

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The international cooperation of researchers around the world is a pre-requisite for the development of science. English, the lingua franca of the 21st century, is a widely accepted tool for global communication of those involved in research. The present paper is meant to investigate into the kind of language these scientists, very often non-native speakers of English, need to cope with in the field they cultivate. Empirical facts indicate that what they need is not simply English for general purposes but English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which includes research article writing, participating in joint projects and giving conference presentations, just to mention but a few. The study claims that a genre-based approach may multiply the use of the outcome. In the corpus of 24 English conference presentations three levels of communication are identified and their role and relative weight are discussed. The conclusions include recommendations on what, how and when non-native speakers of English should be taught to become efficient presenters.

Keywords: conference presentation, ESP, genre, interpersonal communication, signposts.

Introduction

Higher education is a number one priority in many countries of the world. Not only is it regarded as the locus of conveying the cultural and scientific heritage of the previous generations and establishing grounds for creating new values, but also as a process expected to result in successful participation in the international communication among people who are or will be responsible for their nations' technical progresss, welfare and cultural awareness. As globalization is steaming ahead, this latter function is gaining more and more importance, however, there are several disturbing factors, which may partially or fully hinder effective global communication. One of these is the problem of finding a common language. For various reasons this common language seems to be English, the lingua franca of the 21st century. Related to this is cultural diversity, which, in turn, is a most important value within the European Union as well as in the whole world.

The present study is meant to explore one particular aspect of this worldwide exchange of ideas: intercommunication of university and college students being part of or just leaving higher education. Some of them may participate in research projects working under an outstanding tutor or researcher of their university. Others are ordinary students trying to cope with course and exam requirements. Still others have just been awarded their degrees and they are trying to identify their own mission in life. What all members of these groups have in common is that they need to become part of the international professional exchange if they wish to avoid the threat of provincialism. Learning one's

profession must take place hand in hand with learning how to communicate about it (Rébék, 2005). In other words, communication can and should be regarded as one of the most important professional skills. Any expert working in any field at any stage of his or her career needs to be prepared for successfully participating in the international exchange in his or her own field.

Of the several possible forms of international exchange, like students mobility projects, personal visits, semesters abroad, phonecalls, chats on the internet, online discussion forums, reading international medical journals, etc., the investigation underlying the present study focuses on international conference presentations, the most prestigious oral genre used by the international community of researchers. They provide chances for becoming part of this community and opportunities for offering one's research findings for acceptance or criticism by peers. Student researchers and holders of fresh degrees all over the world have a number of opportunities for taking these chances.

Genre, after Swales (1985, 1990), can be defined as a highly structured and conventionalized communicative event characterized by communicative purposes and used by a professional community. Genre can also be interpreted as a set of constraints concerning content, form and arrangement. These constraints may vary from culture to culture. The present study will focus on the Anglo-Saxon tradition lying in the basis of the current trend of global communication.

As has been mentioned, presentations at international conferences count as exemplars of a genre. With a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach in mind, genre analysis will include the analysis of a selected corpus that contains sufficiently prototypical, comparable samples of the genre.

An important feature of the genre of English language conference presentation is their community-based character. The professional community using this genre as a means of intercommunication can be identified by the discourse they conduct, consequently, they can also be called a discourse community. For the purposes of the present paper discourse is defined as the art of most effectively conveying some verbal message. The concept of the international discourse community of researchers will also be used in the present study as a point of reference.

The purpose of the present study is to give a detailed analysis of English language conference presentations with special regard to areas of difficulties originating from the cultural differences non-native speakers of English are obliged to face when they wish to present their papers or just try to follow other presenters at international conferences. A genre-based approach will be used to answer the questions what kind of communicative tasks presenters usually perform and how these tasks can be classified to justify the hypothesis that successful presentations are carried out at more than one plane of communication simultaneously. Another hypothesis the investigation of the research corpus is intended to justify is that the representation of each plane of communication in conference presentations are equally strong and important.

Methodology of Research

The corpus investigated consisted of the transcripts of 24 semi-authentic English biomedical conference presentations. The 24-item corpus was divided into two subcorpora: the oncology subcorpus comprised by 12 biomedical conference presentations on oncology and the cardiology subcorpus constituted by 12 biomedical presentations on cardiology. The term semi-authentic in this case refers to selecting teaching aids i.e. series of sample presentations written for the members of two esoteric discourse communities, researchers working in the fields of cardiology and oncology. These materials (Edelstein and Smith, 1995, and Coffin and Smith, 1995) do not come from sources of their original communicative function, i.e. from volumes containing selected conference presentations. They come from selections of sample presentations prepared by biomedical researchers and editors publishing such presentations. The reason for this is that it is almost impossible to find sources publishing biomedical presentations word for word, as papers written by the presenters bear the characteristics of written scientific prose, from which the authors, in compliance with the genre conventions, exclude the language devices of oral interpersonal communication. The drawback of selecting semi-authentic texts lies in the fact that, as the name suggests, not all the criteria of authenticity are met, which makes the validity of the study disputable. On the other hand, their advantage is that the authors are practicing members of the discourse community and they produced

their sample presentations relying on their own presenters' expertise. Another advantage is that the discourse elements characteristic of oral biomedical presentations are present in a concentrated form, which, in turn, cannot be true for an authentic corpus of the same size, as, in accordance with rules of prototypicality, real-time presentations may contain typical features of the genre in a less concentrated way.

Results of Research

Tables 1 and 2 below show the number of communicative tasks identified in the corpus.

Table 1. Communicative tasks identified in 12 presentations on oncology.

Communicative tasks identified in the presentation	Numbers of the presentations											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
arguing	1		1				1			1		
cause and effect		7	7	3	1	2		4			1	
classification		1	1			3	2		3	4	3	
concluding	2	4	1	1	5	1	1	3	2	2	1	2
contrasting	2	1		1						1		1
definitions	7	2	4	5	2	5	3	4	6			
description	2	4	3	4	3	7	5	7	5	4	4	6
enumeration	2	1	4		1	3	1	1	1	1		2
exemplifying	2	1	3	1	2	3		2	4		3	2
explanation (rewording)	5	4	4	2	1	2	4	5	5	5	4	5
generalization	3		1	1		6	1			3		
greeting the audience		1		1	1		1	1	1	1		1
hedging	2	6	5	5	7	6	4	3	5	5	3	3
highlighting	1	1	1	2	1			6		1	2	
inviting questions	1		1	1	1			1				
politeness	2	1	1	1	2			3	2	3	3	5
preview	1	1	1			1	1			1	1	1
reference to visuals											5	
referring to the time limit			1	1	1	1		2				
rhetorical question		1		1				1				4
signpost: finishing		1			1	1				1		
signpost: moving on		1	2	2	1		5		3		3	
signpost: referring back	2	1	2	5	2		6					6
signpost: referring forward	5	2	7	2	1				1		1	
signpost: summing up	1		1	1		1			2	1		
thanking the audience	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
thanking the chair	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
topicalization	1	1			1	2		2			2	

Table 2. Communicative tasks identified in 12 presentations on cardiology.

Communicative tasks identified in the presentation	Numbers of the presentations											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
arguing				1					1		1	
cause and effect		8	2			2				1		2
classification		2		1	2	2		3		3		
concluding	2	1	1	2	1	3	2	2	2	1	1	2
contrasting		2			3			2			2	

Communicative tasks identified in the presentation	Numbers of the presentations											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
definition	3		4	2		3	2		2	3	3	2
description	4	3	5	4	2	3	3	2	4	3		3
enumeration	3	2	2		3	2		2	2	2	2	3
exemplifying	3		2			2		4				3
explanation (rewording)			1	2	2	4	3		2	4	3	
generalization	3		3	4		2	1	2		3		2
greeting the audience	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
hedging	4	5	2	3	1	3	3	3	5	4	2	2
highlighting		2	1	1	1				1	1		1
inviting questions	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
politeness	5	2	2	3	3	3	2	6	4	1	2	2
preview	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1		1	1
reference to visuals								3			4	
referring to the time limit		1	1		1			1		1	1	
rhetorical question					2				3			4
signpost: finishing			1			1		1		1	1	
signpost: moving on	3	3	3	1			2	4		4	1	3
signpost: referring back	2			2		2		1	1		3	2
signpost: referring forward	1		1			1						
signpost: summing up			1	1			1		1			1
thanking the audience	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
thanking the chair	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
topicalization		1		1			1		1			1

For the sake of consistent interpretation a brief definition of each of the 28 communicative tasks (Tables 1 and 2 above) is given below in alphabeical order:

arguing = listing facts supporting an idea to convince the audience about something

cause and effect = suggesting a relationship of a source as the origin of a product

classification = grouping things on the basis of similarity

concluding = finishing a topic by making a conclusion

contrasting = presenting two things or views by opposing them to one another

definitions = telling the meaning of a thing by including it in a class and giving a typical feature

description = listing the most characteristic features of an object or process

enumeration = naming items of a list

exemplifying = listing practical manifestations of an idea to prove its validity

explanation (rewording) = interpreting the meaning of a term by rewording it

generalization = apply an idea more widely than its original context

greeting the audience = using a conventional formula to express respect and attract attention

hedging =avoiding committing oneself to a particular action or decision

highlighting = emphasizing something

inviting questions = offering the audience to ask the presenter for clarification

politeness = expressing respect towards the audience by using any verbal tools

preview = giving a plan of the presentation or of a part of it

reference to visuals = mentioning non-verbal materials to illustrate the message

referring to the time limit = suggesting that the time at the presenter's disposal is insufficient

rhetorical question = asking something without expecting an answer from the audience

signpost: finishing = signaling that the presentation is coming to an end

signpost: moving on = signaling that the presenter will start talking about a new topic

signpost: referring back = signaling relying on something mentioned earlier

signpost: referring forward = signaling something will be mentioned later

signpost: summing up = signaling a brief review of the essential points of the presentation

thanking the audience = expressing respect by way of expressing gratitude for the attention

thanking the chair = formal expression of respect to the chair

topicalization = highlighting an idea by placing it at the beginning of a sentence

Altogether 527 communicative tasks were identified in the oncology subcorpus (Table 1) and 422 in the cardiology subcorpus (Table 2). Content-oriented communicative tasks (items 1-11 in Tables 1 and 2 above) include all the possible formats and schemes used in the presentations for conveying biomedical information. Of them 292 were found in the oncology subcorpus and 198 in the cardiology subcorpus. These formats are traditional „containers” of knowledge, such as definitions, classifications, descriptions, structures for expressing cause and effect, logical conclusions, exemplifications, arguments and generalizations. Non-content oriented communicative tasks (items 12-28 in Tables 1 and 2) performed by biomedical presenters include all those not serving the communication of facts constituting the topic of the presentation. These were named and identified using the terminology introduced by Powel (1996) and Trimble (1987). Those not included in Powel’s or Trimble’s terminology were given a name for the purposes of the present study. Of them 235 were found in the oncology subcorpus and 224 in the cardiology subcorpus.

Discussion

The analysis of the two subcorpora revealed that the seemingly one-sided communication between presenter and audience takes place at three levels simultaneously.

The factual-logical plane of communication

The first and most important plane of this communication is the factual-logical plane, where the content of the presentation is delivered. Tasks 1-11 in (Tables 1 and 2) above constitute the format for communicating this type of information. These are rather rigid logical structures, which have served as containers of scientific knowledge for thousands of years. All of them are related to formal logic and they are suitable not only for storing this type of knowledge but also for presenting them. The reason for this is that, due to the universal character of science and research, the rather rigid and conventional formulas activate identical or very similar schemata, defined by Anderson and Pearson (1989) as „abstract knowledge structures”. In fact, this plane in itself would be sufficient for communicating research results, were it not for presenting but only enumerating them. Presenting, however, embraces a much wider range of communicative tasks. Not only is it a source of information on fellow-researchers’ findings and results, but, at the same time, it is a social function which takes place in the international globalized arena.

The interpersonal plane of communication

Items 12-16, 19, 20 and 26-28, which represent the second, interpersonal plane of the presentation constituted by two groups of language devices expressing the presenter’s attitudes. Items in the first group (14 and 28 in Tables 1 and 2 above) express attitude towards the content of the presentation. Item 14 includes examples of highlighting, i.e. qualifying certain facts mentioned in the presentation as important. Examples include

- ... let me emphasize the three reasons why ...
- ... I should point out that ...
- ... I would like to stress that ...

- ... it must be stressed that ...
- ... the take-home message that I want to leave you with is that ...
- ... I want particularly to look at mistral valvuloplasts ...

The function of item 28 is very similar, but the significance of certain facts is expressed by a specific word order called topicalization of the phrase “importance” or its derivatives i.e. placing them at the beginning of the sentence. The most typical examples are:

- ... *it is important to highlight* ...
- ... *it is of utmost importance to exclude this* ...
- ... *What is more important is* ...
- ... the important thing is the presence or absence of metastases. ...
- ... it is important to remember that ...
- ... above all, it is important to establish the diagnosis. ...

The other, fairly large group of language devices of the interpersonal plane represented by items 15, 16, 19, 26 and 27 in Tables 1 and 2 above includes various language items used for expressing respect towards the audience. Examples are:

- ... Thank you, Mr Chairman. ...
- ... Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen....
- ... I have included this slide to remind us of this...
- ... you will notice ...
- ... here we can see ...
- ... Unfortunately, I see that time has caught up with us....

Special is the status of item 13 represented in both tables above. By definition hedges are used for expressing uncertainty in order to suggest a restricted degree of commitment to a statement. Judging from the relatively high number of occurrences shown in Tables 1 and 2 above, this kind of language use is important for presenters to avoid being challenged for excessive generalization or being criticised for not sufficiently motivated inferences or conclusions. Examples include:

- ... the malignant cells may look quite similar to their normal counterparts....
- ... prostate cancer tends to metastasize preferentially to bone ...
- ... colon cancer metastasizes essentially to the liver and lung ...
- ... Analytical epidemiology tries to identify
- ... It is not always easy to understand the reason for changing trends. ...
- ... There appears to be a link between cancer patterns and the environment....

Politeness strategies to be used by the presenter can be divided into two groups. The umbrella term for the first group is textual orientation, which could also be regarded as a kind of „elementary politeness”, in other words, language devices that help the audience get oriented within the text of the presentation. There are two basic subgroups of such language devices.

The plane of textual orientation

The third subgroup of language devices used for textual orientation includes those which are meant to guide the audience within the presentation itself. They are also called signposts (items 21-25 in Tables 1 and 2 above), which refer to the presenter’s movement within the text. So do items 17 and 18 represented in both tables above. They can also be considered as politeness strategies as they are there to offer guidance. Examples identified in the study corpus include items like

- ... I’ll say more about chemical carcinogens later. ...

- ... I'll come back to them in a moment. ...
- ... Referring back to the example of the Rous sarcoma virus, ...
- ... the DNA damaging agent, which we discussed earlier ...
- ... The next point I'd like to talk about is laboratory tests. ...
- ... This brings me to my final point which concerns pathologic diagnosis. ...

Without the above listed items the text can still make sense, however, it will remain in the category of a list of facts rather than a presentation.

At the level of text organization we can speak about logical connectors like *and*, *or*, *but*, *however*, *although*, *on the other hand*, etc., which are natural part of any text. They are usually used for connecting phrases or clauses and only rarely are they used for expressing logical connections between paragraphs and longer chunks of the text. If we try to delete them from any kind of text, the message can still be delivered, however, the text itself is felt somewhat awkward and difficult to process. This subgroup of language tools was not focused on in the present study, as they can be regarded as natural devices of textual cohesion, which, together with the the logical structures or schemata mentioned above, are used naturally by any speaker of a language in a constant effort to create coherence.

Conclusion

The comparison of the occurrences of the communicative tasks in each of the three planes of communication represented in the medical conference presentations yielded surprising results. Of the total number of 949 communicative tasks identified in the two subcorpora 490 were found at the factual level of communication (51%), 143 at the level of textual orientation (16%), while in the case of interpersonal communication the number of communicative tasks was 316, which comprises 33% of the total number. In practical terms it means that the main focus of the presenters was the research findings they were giving account of, while textual orientation and interpersonal communication were almost equally important. The latter two groups of communicative functions comprise 49% of the total number of communicative tasks. The relative weight (two third) of the interpersonal plane within the non-factual plane is also important.

The present study was undertaken to explore the decisive features of the genre of English language conference presentations and the pedagogical implications of these features. The results suggest that, in addition to communicating research findings, presenters devote equal attention to textual orientation and interpersonal communication.

The realization of communicative tasks in these planes of communication need to be taught to would-be conference presenters, especially to non-native speakers of English at a relatively early stage of their professional career, preferably while they are still at university. This will help them join the global information exchange, which is an indispensable criterion of successful research activity.

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