Effect of Teaching Academic Spoken English Discourse Features on L2 Oral Performances

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Abstract

Academic speaking is one of the crucial skills for L2 speakers to be able to be successful in universities in English speaking countries. Despite this importance of spoken/written discourse differences in academic communications, L2 students may not be aware of the preferred spoken discourse style in academic settings, if they are not instructed. This study explores if teaching academic spoken English discourse features would lead to better L2 oral performances. High intermediate level students in intensive English program (IEP) were instructed with corpus-informed materials for two weeks to notice discourse differences between academic written and spoken English. Also, the students practiced oral summary of textbook articles, incorporating academic spoken discourse features. Results showed that L2 students used some target discourse features significantly more in their post-tests, and the students' oral performance scores were significantly higher in their posts-tests than the pre-test scores. Pedagogical implications are discussed, and suggestions are made for future studies.

Key words: corpus-informed materials development, academic presentation, L2 spoken discourse

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Background

One important issue related with the L2 academic speaking skills is that L2 students may not be able to cope with the linguistic flexibility that they need when they need to discuss the topics from the readings. In other words, L2 students may not be aware of the different linguistic choices between written English and spoken English, so there speech may sound like reading out from a written passage. Considering the real-time production circumstances in speaking, listeners may find this difficult to understand due to the increased burden of the information processing. For example, written English features such as noun phrases with prepositional phrases/ complement clauses package denser information than verbs with complement clauses, which are more popular in spoken language (Biber et al., 1999).

Therefore, it would be crucial that L2 speakers be able to speak the way they can be understood without listeners' conscious efforts for online information processing. Although extensive corpus linguistics research reiterated the differences between written and spoken English in higher education settings, these spoken discourse features were rarely incorporated to EAP classrooms in ESL/EFL settings. A multidimensional study of university language by Biber et al. (2002) showed "a strong polarization between spoken and written registers" with the spoken registers, regardless of purpose, characterized by more involvement, situated, persuasive, and personal use of language (p. 41). The study urged the necessity of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teaching materials to integrate "patterns of language forms that are typically used for particular functions at the university" (p. 42). To cover the research gap mentioned

above, this study investigates if the explicit teaching of spoken discourse features or spoken grammar would lead to better L2 fluency and comprehensibility.

Research Questions

1. Does explicit teaching of spoken discourse features lead the L2 learners to use the features?

2. Does the use of the target spoken discourse features promote better L2 fluency and comprehensibility?

Methods

Participants

Nine students from PIE level 5B section participated in this study. The students' L1 backgrounds included Arabic (6), Chinese (4), Portuguese (3), and Japanese (1). The students' overall English proficiency was assumed to be more or less similar, as they were placed in the same level according to the in house placement test scores.

The Tasks

In pre-, and post-tests, the participants were asked to read an excerpt from a university textbook on international business, summarize the main points, and state their opinions on the topic. The total speaking time allowed was no more than 2 minutes. Students had 20 minutes to read the article, plan on their language use, and practice their speech. They had no access to the reading passage or to their notes when they performed the tasks. Instead, PowerPoint slides that contained the major points of the reading were given to the students to minimize the effect of individual students' note-taking behavior on their speaking, as some students were likely to read aloud their notes or even read aloud the original reading passage in their performances. In this way, the participants were forced to speak in their own words, based on the major points on the

slides. Two similar excerpts from a university textbook on international business were chosen for pre- and post-test reading passage.

Procedures

This research implemented a pre- and post-test within group design, using parallel forms of tasks on the same topic—reading/speaking integrated tasks on international business, to find out if the explicit instruction of academic spoken discourse features would lead to oral performances more comprehensible to listeners. To further investigate how the participants transferred written language features into spoken features when performing the tasks and how they felt about the explicit instruction, a set of open-ended questionnaire was implemented right after the last teaching intervention. Table 1 shows the overall procedure of this research.

Table 1

Time Table

week	procedure
9	Data Collection 1 (Pre-Test)
10, 11	Explicit Teaching Intervention
	(60 minutes * 3)
11	Questionnaire on Attitudes
12	Data Collection 2 (Post-Test)

Three sessions of teaching intervention were sequenced according to the PIE level 5 listening and speaking class curriculum. The instructional target language features and task topics are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Instructed Spoken Language Features and Tasks Used

Session	Target Language Features and Tasks
1	• awareness-raising activity on academic spoken discourse features using Ted-talk *All your devices can be hacked* by Avi Rubin
2	• spoken discourse features: *personal pronouns, existential there, wh-clefts, verb+ complement clauses* • reading/listening/speaking integrated task 1on *multiple intelligences*
3	• spoken discourse features*: discourse markers, personal pronouns, wh-clefts (end-weight principle) , nouns/ nominalizations* → *verb+ complement clauses (unpacking dense information), paraphrasing technical terms into everyday words* • reading/listening/speaking integrated task 2on *Internet Privacy*

Measurements and Data Analysis

First, the speech samples collected from pre- and post- test were manually transcribed, and the frequency of the target spoken discourse features (both type and token) were counted with AntConc3.2.4w, concordance software. Second, the speech samples were scored by the researcher and another experienced ESL teacher. To make sure of the inter-rater reliability, adjustments were made when the two raters' scores were further than one band away. There were only a couple of occasions when the two raters' scores were more than one band away. The oral summary rubric (see appendix D) that was used in this study was one developed in house for achievement test purposes in the IEP program. This rubric was chosen because it was developed for assessing the oral summary task performances of the high intermediate level ESL students, the same level as the participants. Also, the rubric considers overall oral language proficiency

based on three different dimensions: delivery, content, and language use. First, the delivery dimension measures the extents to which speakers deliver clear fluent speech. It concerns about ill-timed pauses, hesitations, pronunciation of words, intonation, and stress. Overall, it is about intelligibility and listener efforts for comprehension. Second, the content dimension assesses relevance and accuracy of information. It concerns if the summary content— main idea, major details, and closing—is well developed and coherently organized. Third, the language use dimension measures effective use of a variety of topic related words and appropriate grammatical structures.

Third, the frequency of the target spoken discourse features was computed. Unlike the first three categories of ASDF, the last two categories (4. Derivational Word Class, and 5. Lexical Synonyms) had no list of specific language items ready for the frequency counts. Therefore, various attempts were made to operationalize the concepts appropriately. Derivational world class included five congruent verbs which were originally presented as nouns in the prompt summary slides. The participants were expected to change these nouns into congruent verb forms to unpack the dense information and make their speech more audience-friendly. Table 3 shows the list of the target nouns and their congruent verb forms.

Table 3

Derivational World Class

noun	→	verb
expansion	→	expand
sales	→	sell
growth	→	grow
improvement	→	improve
acquisition	→	acquire

The five lexical words in the lexical synonyms category were selected based on the key word and batch search with the AntConc concordancer as well as the manual examination of the transcript. The following five words were used by at least two or more participants to replace some of the key words on the prompt slides. Synonyms that were used by a single participant were excluded as they may not represent the language use of the participants group.

Table 4

Lexical Synonyms

words in the prompt	→	synonyms
profits	→	money
higher	→	more
useful	→	new
foreign	→	different
vast	→	big

Finally, descriptive statistics, Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests were computed on the frequency of the target ASDFs and the oral summary scores to figure out if there is any statistically significant difference between pre- and post-test. Also, Spearman's Rho Tests were performed to see if there is a significant correlation between the frequency of the target ASDFs and pre- and post-test scores.

Results

The answer to the first research question (*1. Does explicit teaching of spoken discourse features lead the L2 learners to use the features?*) was positive; the instruction of the target ASDFs caused the learners to use the target features more to the degree which was statistically significant. However, the answer to the second research question (*2. Does the use of the target spoken discourse features promote better L2 oral performances?*) was negative as there was no statistically significant correlations between the frequency of the target features and the rubric

scores of the L2 performance, though in the post-test the participants did use some of the ASDFs significantly more, with their oral performance scores significantly higher. More detailed results and discussion follow.

Table 5

Frequency of Target Spoken Discourse Features in Pre- and Post-Test

	Target Feature	**Pre-test**	**Post-test**
1. Engaging Pronouns (EP)	*I, my*	38	37
	You, your	14	40
	We, our	7	12
	total	59	89
2. Discourse Markers (DM)	*what (wh*-question*)*	0	3
	OK	1	1
	So	29	19
	Now	1	1
	total	31	24
3. End-Focus Devices (EFD)	*wh*-cleft	0	0
	existential *there*	8	10
	total	8	10
4. Derivational Word Class (DWC)	*expand(s)*	0	7
	sell	1	6
	grow	1	6
	improve(s)	16	10
	acquire	0	1
	total	18	30
5. Lexical Synonyms (LS)	*money*	3	6
	more	8	25
	new	0	3
	different	5	5
	big	2	2
	total	18	41
Sum		134	194
Mean		14.89	21.56

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics and Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test

		Pre-Test		Post-Test		Z	*Sig.*
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
	EP	6.56	6.54	9.89	7.87	-2.72	.007**
	DM	3.78	3.15	2.78	2.73	-.85	.40
	EFD	1.00	0.87	1.22	1.56	-.38	.71
Spoken Discourse Features	DWC	2.00	2.24	3.11	1.90	1.13	.26
	LS	2.00	2.35	4.56	2.24	-2.56	.011*
	Token (ttl)	27.44	14.33	37.33	18.91	-1.96	.05*
	Type (ttl)	6.33	2.24	9.00	2.65	-2.68	.007**
	Delivery	3.86	0.33	4.08	0.65	-1.41	.16
Rubric Score	Content	3.89	0.55	3.92	0.35	0.00	1.00
	Language	4.06	0.43	4.31	0.45	1.89	.059
	Total	11.81	1.13	12.31	1.26	-2.33	.02*

*p< .05, **p < .01

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

Overall, the participants seemed to have felt that the instruction on ASDFs were helpful to improve their academic skills, but it may take more time for them to be able to produce all the target features comfortably. This research has implications for the developmental sequence of how students can incorporate/ adopt certain ASDFs sooner than others. It is likely that many participants more easily adopted to use engaging pronouns and lexical synonyms with high frequency words than syntactic features such as *wh*-clefts or using congruent verb forms, which may be more cognitively demanding to use.

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