

***“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”: Discourse Functions of Self-mention in East Asian TESOL Graduate Student Presentations***

**Alla Zareva**

*Old Dominion University, USA*

The purpose of the present study is to explore the notion of identity in East Asian (EA) TESOL graduate student's presentations. The research is based on a corpus of EA graduate student presentations ( $n = 20$ ), focusing on their uses of the first person singular pronouns and possessive determiners *I*, *my*, and *me*. The analysis builds on Zareva's (2013) methodology of investigating the genre identity roles found in English native-speaking student presentations. The results revealed that the EA students gave the greatest preference to asserting their scholarly selves in their presentations by inhabiting identity roles typically associated with the written academic genres, while still revealing different sides of their personal and social selves in relation to the topic content of their presentations. However, in most cases, their attempts to do so were significantly less frequent than those of the English native-speaking students, and their linguistic choices were more repetitive. I conclude that the individualistic identity implied in the use of the first person pronoun and its determiners in oral academic discourse may be problematic for many EA students, and thus, explicit teaching of how to utilize it strategically would be one means of raising their rhetorical awareness not only as graduate students but also as rhetorically conscious TESOL instructors.

**Keywords:** student academic presentations, oral academic discourse, self-mention, first person pronoun use, identity, East Asian graduate students

“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”...

## **Introduction**

Researchers seem to be in agreement that the literature on academic discourse has been preoccupied with academic writing far more than with the oral academic genres (Hyland, 2002; Morton & Rosse, 2011; Swales, 1990). The writing genres, however, do not exist in a vacuum. They interact, complement, and co-exist alongside a variety of oral genres with which they form academic “sets” and “networks” (Swales, 2004, p. 22) available for dissemination and display of academic knowledge to all disciplines. In relation to this, interest in oral academic discourse has developed in at least two directions—first, comparatively exploring the features that written and oral academic discourse have in common and, second, identifying the features that are typical of oral academic talk and distinguishing it from the more formal written register. In this regard, studies on oral academic discourse, produced by both students and experts, have been able to uncover a wealth of features typical of different oral academic genres, some of which are characteristic of the broader academic community, while others are restricted primarily to the student community (e.g., lectures: Crawford-Camiciottoli, 2004; conference papers: Rowley-Jolivet, 1999; Thompson, 2002; Ventola, Shalom, & Thompson, 2002; Webber, 2005; graduate seminars: Weissberg, 1993; oral presentations: Andeweg, de Jong, & Hoeken, 1998; Boyd, 1989; Dubois, 1980, 1982; Morton & Rosse, 2011; Zareva, 2009a, 2009b, 2011).

This paper will address the functions of self-mention in graduate student academic presentations—a genre that has become one of the commonly practiced genres by the student community at many North American universities. The “popularity” of this genre has increased in many North American universities because of the growing realization among employers and educators that good oral and presentation skills are essential to students’ professionalization across all disciplines (Morton & Rosse, 2011; Zareva, 2011). In other words, once college students enter their professional fields of specialization, they should be able to effectively and convincingly

communicate their ideas and present their professionally produced products to demanding audiences. Similarly, there is a growing realization that students' training in the oral genres typical of their disciplines should start early in their education so that they can become conscious users of a wide range of rhetorical strategies that would help them become skillful presenters. This is perhaps one of the reasons why many undergraduate and graduate courses, at least in the U.S., have started to include oral presentations of student research (empirical and/or theoretical) as a graded component of their coursework.

The ability to show mastery of presentation skills becomes even more urgent when English as a second language (ESL) students enter into graduate programs in different English-speaking countries. This pressure stems in part from the expectation that these students should show a high degree of familiarity and reasonable mastery of this academic genre as soon as they enter their programs. It also comes in part from the expectation that ESL students will quickly "pick up" the rhetorical and linguistic features associated with the presentation as a genre on their own as they are exposed to it in the course of completing their studies (Zareva, 2011). In this author's view, this seems to be an unreasonable expectation, as most ESL students report little or no prior experience with giving academic presentations either in English or their native language in their previous academic studies. This largely explains why most of them feel unprepared and hard-pressed to handle the task of presenting, especially when this assignment comes in their first semester of study when they have hardly had much time to determine what is expected from them from the minimal exposure to oral academic input they have had in their new study environment.

My interest in this paper is to explore the identities that TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) graduate students convey in their presentations, and how they position themselves with regard to their choices of self-mention. This investigation will be limited to an analysis of presentations given by students from several East Asian countries, since these students form the largest international student body of Asian students in the U.S. According

“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”...

to the annual report by the Institute of International Education(<http://www.iie.org/Services/Project-Atlas/UnitedStates/International-Students-In-US>), during the 2011-2012 academic year, the number of foreign students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities was estimated to be 764,495. The Asian students comprised 43% of all international student enrollment, with the main source countries being several East Asian countries—i.e., China (25.4%), Taiwan (3%), and Japan (2.6%). In addition, all East Asian (EA) students who participated in the study reported no previous training or experience with giving academic presentations in their prior education in their native countries, either in English or their native language, which further prompted interest in this particular sample of participants.

The analysis has been motivated by two main goals, the first being to compare the patterns of self-mention prominent in the EA student data to those typical of English native speaking (L1) American graduate students enrolled in similar TESOL Programs. The primary purpose of this comparison is to identify areas in which the EA students may need explicit awareness-raising instruction for some self-mention rhetorical choices that are available to them. The analysis also aims at highlighting patterns of self-reference usage among EA students that bring richness, variability, and valuable content to TESOL-track graduate programs where international students often times form a substantial part of the student body. The central premise driving the investigation is that knowing more about different linguistic and discourse features of the presentation as an oral academic genre will help us finely tune our instructional practices to ESL students’ needs, raise their rhetorical awareness, and influence their linguistic choices to allow them to consciously target specific effects on their audiences.

As pointed out by Hyland (2002), academic prose is by no means completely impersonal. The most prominent means of self-representation and making one-self visible in discourse is the use of the first person singular pronoun and its determiner analogues (*I, me, my, mine*). Unlike academic writing, though, academic speech is much more tolerant of self-mention and self-reference as a strategy not only to display confidence, authority and

ownership of ideas, but also to organize the speech event and lead the audience through the presentation content. Along these lines, research has shown that the first person pronouns (both singular and plural) can be used as a powerful rhetorical strategy, but some studies have also found that many ESL users, especially Asian L2 students, may not feel comfortable using them for a variety of reasons (e.g., Hyland, 2002).

Thus, the focus of the study will be on the use of the first person singular pronouns and determiners by EA TESOL graduate students as the most salient means of self-mention and maintenance of multiple identity roles in academic discourse. More specifically, the analysis will treat two main categories of identity roles—social and academic writing genre identity roles—as they seem to be uniquely characteristic of the academic presentation as a genre in TESOL programs (Zareva, 2013). The analysis will also attempt to shed more light on the relationship between written and oral academic discourse with respect to the feature[s] studied and the extent to which the participants rhetorically explore the power of self-mention in their presentations. Additionally, since the study will replicate Zareva’s (2013) methodology of identity roles analyses carried out on an L1 corpus of student presentations, it will also allow the identity roles the EA students display to be compared with those found in L1 graduate students’ presentations. However, the purpose of the comparison will not be to put forward a native-speaker “model” of delivering a presentation and using the first person singular pronouns. Rather, the primary goal of the comparison will be to uncover patterns of uses that show students’ pragmatic understanding of what they perceive to be an acceptable representation of their developing professional selves as presenters and how they align themselves with the socially constructed identities of their discipline in an L2 context.

“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”...

### **Self-mention and the Choice of Multiple Identities in Academic Discourse**

Social psychology sees the self as consisting of multiple identities—i.e., the self is composed of as many identities as the number of relationship systems people participate in (Stryker, 2007). Thus, the term “multiple identities” reflects the idea that people may identify themselves with and, respectively, inhabit a variety of roles, assigned to them by the organized social systems with which they interact. As Ivanič (1994) succinctly put it, “a person's diverse identities constitute the richness and the dilemmas of her sense of self” (p. 4). For example, a teacher from China who is completing her Master's degree in TESOL as an international student is likely to identify herself simultaneously with being a Chinese, a teacher, a graduate student, and an international student, simply based on these four main social structures of which she is a member. Each of these identities can be further realized by a number of roles she may inhabit within the identities she assumes—for instance, as a Chinese, she may identify with the roles of being a native of China, role model, and others; as a teacher, she may assume the roles of a knowledge provider, classroom manager, knowledgeable professional, and such; as a TESOL graduate student, she may identify with the roles of a class member, novice researcher, and competent ESL user; and as an international student, she may inhabit the role of being a cultural ambassador. Put differently That is, role identities develop from acquiring shared behavior expectations, on the one hand, and, on the otherhand, they are tightly linked to behaviors, expected to be implemented by those occupying specific social positions (Echabe, 2010; Stryker, 2007).

Most of the research on authorial self-mention and self-reference in relation to identity has been primarily on the written academic genres. These studies (e.g., Harwood 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Hyland, 1998, 2001, 2003; Kuo, 1999; Lorés-Sanz, 2011; Peters, 2011) have confirmed that the use of the first person pronouns is a valuable rhetorical strategy to construct multiple identities. Many researchers have also pointed out that identity construction

is not a matter of free choice. In other words, the conventions of personality projection in academic contexts are rhetorically constrained, and while most experienced writers and presenters are familiar with these constraints, novice graduate students do not usually have such familiarity. Yet, early in their studies, they have to make rhetorical choices to position themselves in disciplinary acceptable ways and, at the same time, take on the identity of a member of a community they have just started to become acquainted with.

This usually poses a greater challenge for ESL students coming from more collectivistic cultures (e.g., Asian cultures), whose identities are often embedded in different epistemologies, and the expression of an individualistic identity may be in conflict with their own cultures (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). To make matters even more complicated, unlike in writing, the rhetorical uses of authorial self-mention in oral academic discourse (including student presentations) is a very under-researched area, which makes the issue of “conventions” notoriously uncertain and ambiguous. The ambiguity primarily stems from two main directions: First, the academic presentation is a genre that content-wise is tightly linked to academic writing, since a large part of any academic presentation content is based on written academic sources. Thus, we should expect that some of the language features and rhetorical choices in presentations will be similar to the ones in academic writing. On the other hand, the oral mode of delivery has been also found to influence the language features of presentations, bringing them closer to spoken discourse than to academic writing (e.g., the use of approximators and imprecise numerical expressions [Dubois, 1987], imprecise quantifiers like *about*, *rather*, *a little*, *approximately* [Webber, 2005], adverbials of different complexity [Zareva, 2009a], certain sentence structures [Zareva, 2009b], some aspects of the lexical composition of presentations [Zareva, 2012], etc.) Unfortunately, TESOL graduate students (both L1 and ESL) who are not yet familiar with the oral culture of their disciplines are usually left on their own to decide how to reconcile what Geertz (1988) calls ‘author-evacuated’ prose that many textbooks and style guides recommend to students in writing with the

“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”...

characteristics of the academic presentation as an oral genre.

In this paper I will argue that, in constructing their identity in their presentations, EA TESOL graduate students draw from a multitude of roles. These roles will be interpreted and discussed from a listener’s point of view primarily because my personal observations suggest that, very rarely (if ever), do students make their self-mention rhetorical choices consciously, even though they prepare and rehearse their presentations in advance. My goal in this paper is to explore comparatively L1 and EA TESOL graduate students’ self-mention uses as a strategy to convey multiple identity roles relevant to the genre so that, in our instructions and/or feedback to students’ presentations, we can make them explicitly aware of how they have positioned themselves in their discourse. To my knowledge, such a comparison has never been done before on academic speech. As a starting point, the analysis will use Zareva’s (2013) methodology and taxonomy of identity roles found in L1 TESOL graduate student presentations. What makes this framework relevant and applicable to the current analysis is the similarities the two data sources share (see description of the study for more details) in addition to the fact that, to my knowledge, this is the only research that deals in a systematic way with the rhetorical functions of the first person singular pronoun in reference to identity in student academic presentations.

Based on the review of the literature on social identity, professional identity, written academic genre identity, and her data analysis, Zareva (2013) identified three main categories of roles related to the uses of the first person pronoun in a corpus, consisting of the presentations of L1 American TESOL graduate students, i.e.:

1) **Academic writing genre identity roles**, which, based on Tang and John’s (1999) framework, include specific roles that can be typically found in academic writing—e.g., self-references to portray the author as *a representative, guide, recounter of the research process, architect, opinion holder*, and *originator*. The only role in Tang and John’s (1999) taxonomy that Zareva (2013) did not find in her study was that of “*I*” as *the representative*, probably because this role is mainly realized by the use of the



plural rather than the singular first person pronouns.

2) **Social identity roles** are the roles linked to a person's membership to different social structures. This category distinguishes between 1) students' projection of their developing professional selves as *knowledge providers* as well as *learners* and 2) their identification with certain institutionally related roles—i.e., their self-references as a *class member* as well as an *individual* who connects their own personal experiences to the content of the presentation and/or the topic itself.

3) **Speech event roles** include roles associated with the management of the speech event itself.

The order in which the categories are listed above was also found to reflect L1 graduate students' preference for the facets of their identities that they wished to foreground most in their presentations and the facets that they preferred to downplay—that is, the set of roles related to academic writing roles were given the greatest prominence, followed by those associated with social identity and speech event management.

In light of these findings, the present study will try to address the following research questions by analyzing EA TESOL graduate students' usage of the first person singular pronouns and determiners (*I, me, my, mine*):

1. How do the identity roles projected by EA TESOL graduate students compare to the patterns found in L1 TESOL graduate students' presentations?
2. Which roles tend to dominate EA students' presentations and what is their distribution across the categories?

## The Study

### Participants

The research is based on a corpus of academic presentations, given by EA

“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”...

graduate students who, at the time of the data collection, were enrolled in Applied Linguistics programs with TESOL-tracks at several U.S. universities. The presentations were delivered and recorded during the last two weeks of the students' first term of classes in their respective programs. The corpus contained 41,067 words of individual presentations ( $n = 20$ ) given by first-year, first-term graduate students from several countries in East Asia: Japan ( $n = 10$ ), China ( $n = 8$ ), and Taiwan ( $n = 2$ ). All participants ( $n_{Males} = 8$ ,  $n_{Females} = 12$ ,  $M_{Age} = 28.4$ ) reported having learned English through formal instruction in their native countries ( $M = 12.7$  years of English language instruction) and had spent on average several months in the U.S. ( $M = 3$  years). The proficiency admission requirements for the ESL students required the submission of official TOEFL scores as a test of overall proficiency. The L2 students' paper-based TOEFL scores ranged from 550 to 647 ( $M = 597$ ), computer-based TOEFL—from 237 to 276 ( $M = 254$ ), and their Internet-based TOEFL scores ranged from 83 to 99 ( $M = 91$ ). Based on the TOEFL score comparison table (see <http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/TOEFL-SUM-0506-iBT.pdf>), the proficiency scores indicated that all students were proficient users of English.

## The Data

All presentations were given to satisfy a course requirement for a final project presentation and were on a variety of TESOL-related topics the participants chose to research. Most of the presentations were based on library research, which means they were theoretical in nature, with the exception of three presentations based on case studies. The students discussed a variety of linguistic and applied linguistic topics that were closely related to their TESOL areas of concentration.

Since the EA TESOL graduate student data were compared to Zareva's (2013) L1 TESOL graduate student data, a serious attempt was made to make the current corpus comparable to the one used in Zareva's (2013) study with respect to a number of variables that could potentially influence participants'

uses of the first person singular pronouns and determiner. Below are the features that were kept similar across both studies and data sources.

- (1) Each corpus consisted of  $n = 20$  presentations.
- (2) Based on the assignment grades, the presentations included in each analysis were rated as overall high-quality presentations.
- (3) In both studies, the presentation topics were limited to ones related to second language acquisition (SLA) and TESOL.
- (4) In both studies, the presentation task was explained briefly in the course syllabus. The students were encouraged to critically overview an SLA or TESOL issue of their choice by conducting library research. Their presentations, however, had to contain some independent thought and reveal their stance on the discussed issues.
- (5) The class sizes were relatively small in both studies (between 9 and 22 students) and depended on the regular course enrollment at the time.
- (6) As in Zareva's (2013) study, the presentations had an original time limit of 20 minutes, and on average they complied with this ( $M = 19$  min. average length).
- (7) The presenters in both studies used some form of visuals in their presentations (e.g., PowerPoint and/or handouts).
- (8) The individual presentations in the current study had a similar word length ( $M_{EA} = 2,053$  words) to Zareva's (2013) L1 students' presentations ( $M_{L1} = 2,048$  words).

Following the same methodology as in Zareva's (2013) study, after the presentations were recorded, the students completed a short questionnaire which included demographic items as well as questions related to their training and experience with giving academic presentations. None of the participants reported any specific training in giving academic presentations in their previous education, and this is probably why they were not quite

“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”...

confident in their presentation skills and self-rated them relatively low ( $M=3.5$  on a 6-point scale). They also reported being required to give about four graded presentations per term, which shows that the student presentation is a frequently used graded assignment for assessment and professional development purposes in TESOL-track programs. Overall, all participants considered it important to have good presentation skills ( $M=5.4$  on a 6-point scale).

### **Data Analysis and Coding**

The audio-recorded presentations were transcribed orthographically. Following Zareva's (2013) procedure, the analysis was carried out in two steps: During the first step, the data were run through concordance software (*MonoConc Pro Version 2.0*) and all occurrences of the first person singular pronoun and determiner (*I, me, mine, my*) were identified, of which only *I, me, and my* were present in the corpus. Once all cases were identified, they were all examined qualitatively, and the following cases were excluded from the analysis:

- 1) Occurrences that were not used as a self-reference, usually as part of examples or quotes (e.g., *And then she said “I'm not sure what you mean.”*);
- 2) Occurrences that showed that the speaker has abandoned his/her initially attempted structure (e.g., *I think ... um, okay, ... Here is the next slide*);
- 3) Sequential repetitions of the first person pronoun (e.g., *So I, I, I couldn't go any further in my conclusions.*).

Next, using Zareva's (2013) taxonomy of identity roles found in L1 TESOL graduate student presentations, each of the remaining occurrences was coded as a specific identity role it was perceived to represent. The perspective taken in this categorization was that of a receiver/listener, so it

was important to ensure that the subjectivity of the classification judgment was acceptably minimized. Interestingly, no new identity role categories were found in the EA ESL corpus, which made the comparison between the L1 and EA TESOL students even more accurate.

The following patterns of roles were identified in the EA TESOL graduate student presentations (see Table 1):

TABLE 1  
*Identity Roles in East Asian TESOL Graduate Student Academic Presentations Expressed by Their Usage of The First Person Singular Pronoun in Comparison to Zareva's (2013) L1 TESOL Graduate Students' Usage*

Academic writing genre roles					
	<i>I</i> (raw frequency)	<i>my</i> (raw frequency)	<i>me</i> (raw frequency)	Total EA Ss ( <i>n</i> = 20) (raw frequency/%)	Total L1 Ss ( <i>n</i> = 20) (raw frequency/%) Zareva (2013)
1) "I" as a guide	56	30	2	88 (18%)	147 (22%)
2) "I" as a recounter of the research process	88	7	1	96 (19%)	114 (17%)
3) "I" as an architect	38	14	3	55 (11%)	63 (10%)
4) "I" as an opinion holder	41	9	1	51 (10%)	40 (6%)
5) "I" as an originator	9	-	-	9 (2%)	46 (7%)
Total				299 (60%)	410 (62%)
Social identity roles					
<b>Professional identity roles:</b>					
6) "I" as a knowledge provider	37	-	2	39 (8%)	71 (11%)
7) "I" as a learner	28	3	-	31 (6%)	71 (11%)

“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”...

**Institutional identity**

**roles:**

8) “I” as an individual	26	20	3	49 (10%)	53 (8%)
9) “I” as a community of practice member	33	11	11	55 (11%)	27 (4%)
Total				174 (35%)	222 (34%)
Speech event roles					
10) “I” as a speech event manager	21	-	2	23 (5%)	28 (4%)
Overall Total	377	94	25	496 (100%)	660 (100%)

**Academic writing genre roles.**

**“I” as a guide.** In this role, the presenters used the first person singular pronoun to guide their audience through the visuals and the obvious points of their presentations, e.g.:

I wanna talk about phono- phonetic transfer and I have ... two examples here.

**“I” as a recounter of the research process.** The students employed this identity role to project themselves as researchers who comment on their experiences throughout the research process, e.g.:

For this research, the interviews were done in Japanese, so I re- I didn’t really talk to them in English.

**“I” as an architect.** The students occupied this identity role to outline the organization of their presentations, using primarily metadiscourse language. Unlike the role of “I as a guide,” in which they referred to certain points in the visual (PowerPoint or handout) in their speech, in the role of an architect, the students laid out the plan for their presentations without visual support, e.g.:

“The first part I wanna talk about why I chose this topic. And, second, I’m going to talk about pseudo-communication in the classroom.”

**“I” as an opinion holder.** This identity role allows presenters to take up positions and express their attitudes, opinions, beliefs, etc. that may or may not be in agreement with some of the information discussed in their presentations, e.g.:

And I’m sure there’s a lot of countless numbers of uh limitations of in this study but um I’m just gonna talk about a few. I sometimes felt like I wanted ... I want this information and I want this answer.

**“I” as an originator.** That’s the identity role which reveals the presenters’ self-perception as experts on the topics they discuss, who can also draw conclusions that may be new to them and/or to the audience, e.g.:

Okay, another example related to phonetic transfer is linking. In Chinese, there is no, in terms of sound, there is no connection between every two words. Chinese is very choppy, I think it’s, it’s similar to Japanese in connecting two words together.

## **Social identity roles**

### **Professional identity roles.**

**“I” as a knowledge provider.** In this identity role, the students demonstrate their knowledge on the issues they discuss, give examples to illustrate subject-specific concepts, and thoughtfully evaluate the sources on which the presentation is based, e.g.:

Okay, another example I wanna give you is about syntactical transfer.

“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”...

*“I” as a learner.* The students inhabit this identity role to reflect on what they have carried away from their research and how this experience has influenced their thinking or changed their stance. They also call it into play to share some of their hesitations, uncertainties, and knowledge gaps they are aware of, e.g.:

I am a novice in this kind of discipline, so um there are there are things that I learned very recently so, if you have questions after that, I might not be able to answer correctly.

### **Institutional identity roles.**

*“I” as an individual.* The students take on this role when they find it relevant to connect their personal life, thoughts, and feelings to some aspects of their presentation topics. In this role, presenters usually choose to share specific personal life experiences mainly to point out connections they have discovered or started to see as a result of their researching the presentation topics. This is one of the identity roles that personalizes the presentation and gives the audience a glimpse of the presenter’s personal life, e.g.:

When I was in Hong Kong, I didn’t care what name I used, but when I came to Athens Ohio, I start introducing myself by my English names.

*“I” as a community of practice member.* Presenters assume this identity role to project themselves as class members who also identify with their TESOL community professionally or as a graduate student, e.g.:

So I’ve always wondered how much I should use the target language when I teach English in Japan for example.



## Speech event roles

*“I” as a speech event manager.* This identity role emerges as a result of the spoken mode of the presentation. It includes the uses of the first person singular pronoun in response to the physical environment in the classroom—e.g., self-corrections, apologies, technical or troubleshooting problems, time management and classroom management, e.g.:

Something’s wrong with this computer ... How do I get this on?  
I am so sorry I didn’t give you a handout.

## Discussion

Graduate students occupy a special place in the academe because, in addition to their already existing identity roles, they have to assume two other positions in the academic community—those of a “student” and “researcher” (Ivanič & Camps, 2001). In this regard, discussions of the rhetorical choices they make in academic discourse should take into account the relationship among the “personal”, the “professional”, the specificities of the academic context, the genres students produce in this context, and the discourse itself (Zareva, 2013). Such an approach will help us better understand how the assignments graduate students do as part of their coursework in teacher preparation programs (such as TESOL-track graduate programs) fulfill programs’ goals of shaping them professionally, in addition to sensitizing them to the culture of the discipline.

For international students who are new to a particular social and academic context, some rhetorical choices can be of a considerable challenge, as many of them will be likely to find that the discourse practices of their disciplines and academic programs support identities that differ from those they bring with them (Hyland, 2002). These new identities can be realized rhetorically through a range of linguistic features, but they can be most prominently

“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”...

accomplished by the use of the first person singular pronouns and possessive determiner. As Hyland (2002) has pointed out, the use of these pronouns shows undoubtedly where speakers and writers stand on issues and, in that sense, it is a powerful rhetorical means to express an identity.

The first question the study addressed was to determine/ascertain how the identity roles the EA TESOL graduate students projected as authors of the content and agents of their presentations compared to the patterns found by Zareva (2013) in a similar set of L1 TESOL graduate student presentations. The purpose of this comparison is not to establish a “presentation norm” based on the L1 students performance or to suggest any deficits to what EA student presenters can achieve. The leading motivation behind the study of these two highly comparable corpora was that the comparison can provide information about what the two different groups of language users actually do under the same circumstances. It can also potentially uncover different aspects of their linguistic and interactive schemata, and hence, offer a better understanding of how students try to reconcile their perceptions of the academic conventions governing the presentation as a genre with their own cultural practices.

Looking at the three main categories of roles (i.e., academic writing genre roles, socially-motivated roles, and speech event roles) which have been found to characterize the genre of student presentations, the analysis showed that the two groups shared the same dominance of categories. That is, like in the L1 corpus, the academic writing genre roles (60%) dominated the EA students’ presentational discourse, followed by social identity roles (35%), and speech event roles (5%). This hierarchy further confirms the subtle interplay between the oral and written academic genres as well as EA students’ acute awareness that the oral academic discourse of the discipline is much more tolerant of use of the first person singular pronoun than for writing. It will be also safe to conclude that, even though the presentations were dominated by the identity roles typical of academic writing, the EA presenters subtly marked in their prepared oral discourse their presence as authors of the presentation content, as members of a new community of

practice, as well as individuals.

The second research question the study set out to investigate was to find the identity roles that dominated in EA student presentations and their distribution across the categories. In general, it did not come as a surprise that the identity roles typical of academic writing were also present in their presentations, since the two genres largely overlap in terms of purpose. Indeed, of the six writing identity roles identified by Tang and John (1999), five occurred in the EA students' presentations (the one that did not occur was *I as a representative*, which is usually realized by the use of the plural pronoun "we"). In their research on student-produced academic writing, Tang and John (1999) have also pointed out that the listed order of academic writing genre identity roles (see Table 1) also reflects the potential power wielded by the authorial presence—i.e., the role of *a guide* is the least powerful and face-threatening, while the roles of *opinion holder* and *originator* are the most assertive and face-threatening, as they relate to putting authors' ideas and opinions under the spotlight, and thus, making them vulnerable to criticism. In this regard, like the American TESOL graduate students, the proportional (%) distributions across the categories for the EA participants revealed stronger preference for inhabiting the less face-threatening roles, albeit important to oral academic discourse (as *a guide* (18%), as *a recounter of the research process* (19%), and as *an architect* (11%) than the more assertive ones of *an opinion holder* (10%) and *originator* of new ideas (2%).

However, the raw frequency with which the EA students projected their academic selves (which was, overall, substantially lower than the L1 students') was even more interesting, because it possibly revealed something about their cultural preferences. The high comparability between the two corpora allows us to take a closer look comparatively at the raw frequencies. Evidently, as *guides* the EA students were aware of how valuable it was to guide their audience through the visible aspects of their presentations. However, they used 1st person pronouns as self-reference much less frequently ( $n_{EA}=88$  compared to  $n_{L1}=147$ ) to locate information on the visuals

“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”...

or handouts for their peers or to remind them of previous class discussions pertinent to their presentations. Similarly, as *recouters of the research process*, they made themselves visible as researchers and decision-makers in the research process by describing the details of their research, which was probably perceived as a reflection of the objectivity and depth of their thinking that gave some validation to their opinions, conclusions, and findings from their research. However, again, they did so with lower frequency than the L1 graduate students ( $n_{EA} = 96$  compared to  $n_{L1} = 114$ ). Finally, as *architects* ( $n_{EA} = 55$  compared to  $n_{L1} = 63$ )—a role that is mostly metadiscoursal—the EA students talked overtly (yet inconsistently) about the content organization of their presentations by clarifying the sequence of the information flow, the main points to be addressed in their presentations, and the direction of their arguments.

There are a couple of plausible explanations for this state of affairs. One possibility is that the EA students utilized other means to fulfill these roles (e.g., passive structures [e.g., “*The research was carried out as follows.*” or other pronominal references—e.g., “*You can see the agenda on this slide.*”) rather than authorial self-reference, which was the L1 students’ preferred means to realize these identity roles. If that were the case, this would suggest that the EA students tried overwhelmingly to remove themselves as authors of their presentations and keep their authorial selves less visible, which did not seem to be confirmed by their overall self-mention presence. Another possibility is that the EA students stayed true to their cultural communication style preferences, much like the American graduate students did. That is, in their utilization of the three main categories of identity roles, the EA students seemed to adhere to the norms of the high context culture typical of Asian countries (e.g., Hall, 1976, 2000; Kittler, Rygl, & Mackinnon, 2011), while the American students, as representatives of a low context culture, aimed at providing much more explicitness in the roles of *guides*, *representatives*, and *architects* of their presentations.

Hall (1976) introduced the notion of high-/low-context cultures, suggesting that, according to their communication styles, cultures can be characterized

along the continuum of high-/low context cultures, with the classic dichotomy being the U.S.–Asian comparison (Kittler, Rygl, & Mackinnon, 2011). Subsequent cross-cultural communication research has largely confirmed the validity of this distinction in which high-context cultures (HC) rely primarily on the implicit code (i.e., they provide only minimal information in the message), while in low-context cultural (LC) communication, “the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code” (Hall, 1976, p. 79). That is, low-context messages tend to be more explicit and direct, whereas high-context messages are perceived as more indirect and often times ambiguous (Kim, 2013). While this cultural communication preference is shared within one’s own culture, it may become problematic in cross-cultural communication—i.e., listeners from low-context cultures may find high-context messages vague and/or unclear, and listeners from high-context cultures may perceive messages from low-context individual cultures to be too direct, explicit, and even aggressive (Kim, 2013). The present study did not specifically examine any cross-cultural effects stemming from the different frequency of use of the first person pronoun by the EA graduate students, but, in my view, it is useful for those students to be consciously aware of the specificities of the genre, on the one hand, and the cultural expectations of their audience, on the other hand.

An identity role the EA students occupied more prominently ( $n_{EA} = 51$ ) than the American students ( $n_{LI} = 40$ ) was the role of the presenter as an opinion holder, which requires the students to openly express a stance on the issues they discuss. Though this role was not overwhelming present in the data, it was evident that the EA TESOL graduate students did not shy away from expressing explicit commitment to their own ideas. However, the range of different structures they used was limited to a small number of expressions (e.g., *I think/I don’t think, I feel, I doubt, I’m not sure, in my opinion, etc.*). Understandably, the weaker claims of an *opinion holder* (e.g., *But personally I think students’ personality also affects their learning.*) were much more prevalent than the stronger ones of the presenter as an *originator* (e.g., *I have a different perspective on this issue.*). In the role of *originators*, professional

“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”...

authors usually use self-mention as a strategy to make knowledge claims and assert their authority as experts on a topic (Hyland, 2002), which is probably why this role is perceived as the most face-threatening. On average, the EA presenters were quite shy to align themselves with their claims ( $n_{EA} = 9$ ) compared to the L1 presenters ( $n_{L1} = 46$ ), which implied some hesitation on their part to assert themselves as authors who are relatively confident in their professional and subject-area expertise.

Social identity roles were the second most commonly inhabited category in both the L1 and EA presentation corpora, which comparatively also showed some interesting patterns of distribution. For instance, the EA students were twice more likely ( $n_{EA} = 55$ ) to align themselves with the role of *members of the TESOL community of practice* but twice less likely ( $n_{EA} = 70$ ) to project themselves as *knowledge providers* or *learners* compared to the L1 students ( $n_{L1} = 142$ ). For two roles, Farrell (2011) has rightly pointed out that, unlike some professional identity roles that may be imposed on teachers by the administration (e.g., *teacher as care provider*, as *entertainer*, etc.), the professional roles of TESOL teachers as *knowledge providers* and *learners* should be seen as examples of roles that are primarily individually created and negotiated. So, by taking on one of these roles in their presentations, the TESOL students take on an opportunity to share with their peers not only what they have learned from their research but also their reflections on their on-going professional development as teachers. By and large, explicit self-reflection about one's professional development and learning is strongly encouraged and a common practice at U.S. universities and, in that sense, there is an expectation that students will show this side of their academic selves both in writing and in speaking. In this regard, it seems that it is the explicitness of the self-reflection rather than the conscious awareness of their personal academic learning that the EA students were more reluctant to express and, in my view, it will be beneficial to them if they are encouraged early on, as ESL learners, to be explicitly reflective in their academic discourse.

Another area where the EA students contributed much more willingly than

the L1 students was when revealing their identities as members of the TESOL community of practice. This identity role allows presenters to refer to themselves either as class members and individuals who share common experiences with their peers or are open to sharing their own teaching experiences in relation to the issues they discuss in their presentations. In this role, the EA students were the most explicit in pointing out the reasons that motivated their choice of research and presentation topics (e.g., *Um, I choose this topic because I want to know how much I should use the first language when teaching English.*), followed by direct references to their personal experiences as teachers (e.g., *When I was teaching English in Japan, ah, one of my students asked me why do we have to study English because he hated it.*) as well as class members with shared knowledge (e.g., *If you remember, we talked about gender in class a couple of weeks ago and this kind of phenomenon really interests me and impresses me.*). Thus, the bond the EA students tried to create in their presentations between themselves, the class, and the larger TESOL community was remarkable because it brought variety and uniqueness to the international graduate TESOL classroom that a homogenous L1 TESOL classroom usually does not have. More importantly, by fulfilling this identity role, the EA students revealed their awareness that, as TESOL instructors, they have to be able to bridge their own culture and the one of the language they are planning to teach professionally not only linguistically but also rhetorically.

## Conclusion

Newly admitted graduate students are typically exposed to a number of new to them genres and discourses specific to their disciplines and they are expected to be able to adequately perform in them almost immediately. The oral academic presentation is a genre in which international graduate students, including EA students, do not receive much instruction either in their home countries or when they join their new programs at U.S. universities. In the

“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”...

absence of sufficient exposure to the typicality and the socially encoded oral cues in the host academic cultures, this lack of previous experience and/or instruction may make them rhetorically uncertain as to how to position themselves as authors in academic speaking . As a result, students may often find that their discourse choices to express authorship and authoritativeness in their presentations align them more closely to the values and beliefs that support their particular cultural identities, but not necessarily the expectations of the dominant forms.

The present study was an attempt to shed some light on the identity roles that EA TESOL graduate students project in their presentations and how they align themselves with their L1 peers in creating their genre and area-specific knowledge. Replicating Zareva’s (2013) methodology of data collection and identity role identification ensured high compatibility between the L1 and EA presentation corpora, thus making the comparisons possible and, more importantly, drawing conclusions against a backdrop of “sameness.” The analysis of EA students’ self-mention choices revealed that, like the L1 TESOL graduate students, the EA presenters give the greatest preference to asserting their scholarly selves in their presentations by staying close to the identity roles typically associated with the written academic genres, while still revealing different facets of their personal and social selves in relation to the content of their presentations. However, their attempts to do so by using the first person singular pronoun and determiner were significantly less frequent in most cases, and their linguistic choices to claim authorship and authority were quite repetitive. In my view, explicitly teaching students to strategically use the first person pronouns would be a way of making them consciously aware of the different ways they can make themselves visible as authors, while staying true to the conventions of their discipline, the genre, and their audience. This will, consequently, raise their rhetorical awareness and impact their linguistic choices not only as graduate students but also as future rhetorically conscious TESOL instructors.



## The Author

*Alla Zareva* is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Old Dominion University (USA). Her research interests range from lexical research and the structure of the mental lexicon of high proficiency L2 users of English to a variety of language features of student academic presentations.

Department of English  
5000 Batten Arts and Letters  
Old Dominion University  
Norfolk, VA 23529  
USA  
Tel: +1 7576834042  
E-mail: azareva@odu.edu

## References

- Andeweg, B. A., de Jong, J. C., & Hoeken, H. (1998). "May I have your attention?": Exordial techniques in informative oral presentations. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 7, 271–284.
- Boyd, F. A. (1989). Developing presentation skills: A perspective derived from professional education. *English for Specific Purposes*, 8, 195–203.
- Crawford-Camicciottoli, B. (2004). Interactive discourse structuring in L2 guest lectures: Some insights from a comparative corpus-based study. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 3, 39–54.
- Dubois, B. (1980). The use of slides in biomedical speeches. *The ESP Journal*, 1, 45–50.
- Dubois, B. (1982). "And the last slide please": Regulatory language function at biomedical meetings. *World Language English*, 1, 263–268.
- Dubois, B. (1987). Something on the order of around forty to forty-four:

“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”...

- Imprecise numerical expressions in biomedical slide talks. *Language and Society*, 16, 527–541.
- Echabe, A. E. (2010). Role identities versus social identities: Masculinity, femininity, instrumentality and communality. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 13, 30–43.
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2011). Exploring the professional role identities of experienced ESL teachers through reflective practice. *System*, 39, 54–62.
- Geertz, C. (1988). *Works and lives: The anthropologist as author*. Stanford University Press.
- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday.
- Hall, E. T. (2000). Context and meaning. In L. A. Samovar & R. E. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural Communication: A reader*, (Vol. 9). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Harwood, N. (2005a). “I hoped to counteract the memory problem, but I made no impact whatsoever”: Discussing methods in computing science using I. *English for Specific Purposes*, 24, 243–267.
- Harwood, N. (2005b). “Nowhere has anyone attempted ... In this article I aim to do just that”. A corpus-based study of self-promotional I and we in academic writing across four disciplines. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 37, 1207–1231.
- Harwood, N. (2005c). “We do not seem to have a theory ... The theory I present here attempts to fill this gap”: Inclusive and exclusive pronouns in academic writing. *Applied Linguistics*, 26(3), 343–375.
- Hyland, K. (1998). Persuasion and context: The pragmatics of academic metadiscourse. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 30, 437–455.
- Hyland, K. (2001). Humble servants of the discipline? Self-mention in research articles. *English for Specific Purposes*, 20, 207–226.
- Hyland, K. (2002). Authority and invisibility: Authorial identity in academic writing. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 34, 1091–1112.
- Hyland, K. (2003). Self-citation and self-reference: Credibility and promotion in academic publication. *Journal of the American Society*

- for Information Science and technology*, 54(3), 251–259.
- Ivanič, R. (1994). *I* is for interpersonal: Discoursal construction of writer identities and the teaching of writing. *Linguistics and Education*, 6, 3-15.
- Ivanič, R., & Camps, D. (2001). I am how I sound: Voice as self-representation in L2 writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 10, 3-33.
- Kim, J. (2013). Information and culture: Cultural differences in the perception and recall of information. *Library & Information Science Research*, 35, 241–250.
- Kittler, M. G., Rygl, D., & Mackinnon, A. (2011). Beyond culture or beyond control? Reviewing the use of Hall's high-/low-context concept. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 11(1) 63-82.
- Kuo, C.-H. (1999). The use of personal pronouns: Role relationships in scientific journal articles. *English for Specific Purposes*, 18(2), 121–138.
- Lorés-Sanz, R. (2011). The construction of the author's voice in academic writing: The interplay of cultural and disciplinary factors. *Text & Talk*, 31(2), 173–193.
- Morton, J., & Rosse, M. (2011). Persuasive presentations in engineering spoken discourse. *Australasian Journal of Engineering Education*, 17(2), 55–64.
- Peters, S. (2011). Asserting or deflecting expertise? Exploring the rhetorical practices of master's theses in the philosophy of education. *English for Specific Purposes*, 30, 176–185.
- Ramanathan, V., & Atkinson, D. (1999). Individualism, academic writing, and ESL writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8(1), 45-75.
- Rowley-Jolivet, E. (1999). The pivotal role of conference papers in the network of scientific communication. *ASP: La Revue du GERAS*, 23-26, 176–196.
- Stryker, S. (2007). Identity theory and personality theory: Mutual relevance. *Journal of Personality*, 75(6), 1083–1102.

“I think I wanna talk about the reasons why I chose my topic”...

- Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge, England: University of Cambridge Press.
- Swales, J. M. (2004). *Research genres: Explorations and applications*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Tang, R., & John, S. (1999). The ‘I’ in identity: Exploring writer identity in student academic writing through the first person pronoun. *English for Specific Purposes*, 18, S23–S39.
- Thompson, S. (2002). As the story unfolds: The uses of narrative in research presentations. In E. Ventola, C. Shalom, & S. Thompson (Eds.), *The language of conferencing* (pp. 147–167). Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Ventola, E., Shalom, C., & Thompson, S. (Eds.). (2002). *The language of conferencing*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Webber, P. (2005). Interactive features in medical conference monologue. *English for Specific Purposes*, 24, 157–181.
- Weissberg, B. (1993). The graduate seminar: Another research-process genre. *English for Specific Purposes*, 12, 23–36.
- Zareva, A. (2009a). Informational packaging, level of formality, and the use of circumstance adverbials in L1 and L2 student academic presentations. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 8, 55–68.
- Zareva, A. (2009b). Student academic presentations: The processing side of interactiveness. *English Text Construction*, 2(2), 265–288.
- Zareva, A. (2011). “And so that was it”: Linking adverbials in student academic presentations. *RELC Journal*, 42(1), 5–15.
- Zareva, A. (2012). Lexical composition of effective L1 and L2 student academic presentations. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 6(1), 91–110.
- Zareva, A. (2013). Self-mention and the projection of multiple identity roles in TESOL graduate student presentations: The influence of the written academic genres. *English for Specific Purposes*, 32, 72–83.