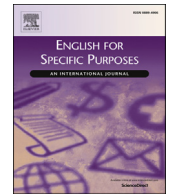


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International conference paper presentations: A multimodal analysis to determine effectiveness



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ABSTRACT

International conference presentations represent one of the biggest challenges for academics using English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). This paper aims to initiate exploration into the multimodal academic discourse of oral presentations, including the verbal, written, non-verbal material (NVM) and body language modes. It offers a Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) and multimodal framework of presentations to enhance mixed-disciplinary ELF academics' awareness of what needs to be taken into account to communicate effectively at conferences. The model is also used to establish evaluation criteria for the presenters' talks and to carry out a multimodal discourse analysis of four well-rated 20-min talks, two from the technical sciences and two from the social sciences in a workshop scenario. The findings from the analysis and interviews indicate that: (a) a greater awareness of the mode affordances and their combinations can lead to improved performances; (b) higher reliance on the visual modes can compensate for verbal deficiencies; and (c) effective speakers tend to use a variety of modes that often overlap but work together to convey specific meanings. However, firm conclusions cannot be drawn on the basis of workshop presentations, and further studies on the multimodal analysis of 'real conferences' within specific disciplines are encouraged.

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1. Introduction

Carrying out an effective academic oral presentation at an international conference is a matter of using a variety of modes, that is, ways of representing and communicating meaning (Kress, 2003), so as to be understood and appreciated by a multicultural audience. In recent years, since multimedia packages have become commonly used by conference speakers who use English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), it appears that having the ability to orchestrate semiotic resources or modes such as images, writing, layout, sound, gestures, speech and 3D objects (Kress, 2010) may be more important than just having a good command of the spoken language or verbal mode. Developing a multimodal communicative competence, that is, the ability to understand the combined potential of various modes for making meaning so as to make sense of and construct texts (Royce, 2002) should be the top priority for international communicators and their trainers.

The advent of the digital era and the pervasiveness of technology have broadened our view on language and how it is regarded in the academic world. Due to the fact that the tools for communication in the twenty-first century have increased in

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their degree of multimodality, defined by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001, p. 20) as “the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event”, academic genre studies have started to take on other dimensions. In other words, our cultural artefacts include numerous modes of representing and communicating meaning. Therefore, it is no longer enough to take into account the written or spoken texts and their underlying meanings. We now need to examine, in so far as oral presentations are concerned, not only how the verbal mode is produced and perceived, but also the written, the non-verbal material (NVM) and the body language modes that characterize the diverse mediating tools and resources that we use in present-day conferences.

In this study, I explore the contributions of the different semiotics (i.e., spoken and written English, non-verbal material and body language modes) used in conference presentations to the success of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) speakers. For this purpose, I provide a model (see Figure 1), based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and multimodality, to describe *what* and *how* communication takes place in a presentation. As is explained in the study, this framework is implemented in an ELF workshop for mixed-disciplinary academics to raise awareness of the academic presentation genre, to establish evaluation criteria, and to carry out a multimodal analysis of four presentations – two from the technical sciences and two from the social sciences. Before proceeding with the study, I will review some of the most relevant resources and studies that have been essential to establish research-based principles to teach and to evaluate academic oral communication in general. Then, I refer to the research that focuses on the oral use and pedagogy of English for international contexts, and finally I direct attention to the few recent studies that have taken a multimodal approach in exploring oral paper presentations.

Although the analysis of scientific academic discourse has focused more on written than on spoken research genres (Lynch, 2011; Rowley-Jolivet, 2002), in the past decade there have been an increasing number of spoken academic discourse studies. This proliferation of research on oral aspects is largely due to the availability of online spoken academic corpora, such as the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micase/>), the British Academic Spoken English Corpus (BASE) (www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/collect/base/) and the more recent English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings (ELFA) project (www.helsinki.fi/elfa).

MICASE and BASE provide large corpora of academic spoken language in English-speaking universities, and have been particularly useful to explore the oral discourse of the academic world in American and British universities. Studies stemming from either (or both) of these two academic corpora have focused mostly on lecturing or classroom talk (e.g., Chang, 2012; Deroey, 2012; Deroey & Taverniers, 2012; Lee, 2009; Lin, 2010; Nesi, 2012).

In contrast, the ELFA Project at the University of Helsinki aims to offer an empirical basis to understand how English is being used internationally as the global lingua franca, or contact language, by people who do not share a common language and who far outnumber native speakers. According to Anna Mauranen, the director of the project, ELFA was developed in response to the need to find principled ways of teaching and assessing successful spoken communication in English for international use. Mauranen, Hynninen, and Ranta (2010, p. 184) claims that for applied pedagogical purposes, “it is top priority to analyse successful language use”, so as to determine what to focus on in terms of successful discourse strategies in ELF circumstances. She also claims that ELFA will help to answer the question, “What do effective ELF users do as lecturers, supervisors, students or research group members?” (and, I would add, as presenters). Thus, in the coming years we can expect from ELFA a broad range of investigations, much like we have received from MICASE and BASE, but with a focus on the use of ELF for international communication.

Other spoken academic discourse studies having to do with ELF, or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) have also concentrated more on lecture discourse (e.g., Bjorkman, 2011; Crawford Camiciottoli, 2004; Flowerdew, 1994; Miller, 2002; Morell, 2004, 2007a) than on paper presentations. Nevertheless, in the past decade, along with the groundbreaking edition of *The Language of Conferencing* (Ventola, Shalom, & Thompson, 2002), a number of studies have begun to explore the characteristics of oral presentations for international communication, and the challenges faced by ELF academics. Some have analysed diverse linguistic and paralinguistic aspects of the verbal mode, such as pitch variation and its effects on engaging the audience (Hincks, 2005), L2 speech rate and the reduction of ideational content (Hincks, 2010), interactive features (e.g., personal deictics and markers) and their role in building rapport (Vassileva, 2002; Webber, 2005), information packaging and syntactic behaviour between NS and NNS (Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005), questions and answers in discussion sessions after presentations (Webber, 2002), or research cultures and the pragmatic functions of humour (Frobert-Adamo, 2002; Reershemius, 2012).

The visual mode of presentations has also received attention and, interestingly, Dubois (1980), which might be considered the pioneer study, was published in the first issue of *English for Specific Purposes*. This preliminary study already highlighted the meaning-making potential of slides and pointed out how visuals can stand alone or accompany texts depending on the speaker's intentions while carrying out the presentation. More recent studies on the use of visuals (e.g., images, tables, graphs, diagrams, charts, etc.), or what may be called non-verbal-materials (NVM), in presentations (e.g., Rowley-Jolivet, 2002), have found a wide range of meaning-making strategies to structure discourse and to express logical relations, which play an important role in facilitating communication, especially for international speakers and audiences.

Besides the academic presentation studies that have focused exclusively on the verbal (speech) mode or on the visual (NVM) mode, some have investigated the combination of, at least, two modes. For example, Charles and Ventola (2002) analyse the video-recordings of a presentation and focus on the switching of modes between speaking from a written text and commenting on a photographic slideshow. They find that the slides with images in the presentation of their study (taken from a conference from the humanities) are embedded as illustrations, while those from other conferences of the physical sciences function as evidence providers. Tardy (2005) considers how the writers' uses of various verbal and visual expressions

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