Applying Genre-based and L2 Pragmatic Instruction to Teaching Oral Presentations on the Web

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the development of an Internet-based instructional platform, which aims to guide EFL college students in learning and practicing oral presentation skills. Genre-based instruction and insights from L2 pragmatic instructional research inspired the platform’s design. The instructional units in the online platform engage learners in a comparative analysis of rhetorical and language features at both expert speaker and learner speech levels and scaffold the learners in utilizing these features to deliver practice presentations. Documenting the four EFL students’ experiences using the platform, the user reports show how the guided tasks expanded the students’ understanding of ‘good presentations.’ For learners whose language-learning goals are directed towards participating in a global community, it is suggested that key factors in developing web-based oral presentations materials are corpus selection and pedagogical tasks, which consider the learners’ subjectivity in determining rhetorical and pragmatic norms.

Keywords: Genre-based Instruction, L2 Pragmatics, Online Instruction, Public Speaking, Rhetorical Moves

INTRODUCTION

In today’s globalized world, oral presentation is a spoken genre that learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) commonly encounter in their work and study. However, in EFL settings, learners generally do not receive as many opportunities to become familiarized with the nuances of rhetoric and pragmatic rules in authentic communicative situations. Even though nurturing presentation skills in English is regarded as an important component of many English for specific or general purposes (ESP/EGP) curriculums in universities, classroom instruction often relies heavily on the teachers’ intuitive understanding of ‘good presentations’ or invented dialogues in

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textbook materials (Cohen & Ishihara, 2013). A review of ESP/EGP research further shows that scholarly work on spoken discourses often focus on high-stakes academic genres, such as academic lectures (e.g. Thompson, 1994; Weissberg, 2003) and research talks/conference presentations (e.g. Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005; Swales, 2004); research on understanding and searching for more effective methods of teaching how to engage in oral presentations for more general audiences—including the necessary linguistic and pragmatic skills—is largely absent.

In looking for ways to better equip learners and teachers in learning and teaching oral presentation skills, this study reports the development of an online instructional platform for oral presentations to supplement classroom instruction. Drawing on genre-based instruction and insights from L2 pragmatic research, the platform aims to raise EFL learners’ awareness of the linguistic, rhetorical, and interactional features in oral presentations, as well as develop their autonomous learning as users of the oral presentation genre.

GENRE AND GENRE-BASED INSTRUCTION

In the last two decades, conceptions of genre have expanded from a system of classification used to define literary works to ‘complex oral or written responses by speakers or writers to the demand of a social context’ (Johns, 2002, p. 3). Scholars in ESP and new rhetoric studies generally believe in the power of teaching genre knowledge and discourse regularities explicitly to help language learners grasp the context and purpose of communication (Freedman & Medway, 1994; Flowerdew, 2002; Hyland, 2004; Johns, 2002). By providing learners with rich, authentic sample texts (spoken or written) and guiding them through analyses of textual regularities, communicative functions, and contexts of use, genre-based language instruction aims to provide learners with not only ‘the knowledge and skills they need to communicate successfully in particular discourse communities’, but also to ‘access to socially powerful forms of language’ (Paltridge, 2001, p. 3).

The upsurge of interest in genre analysis (e.g. moves/schemaic structure, lexico-grammatical patterns) for ESL/EAP pedagogical purposes has mainly centered on written genres. Research efforts have been dedicated to familiarizing students with both non-academic genres (i.e. emails and letters) (e.g. Sachiko, 2011) and academic genres (i.e. doctoral dissertations, research articles, academic essays, examination/quiz responses, summaries, and reports) (e.g. Dudley-Evans, 2002; Flowerdew, 2002; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007; Swales, 2004; Swales & Lindemann, 2002).

Analyses of spoken discourses, though relatively rare compared to written, focus mainly on two academic genres: academic lectures and research talks/conference presentations. Studies on academic lectures and seminars have discussed the problems encountered by lecturers and audiences in organizing and delivering academic lectures and providing strategic support in EAP classrooms to help them either understand or deliver academic lectures and seminars (e.g. Flowerdew, Li, & Miller, 1996; Flowerdew & Miller, 1998; Thompson, 1994; Weissberg, 2003). Similarly, studies on research talks/conference presentations also seek to demystify target genres. Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas (2005) identify three main moves: setting up a framework, contextualizing the topic, and stating the research rationale. These moves are embedded in conference introductions and pinpoint the strategic use of “contextually adapted rhetoric” (p. 64), such as using shorter clauses, pronouns, and active verb structures to contextualize the talks, introducing arguments, and interacting with audiences. Seeing genre acquisition as a form of disciplinary socialization, Morton (2009) compares the rhetorical strategies employed by novice and near-expert presenters to interact with their audience in the field of architecture and underlines genre analysis as an “effective heuristic device” (Morton, 2009, p. 228) for students to socialize into and critically examine their disciplines. An advocate of genre-based instruc-
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