Pedagogy, Practice and Personal Pronouns: the Use of "I" and "We" in Academic Writing

教授法・実践・人称代名詞：
アカデミックライティングに見られる「I」「We」の使用

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要旨

　伝統的に、ライティングはコミュニケーションとは異なり、テクスト（文字化された）の中で見られるものである。プロダクト・ベース・アプローチは、元来言語の構造と関係があった。学生のライティングの進歩とは教師が示した他の書き手のスタイルを、どの程度模倣できたかの結果であった。このことに対する批判により、書き手の「声」と読み手の「気づき」を強調するアプローチの多様性が注目されるようになった。書き手は他人の模倣よりも、むしろライティングの中に自分自身を表現することを望んでいるため、定型化したライティングの産出からはずれようとする動向に意味がある。意図、読み手そして人々が所属する社会は、書き手がライティングの中に自分自身を主張したい時考慮する事が求められる要素である。

　書き手が自分自身の主張や立場を表現できる最も明確な方法の一つに「I」「We」という人称代名詞の使用がある。この使用に関する研究は多くあるが、実際に何が起こっているかに気づくことも重要である。本研究ではこの教育学上の側面をより明確にする目的のために、日本の大学で「アカデミック　ライティング」の講義を行なっている教師に人称代名詞の使用に関する彼らの見解を調べるためインタビューを行なった。インタビューの結果、実際に教えられている内容は研究によって提示されたアプローチとは異なることが示された。このことが表す示唆と見解は将来の研究で検討されるべき事を示していると思われる。

Introduction

Academic writing is not just about conveying content, it is also about the representation of the writer's self. This representation has become a popular area of research in recent years and researchers have deployed various terms to describe it. Ivanic (1998) uses the term 'identity' and identifies three aspects which interact in writing, the 'autobiographical self', influenced by the writer's experiences, the 'discoursal self', the image the writer projects in a text, and the 'authorial self', the extent to which the writer intrudes into a text and claims responsibility for its content. Other terms used by other researchers include 'evaluation', 'appraisal' and 'stance'. According to Hunston and Thompson (2000, p. 6) 'evaluation' serves three functions: '(a) to express the writer's opinion, and in doing so to reflect the value system of that person and their community, (b) to construct and maintain relations between the writer and the reader, and (c) to organise the discourse'. 'Appraisal' is used by Martin (2000, p. 145) to refer to the semantic resources that negotiate how authorial opinion is expressed and similarly, Conrad and Biber (2000, p. 57) use 'stance' which they distinguish as having three major semantic categories: epistemic, attitudinal and style. Epistemic stance, in general, represents how certain or reliable the writer's proposition is, attitudinal stance reports personal attitudes or feelings and style stance describes how the information is being presented.

Whilst acknowledging this research into the writer's representation of self this study will use the term 'stance' defined by Hyland (2005, p. 178) as, 'the ways academics annotate their texts to comment on the possible accuracy or creditability of a claim, the extent they want to commit themselves to it, or the attitude they want to convey to an entity, a proposition or the reader.'

This definition of stance and its various features and functions is clearly outlined in Hyland's Model of Interaction in Academic Discourse (2005). This clarity is in contrast to other, maybe more theoretical concepts like identity where it is not so clearly defined as to what

language falls into each category.

In fact a definition of identity is problematical; as Ouellette (2008, p. 259) states it 'can be defined in terms of how we define ourselves, how others define us, and how we represent ourselves to others.' This necessitates some rather philosophical reasoning, which make it difficult to judge with any conviction as to what actual language can be said to represent the writer's self.

The same can be said for 'voice' in academic writing as it has been variously defined as, 'the sound of the individual on the page' (Elbow, 1981, p. 287), and 'the amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive features that language users choose, deliberately or otherwise, from socially available yet ever changing repertoires' (Matsuda, 2001, p. 40). The ongoing debate on 'voice': its definition and features (see Helms-Park and Stapleton, 2008 and Matsuda and Tardy, 2007) and the fact that different writers define terms such as 'voice', 'identity' and 'stance' in different ways underlines the applicability of Hyland's model to this research.

Hyland's Model of Interaction in Academic Discourse

Hyland (2005, pp. 178-181) defines the four elements of stance as:

· Hedges- 'devices that indicate the writer's decision to withhold complete commitment to a proposition, allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than accredited fact.'
· Boosters- 'allow writers to express their certainty in what they say and to mark involvement with the topic and solidarity with their audience.'
· Attitude markers- 'indicate the writer's affective attitude to propositions, conveying surprise, agreement, importance, frustration, and so on, rather than commitment.'
· Self-mentions- 'refers to the use of first person pronouns and

possessive adjectives to present propositional, affective and interpersonal information.'

For the purposes of this research the focus will be on what Hyland calls, 'self-mentions' i.e. the use of personal pronouns.

Self-mention

Self-mentions, in particular, the use of *I* and *we*, are often believed to be contrary to the requirements of objectivity and formality in academic writing. However, although varying between disciplines, a number of studies (Chang and Swales, 1999; Harwood, 2006 and Hyland, 2001, 2002) have shown the importance of such pronouns in helping the writer state opinions and arguments and, generally, organise an academic text. Hyland (2004, p. 143) wrote that 'self-mention plays a crucial role in mediating the relationship between writers' arguments and the expectations of their readers.' Their importance is shown by the amount of research that has focussed on them and some of the most significant will therefore be looked at in more detail in the following section.

Hyland (2002)

Hyland's (2002) study consisted of a corpus of project reports from Hong Kong undergraduates in Biology, Mechanical Engineering, Information Systems, Business Studies, TESL, Economics, Public Administration and Social Sciences. This corpus of 630,000 words was then scanned for the first person used of *I, me, my, we, us* and *our* and then compared to a large corpus of published research articles to explore areas of non-native like behaviour. This corpus compromised 240 research articles, totalling 1.3 million words, from journals in Biology, Physics, Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, Applied Linguistics, Business Studies, Philosophy and Sociology. Finally, supervisors from

each field and focus groups of students were interviewed to provide information about the writing and impressions about disciplinary practices.

Table 1. Functions and examples of self-mentions (adapted from Hyland, 2002, pp. 1100-1106)

Function	Description	Example
Stating a purpose	Signals the writer's intention and provides structure for the text	In this section, *I* am going to describe the findings from *my* interviews…
Explaining a procedure	Describing the research procedures used	*I* have collected the data of Hang Seng Index, Shanghai A…
Stating results/claims	Explicit presentation of the writer's knowledge claim	Likewise *I have offered evidence that* some critical thinking practices may marginalise…
Expressing self-benefits	Expression of what the writers have personally gained	To conclude, this interview is very useful both in completing *our* final year report and teaching *me* about how to do business…
Elaborating an argument	Description of the writer's line of reasoning	*I* think it works something like this: suppose we start with a new, just-assembled ship S…
Acknowledgements	Recognition of assistance	*I* hereby offer *my* deepest gratitude to my mother…

Hyland (2002, p. 1099) found that students' use of author pronouns was mainly to explain methodology rather than more argumentative functions such as presenting and justifying claims. For example,

> *I* have interviewed 10 teachers, there were 10 teachers from different primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. (TESL).
>
> (Hyland, 2002, p. 1101)

　　This is also supported by Harwood (2005) who examined occurrences of *I* in a corpus of native speaker computing students and experts and found that nearly all uses of *I* in the student corpus were used to describe methodology and procedure whereas, in contrast, the expert texts contained very few functionally equivalent uses. Harwood suggests that as MSc students are expected to describe the procedures they went through in some detail in their projects therefore the task had an impact on their overuse of methodological *I*. In contrast is Hyland's study where the non-native students underuse *I* and a possible reason given is Ohta's (1991) suggestion that the use of first person pronouns is largely unacceptable in Asian cultures where collective identity is more valued than individuality.

　　This dichotomy between Western and Eastern culture is often stressed in the literature of applied linguistics but it also has been criticised as being too simplistic. As Kubota (1999, p. 14) argues, 'The assumption underlying this approach is that there is a systematic, culturally determined way in which all members in a certain culture, think, behave and act'.

　　Clearly the use of personal pronouns and the reason why students choose to use them or not is the subject of much debate. The research seems to indicate that, although there are disciplinary differences, that the use of personal pronouns in academic writing is a much more complicated picture than is usually portrayed. But how does this research relate to pedagogy?

　　In academic textbooks used by L2 writer the advice is usually that academic writing involves an objective exploration of ideas that leaves individuality behind.

　　　　The total paper is considered to be the work of the writer. You don't have to say 'I think' or 'My opinion is' in the paper. (…) Traditional formal writing does not use I or we in the body of the paper. This idea is changing, but not all audiences will accept

these changes.

(Spencer and Arbon, 1996, p. 26)

In general, academic writing aims at being 'objective' in it's expression of ideas, and thus tries to avoid specific reference to personal opinions. Your academic writing should imitate this style by eliminating first person pronouns... as far as possible.

(Arnaudet and Barrett 1984, p. 73)

Although, the research suggests that there is widespread use of personal pronouns in academic writing in certain disciplines, the textbooks used by many teachers and students in universities are largely advocating that they not be used. It is interesting to note that the above quotes seem to hedge this by adding that, 'this idea is changing' and 'as far as possible' but does this help the teachers and students? How do teachers explain to students, traditionally taught never to use personal pronouns, that their usage is sometimes possible?

Hyland (2002, p. 355) suggest two responses:

· encouraging students to reflect on their own preferences and behaviours
· helping them to develop a sensitivity to how language is actually used in particular target contexts

This analytical approach, where the students analyse their own or native texts to discover the features and functions of personal pronouns is important as Hyland (2002, p. 357) argues that awareness of the use of personal pronouns is 'central to academic argument, and to university success.'

Methodology

The aim of this paper is to discover how teacher's respond to their students' use of personal pronouns and what feedback they give.

There were five participants who teach writing at a university in Japan. They were selected based on their availability and the fact that they taught writing. Participants A and B teach first-year writing classes, C teaches first and second year students, and D and E, second-year classes.

The participants were given a text written by a student that contained several examples of personal pronouns and asked what feedback they would give the student. They were then given a similar text that had been edited by the student to remove the personal pronouns by using grammatical strategies such as the use of passive voice and asked which of the two texts they preferred and why. (See Appendix for texts). Finally, they were asked what they thought were the goals of an academic writing class.

The participants were interviewed and this data was recorded and then later transcribed.

Results

The results indicate that, generally, the participants discouraged the use of personal pronouns.

> *If the whole essay is presentable and intelligible and has got a good argument and they unnecessarily bring in the first person or other personal pronouns then I point out that they are weakening their essay by doing this. The chances are that they can say the same thing more effectively, more forcefully, more generally, by removing these pronouns.*

(Participant D)

I tell my students never to use 'I' or 'you' but I recommend when they need to express certain feelings about something or opinion I let them use 'we'

(Participant B)

As can be seen whilst stressing that the use of personal pronouns is not recommended the participants do not categorically prohibit their usage. This is illustrated by a quote from Participant E:

As a general rule I suggest try and avoid personal pronouns but where the sense of the passage justifies it then go ahead. I think I'm trying to suggest that, on the whole, these rules should be treated flexibly and that the actual reading and comfort of reading is important rather than sticking to a rigid rule.

This acceptance of the usage of personal pronouns is highlighted by the fact that two participants, B and E, had no problems with the first text, which contained several examples of 'I' and 'we'.

Clear, straightforward, unpretentious...so it wouldn't bother me that the first person is used.

(Participant E)

Personally, I quite like the first one...for some reason...maybe because it has a character to it...

(Participant B)

If this is the case, and as Hyland suggests (2003, p.357) we should focus on the language used rather than the content, what do the

participants think are the goals of academic writing.

The answers to this question indicate that coherence, clarity and organisation are the most important features.

> *Allow them to write clearly and concisely and express their ideas...organise their ideas properly*
>
> (Participant A)
>
> *In the end I'm more focussed on clear development of their topic and the fact that it's coherent, unified, not cluttered...*
>
> (Participant C)

These elements are typically the main focus of most academic writing programs and Hyland (2002, p. 357) agrees with their importance but for him the focus should be on making the students aware of the features of writing in their discipline, which according to his research includes the use of personal pronouns.

Discussion

In general, this investigation has indicated that, although many textbooks state that personal pronouns should not be used, the teachers who teach academic writing are not so definitive. This, therefore, has implications for what we teach to students.

As a teacher it is easy to portray things as black or white to students and, almost certainly, easier for them to understand. However, do we say to them do not use personal pronouns and give them strategies to use to avoid them? Do we say it's OK to use 'we' but not 'I'? Or do we follow Hyland's advice and have them analyse texts in order to understand when it is acceptable to use them?

This is a very difficult question to answer. If we show them how not to use personal pronouns in academic writing it makes their writing seem more academic but are we doing so at the cost of the student's ability to express their own opinions? If we do change the syllabus to focus on textual analysis will we have enough time to teach the students how to organise their writing and produce a coherent and persuasive argument?

Generally, Japanese university students do have two years of study in academic writing with the first year being a basic writing course and the second, academic writing. In theory, therefore, it is possible that the focus of basic writing be on structural matters such as organisation and clarity and the second year include consciousness-raising activities which make the students aware of such matters as the use of personal pronouns. However, although this could be possible in advanced classes, what most teachers find is that, in practice, in the second year they have to reinforce the more structural syllabus of the first year as students still have problems in organising their writing and making their arguments clear.

Research should, in my opinion, inform teaching practice and pedagogy. However, realism must also play a part. Hyland's research (2002) was conducted with two groups: a group of expert writers who published articles in academic journals and a group of novice writers in a Hong Kong university who wrote project reports. He compared the two groups and found that, in comparison with the expert writers, the students underused personal pronouns. This evidence is used by Hyland to support the idea that personal pronouns are used in academic writing and that therefore students should be taught about their use. Whilst the first part of this does seem to be supported by the evidence, the second part is more difficult. In an EFL environment like a Japanese university is it a fair to compare students' writing with that of expert writers? In terms of it being a final goal I am sure that most teachers would love their students to achieve this level of writing but teachers

in this setting, in the limited time available, are forced to concentrate on organisation and structure. Writing is about communication and, although recognising the importance of being able to represent yourself in your writing, if the reader cannot understand the argument then the purpose of writing is lost.

   This study had a number of limitations, for example, there were only five teachers interviewed and the sample of the student's writing was taken out of the context of it's essay so, therefore, the results need to be viewed with caution. It seems to have raised more questions rather than answers and clearly more research needs to be done. Further research could, for example, examine student essays for uses of personal pronouns and interview the students as to why they made those particular language choices. Hopefully by researching this topic in more detail we can produce teaching materials of greater assistance to writers, especially to those who are not native speakers of English.

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Appendix
Texts given to teachers

Text A

In this section I wish to summarise the evidence concerning involuntary or passive smoking. As I have reviewed above, researchers disagree about the danger to non-smokers of breathing in other people's cigarette smoke. If we consider the experimental work by Rogers (1980) we can discover that dogs exposed to their owners' cigarette smoke developed respiratory problems even more rapidly than dogs that smoked cigarettes directly in a laboratory. On the other hand we should consider the more recent statistical research by Smith and Peters (2000) in which we can see that 'passive smokers' have the same rates of death by lung cancer as non-smokers. So let's stop smoking for a healthy life!

Text B

This section will analyse the evidence concerning 'second-hand' or passive smoking. As discussed previously, researchers disagree about the danger to non-smokers of breathing on other people's cigarette smoke. The experimental work by Rogers (1980) shows that dogs exposed to their owners' cigarette smoke developed respiratory problems even more rapidly than dogs that smoked cigarettes directly

in a laboratory. On the other hand, the more recent statistical research by Smith and Peters (2000) should be considered, which shows that 'passive smokers' have the same rates of death by lung cancer as non-smokers. Therefore, it can be concluded that the theory that passive smoking is a danger to the health of non-smokers has not yet been proven.