Will I, won't I? Personal pronouns, grades and changes over semesters in student academic writing

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Most third level undergraduate students are required to write essays as a form of assessment. In these essays, the students are expected by those correcting the essay to adhere to certain language norms as well as display appropriate knowledge. In disciplines of study in which students have no prior academic experience they have no discourse expectations, even at a lexical level, when they begin the course in first year. With time, as the students are exposed to lectures, tutorials, readings and lecture handouts, they develop some expectations and use these when producing their own writing for assessment. However, some students have difficulty mastering the language of creating an argument and are often confused about how they can place their own voice in this argument.

This paper uses a corpus of undergraduate Philosophy essays collected in a third level college in Ireland from the same group of students in the first, the second and the third semesters to examine the relationship between the language used by these students and the grade received from the corrector. The corpus consists of 90 essays. Personal pronouns within the argument and within the text as a whole are examined and compared across grades and across semesters. A number of functions for the students choosing to use personal pronouns are identified and the correlation between these functions and the grade received is then explored. Furthermore, the change in the linguistic realisation of these functions over the course of time is demonstrated. This data is used to argue that research into academic writing needs to be carried out over time as students can change their writing style during the course of their third level education. In addition, it would seem that the presence of interpersonal and organisational features in the text to give personal reaction and architectural structure is essential to receive a high grade and it would seem that it is better received if this is done without a personal pronoun.

Previous research into pronouns in academic writing includes Tang and John (1999) who examined 27 first year undergraduate essays collected from students studying English Language at the National University of Singapore. They investigated how the identities of the writers are revealed through the use of the first person pronoun (I, my, we, us, our). Building on the work of Ivanic (1995, 1998), they order their possible roles along a continuum ranging from least powerful authorial presence to most powerful authorial presence. The six steps along the continuum are representative, guide, architect, recounter of research process, opinion-holder and originator. Hyland (2002) categorises the use of personal pronouns in professional academic writing into discourse functions such as stating a goal and explaining a procedure. He then compares this to student writing and concludes that students significantly underuse authorial pronouns.

This paper uses undergraduate essays instead of professional academic writing because there are some major differences in the circumstances of the writings of students and the
writing of professionals. The audience differs as students are writing for one particular corrector while the professional academic article is aimed at those of the discourse community. There are also obvious differences in terms of motivation and goal between professional academic articles and undergraduate essays. Evaluation, which is of particular concern here, differs also. Students have their essays graded by a corrector and get a specific grade for their work. They are made aware of this grade while professional articles are not graded but may be assessed by peers.

The quantitative results of the study demonstrate differences between upper and lower grade essays as well as differences between semesters. In semester 1, the lower grade essays have almost twice as many interpersonal 'I' as the higher grade essays. However, the higher grade essays have slightly more organisational pronouns than those that received a lower grade. Pronouns that seem both interpersonal and organisational at the same time feature more often in the lower grade essays. This trend continues into the second semester. Again, the interpersonal pronoun is more common in the lower grade essays, but the difference is not to the same extent. However, the difference between the organisational pronoun in the second semester is larger than the first, with this function occurring almost twice as often in the higher grade essays that the lower grade essays.

Overall, the lower grade essays have more pronouns than the higher grade essays, but this difference is dramatically reduced in the second semester. Interpersonal pronouns are more common in the lower grade essays in both semesters, but the amount of pronouns is reduced in the second semester. Organisational pronouns are more common in the higher grade essays in both semesters and the extent of the difference increases in the second semester.

The differences in pronoun number and function over the semesters points to the need for corpora collected over time instead of a single snap-shot of academic writing. The differences in distribution of the functional types between grades demonstrates that some rhetorical and discoursal functions are necessary to achieve a good grade in an academic
essay. Furthermore, the differences in pronoun use between the grades received by the students show that pronoun use should be addressed in EAP courses.

References


