

Academic Presentations across Post-secondary Contexts: The Discourse Socialization of Non-native English Speakers

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Abstract: This qualitative multiple-case study draws on second language (L2) socialization theory (Duff, 1995, 2003; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) to explore the discourse socialization of six non-native graduate students through their engagement in an oral activity, the academic presentation (AP) in regular content courses at a Canadian university. Multiple data sources (AP observations, interviews, field notes, course outlines) were collected and triangulated for analysis, which involved recursively going over the data identifying salient and recurrent themes. The study extends our understanding of APs across post-secondary settings by analyzing and comparing the main activity characteristics in four disciplines. In addition, an examination of the presentation challenges and coping strategies of the participating students contributes to viewing their L2 academic discourse socialization as a complex process that may be perceived as difficult even by students with advanced language proficiency and may be resisted by students whose home academic discourse values contrast with those in their new contexts.

Keywords: academic discourse; oral presentations; language socialization; international students

Résumé : Cette étude qualitative de multiples cas part de la théorie de la socialisation de la langue seconde (Duff, 1995, 2003; Schieffelin et Ochs, 1986) pour explorer la socialisation du discours de six étudiants étrangers lors de leur participation à une activité orale, une présentation universitaire (PU), dans le cadre d'un cours normal aux cycles supérieurs dans une université canadienne. Des sources de données multiples (observations sur les présentations, entrevues, notes, plans de cours) ont été recueillies et validées avant d'être analysées, ce qui a exigé de revoir les données de façon récursive pour déterminer les thèmes essentiels et récurrents. L'étude nous permet de mieux comprendre les PU dans un cadre postsecondaire, grâce à l'analyse et à la comparaison des caractéristiques de l'activité dans quatre disciplines. De plus, elle examine les défis liés à la présentation elle-même et les stratégies d'adaptation des étudiants participants, ce qui permet d'envisager la socialisation de leur discours universitaire en L2 comme un processus complexe qui peut être perçu comme étant difficile, et ce, même par les

étudiants ayant une compétence langagière de niveau avancé. De plus, les étudiants dont les valeurs du discours universitaire à la maison vont à l'encontre de celles notées dans le nouveau contexte peuvent y être réfractaires.

Mots clés : discours académique; présentation universitaire; socialisation langagière; étudiants internationaux

Introduction

Increasing numbers of international students, many of whom are non-native English speakers (NNEs), enrol in English-medium universities every year. Eventually, their academic success is largely measured by how well they perform multiple written and spoken activities. The importance of students' oral proficiency and readiness to participate in spoken tasks, in particular, has been highlighted in several recent studies concerned with the academic discourse socialization of international students through oral discourse in their respective institutions (e.g., Morita, 2000; Kobayashi, 2003). Moreover, the need for advanced speaking abilities has also been recognized by higher education (HE) institutions, some of which are modifying their language entrance requirements so that international applicants' oral skills are also screened before they are granted program admission.¹ Clearly, the academic and language learning communities recognize that HE students need effective *oral* as well as *written* communicative ability in order to succeed in school.

Successful performance of oral activities requires not only that students possess high levels of language proficiency but also that they have a good understanding of the rules and specific behaviours valued by each discipline and each institutional context. Developing this type of knowledge takes time, however, and, as illustrated in Morita (2000), it can be very challenging for both NNEs and native English speakers (NESs), although NNEs generally tend to find it demanding for different and more numerous reasons.

The study documented here, therefore, investigated the experiences of NNE graduate students as they delivered an academic presentation (AP), a very pervasive activity in Western HE contexts. The study was conducted at a major Canadian university with a student population of over 45,000, more than 5,400 of

whom were international students representing a large number of non-Anglophone countries. The participants included students and their course instructors in four disciplines. The aim of this study was to contribute to the knowledge about the kinds of demands or challenges associated with this particular activity, especially for NNEs. The analysis focuses on the students' actual presentations as well as on their preparation for and subsequent reflection on their performance. In providing a qualitative interpretive account of how the participants approached and accomplished the activity, this article also aims to illustrate the key role academic presentations played in socializing students into the academic communities in which they sought membership.

Previous L2 research on oral academic discourse

In spite of the pervasiveness of oral activities in post-secondary contexts, there has been relatively little research on the development of oral academic discourse. Early studies investigated the listening/speaking needs of university students (e.g., Johns, 1981; Mason, 1994; Ostler, 1980). Different kinds of oral/aural tasks were surveyed and described in these studies, and the findings underscored the importance of including spoken academic discourse in L2 researchers' agendas. Building on this emerging body of research, Ferris and Tagg conducted several studies that explored the oral language needs of English for academic purposes (EAP) learners (Ferris & Tagg, 1996a, 1996b; Ferris, 1998). In a series of large-scale surveys, Ferris and Tagg (1996a, 1996b) gathered information about subject-matter instructors' expectations of HE students' oral performance and abilities. Among their major contributions was the development of a typology of activities usually performed by university students (e.g., class participation, small-group work, oral presentations, debates). Taken together, these studies provide an overview of oral discourse use and status in university-level courses. However, the main limitation of their research was the lack of specificity about any single activity. Furthermore, the investigations were essentially quantitative and descriptive; most findings were limited to rank-ordering the activities or identifying (but not deeply exploring) task difficulty. Hence, research providing more detailed insights about individual oral activities in HE settings was needed.

This gap has been partially addressed by recent research focusing on NNEs' oral academic discourse development

(e.g., Kobayashi, 2003; Morita, 2000; Robinson, Strong, Whittle, & Nobe, 2001; Weissberg, 1993). Apart from the study by Robinson et al., all these were qualitative multiple-case studies. Weissberg focused on the graduate seminar as a speech event in the fields of animal sciences and agronomy. Based on observations of 10 student presentations and interviews with students and their instructors, he found that the oral presentation represents 'an instance of the graduate student moving from apprentice to peer within the speech community' (p. 26), thus foregrounding the crucial role of oral speech in socializing students into post-secondary contexts. A few years later, Morita (2000) explored the academic socialization of native English speaker (NES) and NNEs students in a TESL graduate program at a Canadian university as they observed, performed, and later reviewed their academic presentations. Besides showing that both NNEs and NES students faced multiple challenges in relation to this activity, Morita's study reveals that APs present students with a unique potentially effective opportunity to become acculturated into the valued norms and behaviours of their respective classroom communities. Focusing on the preparation stages of APs, Kobayashi (2003) explored the kinds of collaborations that took place among NNEs in a Canadian university as they negotiated understandings of task demands and reached agreement about their joint task performance. His study reveals that much interaction took place among peers before the actual presentation, often outside of class, and, as a result, the AP is portrayed as an opportunity for L2 practice and learning, as well as for academic socialization through oral discourse practices (similar to the findings of Morita, 2000).

These more recent qualitative studies on academic APs have provided valuable in-depth knowledge about oral discourse in Western academic contexts, and they all suggest that student engagement in formal and informal activities involving oral discourse contributes significantly to their academic socialization. Still, in light of the increasingly diverse HE student population, there is a need to investigate the experiences of university students from a wider range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds (particularly since the NNEs in most of the previous qualitative studies were Asian), as well as from diverse disciplinary fields (other than agronomy, animal sciences, TESL, and content-based ESL courses). This information would help us to better understand and accommodate students' needs, as well as to recognize and acknowledge their strengths, and to gain a better understanding of the different practices and expectations across disciplines.

The current study partially addresses this gap by making some unique contributions, including a description and comparison of AP characteristics as well as an examination of the main values promoted and discouraged in hitherto little studied disciplinary contexts. In addition, the findings of this research complement existing knowledge about the AP-associated challenges faced by NNEs in North American HE contexts, as well as the strategies developed by them to prepare for and perform this activity. The study also shows that, by comparison with the findings of previous closely related investigations, participants in most courses did not seem to engage in as many instances of peer collaboration and scaffolding and that support from NES peers and instructors could be made more explicit, especially since other research has documented the impact that affective variables have on L2 learners' engagement and performance in oral activities (e.g., Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000). Finally, through examples of students' resistance to adjusting to the AP expectations in their respective courses, this study also provides further evidence of the contested nature of oral academic discourse socialization, which has previously been described mainly with respect to written academic discourse (e.g., Leki, 1995; Spack, 1997). It is hoped that the results of this research will be particularly useful for students with similar disciplinary fields, backgrounds, and oral academic discourse expertise to those examined in this study, as well as for the content and ESL instructors preparing them for these activities.

Theoretical framework

This study was framed along the lines of second language socialization (L2S) theory (Duff, 2003; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Watson-Gegeo, 2004; Zuengler & Cole, 2005). Drawing on techniques and theories originally developed in the fields of anthropology, sociolinguistics, sociology, and psychology, L2S research seeks a holistic, integrative, cross-cultural perspective that views linguistic and sociocultural knowledge as inextricably linked and acquired in tandem (see Duff, 2003, in press-a; Duff & Hornberger, in press; Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez, 2002; Kulick & Schieffelin, 2004; Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen, 2003; Zuengler & Cole, 2005). As a result, the focus of L2S research is on the nature of interactions and the role they play in socializing individuals into the different groups and social contexts in which they seek membership. Selecting a particular recurring activity as the main unit of analysis to capture the motives, actions, and goals underlying

human action (e.g., Coughlan & Duff, 1994; Duff, 1995; Kobayashi, 2003; Mohan & Marshall-Smith, 1992; Morita, 2000; Parks, 2000) is also fundamental in L2S. Ochs (1988) notes that 'social activities involving language are structured by linguistic and sociocultural knowledge' (p. 21), and it is through their participation in these activities that novices 'acquire knowledge in these two domains' (p. 22). Based on this premise, the current study also adopts an activity (the AP) as the unit of analysis to holistically explore the simultaneous acquisition of linguistic and sociocultural knowledge.

As a theory, L2S has come a long way in the last few years, having been used to explore the integration of L2 learners in a wide range of contexts such as the workplace, professional programs, life in bilingual and multilingual communities, L2 content classrooms, and the world of academia (for overviews see Duff, 2003; Zuengler & Cole, 2005). In particular, L2S theory has been very successfully used to account for the academic linguistic and sociocultural development of students in post-secondary contexts (e.g., Atkinson, 2003; Kobayashi, 2003; Matsumura, 2001; Morita, 2000; Poole, 1992). These studies show that the L2S framework illuminates aspects of learning and using language that would have remained obscure had a less socioculturally sensitive approach been employed. By focusing on the students' previous backgrounds and histories, as well as on the institutional and social contexts of the participants, L2S studies foreground the interplay between internal (from the individuals) and external (from the social contexts) factors that have an impact on L2S processes. L2S studies are also characterized by an examination of how the participants' agency is enacted to resist, adapt, or react in multiple ways to their acculturation in new academic contexts. In addition, by focusing on the interactions and scaffolding taking place between newcomers and more experienced members of any given community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998), L2S is understood as a complex, dynamic, contested, and multidirectional process (Duff, 2003).

Method

The following general research question guided this study: What role did academic presentations play in the academic discourse socialization of the participating NNEST students? More specifically, what were the characteristics of the APs observed in graduate courses at one major Canadian university, and what purposes did they fulfil? What were the associated AP qualities promoted in each course? What kinds

of challenges did the NNES participants face in relation to the activity, and how did they cope with them?

Data collection and analysis

This project followed a qualitative multiple-case study design (Duff, in press-b; Merriam, 1998). To obtain rich, contextually anchored accounts from the students (i.e., their *emic* perspectives), I gathered data from several sources (AP observations, interviews, field notes, and course outlines) over a four-month period (i.e., a full semester). I observed all APs given in each course, adopting a role close to that of 'observer as participant' (Merriam, 1998, p. 101). This allowed me to construct my own perceptions of the activity based on a larger number of performances; it also gave me a better sense of how the key participants positioned themselves as members of the audience. In this way, I was able to gather additional insights that informed my *etic* perspective on how the participants operationalized the activity. This information was later combined with the data gathered from semi-structured interviews I conducted with the participants. The interviews, all conducted in English, became an opportunity for them to reflect on their AP performance and to provide information about their self-assessed English proficiency and confidence using the language, their past exposure to APs, their preparation, their strategy use, and their thoughts about how they judged their AP performance.² Finally, I conducted interviews with the instructors, which gave me access to their expectations and their views on how those expectations were fulfilled by the students.

Aware of the inherently subjective nature of qualitative research, I tried to enhance the trustworthiness of the study by performing triangulation of results within case-study participants (i.e., comparison and contrast of data collected from different sources), as well as across participants, and by checking my initial data interpretations with the study participants as well as with colleagues.

The interview and the AP recordings were transcribed for analysis, which involved recursively going over the data and triangulating different data sources to compare and contrast the findings. As a result, recurrent and salient patterns and themes were identified, following the procedures for coding and categorizing data described in Miles and Huberman (1994). Next, the analysis was carried a step forward by reviewing all the initial findings and contrasting them with the findings from previous studies, resulting in the interpretive narrative account presented here.

Participants and sites

The study took place at a large research-based university in Western Canada, hereafter referred to as Western Canadian University (WCU).³ By means of Internet searches of the university's online course catalogue, I was able to identify 12 courses across a wide range of disciplines that included APs as one of the required course assignments. I then contacted the corresponding course instructors, verified with them that there was a mix of NNEs and NES students in their classes, and, if this was the case, asked for their permission to invite their students to participate in the study. This procedure gave me access to seven graduate courses. All students ($N=55$) in these seven courses agreed to participate, and of those 55, 18 were NNEs. This report, however, focuses on the six NNE students who participated more fully in all phases of this study.⁴ Their profiles are summarized in Table 1. These six students came from (1) an anthropology research methods course (ANTH) with 9 NESs and 1 NNE; (2) a comparative history course (HIST) with 6 NESs and 3 NNEs; (3) a biochemistry course on cellular analysis (BIOC) with 8 NESs and 2 NNEs; and (4) a neuroscience course on different approaches to the study of the nervous system (NRSC), with 12 NESs and 3 NNEs.

Findings

I begin with a description of the general characteristics of APs and the values promoted in each course, then continue with an examination of the challenges and strategies of the six focal students in order to explore their academic discourse socialization through presentations.

AP characteristics and qualities promoted

Although students and instructors characterized the APs in the courses I observed as 'typical' of their respective programs, because I observed only one course in each discipline, the findings reported in this study cannot be generalized to all other courses in the same fields included here. However, since I observed and audio-recorded all APs in each course, the information I collected allowed me to make comparisons of the activity within and across the specific courses observed. These findings are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 1
Participants' profiles

Student pseudonym	Country of origin	Relevant information	Course
Sachiko	Japan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • first-year PhD student • living for two months in Canada at time of study; had lived for four years in the United States, where she did her MA • was aware of Western academic discourse characteristics but said she found it hard to adjust to them • displayed limited oral English proficiency 	ANTH
Jose	Mexico	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • first-year MSc student • living for one month in Canada at time of study • was used to giving APs in Spanish at home university • displayed advanced English proficiency 	BIOC
Sohan	India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • first-year MSc student • living for one month in Canada at time of study • worked as lecturer in home university; explained that this gave him experience speaking in public • displayed advanced English proficiency 	BIOC
Lin	China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • first-year MSc student • living for six months in Canada at time of study • presented only twice in home country, where APs are read aloud • displayed very limited English proficiency 	NRSC
Alexei	Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fourth-year PhD student • had lived two years in the United States and 3 in Canada at time of study • pursued career in the media working for local TV station in Russia, which he explained gave him good presentation strategies and practice • displayed advanced English proficiency 	HIST
Chao	China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • second-year PhD student • living for 15 months in Canada at time of study • was not used to speaking English • was used to giving APs in China, but these were in Mandarin and involved reading aloud • displayed limited English proficiency 	HIST

TABLE 2
Summary of AP characteristics

Course	HIST	ANTH	BIOC	NRSC
Frequency and presenters per class	1 AP per presenter; 1 or 2 APs per day throughout term	3 APs per presenter in 3 different classes	1 AP per presenter; 1 or 2 APs per day throughout term	1 AP per presenter on 3 different classes
Length	46–100 min.	7–25 min.	25–43 min	15–20 min
Goals	Present and discuss topic chosen for final research article	AP (a) Summarize book review AP (b) Summarize research proposal AP (c) Report on research findings	Report and critique a published research study	Report and critique a published research study
% of course grade	25	5	20	<10 (part of 10% participation mark)
Expected procedures	Presenters discussed AP topic with instructors and shared outline with moderator (a peer); one day before AP, they sent abstract to class members.	Presenters discussed AP topic with instructor; classmates had no knowledge of presenter's choice of topic and little background on it.	Presenters chose article; if they had questions, they asked the instructor.	Presenters chose article; if they had questions, they asked the instructor.

Components and sequence	i. Topic introduction	(based on AP (b))	i. Topic introduction	i. Topic introduction
	ii. Topic background	i. Topic introduction	ii. Detailed summary of background and methodology of study	ii. Research questions
	iii. Literature review	ii. Chosen research method	iii. Results	iii. Main hypotheses
	iv. Main questions and arguments	iii. Aims of proposed study	iv. Critique of results and/or methodology	iv. Results
	v. Key ideas for article	iv. Expected findings	v. Conclusion	v. Critique of results and/or methodology
	vi. (Open) conclusion	v. Instructor feedback	vi. Q&A period	v. Conclusion
	vii. Discussion period	vi. Q&A period		vi. Q&A period

Academic presentations in history

In the HIST course I observed, all APs began with a topic introduction, followed by a rationale for topic choice. At this stage, presenters usually included personal anecdotes that positioned themselves as 'licensed' to discuss their topic. Presenters were also expected to demonstrate that they had done exhaustive research using relevant sources. In most cases, key studies were cited, together with the gaps found in the specific area of interest. Next, presenters spent a long portion of their AP (e.g., 15 minutes) stating the main arguments they had derived from their literature review and identifying gaps to explore in future research. The gaps were formulated as research questions and key ideas they would develop in their research paper. Tentative research paths and findings were suggested by presenters, and this was followed by a very lengthy discussion period (up to 50% of the overall AP time), usually initiated by instructors and engaged in by the whole class. As indicated by some interviewees, the success of the AP was largely measured by the degree of audience engagement during the discussion.

Academic presentations in anthropology

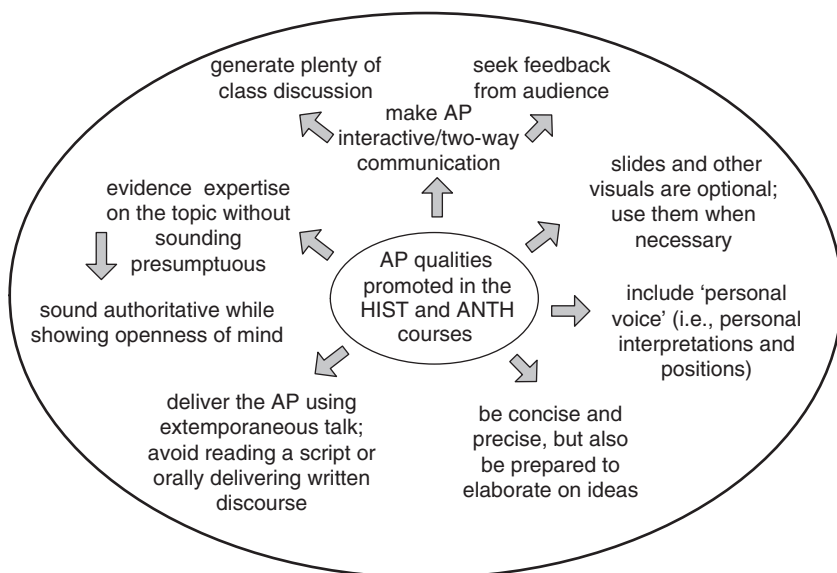
Anthropology students were expected to do three presentations each (a, b, and c; see Table 2). In the ANTH course, unlike the HIST course, all APs took place on the same day, and therefore the APs were shorter. Also, there was no timekeeper, so some APs lasted as little as seven minutes while others took up to 25 minutes. In general, APs started with a very brief topic introduction. Since this was a research methods course, the instructor expected a detailed explanation backing up the choice of method. The next stage involved an overview of the proposed aims of the study. This was done rather quickly and without major reference to previous research. More time was spent again on the expected findings. Immediately afterward, the instructor offered feedback, which was mostly intended to problematize the choice of method and the expected findings. Finally, classmates were given the opportunity to pose questions, although this period was usually very brief (3 to 5 minutes), mostly because of the limited time allotted for each AP.

AP qualities promoted in history and anthropology

Presenters in HIST and ANTH were expected to employ informal extemporaneous talk and to make the AP highly interactive by seeking

FIGURE 1

AP qualities promoted in HIST and ANTH (based on interviews with students [$N = 19$] and instructors [$N = 2$] and my observations of APs [$N = 19$])



input and participation from the audience. The use of slides or other visuals was optional, and when presenters used them it was usually to display information that would have been hard to explain verbally (e.g., maps and photographs). Mastering the skill of presenting in HIST and ANTH involved sounding authoritative enough to convince the audience while still displaying openness to audience input, which was expected to come in the form of friendly and constructive critique. Also, presenters were expected to include their personal views, 'their voice' (see Figure 1).

Academic presentations in biochemistry and neuroscience

Since the APs in these two courses shared many characteristics, I have chosen to describe them together. Here, presenters were to report on a published study (a scientific research article). BIOC presenters were given 25 to 30 minutes to talk and about 10 minutes to answer questions from the audience. There were usually two APs per class throughout the term. NRSC students, on the other hand, were given 10 minutes to present and five minutes to answer questions.

There were up to nine APs per class; three different classes were entirely devoted to this activity. After a brief topic introduction (which involved just mentioning the name of the article, the author, and the area of research it belonged to), BIOC students provided a detailed account of the background and methodology of the study, while NRSC students focused on the research questions. The AP components were identical: in both courses, students reported on the study results, then offered a critique based on the factual information provided in the article. This was followed by a conclusion (lengthier in BIOC) that summarized the main points presented and, in the case of BIOC students, also included suggestions for future research. The AP ended with a question period. In NRSC, there was time for just two questions (from the instructor or students), which usually asked for clarification and thus demanded short answers; in BIOC, on the other hand, the audience usually asked more questions, which also required more elaboration from the respondents.

AP qualities promoted in biochemistry and neuroscience

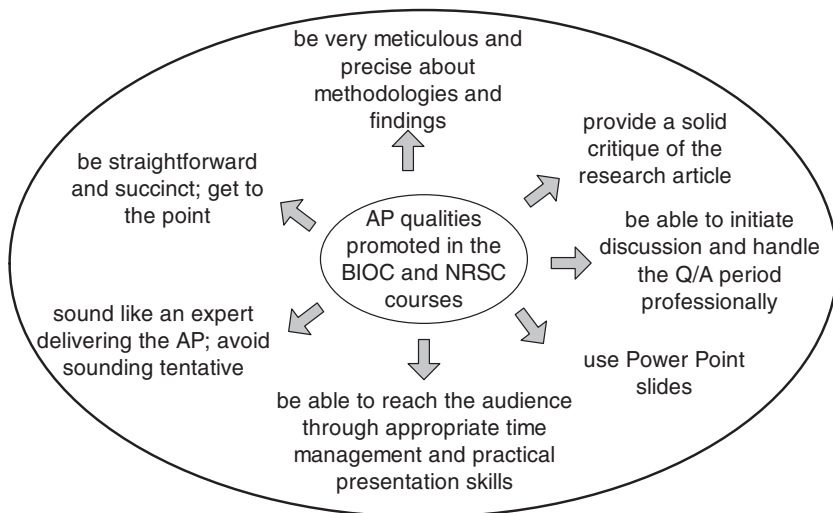
In the BIOC and NRSC courses, the presenters were also expected to talk extemporaneously, although, compared with the ANTH and HIST courses, the register of these APs was more formal, more closely resembling spoken written academic discourse (e.g., making heavy use of the passive voice and formulaic expressions).⁵ Presenters were expected to sound like experts on the topic even if they were just becoming familiar with the subject matter of their AP (although, as discussed later, most of them presented on a familiar topic when given the opportunity to choose). Unlike students in the HIST and ANTH courses, BIOC and NRSC presenters were expected to do their AP using PowerPoint slides, which included a mix of graphics, tables, and supporting text (see Figure 2).

AP purposes, goals, and content

APs were seen by instructors across disciplines as an instance of academic apprenticeship through which the students become familiar with the skills and subject matter associated with their respective fields. In this sense, APs were an opportunity to learn about 'how to sound and how to act' according to the values promoted in each field, as well as in each specific course. The NRSC instructor explained that APs are included in order to give students practice in a kind of activity they will need to be familiar with as professionals presenting

FIGURE 2

AP qualities promoted in BIOC and NRSC (based on interviews with students [$N = 25$] and instructors [$N = 2$] and my observations of APs [$N = 25$])



in academic conferences. Similarly, the BIOC instructor stated that ‘the most important thing is that [in the AP] they are working on things that are going to be helpful in their graduate program’ (Interview). He also indicated that APs stimulate students’ critical thinking abilities, a view shared by the other participating instructors. The HIST course instructor saw the task as a way to give students a chance to ‘play with ideas’ (Interview) and to create a space for interaction and discussion about issues of interest to the presenter and to the whole class. Likewise, the ANTH course included APs to ‘provide an appropriate environment to generate discussion and active participation [...] to constructively criticize each other’s work’ (ANTH course outline, p. 1). Therefore, APs were employed not just as an assessment tool but also, and perhaps most importantly, as a way to enculturate students into the most common practices of the academic and professional worlds to which they aspired to belong.

The instructors’ views on the role of APs were echoed by NES and NNES students, who saw the activity as an opportunity to refine their presentation skills and to rigorously organize their ideas in order to better prepare themselves as future professionals. In addition to this, NNES students also acknowledged another function of APs: the opportunity to practise speaking English.

AP challenges for NNEs

The participants in this study faced multiple challenges in preparing for and delivering their APs. They faced some difficulties related to linguistic limitations, others that resulted from a lack of exposure to the activity and/or unfamiliarity with APs in the Canadian graduate school context (sociocultural challenges), and still others of a psychological nature (e.g., trying to overcome shyness, combating nervousness, feeling insecure or less knowledgeable than their peers). Although it is possible to classify the difficulties into three main types, the data also reveal that these challenges were closely interrelated and that they affected the students' performance in multiple and interconnected ways.

*Examples of challenges**Preparing for the AP*

When participants were asked about the amount of time spent preparing for their AP, interview data show that, on average, NNEs spent 30% more time than their NES counterparts while engaging in similar kinds and amounts of literacy activities (i.e., reading materials, producing slides, etc.). This information confirms the NNEs' self-perception of being slower than their NES classmates or even some of their more proficient NNE peers. In addition, many NNEs claimed that preparing an AP in English took them longer than it would have taken them in their L1. Sachiko (ANTH student) argued that this was mostly due to her limited English proficiency, which required her to look up many words in the dictionary and to spend time reading articles in English to find good language models. She also reported that she needed to revise her slides and scripts more carefully than she would have had to in her L1. Lin (NRSC student) mentioned that preparing for the AP 'took me – perhaps I took three more hours than in Chinese – 'cause I had to look up, many often. I didn't know how to say, so I looked – I read many articles, many times, to find way to say it' (Interview). The NES students considered themselves to be at a disadvantage compared to their NES peers. Even students who displayed advanced English abilities (e.g., Sohan and Jose) and those who had also lived in an English-speaking context for a number of years (e.g., Alexei) reported feeling linguistically challenged, and they all mentioned that giving a presentation in English made them significantly more nervous than doing the same activity in their L1.

Using extemporaneous talk

Many students said that they found talking extemporaneously very challenging and very 'different' because they had not been trained to speak 'conversationally' in an academic context. For instance, Sachiko was aware that her classmates' APs were 'totally different from mine. And their way of presentation is more casual and more natural' (Interview). She then added,

We are not trained to do presentation. So, basically, many of us don't have language, the language expression. [...] 'Cause – in America or Canada – I heard the children student are encouraged – to speak out from childhood? So, yeah [...] I guess they're get used to express their thinking orally? Much more than Japanese. (Interview)

In contrast, she mentioned that in Japan students are discouraged from interrupting their instructors or other students, and therefore it was very hard for her to practise English turn-taking patterns: 'If we miss timing, we cannot speak out,' she explained.

Chao's experience was slightly different; he was used to attending and giving presentations at academic events in his home country, and thus seemed more readily inclined to participate in class and to perform his AP. However, because in China presenters usually read aloud from a script – something Chao, as well as other Chinese students, told me is believed to add formality and professionalism to the performance – he also saw a clear gap between his past and current AP practices. The same views were shared by Lin, another Chinese student, who told me that she felt unprepared to 'memorize' her talk in English and that, besides, she thought that reading her AP would make it sound more academic. Hence, it seems that apart from lacking the experience and skills to speak extemporaneously in an academic context (either in English or in their L1), Sachiko, Chao, and Lin saw a marked contrast between the classroom interaction patterns valued in their Asian home countries and those promoted in North America.

Sounding 'smart' and speaking 'clearly'

The key participants seemed deeply frustrated by their reported inability to portray themselves as 'smart' individuals in front of their peers and instructors. Students said they found it challenging to express their thoughts clearly in English while simultaneously

trying to convey complex ideas. Chao reflected on this in his interview:

If I do presenting in Chinese, I can use very – soph – sophisticate meaning? [...]. But right now I have to use very simple but clear word [...]. If I use a very simple word – I would be definitely lose some subtle meaning. So that was my – that I worry about. (Interview)

The same feelings were echoed by Sachiko and Lin. The other key participants, including those with higher English proficiency, also felt that it was very hard for them to convey nuanced meanings in an L2. However, according to my observations, some of the other NNEs key participants (e.g., Alexei, Sohan, and Jose) were indeed very successful at expressing elaborate ideas and, consequently, at coming across as ‘smart’ individuals. For instance, extracts A and B below illustrate how Alexei (HIST student) effectively constructed a solid argument by including precise vocabulary (e.g., nouns like ‘backwardness’ and ‘stagnation’ in extract A, and the phrase ‘oriental despotism’ in extract B) and by making reference to several relevant historical figures, thus positioning himself as a knowledgeable person. In addition, he delivered his talk fluently (i.e., very few instances of hesitations and pauses can be found throughout his AP) and overall he displayed a very good command of English grammar, thus not only ‘sounding smart’ but also speaking clearly:

Extract A

Uh – so what enlightenment brought to China – was – uh – Voltaire admired China, but Rousseau and Montesquieu criticized its lack of liberties. Adam Smith – even though he acknowledged China’s sophisticated trade and also its economic system – he also criticized its backwardness and stagnation. (AP observation, Alexei)

Extract B

Uhm – if – moving to the nineteenth century, when the liberal view of the word ‘history’ develops in Europe, and the idea of freedom is – you know – is again generating in the Industrial Revolution in England – uh – they all make China with its dynasties look very despotic. And as Hegel mentions in his articles, he says that’s a – you know – the Chinese system is – he called it ‘oriental despotism.’ (AP observation, Alexei)

In addition, NES peers and instructors also reported in their interviews that, particularly in the cases of Alexei, Sohan, and Jose, they believed

these students had done a fantastic job of their APs and that they had managed to impress the audience with their strong arguments and effective delivery. Hence, while all NNES students claimed to feel constrained in expressing nuanced meanings in their L2, for students with more advanced English proficiency this challenge was more apparent to them than was actually perceived by others.

Managing the question and discussion periods

The question period – during which students had to demonstrate their ability to engage in and maintain a discussion, retrieving linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural knowledge simultaneously – seemed to be the ultimate challenge for most NNES participants. Many commented that because they had practised their AP so many times, and because they had either a script or a slide they could glance at while presenting, they felt that even if they stuttered or hesitated during the delivery, the overall outcome would be satisfactory. But the unexpected nature of the question period made them extremely nervous. For instance, Sachiko mentioned that she usually became very tense when people asked her questions because often she was unable to understand them. During my observations, I recorded several instances where she faced this type of challenge. On one occasion, she presented a very factual account of her research findings. Unsatisfied with Sachiko's analysis, her ANTH instructor prompted her to examine those facts critically by asking, 'Where is your voice?' But Sachiko misinterpreted the instructor's question, thinking that perhaps she needed to speak louder, and therefore she started speaking up. A few words later, she was interrupted again by her instructor, who rephrased the question: 'No, no, where do you situate yourself in this research?' (AP observation, ANTH instructor). This time, Sachiko successfully interpreted and addressed the question.

I also recorded several instances where some of the key participants had pronunciation and comprehension difficulties, which usually surfaced during the discussion period. Extract C below, which comes from Chao's AP in HIST, illustrates this point:

Extract C

HIST instructor: I'd like to throw in a comparison. Were the Chinese recruited in Siberia as indentured workers?

Chao: As what?

NES peer: In-den-tured.

[Chao shakes his head.]

HIST instructor: Indentured, contracted.

Chao: Oh, contract, ok (AP observation, Chao)

This type of situation, where a NES peer or instructor used a term that the presenter did not know, happened several times, and hence the flow of communication was interrupted each time until the meaning was clarified. Additionally, lack of vocabulary or limited knowledge of word formation pushed students to resort to frequent repetition and rephrasing, which affected their fluency and added to their feelings of inferiority. The following examples from the discussion period of Chao's AP illustrate this: 'Chinese labour is regarded – is very low – is – have very low salaries, very low wage'; 'The migrate – migration took many – several years' (AP observation, Chao).

In spite of NNEs' fears of being perceived as intellectually inferior, interview data reveal that the NES peers and instructors did not seem to judge them as such. On the contrary, they expressed great admiration for their courage in undertaking graduate studies in a foreign language and country. Unfortunately, this was not communicated to the NNEs, who would most likely have felt encouraged by such comments. Individuals also tended to support each other as part of a classroom community, as expressed by Mike (a HIST NES peer) in his interview a week before Chao's AP:

I think we'll treat his [Chao's] presentation with a lot more respect, next week. [...] I speculate, we'll be very considerate. I think if we ask him questions, they will be very simple ones that he can elaborate on. Not easy ones, but linguistically simple.
(Interview, Mike)

In Lave and Wenger's (1991) terms, more experienced presenters (such as Mike, who was in his third year of the PhD program) supported novices (such as Chao, a first-year PhD student) and behaved in ways that would help them learn and act according to the values inherent to each community of practice (in this case, the HIST course). Nevertheless, some of this intended assistance (e.g., linguistically simplified questions) proved difficult for newcomers like Chao to process at the outset.

Examples of coping strategies

Analysis of the interview and observational data reveals that the NNES students collectively employed numerous strategies – most of which proved very effective, according to the audiences – to cope with the challenges associated with the APs. These are grouped into two main categories: preparation and delivery strategies.

Preparation strategies

(a) *Choosing a familiar topic:* When given a choice about what to present (as in BIOC, HIST, and ANTH), students (NES and NNES alike) reported strategically selecting familiar topics. This gave them a sense of security that not only lowered their levels of nervousness but also helped them to display their authority and expertise.

(b) *Avoiding content of little interest to the audience:* Some participants highlighted the importance of being careful not to include information that, although topically relevant, would not capture the audience's interest and would therefore backfire. Chao commented, for example, that

Sometimes I think about some point that is important but I can realize this is my interest [...] audience may not interest in that. [...] Even some of the point I found very worthy to explore in a very elaborate way, but if I do that in this classroom nobody will interested. [...] So I just wipe it out and talk about something both sides have interest in. (Interview)

(c) *Searching for multiple sources:* participants reported consulting multiple sources. This strategy was not restricted to those who were researching a topic and choosing among a wide range of resources to present (e.g., HIST and ANTH students). BIOC students, who were expected to critique an article, also believed that preparing for the AP involved reading other articles or textbooks. One BIOC student (Jose) even reported e-mailing the author of the article to obtain further information. Although his behaviour should be considered atypical (of the 55 students interviewed, he was the only one to do this), it illustrates how resourceful and strategic students could be and how seriously they took their job.

(d) *Preparing an outline or script:* Besides reading the assigned readings and doing the necessary research, all NNES key participants also

prepared an outline or a whole script of their AP. And while Alexei, Jose, and Sohan used this merely as a back-up during their APs, Lin and Sachiko (and Chao, to a lesser degree) relied more heavily on their scripts.

(e) *Rehearsing*: Preparing in advance also involved practising the talk orally. Lin, for instance, mentioned reading her script 10 times before she presented, which she found an effective English pronunciation practice exercise. Jose and Sohan rehearsed their APs together, doing mock presentations for one another at least twice. They found this also helped them time themselves, which was very important for them because they each had only 30 minutes to deliver their talks. Alexei, Chao, and Sachiko also reported rehearsing their APs beforehand.

(f) *Choosing to present the 'big picture'*: Sohan, Jose, and Chao also reported strategically leaving some details aside. According to Sohan, it was crucial to present the 'big picture' and not include too many details, because 'sometimes too many details is too much.' (Interview)

Delivery strategies

(g) *Speaking at a slow rate*: In general, NNES students reported struggling to speak clearly (as discussed above). In order to cope with this difficulty, some of them purposely slowed down their speech, in the hope that their audience would understand them better. Sachiko, for instance, was aware of her Japanese accent, so she said 'I speak very at a slow rate, so people understand me. I hope' (Interview), which proved to be an effective strategy, according to her peers.

(h) *Engaging the audience*: Most key participants were aware of strategies to capture and maintain the audience's attention. For instance, they mentioned that effective presenters made their APs interactive by posing questions to the audience and by showing appreciation of their feedback. Also, using facial expressions and hand gestures to convey enthusiasm was believed to help establish rapport with the audience. Making humorous comments, including personal anecdotes, and using visuals were also considered appropriate, particularly by HIST and ANTH students, since some of these strategies were also modelled by professors in their teaching. The participants used these strategies to different degrees; those who chose

to read their AP aloud (Sachiko and Lin) failed to effectively use any non-verbal strategies, and they avoided questioning the audience. On the other hand, other NNES students employed them successfully. Alexei, for example, wore a t-shirt with the words 'Simple modernity' written on it. He started his AP with the following comment: 'Today I am wearing a t-shirt which is not an accident. I thought – uh – of simple modernity reflects how really complicated things are today with the definition of "modern"' (AP observation, Alexei). As a result, his instructor later said, 'it was a very original way of opening up.' And one of his NES classmates commented, 'He had us all from the beginning.'

Some students (Alexei and Sohan) also reported making controversial comments in order to capture the audience's interest and engage them in discussion, a strategy I saw them use.

(i) *Choosing to be among the first presenters:* While some presenters preferred to witness a peer presentation before doing their own, others said that being among the first presenters gave them more freedom to choose how to do it (Alexei) or that once it was done, they could enjoy the rest of the course (Sohan, Jose) or the class (Sachiko).

Discussion

Drawing on the triangulation and interpretation of multiple data sources, this study explored the AP practices of six NNES key participants in different disciplinary fields. An L2S perspective was employed in an attempt to yield holistic understandings. Hence, rather than focusing exclusively on the cognitive and psycholinguistic difficulties faced by these students, the analysis includes their personal background and their past experiences with the activity in their respective former and current sociocultural contexts. The results show that APs were a central activity in all the courses observed, at least on certain days, and that students' investment in preparing for this activity was high, as were the students' and instructors' expectations for how the APs were performed. As documented in previous studies focusing on a similar activity (Kobayashi, 2003; Morita, 2000; Weissberg, 1993), it was found that doing an effective AP involved being aware of the values promoted in each local context (in this case, the graduate courses) as well as in the larger institutional and socio-political contexts in which the students were immersed.

However, gaining awareness of the rules and learning how to behave according to them not only takes time but also, in some cases, may be resisted.

The key participants viewed the AP task as daunting, particularly because it involved mastering a combination of skills, such as talking extemporaneously and leading an open discussion period. Like the students in Weissberg's (1993) investigation, some of the NNES participants in this study (particularly Lin and Sachiko) found not only that 'the demands of extemporaneous speech may have been too formidable to undertake' (p. 32) but also, since they were used to presenting 'memorized or read-aloud versions of written texts' (p. 31) in their home contexts, that adapting to the oral academic discourse values of their new graduate school contexts was not just a matter of coping with linguistic challenges. For these students, there was a clear discrepancy between their home-country notions of what constitutes acceptable academic speech and the values fostered in their host country, which they resisted. Similar results are reported from a study by Yook and Seiler (1990), who examined the performances and beliefs of what constitutes good public speaking for 21 Asian students while they were studying in an L2 context. The students' conceptions of public speaking clashed with the oral discourse behaviours valued in their new American university courses, and mastering the use of paralinguistic features (e.g., posture, eye contact, gestures, facial expressions) according to North American standards represented a huge challenge for them.

Still, many NNES participants in this study expressed a vested interest in becoming socialized into the Canadian graduate school culture, though they acknowledged this would take much effort and time. Chao's words on this subject were loaded with emotion, hope, and uncertainty: 'a little bit I'm improving, but I think my progress is really slow. But maybe I will take more – give me three years – or two years – to be totally acceptable – accepted by audience. I don't know' (Interview).

An analysis of the AP characteristics and qualities valued in each course revealed that there were close resemblances between the HIST and ANTH courses (both social science courses), and the BIOC and NRSC courses (both related to natural sciences and medicine). Perhaps the most significant difference between the two course clusters relates to how the presenters were expected to display their expertise on the topic. Drawing on the work of Ohta (1991), Morita (2000) talks about this in terms of 'epistemic stance,' which is revealed through the students' positioning in their social interactions as 'relative experts or

novices' (p. 289). While in general the participants in this study opted to display an image of themselves as experts or relative experts, students in the social sciences courses seemed to take on a variety of stances along the expert–novice continuum throughout the AP, particularly in the discussion period, similar to the education students in Morita's investigation.

Overall, there was agreement among instructors and students about the purposes served by the task. APs were seen as an opportunity to refine presentation skills that would eventually be useful in the students' future academic and professional contexts. Instructors also felt this task would encourage students to become better critical thinkers, an attribute promoted in all examined courses. These two purposes were applicable to both NESs and NNEs. Third, while NNEs students felt linguistically disadvantaged compared to their NES counterparts, they welcomed the chance to present in class, as they viewed it as a fruitful opportunity to practise and refine their English. However, some NNEs did not believe their expectations in this regard were fulfilled, as they realized that, in general, their Canadian peers and instructors would not offer advice on how to improve specific language problems. In fact, one instructor mentioned in his interview that 'this is beyond what we can do' (HIST instructor), hinting that the job of helping students improve their English skills should be left to others.

As I have shown above, the challenges faced by the students may be associated with three types of problems of an interrelated nature: linguistic (e.g., unclear pronunciation, lack of vocabulary, or limited fluency); sociocultural (e.g., lack of familiarity with APs or rejection of the presenter qualities valued in their Canadian courses); and psychological (e.g., shyness, fear of presenting in front of a large audience). In most cases, students were aware of their difficulties and thus tried to overcome them by resorting to specific coping strategies. Leki's (1995) investigation of the strategies employed by NNEs students to solve problems with writing tasks across the curriculum showed that the students used numerous and diverse strategies, 'with different individuals relying on them to differing degrees' (p. 247). Similarly, although in relation to an oral activity, my analysis of the strategies mentioned by the students showed that they developed a wide inventory of strategies that could help them with their APs, and thus they could become very resourceful and creative.

Research focusing on language anxiety and task motivation suggests that for people communicating in their L2, 'the challenge of trying to express one's thoughts using a limited linguistic code to

decode the interlocutor's meaning . . . creates an emotional state that is different from the communication mode in one's mother tongue' (Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000, p. 291). The same appears to apply to the NNEs participants of this study, most of whom claimed to find it extremely hard to convey the same levels of complexity (and sophistication, to use Chao's terms) as in their L1 and therefore experienced high levels of anxiety and nervousness during their AP preparation and delivery.

Some studies (e.g., Kobayashi, 2003; Morita, 2000) have found that the students actively seek help from their more experienced classmates, and that this plays a key role in their academic socialization. The participants in this study, however, did not seem to engage in as many instances of peer collaboration and scaffolding. HIST students were the only ones who reported asking their peers for advice or receiving tips from them. The case of Mike, the NES student who commented on how he expected the whole class not to challenge Chao linguistically during his AP, illustrates an instance where a more language-proficient peer was aware of a less proficient peer's difficulties and thus tried to help him (although it is important to note here that this kind of support was never explicitly stated to Chao). And Jose and Sohan, who gave individual presentations on the same day, reported coaching each other by listening to each other's AP rehearsals. Sachiko and Lin, on the other hand, were never observed interacting with their peers or instructors in class except when strictly necessary, nor did they report doing so out of class. Perhaps one of the reasons for this discrepancy in the studies' findings is that the students in Kobayashi (2003) were preparing for a group activity, and therefore were also expected to meet to discuss issues related to their APs. According to Kobayashi, it was during these 'behind the scenes' occasions that most of the informal peer collaboration and learning took place. In Morita's (2000) case, the instructors seemed to play a major role in facilitating a classroom atmosphere that led to friendly discussions and to a feeling of camaraderie that was conducive to establishing strong bonds among the members of those communities of practice, something that did not seem to explicitly occur in the courses I observed and was not revealed in the interview data either.

All participants were offered some level of instructor guidance when their AP was finished, but this feedback was usually related to academic aspects rather than to the organization and delivery of their AP. Nevertheless, the findings show that while APs were challenging for NNEs, they were also perceived positively, as a 'hands-on'

opportunity for academic discourse socialization through which they practised English, learned about the values promoted in Canadian graduate courses, and refined their presentation skills by observing, performing, and reflecting on the activity.

Implications

Through a holistic examination of APs and NNEs' activity practices, this study contributes to theorizing L2 academic discourse socialization as a multidimensional process that may be perceived as difficult even by students with advanced language proficiency and may be resisted by students whose home academic discourse values contrast with those in their new contexts. The findings show that APs were taken very seriously by both instructors and students. In fact, some participants believed that their AP performance could dramatically affect their graduate-student lives:

For me, presentation in this seminar meant huge – it's like a thesis defence. *Life or death*. If today I would have screwed up there, maybe there would have been a negative effect on my psyche which would have never permitted me in giving other lectures, no matter how well prepared I am. (Interview, Sohan; emphasis added)

Keeping this in mind, guidance from instructors and more experienced peers would especially benefit novice students, as would involvement in peer assessment and systematic reflective practices. As well, modelling the activity (which none of the instructors in this study did) and explicitly communicating expectations would help lower the students' level of anxiety. Students whose previous educational, disciplinary, and presentation experiences differ from the values promoted in a Western, English-medium academic context would benefit from engaging in a gradual process of enculturation, whereby initially they might be allowed to read their AP until eventually (although not necessarily) they approach the expected performance style. Both NESs and NNEs might also benefit from working in pairs or in teams, at least for the first AP in each course. This would be particularly valuable for newcomers to a graduate context.

Also, in order to better examine the development of oral academic discourse in time, studies with a longer longitudinal design, tracking the students' performance along their entire academic program and even after graduation (of the kind conducted by Casanave, 2002, and

Spack, 1997, in relation to L2 academic writing development) are needed. In addition, further investigating the interaction of spoken and written discourse or intertextuality is a promising new research path. While this study illustrates that students' oral performance was based on their engagement with different kinds of texts (reading various sources and writing summaries, scripts, and slides), 'cross-modality research' (Weissberg, 2005) has the potential to uncover novel ways of interpreting the relationships between oral academic speech and written discourse. Finally, another area that must be explored in more detail relates to the use of paralinguistic features. Robinson et al. (2001) note that 'nonverbal cues for oral interaction and participation, and cross-cultural differences in nonverbal behavior patterns can often lead to misunderstanding or even communication breakdown' (pp. 350–351). In spite of the role of non-verbal activity in all kinds of interaction, to date this topic has been mostly ignored by academic discourse researchers, and therefore promises to be an interesting new research avenue.

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Notes

1. It should therefore come as no surprise that the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), developed by the Educational Testing Service, the most commonly used language test in tertiary-level schools across North America, now includes a speaking component in its recently launched iBT (Internet-based test) version.
2. Note that one of the trade-offs associated with interviewing participants via the medium of a second language (as in this case) is that, particularly

for those students whose oral L2 proficiency is more limited, speaking in their L2 may prevent them from fully expressing their views and feelings.

3. Pseudonyms are used for all participating individuals, all courses, and the institution to protect their real identities.
4. An analysis of the APs of all NNES students is included in Zappa-Hollman (2001).
5. This study analyzed the different registers of APs across courses based on the observational data gathered. For reasons of space, however, this information is not included here.

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