Study of Conference Presentations by Novice and Expert Presenters in Computing

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the organisational structure of academic conference presentations in the field of computing. It examines possible differences between novice (postgraduate students) and expert (faculty) presenters. A self-built corpus of 15 presentations was analysed using NVivo 12. Findings reveal 14 moves in the presentations, with variations based on presenter expertise, particularly in audience orientation and content presentation. The study has pedagogical implications for teaching conference-presentation skills to postgraduate students.

KEYWORDS

Computing, conference presentation, expert presenter, novice presenter, move analysis

INTRODUCTION

The academic conference presentation is a specialised form of public speaking and a challenging task due to its real-time delivery to an expert audience (Heino et al., 2002). According to Seliman (1996), academic conference presentations hold great significance as they offer more up-to-date information than written versions. They are considered an essential component of the research cycle and constitute a key academic genre (Hyland, 2009).

Some scholars may believe there is no difference between writing a paper for publication and presenting a paper at a conference, ignoring the fact that the organisation and language use of the two texts are different. Academic conference presentations are particularly vital for postgraduate students, as novice researchers and new members of the academic community, as these help them to be accepted within the target academic community. Therefore, the presenter should be aware of the rhetorical organisation of the presentation, ensuring it is well organised, clear, and effectively conveys the information.

To date, the extensive and rapidly growing body of literature on the language of research reporting has mainly concentrated on written forms (e.g., research articles, theses, essays or proposals). Spoken forms of research reporting, such as academic conference presentations, have received less attention.

The pioneering study on conference presentation was conducted by Dubois (1980) on biomedical conference presentations from a rhetorical perspective. Since then, there have been valuable contributions to studying the academic conference-presentation genre. Thompson (1997) and Webber (2002) compared interactive features used by presenters in delivering presentations. Heino et al. (2002) focused on interpersonal and text-organising aspects of conference presentations. Hood and Forey (2005) examined how speakers shape their talks to interact with the audience. Wulff et al. (2009) also compared the presentation session and discussion session in terms of phraseological patterns, discourse management aspects and chairs' utterances.

Furthermore, some studies have paid attention to the multimodal nature of conference presentations, especially in technical, medical and scientific fields. For example, Dubois (1982) stressed the structuring role of visuals in conference presentations. However, some scholars, including Selimen (1996), Webber (1997), Shalom (2001), Ventola (2002), Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet (2003), Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas (2005), and Querol-Julián (2011),

investigated the structural organisation of conference presentations in various academic fields such as applied linguistics, engineering, health science and medical science.

The available literature mainly focuses on expert presenters who have been in the academic community for years, while neglecting the new members of the academic community. Additionally, none of the studies so far has focused on the organisational structure (i.e., moves and steps) of conference presentations in the field of computing. As a result, this under-researched academic genre still requires the attention of scholars and more in-depth research.

AIMS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The main purpose of the study is to contribute to the description of computing conference presentations by investigating the organisational structure (moves and steps). According to Swales & Freak (2004), a move is a rhetorical unit that performs a communicative function in a discourse. In other words, a move is a functional, not a grammatical unit. A step is a sub-unit of a move, and its function is to achieve the purpose of the move to which it belongs (Cortes, 2013). Each move can comprise several steps.

This study aims to identify possible differences in the rhetorical structure of conference presentations between novices in the academic community (postgraduate students) compared to experts (faculty members). The study addresses the following research question:

Does the structure of the conference presentation vary based on the presenter's expertise (novice or expert)?

To conduct this research, a self-built corpus was created, comprising 15 conference presentations in the field of computing. These presentations consist of texts from two sources: fresh data collected from PST 2016: 14th International Conference on Privacy, Security and Trust, held in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, and recorded data from a public-domain website called Video Lectures (http://videolectures.net). Among the 15 presentations, eight were delivered by novices, while seven were delivered by experts. Each presentation was transcribed, and the data was analysed using NVivo 12.

The selected conference presentations were all research presentations delivered at parallel conference sessions. The novice presenters of the study were either master's students or first/second-year PhD students in the computing field. The expert presenters were faculty members teaching at different universities around the world.

To identify the rhetorical moves and steps in conference presentations, the study employed Seliman's (1996) move model. Seliman's (1996) model is grounded in her examination of engineering conference presentations and incorporates Swales's (2004) definition of a move, which regards it as a functional unit identifiable by its communicative function within the text.

The move analysis of the conference presentations has been achieved through three phases. Phase One is the move model development, which includes the initial coding of text segments based on their communicative function according to Seliman's (1996) model. In Phase Two, three of the conference presentations were coded using NVivo 12. At this phase, a specialist advisor in the computing field was consulted during the coding procedure on discipline-specific technical concepts that needed clarification. The data was coded twice, using the identified coding scheme, to minimise human errors during the coding procedure and ensure consistency in the coding. There were four-week gaps between each coding round to avoid any previous biases in the new coding round. Finally, in Phase Three, the inter-coder reliability test was conducted to assess the reliability of the coding.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

In total, 14 moves were identified in computing conference presentations: three in the introduction section, seven in the body section, and four in the conclusion section. However, the findings reveal differences in the structural organisation (i.e., moves and steps) of various presentation sections based on the presenter's level of expertise (novice or expert). The study demonstrates that a presenter's expertise also influences the sequence of moves and

steps, particularly in orienting the audience and presenting the content in both the introduction and body sections of conference presentations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has significant pedagogical implications for teaching the structure, organisation and delivery of conference presentations to postgraduate students in computing as novice members of the academic community.

The available books on conference presentations, such as Silyn-Roberts (2012), Jalongo and Machado (2015), and Freiermuth (2022), offer very general guidance and are not informed by comprehensive fieldwork or corpus-driven analyses, such as the approach taken in this study. Previous research demonstrates that learners' understanding of genre knowledge positively influences their production of that genre (Kaufhold, 2017). Therefore, the genre-knowledge framework developed in this study can be utilised in designing and implementing courses for postgraduate students in computing.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The first limitation is the small sample size, which restricts the generalisability of the results. To enhance the reliability of the findings, future research should consider conducting similar studies with a larger sample size. Additionally, this study did not distinguish between conference presentations delivered by native-speaking and non-native-speaking presenters, as its primary focus was on exploring differences between experts and novices in delivering presentations. Hence, future research could investigate the distinctions in the move and step structure among presenters from diverse cultural backgrounds.

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