like 'Building on that point…' or 'Another key issue is…' helped me connect my ideas more smoothly. I used to pause or say 'uh… so… next', but now I can shift topics more confidently."*

Six participants specifically cited the use of cleft constructions (e.g., *"What we need to focus on is…"*) and lexical focus markers (e.g., *"especially"*, *"in particular"*) during their post-test performances. These elements contributed to the improved Focus Shift Effectiveness (FSE), as one student reflected: *"In the debate about free education, I said, 'What really matters is equal access.' That structure made my point sound stronger, more serious. My partner nodded right away, so I felt heard."*

Another student emphasized the persuasive effect on the audience: *"When I used phrases like 'The key issue we cannot ignore is…', I noticed my classmates listened more carefully. It gave me more authority."* Affective benefits were also reported. Seven students stated that the file-card method reduced anxiety and increased their speaking confidence. One noted, *"I used to get lost in the middle of my speech, and my mind went blank. But with file cards, I knew what came next, so I didn't panic."*

Another added that file cards supported collaborative performance: *"Because my partner and I used similar cards, we could follow each other better. When she moved to 'solutions', I knew my card was 'limitations', so I was ready. It felt more like teamwork."*

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the file-card model supported not only linguistic gains but also metacognitive and affective development. By providing a structured and visualizable discourse plan, the method enhanced students' ability to manage extended speaking

tasks, thereby reinforcing both the observed statistical improvements and the theoretical rationale underpinning the study.

Findings related to recording and transcription

The video and audio recordings provided a rich dataset for analyzing both linguistic and paralinguistic features of the debates. Verbatim transcriptions captured not only the lexical content but also key discourse markers, pauses, self-repairs, and overlapping speech, which were crucial for identifying topic chaining and focus shifts.

Analysis of the transcripts revealed the following:

►Frequency of explicit transition markers: In the experimental group, 87% of topic shifts were accompanied by explicit transition markers (e.g., "Building on that point", "Another key issue is"), compared to 54% in the control group.

► Coherence in topic development: The recorded performances showed that the experimental group maintained coherent topic threads for an average of 4.2 turns before shifting topics. In constrast, the control group averaged 2.7 turns, indicating a stronger ability to sustain topic-relevant contributions.

► Focus marking signals: Prosodic features such as stress and intonation patterns, observable in the recordings, aligned with lexical focus markers in 76% of the experimental group's focus shifts, but only 48% in the control group, suggesting a more integrated use of verbal and prosodic cues.

►Disfluency patterns: Fillers (e.g., um, uh) and false starts occurred less frequently in the experimental group (mean rate: 3.1 per minute) compared to the control group (5.4 per minute), reflecting improved fluency and planning efficiency after file-card training.

These findings confirmed that the recording and transcription process was critical for capturing nuanced speaking behaviors that written scores alone could not reveal, thereby allowing for a more accurate assessment of the impact of the file-card model on speaking performance.

The video and audio recordings provided a rich dataset for analyzing both linguistic and paralinguistic features of the debates. Verbatim transcriptions captured not only lexical content but also discourse markers, pauses, self-repairs, and overlapping speech—key factors in identifying topic chaining and focus shifts. Example from Transcript (Explicit Transition Markers): Experimental Group: "To continue from where I left off, we can also see that free university education will lead to a more competitive workforce, which will benefit the economy." Control Group: "Okay, so, now I'll talk about the economic side of things... uh, it's costly, you know?"

Table 3. *Comparison of transcript-based indicators between experimental and control groups*

Indicator	Experimental Group	Control Group	Difference	Interpretation
% Topic shifts with explicit transition Markers	87%	54%	+33%	Greater discourse cohesion in experimental group
Average turns sustaining topic	4.2	2.7	+1.5	Improved topic development
% Focus shifts with prosodic and lexical marking	76%	48%	+28%	Better integration of verbal and prosodic cues
Fillers/False starts (per minute)	3.1	5.4	-2.3	Higher fluency and planning efficiency

Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

This subsection presents the detailed pre-test and post-test results for both the experimental and control groups (Table 4). Measures include Topic Chaining Index (TCI) and Focus Shift Effectiveness (FSE), with corresponding mean scores, gains, and standard deviations (SD). These data offer a more precise picture of the changes in performance following the intervention.

Note:

- TCI (Topic Chaining Index): Percentage of topic shifts coherently linked based on the file-card model.

- FSE (Focus Shift Effectiveness): Percentage of focus shifts clearly and appropriately marked using syntactic, prosodic, or lexical cues.

The experimental group demonstrated significant improvements in both TCI (+23.1%) and FSE (+21.4%), reflecting the positive impact of file-card-based training. The control group showed only modest gains, approximately one-third of those in the experimental group. Additionally, the reduced standard deviations in the experimental group from pre- to post-test indicate more consistent performance among participants.

Table 4. *Pre-test and post-test results with standard deviation*

Measure	Group	Pre-test Mean (%)	Post-test Mean (%)	Gain (%)	SD Pre	SD Post
TCI	Experimental	55.3	78.4	+23.1	7.1	6.2
TCI	Control	54.9	62.7	+7.8	6.8	7.5
FSE	Experimental	61.2	82.6	+21.4	6.5	5.9
FSE	Control	60.7	68.9	+8.2	6.3	6.4

Example from Transcript (Topic Chaining): Experimental Group: To continue from where I left off, free university education not only reduces inequality, but it also stimulates long-term economic growth. Control Group: “Uh, and yeah... free education is good... and people want it”. Example from Transcript (Focus Shift): Experimental Group: “What we really need to highlight now is the financial sustainability of such a policy. Especially in countries with limited budgets, it becomes a crucial issue.” Control Group: “Free education sounds great, but like... I don’t know, maybe it’s too expensive?” These examples illustrate the clear improvements in both thematic coherence and focus management in the experimental group, as evidenced by their use of explicit markers and structured transitions.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that applying the File-Card Model in *Speaking 4* for third-year English-majored students has a significant positive effect on both the Topic Chaining Index (TCI) and Focus Shift Effectiveness (FSE). The substantial gains in the experimental group compared to the control group - more than double in both measures - highlight the potential of file-card-based training as a pedagogically effective approach for advanced-level speaking instruction. These results explicitly support Erteschik-Shir’s (2007, 2016) theoretical proposition that structured topic management enhances discourse coherence by maintaining active “file cards” and updating them with relevant focus information. The model’s function as a dynamic topic–focus interface was empirically validated here: learners who internalized the file-card logic exhibited smoother topic chaining and more precise focus signaling, suggesting that discourse coherence emerges from the continuous updating of mental “cards.”

The quantitative improvements in TCI indicate that students became more adept at linking ideas within a coherent thematic progression, suggesting that explicit training in topic chaining

directly translated into better argumentative organization. This finding aligns with Erteschik-Shir's claim that topic continuity is a core mechanism in maintaining discourse accessibility and supports the model's extension into applied linguistics. It also resonates with previous findings in debate pedagogy, such as Kuhn (2019) and Hyland (2019), who emphasize dialogic reasoning and genre-based scaffolding. However, while Kuhn focuses on cognitive reasoning and Hyland on rhetorical organization, the File-Card Model provides a *micro-discourse mechanism* that operationalizes these principles: it shows *how* speakers retrieve, update, and link ideas through topic–focus operations during real-time debate.

Similarly, the gains in FSE suggest that students were better able to introduce, highlight, and transition focus points within their arguments. The use of syntactic, prosodic, and lexical markers observed in the experimental group reflects a more deliberate and audience-oriented discourse strategy. . hese improvements likely result from several underlying cognitive mechanisms. First, *attentional control*: focus marking heightens the salience of key propositions, guiding message planning and comprehension. Second, *cue-based retrieval*: labeled topic cards facilitate memory recall of earlier claims during rebuttals. Third, *working-memory offloading*: grouping arguments into topic-linked cards reduces planning load, allowing smoother formulation. These mechanisms together explain why the model effectively enhanced coherence and persuasiveness—learners could track discourse states cognitively while maintaining linguistic precision.

The qualitative findings further support the quantitative outcomes. Discourse analysis showed that participants in the experimental group frequently employed cohesive transition markers (e.g., "Building on that point") and maintained coherent and smoothly progressing topic development throughout their discourse. In contrast, the control group often shifted issues abruptly, leading to occasional breakdowns in coherence. These differences suggest that the File-Card Model's structured mental representation of issues can help learners maintain argument continuity over extended turns, even in cognitively demanding debate tasks.

Moreover, the reduction in standard deviations for both TCI and FSE in the experimental group points to more uniform performance across participants. This may indicate that the File-Card Model not only benefits high-achieving students but also supports weaker speakers by providing a concrete cognitive framework for organizing speech. Such scaffolding appears particularly relevant for C1-level target outcomes, where communicative success depends on precise discourse management rather than basic grammatical accuracy alone.

In summary, the study's results confirm that integrating the File-Card Model into advanced speaking instruction fosters measurable improvements in discourse organization and focus control. Theoretically, these results strengthen the explanatory power of Erteschik-Shir's model by showing its pedagogical adaptability; empirically, they extend the scope of debate pedagogy through discourse-cognitive training.

Nevertheless, researchers should note several limitations. The study involved a relatively small sample (n = 30) from a single Vietnamese university, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should replicate this approach with larger and more diverse cohorts across institutions to validate the observed effects and explore long-term retention and transferability.

Conclusion

The current study examined the application of the File-Card Model in advanced English-speaking instruction for third-year English-majored students. The quasi-experimental results

revealed significant gains in both Topic Chaining Index (TCI) and Focus Shift Effectiveness (FSE), supported by qualitative evidence of smoother transitions, more explicit focus marking, and greater coherence in student debates. These outcomes confirm that integrating the File-Card Model fosters structured discourse organization and persuasive communication at the C1 level. Pedagogically, the model offers a practical cognitive framework that helps learners manage topic continuity and focus more systematically. Classroom activities designed around topic mapping, chaining, and focus updating can enhance discourse coherence and confidence in debate contexts. The study also introduces TCI and FSE as reliable indicators for assessing discourse-level proficiency, bridging theory and pedagogy through measurable outcomes. Theoretically, the findings provide empirical support for Erteschik-Shir's topic–focus framework, demonstrating its applicability in EFL speaking classrooms. Nonetheless, the study's small sample size and single-institution setting limit the generalizability of the results. Future research should test the model across diverse contexts and examine its long-term impact on oral performance and transferability to other genres of academic communication.

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