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A study of L2 EAP learners' performance in a simulated international conference: Three markers of interpersonal relationship in discussion sessions

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Despite a growing interest in research on the spoken EAP genre of conference presentations, the Question and Answer session, which is now routinely embedded in such presentations, is under-researched. Particularly lacking is research on how L2 learners handle the shifting speaker-discussant relationship during discussion sessions. To explore this uncharted area, the study reported in this paper examined a group of eighteen L2 EAP learners in a simulated international conference with a focus on three interpersonal relationship markers, namely, how they opened the floor for discussion, what expressions they used for that occasion and the use of *I think*. Some pedagogical implications for EAP instruction are revealed.

Keywords: Speaking English for Academic Purposes; discussion sessions; conference presentations; genre; Chinese university students

Introduction

Conferences are an important channel for the dissemination of research findings. The presentation itself is generally an academic monologue (Thompson, 1997), but the discussion session, which now routinely follows, requires presenters to be alert to the constant shifting of the position between the audience and themselves and necessitates immediate improvisation of appropriate responses. If presenters fail to survive the discussion session, their professional reputation will be damaged (Partington, 2006). Experienced presenters know how to muster their professional knowledge, confidence, charisma, karma or whatever is needed under these circumstances, to get their messages across and win the verbal tug-of-war. In contrast, novice presenters may regard the Question and Answer (Q&A) session as a huge hurdle because it usually features unpredictable questions. At an international conference with participants from diverse cultural backgrounds and with varying professional profiles, novice speakers, especially non-native speakers (NNS) of English, may be as equally concerned about correctly following the norms of the academic community as they are about the challenge of formulating responses on the spot. To inform novice speakers and teachers of L2 EAP students, this paper investigates how expert presenters deal with their relationship with the audience during discussion sessions in which English, as "the lingua franca of academic conferences" (Shalom, 2002, p. 51), is the medium of communication.

Expert strategies

Several studies have been conducted to examine the strategies expert presenters implement to manage their interpersonal relationships with the audience. Webber

(2002), drawing on 130 Q&A exchanges from a corpus of international medical conferences, identified four interactional features, namely, exchange structure, discourse markers, politeness devices and interpersonal distance. Webber found that these exchanges between presenters and their audiences shared some features of a dialogue but with due attention to the appropriateness of how the questions were asked and answered within the context of professionals or colleagues in which the dialogue took place. Using these linguistic and rhetorical devices, Webber (2002) found that medical academics managed to maintain adequate levels of politeness and solidarity with their colleagues while holding the floor in times of argument or conflict. Wulff, Swales, and Keller (2009) also discussed how participants at an applied linguistic conference exhibited their competence in dealing with interpersonal relationships during the Q&A sessions. For instance, these applied linguists were found to employ such hedging devices as *I think* more frequently in their discussion sessions than in their paper presentations. Use of *I think* usually conveys politeness, uncertainty or mitigates conflict (see, for example, Aijmer, 2001; Kärkkäinen, 2003). In the linguists' conference it was probably used as a hedging device for the sake of politeness. Another hedging device they used was "sort of". This is considered as vague language conveying a sense of modesty (Webber, 2002). Wulff and her colleagues (2009) also found in their study that those who were appointed at the linguistics conference as chairpersons implemented their own strategies to preside over forums for their colleagues. Firstly, they pronounced how much time was available for questions and then wrapped up the discussion when time was up. Secondly, their own involvement in the discussion was very limited. Thirdly, the chairpersons allowed the speakers to designate their own questioners. Finally, most of the chairpersons seemed to prefer using the term *questions*, despite the predominance of the term *comments* from the floor. Wulff et al. (2009) described this phenomenon as "phraseological spanning" (p. 84). It may also be seen as a marker of group identity, or as Konzett (2012, p. 8) put it, "doing being a member of the research community". In expert-expert interactions, presenters co-construct their self- and other- identities.

Non-expert presenters

Studies of expert presenters clearly inform EAP pedagogy but studies of how novice L2 learners perform in academic meetings may also have some pedagogical potential. Given that very few L2 learners, especially undergraduates, have opportunities to present at a formal English-mediated conference and to handle the ensuing Q&A sessions, it makes sense to look at studies of L2 learners' discussion skills in classroom settings. One of the earliest studies of this kind is Johns and Johns (1977) who looked into "the kinds of difficulty experienced in seminars and the degree of difficulty experienced" (p. 99) by L2 postgraduates in their seminar participation. To overcome these difficulties, they suggest that L2 students may need to be taught how a move in discourse is realized through linguistic and paralinguistic markers. Kim (2006) conducted a survey among non-science, non-engineering international graduate students concerning their listening/speaking skills needs. Student participants listed three needs: participation in class-wide discussion, participation in small-group discussion and asking questions during class. All are related to discussion skills. Yang (2010) investigated the challenges of academic presentations in disciplinary courses for five Chinese students from a Canadian university and arrived at a similar conclusion that discussion is one of the biggest challenges for NNS undergraduate students in the English-speaking university. Guo and Lin (2016) researched group discussions in a

TESOL graduate course in Taiwan and pointed out the importance of teaching L2 learners some discipline-specific norms in classroom interaction. As demonstrated by the above studies, L2 learners clearly encounter difficulties in group discussions. With the rising number of NNS students learning in English-mediated programmes in English-speaking universities, the need to improve their discussion skills is increasingly pressing (Kobayashi, 2006, 2016; Lee, 2009).

Conference papers versus seminar discussions

Seminars (as categorized by Furneaux, Robinson, & Tonkyn, 1991) differ significantly from conference papers so the discussion skills applied in seminar discussions where learners talk with each other as non-professionals and for the purpose of learning in classroom settings are different from the skills that professionals implement in expert-to-expert exchanges of information in conference Q&A sessions. English proficiency apparently helps speakers in both cases but the way to ask questions and answer questions in relation to different identities of interlocutors and the size of the audience of the conversation calls for different strategies, especially in dealing with interpersonal relationships. Therefore, teaching how to interact in conference Q&A sessions can best be facilitated by a study of such sessions.

The research gap

From the research literature discussed above it is clear that to-date research mostly accentuates interests in how experienced conference attenders deal with the speaker-audience relationship during Q&A sessions. Few studies have examined how L2 EAP learners cope with these shifting relationships. More research is needed in this area because as Kim (2006) suggests, EAP teachers need to provide learners with simulations of academic settings to enable them to acculturate to the target academic community. With this in mind, the current study was hence designed to answer the following questions:

1. What speaker-discussant relationship markers were used by Chinese EAP learners in the simulated conference discussion sessions?
2. How did these learners negotiate their speaker-discussant relationship in their presentations and the subsequent Q&A sessions using these markers?

Research design

Research context

The current study drew on a credit-bearing speaking-oriented EAP course at a university in mainland China. As part of the course assessment, students presented at a simulated international conference (hereafter SIC) at the end of the academic term to fulfil the curriculum requirement. There are similarities between an SIC and an average student classroom presentation, such as the general requirement for a presentation and its evaluation criteria. Dissimilarities, however, indicate that SICs merit separate study. Unlike a one-off classroom presentation, an SIC is a semester-long, process-oriented, student-centred programme which evaluates a whole set of skills for conference presentations or as Swales put it, "a chronological chain of genres" (Swales, 2004, p. 197). The set of skills includes pre-conference email communication, individual paper presentation, dealing with Q&A, chairing, preparing a conference opening/closing speech, post-conference communication and writing for publication. Participants learn

these skills during the course. Attending the simulated conference at the end of the course is their opportunity to show whether they have acquired a good command of this set of comprehensive conference presentation skills.

Participant profile

The study examined eighteen participants who took the EAP course in Spring 2016. They were male and female undergraduate from a wide spectrum of disciplines, including Art and Humanities (AH), Physical Science (PS), Life and Medical Science (LMS) and Social Science (SS) (see Table 1). The students were from Years 1, 2 and 4 of their studies.

Table 1. Participants' profile (*N*=18)

		Year 1	Year 2	Year 4	Total
Arts & Humanities	number	1	2	0	3
	percentage	5.6%	11.1%	0.0%	16.7%
Life & Medical Science	number	1	4	0	5
	percentage	5.6%	22.2%	0.0%	27.8%
Physical Science	number	1	1	2	4
	percentage	5.6%	5.6%	11.1%	22.2%
Social Science	number	2	2	2	6
	percentage	11.1%	11.1%	11.1%	33.3%
Totals	number	5	9	4	18
	percentage	27.8%	50.0%	22.2%	100.0%

To best guarantee the authenticity of the simulation, the SICs routinely borrow their thematic topics from the website of Universitas 21, an organisation providing various university student research opportunities. Two themes were selected for SIC Spring 2016, one for each day of the conference. They were *A Global Perspective on Ageing Societies* (day 1) and *Traditional Chinese Medicine and Its Culture* (day 2). Participants self-selected the theme they would present on. The balance between topics was fairly even (see Table 2).

Table 2. Participants' topic selection in relation to student grade (*N*=18).

Topic		Year 1	Year 2	Year 4	Total
A Global Perspective on Ageing Societies	number	4	2	2	8
	percentage	22.2%	11.1%	11.1%	44.4%
Traditional Chinese Medicine and Its Culture	number	1	7	2	10
	percentage	5.6%	38.9%	11.1%	55.6%
Totals	number	5	9	4	18
	percentage	27.8%	50.0%	22.2%	100.0%

There may have been some disciplinary influence in the choice of themes. Of the students who chose *Traditional Chinese Medicine and Its Culture*, half were from Life and Medical Science. The topic *A Global Perspective of Ageing Societies* was mainly selected by Art and Humanities, Physical Science and Social Science students. No Life and Medical Science students selected it. However, due to the small sample size, it is difficult to be sure whether disciplinary background affected the choice.

Expert participation

In a classroom student presentation, the audience is mainly made up of the course instructor and students. In SIC, however, a professional in the relevant area is also invited to join the audience and ask questions pertaining to the students' presentations. Keith was invited to the Day One conference dealing with ageing issues. He came from Germany and spoke English very fluently. His academic background is related to globalization, politics and economy. Germany is a country which has long been inflicted by the problem of ageing, therefore during the discussion Keith provided an insider perspective on tackling the worsening problem of aging. Peter, the Day 2 guest, was a native speaker from the UK and his professional profile was related to international politics and intercultural studies. He had been teaching in China for several years and at the time of attending the SIC, he was teaching a course which included traditional Chinese medicine culture on its agenda.

Research methods and data collection

This paper focuses on the Q&A sessions embedded in students' presentations during the SIC of Spring 2016. Students' presentations as well as their interactions with the audience were videotaped and then transcribed as faithfully as possible except for very few indecipherable words (which are represented in the tapescripts as …). Their discussions formed Dataset I which amounted to approximately 10,000 words representing 87 minutes of discussion. The average length of discussion for each presenter was 4.8 minutes. Their presentation scripts formed Dataset II which amounted to approximately 28,700 words, representing 4.39 hours of paper presentations. Permission was granted by students for the use in this study of their presentations and discussions on condition that pseudonyms are used to protect their real identity. Pseudonyms are also used to refer to the invited discussants.

Coding scheme

Dataset I and Dataset II texts were imported into MAXQDA Analytics Pro (VERBI Software, 2016) for data analyses. The function of *autocoding with dictionary* provided by the software was used to code the texts automatically. Firstly, frequency of words composed of more than three letters was calculated. Words such as *a, an* or *the* were thus ignored. Words that both had a bearing on interpersonal relationships and occurred more than 30 times were categorized as interpersonal relationship markers. Three terms fitted into this category, namely, *thank*, *question* and *think*. These terms established a dictionary which was then used to auto-code the previously imported Dataset I and Dataset II texts. Segments in which *thank* frequently occurred were usually utterances by student speakers who finished their paper presentations and invited questions afterwards. Given that the current study focused on how student speakers sent out signals for questions, instances of *thank* used by student discussants and guest discussants were manually decoded. For the same reason, *question* used by student

discussants and guest discussants were excluded as well. The coded segments with *think* were manually checked. Segments with *I think* were kept and further sub-coded into usage by student speakers, by guest discussants, by student discussants and in presentations. Three themes or markers of interpersonal relationships emerged in the process of coding. They were: signal of invitation for questions, expressions of invitation for questions and use of *I think* by student presenters.

Results and discussions
Three markers were indicative of how student presenters negotiated with their discussants in the Q&A sessions of the SIC.

Marker 1: Signal of invitation for questions
The first marker of presenters' negotiation of their position in relation to that of discussants was a signal of invitation for questions. The invitation varied significantly in length from "Any questions?" to a 24-word statement (see Example 1) with an average length of 12 words.

> Example 1
> Now any questions? Is there any point that I didn't make clearly? Please point it out and I will,
> I will add an explanation.

Further examination into these signals of invitation shows that not every signal fits in the generic structure proposed by Ventola, Shalom, and Thompson (2002, p. 29). The presenters' signal of invitation for questions is composed of up to three elements (see the example in Figure 1). The first element is the indicator of the end of the paper presentation. The second element is an acknowledgement of the audience. The third element opens the discussion. Table 3 shows the frequency with which these elements occurred across all presenters. As can be seen, the first element was far less common than the second and third elements. There was no mention of the first element in the work of Ventola et al. (2002).

Indicating the end of the paper presentation	· *This is the end of my presentation.*
Thanking the audience	· *Thank you very much for your attendance.*
Opening the floor for discussion	· *You are welcome to ask me questions now.*

Figure 1. An instance of a signal of invitation to questions

Perhaps thanking the audience, sometimes coupled with a slide containing a reference list, may serve sufficiently as the signal of the end of the paper presentation without a

need to specifically announce the end of the presentation. The second element was used by thirteen out of eighteen students and the third element was used by all eighteen students. This indicates that student presenters, despite their inexperience, were clearly aware of some basic elements of the generic structure of conference paper presentation, that is, they needed to acknowledge audience's presence before they dealt with their questions.

Table 3. Frequencies of three elements in a signal of invitation for questions (N=18).

	Indicating the end of paper presentations	Thanking the audience	Opening the floor by speaker
Number of student presenters	2	13	16
Percentage of student presenters	11%	72%	89%

Noteworthy was the use of the third element, the discussion-opening. Only two student presenters, paused after acknowledging the audiences' attention to allow the chairperson to take the floor and perform the discussion-opening move. A large majority of speakers proceeded to a Q&A session immediately after finishing their presentation. These instances in which the chairpersons' discussion-opening move was preempted by the student presenters might be due to inexperience but could also be due to time constraints. Nevertheless, L2 presenters need to be informed that there are certain unwritten rules in the academic community and letting the chairperson open the discussion and choose questioners for them is one of these unwritten rules. It should be noted that expert speakers may have more flexibility in this regard as was the case in the linguistics conference mentioned above.

Marker 2: Expressions of invitation for questions
This study also looked at how student presenters employ linguistic devices to invite discussants. A comparative study of linguistic realizations used by learners and by experts may raise the novice academic's awareness and provide some insights for EAP teaching. More than 80% of the student presenters at SIC used only the term *question* or *Q&A* (see Table 4). There was only one instance of *suggestion*. A similar pattern of a strong preference for *question* over other expressions such as *comment* or *discussion* can be seen in a study of expert presenters (Wulff et al., 2009). An analysis of 23 chairpersons' invitations to questions listed in the appendix of Wulff et al. (2009) indicated seventeen instances of using *questions* and four of *questions or comments* and two omissions. Their study also pointed out that chairpersons inclined to use formulaic expressions despite the fact that they were less commonly used from the floor. They described this as "phraseological spanning" (Wulff et al., 2009, p. 84).

Table 4. Expressions in a signal of invitation for questions in SIC as compared to linguistics conference

	question or *Q&A* or both	other expressions such as *suggestion* or *comment*	omissions
L2 Student presenters at SIC (N=18)	15 (83%)	1 (6%)	2 (11%)
Experts at linguistics Conference (N=23)	17 (74%)	4 (17%)	2 (9%)

Given that the chairpersons at the linguistics conference studied by Wulff et al. (2009) mitigated their temporary authority by restricting their roles to mostly looking after the discussion sessions, a study of their discussion-opening utterances may teach L2 learners how to deal appropriately with the shifting relationship in the discussion through the use of linguistic devices. Learners may also need to be aware that in discussion sessions, the audience might contribute comments from the floor, as well as make suggestions and ask questions. Knowing that they may not necessarily be confined to the use of *question* is crucial to the students' participation in the future. By welcoming questions, they may act as experts who are ready to provide answers. If they shift to asking for comments or suggestions, they may identify themselves as learners, novice researchers or new-comers into the academic community who are open to advice from more seasoned experts.

Marker 3: Use of I think by student presenters

The third marker which illustrates the level of SIC presenters' competence in dealing with the presenter-discussant relationship is the use of *I think* which is "the most common epistemic marker in American English speech" (Kärkkäinen, 2003, p. 105). Studies of *I think* (e.g., Aijmer, 2001; Kärkkäinen, 2003) indicate, this expression can be used for face saving as well as organizing speech. The current study looked at how L2 presenters use *I think* to mitigate their argument in discussions with experts (the guest at the SIC) and with their peers. According to Wulff et al. (2009), expert presenters at the linguistics conference used *I think* as a hedging device more frequently in discussion sessions (107 occurrences) than in their presentations (92 occurrences). In that study there was no need to differentiate between presenters and discussants since all the participants, including both presenters and discussants, were expert linguists. In the current study, however, the use of *I think* was examined in terms of different users, students or guests. There was a total of 89 instantiations of *I think* in the Q&A dataset. Seventy-seven of the instances were from student presenters' responses, five from peer discussants and four from the guest discussant on Day 1 of the conference and three from the guest discussant on Day 2. The L2 learners, including both student presenters and their peer discussants, generally used *I think* (82 instantiations) more than the guest questioners (7 instantiations). In contrast, the student presenters only used *I think* seven times in their individual paper presentations. Following the analysis of Wulff et al. (2009), norming the frequencies of use against the total number of transcribed SIC presentations and discussion sessions showed more uses of *I think* among student presenters and their peers than guests (82 to 7) and more in discussion than in presentation (82 to 7), as can be seen in Table 5. A similar pattern of preference of *I think* in discussion can be found in the expert discourse from Wulff et al. (2009).

However, this does not necessarily imply that Chinese L2 EAP speakers were underusing *I think* in their presentations as compared with their expert counterparts and overusing *I think* in their discussions as compared with their guess discussants. Such an inference needs further investigation, preferably with a larger data set. On the other hand, it is important to note that overuse or underuse of certain discourse markers as compared with native-speakers connotates "somewhat negative tones" (Zhang & Sabet, 2016, p. 347).

Table 5. Frequencies of *I think* in SIC presentations and discussions as compared with linguistics conference

	Number of uses in presentation (% of total words)	Number of uses in discussion (% of total words)
SIC student presenters and their peer discussants	7 (0.024%)	82 (0.286%)
SIC guest discussants	N/A	7 (0.024%)
Expert presenters and discussants at the linguistics conference	92 (0.01%)	107 (0.46%)

One of the reasons for using *I think* might be due to presenters' limited understanding of the topic they had researched. Using *I think* may have been a way of expressing their uncertainty about the claims they made in their presentation. If their claims were not well grounded, they may have used *I think* to avoid losing face, thus it is a form of hedging. The use of *I think* may also have been an attempt by speakers to save the discussants' face. This is because in the SIC, the audience, including both the guests and the peer students, were required to assess the performance of the student presenters. The use of *I think* avoided direct confrontation with the discussants and therefore saved their face. The third possible reason for using *I think* is for speakers to express their respect to and establish solidarity with their audience. In other words, they perhaps intended to save the face of their audience, which in turn, would save their own face. Finally, for some student presenters, *I think* could also have been a handy catch phrase to *buy* a few seconds in which they could formulate an appropriate answer. For instance (see Example 2), Linda used *I think* quite a few times when responding to a question from Keith (guest discussant on Day 1) about an innovative way of handling the ageing problem in China.

Example 2
Turn 1
Linda: … Any other questions?
Keith: Maybe one very short question, uh. You mentioned that we have to spend more money. Do you see any innovation which can naturally help us save cost, to save expenses for the elderly?

Turn 2
Linda: Sorry. I didn't quite understand.
Keith: If you see any innovation to save cost when it comes to providing services to help the elderly?

Turn 3
Linda: Innovation. Innovation measures?
Keith: In terms of administration, or in terms of technological innovation, social innovation?

Turn 4
Linda: uh You mean, you mean, any other innovations that spends money?
Keith: which can help to save money. For example, now we speak of families which can take care of the elderly. Maybe it's more expensive if they withdraw from their work than put them into the nursing home.

Turn 5
Linda: Because uh *I think*, OK.
Keith: Think in terms of technological innovation, are there any technologies that can actually help cut the cost?

Turn 6
Linda: uh…Sorry. I still don't quite understand what your questions.
Keith: Never mind.

Turn 7
Linda: [To help Linda understand what Keith meant, especially for the purpose of keeping the discussion going, the instructor cut in and said "how to spend less money". Linda continued by repeating] How to spend less money? OK. *I think* this is the newer solution to the ageing problems so it is still in the very early development. So *I think*, and first *I think*, the first period, of the early period, is that the government still needs to pay money to this development. It is still not very general in China now. This mode. Here exists some time we have to go through to see what is going to develop next.
Keith: Just mention one example in Finland which I heard recently, which now they provide lodging for students and reduce cost if they are willing to live with the elderly. So elderly have enough space, the apartment and the housing is very expensive in Helsinki. So they connect these two problems and therefore the young they have to take care of the elderly, say, spend one hour a day, speaking to them, helping them, (…) Both are connected to the problems. Connecting the problems definitely save cost.

Turn 8
Linda: *I think*, this is, this is a very good example for our countries to refer to.

As it turned out, Linda was not stumped by the dictionary meaning of *innovation*. During the tea break after that day's SIC presentation, she said that she knew perfectly well what the word meant. What confused her was what measures could be rated as innovative. Therefore, she kept saying that she did not understand the question or used quite a few instances of *I think* simply to gain a few more seconds to formulate the right answer (see Turn 2-6 in Example 2), a strategy which she had learned during her training as a debater.

Conclusion

Summary of findings
This study has examined how L2 EAP learners at a Chinese mainland university handled the discussion sessions of a simulated international conference. The student

presenters seem to have observed a few written rules of academic presentations like introducing themselves at the beginning of their individual paper presentation and thanking the audience for their attention before inviting questions. Yet few of them followed the unwritten rule of letting the chairperson open the floor for discussion and designate the questioners. Time constraints, or inexperience, could be the main reason for this negligence.

Also noteworthy is the students' preference for inviting *questions* rather than *suggestions*, *comments* or *feedback* when welcoming discussions concerning their presentations. They need to be aware that even if it is a Q&A session, they can still take suggestions or comments rather than only seeking questions.

The third marker of how student presenters negotiate their position in relation to their audience, including both the guest and their peers is the use of *I think*. It is safe to say that *I think* is a handy device for conference goers, expert presenters and non-experts alike. It can be used to protect their own face and that of their audience or to show their uncertainty in their claims, which is particularly true for SIC presenters in the current study. Another function of *I think* may be to use it to gain more time to come up with an appropriate answer. The speakers used more *I think* than guest discussants who were professionals in the topic areas.

Limitations and areas for future exploration
This study focused on undergraduate student speakers but future work should certainly include graduate students and possibly compare the skills of the two groups as a way of detecting improvement in the relevant skills. It is inevitable that in a simulated conference environment the audience will contain fewer experts. Given that the make-up of an audience is generally recognized as an influential factor that impinges on a presenter's preparation, presentation and Q&A session, the simulation is not a fully authentic experience. Nevertheless, these findings will add to understanding of learner discourse in such formal settings.

Implications for EAP pedagogy
The findings of this study can contribute towards developing new ideas to help students learn about how to handle the Q&A session of a presentation and the associated difficulties of the speaker-discussant relationship. This is an important form of advanced preparation for students in China who may become postgraduate students and then need support to fully engage in academic communications, including paper presentations in international conferences. There is a consensus that the dynamism inherent in discussion sessions poses a substantial amount of challenge to experienced conferees and L2 learners alike. The need is pressing, therefore, to make learners fully prepared for it.

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