

EXPLORING INTERACTIONAL VOICE IN NON-NATIVE STUDENTS' ENGLISH ESSAYS

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Abstract

Academic writing is a social practice that involves scholarly exchanges to distribute knowledge and negotiate interpretations. While disseminating knowledge, the writers present themselves and build interactions with the readers through their ways of using language. This study drew upon Hyland's (2005) Interpersonal Metadiscourse Model to explore the interactional voice in English essays written by non-native students. It looked closely at the interpersonal system of stance in their essays that included *hedges*, *boosters*, *attitude markers*, and *self-mention*. The data were taken from six English essays written by six Indonesian university students. The findings showed that the self-mention marker was used most frequently in all essays, with an overall percentage of more than 50%. This type of marker was used mainly to exhibit their position in the discussion and to establish interpersonal interaction with the readers. The educational implication was specifically intended for academic writing lecturers to include metadiscourse in classroom instruction for the students to become effective writers.

Keywords: *interactional voice, stance marker, metadiscourse, identity, academic writing, essay*

Introduction

University students undergo an identity transition when they enter the higher educational setting. They are forced to adapt to the conventional norms and practices that once were alien to them in most aspects. Among several practices, writing requires comprehension in many degrees as it is one of the most substantial social practices in academia (Rahimivand & Kuhi, 2014). It may not be a first-time experience for them, but academic writing comprises more than what they have encountered in their previous levels of study.

Members of the academic discourse community are expected to produce knowledge and disseminate it through their writings in the ways recognized by the community (Rahimivand & Kuhi, 2014). It may be the most daunting first step for students to gain recognition as a part of this community. As a social practice, academic writing differs from other types of writing, as suggested by Hyland (2004) that three key characteristics of academic writing are having high lexical density, nominal style and impersonal construction. These facets are explicitly implied and observable in the text. While academic texts can be characterized through these traits, Swales and Feak (2012) also

propose six concerns, including the audience, purpose, organization, style, flow, and presentation that writers should consider in composing their academic texts (p. 3).

Hyland (2005) argues that a well-written academic text demonstrates the writer's understanding of its readers and the implications. In this concern, choices in aspects of the way the text is written should be made consciously following the styles preferred in the community. Furthermore, in producing and disseminating knowledge, the writers present themselves to the readers through their ways of using language while simultaneously negotiating meanings and building social relationships with them (Hyland, 2005). While conforming to conventional styles, the writers construct their identity and show their stance on their discussed subjects. As a result, their texts sound different because the writers are varied in their approach to this endeavour.

Of all the academic text forms, essays must be the most common type the students contend with. It is a piece of writing that is intended to persuade the readers or provide information on a particular subject. Even though its structure may not be as systematic as other academic writings since it presents the writers' opinion on the topic from a limited and personal point of view, it still has to be constructed in a specific way and include some components to ensure the ideas flow logically.

Writing is essentially an interactive communication between writers and readers that involves the active participation of both parties in giving meaning to the text that is supposedly mutual. The academic writers reveal their identity in ways that are unique to another while aligning themselves with the literary practices of the academic community. Through this process, they hope to convey their ideas and knowledge with an impersonal and objective authorial voice (Lehman & Sulkowski, 2020). Hyland (2005) addresses the issue of the way academic writers use language to convey their position and connect with their readers and comes up with a model that involves two main ways, stance and engagement (p. 174), which is widely adopted in research on writers' authorial voice.

Over the past few decades, experts in linguistics have devoted their focus on some linguistic resources of academic texts to reveal the writers' persuasive attempt (Swales, 1990, 2004; Hyland, 2004, 2005; Matsuda, 2001; Rahimivand & Kuhi, 2014; Castillo-Hajan et al., 2019). Reading texts of different writers gives different impressions because of the way things are said. It is called a voice, a linguistic manifestation that conveys the writers' identities, standpoints, and presence in the text. Having an authorial voice is a part of identity building and is essential in academic writing (Peng & Zhang, 2021). However, it is more challenging than it sounds, especially for novices. On many occasions, even experienced academic writers hardly see it as an unproblematic process.

According to Lehman and Sulkowski (2020), the concept of writer identity is complex and encompasses both the writer and writing context, which includes the available disciplinary and cultural resources. Thus, the developed identity is established through the voice in the text. Hyland (2002) claims that the importance of authorial voice should be emphasized and explicitly taught in ESL classes to provide students with the best tools possible to secure their place as English academic writers.

The students' final learning outcomes in almost all courses at the university are measured from their written reports, which include essays. They are required to be able to produce at least one essay every semester on varied topics. Therefore, it is safe to say that, at the very least, they are aware of the essential elements an essay should have. Although very helpful, being aware of these components does not absolve them of

challenges when writing one. The problems may vary from selecting appropriate vocabularies, arranging and organizing ideas, and finding the relevant references to support their opinion. In addition to that, they are demanded to voice their ideas in a way that represents themselves while still maintaining to stay in the line respected in the academic discourse community.

An essay is persuasive, and one way to accomplish persuasion is through the use of metadiscourse markers. This persuasive intention can be more easily achieved if when presenting ideas and interpretations, the writers show their position, represent themselves, and interact with their readers (Hyland, 2005). This interaction can be managed in two ways: stance and engagement. Hyland (2005) claims that writers use stance markers to express their voices, present themselves, and convey their judgments, and opinions (p. 176). On the other hand, in engagement, writers connect by acknowledging their readers, drawing them into the argument, paying attention, addressing their uncertainties, involving them in the discourse, and assisting them in interpretations.

The study of writer identity in EFL and ESL classrooms has received massive attention from linguists and scholars. Castillo-Hajan et al. (2019) investigate students' identity construction in writing persuasive essays through a metadiscourse analysis. They mainly look at the dominant metadiscourse features to reveal how and what kind of identity the students build in their essays. From 50 essays that they analyze following Hyland's model of interpersonal metadiscourse, they find that the students mostly employ the self-mention features in presenting themselves as writers.

Liu and Zhang (2022) employ Hyland's (2005) interactional metadiscourse model and Sun's (2015) category of identity construction to compare the frequency of interactional discourse metadiscourse markers between Chinese masters' theses and international journal articles. Regarding the metadiscourse markers, Chinese master's students are found to use fewer markers compared to the authors of international articles. Meanwhile, the constructed identity categories are researcher, interactor, and evaluator sequentially from the highest frequency.

In another study, Abdi (2009) tries to reveal if Persian writers preserve the cultural identity and norms of their native language or adopt the identity and norms of the intended discourse community when writing in Persian. Using 72 articles, half of which are Persian and the other half are English articles; he examines the interactive and interactional metadiscourse to see the cultural identity in articles of both languages. The findings show the similarity in interactive metadiscourse and vary considerably in interactional metadiscourse. He concludes that writers' mentality, native culture, and the target language culture significantly contribute when they write in different languages.

It can be seen that writers' authorial voice and identity have been examined in various linguistic features, text types and even across languages. This research delves into the students' interactional voice in their essays by focusing mainly on the interpersonal systems of stance. It aims to add knowledge to the existing literature on the subject matter, as well as to address the gap in relevant research on students with insufficient experience in essay writing.

Method

The data were gathered from six English essays written by six undergraduate students of an Indonesian university as part of the assessment in writing course. Some participants have sufficient and some lack of experience in writing English essays, nevertheless, none of them can be considered experienced writers. They were assigned to complete an argumentative essay on the topic they were most interested in. The participants were given the freedom to write about a case, fact, or idea that they considered fundamental and crucial to address. This research investigated the interactional voice through specific metadiscourse markers in students' essays and is limited to the markers of stance following the model proposed by Hyland (2005). The collected essays were manually coded in terms of the stance voice markers to ensure accurate identification of the textual data. Stance includes the writers' attitudes expressed through hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mention (See Table 1).

Table 1. Stance Markers

Linguistic Features	Accepted	Examples
Hedges	Withhold commitment and open dialogue	Might; perhaps; possible; about
Boosters	Emphasize certainty and close dialogue	In fact; definitely; it is clear that
Attitude markers	Expresses writer's attitude to proposition	Unfortunately; I agree; surprisingly
Self-mention	Make explicit reference to the author(s)	I; we; me; us; my; our

Result and Discussion

Result

The essays were varied in length but, on average, comprised more than 1000 words. The results show the frequencies of each stance marker as well as the most and the least frequently used markers in all essays. The frequencies are given in the overall essays' number and percentage of usage.

Table 2. Stance Markers in Students' Essays

Linguistic Features	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Hedges	1	3
Boosters	6	16
Attitude markers	10	27
Self-mention	20	54
Total	37	100

Table 2 shows the two most used types of stance markers self-mention and attitude markers. With self-mention took up more than half of the total frequency of interactional markers in the essays. On the other hand, hedges and boosters received the most minor usage, with a frequency of 3% and 16% respectively. However, the hedge was the least employed marker, which was only used once in all of the essays. Examples of linguistic features that represent the interactional stance in the essays are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Stance Markers in Students' Essays

Linguistic Features	Examples
Hedges	may
Boosters	In fact; the best
Attitude markers	It is imperative to; it is important to
Self-mention	I; my; we; our; us

As the most employed marker, self-mention was found in all essays. This type of marker varied from singular to plural first-person pronouns and possessive adjectives, 'my' and 'our.' The use of self-mention can be seen in the following excerpts from two different essays.

Therefore, I invite us to strengthen the relationship between ... (Essay 1).

At first, our meal allowance was cut due to the introduction of work from home. (Essay 3)

The attitude markers were mostly used to show the writers' affective attitude to propositions by conveying importance with the use of phrases, such as *it is important to* and *it is imperative to*. As well as showing frustration by using words like *unfortunately*.

In an era marked by rapid globalization and technological advancement, *it is imperative to* explore the significance of preserving culture. (Essay 2)

Unfortunately, there is a stark contrast in the legal treatment of corrupt individuals who receive lenient punishment compared to ... (Essay 1)

Hedges with the lowest frequency were found in one essay and only appeared once throughout the essay. The writer used the word *may* state the plausible reasoning behind an action to allow more interpretations.

... to their friend who *may* be posting curated versions of their lives. (Essay 5)

The last type of interactional metadiscourse, boosters was found in three essays. They mostly occur to emphasize writers' conviction in their argument, such as in the following excerpts.

Some say that men and women can't just be friends. (Essay 6)

The best solution is to keep giving your best work at work. (Essay 3).

Both statements show the writers' certainty while at the same time offering assurance to invite readers to believe in their claims before presenting more statements to support their argument.

Discussion

The primary function of interactive metadiscourse is to assist the readers in navigating the material in the text. According to Crismore et al. (1993), metadiscourse is the writer's guidance and involvement in how readers should read, evaluate, and assess the ideas

put forward. As one way of interaction, stance describes how writers annotate their texts to make remarks on the plausibility or credibility of claims, the degree to which they wish to adhere to it, or the attitude they wish to express toward a proposition, an entity, or the reader (Hyland, 2005).

The use of the first person is closely associated with the desire to take credit for one's perspective and to firmly identify with a certain argument. The students relied mostly on the self-mention to include themselves in the discussion with the readers. Hyland (2005) argues that it is common in humanity and social science. According to him, personal references indicate "the perspective from which a statement should be interpreted" that allows writers to highlight their contribution to the field and seek agreement for it (p. 181). This is true for most of the investigated texts, where the students claim to have the initiative power on their arguments.

Findings on attitude markers somehow are inconsistent with several previous findings (Abdi, 2009; Yoon, 2017; Castillo-Hajan, 2019; Liu & Zhang, 2022). In their conclusions, these markers are less preferred as they profoundly function to show affective attitudes to the proposition. Their use in the text indicates writers' adeptness at conveying their attitudes and feelings. The Persian writers in Abdi's (2009) and the Chinese master's students in Liu and Zhang's (2022) research are reluctant to express their emotional attitudes explicitly, which causes the lack of these markers in their texts. However, the native counterparts in their research demonstrate somewhat different approaches in this regard, showing that they are more likely to establish a closer relationship with their readers actively and to give objective evaluations of propositions or opinions (Liu & Zhang, 2022). Slightly but not completely similar, the students in this research are more comfortable presenting their cognitive standpoint and are more open to interactions with the readers.

Hedges indicate writers' attempts to open discussion by presenting their statements as opinions rather than authorized facts. Words such as *possible*, *perhaps*, and *might* have the power to show writers' willingness to reserve complete commitment to a proposition and to allow readers to dispute their interpretations (Hyland, 2005). Findings on hedges in the present study differ significantly from those of Liu and Zhang (2022). In their research, this type of marker received the most frequency in Chinese master's theses and international journal articles. The hedges in their findings indicated the writers' attempts to soften their explanation and spare themselves from readers' criticism.

On the other hand, hedges in the study of Castillo-Hajan et al. (2019), even though they are not the most widely used markers, looking at the percentage (10.13%), are used more often than in this study (3%). However, they claim that the use of hedges in essays is relatively rare, supporting the present findings. Nevertheless, it is not in line with Rahimivand and Kuhl's argument (2014) that by using hedges, writers can anticipate potential objections while appearing not to be too assertive.

The frequency of boosters is a little superior to that of hedges. Again, its small frequency does not go well with Rahimivand and Kuhl (2014), who highly suggest the use of boosters to enhance authoritative demeanour for various purposes. Writers use boosters to demonstrate their certainty in their writings. The same reason applies to the students who express their affirmative voice when presenting their argument to convince the readers that their claims are factual. Nonetheless, their low frequency here is inconsistent with that of Zhao (2017), who mentions that hedges and boosters have a

strong correlation with essay scores on the TOEFL test. It goes in line with Abdi (2009), who concludes, based on his findings that the employment of hedges and boosters is closely influenced by the writers' culture and national linguistic practice.

Overall, the findings in this research are contrary to those of Abdi (2009). When students in this study are seemingly more attached to their texts and willing to negotiate meanings with the readers, the Persian writers in his research are found to be more objective and withdraw themselves from direct involvement with the readers. This significant contrast is most likely due to the difference in the types of texts examined. Unlike essays that are more flexible in terms of word choice, research articles are highly suggested to avoid self-mentioning words to prevent them from sounding subjective.

In writing, the writer makes conscious choices to take a particular stance to demonstrate their position in the discourse. At the same time, they should be aware of the norms maintained within the academic discourse community. The low frequency of hedges indicates the students' efforts to express their firm stances and views on the topic. Nevertheless, this does not mean they leave no room for discussion and negotiation, as evidenced by the heavy use of self-mention.

Conclusion

This research explores the interactional voice of stance markers in non-native students' English essays. Concentrating on the features of stance reveals how students portray themselves and communicate their viewpoints. The features include *hedges*, *boosters*, *attitude markers*, and *self-mention*. Even though they are frequently used simultaneously in a piece of writing, it is important to consider that each marker possesses unique functions, thus their employment should be seen as an independent entity.

The predominance of self-mention markers in the essays indicates the students' intention to involve themselves in the discussion and emphasize the originality of their writings while at the same time building interpersonal interaction with the readers. As stated by Ivanic (1998), presenting the discursal self is essential in the writing process. The findings highlight that an explicit understanding of metadiscourse in writing provides many benefits for the students. With the help of clear classroom instructions in metadiscourse, students can produce more acceptable academic writings that meet the conventions of the socio-rhetorical framework of this discourse community.

Although this research intends to offer valuable insights on the matter for academic writing lecturers, it is crucial to acknowledge that its findings may not be generalized to other contexts because of the restricted scope this research covers. Moreover, future studies can take advantage of Hyland's Interpersonal Metadiscourse Model to dive deeper into writers' authorial identity and voice from different genres, more texts, or textual elements.

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