



## Investigating Discourse Socialisation Progress of an English as a Second Language Learner Using Systematic Functional Linguistic Approach

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### Abstract

This study was framed on the theory of Language Socialisation and a Systematic Functional Linguistic (SFL) approach. The aim of the study was to analyse the oral presentation discourse produced by an elementary Iranian English as Second Language (ESL) postgraduate student in an American university four times (September/December, 2015 and March/September, 2016) over one year. The data were collected in terms of textual resources during the discourse socialisation process while in a second language community. The data relating to oral presentations were taken through the Oral English Proficiency Test (OEPT) and later transcribed for further analyses. The findings revealed that the participant became more competent as he continued his language socialisation in the second language academic community. He made progress through the use of textual resources, through the use of basic cohesive devices, including 'and' and 'so' over time. The study contributes to the language socialisation research by employing a systemic functional linguistics approach as a tool for the discourse development. It is intended that the findings will contribute to the knowledge around curriculum and the delivery of second language oral skills.

**Keywords:** Discourse socialisation, Language socialisation, Oral academic discourse, Social cultural theory, Systemic functional linguistics, Teaching English as a second language, Second language learning, Second language teaching

### INTRODUCTION

Oral academic presentation is often viewed as an important skill in a post-graduate course (Kim, 2006). Godev (2007) asserts that oral presenta-

tion can be a strategy to improve language learning for English as Second Language (ESL) Learners. Oral presentation refers to an academic discourse that represents a mode of using language in an academic style (Lantolf, 2000). Discourse can refer to language in use. In recent research stud-

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ies dynamic and complex academic activities from a discourse socialisation perspective have been explored (e.g. Ho, 2011; Kobayashi, 2005; Morita, 2000; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). The findings from these studies, however, show that discourse socialisation is not always a smooth process. It can be a process of constant negotiation and exercise of agency. These studies provided a dynamic perspective of the oral academic discourse socialisation through sociocultural theory, which originates from Vygotsky's (1978) concepts of learning. Vygotsky views learning as the construction of knowledge, which is socially determined, for example, between a student and a more knowledgeable other. A significant theory relating to social constructivism is the notion of the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky this relates to the area between the current level of knowledge, as determined by independent problem-solving, and the level of potential development that can be achieved with the assistance of adult guidance and / or peers (as cited in Lantolf, 2000).

### **BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM**

This study considers the theory of language socialisation as a theoretical framework. This theory arose out of an anthropological belief that language is a fundamental medium in children's development of social and cultural knowledge and sensibilities: a domain that the field of language acquisition does not capture (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011). In his work, Ochs (1988) asserts that the theory of socialisation is not only limited to children acquiring their native tongue or learning a second language, but that language socialisation is a lifelong process. Language socialisation also refers to the process of acquiring culture through language and how to use the appropriate language codes in various social contexts (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986).

Recently, research studies in second language learning have foregrounded language socialisation as the theoretical framework (e.g. Anping, 2001; Atkinson, 2003; Duff, 2002; Duff, Wong,

& Early, 2000; Morita, 2000; Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen, 2003; Zuengler & Cole, 2005). The above mentioned studies investigated the academic discourse socialisation and the cultural aspects of academic oral presentations and explored how students were socialised into their academic community. None of the above research studies, however, addressed the progress of second language learning by learners during the discourse socialisation process.

### **Social cultural theory**

Sociocultural theory argues that human mental functioning is fundamentally a mediated process that is organised by cultural artifacts, activities, and concepts (Lantolf, 2000). According to Lantolf and Thorne (2007) human beings utilise existing cultural artifacts to create new ones that allow them to regulate their biological and behavioral activities. They suggest that language use and structure are the primary means of mediation. Developmental processes take place through participation in cultural, linguistic, and historically formed settings, such as family life and peer group interaction, and in institutional contexts like schooling, organised sports activities, and work places (Lantolf, 2000). According to Lantolf and Thorne sociocultural theory argues that while human neurobiology is a necessary condition for higher order thinking, the most important forms of human cognitive activity develop through interaction within these social and material environments.

### **Systematic Functional Linguistics**

Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) originated from Halliday's (1994) work and practiced by a number of researchers in the field (e.g. Achugar & Colombi, 2008; Byrnes, 2006; Lemke, 1998; Martin, 1993; Mohan & Beckett, 2003; Stillar, 1998). According to Schleppegrell (2004) SFL is a theory of language centered around the notion of language function. While SFL accounts for the syntactic structure of language, it places the function of language as central (what language does, and how it does it), in

preference to more structural approaches, which place the elements of language and their combinations as central (Mohan & Beckett, 2003). According to Byrnes (2006) SFL starts at a social context level, and looks at how language both acts upon, and is constrained by, this social context.

Stiefvater (2008) provides an elaboration on how a functional linguistic approach aligns with language socialisation, and is congruent with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. As Stiefvater asserts, a central notion of SFL is 'stratification'. This refers to language being analysed in terms of four strata: Context, Semantics, Lexico-Grammar and Phonology-Graphology. Context concerns the Field (what is going on), Tenor (the social roles and relationships between the participants), and the Mode (aspects of the channel of communication, e.g., monologic/dialogic, spoken/written, +/- visual-contact, etc.).

In a research study conducted by Schleppegrell (2004) on the language of schooling, the effectiveness of SFL shows that many children who had never learned the language academically may be less successful in their academic tasks at schools. Schleppegrell divided the context into three variables and listed the grammatical structures that realise the variables: *field*, *tenor* and *mode*. According to Schleppegrell, *field* refers to the ideas to be conveyed; *tenor* identifies the relationship between the audience and speaker, or the reader and the writer; and *mode* views how the language is structured to serve the ideational and interpersonal purposes of the speaker - more specifically it refers to the channel of communication (i.e. spoken/writing, monologic/dialogic, visual contact like: video conference).

The SFL approach was adopted for this study, because it provides a potentially effective tool to analyse the linguistic productions of oral presentations. It was adapted from Schleppegrell's (2004) original model and was mainly used to discuss the cohesive devices in written language. In this study the variable 'mode' refers to the textual resources used for communication purposes.

Different modes require different ways of presenting and organising a text. For instance, different modes may be used when writing a journal article or speaking to a friend on the phone; each requires making different linguistic choices and text organisation. The linguistic resources that consider mode include cohesive devices, phrase-combining strategies, and thematic organization (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Schleppegrell, 2004).

This study focused on the components of textual resources (i.e. cohesive devices) and SFL provided a framework to analyse the language patterns to recognise how information is presented. In this way the SFL approach can dissect oral presentation and, hence, it provided a valuable analytical tool for oral presentation texts. The section below provides a brief description of the cohesive devices, which will be considered in the data analysis and findings.

### **Cohesive devices**

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976) cohesive devices establish cohesion in texts. The five types of cohesion include *reference*, *substitution*, *ellipsis*, *lexical cohesion* and *conjunction*. Reference "occurs when one element of a text points to another for its interpretation" (Crowhurst, 1987, p. 185). Halliday and Hasan (1976) classify *reference* as pronominal, such as: he, him, his, it, hers; demonstrative and definite articles, such as: this, those, there, the, then (time adverbial) and comparatives such as: same, similar, different, other, else.

*Substitution* means replacing the previous nouns, verbs or phrases with another word or phrase. It was divided into three types: nominal substitutes, verbal substitutes and clausal substitutes. Substitution is the replacement of a sentence element with another word or phrase of the same meaning.

*Ellipsis* refers to the omission of the previously mentioned words or phrases. It can be divided into nominal ellipsis, verbal ellipsis and clausal ellipsis. For instance: What is Tim doing? – Sleeping. Here the nominal head 'Tim' and oper-

ator 'is' are omitted.

*Lexical cohesion* refers to either a repetition of an item or the synonyms, or near synonyms, superordinate, or lexical collocation.

*Conjunction* relates to the use of words and phrases to create logical relations. It includes five kinds: additive (and, nor, that is), adversative (yet, but, however, on the contrary), causal (so, then, therefore, because, in consequence), temporal (then, first, at once, soon) and discourse (well, anyway, surely).

### RESEARCH AIM

Learners' progress concerning second language development in relation to the theory of language socialisation was, therefore, deemed worthy of investigating. This research study aimed to explore how language socialisation process, over time, results in English as second language (ESL) learner's progress in an academic discourse community?

### METHODS AND PROCEDURE

A systemic functional linguistics (SFL) approach by Schleppegrell (2004) was implemented in this research study to analyse the data relating to the oral presentations. This study investigated the academic language socialisation in an academic discourse of oral presentations. The participant in this study was an elementary Iranian postgraduate student who had been studying Physics in an American university for about two years. The data were collected through transcripts of video recordings, observations, semi-structured interviews, and some field notes.

Instruments used in this study involved a test called the Oral English Proficiency Test (OEPT). According to Jenkins and Parra (2003) OEPT is a computer-based test to screen prospective teaching assistants for language proficiency. Participant responded to a variety of questions, presented information and spoke extemporaneously on various topics within a discipline. The responses were recorded and evaluated by two qualified evaluators. A score of 50 or higher is required for certification. All graduate students, in America,

who would like to assume teaching responsibilities are required to take the test, which focusses on terminologies relating to their discipline.

The data from this research were gained through four oral presentations, during a one-year period (September 2015, December 2015, March 2016, September 2016) and focused on cohesive devices (which have been described in above sections) in the texts of the participant's oral presentations. The aim of this study was, therefore, to describe the linguistic development of the participant's academic discourse socialisation from a SFL approach.

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overall, the findings revealed that the use of cohesive devices used by the participant increased in the oral presentations over the one-year duration, in both quantity and variety. The following four excerpts (Shown below in *italics*) illustrate how the participant discussed the same or similar topics: the discovery of Newton's Law/ the discovery of Newton's law of universal gravitation.

The cohesive devices in the following excerpts from the OEPT were analysed according to the following categories: references, lexical cohesion, and conjunctions.

The participant did not apply the ellipsis device in his speech. Substitution device was also used only once in September 2016 by him: "Newton found that this force can be a more general one". "One" here is a substitution for "this force". Therefore, the data were not analysed and discussed in relation to ellipsis and substitution devices.

*I think everybody's heard about that. Yeah? Before Newton, a lot of scientists [did] a lot, a lot of research to summarize the motion of a ...of [an] object. So they tried a lot. Newton [summarized] their work and then Newton got his law.*  
**(Documents: September 2015)**

*So I think everyone has heard the story of [Newton's law]... how he*

*discovered the law of universal gravitation. It is that, uh, an apple [fell off] the tree, it just hit Newton's head so and Newton [became]... started to think about [the concept], so, why would the apple fall off. So, after he [thought] about it, he [got] Newton's law, which is... which is published in 1687.*

**(Documents: December 2015)**

*So first, I would like to, I would like to go back to talk about some history, about the discovery of universal gravitation so...I think that during this process, [apples] have [played] an important role to the discovery of universal gravitation... mmm. About three hundred ago, I think all of you have learned, have [known] that, known that, that story as the apple fell off and it hit the head of Newton and so Newton [began] to think about why the apple fall off, so if that the force, that ...mmm, as soon as, as soon as the force were attracting between the earth and the moon, so Newton, Newton is ...[began] to think about*

*this question so he discovered the Newton's law of universal gravitation. **(Documents: March 2016)***

*And Newton found this law about 300 years ago. And before we start I'd like to talk about how Newton discovered this law. And this law is kind of [upsetting] to us. Why Newton discovered it? And... So you know that, yeah, you know that about three hundred years again, ago, Newton was in the garden and you know an apple hit upon his head and he started to think about why the apple [fell] off and so he found later that it's because [of] the gravitation the earth applies to the apple... So there was, is a force between the apple and the earth. And later, Newton found that this force can be a more general one. So he found that every subject, every subject with masses, they would attract each other by a force. So the [force] that the earth applied to the apple is just, uh, an example of the universal gravitation.*

**(Documents: September 2016)**

**Table1**

*Participant's use of references*

<b>September 2015</b>	<b>December 2015</b>	<b>March 2016</b>	<b>September 2016</b>
<i>I, everyone</i>	<i>I, everyone</i>	<i>I, you</i>	<i>I, we, you, us</i>
<i>that (Newton's law)</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>the</i>
<i>they (the scientists)</i>	<i>He, (Newton)</i>	<i>This (discovery)</i>	<i>this, 3 times (the law of universal gravitation)</i>
<i>their (the scientists)</i>	<i>It, (the story)</i>	<i>it, (the apple)</i>	<i>it, (the law)</i>
<i>the</i>	<i>It, (apple)</i>	<i>this, (the question)</i>	<i>that (the story)</i>
<i>his (Newton)</i>		<i>he (Newton)</i>	<i>his (Newton)</i>
			<i>he, (2 times, Newton)</i>
			<i>this (force)</i>
			<i>they, (every subject)</i>
			<i>each other; (subject)</i>

The Table 1 above shows how the participant used references to establish cohesion in the texts. As we can see, from

September 2015 to September 2016, there are many changes in terms of using reference to establish cohesive texts.

In September 2015 and even in December 2015, the participant used only very basic reference words such as 'they' referring to 'the scientists' and 'he' for 'Newton'. In comparison, in September 2016, he continued the use of 'he' but he added a lot of

reference words to establish and maintain a coherent flow of the text. In addition to references, lexicons could also be used as cohesive devices as shown in Table 2 below when he used lexis as cohesive devices at different times.

**Table 2**

*Participant's use of lexical cohesion*

September 2015	December 2015	March 2016	September 2016
	<i>the story</i>	<i>history</i>	<i>Discover</i>
	<i>Newton's law</i>	<i>the discovery of universal</i>	<i>(this) law</i>
	<i>the law of universal</i>	<i>gravitation</i>	<i>The apple</i>
	<i>gravitation</i>	<i>apple</i>	<i>the force</i>
	<i>apple</i>	<i>story</i>	<i>the earth</i>
		<i>The force</i>	<i>the gravitation</i>
		<i>Newton's law of universal</i>	<i>every subject</i>
		<i>gravitation</i>	<i>The universal gravitation</i>

Table 2 above shows how lexical cohesion developed over time in the participant's discourse productions. In September 2015, he did not use any lexical cohesion devices. In December 2015, he started to use words like 'the story', 'Newton's Law' and 'the law of universal gravitation', repeating these lexical resources to describe the concept and create a sense of cohesion.

While talking about the discovery of the law of universal gravitation, for example, he used the word 'apple' twice in December 2015, three

times in March 2016, and five times in September 2016. Moreover, in September 2016, words like 'the earth' and 'a/the force' are also very important in describing this concept and their repetition also helped to create a more cohesive text.

As the participant continued his language socialisation in his new academic community, he was making good progress in his language use. Table 3 below discusses the participant's use of conjunctions.

**Table 3**

*Participant's use of conjunctions*

September 2015	December 2015	March 2016	September 2016
before	that	so	and
so	so	first	before
and then	why	as	and so
	and	and	and later
	so	why	that, (found that...)
	after	if	why
	which	as soon as	that, (the forces that)
		that	it
			because
			and so
			and later

Table 3 above shows the third category of cohesive devices (i.e. the conjunctions) that appeared in the participant's transcribed oral

presentation. As the participant continued the process of language socialisation in his academic community, he produced longer texts and used

more cohesive devices, both in terms of variety and quantity.

Initially, the participant used four simple conjunctions. Among these, 'before' functioned as a preposition to indicate time; 'so' was used as a summary of what was just being done; 'and then' means 'as a result' (September 2015). In comparison, it is noticeable that he introduced a 'which' phrase in December 2015. He also started to use more kinds of conjunctions such as 'if' and 'as soon as', though not very successfully (March 2016). In September 2016, he still used 'and' at the beginning of the sentence, but he also used 'and so' and, 'and later' more appropriately. He used 'because' and 'that' phrases appropriately in the text. The ability to use greater variety in cohesive devices is definitely an indication that the participant was making progress with increasing linguistic resources at his disposal.

### COMPARING THE FINDINGS IN THIS STUDY WITH THE PREVIOUS STUDIES

The investigation of the four transcribed oral presentations by the participant over a year revealed that there was an interesting increase in the numbers of 'and' and 'so'. Jin (2001) argues that different usages of cohesive devices in writing by native speakers and non-native speakers of English can be associated with some general areas. He summarises these as thought pattern, writing organisation, writing style, and language and writers' perceptions of cohesion. It seems that the participant of this study tended to use conjunctions such as: 'because', 'so', 'as' instead of 'in view of the fact that', 'in conclusion', and 'to begin with'.

Interestingly, Anping (2001) conducted a study to investigate the use of 'so' by English as foreign language (EFL) learners. Including a cohort of native speakers and non-native speakers, he found that EFL learners used 'so' in their writing seven to ten times more than the native speakers. Concerning the position of 'so' in the sentence Anping (2001) found that 78% of undergraduate and 44% of postgraduate EFL learners tend to use 'so' at the beginning of the sen-

tence, compared to the 22% of English native speakers who used 'so' at the beginning of sentences. Furthermore, it was noticed that 78% of English native speakers used 'so' in an embedded position in the text, compared to 22% of undergraduate and 56% of postgraduate EFL learners. Anping concluded that English learners' unawareness of spoken and written styles, their limited exposure to English and learning/performing strategies, along with the influence of the mother language transfer were considered possible reasons for the overuse or misuse of the word 'so' in the texts written by undergraduate and postgraduate EFL learners.

It could be concluded, therefore, that the participant of this study used more notional or logical connectivity between inter-clausal connections (Jin, 2001). The limited use of several simple conjunctions in the earlier sample (e.g. in Documents, September 2015) could be indicative of influence of the mother language transfer according to Anping (2002). Interestingly, the participant mentioned in a conversation that he thought a lot of Iranian learners of English simply translate their ideas into English without even changing the order of the words. As he continued his language socialisation in this academic community, it seemed that he developed the sense that there should be some conjunctions between the phrases or sentences. The increased number of the conjunctions, particularly 'and' and 'so', may have been an attempt, for this Iranian participant, to establish a connection between his ideas. Of course, in some cases, 'so' is used to express the ideas of 'as a result and therefore'; but in some situations, it may just work as a filler or transition to the next topic. In a study conducted by Hinkel (2002) it was found that ESL and EFL learners tend to use limited numbers of conjunctions in their speaking and written skills compared with native speakers.

Findings from this study also indicate that the participant used some logical conjunctions in his oral presentations to create a sense of cohesion (e.g. basic conjunctions such as: 'and, then, next, so'). The participant seemed to have a limited

linguistically appropriate repertoire to make the text more coherent. Despite the absence of comparative groups, the oral discourse finding, in the present study, reveals similar conclusions to Hinkel's (2002) study that found participants as presenters tend to have a rather limited number of cohesive devices to create cohesive texts, when learning English as a second language.

### **Exploring the research aim**

This study investigated the discourse socialisation progress of an Iranian English as second language (ESL) learner, studying in an American university, using the Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach. In other words, SFL approach was applied, in this study, to analyse the oral presentation discourse constructed by an Iranian postgraduate student, over time, in terms of textual resources. The findings revealed that the participant made progress during his socialisation process and he was able to draw on linguistic resources to achieve those purposes (mode).

It is evident that he became more competent as he continued his language socialisation in the host academic community. He made progress in terms of using textual resources. Through SFL analysis. It appeared that the participant learned to use the language more appropriately during the continued socialisation in the target community. As Ochs and Schieffelin (2011) argue, however, language socialisation is a lifelong process, so the participant is bound to face challenges and difficulties in terms of English language use.

Hinkel (2002) compared 68 linguistic features of texts produced by ESL writers with those of native speakers in postgraduate first year composition courses. She found that many ESL writers included oral features, such as frequent use of conjunctions, especially causal conjunctions, exemplification markers, and established text cohesion with demonstrative pronouns, rather than lexical ties. For the cohesive devices, second language (L2) writers also used more conjunctive and fewer lexical ties. ESL writers showed less lexical control, variety and sophistication com-

pared to the native speakers'. Hinkel concluded that many postgraduate ESL texts rely on simple phrase and sentence-level conjunctions and exemplification. These findings can also be linked to ESL oral presenters, who also rely on several simple logical conjunctions to maintain the text cohesion. Using the participant of this study as an example, it was found that not only did he increase the number of cohesive devices, but he also increased the use of cohesive devices, over time. Overall, however, the participant in the present study was found to primarily rely on several simple conjunctions for transition or cohesion, such as: 'and', 'so'. Although, sometimes he failed to use logical connectors between topic units.

### **SO WHAT IS NEXT...?**

The findings of this study indicated that the participant was often unaware of how his linguistic productions might have affected his performance with oral presentations. It is, therefore, important to raise ESL learners' awareness of the expected linguistic productions of oral presentations to accelerate or facilitate second language academic discourse socialisation. Discourse analysis can be used as a way to increase ESL learners' awareness of their own linguistic productions. In this way, second language learners can self-monitor their own productions, although they may need to be explicitly taught about the linguistic features that are more commonly used by native speakers/writers.

Based on the findings of this study, ESL learners may need to focus more on how an oral and written presentations ought to be constructed and structured. This means developing their use of cohesive devices to create a coherent speech. This may be challenging for them and although the difficulties documented by Hinkel (2002), it does remain possible for ESL learners to become accustomed to the norms of the second language discourse community. In doing so they will ably work towards the goal of becoming advanced ESL proficient speakers, for example, when performing oral tasks.



In spite of the difficulties that the participant reported as experiencing with oral presentations, the findings indicate he expressed very positive attitudes towards oral presentations as a form of learning. This activity required the learners to not only know the structures of the words and the sentences, but also to develop a capacity to organise and deliver their ideas clearly using a second language. A recommendation, therefore, would be to integrate oral presentations into the graduate curriculum exploratory learning where exploratory learning is embraced (see also Beckett, 2005).

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