

Scientific Presentation at IEEE Conferences in Asia: Observational and Survey Findings

William Rozycki
University of Aizu
rozycki@u-aizu.ac.jp

Ian Wilson
University of Aizu
wilson@u-aizu.ac.jp

Abstract

Observation of presentations at a conference in the field of network and sensor engineering (ICNSC 2009), and a survey from participants at a conference on fuzzy and artificial intelligence and neural networks (19th Intelligent System Symposium), both hosted by IEEE-affiliated units in Japan, along with findings from recent research on the intelligibility of the English of non-native speakers in international contexts, are presented. Findings indicate that the use of English as the lingua franca of science, when used by non-native speakers of English (NNSEs) to other NNSEs, has organically produced new strategies of oral presentation. NNSE participants report that speaker presentation of text-dense slides increases their own comprehension of the research being presented. Keywords: research presentation, PowerPoint, rhetorical convention, non-native speakers of English.

Introduction

The English language has served, since at least the mid-twentieth century, as the means of international communication in science and engineering. While a common *lingua franca* facilitates communication internationally, this global use of English in professional communication tends to privilege native speakers over those whose English is less proficient. Linguists have studied the added burden that non-native speakers of English (NNSEs) must bear in disseminating scientific findings in a language that is not their own [1-3], and the European scholar Ammon in particular has quantified the financial and temporal cost to NNSEs active in the fields of science and engineering [4, 5]. All these studies have focused on the burden of writing and publishing research findings in English. However, an equally daunting task is the oral presentation of research before international audiences at conferences.

A 2005 study of research presentations in the field of physics found differences between presentation strategies of native speakers of English and NNSEs [6], and

concluded that lack of syntactic flexibility weakened the discourse effectiveness of NNSEs. More recently, Orr et al. [7] have demonstrated discordance between the oral presentation strategies employed by NNSEs and the guidance on presentation that is published in self-help books. They have suggested that strategies observed among experienced NNSE presenters, such as compensating for pronunciation differences by offering more visual support, could profitably be incorporated into published guidance for novice NNSE presenters.

It is not surprising that NNSEs adopt communication styles and strategies beyond those published in guidance meant for either native-speaker-to-native-speaker communication or NNSE-to-native-speaker communication. The global scientific and engineering communities are now composed primarily of NNSEs (see [8, 9] for supporting data), and communication in English will not and cannot be effective by adhering to models that arose organically among native speakers. The current research arises from calls for study of this new language phenomenon [10-13] and is made up of two parts: 1) observational study of an IEEE-affiliated international conference in computer science and electronic engineering held in 2009 and then, to confirm hypotheses made following that observation, 2) a written survey of participants at an annual IEEE-affiliated international symposium in a sub-field of computer science, also carried out in 2009.

The findings will help educators in Asia to prepare students to effectively present in varied international venues, and may help researchers in the West to accept the rhetorical strategies of Asian researchers when they use non-canonical communication strategies in Western presentation venues.

Observation of an international conference

For the site of our observational and semi-ethnographic study of communication in English, the IEEE International Conference on Networking, Sensing, and Control (ICNSC 2009), held March 26-29, 2009 in Okayama, Japan, was selected. The conference was