



# Personal pronouns for student engagement in arts and science lecture introductions



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 18 December 2013

### Keywords:

Lecture introductions  
Student engagement  
Personal pronouns  
Academic speech

## ABSTRACT

In lecture introductions, student engagement is important for receptivity of the lecture. The study examined the use of personal pronouns (*we*, *I*, *you*) in lecture introductions in the arts and science disciplines. The 37,373-word corpus was compiled from 47 lecture introductions delivered in English in a Malaysian university. *You* is the most frequently used personal pronoun, followed by *I* and *we* which both have similar frequencies. All three pronouns are used for activating prior knowledge and giving instructions or announcements, the two main activities of the lecture introductions. In addition to these discourse functions, *you*-audience is used when lecturers share personal experiences and direct students' attention but *you*-generalised occurs in explanations of subject matter. Inclusive-*we* is used for stating aims and objectives of the lecture and occurs more frequently than exclusive-*we* which sometimes surfaces in science lecturers' explanations of the subject matter when reviewing content covered in previous lectures. The results suggest a disciplinary difference in the use of personal pronouns for student engagement in lecture introductions because the science lecturers used *you*-audience, *we* for *I*, *we* for *one* and *I* more than arts lecturers but *you*-generalised is more frequent in arts lecture introductions.

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## 1. Introduction

The role of personal pronouns in engaging students with lecture content is important because interactive lectures enhance comprehension (Morell, 2004; Suviniitty, 2010). Much of the previous research on university lectures has focused on lecture comprehension (e.g., Flowerdew, 1994; Morrison, 1974; Olsen & Huckin, 1990; Tauroza & Allison, 1994, 1995). In view of the movement towards more interactive lectures, however, research has also begun to turn to techniques to engage students in lectures. One line of inquiry has dealt with the use of activity-based interventions which include personal response systems and mobile devices (Kinsella, 2008; Scheele, Seitz, Effelsberg, & Wessels, 2004) and low-tech solutions (Huxham, 2005) such as one-min papers (Dyson, 2008). Another line of inquiry has concentrated on traditional techniques such as lecturer questioning to solicit student engagement, which simultaneously serve to increase lecture comprehensibility in some studies (Suviniitty, 2010) but not in others (van Dijk, van den Berg, & van Keulen, 2001). Some researchers have focused on the functions of questions in lectures (e.g., Crawford Camiciottoli, 2008; Morell, 2004, 2007; Querol-Julian, 2008). Using lecturer questioning as an indicator of interactive lecture discourse, other researchers have found gender differences (Chang, 2012) and variations across disciplines (Garcia, 2010; Yeo & Ting, 2012). Besides questions, the use of personal pronouns also indicates interactivity in lectures.

Personal pronouns have been extensively studied as an engagement feature in academic writing (e.g., Hyland, 2001, 2002a, 2004; Kim, 2009; Kuo, 1999; Sheldon, 2009; Tang & John, 1999). For example, Harwood's (2005) analysis of 40 single-authored journal articles from four disciplines revealed that writers from the hard fields use more exclusive-*we*

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but writers from the soft fields use more *I* to plug knowledge gaps. In Hyland's (2002b) study, students and expert writers from the soft disciplines are more inclined to use author pronouns to establish their presence than those from the hard disciplines. In comparison, fewer studies have examined use of personal pronouns in academic speech (but see Crawford Camiciottoli, 2004; Morell, 2004; Webber, 2005). For example, Morell (2004) showed that more interactive lectures are characterised by a higher frequency of personal pronoun usage and Okamura (2009) identified *you* as "a useful tool for engaging students in the narrative of the lecture" (p. 17).

When researchers began to investigate the role of personal pronouns in academic speech, the focus was on the frequently used pronouns. Based on her analysis of a 26,734-word corpus of lectures delivered by native and non-native English-speaking teaching assistants of Mathematics at the University of Michigan, Rounds (1985) reported that *we* was used three times more frequently than *I* or *you*. The more successful teaching assistants were those with higher frequencies of *we* in their speech (Rounds, 1987a), success being associated with those who received positive end-of-semester student evaluation, few complaints and good evaluations based on their supervisor's observations. Fortanet (2004) followed up on Rounds' findings using a more multi-disciplinary corpus, the 1.7 million-word Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), and found that the inclusive-*we* personal pronoun is more often used in academic speech than the exclusive-*we*. Contrary to Rounds' findings, Fortanet identified *you* as the most frequently used pronoun in the lectures, colloquia and study group interactions and attributed the reduced occurrence of *we* to an evolution of academic speech towards *I* and *you* (see also Fortanet Gómez & Fortuño Belles, 2005). Okamura's (2009) analysis of the same corpus revealed that the lecturers used *you* to engage undergraduate students in dialogue and to instruct them to act whereas *I* was used in public lectures to present a particular perspective on the topic. Okamura excluded interactional lectures and question-and-answer sessions in monologic lectures from the analysis to eliminate possible use of *you* to refer to individual students because the purpose was to analyse the plural *you*. Based on the analysis of collocates, Okamura concluded that *you* was used to engage the students in talk (e.g., *if you were/are*) and to show that it is the students who need to act (e.g., *you read*). In a case study, Crawford Camiciottoli (2005) compared the use of personal pronouns in lectures delivered by a senior lecturer to native speakers of English in his home institution in the United Kingdom and to second language speakers of English as a guest lecturer in Italy. The lecturer's use of more inclusive-*we* in his home institution reflected his familiarity with the audience, but in Italy he used more *I* and *you*-audience to establish rapport with an unknown audience.

Although there are indications of variations in student engagement across disciplines using lecture questioning as an indicator of interactivity (Garcia, 2010; Yeo & Ting, 2012), the differences have not been established. As interactivity plays an important role in improving comprehension of lectures (Morell, 2004; Suvinitty, 2010), it is relevant to examine student engagement using another indicator of interactive lecture discourse, that is, personal pronouns – particularly since there are limited studies on personal pronouns as an interactive feature in lectures.

The present study examined use of personal pronouns for student engagement in lecture introductions in a number of disciplines in the arts and sciences. The specific aspects examined were:

1. frequency of personal pronouns (*you*, *I*, *we*) used in lecture introductions;
2. comparison of frequency of personal pronouns in arts and science lecture introductions; and
3. discourse functions of personal pronouns in arts and science lecture introductions.

Lecture introductions are the focus of the study because lecturers usually begin their lectures by engaging students with the lecture content (see Lee, 2009; Thompson, 1994), for example, by orienting students to some commonly known referents and making a transition from the known to new teaching material or building continuity from lesson to lesson (Schuck, 1970). The findings will show the different uses of personal pronouns by arts and science lecturers in lecture introductions in relation to student engagement.

## 2. Theoretical framework

For the purpose of studying the use of personal pronouns to engage students in monologic lectures, it is necessary to draw upon the link between pronouns and distance in the speaker–audience relationship. Views of the relationship between the pronoun system and distancing strategies are consistent. For example, Brown and Levinson (1994) identify the use of inclusive-*we* with positive politeness (closeness) and *one* as a substitute for *you* and *I* with negative politeness (distance). On a general scale of pronominal distancing, Rees (1983) associates *I*, *we* and *you* (direct) with closeness and indefinite reference (*one*, *you*, *it*, *she*, *he*, *they*) with distance. Similarly, Kamio's (2001) gradation of pronouns moves from *we* for the greatest closeness through *you* to *they* for the least closeness.

To inclusive-*we* and exclusive-*we*, Rounds (1987b, pp. 18–19) adds three more types of *we* with different referents: (1) *we* to refer to the lecturer (*I*); (2) *we* to refer to the students; and (3) *we* which can be substituted by indefinite *one*. Rounds' semantic remappings for *we* have not been widely adopted and many studies have retained the dichotomy of inclusive-*we* and exclusive-*we* (e.g., Crawford Camiciottoli, 2005; Íñigo-Mora, 2004). In a dichotomous categorisation of the five referents of *we* proposed by Rounds (1987b), inclusive-*we* includes *we* for *you* and *I*, *we* for *I* and *we* for *you* whereas exclusive-*we* includes *we* for *I* and *they* and *we* for the indefinite *one*. The definition of *we* for the indefinite *one* as a form of exclusive-*we* is provided by Kuo (1999) and Fortanet (2004).

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