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Ken Hyland, Philip Shaw

Seminars

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Marta Aguilar
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SEMINARS

Marta Aguilar

Introduction
Among the most common academic classroom oral activities, listening to lectures and note-taking stand out, followed by participating in whole-class discussions, delivering oral presentations, raising questions or participating in seminar discussions. Seminars have often been regarded as an occluded genre that may have been overshadowed by lectures. Nevertheless, over the past decade, they have started to be recognised as an important academic instructional genre, alongside lectures and textbooks (Hyland 2009). Participating in seminars can be challenging for many university students, especially for non-native English-speakers (NNESs) (Kim 2006; Morita 2004), so pinning down seminars can help us gain insight into the increasingly larger linguistic and communicative demands that are cast over native and non-native English-speaking university students alike.

A seminar is, in its generic sense, a site of inquiry where teaching, research and learning are not dissociated, and where a small amount of participants engage in theory–practice disciplinary dialogue. A seminar is, however, a label that denotes different events in different countries and educational cultures (Mauranen 1994). In the US, for example, seminars are usually student seminars where students debate and discuss ideas with the purpose of improving their academic communication skills while talking about topics related to their field of study. By and large, two different types of seminars can be identified, namely student instructional seminars and expert research seminars. While the pedagogic student seminar has received some attention (as seen below), less is known about the expert seminar. The former is, strictly speaking, an instructional genre that mainly involves small-group interactive teaching and discussion, and can be more or less tutor-led depending on the discipline, the course or the institution. A student seminar is used to further disciplinary acculturation of (post)graduate students, who are provided with the opportunity to explain and discuss their scholarly work. On the other hand, in a peer (expert) seminar, academics address a small expert audience to informally disseminate their research. These seminars are self-contained events where a speaker who has been invited in a different or foreign university speaks about his/her on-going or completed research. They are a hybrid genre that shares features with spoken genres like conference presentations, colloquia or lectures and with written research articles.
Instructional seminars

The seminar is an academic spoken genre, whose origin can be traced back to the Socratic debate, and which consists in asking and answering questions with the purpose of stimulating critical thinking. If in lectures students are seen as receivers of knowledge, in seminars students at various levels are regarded as learners that have to actively be involved in their learning process. Graduate and postgraduate seminars, as they are usually known, revolve around selected readings and subsequent discussions with questioning and debating. The canonical form of seminars tends to consist of two sections, namely an oral presentation (based on selected readings, for example) delivered by one or several students, which is then followed by a discussion section. In these small group classes, students learn how to move from an apprentice to an expert position. Seminars are not only believed to facilitate the student’s path to graduation or doctorate but also to facilitate socialisation, development and peer mentoring, increase retention and achievement among students, enhance critical thinking, problem-solving and communication skills, and reduce anxiety. By the same token, sociocultural theories drawing on Vygotsky (1987) and Bakhtin (1981) posit that dialogue helps learners learn because dialogic interaction builds up and extends one’s thinking in the same way reflective reading and exploratory writing expand thinking and understanding. It then stands to reason that the nature of seminars lends itself to the incorporation of social constructivist approaches that are known to help students internalise knowledge and improve and practise their research skills.

Interaction being a defining characteristic of seminars, seminar research mostly focuses on seminar discussion and interactivity. Seminar discussion is found in the literature as an umbrella term encapsulating interaction in small groups. Yet, an exploration of practice and literature reveals that the term seminar discussion tends to be used interchangeably with class discussion (Basturkmen 1995) and even with the oral presentation that may precede the discussion. Basturkmen (1995), for example, identifies three subgenres within MBA seminars: i) the discussion following the presentation by an expert speaker from outside the university; ii) the discussion following the presentation by students; and iii) tutorial-type discussion class. Similarly, claiming that the graduate seminar and the thesis defence belonged to Swales’ category of ‘other research-process genres’, Weissberg (1993) subdivided graduate seminar presentations into four subtypes: i) PhD proposals; ii) in-progress reports; iii) preliminary literature reviews; and iv) finished research reports. All four types of presentation finish with a question–answer period, where discussion takes place.

Research into these seminars has yielded information about the following important issues:

i seminars as pedagogic tools to improve listening/speaking skills together with discussion and communication skills;
ii description of the language of seminars, specifically of interactional features in the discussion section (linguistic, pragmatic or structural); and
iii factors affecting participation, particularly among non-native speakers (NNSs).

Seminars as pedagogic tools

Because establishment of a sense of community and perceived learning seem to be linked, seminars can be an appropriate site conducive to learning and academic enculturation. In addition, seminar attendance and participation provide students with practice in
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communication and discussion skills, fundamental skills in most professions. If seminar participation can be challenging for native students, for many non-native students the experience can be so daunting that anxiety, silence and disappointment could neutralise its potentially positive learning outcomes. For this reason, the role of the instructor in effectively attaining these goals is pivotal (Huaiyuan 1988; Ma 2008; Lee 2009; Coward & Miller 2010; Samimy et al. 2011). As we will see below, instructors should avoid being over-dominant, be generous in giving the floor and encourage participation, particularly among NNSs with a low English proficiency and a silent attitude, as conferred by their (mostly East Asian) background education. If the discussion is properly led, though, using the seminar method (i.e. discussion on a list of assigned readings) can create important benefits among NNSs, like stimulation of student oral skills, raised sensitivity to matters of style and function, increased willingness to take risks, reduced apprehension, ability to think for oneself and evaluate one’s own work, or ability to use language creatively (Huaiyuan 1988). Morita (2000) found that through oral seminar activities in a teaching English as a second language (TESL) seminar, NNS students who initially remained silent, either because of their insufficient English proficiency or because of their inexperience in participatory classroom formats, are seen to develop their discourse socialisation and oral presentation skills. In fact, many participants in seminars become more aware of their own multifaceted contexts and the causes of their powerlessness, and from this new knowledge they are then able to create a new positive non-native speaker identity as legitimate members of their community of practice (Samimy et al. 2011). In short, a seminar effectively proves an ideal place where empowerment can best be achieved in collaboration between the teacher and other students.

The potential of seminars can of course also be exploited to socialise and empower foreign language teachers, who can become more reflective about their role of L2 teacher educators. In particular, foreign language teaching assistants (TAs) are seen to better understand research, adopt new teaching practices and use action research as a tool for individual and professional development (McDonough 2006) by participating in seminars where action research is included.

Another positive effect of seminar participation is participation itself, that is, gaining acquaintance with floor-holding and floor-winning strategies and with seminar discussion conventions. Seminars are sites of collaborativeness and competitiveness, so different types of conflict, conflict resolution and conflict handling usually occur in academic seminars (Allwood 1993). Defining conflict as differences of opinion or action that are perceived as conflict-generating, Allwood identifies common types of conflict in seminars, like denying the claim, relativising validity of the claim or claiming non-comprehension or irrelevance of the claim. Conflict in seminars can be handled by preventing it (e.g. reaching consensus), avoiding it (e.g. postponing or changing topic), pursuing it (one loses, the other wins or dominates) or by resolving it (e.g. removing grounds for conflict). Seminars are sites for competition for the floor where students participate in different ways. Participation seems to vary according to gender, ethnicity, power relations and previous acquaintance with the conventions of the genre. To some extent, this could be considered to substantiate Benesch’s (1999) concept of rights analysis. Rights analysis recognises the classroom as a site of struggle, and studies how power is exercised and resisted in academic settings. Benesch theorises EAP students as potentially active participants and acknowledges that academic situations, like for instance the seminar, offer their own opportunities for negotiation and resistance. The study of power relations in seminars can help us discover possibilities for greater student engagement.

De Klerk (1995) studied South African postgraduate seminars to ascertain trends in participation and levels of assertiveness and dominance. Not only did male and white
participants’ turns take up 84 per cent of the conversational floor but their turns were also longer than female and other-than-white participants’ turns. A high level of assertiveness also seems to be necessary for students to win the floor because the most participative and experienced students were seen to fight for the floor rather than wait to be given the chance. This suggests the high level of competition among students and the importance of familiarity with the appropriate discourse conventions in discussions. De Klerk mentions that the tutors in his study did not know the art of participatory discourse because they were over-dominant in every instance: they showed the highest frequency rates of floor-taking and humour, for instance. This type of research substantiates once again how important the role of teachers can be. Successful levels of participation are thought to render seminar instruction more effective, so a well-informed syllabus providing clear instruction and practice in seminar discussion for both EAP tutors and students is expected to facilitate involvement, which seems particularly necessary in the case of NNS students.

Finally, seminars have been one of the first classroom formats to be virtualised due to their student-centred and dialogic nature (Carey 1999). Web-based courses, synchronous and asynchronous online seminars or a combination of both (blended learning) seem to be on the rise, an alternative to traditional modes of instruction. Emerging technologies can be used to create constructivist learning environments that challenge students to participate more actively in their own education. Research has confirmed the connection between establishing a sense of community and perceived learning, and seminars stand out as an ideal classroom format where new technologies can provide students with opportunities to capitalise and resort to their own experiential knowledge (Potts 2005), either through the use of bulletin board interactions or WebCT packages, or through wikis and other online activities (as Kuteeva further explores in this book). Collaborative cyber communities in foreign language courses (Lord & Lomicka 2004) introduce components like multi-user object-oriented domains (MOOs), electronic discussion, e-portfolios or virtual guests. These online resources seem to bring about clear pedagogical benefits like higher motivation among students, mainly because, in seminars, students learn oral academic skills by speaking and communicating in an academic setting. In brief, distance learning and online seminars with virtual communication teams in academia may become powerful modes of instruction for students to improve their oral academic competence as well as their intercultural communicative competence.

To finish, it must be said that how interaction works in synchronous and asynchronous seminar discussions can yield fruitful information and is still under-researched. For example, an analysis of the nature and extent of interaction through duration of discussion, rates of participation and the extent of interaction in an asynchronous text-based educational environment revealed that lexical cohesion exists by means of subtle links between apparently unconnected messages that did actually work together to advance the construction of knowledge and social connections (Blanchette 2012). Other elements for assessing the quality of student-/tutor-led interaction in online foreign language seminars could be interaction patterns, word quantity, metadiscourse, humour or politeness, and attitude markers.

**Discourse, interactivity and structure of seminars**

The discourse of interactivity and the structure of interaction are core features of seminars. Within the first aspect we find personalisation, conversational and formulaic expressions, stance markers, metadiscourse, physical cues, expression of non-comprehension and formulation items. Like lectures, seminars seem to contain a mixture of conversational
features and formal academic expressions. For example, explicit interactivity and a high use of person pronouns (I, you) are defining features of seminars (Hyland 2009), deploying certain similarities with interactive lectures. Hyland shows that the MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English) seminars, however, contain almost 50 per cent more person pronouns than large lectures, with I and you collocating with know and think and also with look, see and can as in: You know (that), I think (that), I don’t know, you can see, or if you look. As noted by Hyland, this confirms Biber’s (2006) work in that classroom discourse shows more stance markers than written academic texts like textbooks or conversations. The differences between lectures and seminars stem from the differences in class size, but also from the existence of discussion or negotiation in seminars, and ultimately in the more egalitarian personal relationships found in seminars because they reflect how students evaluate and convey attitude or certainty when they assess their peer students’ contributions.

Yet, it might be noted that in much research on academic spoken English, lectures and seminars are rarely separated and often unequally distributed. For example, Biber (2006) used 159 lectures and 40 seminars (25.1 per cent of data) from the BASE (British Academic Spoken English) corpus. It may be hypothesised that results might have changed had lectures and seminars been kept apart or equally distributed. Depending on the specificity of the research scope, including or excluding seminars can be a decisive criterion to take into account because higher levels of interactivity in seminars may affect the final result, particularly if one bears in mind Hyland’s seminar versus lecture analysis.

As can be seen, few studies exist on the interactional functions of discourse markers in seminars in particular. One exception could be the study on the functions of also as a discourse marker in seminars and TV roundtable discussions (Waring 2003). The additive functions of also arise from the tension between collaborative attempts to keep coherence and confront or disagree. Waring describes how also is used to add something that is irrelevant to prior talk (disjunctive) but may be relevant to a prior super-topic, achieving the appearance of structural coherence and legitimising one’s speaking rights. Also is also used to add a comment to undermine another’s talk, to strengthen disagreement and intellectual competence, and to soften disaffiliative talk (disagreement), thus creating an illusion of affiliation while expressing disagreement. Most studies have analysed the functions and frequencies of other particles like just in academic spoken English (Grant 2011) or of formulaic expressions in academic speech (Simpson 2004). Simpson found out that the expressions that were significantly more frequent in the MICASE could be grouped into two broad categories – those related to the organisation and structuring of discourse, and those related to interactivity.

Metadiscourse in seminar discussion in particular has been shown to serve textual and interpersonal functions (Basturkmen 1995). Within the textual group, she finds three main functions, namely, items that signal topic, activity and type of information. Among topic-signalling items, she distinguishes two turn-initial devices: back-referencing (you talked earlier about) and titling (one other thing you hear is X). Discourse activity markers, on the other hand, can be prefaces (can I just come back in with another; but the point I’m making is) with question and point and the verb ask frequently appearing together. The last group is information-type indicators like advance labelling and elicitations (I was going to ask you about the similarities and differences). Within the interpersonal category, she mentions politeness markers (I’m sorry to interrupt you but), hedging (almost, sort of, strictly speaking, kinda) and attitude markers indicating detachment, commitment (I think, I mean) or validity.

Reformulation is very important to convey recipiency (i.e. resources used to convey ‘I’m following you’ without actually saying so) in this competing and collaborative site. Waring
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(2002b) probes how native and non-native speakers signal they are following by making minor and non-disruptive contributions that do not assess what has been previously said. Her findings essentially reveal how knowledge is constructed collaboratively in seminar discussions, and hint at ways conflict is shunned in favour of collaborativeness. Three main types of recipiency are outlined: (a) reformulating; (b) extending; and (c) jargonising.

When seminar participants reformulate (e.g. so what you’re saying is), they are not simply checking information; rather, they use it to resolve disagreement between two parties. An unaddressed third-party recipient singles out opposed disagreement to unlock it and restore a sense of collaboration. When participants extend (e.g. you know what this means; in other words), they maintain the continuity of the prior speaker’s statements and constructively develop the idea. Extending preserves the continuity of the person whose talk is being extended, and is commonly understood as an affiliative move. Finally, participants sometimes reformulate part of prior talk in a more technical way: they jargonise. Jargonising implies helping another speaker to verbalise a complex idea and showing in-group affiliation; it invokes the shared context that defines the group, and in fact finishes what another speaker might have intended in more concise and technical terms. These verbal forms point to the presence of collaborativeness and conflict resolution in the seminar, a context where clarity, synthesis and rigour are goals to be attained without sacrificing or damaging relationship among the participants.

How non-comprehension is expressed is another instance of the cooperative mode in seminar conflict handling. Whereas silence may be the preferred option chosen by participants when they do not understand, Waring (2002a) identifies three main strategies used by NS and NNS participants to cope with non-comprehension in seminars. The first strategy consists of delaying saying they do not understand, the second consists of giving an account of attempted understanding, trying to make it somewhat acceptable and the third is appealing for group assistance. Below are examples from the first two strategies:

a) delaying saying they do not understand

A:::nd (0.6) what Hudson (.) is (.) suggesting (.) is that the ceiling isn’t
a::: (0.2) just a linguistic ceiling, it’s a::: hhh linguistic a:::nd psycho (.) linguistic? I
think he said? (0.2) ceiling?

(2002a, p. 1716)

b) giving an account of attempted understanding

Ellen: I actually have a question of that whol:e (.) short circuit?
Kelly: Yeah.
Ellen: Um (3.0) Does it no mean what I think it means? It’s like __.

(2002a, p. 1719)

Waring suggests that expressing non-comprehension in a graduate seminar is dispreferred. Students do not only explicitly admit non-comprehension, they delay its admission by means of multiple micropauses, and hedge it (e.g. A:nd (1.4); I don’t know; maybe it means). In other words, students attending seminars avoid acknowledging they do not understand, and they strive to project an identity of intellectual competence, treating their non-comprehension as a by-product of their novice status. They sometimes appeal to the group offering a candidate understanding in the expression of non-comprehension, and in this way strike the balance between their individual display and compliance with
the collaborative nature of discussion. By treating non-comprehension as their fault while at the same time asserting intellectual competence through the display of candidate understandings, Waring (2002a) contends, students acknowledge their novice status without giving up a claim to their intellectual expertise.

It’s not only discursive practices when speakers reformulate or express non-comprehension that give us information about seminar participant intentions. Seminars have a dual nature in that ‘speakers become hearers as hearers become speakers’ (Viechnicki 1997, p. 105), and for this reason physical cues like gaze, pauses or restarts together with metadiscourse are claimed to cover both the goal of understanding and the competing goal of relationship maintenance (Viechnicki 1997). Thus, familiarity with the academic vocabulary and usual academic spoken formulaic chunks on the one hand, and practice on how to interpret and rely on physical cues on the other, should be catered for in an EAP syllabus to increase idiomacity and fluency and to facilitate comprehension of academic seminars.

The structure of interaction in seminars, exchanges, moves and acts that initiate exchanges and components within turns have been studied following Sinclair and Coulthard’s approach (Basturkmen 1995, 2002). As previously discussed, Basturkmen subdivided seminar discussion into three subgenres, some of which are more tutor-led than others. In the UK university seminars that Basturkmen studied, she identified two basic different sequential patterns of discourse organisation and found out that the most frequent pattern of interaction was the simple IRF (initiation, response, feedback) pattern as in this invented example:

Teacher:  What is the capital of France?  –  (Initiation)
Student:  Paris –  (Response)
Teacher:  Right, Paris. –  (Feedback or follow-up)

Speakers used this simple pattern when they were dissatisfied with the answer, and the exchange continued until the acceptable or correct answer was uttered. The second pattern identified by Basturkmen is an extended pattern where the follow-up moves can be recursive; in this way, an inserted sequence F/I(n), treated as re-initiation, can co-occur many times, thus making up the following more complex sequence: I R (F/I R)n F. The F/I moves are located by their position and function and they are usually preceded by conversational metadiscourse markers like well, so, but and though, as can be seen in this incomplete student–student exchange (Basturkmen 1995, p. 120):

Speaker:  Well yes the point I’m firstly a point on what you’ve just said –  (Initiation)
Presenter:  Well it will depend very much on the organisation itself –  (Response)
Speaker:  So you see it but you see it as a process being associated with the top of the organisation –  (F/I)
Presenter:  Yes –  (Response)

This type of exchange can be further lengthened and elaborated in order to enable negotiation of ideas, with the initial idea being refuted or debated, and new ideas appearing in the interaction. The discourse structure is therefore the framework where discussion and ideas are co-built and negotiated. In Basturkmen’s data, the second pattern accounted for over 30 per cent of all exchanges, yet Hyland (2009, p. 110) notes that in the MICASE data, the second pattern, not the first, is the most common one. As Basturkmen’s and Hyland’s data came from British and US universities respectively, the discrepancy may hint that seminars are different in different academic cultures, as pointed out by Mauranen (1994).
The relationship between the kind of sequential pattern and the type of question that motivates a given pattern could also be studied from the linguistic/cognitive complexity perspective; that is, if different types of questions require different levels of cognitive complexity, questions requiring a less demanding answer, linguistically speaking, may be more appropriate for less proficient non-native English speakers. For example, fact-closed what-questions and yes–no questions (e.g. *What group does this belong to?*) require short and simple answers; questions eliciting description and narration require a slightly higher metacognitive effort (*What is a…?*), whereas description or metacognitive questions (*How do producers make us buy…? Why do you think that…?*) demand the highest complexity. In international higher education settings like seminars, subject competence and language competence are sometimes not aligned and one can expect that international students who want to make deep or complex comments may have poor L2 proficiency. It is reasonable to suggest that seminar instructors should bear this in mind when, for example, they address international students with a low English competence. If seminar teachers are made aware of the outcomes of using open or closed questions, they may be able to gear the level of difficulty in questions according to the linguistic proficiency of the students to whom they are appealing, or according to how deeply they want students to explore ideas in the discussion.

**Seminars and international student participation**

A third line of research has explored how linguistic proficiency, cultural or educational differences and identity interact in and affect NNS participation in seminars. Most studies examine the difficulties that East Asian students encounter when they attend seminars in US universities, and seek to understand how NNS learners are socialised in a target language community. East Asian students have been reported to use an excessively formal style (possibly borrowed from scientific writing) in contrast to their NS counterparts, who deliver their oral presentations in an audience-friendly speaking style (Weissberg 1993). By the same token, if student questions in seminars are associated with academic identity needs, more specifically with regard to the originality and intellectual contributions in PhD seminars (Tracy and Naughton 1994), NNSs’ questioning practices also differ and merit further study.

Among the most extensively explored issues, we find linguistic difficulties. NNS participation in seminars has been quantitatively studied in relation to students’ scores in the test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) and to their self-perceptions of discussion participation. In order to better understand East Asian students’ perception of and difficulties in listening and academic skills at university, Kim (2006) conducted a survey, which partly informed an analysis of their needs. The activities that East Asian students were most concerned about were leading class discussions in the first place; participating in whole-class discussions came second, followed by engaging in small-group discussions. They considered formal oral presentations and listening comprehension to be the most important skills for academic success, and acknowledged that participating in whole-class discussions, practising strong listening skills, raising questions during class and engaging in small-group discussions were the four most frequently required listening-/speaking-related classroom tasks in graduate courses.

For international students, low L2 proficiency is an obstacle that is made manifest even before class, as they have difficulty understanding the required readings. When, during a seminar discussion, they are not able to effectively use connecting words to signal transition from one topic to another or to successfully convey the illocutionary meaning of an utterance, discussion is negatively affected because American NS students cannot grasp the intention.
and purpose of international students’ comments (Coward & Miller 2010). On the whole, East Asian students’ lack of willingness to participate renders them more silent and passive because they feel they learn better by listening reflectively, and this seems to privilege US students (Ma 2008; Morita 2004).

However, linguistic problems may have been overestimated as the main reasons for lack of participation. It has been found that East Asian students’ learning developed through oral discussion and through reading and writing changes according to the task involved, and depending on the type of discussion, small group or whole class (Ma 2008); and second, that the scant participation of NNSs is due not only to linguistic problems but also to cultural, personal and disciplinary discourse problems. For example, the major categories that influence Korean students’ oral participation in US graduate seminars are English language ability, sociocultural differences (like cultural beliefs, gender and age), individual differences (content knowledge, personality and anxiety) and classroom environment (their class members’ attitude toward their comments or questions as well as discussion formats) (Lee 2009). Seminar instructors could help international students open up by creating different types of discussion (small group, whole-class discussion and online), by giving pre-discussion reviews, post-discussion summaries and promoting cross-cultural understanding between US and culturally diverse students.

The question of identity and culture is repeatedly referred to in the literature as a factor affecting participation. Drawing on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concepts of community of practice and legitimate peripheral participation, Samimy et al. (2011) analysed how learning and identity intertwine, and proposed the kinds of practices that influenced three NNES graduate students’ negotiations of identities as NNESs. In order to empower NNES graduate students and push them from peripheral to full participation in a TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) programme, three actions were taken in the seminar. First, the students were assigned a mentor who was a successful Japanese faculty member, a model of full participation who was a trusted counsellor for them. Second, students created a community group that allowed them to share their concerns, obtain academic support and resist marginalisation in a safe space. The third intervention refers to providing exposure to alternative discourses; these discourses consisted in providing and discussing readings on the native-speaker superiority fallacy and on the World Englishes paradigm, which helped students see themselves as speakers of a given type of World English, rather than poor speakers. In other words, the NNES students discovered that their low self-image of NNES was based on erroneous stereotypes, and that the seminar had enabled them to associate themselves with more positive and empowering identities as ELT (English language training) professionals.

Research also suggests that culture and NNS identity may have been overstated. Interestingly, it is the novice–expert identity of native and non-native students that also seems to play a role in participation (Vickers 2010). When the interactional achievement of expert–novice in NS–NNS face-to-face interaction is analysed, together with the processes that contribute to expert–novice differentiation during team meetings, it is demonstrated that NSs take on an expert identity whereas NNSs take on a novice identity. It is through the process of ratification, failure to ratify, and rejection of contributions that the expert–novice differentiation and allocation take place. The NS’s ability to gain expert status is linked to prior experience; that is, to the NS’s previous access to opportunities to participate in similar discussion formats. These findings point to the fact that novice linguistically-based identity inhibits the achievement of an expert non-linguistically-based identity, and that, therefore, EAP instruction has to provide appropriate access and practice. In a similar vein, Coward
and Miller (2010) examined how Asian and US students in US universities participated in a seminar discussion, paying attention not only to linguistic proficiency but also to their goal orientation (knowing it is good to talk and participate, for example), and to their sense of self in the classroom. They contend that cultural background alone cannot account for low or high participation rates because, among other things, even students from the same country have been exposed to different classroom formats, and are equipped with different (mis)conceptions about the importance of classroom discussion. Contrary to previous research, their data suggest that the level of participation of these international students is not linked to their cultural background understanding that learning cannot take place in discussions outside the traditional classroom format. The students in their study did feel they were learning in discussion and welcomed the different learning format because they acknowledged they were in a different cultural setting, even those who had had no previous discussion experiences. In their study, it was the NNSs’ low linguistic proficiency that constrained them, as it was clear they had problems in all areas. In addition, they were reluctant to ask questions because they feared questions would only reveal their ignorance. Their findings point to the importance of two other factors. One is the role of instructors and other international classmates in engaging these Asian students. If instructors and classmates are sensitive to Asian students’ difficulties and act as mediators, these students feel more secure and participate. The second points to the importance of providing international students with the appropriate resources and opportunities that help them develop not only their academic language skills, but also their practical communicative ability in English.

The pedagogical implications for EAP teacher education and graduate study programmes are clear. Interventions should be created to improve the communicative competence in general and promote the oral classroom participation of international students. The role of the instructor is key to native and non-native student socialisation and full participation, as already mentioned, and in addition NNS students should be provided with opportunities so they can practise their speaking, listening and discussion skills during their stay at university. To conclude, research on instructional genres reflects the tension between acknowledging cultural differences and facilitating access to discursive conventions (Hyland 2006). The linguistic and cultural diversity of today’s graduate, postgraduate and doctoral classrooms pose many challenges for instructors and students, but if all students manage to participate fully in discussion-based classrooms, intercultural communication will benefit all students – national and international.

**Expert seminars**

As mentioned above, in peer expert seminars, academics have been invited to deliver a talk to a small expert audience made up of professors, lecturers and a few PhD students about a topic they are researching. Hence, expert seminars can be regarded as a research genre (Swales 2004). These seminars are self-contained events that last no longer than two hours and which share similarities with the conference presentation in terms of the main structural organisation: the host academic introduces the guest speaker, the speaker proceeds with his/her presentation and finally some questions may follow. Seminars, however, usually have small audiences and tend to be more informal than conference presentations in that they are not scheduled nor framed within such a formal event as a conference. Time pressure is not a matter of concern and interruptions in the form of questions or constructive commentaries may occur in the middle of the talk. Typically, the guest speaker’s visit to an outside or foreign university has been previously arranged within a mobility programme. The length
of the stay may range from two days to months, and he/she usually comes with a hidden agenda – for example, networking or starting a joint research venture. More often than not, research projects are born or developed as a result of a seminar. Lastly, the seminar speaker may talk about his/her on-going research, explain the research work he/she has been performing during his/her stay at a host university at the end of this stay, or simply inform about the latest development in the research work that he/she has completed with his/her home university team.

The rhetorical structure of seminars and the metadiscourse used in them seems to show the nature of this genre (Aguilar 2004, 2008) and merits further research. These seminars are a hybrid genre, sharing features with other spoken genres in Dubois’ continuum (1987), like plenary lectures, conference presentations (Ventola et al. 2002), slide talks or local colloquia; with other academic genres like lectures, in particular of guest lectures (Crawford-Camiciottoli 2004); and with written research articles.

Seminar speakers possibly rely on their previous experience in lecturing and in conference participation when a seminar is arranged for them to speak. Therefore, some porosity, or hybridisation, is likely to exist, and just as some similarities with the conference presentation and the lecture are expected to emerge, so the specific peculiarities of the event are to result in structural and linguistic differences. For example, when the metadiscourse of engineering lectures and engineering seminars was compared (Aguilar 2008), it was found out that academics utter many more hedges and many more textual glosses used to rephrase, expand, specify, etc. when they speak to experts in a seminar than when they lecture to students.

Gaining more fine-tuned knowledge about academic spoken genres may be necessary to help academics and EAP practitioners because in the process of acquiring a good command of academic genres, they may also acquire disciplinary and academic socialisation and, ultimately, practise a core competence that instils confidence and raises cross-genre awareness (Yayli 2011). Likewise, when Hyon and Cheng (2004) identified occluded written genres for university lecturers and discussed the pros and cons of explicit teaching through EAP curricula and faculty seminars, they suggested further research through triangulation methods or through textual analyses that could uncover similarities among genres with related purposes and even among functionally-related texts (in other professions). It is guessed that some connection may exist between academic seminars and business meetings, as both genres are sites of discussion, conflict and collaborativeness. Do students who have been taught to perform well in academic seminars make good participants at a business professional meeting? That knowledge could provide insight into if and how the mode of communication and the academic or professional orientation (for example, research article vs. seminar, or business meeting vs. seminar) affect the organisational and linguistic features of the genres, and raise cross-genre awareness.

Conclusion

This chapter can be concluded by highlighting that seminars, whether student or expert, remain an under-researched genre. Students are usually challenged by seminars, and in particular by seminar discussions, because their identity as individuals, as novice or expert students, as dialogic or dominant classmates and as native or non-native speakers will come into play at the same time as they learn to collaboratively co-construct knowledge, exchanging and negotiating their ideas. This collaborative construction of knowledge will take place in their native or in a foreign language with fellow students who may come with a different educational background, and under the supervision of a teacher who will assess
their participation. At the same time, academics and researchers may also need to deliver a talk in a seminar and show professional mastery in gauging the degree of conversational features, hedging or humour that is most appropriate in the genre known as the expert seminar. Another issue is whether and how both seminars are going to change over time as they become more and more virtualised within a higher education landscape that seems to increasingly offer not only online seminars, but also large, online lectures.

Further reading

Basturkmen (1999); Weissberg (1993)

Related chapters

20 Multimodal approaches to English for academic purposes
30 The academic poster genre
32 Interpersonal meaning and audience engagement in academic presentations

References

Seminars