

Stance Features in ESL Students' Oral Presentations

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Euijung Cheong

Department of English

Northern Arizona University

Abstract

Classroom presentation is a spoken academic discourse, which has not been researched extensively so far. Stance expressions in oral academic presentations are significant in that principal aims of presentations are to suggest the presenter's view of his or her research experiences, and to persuade the audience of the value of the research by taking a proper authorial stance (Hunston, 1993). However, little has been known about linguistic features of how L2 students express their opinions, feelings, or value judgments in their classroom presentations. This study explored L2 students' use of stance expressions and other linguistic devices that were used to fulfill different metafunctions in their oral academic presentations. Six participants' presentations were video-recorded, and manually transcribed to be analyzed. First, situational characteristics of the classroom presentations and the language features involved were functionally analyzed based on the register analysis frame work. Next, small corpus of the students' presentations was analyzed with a concordancer to find the most frequently used stance features. Each individual presentation slide and its oral commentary were further investigated to find how students' oral commentaries effectively realized their slides. Corpus analysis findings showed that the students' relied heavily upon some stance expressions and tended to use stronger stance markers than weaker ones. Metafunctions analysis findings showed that L2 presenters functionally used certain language features to realize three general metafunctions: 1. to structure their oral discourse; 2. to interact with visuals and 3. to express their value judgments or feelings. Some pedagogical implications were suggested.

Key words: oral academic presentations, L2 presentations, authorial stance, small corpus

Background

This study investigated how ESL learners express stance in their oral academic presentations. This study is significant in that the analysis of student academic presentations has relatively been an under-researched area in spoken academic discourse, which has a potential to discover interesting features of this genre. The goal of this study was to identify L2 students' uses of stance features, especially when they verbalize their PPT slides to give the accompanying spoken commentary.

1. What are the most frequently used stance expressions based on lexico-grammatical stance features by Biber (2006)?
2. What linguistic sources were used to fulfill different metafunctions (1. to structure their oral discourse; 2. to efficiently interact with visuals; and 3. to express their value judgments) in students' oral academic presentations?

Methods

Participants

Six students (six male and one female) at advanced level listening and speaking class in PIE (Program Intensive English) participated in this research. The students had three different first language backgrounds: three Chinese; two Japanese; and two Saudi. The main purpose of the students' studying in the intensive English program was to get into a graduate program in NAU or other universities in the United States. All students were in their early to mid-twenties, and their lengths of residence in the United States varied from 1 month to one year. The students were fairly motivated to improve their oral English skills; thus participated in the class activities with enthusiasm.

The Task

The presentation topic was a self-introduction to get college or graduate school admission, or to get a job, depending on different situations in which the students might be. The common purpose of the speech was to persuade the gate keepers to let you in. In other words, it was imagined that students were giving this presentation to get an opportunity in their life, whether it was to get into a school or get a job. The presentation was organized into three main parts: introduction (1-2 minutes), body (7-9 minutes), and conclusion (1-2 minutes). The body part consisted of three sub-topics: 1. Tell us about an inspiring person in your life; 2. How did you overcome a difficult situation in your life (or Tell us about your major achievements); 3. Describe your typical day in five years from now. The total presentation time was expected to take around 10-13 minutes were expected to take to give a presentation; however most students delivered 7-9 minutes long presentations, which was a little bit shorter than the given time.

Analysis

To answer the research question 1 (*What are the most frequently used stance expressions based on lexico-grammatical stance features by Biber (2006) ?*), the students' presentations were video-recorded, transcribed orthographically, and turned into a small L2 presentations corpus. Stance features were examined based on Lexico-grammatical stance features (Biber, 2006) by AntConc 3.2.4w, a concordance software. The raw frequency of these stance expressions was counted, and twenty most frequently used stance expressions were selected from three different word classes: eight modals, six lexical verbs with complement clauses, and six adverbs.

To answer the research question 2 (*What linguistic sources were used to fulfill different metafunctions in students' oral academic presentations?*), the corpus was further analyzed by the modified framework for analyzing metafunctions in the spoken commentaries (Rowley-Jolivet,

2012). While the original framework consists of ten categories, the adapted framework used in this study is composed of five categories (1. Sequencing; 2. Inter- & intratextual referencing; 3. Visual-verbal interaction; 4. Lexical discourse markers; 5. Value-laden words) to better suit the language features of the students' (Table 1). Some categories in the original framework were deleted, because they were hardly found in the students' oral commentaries. Category 5 was named "Evaluation" in the original framework, however this study used the term "Value-laden words" following the classification of stance by Gray & Biber (2012).

Table 1

Framework for Metafunctions

Metafunction	Example
1. Sequencing (SQC)	<i>First, Second, Next, After that,</i>
2. Inter- & intratextual referencing (IIR)	<i>I am going to talk about ... I will talk about ...</i>
3. Visual-verbal interaction (VVI)	<i>There is a picture. <u>This is</u> Shandong province. I start university <u>here, this one,</u> Qingdao.</i>
4. Lexical discourse markers (LDM)	<i>O.K, So, Now,</i>
5. Value-laden words (VLW)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modals: <i>I <u>will</u> go back to China and find the job first. You <u>must</u> look be nice and...</i> • Lexica Verbs: <i><u>I think</u> I will accomplish all of this at NAU... <u>I try my best to</u> improve as soon as possible. <u>I need</u> more knowledge to support me.</i> • Adjectives: <i>This is my <u>big</u> achievement. That was a very <u>exciting</u> experience.</i> • Adverbs: <i>My favorite hobby <u>maybe</u> is party with friends. ...and <u>of course</u> we play game ...</i>

Relevance to PIE

This study explored L2 students' use of stance expressions and other linguistic devices that were used to fulfill different metafunctions in their oral academic presentations. First, the corpus findings showed that speakers had a tendency to heavily depend on eight modal verbs and twelve other lexical choices to express stance in their oral presentations. Also speakers tended to prefer to use strong stance expressions rather than weaker ones. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers may need to teach diverse stance markers, which are frequently used by native speakers in academic oral presentations. In addition, teachers may need to focus on hedging expressions and weaker stance modal verbs (e.g. *may, might, would, could*) to help L2 speakers to adjust their tone appropriately according to context.

Second, metafunctions analysis findings showed that L2 presenters functionally used certain language features to realize three general metafunctions: 1. to structure their oral discourse (SQC, IITR, and LDM); 2. to interact with visuals (VVI); and 3. to express their value judgments or feelings (VLW). Several suggestions were made for teaching implications. ESL students may be encouraged to use LDM that native speakers frequently used (e.g. *okay, so, now, okay so now*) (Swales & Malczewski, 2001) along with other discourse organizing markers to make their speech more natural to hear. Next, students PPT slides and their spoken commentaries were somewhat loosely intertwined, except when the presenters explained pictures or maps on their slides. L2 students may be instructed to be more flexible with their language use as they closely interact with the text on their slides.

Last, to better understand L2 students' stance use in oral academic presentation situations, this study explored both GSD and VLW, and found out L2 students were constantly engaged in making evaluative remarks, across all three different sub-topics, though they were not using

various kinds of GSD. However, findings in this study are hard to be generalized, because this study is a case study with only six participants. Furthermore, “semantic salience, teachability, learnability and sociolinguistic appropriacy” should be considered when we give pedagogical implications on stance expressions (Swales & Malczewski, 2001, p. 151).