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Orality in English for Specific Purposes

Communication in both professional and personal contexts is increasingly multimodal, and spoken language is crucial to the way many of us access and share information. In this joint paper, the four co-presenters draw on different fields of research to show the relevance and necessity of research on the question of orality in the field of English for specific purposes.

The pandemic has greatly increased our reliance on digital communication, with video conferencing replacing physical exchanges for many (Okabe-Miyamoto et al., 2021). This provides us with a rich source of multimodal data exemplifying the diversity of oral English used in numerous professional language communities. And yet the language of discourse communities, or rhetorical discourse communities, is often defined largely by its lexis (Swales, 2016) and syntax, with analysis of the language of professional communities often eschewing orality. A bibliometric search of two international, peer-reviewed, anglophone and francophone journals in the field reveals the extent to which written language has been the predominant focus of research. Key words were queried over both publications, for example native, oral, speaking, speech, word stress, in the period 1993-2021. Results confirm that there is tremendous scope for contributions on orality in LSP.

Recent work that adopts an ethnographic, or holistic, perspective to the study of specialised languages and communities (Wozniak, 2019) goes some way to redressing this balance in that it foregrounds multimodality. Drawing upon the long history of ethnographic linguistic research (Gumperz & Hymes, 1986[1972]; Duranti, 1997), we explore how such an approach, when combined with a focus on orality, might help elucidate questions that sit at the heart of ESP. For instance, in a world where cross-cultural exchanges are facilitated by digital technology, in addition to physical movement of people, phonetic features and the way they help to define ingroup membership are a rich source for analysis in many contexts. This is the case for professional communities, as shown by the sizable body of research into aviation (Moder, 2014; Trippe & Baese-Berk, 2019), where effective communication in oral exchanges in English can be a life-or-death matter. However, we argue that aviation is an exception in this respect and suggest that spoken language is often tackled in the same way as written language, neglecting what Pickering and Byrd term the “acoustical realizations” of authentic spoken discourse (2008, 115), key to expressing group membership.

Shifting focus to authentic spoken discourse also raises questions regarding the specific process of listening to specialized oral discourse as produced in interaction. For example, if the hypothesis according to which specialized oral discourse belongs to biologically secondary knowledge is correct (Sweller, 2008), then a fundamental research question is whether specific cognitive processes are involved in the reception of specialized discourse.

In this collaborative effort, we argue that researching orality as a key aspect of a multimodal perspective is likely to renew some of the fundamental research questions in both applied linguistics and ESP, and call for further work to identify and characterize specialized oral discourses.

Key words: Corpus; ethnographic; intelligibility; interaction; listening; oral; phonetic.

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