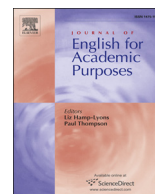


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Exploring rater conceptions of academic stance and engagement during group tutorial discussion assessment

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ABSTRACT

The present study uses concurrent think-aloud verbal protocols alongside post-hoc interviews to explore how six teacher-raters determine a students' ability to explain academic concepts and argue for an academic stance supported by sources during a 25-minute group tertiary academic tutorial oral assessment. We explored how the raters arrived at decisions regarding the quality of students' academic stance and engagement in light of difficulties with rater attention in real-time, L2 language concerns, assessing engagement in a group oral setting, and the use of spoken citation to support speakers' claims. Substantial differences in rater practice, beliefs and interpretation of assessment criteria were all found during the assessment of student performance, confirming a number of difficulties faced by raters assessing the academic ability of multiple participants over lengthy extended, interactional discourse. The findings shed real-time conceptions of (un)successful academic stance and engagement in group oral contexts, as well as confirm the usefulness of verbal protocols in revealing previously hidden complications for group oral assessments in an academic context, with accompanying suggestions for resolving such complications.

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1. Introduction

In a country like Hong Kong (HK), where English is the medium of instruction (MOI) in tertiary education but where most students' primary first language and much of their secondary education is conducted in either Cantonese or Mandarin Chinese, the transition from secondary to tertiary education represents a considerable linguistic challenge for freshman undergraduates. Potential structural disadvantages include a recent shift in HK from three to four years of tertiary undergraduate instruction resulting in one year less of secondary education in which to prepare for academia, as well as the shift from English to Chinese as the MOI in most HK schools since the 1997 handover of sovereignty to China from the UK (Lo & Lo, 2014). Researchers of the kind of academic language students have to master during the first crucial months at university consider such language an 'alien form of literacy [... with] many students arriving at university thinking they have landed on Mars' (Hyland, 2016a, p. 246), and this appraisal is becoming increasingly applicable to HK students for the reasons outlined above. Evans and Morrison (2011) provide evidence of four key areas where students in Hong Kong experience language difficulty upon entering university, namely understanding technical vocabulary, listening to lectures, writing in an

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appropriate style, and conforming to the conventions of academic discourse. This paper is concerned with the latter of these issues, focusing on the assessment of academic discourse in the spoken register.

Difficulties with conforming to conventions of academic discourse are commonly addressed via freshman pre- or in-session courses on English for academic purposes (EAP). At the tertiary level, being able to simply converse on a topic is insufficient. Specifically within academic tutorial discussions, students are expected to formulate a *stance* on the topic of discussion, support their stance with examples drawn from appropriate academic sources, *defend* their stance in the face of challenges from others in the group, and *critically engage* the stance of others. Stance is 'something of a catch-all yet elusive concept' (Crosthwaite & Jiang, to appear) referring to the linguistic projection of a language user's views toward the topic under discussion, while engagement involves the dialogic way in which speakers 'relate [to their listeners] with respect to the positions advanced' (Hyland, 2016b, p. 169). Biber (2006) describes stance as 'attitudes that a speaker has about information, how certain they are about its veracity, how they obtained access to the information, and what perspective they are taking' (p. 87), while Hyland (2016a) describes stance as the triangulation of three important rhetorical questions that a speaker may bring to any statement:

How certain do I want to be about this?

What is my attitude towards it?

Do I want to make myself prominent here? (Hyland, 2016a, p. 248).

Mastery of a range of rhetorical strategies in the L2 is required for the successful and appropriate presentation of stance and engagement in an academic tutorial discussion setting, from the asking of direct or indirect questions to other candidates, rebuttals of other candidates' claims, the derivation of counter-arguments to a speakers' own stance, and the presentation of facts, opinions or statistics from academic sources (orally presented as 'spoken citations'). Knowledge is also required of a variety of register-appropriate linguistic devices such as hedging, boosting, self-mentions or attitude markers used to 'stamp their personal authority or beliefs onto their arguments' (Hyland, 2016a, p. 247). However, in HK, due to the time spent preparing for high school examinations in a 'competitive exam-oriented system' (Kennedy, 2002, p. 439), freshman students have had relatively little opportunity to practice their development of an academic stance and to engage with others in oral production during their secondary education, at least when compared to the amount of time spent on writing and rote memorization (Kennedy, 2002; Lee, 2008). This often results in the quality of stance and engagement produced by freshman undergraduates in HK and other contexts lying in the middle of secondary and tertiary academic expectations (Matsuda & Jeffery, 2012), and such students have been found 'to use and respond to the features of stance and voice differently' to the expectations of their academic tutors (Sancho-Guinda & Hyland, 2012, p. 2).

In response to the difficulties outlined above for HK and other similar students at English MOI tertiary institutions, the use of peer-to-peer/group oral second language assessments over the use of one-on-one oral interviews has been a long-time feature of EAP assessment in HK (since the 1990s), following the introduction of an academic group discussion segment into the HK secondary 'Use of English' exam, as a matter of government policy. There are numerous perceived benefits to a group oral approach, from the financial benefit of testing multiple participants at once, to student engagement with non-standard/non-inner circle varieties of English (Kachru, 1985; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Other benefits include positive washback, particularly in cultures like HK where the exam-oriented culture results in deficits to speaking-focused teaching and learning goals (Shohamy, Reves, & Bejarano, 1986; Van Moere, 2006), as well as the empowerment of individual learners when producing language outside of privileged interviewer/interviewee relationships with 'predictable' question/response structure (Galaczi, 2004; Lazaraton, 1992; van Lier, 1989). From a formative assessment perspective, learner-to-learner interactional assessments provide suitable conditions for 'negotiation for meaning' (Long, 1985, 1996), whereby the input test-takers receive is obligatorily modified for comprehensibility wherever breakdowns in communication occur (Krashen, 1987). Here, students are active participants in 'noticing the gap(s)' (Schmidt, 1992) in theirs' or others' linguistic knowledge as evidenced by communication breakdowns, and actively repair such breakdowns via a range of conversational repair strategies including confirmation checks ('high marks?', Pica, 1987, 1996) and clarification requests (e.g. 'what did you say?'), prompted and received by students rather than interviewers that are proficient in the target language (Foster & Ohta, 2005). Such interaction leads to the enhancement of student output (Swain & Lapkin, 1995), which, in turn, results in further learner-to-learner co-construction and negotiation of knowledge (McNamara, 1997), particularly for groups of lower-level language learners who encounter gaps in conversation more frequently than higher-level learners (Gan, 2010).

Numerous studies have explored group oral assessments in terms of how students manage interactional language in such a context, and how raters perceive student performance of said features within that context. For example, higher-rated students are better able to engage with others' ideas via a range of functional language, including suggestions, (dis)agreements, explanations and challenges (Gan, 2010). Gan notes the ability to both pursue and shift the topic of talk while still making meaningful individual contributions is seen by raters as a positive aspect of student performance in a group setting (Gan, Davison, & Hamp-Lyons, 2009), although Gan's studies focus on the secondary rather than the tertiary context. He and Dai (2006) looked at the L2 Chinese tertiary context for group oral assessment, namely L2 English students taking the required Chinese College English Test–Spoken English Test (CET–SET). They note that Chinese L2 students taking this test produced a significant amount of interactional language functions but that the overall range of functions was rather limited (e.g. 'agreeing', 'disagreeing'). Other, quantitative, studies on group orals have looked at how issues of shyness (Bonk & Van Moere,

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