BRIEF REPORT

# ESL students transitioning from high school preparation to high school: Authorial voice in academic writing

**Olga Mhilli**

The University of Sydney

## *Introduction*

This brief report presents the preliminary results of the textual data analysis within a qualitative longitudinal study that examines ESL adolescent writers' voice in their academic writing as they transition from a High School Preparation (HSP) intensive English program to mainstream high schools (HS) in Sydney, Australia.

## *Background*

Recent research indicates that students in transition from one educational setting to another experience challenges on multiple levels, resulting in issues ranging from emotional insecurity to inability to demonstrate adequate skills in such essential areas as writing; however, research into writing in transition is scarce (Baker, 2013; Everitt-Raynolds et al., 2018; Fong, 2013; Hanna & Saidy, 2014; Yi, 2009).

Within academic writing, the author's voice and the students' ability to use their voice effectively to their advantage cannot be overestimated. Internationally, secondary school curricula include authorial voice as a target construct for successful writing (Llosa et al., 2011; Matsuda & Jeffrey, 2012). In Australia, voice as a learning and teaching concept is mentioned repeatedly in the Australian National Curriculum (ACARA, 2019). However, in ESL writing, there has been a tendency to see authorial voice as a peripheral construct and exceedingly challenging for non-native speakers (Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003; Stapleton, 2002). Nonetheless, more recent studies have demonstrated a correlation between essay quality and authorial presence or, more specifically, the use of markers of stance and engagement in ESL academic essays. Yoon (2017), Zhao (2017), and Hyland (2002), for example, argue that authorial voice should be explicitly taught in ESL classes to provide students with effective tools to realise their potential as academic writers in English. Thus, the ability of ESL students to express their authorial voice in academic writing in secondary school

is important. However, research into authorial voice of ESL adolescent writers is scarce, while research into authorial voice of ESL writers moving from HSP to HS is non-existent. This study aims to redress this gap and look at how the students' authorial voice changes as they move to a more challenging educational setting.

Ontologically, the study takes a dialogic view of voice and recognises the inextricable connection between the writer's individual voice and changes to the context in which writing takes place. It looks at voice as a living thing, a reflection of the writer's identity in discourse, perpetually changing and developing within the personal environment of the author as well as wider sociocultural contexts (Matsuda, 2001, 2015; Matsuda & Tardy, 2007; Tardy, 2012).

### *Methods*

The six participants in this study each composed texts of around 1000 words as part of the usual assessment cycle in the HSP program and HS. This textual data comprises 'expositions' that can be categorised as 'arguments', and 'interpretations' and that fall under a broader category of 'text responses' in the Sydney School terms (Martin & Rose, 2008, pp. 93–94; Rose, 2012, p. 212).

The first stage of textual data collection took place when the participants were still in HSP, where they composed 'arguments'. The second stage of data collection happened one year later for two out of the six participants, when they were in Year 10 in their high schools and where they also composed 'arguments.' For four participants, the second data collection happened two years later, when they were in Term Four of Year 11 and where they composed 'text responses' in preparation for the Higher School Certificate Paper One, Language Study within an Area of Study, Section Two, Question Two (NESA, 2018).

It is noteworthy that although 'arguments' and 'text responses' are different genres, they have important similarities when it comes to authorial voice: more specifically, affective stance and evaluative language. Indeed, according to the typology of genres developed by the Sydney School (Martin, 2000, 2006; Martin & Rose, 2005, 2008; Rose, 2012) for the Australian secondary school curriculum both of the genres fall under the same category of 'evaluating' texts where the writers mainly draw on 'evaluative language resources' to either 'evaluate . . . opinions and issues', in the case of 'arguments', or to 'evaluate [prescribed] texts', in the case of 'text responses' (Rose, 2012, pp. 211–212).

Hyland's (2005) interactional model of voice was used for the textual data analysis. After the essays were collected in both settings, each essay was coded manually to ensure accurate identification of the markers in the textual data. All frequencies were normed per 1000 words.

Hyland's (2005) model distinguishes between the dimensions of stance and engagement. Stance, or writer-oriented features of interaction, includes the writer's attitude and certainty and is realised through the categories of hedges, boosters, attitude markers and self-mention (See Table 1).

**Table 1**

***Markers of Stance***

| Linguistic Features | Meaning, Purpose & Examples |
|---|---|
| Hedges | Devices like *possible, might* and *perhaps*, which indicate the writer's decision to withhold complete commitment to a proposition |
| Boosters | Words like *clearly, obviously* and *demonstrate,* which allow writers to express their certainty in what they say and to mark involvement with the topic |
| Attitude Markers | Words or phrases which indicate the writer's affective, rather than epistemic, attitude to propositions, conveying surprise (e.g., *astonishing)*, agreement (e.g., *disagree*), importance (e.g., *it's important to* . . . ) and frustration (e.g., *unfortunately*) |
| Self-mention | The presence or absence of explicit author reference like 'I' |

*Based on Hyland, 2005, pp. 178-181*

Engagement in Hyland's (2005) model builds a connection between the writer and the readers, stressing solidarity with the readers, making predictions about what the readers are likely to think or how they are likely to react and explicitly guiding their actions or thinking. This orientation towards the readers is realised through features such as reader mention, directives, questions, reference to shared knowledge and personal asides (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

***Markers of Engagement***

| Linguistic Feature | Meaning, Purpose & Examples |
|---|---|
| Reader Mention | Second and plural first-person pronouns and possessives referring to the reader, e.g., *you* that entwine the conceivable reader's perspective into the argument |
| Directives | Imperatives, e.g., *consider, imagine*; modals of obligation, e.g., *must, should*; predicative adjectives expressing the writer's judgement of necessity/importance, e.g., '*It is important to understand* . . . ' used to instruct the reader to perform an action or to see things in a certain way |
| Questions | Rhetorical questions used to involve the reader in a dialogue, ultimately leading to the writer's viewpoint |

| Linguistic Feature | Meaning, Purpose & Examples |
|---|---|
| Reference to Shared Knowledge | Explicit calls asking readers to identify with particular views, e.g., *of course*, and *obviously* |
| Personal Asides | Insertions by the author that often appear in the middle of a statement as a personal comment or reflection to briefly interrupt the flow of the argument and to engage the reader, e.g. '. . . *(often, it is true, insufficiently thought out)* . . .' |

*Based on Hyland (2005, pp. 182–186)*

### *Findings*

The results of the descriptive statistics analysis reveal the most and the least frequently used markers of voice in HSP and HP settings. The results also show the overall frequencies of voice markers, as well as the frequencies for stance and engagement for each participant in the two settings.

**Table 3**

***The Most and the Least Frequently Used Markers of Voice in HSP and HS***

| Markers of Voice & Category | HSP | HS |
|---|---|---|
| ***Most frequently used:*** | | |
| Attitude Markers (Stance) | 20 | 10 |
| Reader Mention (Engagement) | 10 | 6 |
| ***Least frequently used:*** | | |
| Self-mention (Stance) | 3.4 | 1 |
| Reference to Shared Knowledge (Engagement) | 2.7 | 1.4 |
| Questions (Engagement) | 0.4 | 0 |
| Personal Asides (Engagement) | 0 | 0 |

Table 3 shows that in both HSP and HS the participants relied mostly on attitude markers (20 per 1000 words in HSP and 10 in HS), followed by reader mention (12 in HSP and 6 in HS). The least frequently used were markers of engagement, reference to shared knowledge (2.7 in HSP and 1.4 in HS), questions (0.4 in HSP, and 0 in HS) and personal asides (not used in either setting). The least frequently used marker of stance was self-mention (3.4 in HSP and 1 in HS).

**Table 4**

***Markers of Stance, Engagement and Total Voice***

| Categories of Voice | Participants and Settings | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Daniel | | Aaron | | Leo | | Anthony | | Kate | | Felicity | |
| | HSP | HS (Y11) | HSP | HS (Y10) | HSP | HS (Y11) | HSP | HS (Y10) | HSP | HS (Y11) | HSP | HS (Y11) |
| Stance | 35.5 | 28.2 | 39.1 | 22 | 61 | 23.7 | 23.6 | 19.7 | 24.7 | 16.4 | 58.3 | 16.9 |
| Engagement | 31.7 | 13.2 | 27.6 | 0 | 26.7 | 2.9 | 5.2 | 2.5 | 5.4 | 20.5 | 16.3 | 10.3 |
| **Total Voice** | **67.2** | **41.4** | **66.7** | **22** | **87.7** | **26.6** | **28.8** | **22.2** | **30.1** | **36.9** | **74.6** | **27.2** |

Table 4 shows that for five out of six participants, there are fewer expressions of total voice (the sum of the markers of stance and engagement) in HS than in HSP. When looking separately at stance, it can be noted that all the participants used stance more often in HSP than in HS. When comparing the use of stance and engagement, it is clear that all six participants attempted to communicate their stance more often than they tried to engage their reader in both settings.

While all the participants show similar patterns in the use of stance in the two settings, the use of engagement is similar for five participants but is different for Kate. Kate showed a noticeable increase in the frequency of the markers of engagement in HS which was counterbalanced by a drop in her use of the markers of stance in HS, resulting in only a slight rise in the total markers of authorial voice in HS compared to HSP.

### *Implications*

The results of the preliminary textual data analysis reveal a distinct downward trend in the use of the markers of voice, especially markers of authorial stance, in HS compared to HSP. Although it can be argued that this decrease is due to the differences in genres composed in HSP and HS, it should be noted that two of the six participants composed the same genre, exposition essays (or arguments), in HSP and HS. Thus, the decrease in the markers of authorial stance was evident in both interpretations (or text responses) and exposition essays (or arguments) in HS.

In fact, previous studies on voice in academic writing emphasise the vulnerability of the individual authorial stance in novice and particularly beginning ESL and EFL writers in the context of rigid academic discourse. Indeed, academic writing courses and textbooks often discourage students from using the language features that reflect their personality or project their authorial stance (Delvin, 2016; Fallas Escobar & Fernandez, 2017; Santos & DaSilva, 2016). In addition, as novice ESL academic writers enter a new discourse community, their affiliations with their home countries and

their authorial identity may become weaker, which can be subsequently reflected in their writing where they minimise their authorial presence, reducing the number of markers of stance such as self-mention (Hyland, 2002).

However, the preliminary results of the current study indicate that it is not only self-mention but all markers of stance, including attitude markers, which are decreasing as the participants gain more experience in academic writing. Attitude markers are the indicators of affective authorial stance and are the evaluative language resources (see Martin & White, 2005) that writers are expected to draw upon not only when composing expositions but also when composing interpretations in HS. Indeed, the two main rhetorical stages of interpretations are 'evaluation' and 'reaffirmation of evaluation' (Martin & Rose, 2008, pp. 93–95; Rose, 2012, p. 221). The current research project aims to contribute to the understanding of the authorial voice of novice ESL academic writers and it is expected that further in-depth qualitative analysis of the textual and interview data will shed more light on the preliminary results presented in this brief report.

## References


ACARA. (2019). *Foundation to Year 10: Review of the Australian curriculum.* Retrieved from http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/foundation_-_year_10.html

Baker, S. (2013). Transitions and shifting understandings of writing: Building rich pictures of how moving from school to university is experienced through exploration of students' discourses of writing. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning, 7*(2), A35-A49. Retrieved from http://journal.aall.org.au/index.php/jall/article/viewArticle/265

Devlin, K. (2016). Is the academic essay becoming a fossil through lack of authorial voice? The case for more stylish and exploratory writing. *Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal, 1*(1), 34-40. Retrieved from https://sparkjournal.arts.ac.uk/index.php/spark/article/view/4/3

Everitt-Raynolds, A., Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2018). 'They don't want my opinion do they?': Authorial identity and transitions into and within higher education. In K. S. Miller, & M. Stevenson (Eds.), *Transitions in writing* (pp. 143-169). Leiden: Brill.

Fallas Escobar, C., & Chaves Fernández, L. (2017). EFL learners' development of voice in academic writing: Lexical bundles, boosters/hedges and stance-taking strategies. *Gist Education and Learning Research Journal, 15,* 96-124. https://doi.org/10.26817/16925777.392

Fong, L. L. (2013). Writing transition in postsecondary education: A case study. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 90*, 267-277. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.07.091

Hannah, M. A., & Saidy, C. (2014). Locating the terms of engagement: Shared language development in secondary to postsecondary writing transitions. *College Composition and Communication, 66*(1), 120-144.

Helms-Park, R., & Stapleton, P. (2003). Questioning the importance of individualized voice in undergraduate L2 argumentative writing: An empirical study with pedagogical implications. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 12,* 245-265. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2003.08.001.

Hyland, K. (2002). Authority and invisibility: Authorial identity in academic writing. *Journal of Pragmatics 34*(8), 1091-1112. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(02)00035-8

Hyland, K. (2005). Stance and engagement: A model of interaction in academic discourse. *Discourse Studies, 7*(2), 173-192. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445605050365

Llosa, L., Beck, S. W., & Zhao, C. D. (2011). An investigation of academic writing in secondary schools to inform the development of diagnostic classroom assessments. *Assessing Writing, 16,* 256-273. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2011.07.001

Martin, J. R. (2000). Grammar meets genre – Reflections on the 'Sydney School'. Arts: *The Journal of the Sydney University Arts Association, 22*, 47–95.

Martin, J. R. (2006). Metadiscourse: Designing interaction in genre-based literacy programs. In R. Whittaker, M. O'Donnell, & A. McCabe (Eds.), *Language and literacy: Functional approaches.* (pp. 95–122). London: Continuum

Martin, J. R., & Rose, D. (2005). Designing literacy pedagogy: Scaffolding asymmetries. In R. Hasan, C. M. I. M. Matthiessen, & J. Webster (Eds.), *Continuing discourse on language* (pp. 251–280). London: Equinox.

Martin, J. R., & Rose, D. (2008). *Genre relations: Mapping culture*. London: Equinox.

Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R (2005). *The language of evaluation: Appraisal in English.* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Matsuda, P. K. (2001). Voice in Japanese written discourse: Implications for second language writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 10*(1), 35-53. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1060-3743(00)00036-9

Matsuda, P. K. (2015). Identity in written discourse. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 35,* 140-159. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190514000178

Matsuda, P.K., & Jeffrey, J.V. (2012). Voice in student essays. In K. Hyland, & C. Sancho Guinda (Eds.), *Stance and voice in written academic genres* (pp.151-156). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Matsuda, P. K., & Tardy, C. M. (2007). Voice in academic writing: The rhetorical construction of author identity in blind manuscript review. *English for Specific Purposes, 26*(2), 235-249. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2006.10.001

NESA. (2018). *Higher School Certificate Examination: English (ESL)*. Retrieved from https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/wcm/connect/3287352f-b9a6-4658-84ed-c2e8d3b87b8f/2018-hsc-english-esl-p1.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE-3287352f-b9a6-4658-84ed-c2e8d3b87b8f-mD.Awjz

Rose, D. (2012). Genre in the Sydney school. In J. P. Gee, & M. Handford (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 209-225). Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge.

Santos, J. V., & Da Silva, P. N. (2016). Issues with publishing abstracts in English: Challenges for Portuguese linguists' authorial voices. *Publications, 4*(2), 12. https:doi.org/ 10.3390/publications4020012

Stapleton, P. (2002). Critiquing voice as a viable pedagogical tool in L2 writing: Returning the spotlight to ideas. *Journal of Second Language Writing 11*(3), 177-190. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1060-3743(02)00070-X

Tardy, C. M. (2012). Current conceptions of voice. In K. Hyland, & C. Guinda (Eds.), *Stance and voice in written academic genres* (pp. 34-48). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Yi, Y. (2010). Adolescent multilingual writers' transitions across in-and out-of-school writing contexts. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 19*(1), 17-32. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2009.10.001

Yoon, H. J. (2017). Textual voice elements and voice strength in EFL argumentative writing. *Assessing Writing, 32,* 72-84. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2017.02.002

Zhao, C. G. (2017). Voice in timed L2 argumentative essay writing. *Assessing Writing, 31,* 73-83. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2016.08.004

**Olga Mhilli** has taught English as a foreign and second language for over 20 years in Australia and overseas. She is an English teacher in a High School Preparation program and a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney School of Education and Social Work.

onik9943@uni.sydney.edu.au