
Abstract

In this chapter, we will briefly discuss some of the external factors that affect or influence the analysis of conference spoken discourse. These include constraints based upon the social and physical environment of FP/PSs, immediate/environmental sociocultural factors, and the use (or non-use) of supplementary handouts.

11.1 Parallel Session and Free Paper Environments: An Overview

FP/PS presentations are distinct in both form and style from plenary, keynote, or specially invited speeches in that the former largely consist of narrow-focus research ‘reports’ from rank and file members of the discourse community whereas the latter usually address wider-ranging topics and are given by prominent figures in the field.

As we noted in the chapter comparing TED presentations with academic CPs, FP/PSs are not primarily intended to entertain, perhaps not even to be explicitly persuasive, but largely serve to report research processes and (tentative) findings. Since these are the types of presentations that most novice academics and professionals will be performing and attending, they therefore warrant special consideration in terms of understanding how the discourse is typically, and most effectively, managed. Understanding how the discourse is managed by effective practitioners is foundational to becoming a competent presenter oneself.

It is incumbent upon CP trainers then to emphasize the difference between managing a one-hour workshop, delivering an invited TED-styled speech, and giving a 10-minute FP/PS academic research presentation. In short, mastery of FP/PS discourse features should precede the acquisition of more kinetic or visceral

‘presentation skills,’ not the other way round. FP/PSs should *not* be particularly concerned with grand gestures and kinetic bling, as the primary purpose is to inform, rather than to entertain or persuade.

Audiences too differ according to CP type. As the conferences I attended were generally large and international in scope, with several FP/PSs running simultaneously, thematic FP/PSs tended to cover very narrow areas of highly specialized research interest. Audience members were largely made up of researchers in the same field and thus familiar with the academic content.

In my own observations and research, I was always careful to clearly categorize and mark the different CP categories. Also, beyond the initial CP categorization, local factors, such as the particular academic/professional discourse community’s expectations (which notably affects the balance between the dimensions of entertainment, persuasion, and information), as well as the immediate physical and social environmental factors that may affect both the parameters of CP performance and the expected role of the audience, were also taken into consideration. These factors constitute the following sections.

11.2 Sociocultural Factors

While the establishment of an interpersonal dimension between presenter and audience in the CP may be viewed as a necessity, the manner and/or degree to which this is established may be tempered by the cultural milieu. In presentations openings in particular, certain common metadiscursive choices may clash with local norms or sensibilities, particularly if Anglo-American norms and standards are assumed to represent the prescribed model (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2005). For example, the move from the non-personal to a personal voice typifying the difference between RPs and CPs has been noted as a major cultural adjustment for Taiwanese presenters (Yang, 2014). Cultural factors can be particularly pronounced in the summary and conclusion sections, where alternating degrees of hedging and assertion need to be delicately balanced (Fig. 11.1).

The difficulty in developing English CP coping models for presenters from China and Japan in particular has been noted by Zappa-Hollman (2007). The Japanese have been described as the least aggressive and least direct participants in the more interactive sessions (Rowley-Jolivet, 2002). Furthermore, in the same region, reading from a prepared script can often meet the local expectations of an academic CP. Zappa-Hollman (2007) notes that, as a result of these factors, presenters from such cultures may be, ‘...viewing their L2 academic discourse socialization as a complex process ... even by students with advanced language proficiency,’ adding that including dynamic elements of persuasive and/or entertainment value ‘...may be resisted by students whose home academic discourse values contrast with those in their new contexts’ (p. 455).

Fig. 11.1 In East Asia, gestures and body movement are generally less flamboyant during free paper presentations (Photograph by author, with permission from Takayuki Oshimi)



Research report CPs are generally expected to adhere to a fairly rigid format paralleling the Introduction–Methods–Results–Discussion (IMRD) structure common to written RPs, since there exists a very strong discourse structure expectation in scientific CPs (Green, DeCherrie, Fagan, Sharpe, & Hershman, 2011), and thus there is little expectation of levity and humor. This factor was magnified by the fact that presenters I noted often were not speaking in their L1 and thus often opted for a safer, more familiar structure. Also, many hailed from regions in which a Confucian academic cultures dominate, and these are cultures in which more flamboyant types of presentations might not be considered suitably academic (Yang, 2014). The tone for most such CPs was, for the most part, somber and sober (Fig. 11.1).

These socioenvironmental factors have the uptake of placing even greater importance upon the internal organization of the text and how this becomes represented in the presenter's speech. Since the impact of gestures and physical movement in FP/PSs will necessarily be limited, the audience will depend more on the spoken text and intonation alone to guide them to recognize opening strategies, transitions, and other rhetorical moves.

Readers might also want to ask themselves whether pitching a product or method, that is, using the language and demeanor of the salesman in a session where field and tenor are traditionally focused upon the relatively detached presentation of research data, is likely to backfire. One lasting impression from my observations was that the type of presentation which served largely to promote or propagate the institutions or activities of the speaker/researcher (what might best be described as ‘About my university/institution/program program’ CPs) were generally less well-received, particularly at scientific conferences, and appear to be decreasing in number in the humanities. One reason for this may be that background data for local studies were often too specific, relevant only to a single institution or geographical location, and/or too obvious in their attempts to appeal, lacking applicable scope, and also lacking a novelty factor that could be considered useful to their peers in the audience.

11.3 Physical Environment Factors

Almost without exception, the FP/PS presentations I attended took place in meeting rooms seating less than 100 people. In over 70% of CPs, I observed there was no defined ‘stage’ and lighting was subdued, with the presentation area dominated by the screen and the presenter standing off to one side, either behind or next to a podium or small table or desk supporting the computer equipment (Fig. 11.2).



Fig. 11.2 A standard free paper/parallel session presentation room

This physical environment immediately restricts the kinetic possibilities for most presenters. Movement is restricted, with the audience's focus expected to be upon the visual texts and the screen, not upon the presenter. This reduces the importance and effectiveness of larger physical gestures and traditional presentation staples such as eye contact. As discussed earlier, the entertainment and persuasive properties of a highly interactive TED lecture are not viable in such an environment. This should not, however, be construed as demanding excessive formality or dryness. Rather, it puts the onus upon the novelty value of the content in that a '... focus on novelty, combined with the often stringent time constraints imposed on speakers, will have a significant influence on the choice and organization of the scientific content.' (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2005, p. 50).

11.4 The Use of Conference Presentation Handouts

The practice of providing handouts to accompany CP slides is becoming less common in both hard and soft science CPs, especially given the increasingly frequent habit of audience members taking photographs of slides using cellphones or of slides being made available online. In a handful of cases, however, handouts were made available at the end of the CP for those who wished to take a copy. These were often placed at the entrance/exit to the presentation room.

However, if the presenter wishes to support their presentation with handouts, the following guidelines, based on my experience and observations, are suggested below:

1. Do not distribute the handouts at the beginning of the presentation (activity-based workshops in which detailed instructions must be followed would be the main exception to this rule). This will only encourage audience members to read the printed text and ignore the actual CP.
2. Keynote and plenary speakers used supporting handouts in about 20% of all such presentations that I attended. These were, in almost all cases, prose summaries of the presentation content, not printed slides.
3. Do not construct the handout exactly as your slides. Edit to focus primarily on key take-home points or specific data that the recipient might be able to refer to later. Remember that the additive or surprise value of using animation in a CP does not have the same effect in printed versions of slides.
4. If you print your slides, six to a page, pure black and white is the most convenient form, but do realize that the intricacies of charts and graphs may then become illegible.
5. If possible, distribute handouts at the end of a presentation (this can be more easily carried out with the help of presentation room staff). This allows only those who want a copy to take one.

6. Inform audience members that a handout will be made available at the end of the presentation. This will allow the audience to concentrate on what you are conveying in real time as opposed to taking hurried notes and falling behind.
7. Keep some handout copies for attendees who wanted to attend your presentation but didn't or couldn't. Often, I've met both interested, and interesting, attendees after my own presentation has finished. By giving them a handout, they can gain the gist of the CP and, if they are truly interested, can contact you after.

Questions and Exercises for Chapter 11

1. Why is the use of flamboyant visuals and powerful gestures less suited to free paper CPs than other types of conference presentations? Give two reasons.
2. Why might a typical TED-style presentation be unsuited to certain cultural milieus? Give two reasons.
3. List 2 physical factors that distinguish most free paper CPs from keynote or plenary CPs.
4. In what cases would you offer a handout with your CP? What factors might determine whether you distribute it before, during, or after the presentation?

References

- Carter-Thomas, S., & Rowley-Jolivet, E. (2005). The rhetoric of conference presentation introductions: Context, argument and interaction. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 15(1), 45–47.
- Green E. H., DeCherrie, L., Fagan M, J., Sharpe B. A., & Hershman W. (2011). The oral case presentation: What internal medicine clinician-teachers expect from clinical clerks. *Teaching and Learning in Medicine*, 23(1), 58–61. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/10401334.2011.536894>.
- Rowley-Jolivet, E. (2002). Science in the making: Scientific conference presentations and the construction of facts. In E. Ventola, C. Shalom, & S. Thompson (Eds.), *The language of conferencing* (pp. 51–68). Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Yang, W. (2014). Strategies, interaction and stance in conference language: ESP presentations made by non-native English speakers. *Taiwan International ESP Journal*, 6(2), 26–55.
- Zappa-Hollman, S. (2007). Academic presentations across post-secondary contexts: The discourse socialization of non-native English speakers. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 63(4), doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.63.4.455>.