



Metadiscourse in the classroom: A comparative analysis of EAP lessons and university lectures



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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study investigates teachers' use of metadiscourse in EAP lessons and academic lectures. The analysis is based on two corpora of instructor contributions to classroom discourse: 18 EAP lessons from the L2CD corpus and 18 university lectures from the MICASE corpus. Based on Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse, the two corpora were compared to examine the influence of pedagogical content and context on teachers' enactment of metadiscourse in the classroom. Findings of the comparative analysis suggest that these aspects of teaching and learning influence teachers' use of metadiscourse in significant ways. EAP teachers seem to be more concerned with explicitly framing the discourse primarily to set up classroom tasks and engendering greater student involvement and participation. On the other hand, university instructors' priority lies in establishing relationships between ideas in the unfolding arguments of lectures. Yet for some metadiscoursal features, the real-time spoken environment of the classroom appears to override pedagogical focus and approach. The paper concludes with a few pedagogical implications.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, English for academic purposes (EAP) has become an important and innovative pedagogical approach to language learning and teaching. Regarded as distinct from other approaches to English-language instruction, commonly referred to as 'general English'; EAP pedagogy is considered to be "specialized English-language teaching grounded in the social, cognitive and linguistic demands of academic target situations, providing focused instruction informed by an understanding of texts and the constraints of academic contexts" (Hyland, 2006, p. 2). The primary aim of EAP courses is to assist academically-oriented second language (L2) learners to gain the literacies and skills necessary to navigate a diverse range of complex academic discourses and be successful participants in the academy. Therefore, unlike general English as a second language (ESL) teachers, EAP instructors have the challenging task of simultaneously developing ESL students' "situated language use" and academic skills (Basturkmen, 2009, p. 8), such as writing academic essays, listening to academic lectures, and taking lecture notes, in order to undertake academic work as university students. Adopting pedagogical practices that simulate academic tasks, and at the same time developing students' linguistic and communicative competence, EAP teachers assist such learners in unpacking, navigating, and practicing academic discourse.

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In order to better understand academic register and genres, considerable attention has been devoted to “the more work-a-day functions of teaching and learning” in university settings (Hyland, 2009, p. 96). Research in academic discourse has investigated a diverse range of written and spoken discourses within and across disciplines including various types of student-produced texts, textbooks, research articles, lectures, seminars, and conference presentations (see Charles, 2013, for a recent review). While these studies have been valuable in describing the different academic discourses EAP students and teachers may need to focus on, there continues to be a lack of attention given to what actually happens in EAP classrooms (Basturkmen, 2009; Cheng, 2011; Hamp-Lyons & Hyland, 2004) and the communication patterns that occur within such classrooms. Furthermore, even though EAP teachers' work involves preparing academically-oriented learners to be successful in university settings, surprisingly little is known about how EAP classroom discourse compares with that of university content-area classes. Understanding the ways in which EAP instructors structure classroom discourse, and especially how this compares with university instructors, can provide important insight for L2 teacher education. Such comparisons can provide insights into how successful EAP instructors balance the need for simulating authentic academic discourse with the need for making this discourse accessible to students in the process of developing academic English competence.

Utilizing Hyland's (2005) concept of metadiscourse, or linguistic expressions used for organizing discourse and expressing stance toward content or audience, this exploratory study compares EAP teachers' and university lecturers' use of metadiscourse in the classroom. We first review relevant research that informs the study, and then present the corpus and methods employed. This is followed by the findings and discussion of this comparative analysis.

2. Metadiscourse

The ‘common sense’ view of language suggests that it is primarily a tool of informational (i.e., transactional) exchange. This perspective, however, has changed considerably over the past few decades, as scholars have increasingly recognized that language serves both propositional and non-propositional functions. Speakers and writers use language not only to convey information, but they also concomitantly employ it to organize the information for their audience and to encourage them to understand the unfolding discourse in particular ways. This non-propositional aspect of communication is referred to as metadiscourse, although other terms include *metatalk* (Schiffrin, 1980), *meta-text* (Mauranen, 1993), and *discourse reflexivity* (Mauranen, 2010). Although initially delimited to essentially linguistic resources used to organize discourse, the concept of metadiscourse has been developed to go beyond simply referring to text organization. It has been conceptualized to include a range of linguistic features utilized both to organize and evaluate the propositional content (Crismore, 1989; Schiffrin, 1980; Vande Kopple, 1985). Still, metadiscourse has often been characterized as simply ‘discourse about discourse’ or ‘talk about talk’. Noting the challenge of pinning down this fuzzy concept, Hyland (2005) more recently defines metadiscourse as a “cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers [or listeners] as members of a particular community” (p. 37). He proposes metadiscourse as a robust analytic framework for exploring these aspects of language. In particular, Hyland points out that “a text has to talk to readers or hearers in ways that they find familiar and acceptable, which means that the processes of comprehension and participation are not just a matter of informational clarity, but of the individual writer's or speaker's projection of a shared context” (pp. 13–14). For this reason, Mauranen (2010) contends that metadiscourse is a “crucial aspect of human communication, which deserves to be studied in its own right” (p. 37).

Based on this view that speakers and writers employ a wide range of rhetorical and interactive strategies to clarify the organization and to explicitly direct the audience in making sense of the discourse (Hyland, 2005, 2010; Hyland & Tse, 2004), considerable attention has been devoted to the concept of metadiscourse. Research in this line of inquiry has examined different categories of metadiscourse employed in various forms of written academic discourse, such as research articles (Hyland, 2005) and theses and dissertations (Hyland, 2004). They have also investigated how metadiscourse is employed across cultures (Mauranen, 1993). Such investigations have increased our understanding of how writers of various genres with different institutional statuses use metadiscoursal resources within and across disciplinary and cultural domains.

2.1. Metadiscourse in the classroom

Mauranen (2010), however, argues that metadiscourse plays a “much more important role” in spoken discourse than written prose because the “need to manage spoken interaction in real time” is greater (p. 37). However, comparatively speaking, fewer studies have investigated how metadiscourse is employed in spoken discourse. Most scholars who have examined spoken language have focused on certain metadiscoursal aspects of university lectures. Some studies have concentrated specifically on discourse signaling cues (e.g., *so*, *okay*) in text structuring (Chaudron & Richards, 1986; Flowerdew & Tauroza, 1995; Jung, 2006; Thompson, 2003). They show that university lectures are “heavily signaled and signposted” (Swales, 2001, p. 35), as lecturers tend to explicitly structure the organization of classroom discourse and highlight the relationship between ideas presented. Evidence suggests that such cues benefit listeners because they assist them in forming a coherent ‘mental map’ of discourse organization, as well as aiding listeners in processing information (Thompson, 2003). Others have examined some interpersonal features in lectures, such as the use of personal pronouns (Fortanet, 2004; Lee, 2009; Morell, 2004), asides (Strodt-Lopez, 1991), and rhetorical, display, and referential questions in university lectures (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2005; Morell, 2007). These studies demonstrate the level of interactivity found in different class sizes and lecturing styles, and how these features can enhance or diminish student engagement. Although

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