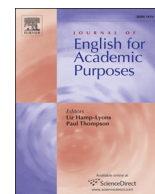




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'You' and 'I' in university seminars and spoken learner discourse



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ABSTRACT

You and *I* may be little words but they do a great deal. In spoken discourse they reference shared knowledge and mark stance. In pedagogical contexts, they maintain relations in teacher-student discourse. However, language classrooms may rarely explore this array of pragmatic meanings. A lack of awareness of the variety of these functions may be problematic for learners when seeking to construct interpersonal relations and operate successfully in particular spoken contexts. This paper presents a study of *you* and *I* in two spoken corpora: a corpus of English language learner task talk and a corpus of university seminar talk. Findings illustrate different patterns of *I* and *you* between the two corpora: *I* and *you* have a higher rate of occurrence in learner discourse, and pronoun repetition is more frequent in learner discourse, though it does not account for the higher rate of *you* and *I*. These findings suggest that language learner task talk displays more features tied to speech production and self-regulation and fewer features associated with attempting to point to the informational space of others, a key feature of university classroom talk. This paper concludes by outlining pedagogical applications to overcome features perceived as disfluent.

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1. Introduction

University seminars and tutorials are driven by an underlying belief in the educational value of face-to-face discussions of subject knowledge. It is often explicitly stated that university classrooms and seminars focus on the exchange of opinions and evaluation of knowledge through dialogue (e.g. Griffiths, 2009). Yet, as Kim (2006) reports, it is participating in whole-class discussion and small group discussions which is of significant concern for English for Academic Purpose students. Although *you* and *I* may seem to be little functional words, in the complex arrangement of linguistic and non-linguistic features which make up participation in university classrooms, they do a great deal. Personal pronouns reference a shared knowledge of people, objects and entities (Carter & McCarthy, 2006); they signal agentive action and mark the territories of information of the speaker and listener (Kamio, 1997). With particular reference to the evaluation of knowledge, pronouns index stance-taking and can signal the alignment or, indeed, disalignment, of speakers to evaluations in face-to-face contexts (Du Bois, 2007).

Although powerful, these items have received more attention in academic writing than in speech (e.g. Harwood, 2005; Hyland, 2002; Tang & John, 1999). Observed differences in the use of pronouns in novice-expert or NS–NNS written

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discourse are considered to be indicative of different levels of mastery in particular writing events (e.g. Gilquin & Paquot, 2007; Hyland & Milton, 1997).

The domination of research in written discourse may not solely account for the backgrounding of *you* and *I* in spoken discourse. It may be the case that the array of pragmatic meanings expressed in the use of *you* and *I* are rarely explored in EAP classrooms in relation to spoken academic genres. Personal pronouns may be reduced to core meanings: to signal who is the speaker, who is the listener and who/what is being talked about. However, it is important for EAP students and teachers to be aware of the variety of subtle and incremental functions which *you* and *I* perform in conjunction with other features in order that English language learners can operate successfully in particular spoken academic genres. When used contrary to genre expectations, seemingly discrete functional words such as *I*, *you* and *we* can become a source of controversy (Hinkel, 2004). The omission and misuse of pronouns in learner discourse are argued to be the negative effects of first language (Muñoz, 1991), which are conceptualized as interference and therefore problematic. Despite being a regular feature of spoken discourse (Altenberg, 1990; Clark & Fox Tree, 2002; Fung & Carter, 2007), repetitions of personal pronouns are generally regarded as markers of disfluency (e.g. Clark & Wasow, 1998) and are considered to interrupt the naturalistic flow demanded in some assessment frameworks (e.g. Brown, 2007; Council of Europe, 2001). It seems, therefore, that although these little items may not be salient in the stream of speech, their absence, overuse, misuse, or underuse becomes entirely significant for listeners' perceptions of fluency and genre expectations.

It is also important to consider that in relation to EAP students, a speaker's language use may reflect the classroom practices, teaching approaches and materials they have experienced. Therefore, it is of significant consequence to understand how and why learners use language in and out of language classroom events, without the need to describe this use as misuse or deficient. Of equal importance is evidence of the "genre-specific purposes and discipline-specific practises" (Groom, 2005: 257) of the spoken academic discourse in which EAP students will be involved.

Learner discourse has been investigated through corpus-based studies, which often compare learner or novice discourse with native speaker or expert discourse (Gilquin, 2008; Gilquin, Granger, & Paquot, 2007; Gilquin & Paquot, 2007; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Luzon, 2009; Martinez, 2005). Such research can be embedded within a 'different' versus 'deficient' model of communication and can be discussed in relation to how, for example, English as a Lingua Franca is conceptualized (Seidlhofer, 2005). Some see comparisons of learner and expert discourse as a means to learner empowerment (Martinez, 2005), as a means to the development of important competencies (Hyland & Milton, 1997) and as a means of overcoming non-fatal infelicities and misuse (Gilquin et al., 2007). To take up a 'difference' model is to investigate which patterns of use occur, and why. As an alternative to scouring learner discourse for examples of error or incompetency, an investigation of learner discourse can reveal something about the process of language learning itself, just as any spontaneous speech provides clues to the process of speech production (Chafe, 1994; Clark and Fox Tree, 2002).

Indeed, corpus-based studies offer both a means of identifying particular features of learner discourse and providing possible explanations for observed differences. One explanation for the observed overuse of pronouns in learner written discourse, when compared to native speaker writing, is that learners transfer what they know about the use of pronouns in speaking to the production of written discourse (Gilquin et al., 2007). Less has been written about pronouns in learner spoken discourse than in learner written discourse, with the notable exception of Gilquin (2008). Parallels can be drawn between learner writing and novice writing in EAP contexts, although differences between these groups can also be noted (Gilquin et al., 2007). However, parallels may be less clearly drawn between learner speech and novice speech, or between learner speech and expert speech, whatever that may be. In an EAP context, an undergraduate seminar may constitute novice speech, which is novice to the discipline and event, whereas an inaugural lecture may constitute expert speech. It may be more difficult to consider where a conference presentation or a postgraduate seminar would lie along such a continuum. These are related, yet different, events to which corpus studies can contribute an understanding. For example, Csomay (2007) observes changes in student and teacher academic discourse as the level of instruction increases. In her study of US university classroom talk, Csomay (2007) suggests that an increase in the use of personal pronouns and active voice demonstrates an increase in interactivity with level of instruction (Csomay, 2007). In relation to language variety, Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas (2005) observes differences in *you* and *I* in conference presentations. NNS scientists appear to avoid such interactional features preferred by their NS peers. Therefore, it would seem that particular linguistic features such as pronouns must be understood in relation to the (genre specific) purposes and practises of the events in which they occur.

If the goal for EAP students is successful participation in university seminars, it may prove useful to compare the learner discourse of an ELT classroom with the talk of university seminars.

As spoken academic discourse becomes increasingly internationalized, through English medium universities, internationalization at home strategies, and an increase of online learning, understanding the various functions that personal pronouns play and how to avoid the negative consequences of differential use is ever more relevant. Pronouns clearly do more than index a speaker and a listener; they contribute to the overall sense of what it means to participate fully, or be fluent, in a particular genre; and they can be used differently in particular contexts for particular purposes. Potential hazards exist for all language users in relation to the complexity of pronoun use described as the 'politics of pronouns' (Pennycook, 1994). Knowingly or otherwise, the choice of one particular pronoun over another can index more than a shared reference; it can signal inclusion or exclusion or result in contestable representations (Wortham, 1996). To some extent, therefore, these little functional words carry quite a heavy social burden.

In terms of preparing such information for teaching purposes, personal pronouns in academic contexts are items which are far from amenable to a simple description of language use unrelated to their associated complex social signals.

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