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Abstract

The increasing use of computers to enable or replace face-to-face tutorial discussion groups in higher education is creating a new form of academic writing. This small-scale study of 43 students and three tutors identifies ways in which students present their opinions in a forum which allows greater time for reflection, but also creates a permanent record. The notion of collaborative learning in computer conferencing militates against taking a strong, possibly controversial, stance. Opinions are therefore hedged, or located in the peer discourse community rather than the individual. Through a corpus analysis of the use of the pronouns *I*, *we* and *it* we identify ways in which student writers are representing themselves and their views in both computer conferences and in single-authored essays. A powerful authorial voice was often associated not with the individual *I*, but with the collective *we*. In their single-authored essays, students drew upon the consensual voice developed in the conference discussion to support their personal points of view. In both genres, students made use of impersonal *it*-clauses, but frequently preceded them by personal frames such as *I think*, thereby resisting the impersonal, but powerful, voice of much academic discourse. This paper contributes to our developing understanding of evolving student writing practices in disciplinary settings.

Writing in multi-party computer conferences and single authored assignments: exploring the role of writer as thinker

1. Introduction

In this paper, we examine the use in written texts of *I, we* and impersonal *it* constructions (e.g. *It is interesting to observe that…*) that can be indicative of a student's role as thinker - engaging with the debates in their subject area. Previous studies of student academic writing (Xxx and Mayor 2004; Harwood 2003; Xxx and Xxx 2002; Hyland 2002; Tang and John 1999) have found that *I* and *we* pronouns and impersonal *it*-clauses occur in places in discourse where writers give their views; that is, identify themselves with the opinions expressed or seek to attribute them less personally. This research investigates the writer as thinker in two contrasting media and genres - computer mediated discussions and traditional essays - in an applied discipline.

Studies to date on interaction in computer mediated student discussion sites have frequently drawn on research paradigms associated with educational technology and psychology (Joiner & Jones 2003; Light et al. 2000; Schellens and Valcke 2006; Tolmie and Boyle 2000). However, this paper brings a linguistic focus, highlighting the role of language in the construction of shared knowledge (Mercer 1995; Wells 1999). We analyse how students portray themselves as 'thinkers' in the relatively new pedagogical space of dialogic computer mediated discussions compared with traditional single-authored essays.

The data for this paper comes from an exploratory study of essays and writing in computer conferences on a Master's level course at the Open University (UK). The students and tutors were based in the United Kingdom and mainland Europe and contributed to discussions at times convenient to them. Before outlining our methodology, data and findings, we review relevant research in applied linguistics on the rhetorical significance of the writer, particularly the 'writer as thinker' as signalled through the use of *I, we* and impersonal *it*-clauses.

2. The linguistic construction of the writer

There has been growing interest in the rhetorical role of the author in academic writing and what this can indicate about disciplinary discourses, genres and writer identity (Cadman 1997; Cherry 1998; Gragson and Selzer 1990; Harwood 2005; Hyland 2000; Ivanič 1994; Ivanič and Weldon 1998; Lillis 2001; Myers 1989a). There is overall agreement that how writers choose to represent themselves in discourse is significant, reflecting the positioning of the writer vis-à-vis the reader, the discipline and the content. The choices open to writers, however, vary depending on the particular genre they are writing, which also reflects the type of readership envisaged and their relationship with that readership.

A number of researchers (Chang and Swales 1999; Hyland 2001; Kuo 1999; Myers 1989b) have examined pronouns, among other features, in published academic writing. Choice of pronouns in writing conveys information about the writer to the reader and about the writer's relationship with the reader and to the propositional content of their writing. Myers (1989b), for example, draws on Brown and Levison's

politeness theory to explain pronoun and other choices in scientific writing particularly with regard to the hedging of claims. Studies which have concentrated on pronoun use in student writing have often focused on speakers of English as a second language (L2). Tang and John (1999), for example, looked at the genre of the academic essay in the context of a Singaporean undergraduate student group. They constructed a typology of possible identities indicated through pronoun choices which they organised in terms of a cline of authorial presence. The least powerful authorial presence was associated with a lack of personal pronouns, or where pronouns were used only to signpost the discussion (Let *us* now look at some examples...). The most powerful authorial presence was described as 'I' as originator (e.g. *My* idea rested on the assumption that at each of these stages...). Tang and John's discussion focused on the frequency with which different roles were occupied. They illustrated that the less powerful authorial roles were taken up more frequently by their students indicating a reluctance to assume authority within a discourse community in which they felt themselves to be novices – 'students feel insecure about the validity of their claims, seeing themselves to be at one of the lowest rungs of the academic ladder' (Tang and John 1999: S34).

Another study (Hyland 2002) compared pronoun use by L2 students from Hong Kong and professional academics writing across a number of disciplines, in order to examine 'the degree of authoritativeness writers are prepared to invest in their texts to personally get behind statements' (2002: 1093). Hyland's results for his undergraduate student project reports show similarities with those of Tang and John, particularly in the reluctance of students to take an authoritative stance. He attributes this in part to the influences of the students' second language cultural backgrounds,

claiming that 'L2 writers from other cultures may be reluctant to promote an individual self' (Hyland 2002: 1111).

A study which has examined the use of personal pronouns in *native* English speaker postgraduate texts is that by Harwood (2003) who compared research articles (RAs) and Master's dissertations in Business and Management, and Computing Science. The most striking finding for Harwood was the variation between the two dissertation corpora. In a genre where making claims and taking authorial responsibility is part of the rhetorical expectation, he found only 22 uses of *I* and *we* in Business and Management dissertations (74,117 words) compared to 604 in Computing Science dissertations (61,855 words). Computing students used *I* and *we* mostly to take the reader through the procedures that they followed in carrying out their research and to elaborate the argument surrounding their programming decisions. Business and Management students also made claims and argued, but they subdued or eradicated markings of interpersonal stance preferring instead to use passives and phrases such as *it is fair to say that….*

The rhetorical significance of the replacement of personal pronouns by *it*-clauses was the focus of work by Xxx and Xxx (2001; 2002). They examined the use of 'anticipatory *it*-clauses': clauses in which the subject is placed at the end of the clause and *it* occupies the normal subject position (e.g. *It is important* to clarify the terms used). They excluded from their analysis clauses where *it* functions as a pronoun, in cleft sentences and as dummy *it* (e.g. *It*'s raining), but included *it seems* and *it appears*. They were interested in the roles of anticipatory *it*-clauses in helping to organize, interpret and evaluate propositional content. They argue that such clauses

function in academic writing to 'both express opinions and to comment on and evaluate propositions in a way that allows the writer to remain in the background' (2002: 368).

A further pronoun study of student writing (Xxx and Mayor 2004) useful in considering the role of the writer drew on Thompson and Thetela's (1995) notion of the 'reader-in-the-text' and Halliday's (1994) personal pronoun framework. Xxx and Mayor categorised what they referred to as 'authorial voice or dialogue with the audience', as evidenced by the extent of explicit writer or reader reference. They discussed four broad categories (writer reference, reader reference, joint reference to writer/reader-in-the text, and collective reference to writer and reader, plus others, in the world beyond-the-text) which dealt with establishing who or what the reader/writer referents signified. Their data was essays written by international students as part of an academic English language test taken in order to enter higher education. They found a significant difference from the results reported for different genres in the earlier studies discussed. In particular, there was a high level of *collective reference* often signalling an assumed alignment of the readers' and writers' points of view. This, they argued, was creating an assumed common sense and unproblematic standpoint invoking consensual knowledge.

The broad classification used by Xxx and Mayor (2004) has similarities with work on professional, not student, academic writing (Harwood 2005; Hyland 2001) and non-academic spoken discourse (Ward 2004). All three focus on the inclusivity or exclusivity of pronoun choices. Harwood, for example, noted that inclusive pronouns could be used to indicate a gap in knowledge that the research community is likely to

accept and then an exclusive pronoun signals that the writer will fill that gap. He illustrates this with an example from writing in business and management:

> **We** do not seem to have [a] theory of how users initially comprehend the capabilities of a technology.

> **The** features-based theory of sensemaking triggers (FBST) **I** present here attempts to fill this gap. (Harwood 2005: 352-3)

Ward, concentrated specifically on the use of *we* in constructing identities in discourse between trades union representatives and their members. Contrary to expectations, he found that *we* was associated with a discourse of exclusion by union representatives; *we* was linked with active roles for the union officials who had undertaken negotiations but the membership were excluded from this process, a fact which was underlined by the use of the exclusive *we*, meaning the union officials but not the workers. The significance of Ward's work lies in the way the use of pronouns can be seen as suggestive of the interactional relations being constructed; it is indicative of language choices that contribute to delimiting discoursal roles.

3. Methodology

The context for the research was one of three distance-learning modules contributing to a Master's in Education degree in Applied Linguistics. The teaching was a combination of print-based and audio-visual materials together with six tutorials conducted via asynchronous computer conferences which lasted between two and four weeks each. The software used was the commercially available First Class asynchronous system. These tutorial conferences enabled geographically dispersed students, most of whom were practising teachers, to participate in written exchanges,

at a time of their choosing. Groups comprised 10-18 students (mainly British people based in the UK and continental Europe, Germans, Greeks and Italians), plus a tutor who facilitated reflection on, and discussion of, aspects of the course content, often in relation to forthcoming written assignments. For example, the first task of a series set by one tutor was:

> Choose one factor which you think influences second language learning (based on your own experience of learning a language or observations of students learning a language). Give reasons for why you think the factor is important and examples from your own experience.

The electronic discussions were leading up to an essay on factors affecting second language acquisition.

The data was collected from three computer conference groups comprising 43 students and three male tutors during two periods of conferencing (six sessions of computer conferencing in total). We collected interactions from the first, and most active, computer conference of the module (Confs 1), from the fourth (Confs 2) and from the essay assignments which related to the discussions in the two conferences (Essays 1 and Essays 2[1], 58 essays in total). Following Hyland (2002) and Harwood (2003), we based our initial investigation on an analysis of computer generated concordance lines (using Barlow's *MonoConc Pro*) of four corpora (Table 1). Students and tutors were also surveyed via questionnaire and telephone survey on their experiences related to computer conferencing. At that time, however, we had not identified pronoun use as of particular interest. Our understanding of student choices would have been enhanced by focused questions on pronoun usage.

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[1] There was an alternative, non-essay-based assignment option which meant that only about half the students submitted Essay 2.

Insert Table 1 around here

We looked at the personal pronouns *I* and *we,* and at *it* where it was used to represent an impersonal agent. A three stage analysis was undertaken. First, raw frequency information was obtained for the three words in all the corpora (Table 2). To provide a way of comparing frequency of usage, occurrences per 1000 words were calculated.

Insert Table 2 around here

The large number of occurrences of *I* meant that in order to make the analysis manageable we needed to sample our data rather than classify all examples. We decided to use only the subcorpora containing the first, and larger, of the two tutorial conferences (Confs 1) and the first essays (Essays 1). Confs 1 was systematically sampled using the 'Every n-th hit' facility in *Monoconc Pro* to produce a subcorpus of 1000 concordance lines, in addition to the total 510 occurrences in Essays 1. *We* and *it* were analysed in two separate amalgamated corpora (Essays All) and (Confs All). All concordance lines were manually checked and repetitions of earlier messages deleted[2]. This was necessary to avoid over counting as conference messages were frequently responses to earlier messages and contained all or part of that earlier message. The final numbers of concordance lines analysed in each corpus are shown in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 around here

[2] For the benefit of any researchers intending to use corpus analysis techniques with computer conferencing data, we would recommend that principled decisions on what repeated material to delete should be taken before any statistical data is compiled or corpus analysis undertaken. We acknowledge this as a shortcoming of the analysis method applied here, which makes the use of comparative statistics problematic.

Initial work concentrated on a sub-classification of *we* in order to clarify whether *we* was being used to foreground the writer, to include or exclude the reader, or to create an air of impersonality. Building on work by Xxx and Mayor (2004), Harwood 2005, and Ward (2004), we developed a simple classification of *we* indicating who is included or excluded.

1. writer only: *we* refers to the writer or writers only

2. generic *we*: where the reference could be paraphrased as 'people' or 'humankind'

3. writer plus reader: *we* includes the writer and the reader

4. writer plus others: *we* includes the writer and others beyond the readership of the text.

Categorisation was based in the first instance upon the evidence of the concordance lines, but wider context was available, via a context window, for consultation when necessary. Further sub-categorisation took place when investigating how *we* was functioning rhetorically and this is dealt with in Section 4.

The pronoun *I* was not ambiguous in the same way as *we*. We therefore moved on to a simple rhetorical classification, isolating those occurrences where *I* clearly indicated writer as thinker, the person taking responsibility for an opinion on the academic topic under discussion. In the majority of the cases, *I* was associated with verbs of mental perception, as in:

Aptitude is, *I believe*, a factor to be considered… (Confs 1)[3]

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[3] In examples the corpus details are given in brackets.

We disregarded instances of *I* where it was used to fulfil other functions such as signalling organisation in the essays:

> These are also the factors that I will focus on in the following paper… (Essays 1)

It is common in all the corpora, primarily as a backward referent. For this study we were interested only in anticipatory *it*-clauses. We have called this 'impersonal *it*' because it frequently functions to make less personal the agency in a sentence by allowing the writer to be less visible than would be the case if *we* or *I* were used. Initial analysis therefore concentrated on separating impersonal *it* from other uses of *it*.

In the next section we examine the frequency of the three words in the categories outlined and discuss what they indicate about the student writers as thinkers in the contrasting contexts of computer conferences and essays.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 '*We*'

The initial categorisation of *we* detailed in Section 3 was applied to all the conference and essay data (Table 4).

Insert Table 4 around here

4.1.1 Writer only

There are fewest uses of *we* in the exclusive 'writer only' category in both conferences and essays. The form is used by only six students, which is not surprising as all the texts are single authored. Of the 16 occurrences in the essays only 3 are associated with signposting through the discourse (e.g. So far *we* have shown that…(Essays)). The majority contain verbs denoting mental processes and convey the writer's personal opinion (e.g. *We* believe that it would be simplistic to conclude…(Essays)). Examination of the wider context showed that in these essays students moved between the use of *I* and *we* to denote the writer only. This use of exclusive *we* may reflect, for these writers, a lack of certainty over disciplinary expectations given that *we* is generally less frequent in soft disciplines than hard disciplines (Harwood 2003, 2005; Hyland 2002). Without follow-up interviews to discuss the specific texts with their writers it is not possible to explore this finding further.

4.1.2 Generic *we*

Occurrences of 'generic *we*' refer to universal traits or beliefs and typically co-occur with present tense verbs. They do not foreground the writer or the reader. Rather they are inclusive but vague as the referent is all people (e.g. I don't really think *we* ever reach a stage when *we* stop learning (Confs)).

Hyland (2002) chose to omit the generic *we* and all uses of *we* that were inclusive (our category 3) because of his focus on the visibility of the individual authors. For our purposes, the use of a generic or inclusive pronoun was a significant choice as it is

one of an array which allows the writer to be more or less identified with the views being put forward and to claim different types of authority for a point of view. Generic *we* can be used to imply that something is common sense, universally accepted and unproblematic, or to set up that position in order to critique it.

4.1.3 Writer plus reader

The category which includes the most occurrences of *we* in both the computer conference and essay corpora, and is the most obviously inclusive of those actually reading the texts, is 'writer plus reader'. Of interest in terms of writer as thinker is the frequent specification of the readership as a group to which the writer claims membership. This group may be specified using the pattern *we + as + noun* (e.g. I agree that small groups are easier to teach and *we as teachers* are able to give more individual attention to each learner (Confs)). *We as teachers/educators/employees* is a pattern that is used in both essays and conferences. In the conferences, a personal opinion is often stated and then supported by reference to the common experience of all members of the tutorial group. A common identity and experience is thereby invoked which is difficult to challenge. The position of the tutor as reader here is not clear. The writer may or may not have had the tutor also in mind; using *we* may be a means of sidestepping the normal tutor-student hierarchy and including the tutor as a peer.

The readership implied by *we* in the essays corpus was more ambiguous. *We* referred to the writer plus *generalised* others – not relating to a specific person or group of known people (e.g. As educators *we* need to recognise the importance of… (Essays)).

It differed from 'generic *we*' in that it did not refer to people or humankind in general. The non-specific readership implied was often teachers or researchers, which may or may not have been intended to co-opt the tutor (e.g. Theory should form a foundation upon which *we* build our methods and teaching… (Essays)). *We* in this sub-category often co-occurs with modals such as *need* or *should,* or material or mental processes such as *do*, *walk* and *think.*

Within the essays, *we* encompassing the reader and the writer is also often used in conjunction with a verb denoting a mental or material process. In, for example,

> In conclusion, *we* have seen… (Essays)

seen is a metaphorical rendering of *I have shown you*, but by making the pronoun inclusive the writer assumes a level of complicity on the part of the reader and an acceptance that the points made so far have indeed been seen and accepted by them both. It is also a device for steering the reader through the argument of the text, which seems also to be its function in:

> …but a further dimension arises if *we* consider van Lier's notion (2001) that…
> (Essays).

Here, the premise of the if-clause is to be examined and the reader is presumed to be examining it at the same time, as if alongside the writer.

The significance of this category lies not in its inclusiveness or exclusiveness in relation to the reader, but its use of the wider community, usually of teachers, to apparently validate what is being said. At one and the same time the writer is putting forward a view but indicating that it belongs to, is enacted by, or is needed in some way by the teaching or other community being invoked. For example, the claim that

'As educators *we* need to recognise x' could have been expressed with *educators* as subject ('Educators need to recognise x'), but instead the writer is declaring membership of the group of educators and speaking as one of them – thereby claiming a greater degree of authority and making the proposition harder to challenge.

4.1.4 Writer plus other(s)

The final category, 'writer plus other(s)', is the most explicit in excluding the readership, often through including *specific* others beyond the readership of the text in the referent *we* (e.g.…*we* both share a Slavonic background (Confs)). *We* is mainly used to refer to events in the lives of the student writers and is associated with either introductions – part of the first tutorial for all groups – or with providing anecdotal evidence to illustrate or support points being made, as in:

> I asked the group of younger learners for their views about the texts, how *we* could make them more relevant, worthwhile etc. Answer: you tell us the answers. I asked the older learners and *we* discussed the issue for an hour…
> (Confs)

These arguments rehearsed during the tutorial conference were later incorporated into the student's essay and introduced as anecdotal evidence by the words 'In my teaching situation…' (Essays). *We* here generally co-occurs with verbs in the past tense and alongside *I* also used to recount past events in the student's experience.

What we can draw from the findings in relation to the categorisation of *we* pronouns is that the inherent lack of clarity around who is being referred to is exploited, whether consciously or unconsciously, in a number of ways in the computer

conferences and essays examined. In category 1, a personal pronoun which encompasses more than one person is used to denote the individual writer. Although uncommon, it is mostly associated with co-opting the reader into sharing the viewpoint being put across by the writer. This function is most clearly visible in category 3 'writer plus reader'. In the context of computer conferences the writer can make *we* maximally inclusive encompassing both fellow students and the tutor. This category is associated in essays with guiding the reader through the text and assuming the reader's agreement with conclusions reached or opinions put forward on the basis of evidence presented. This is arguably a stronger rhetorical position than the writer foregrounding his/her own individual position (see discussion of *I* below), but it is taking less personal responsibility for the view expressed

Within category 3 the writer often names the readership that he/she is assuming, e.g. *we as teachers/educators*, etc. In the conference discussion, this draws specifically on the shared professional backgrounds of the students, a rhetorical move that would not be open to student writers on a non-vocationally oriented programme. In the essays, this use of *we* can be more ambiguous, referring to groups beyond the single reader of the essay. The appeal to teachers and others as a group is often combined with supporting a point of view. These inclusive uses of *we* often indicated where the general experience of others was being used to back up what might be called anecdotal evidence, often a legitimate use of experience in a practice-based course (Scott, 2000; Stierer, 2000). It is this blurring of what is acceptable evidence or warrant for the arguments being put forward that makes inclusive *we* particularly rhetorically salient within the contexts of the texts examined. We move now to look at the more individually 'writer responsible' role implicit in the use of *I*.

4.2 I as thinker

   An alternative to making *we* the responsible agent when putting forward an opinion or point of view is to use the first person singular pronoun *I*. Studies by Harwood (2003), Hyland (2002) and Tang and John (1999) all propose clines of authorial presence or visibility. We have concentrated our analysis on the most visible end of such clines, on usages glossed as '*I* as thinker' (Table 5).

                          Insert Tables 5 and 6 around here

Verb collocates at one or two words to the right of the pronoun in our study are listed in Table 6. '*I* as thinker' was frequently used in conjunction with verbs denoting mental or verbal processes. This is in contrast to Hyland's findings that 'very few student reports contained personal pronouns associated with explicit cognitive verbs such as *think, believe* and *assume'* (2002: 1103). The example below is typical of a pattern in which the writer introduces a personal opinion with a clause containing a mental process (*I believe*) which serves to highlight that the reason given is based on the knowledge and interpretation of the situation by the writer. In Halliday's terms it is an interpersonal metaphor expressing modality (1994: 354), indicating a level of uncertainty about the proposition. In Hyland's terms, it is acting as a 'hedge' 'by alerting readers to the writer's perspective towards the propositional information and to the readers themselves' (1998: 5).

> The students in this class progressed dramatically in their reading to
> understand. *I* believe that this was because they were able to engage closely
> with the characters and themes… (Essays 1).

Similarly, the inclusion of *I feel* in 'In conclusion, then, I feel that these are very complex issues…' (Essays1) advances the opinion in a more tentative way. Similar uses have been found in professional academic writing where personal attribution acknowledges that others may have valid but opposing views (Myers 1989b) and in mitigating critical comments by teachers when commenting on the work of their students (Hyland and Hyland 2001).

Using *I* is a highly visible strategy which commits the writer but, together with the choice of verb, conveys explicitly that the opinion is subjective. Rather than asserting something is the case, the addition of *I believe, think,* etc. stresses the personal nature of the opinion and leaves open the possibility that others may have different views. Within the computer conference context this is particularly significant in allowing peers to disagree or take up different positions, without being face-threatening to others or damaging the collaborative character. This is illustrated in the extract below which shows a student challenging an opinion put forward by the tutor (PB) which had also been endorsed by another student (LP):

> I want to challenge this opinion, which has alsopreviously been heard by LP. PB himself talks about cases of boys who are better than girls but I want to question it on the whole.I do agree that girls ,at least in Greece,study more than boys.*I believe* that this has to do with social conventions and the fact that girls are more motivated to study as they want to leave their homes more than boys and studying is the safest way for that …(Confs)

Within conference discussions, '*I* as thinker' was often used alongside *I* introducing an anecdote. The next example comes from a very long conference posting in which

the student picks up the issue of age of acquisition in language learning. She states her view (*I think…, I still believe*) about the impact of an early start to learning languages and justifies it with anecdotal experience (*I have been teaching…*):

> *I* think age of acquisition is an interesting factor to consider in relation to successful language acquisition…Until one or two years ago *I* held the view that…*I* still believe this to be true, but only if… Let me give some examples. *I* have been teaching a small group… (Confs 1)

Interestingly, even when using her own experience, she acknowledges a little later in her posting that a reader might not be in full agreement with her, having had different experiences, and she tries to deal with the possible counter arguments: *Of course I do know some teenagers who started early…but….* These personal reflections on theory were encouraged by the type of tasks set for the students to carry out in the conference. They were therefore at liberty to use examples from their past to help in evaluating the theoretical notions under discussion. *I* as thinker is consequently often in close proximity to other uses of *I* such as giving personal details or anecdotes relevant to the topic under discussion. This use of *I* as thinker alongside more anecdotal uses is also found in the essays and seems to have been influenced by the conference discussions. Some students treated the evidence of their peers as sources similar to published works (c.f. Lea, 2001). In essays, students appeared to be comfortable stating their own finding if they had support from the experiences and opinions of another member of the group. Judging by the tutor comments on these essays, evidence from peers, as practising professionals, was not penalised.

Generally, we can say that the student writers examined here do make themselves and their views visible through the use of *I*. In discussions in computer conferences

there is freedom to juxtapose opinion and anecdotal evidence assuming a readership of peers. Student writers appear to respond to this by relating their views to published academic writing and using their experience as support. The use of *I believe* and *I think* convey the message that 'this is my opinion and I have an equal right to express it as we are all students together, but I acknowledge that you may think differently'. In essays, however, the same pronoun and verb combinations addressed to the more powerful tutor-assessor have a different rhetorical effect. The writer as thinker is still highly visible, but assertions appear more tentative and there is greater diffidence.

4.3 Impersonal *It*

Diffidence in making claims and stating opinions is also evident through the use of impersonal *it*-clauses. Xxx and Xxx (2002) identify three rhetorical motivations for the choice of *it*-clauses. First, they can be used as hedging devices (e.g. *It has been asserted* that motivation affects perseverance (Essays)), with the *it*-clause distancing the writer from the content expressed in the following clause (Quirk et al 1985; Thompson 1994). Second, inclusion of adjectival complementation in the *it*-clause allows the writer to encode evaluation of the subsequent clause (Hunston and Sinclair 2000) (e.g. *It was interesting* to learn that... (Confs)). Third, use of an *it*-clause rather than a personal pronoun (e.g. In the light of these findings, *it is frustrating* that none of the researches actually indicate… (Essays)) allows the presentation of opinions as more distanced, objective and less open to negotiation (Martin et al. 1997).

We adapted Xxx and Xxx' methods to isolate *it*-clauses with an interpersonal function; that is, where they carried a) a rhetorical function related to the discussions

in the computer conferences and the essays, and b) where they helped to interpret and evaluate the propositional content of the main clause without necessarily drawing attention to the writer and holder of these views.

The use of this rhetorical option is common in the data examined here, as shown in Table 7. The number of occurrences of impersonal *it*-clauses is compared to all uses of *it* in the corpora examined.

Insert Table 7 around here

A higher proportion out of all uses of *it* were impersonal *it* constructions in the Essays than in the Conferences where discussions between peers were more personalised. The use of impersonal *it* as opposed to *I* or *we* as the agent meant that views put forward sounded more authoritative and less subjective, as in:

It is not surprising that Lightbown and Spada (2001) report… (Essays)

This could have been phrased as 'I am not surprised that...' but the use of the *it*-clause makes it less personal and perhaps less likely to be challenged. This has similarities with uses of *we* in category three to co-opt others into the same view of things. The next example has a different rhetorical function, emphatically asserting the views of the writer:

In such a classroom, *it is essential* to provide the learners with opportunities to explore… (Essays)

Here the student writer is seen to take up the most visible writer-as-thinker position by strongly stating an opinion. That the opinion is their own, despite the *it*-clause, is not in doubt given the convention in academic writing that unless attributed elsewhere, opinions are assumed to be those of the writer.

Although *it*-clauses generally introduce the reader's opinion or evaluation, in both the essays and the computer conferences there were examples of *it*-clauses being introduced by more personal framing clauses, commonly *I+believe, think,* etc. (e.g. *I feel* that it is not really academically sound to… (Confs)) or phrases such as *In my opinion* (e.g. *In my opinion* it can therefore be mentioned that all research… (Essays)) or specific personal reference in the *it*-clause (e.g. *It seems to me* that in a non-intensive learning environment... (Confs)). There were 19 occurrences (approx 5.1 % of the total) in the Essays corpus and 36 (approx 17.1%) in the Conferences corpus.

The initial *I* clause or *my* phrase frames the impersonal construction in a personal light, which increases the visibility of the writer but simultaneously decreases their authoritativeness. It is almost as if the student writer is reluctant completely to assume the independent impersonal voice of academic texts, preferring instead to maintain a level of solidarity with student peers. This may position the students along a continuum of resistance to academic identity which has previously been identified in classrooms and tutorial settings at secondary and tertiary levels (e.g. Benwell and Stokoe, 2005). This is not to say that they were detached from academic endeavour, but rather that they did not yet feel able to assume the voice associated with the professional academic, at least not with their peers in conference interaction.

Using *I/my/me* with *it*-clauses in essays may have been in response to the jointly constructed nature of the opinions in the conference. In order to personally own a point of view that has similarities with the conference discussions, students may combine a personal and an impersonal voice even in circumstances where it would

have seemed appropriate in a single authored essay to leave out the personal referent. In the example below, the student has interwoven her own voice with that of her tutor (PB):

> I noticed that in Tutorial 1 (E841 pjb 353 February) motivation was brought up as an important factor by various participants of the tutorial, as a significant factor in affecting second language acquisition.So *I feel it is very important to* understand why a learner has lack of motivation as it can negatively affect learning. As PB states "Motivation is something that learners have when they come to us, but also something that we can work to maintain and enhance."(PB.E841 pjb353 Tutorial1, 9 February)…(Essays)

5. Conclusion

  An analysis of the uses of *I, we* and *it* in conveying opinion has refined and added to our understanding of how student writers represent themselves and their views in two different written media. In particular, it has shown that there is not a straightforward dichotomy between the language used by students and that used by experts. Differing levels of responsibility for propositions were indicated by pronoun choices and with reference to the readership of the texts. *I* is the pronoun associated by Harwood (2003), Hyland (2002) and Tang and John (1999) with powerful authorial presence or high writer visibility, but findings from this study suggest that students who are already experienced practitioners write and construct themselves differently from, say, the Hong Kong and Singaporean undergraduate writers studied by Hyland and Tang and John. Rather, the students studied seem to share some of the features of professional academic writers observed by Hyland and Hyland (2001) and Myers

(1989b). In the computer conferences, '*I* as thinker' was less face threatening to peers as it acknowledged the personal nature of the proposition and therefore the fact that it is more open to argument. This helped to maintain the constructive, non-adversarial tenor of collaborative conferencing. In the essays and conference data, the use of *I* plus a mental process verb usually served to hedge propositions, confining the assertion to the opinion of a novice in the discipline.

The use of *we* could in some circumstances be seen as adopting a stronger voice in making claims and stating opinions. *We* could serve to either co-opt the reader into the unfolding argument or to strengthen a claim by linking it to a wider group such as teachers, which also gave greater authority to what was in effect anecdotal evidence. Privileging anecdotal evidence may, in the contexts examined in this study, be linked to the experience of collaborative learning brought about by the conferencing activities. In this applied discipline such recourse to the experience of teachers appeared to be academically acceptable as many of the discussions and assignments involved students in reflecting in the light of their past experiences on theory and practice. Discussion in the computer conferences allowed experiences to be shared and thus to enhance the feeling that 'we as teachers' did have a particular standpoint from which to argue as a profession. A collective voice emerged in the conference discussions and was adapted for use in the single-authored essays allowing more weight to be attached to the claims made. Where greater circumspection was needed the modality associated with using *I* followed by verbs such as *think* or *believe* was available for use by writers.

In addition to drawing on a collective body to add strength to expressions of opinion, student writers also consciously or unconsciously exploited the ambiguity of the referent in *we*. This feature of English, whereby the exact scope of the pronoun may not be clear, rendered the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of the *we* pronoun difficult to pin down. In the conference discussions students frequently used *we* to refer to the readership, but it was often unclear whether the writer was including the tutor as a member of the readership. This was useful as it seemed to allow a collective view to be assumed by the writer, but without the necessity of acknowledging the hierarchical relationship or power imbalance between the tutor and the students. The tutor could, if necessary, be seen as a bystander; having posted an activity he now waited in the wings as the students discussed it. (For wider discussion of the tutor-role in this research see Xxx 2003; Xxx and Xxx 2006). Within the essays, *we* with a general referent, such as *teachers,* was used to widen the authority for the claim being made and was vague in terms of inclusiveness of the actual reader.

Finally, we noted that students have impersonal options available to them, one of which is the use of impersonal *it*-clauses. These constructions were particularly common in the Essays corpus. While impersonal *it*-clauses do not signal writer visibility, they can indicate a powerful authorial presence, with writers not needing to mitigate their claims by signals of their personal involvement. Thus, where *it* is the agent in the sentence the views expressed may sound more authoritative. However, *it*-clauses were also often combined with *I* or another personal phrase. We suggested that the intrusion of *I* into otherwise impersonal constructions in essays may have signalled an awareness of the jointly constructed conference texts that formed one of the source texts for the single-authored essays. Within the computer conference

discussion the combination of *it*-clauses and *I* may be indicative of a resistance to, or reluctance to take on, the impersonal voice of academia.

We can conclude from this discussion that students adopt different roles vis-à-vis their readership in the different media. In part, this is an acknowledgement of the conventions surrounding assessed essays as opposed to the more collaborative and interactive nature of computer conferences. The discussions using computer conferencing, however, did appear to influence the subsequent single-authored work through the creation of a validation mechanism. Student experiences, which were legitimate subjects for the conference, were amalgamated with the experiences of the student-author and used to strengthen the reflections put forward in essays. Individuals' claims, (*I believe*), were often supported by reference to the shared experience of the group. An inclusive 'we the teachers' voice was used alongside citations of published work. Knowledge that such new academic writing practices are emerging and evolving is important in understanding the impact of new pedagogic practices on students' constructions of themselves as writers of academic texts and of the disciplinary arguments and conventions acceptable. We can no longer rely on apprenticeship or enculturation into academic and disciplinary practices via students reading only texts sanctioned by the professional disciplinary community. Peer arguments and reflections made permanent by computer technology are a new source of ideas and possible models for writing, and methods for evaluating their worth without jeopardising the benefits of collaborative learning through conferencing will need to be developed.

Acknowledgements

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Table 1: Corpus details

Confs 1	112 862 words
Confs 2	23 984 words
Total conferences	136 846 words
Essays 1	65 234 words
Essays 2	44 483 words
Total essays	109 717 words
Total	246 563 words

Table 2: Frequency of 'I', 'we' and 'it' in the sub-corpora

	Essays 1		Confs 1		Essays 2		Confs 2	
	Raw freq	Per 1000 words	Raw freq	Per 1000 words	Raw freq	Per 1000 words	Raw freq	Per 1000 words
I (+'ll etc)	510	7.8	2739	24.2	198	4.4	475	19.8
we	137	2.1	479	4.2	137	3.1	169	7.1
it	435	6.7	1046	9.3	327	7.4	220	9.2

Table 3: Final numbers of concordances lines analysed for each pronoun after duplicate lines deleted

	Essays 1	Confs 1	Essays All	Confs All
I	493	827	-	-
we	-	-	270	458
it	-	-	753	942

Table 4: Categorisation of occurrences of 'we' pronoun showing comparative figures for all conferences and all essays. Percentages in brackets.

	1 Writer only	2 Generic *we*	3 Writer plus reader	4 Writer plus other(s)
All Confs	2 (0.4)	19 (4.1)	306 (66.8)	123 (26.8)
All Essays	16 (5.9)	30 (11.1)	190 (69.9)	36 (13.2)

Table 5: 'I' pronouns associated with the function of giving opinion (*I* as thinker)

	No. of occurrences of *I* classified	No. of occurrences *I* as thinker (%)
Conferences	827	181 (21.9)
Essays	493	127 (25.8)

Table 6: Lexical verb collocates one and two places to the right of 'I'

Confs All (%)	Essays All (%)	*I* as thinker Confs All (%)	*I* as thinker Essays All (%)
Think 61 (7.4)	Feel 34 (6.9)	Think 41 (22.7)	Feel 27 (21.3)
Find/found 47 (5.7)	Find/found 27 (5.5)	Agree 22 (12.2)	Believe 24 (18.9)
Agree 24 (2.9)	Believe 26 (5.3)	Find/found 17 (9.4)	Think 17 (13.4)
Know 21 (2.5)	Think 21 (4.3)	Feel 12 (6.6)	Agree 6 (4.7)
Feel 18 (2.2)	Like 13 (2.6)	Believe 11 (6.1)	Say 4 (3.1)
Like 18 (2.2)	Chosen 8 (1.6)	Like 8 (4.4)	Argue 4 (3.1)
			Like 4 (3.1)
Total no. of occurrences 827 (100%)	Total no. of occurrences 493 (100%)	Total no. of occurrences 181 (100%)	Total no of. occurrences 127 (100%)

Table 7: 'It' pronouns

	Total occurrences	**Occurrences of impersonal *it* (%)**
Conferences	942	211 (22.4)
Essays	753	373 (49.5)