



Using Self-Mentions in Academic Writing: Acceptance, Rejection, and Negotiation

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Introduction

Academic writing in higher education requires an inclusion of writers' propositions or arguments to indicate their understanding of the content knowledge and critical thinking regarding the topic at hand (Morton & Storch, 2019; Wingate, 2012). The concern that has arisen is how writers' propositions should be presented in writing. Hyland (2005) proposes a framework of hedges (expressions of opinions), boosters (expressions of certainty), attitude markers (expressions of affective attitudes), and self-mentions (first person pronouns and possessive adjectives) as linguistic categories for writers to indicate their propositions or arguments.

In this framework, self-mentions such as "I" and "my" are among the most popular choices for writers' propositions (Abdi & Farrokhi, 2015). However, different readers would have different expectations on how writing should be performed including the language used to represent the writers' views (Shen, 1989). With this rationale, the paper discusses how "I" and "my" as representatives of self-mentions are used by EFL students to perform their positions or arguments in academic essays and responded to by instructors as readers in an Academic Writing course at college level. This paper explores the various views on the use of these linguistic features, challenges the common view of cultural generalisation in writing, and proposes the necessary negotiation among Writing instructors in teaching and assessment practices in Academic Writing courses.

Literature Review

To be able to get involved in a particular academic discipline, a common requirement for academics is the awareness of how linguistic and rhetorical devices should be used in that particular area (Abdi & Farrokhi, 2015; Hyland, 2001; Viete & Phan, 2007). In fact, research in the field of academic writing has been much concerned about the kinds of rhetorical and linguistic conventions that are believed to meet academic standards so that a piece of writing is considered to be academic (Abdi & Farrokhi, 2015; Hyland, 2001; Swales, 1990). Illustrated by Hyland (2001), publishing papers in academic journals requires writers to "display some degree of disciplinarity" and "a familiarity with the rhetorical conventions" requested by the journals and the readers (p. 209). A long-lasting debate in academic



writing is how writers' positions should be indicated in the written work as expected across disciplines so that the writing can be accepted by the readers (Abdi & Farrokhi, 2015; Hyland, 2001, 2002).

Academic writing conveys not only the meaning of written messages but also the self-representation or identity of authors (Hyland, 2001, 2002). How writers present the "self" in their writing and "how they [writers] stand in relation to their arguments, their discipline, and their readers... have an important impact on the outcome of their discursal purposes" (Hyland, 2001, p. 210). Further researching the demonstration of authorial position, Abdi and Farrokhi (2015), Hyland (2001, 2002), and Tang and John (1999) focus on the use of the singular first-person pronoun as an element of self-mentions to indicate writers' propositions in their academic written work. The quantitative data on the frequency of "I" employed for self-expression purposes show that the use of personal pronouns or the presence of authorial identity in academic writing largely depends on academic disciplines and cultural influences (Abdi & Farrokhi, 2015; Hyland, 2001, 2002). An example for this case is the more frequent use of "I" by experts in Applied Linguistics than writers of Medical Engineering and Medicine disciplines. It could be explained that writers need to convey the messages in a way that is accepted by members of their discourse or rhetorical communities "with certain norms, expectations, and conventions with respect to writing" (Purves, 1986, p. 39). Also, the underuse of personal pronouns for writers' self is claimed as a result of the cultural beliefs of the writers. Some L2 English writers avoid the use of personal pronouns to make their writing impersonal (Abdi & Farrokhi, 2015; Hyland, 2001, 2002; Shen, 1989; Viete & Phan, 2007). The limited use of the singular first-person pronoun would be common to those of Confucianism as a useful way to prevent subjectivity which could then lead to criticism and threats (Shen, 1989).

While most research tends to discuss writing from writers' perspectives, readers' influences on writers are not paid much attention to (Morton & Storch, 2019). In a discourse community, there are readers that are seen as gatekeepers, and writers seen as emerging professionals need to satisfy the readers' expectations in order to be accepted in the community (Johns, 1997; Shen, 1989; Swales, 2016). Notably in educational settings, readers who are also Writing instructors and examiners may be subjective in teaching and evaluating writing, indicating that their personal preferences guide their teaching practices and the establishment of expectations for writing (Beck, 2006; Green, 2007). Therefore, it is necessary for students to understand instructors' expectations to see how they evaluate the quality of writing pieces, what constitutes their judgements, and whether different readers would propose different criteria for marking writing.

The use of self-mentions to represent the writers and their positions is an increasingly debated topic as there are variations across disciplines, writing contexts, readers' influences, and particularly sociocultural factors that guide what to write, how to write, and whom the writing is addressed to (Viete & Phan, 2007). Due to the ongoing controversy on the use of self-mentions in academic writing to show writer's positions, it would be necessary to investigate how these features are used by the students and responded to by different instructors in academic writing. Sorting out this concern could be helpful to understand how academic writing which requires writers' positions is taught, performed, and assessed so that implications could be made. Also, the discussion about the use of self-mentions may reveal personal and sociocultural factors that decide if these features should be accepted as well as how these factors are treated in the teaching of academic writing.

The Study

The Context

This study took place at a Vietnamese university which hosts a large number of students who take English Language Studies as their major. The students in this major have to take a number of Academic Writing courses and study various forms of writing such as letters, essays, and reports. Essays, which account for the highest percentage of the Academic Writing curriculum, are used to develop students'

writing skills, critical thinking and argumentation through the way they respond to the writing topics with supporting evidence. One of the core components of Academic Writing courses is argumentative essays in which “you [the writers] must take a position and persuade the reader to agree with your opinion by using strong, logical reasons to support your argument” (Davis & Liss, 2006, p. 93). This kind of essay is the focus of the study as it requires the student writers to propose an argument and relevant support to convince the readers.

The Participants

The student participants were in their third year at college and had been involved in four Academic Writing courses. The students had completed numerous written assignments in which they had to provide their opinions with support from relevant literature. I selected a class of over 20 students. After getting their essays to analyse, I focused on five students whose essays I would use as examples as their essays received detailed feedback on the use of self-mentions.

In addition, three instructors participated as examiners of the students' writing. These instructors/examiners were experienced in teaching Academic Writing at different levels at the institution and were familiar with the curriculum and assessment procedure. The IELTS Task 2 marking criteria were used for this project including Task Achievement, Cohesion and Coherence, Lexical Resource, Grammatical Range and Accuracy (British Council, n.d.). IELTS marking criteria were selected as they were thought to cover the aspect of a good academic writing piece and IELTS marking criteria had been used at the institution to evaluate students in their Academic Writing courses.

Research Methods

This study employed text analysis of students' argumentative essays on the topic “*Should students be allowed to grade their teachers?*”. Essays of five students whose pseudonyms were Larry, Danny, Chris, Nancy, and Vicky were collected for analysis of how self-mentions were used and responded to. Examiners' comments were used as the basis for follow-up interviews to gain their insights into the use of self-mentions in academic writing. The interview questions were central to how the examiners perceived the use of self-mentions in academic writing to indicate writers' opinions and arguments. Themes revealed from the interview data are presented to describe the students' uses of self-mentions and the examiners' responses to the use of self-mentions in academic writing.

Findings

In this section, I present how self-mentions were used in academic writing by the students and were responded to by the examiners. I then describe how negotiation was necessarily made among the examiners for a shared view on these features in academic writing.

The Use of Self-Mentions in Academic Writing

The students wrote essays that indicated their views, either agreement or disagreement, with the act of students evaluating teachers. The students used “I” and “my” to claim their positions such as “In my opinion”, “In my perspective”, “I believe that”, and “I strongly recommend” as instructed. The following extracts from students' essays show how self-mentions were used to indicate the students' arguments in their thesis statements.

In my perspective, students should grade their teachers because of improving educational quality and teacher's responsibilities despite basing on student's sensibilities so much. (Chris)

In my point of view, I believe that the evaluation has more advantages than disadvantages. (Danny)

In my opinion, letting students evaluate their teachers is a great idea because it provides students a chance to give feedbacks on their teacher and the course contents. (Larry)

Besides the thesis statements where "I" and "my" were used to highlight the writers' arguments, these self-mentions appeared in some students' essays to indicate the supporting evidence of their arguments. Extracted students' supporting statements could be seen as follows:

For example, when I was high school, my teacher ask me about her way how to teach. Although I am not really clear, I still said "it is ok". (Vicky)

I do not deny that there are many students who grade by themself beside many students who grade follow their feeling. (Nancy)

It therefore could be concluded that the students employed self-mentions as the signals of their arguments and personal experiences that provided evidence of their claims. This use of self-mentions in academic writing was exercised by following their instructor's suggestion which the students thought as the norms or common knowledge of writing.

I think the question asks for my opinions, so I used "In my opinion" to show what I think. I see nothing wrong with this. (Larry, interview)

My teacher allowed me to use "I" and "my" to show my ideas in writing, and I also see this in the samples that he gave me. I think it is okay to use those. (Chris, interview)

The Responses of the Examiners

In this study, three examiners who hold different views about the use of self-mentions in academic essays were involved. This section reports the acceptance and rejection of two examiners of the use of self-mentions.

The acceptance

Examiner One encouraged the students to use "I" and "my" as markers of the students' arguments. This encouragement stemmed from his review of relevant materials that allow the use of self-mentions in academic writing.

I am aware of the model of Hyland and revisited some journal articles in Education discipline, and the sample essays in the coursebook. I could see that self-mentions still exist in these academic writing pieces. So, I allow my students to use these and I am confident with this suggestion after seeing these features in articles in top-ranking journals and books from well-known publishers. (Examiner One)

In addition, he shared his experience as a former international student in an English-speaking country where he was suggested using "I" and "my" to claim the authority of his arguments. All of these helped strengthen his positive belief on the use of self-mentions in academic writing.

The rejection

As part of the marking policy at the institution, students' essays are required to be marked by two examiners. This policy is to ensure the fairness and reduce the teachers' subjectivity in assessing students' performances. In compliance with the policy, students' essays were sent to an English-native teacher who used to teach Academic Writing courses at the institution but was external to the current course (Examiner Two). What stood out in the marking practices was the rejection of the use of self-mentions, "I" and "my" in the essays.

Most people think that only teacher can evaluate their students which is not equal. Elbert Hubbard said that "The teacher is one who gets the most out of the lesson and the true teacher is learners". In my opinion and other students who should be allowed grade their teacher so that teacher know their strengthness and weakness as well as become friendly teacher. But it also helps students gain knowledge better.

* not academic

In conclusion, though these disadvantages really exist, the advantages outweigh. So I strongly recommend that the measures should be taken as far as possible.

Figure 1. Extracts of students' writing and Examiner Two's comments.

As commented by Examiner Two, the use of these self-mentions was not effective and should not be accepted in academic writing as they showed subjectivity. For this examiner, writing academic essays, particularly Argumentative essays, is to convince readers of the writers' arguments. Therefore, using such personal pronouns and possessive adjectives makes the essays personal and less convincing.

When students use personal pronouns like "I", "My", "We" in academic writing particularly in a thesis, it personalizes the writing to an informal level. It takes the strength out of the writing. (Examiner Two, interview)

Indeed, she suggested the use of other expressions such as the evaluative "It construction" or other more objective statements to replace the self-mentions such as "Popular opinion believes", "Academics often state", "Research has found", "People in general believe", "A popular school of thought is", and "Previous writers addressing this topic have".

The negotiation

To sort out the matter, a third examiner was assigned who was also teaching Academic Writing, and she accepted these features. This examiner reported that these linguistic features did not disqualify the academic characteristic of the essays and to some extent were still relevant as the essays required the writers' opinions.

What I look for in an argumentative essay is how well the argument is supported with evidence. For language use, I am only concerned about inaccurate word use and structure that could make the ideas unclear, not the use of "I" and "my". (Examiner Three)

Contrasting ideas on the use of self-mentions required negotiation among the examiners, which was not simply a negotiation in the use of language in this given essay but also involved the act of policy-making for guidelines on how writing should be performed by students and assessed by examiners. From the discussion, the acceptance and rejection of "I" and "my" were attributed to readers' experience in

teaching and evaluating academic writing. Examiner One, as reported by him, had experienced the use of self-mentions in his postgraduate programs to claim his propositions and the ownership of his claims. This experience was further strengthened as he could realise the existence of these features in articles published in prestigious journals and sample essays in the coursebook. All these constituted the acceptability of self-mentions in academic writing.

I have seen many students who are not confident enough to raise their voice in writing although these are their ideas coming from their experiences. I think that trying to hide their ownership of these ideas would not be appropriate. They should be able to claim these ideas as their property through the use of “I” and “my”. (Examiner One)

He was concerned that avoiding these self-mentions would weaken the students’ credibility in their writing and their responsibility as owners of these claims. Therefore, he recommended the incorporation of these features in writing, believing that students would be more confident in raising their voice in not only academic writing but also in other situations as their habitual actions.

Following the comments of Examiners One and Three, Examiner Two who rejected self-mentions in academic writing explained that different beliefs and contexts would pose different views on what is accepted in academic writing.

Maybe in different contexts, there are different views on the use of “I” and “my” in academic writing. If you look on the internet about the use of personal pronouns in academic writing, it clearly gives out the message that you can use them but also bear in mind that most information comes from American universities. (Examiner Two)

It should be noted that what sounded more convincing about the acceptable use of “I” and “my” to the examiners was not primarily the experience of Examiner One from his postgraduate study. It was indeed the academic sources of journal articles and sample essays from textbooks where “I” and “my” were used that had stronger influences on the other examiners to accept self-mentions in academic writing.

If there are cases where these are used in academic writing, I think we can accept these in the students’ essays. I agree that there is not a writing rule that can be applied in all cases. (Examiner Two)

Eventually, these self-mentions were accepted by the examiners and even integrated into marking criteria in other Academic Writing courses at the institution as an option to show writer’s voice.

Discussion

In this study, the students used “I” and “my” in their academic writing to claim their propositions as well as provide evidence from their personal experience. Using these features was suggested by their instructor. Playing the role of the gatekeepers in the discourse community and holding the image of the master of knowledge (Morton & Storch, 2019), the instructor’s suggestion became the norms and common knowledge of writing to the students (Beck, 2006; Phan & Li, 2014; Viète & Phan, 2007). Students practice what they are taught by their instructors without a doubt as there is a long-lasting belief of the high position, credibility, and powerful influences of teachers on their students, particularly in Confucianism (Phan & Li, 2014). This emphasises the significant roles and influences of teachers on students, which may change the students’ current beliefs to meet the expectations of the teachers (Viète & Phan, 2007).

The controversy on the use of “I” and “my” in academic essays is commonly claimed to be rooted from different academic and cultural experience as readers also bring their own experience into interpreting and evaluating writing (Morton & Storch, 2019). This requires negotiation among examiners to ensure the objectivity and fairness in assessment (Beck, 2006). What could be retrieved from the negotiation among the examiners is the need to establish an approved marking guideline that would also guide the teaching practices. How writing is assessed would greatly influence how it is taught to students, especially as writing tests are high-stakes in order to decide if the students are eligible to move to the next level (Beck, 2006; Green, 2007). As students’ opinions are required in academic essays at the institution, how their opinions should be presented in writing should be clearly explained and carefully taught to the students.

In addition, the common view on Asian writers avoiding showing their propositions in their writing has been again challenged, following Shen (1989) and Viete and Phan (2007). In this study, it was convincing to the Vietnamese instructor that “I” and “my” should be used following his academic and personal beliefs, which challenges the generalisation on the limited use of self-mentions of Asian writers. This could be explained due to his interactions with academics and materials that encouraged using “I” and “my” in writing. Hence, there should not be generalisation on how people of a culture write as different individual writers would bring different experience into their writing, constituting the complexity and diversity of writing (Kubota, 1997; Matsuda, 2001; Tran, 2011). This further presents a reminder for the readers of acknowledging the various personal and sociocultural factors that writers may bring into academic writing.

What may also sound interesting in the study is how Examiner One defended the use of self-mentions in academic writing. As different personal experience may lead to conflicts among instructors (Beck, 2006; Morton & Storch, 2019), the evidence of academic articles and books showing how self-mentions were used created a solid foundation for Examiner One’s argument, contributing to the acceptance of self-mentions in academic writing. It could be concluded that content knowledge and well-grounded evidence from literature are useful to support one’s arguments or proposals (Wingate, 2012), especially in the case of policy-making act. This may be helpful as pedagogical implications where policies in teaching and evaluating students could be foregrounded by relevant literature in the field to avoid controversies.

Conclusion

The study revealed the controversy on the use of “I” and “my” as well-known indicators of writers’ propositions and arguments in academic writing. Evidently, different instructors as readers and examiners have different expectations for the student writers, causing different perspectives in teaching and evaluating academic writing. It is advised that negotiation among instructors be undertaken to sort out the conflicts and to inform student writers of the ongoing debates on not only self-mentions to indicate writers’ positions in academic writing but also other controversial issues in academic writing so that the students are well aware of what is expected in their writing.

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(Received January 06, 2021; Revised February 20, 2021; Accepted March 10, 2021)