

A preliminary description of conference abstracts and poster presentations in Food Science

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Abstract

In EFL contexts the widespread use of English as the *lingua franca* of scientific communication puts written and oral interactional practices at the fore-front. The implication for Language for Specific Purposes teachers is that they are asked to offer language instruction by pivoting learning activities on the genres members of a given community of practice use to interact with one another. The aim of this paper is to report some preliminary observations on specific discourse by introducing conference abstracts and poster presentations in one underrepresented field: Food Science. The two genres, described according to the guidelines issued for one national and one international Food Science conference, show one common feature: they aim at presenting research results in a concise and informative way to allow authors' inclusion in conferences. Such specific peculiarity can be employed in LSP classes to guide future researchers realize how contents can be manipulated to catch conference board's and readers' attention.

Key-words: Community of practice; Conference abstracts; Poster presentations; Food Science.

1. Introduction

The leading role of English as the *lingua franca* of communication is reckoned by its use in contexts as diverse as research, education, publication, conferences and international peer communication (Ferguson, 2007; Hyland, 2009).

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In English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, this anglicized situation impacts university syllabus design since the widespread use of this idiom asks for linguistic ability not only in terms of basic language proficiency but also in terms of the communicative competences related to a given community. The implication for language for specific purposes (LSP) teachers is that in syllabus design they are asked to consider genres a top priority by stressing textual schemata, rhetorical patterns and communicative practices belonging to a given group (Swales, 1990, 2004).

A privileged position to observe how members of a community of practice interact with one another are field-specific conferences. The benefits of such on-site observations are two-fold. First, this kind of study bridges the gap all LSP teachers meet in their professional activities, namely their basic training on language instruction and the teaching of specialized discourses often outside their basic formation (Dudley-Evans & St. Johns, 1998). Secondly, this inquiry offers LSP practitioners the possibility of looking at written and oral genres, used by experts in specific contexts, to gain practical hints to be used in their own classes.

Keeping in mind the pedagogical value of field-specific discourses, this paper will start by sketching the meaning of community of practice; it will, then, describe two interactional genres pertaining to food scientists, namely conference abstract and poster presentation, according to the guidelines issued by the National Conference of Food Chemistry (NCFC, 2010)¹ and those by the Institute of Food Technologists (IFT, 2010)², an US-based organization, for the 2011 annual meeting.

2. The notion of communities of practice

A community of practice can be defined as a group of people using language to achieve common interactional purposes, like the exchange of information, the spreading of results or the reporting of work-in-progress (Swales, 1990; 2004). Communities tend to develop their own communicative styles, that is a sort of slang made up of abbreviations and acronyms, together with collocations and connotations (Swales, 1990), typified in specific genres (e. g. the research article, the case-report, the conference presentation and the seminar, just to name a few).

¹ VIII Congresso Nazionale di Chimica degli Alimenti, Marsala (Italy), September 20-24 2010.

² Institute of Food Technologists, New Orleans (USA), June 11-14, 2011.

The added value of the concept of community to LSP teaching is that understanding the basics of such interactional practices is mandatory if LSP teachers want to guide their students to be part of a given group, thus offering instruction on the genres that are the backbone of their profession (Hyland, 2007). This aim can be easily reached by direct contact with the written and oral “textual artefacts” (Bhatia, 2002:6) peculiar to such groups and to encourage the acquisition of textual schemata, not seen as bare formulas but as conceptual foundations that make communication among experts successful (Hyland, 2007; 2009; Mavor and Trayner, 2001).

3. The conference

Although conferences are an important medium to spread research results, they have not received the same attention devoted to other academic genres like the research article and its different sections, (see Swales, 2004). This gap has been filled by a volume where conferencing in diverse settings (education, engineering, geology, linguistics, medicine, physics and history) has been discussed and analyzed (Ventola & al., 2002) and by research pivoted on single aspects of conferencing, like TESOL conference proposals (Halleck & Connor, 2006); conference presentations and conference visuals in geology, medicine and physics (Rowley-Jolivet, 2002; Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005a); conference presentation and proceeding in physics (Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005b); or the interactional features of presentations in medical conferences (Webber, 2005).

The community of food scientists, to author’s knowledge, has not so far been considered in genre analysis literature, and the present paper wants to fill in part this gap by offering some preliminary insights on two genres, conference abstracts and poster presentations in Food Science conferences.

4. The conference as a genre

A conference is an important forum to discuss research “at various levels of completion” (Hyland, 2009:79), and an event that increases the member’s, or the team’s, reputation by showing affiliation to the community in a precise communicational context (Swales, 2004). Conferences have a genre chain (Swales, 2004) consisting of different steps that reflect “the particular norms and patterns which communities have developed” (Hyland, 2009: 80). This chain starts with the call for papers (or call for abstracts) and its deadline, usually scheduled

months later, to let attendees have time to conceive a conference abstract and to send it to the scientific board; the selection of proposals from the committee; the publishing of the book of abstracts; the conference itself, considered a scholarly meeting but also a social gathering to come across old acquaintances and to make new ones (Shalom 2002); the conference activities, in the form of a plenary speech, a talk in one of the parallel sessions or a poster presentation; the publication of the conference proceedings.

Within the world of conferences, two genres can be used by LSP teacher to meet the educational needs evidenced above: the conference abstract and the conference poster. Although different in layout and overall interactional function, these two genres have a common trait: they catch attention and convey as much information as possible with a limited word count.

A more detailed description of both types can help focus on the general layout and can serve as a starting point for English for academic purposes lectures.

a) The conference abstract

Conference abstracts belong to the category of occluded genres since only accepted proposals are printed in the conference program books (Halleck & Connor, 2006). This means that their specific trait is the highly promotional style used to show that the proposed topic is important for the whole community and deserves consideration and inclusion in the conference (Halleck & Connor, 2006; Hyland, 2009). For this reason, conference abstracts can be described as catchy stand-alone texts that display, in a limited word count, as much information as possible on the topic to be dealt with at the conference.

In Food Science, the typical model adheres to a tripartite template where information on the author(s), the affiliation(s) and the title precede the body of the abstract, followed by a concise reference list (see fig.1). As concerns the body of the abstract, NCFC does not give specific prescriptions on length or word count, whereas the IFT guidelines, are more detailed and ask perspective conference delegates to write a text of no more than 300 words that provides a justification, the research objectives, the research methods, the results and the impact on Food Science (IFT, 2010). Although very promotional in style, this genre must be short, informative, linguistically correct and must adhere to some conventions in line with the requirements of any scientific product. This means that accepted abstracts have to meet specific criteria such as appropriateness of topic; appropriateness of research design, method

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and analyses; clear presentation and accurate discussion and interpretation of data; precise statement of findings, so that results support conclusion (IFT, 2010).

| Food Science conference abstract |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Author(s)• Affiliation(s): institution, address, contact details• Title |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Body of the abstract |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• References |

Tab. 1 Conference Abstract Template

b) The poster presentation

Poster presentations have increasingly gained importance in conferences and are a peculiar feature in biomedical meetings, where they seem to have lost the second class status they had many years ago (IFT, 2010), to be now considered a valid alternative to the traditional oral presentation (Swales, 2004). The rationale behind the growing importance of this academic type in conferencing can be ascribed to two peculiarities. The former are some specific traits such as creativity, conciseness, readability and careful design (Weaver Moore, 2001); the latter are the benefits this genre offers to the committee, to researchers and to the public. The conference board can, in fact, gain considerable advantage from this medium, since posters allow many presenters to be enrolled among the conference participants. Scholars, on the other hand, can present their work in a relaxed, yet interactive, atmosphere. Additionally, posters benefit the public because this medium allows the interaction with presenters in the form of questions, explanations and feedback (Shelledy, 2004; Weaver Moore et al., 2001).

In posters, the research message is presented in brief units shaped around the IMRD layout of research papers complemented by an extensive use of visuals. The typical format consists of nine sections: the badger, where information on the author(s) are displayed; an introduction, to contextualize or to justify the research; materials and methods, where readers are informed on the methodology or the study design; the results section, where findings are described; and the discussion section, where the implication or the impact on Food Science is

presented. To this general layout, visuals of different types can be added and freely inserted within the poster (see fig. 2 for a synoptic model).

As concerns visuals, they solve the space constraints by providing schematic information to support the claims presented in the different sections. They can take the form of charts, diagrams or illustrations, and serve three aims: to provide graphic data that make the overall comprehension easier, to explain or to add up to the research message and to conceive an informative and attractive specimen.

| | |
|--|--|
| Author(s), affiliation(s), address | |
| Abstract (required by IFT guidelines, not mentioned by NCFC) | Discussion: explain findings and their impact on FS |
| Introduction: state of the art, review of literature | <i>Figures</i> <i>Tables</i> <i>Graphs or Charts</i> |
| Materials & Methods: display information to allow replicability. Stress the research questions | |
| Results: introduce findings | |

Fig. 2 Poster Layout

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to offer a brief and preliminary description of conference abstracts and conference posters in the underrepresented field of Food Science according to the guidelines issued for national and international meetings. The two genres have a different layouts, but are both promotional texts arranged around a concise format that must catch readers' attention. LSP teachers can ask colleagues to provide some specimens that can be employed in language and write-across-the-curriculum classes to raise students' awareness not only on the overall structure but also to show how specific contents can be manipulated to catch conference board's and readers' attention when presenting findings at a conference.

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