

Use of multimodal spatial deictics in the online classroom. An ESP teaching resource ?

Abstract

This paper compares the use of spatial deixis in face-to-face (F2F) and online lecture discourse in an EMI context. Spatial deixis is of critical importance in lecture discourse. It allows the lecturer to anchor students in the physical space of the classroom (Friginal et al. 2017) and “to establish a joint focus of attention on a referent” (Peeters et al. 2014: 64) so as to ensure students’ comprehension and participation (Hyland 2005). Furthermore, when co-occurring with gestures, deictics tend to facilitate comprehension even further, as they are clearer, culture-general and require less processing (Bamford 2004). In English-Medium Instruction (EMI) settings, issues of students’ comprehension and interaction were already a concern for EMI lecturers (Lasagabaster & Doiz 2021) before the pandemic. But the abrupt shift to the online has further challenged them, with particular complaints being a lack of interaction and direct feedback (Cicillini & Giacosa, 2020). However, online teaching in the EMI context is still an “unexplored academic instructional digital genre” (Querol-Julián 2021: 297). Similarly, there is little research of an empirical kind into how the change in spatiotemporal coordinates of the classroom speech event affects lecturer discourse in online teaching. To address this gap, this exploratory study aims to compare, from a multimodal pragmatics perspective (O’Halloran et al. 2014) EMI lecturer discourse across different learning settings – F2F and Online Distance Learning (ODL). The main analytical focus is on variations in the use of spatial deixis (Levinson 1983, Fillmore 1997) as a consequence of the reconceptualization of space following the shift to online teaching. The analysis was conducted on a small corpus of six EMI Engineering lectures in both F2F and ODL modes. Spatial deictics were first identified on a lexical level. Then, patterns of lexical deictics co-occurring with non-verbal modes – i.e. gestures and “actional resources” (O’Halloran et al. 2014: 251) related to the use of technological tools, including mouse movements – were identified and transcribed following a multimodal pragmatics approach, which combines Halliday’s social semiotic theory (1978) with pragmatics to investigate how participants deploy multiple semiotic resources in a Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) context to accomplish specific communicative functions. Collected data were analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Findings indicate that, in line with Bamford (2004), the collocational pattern

here + gesture frequently occurred in F2F. However, in ODL, where lecturers' hand gestures are not framed by the webcam, the collocational pattern *this* + mouse movement occurred much more frequently than the gestural *here* in F2F. The co-occurrence of verbal, visual, and actional spatial deictics in online lecturer discourse tends to link it closer to the immediate physical context than in F2F, such that students can rely on it for interpretation to a greater extent than in F2F. Findings have relevance for the design of computer-assisted teaching methods as a means to support EMI lecturers' multimodal competence (Morell 2018), and contribute to the limited literature on spatial deixis in the EMI classroom discourse.

Keywords: English-Medium Instruction (EMI), Online Distance Learning (ODL), F2F, Classroom discourse, Multimodality, Spatial Deixis.

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