



# Comparing rhetorical devices in history textbooks and teachers' lessons: Implications for the development of academic language skills

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## ABSTRACT

Rhetorical devices signal the authors' attitudes and intentions to their texts or their audiences. Mastering these resources characterises academic language proficiency and contributes to academic success. We explored whether oral and written academic texts provide different opportunities to gain knowledge about rhetorical devices and academic language. We compared 10 teachers' lessons with 10 textbooks – matched according to educational level (Secondary Education), topic (History), instructional content and genre – to determine the frequency, type and format of rhetorical devices: visual forms, reduced verbal forms, or completely discursive forms (with or without explicit orders). The results show that teachers employ more rhetorical devices, include rhetorical devices practically absent from textbooks (those related to discourse-knowledge integration, monitoring, and inter/intra-referential processes), and use both reduced expressions and completely discursive forms (with and without explicit orders). Textbooks employ more rhetorical devices for the overall connection of ideas and widely exploit visual forms.

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## 1. Introduction

Written and oral academic texts usually contain rhetorical resources or devices (e.g., connectives, organisational signals, boosters) that clarify some aspects of the text (e.g., its organisation or the importance of its ideas) or try to foster in the audience some mental processes for understanding discourse in a specific way (Givón, 1992; Hyland, 2010). These devices are part of the linguistic features encompassed by academic language (Uccelli et al., 2015).

Several studies have provided evidence suggesting that rhetorical devices are important in academic language. Firstly, rhetorical

devices affect online processing and improve text memory and learning from academic texts (Degand & Sanders, 2002; McCrudden & Schraw; Meyer, Brandt, & Bluth, 1980; Sanders & Noordman, 2000). Secondly, students with strong knowledge of rhetorical devices tend to demonstrate good comprehension/learning (e.g., Crosson & Lesaux, 2013; García, Bustos, & Sánchez, 2015; Welie, Schoonen, & Kuiken, 2017; Welie, Schoonen, Kuiken, & van den Bergh, 2017). Moreover, mastering academic language contributes to academic success (Snow & Uccelli, 2009; Uccelli et al., 2015).

Consequently, students need to have sufficient knowledge about the meaning and function of rhetorical devices for success with challenging literacy tasks. Acquiring this knowledge does not seem easy and, presumably, requires a long-term process. For this purpose (without overlooking the possibility of a direct teaching), exposure to academic texts 'is probably essential' (Snow & Uccelli, 2009, p. 128).

It follows from the above observation that it is important to describe the rhetorical devices students may encounter in academic language. Specifically, we are interested in studying and comparing which experiences with rhetorical devices are provided by two of the main sources of information and learning in educational settings: teachers' oral lessons and textbooks.

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Lessons and textbooks, or other kinds of registers of spoken and written academic language, have been analysed from at least four theoretical perspectives. First, some studies adopt a Systemic Functional Linguistics approach (e.g., Achugar & Schleppegrell, 2005; Coffin, 2006; Llinares & Morton, 2010; Morton, 2010; Rappa & Tang, 2018). From this perspective, learning a discipline implies learning its linguistic features. Thus, this approach analyses the genres students encounter when learning a specific academic subject and the linguistic features, in terms of grammatical and lexical patterns, that characterise these genres. Some of these linguistic mechanisms are rhetorical devices, which clarify some aspects of the text and how the audience need to process its ideas. For instance, although this is not their specific focus, some studies offer information about connectors (e.g., 'before the . . .', 'during the . . .', 'and', 'as', etc.: Miller, Mitchell, & Pessoa, 2016; Oteiza, 2003), causal devices (e.g., 'as a result of', 'in response to': Coffin, 2006), or engagement strategies (e.g., 'the fact is . . .', 'X proves . . .': Miller, Mitchell, & Pessoa, 2014) included in the language of History at school. We have analysed a corpus of History texts too, but we focus on rhetorical devices that could be cross-disciplinary. Furthermore, much of the analysis on academic discourse within the Systemic Functional Linguistics approach focuses on written texts (Rappa & Tang, 2018), while we are interested in comparing oral and written ones. Finally, some of this prior research provides insight into the linguistic features of texts written by learners about History, but there is less research about the linguistic features they are exposed to when listening to History teachers or read History textbooks (Myskow, 2017).

A second set of prior studies is grounded on the idea that much of our language is composed of prefabricated expressions. These studies have investigated the use of lexical bundles in spoken and written academic registers, including classroom teaching and textbooks (Biber & Barbieri, 2007; Biber, Conrad, & Cortes, 2004). Lexical bundles are recurrent sequences of words, such as 'I want to talk about', or 'our goal is to'. Therefore, lexical bundles may include rhetorical devices but are not the same thing. For instance, some isolated words can act as rhetorical devices (e.g., 'consequently', 'third') because they link sentences or arguments, facilitating comprehension. On the contrary, some recurrent sequences of words do not involve the audience or clarify any aspect of the discourse because they refer to the world outside of the text (e.g., 'can be used to': Biber et al., 2004, p. 381).

Finally, there are two approaches very close to our work: research about metadiscourse (that is, 'discourse about discourse': e.g., Adel, 2010) and psycholinguistic studies about text mechanisms that facilitate comprehension and learning (Britt, Rouet, Georgi, & Perfetti, 1994; Graesser, Jeon, Yan, & Cai, 2007; Graesser, McNamara, Louwerse, & Cai, 2004; Montanero & Lucero, 2011; Sánchez, Rosales, & Cañedo, 1999). These studies offer information about some rhetorical devices in academic language (connectives, anaphors, reformulations), but have not compared spoken and written texts or have not matched these two modalities according to content, issuer, audience and genre.

Therefore, the specific contribution of the present study is to compare the rhetorical devices of lessons delivered by experienced teachers and textbooks matched on educational level (Secondary Education), topic (History), genre and instructional content. More specifically, we examine three sources of possible differences in order to discover the extent to which lessons and textbooks differ with respect to:

- 1) The frequency of rhetorical devices they contain. The number of rhetorical devices provided by textbooks and teachers' lessons might be a first difference between them. This being the case, their contributions to academic language proficiency could also be different: a discourse with more rhetorical devices provides

more opportunities to detect them and to learn how to interpret and use them. In addition, a discourse with more rhetorical devices will offer more support to its comprehension.

- 2) The types of rhetorical devices used. If teachers' lessons and textbooks include different kinds of rhetorical devices, they could also promote different comprehension processes and students could learn a different repertoire of language resources from each modality.
- 3) The format in which rhetorical devices are delivered: as a visual form, as a reduced verbal form, or as a completely discursive form with or without an explicit order clarifying students how to process the discourse (e.g., 'You must to put in relation this idea with the lesson about. . .'). According to this, a third difference between the rhetorical devices employed in teachers' lessons and textbooks could lie in the number of simple (visual forms, condensed expressions) versus complex formats (completely discursive forms) present in both types of texts. A difference at this level may have implications for how students process and take advantage of rhetorical devices, given that complex formats could be easier to detect, interpret and follow.

To understand these differences, the following sections clarify the concept of rhetorical devices, how they are classified in this study and the formats in which they can be delivered, paying special attention to the implications of these elements for understanding discourse and developing academic language skills.

### 1.1. Rhetorical devices and their role in discourse comprehension

We consider a rhetorical device to be any element of discourse that indicates the author's attitudes to his/her text or his/her audience without affecting the organisation or content of the text (Hyland, 2010). This definition includes a broad set of visual and linguistic mechanisms, such as hyphens, connectives, organisational signals, objectives, headings, and so on.

Rhetorical devices highlight the author's communicative intentions reflecting his/her textual acts: entitling, emphasising, organising, advising, and so on (Lemarié, Lorch, Eyrolle, & Virbel, 2008). Each rhetorical device encloses a metasentence that contains information about such textual acts. The set of metasentences in a piece of discourse can be considered a metatext (Lemarié et al., 2008) or metadiscourse (Hyland, 2017), which readers/listeners may detect and turn into an explicit guide to discourse processing and comprehension. Thus, rhetorical devices act as 'potential processing instructions' for the text (Gernsbacher, 1996; Givón, 1992; Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000). For instance, an expression such as 'secondly' must be considered a reduced and conventionalised version of a complete and unambiguous metasentence that refers to a textual act carried out by the author ('Now, I am going to lay out a new cause for this phenomenon that is different from the previous one I have already mentioned'). This expression invites receivers to act accordingly while they try to understand the content that follows. Consequently, processing the expression 'secondly' involves (Sánchez & García, 2009) *detecting* such a device as a statement about the discourse itself (not about the world described by the discourse); *interpreting its meaning and request* by accessing its complete metasentence ('The author goes on to expound an additional cause and he/she wants me to find it'); and *using* that information as a guide or goal to process the upcoming segment of the discourse ('I am going to look for the other cause'). In summary, rhetorical processing involves a change in focus from text content to metatext that ends when each rhetorical device is transformed into a self-guide for understanding the discourse segment referred to.

Many studies have demonstrated the utility of rhetorical devices for discourse comprehension. For instance, rhetorical devices

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