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Addressing Self-Representation in Academic Writing in a Beginners' EAP Classroom

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that it is important for the issue of self-representation in academic writing to be addressed in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classrooms. This is because the ways in which writers present themselves in their texts have consequences for how their writing is received and judged by their readers. I introduce a few of the different aspects of one's self which a person may foreground in his or her academic writing, and suggest a way of using short sample academic texts in the EAP classroom to raise students' awareness of how language works to convey aspects of their identity.

The importance of the writer in academic discourse

My interest in how writers convey their personalities in their academic writing began in my Honours year at the university, when, swamped with assigned readings, I began to notice that there were some articles I quite enjoyed reading, and others that I simply could not wade through, and this had nothing to do with the subject matter of the readings. I found that the writings that could hold my attention were those whose *writers* held my attention. At my happiest, I could be found scribbling little notes in margins, with approving comments such as "Nice one, John!" or less approbatory ones such as "I don't think so, David." Somehow, always addressing writers by their first names, I had a sense that I was interacting intellectually with actual people, and this made reading their work so much more interesting.

Although traditional approaches to academic writing have tended to foreground content and mechanical issues (such as developing thesis statements, paragraphing, punctuation, and proper citation), and although these *are* important issues to raise with a beginning academic writer, I want to suggest here that it is in fact just as important, at the early stages of a novice academic writer's foray into the EAP classroom, to draw his/her attention to the fact that how he/she presents himself/herself in his/her writing is also a crucial part of successful academic writing. It has, after all, long been recognised that good communication does not merely

involve the transmission of a propositional message, but also involves communicators tending to the social aspect of the exchange. Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967), for instance, in their seminal book on the study of communication, propose that all communication has a *content* component and a *relationship* component. Along similar lines, Widdowson (1984) speaks of the *conceptual* and the *communicative* functions of language, with the former referring to language as it is used "for thinking, formulating concepts, fashioning propositions" (70), and the latter referring to language as it used to "engage in social interaction" (70). Widdowson goes on to liken these to Halliday's (e.g. 1994) *ideational* and *interpersonal* functions of language respectively, and, from my point of view, the appeal of Halliday's formulation of these various functions of language lies in his emphasis on the fact that the ideational meaning of a text and its interpersonal meaning are conveyed at one and the same time, through one and the same text. Thus all acts of communication through language *simultaneously* convey propositional information as well as information about the writer's identity, stance, and positioning with respect to others. Perhaps even more significantly, there has been some research to suggest that what is communicated interpersonally by a writer has a real impact on the ideational message that is extracted from a text by a reader. (See for instance Haswell and Haswell 1995 for an intriguing, if disturbing, report on how the identities inscribed by writers in their writing affect the good and bad qualities subsequently perceived by readers in their writing.)

Given that academic writers cannot avoid conveying interpersonal information along with their content/ideational information, and that the former impacts so heavily on the latter, it is clearly to the writer's advantage if he/she were more aware of the kinds of demeanors, personalities, and stances that he/she conveys through his/her writing. This issue has received some research attention in recent years (e.g. Harwood 2005, Ivanič 1998, Ivanič & Camps 2001, Ivanič & Simpson 1992, Lillis 2001, Tang & John 1999), and it is my purpose here to provide a practical framework which can be used in beginning EAP classrooms to help raise students' awareness to the different aspects of their selves that they may (consciously or unconsciously) convey in their writing.

Aspects of self

There are different aspects of one's self that a person can foreground in his/her academic writing. The following five aspects do not represent the whole picture, but I suggest them as an accessible way of easing the novice academic writer into a discussion about self-representation in academic writing:

(1) Personal qualities or characteristics
(2) Roles
(3) Association with particular opinions and/or stances
(4) Style of language
(5) Style of presentation

(1) Personal qualities or characteristics

Most of us have little difficulty perceiving personal qualities and/or characteristics in others in a spoken context. Thus, for instance, someone who speaks softly and slowly may convey qualities such as kindness and gentleness, and someone who sniggers a lot and converses with his arms folded may come across as arrogant and condescending.

In writing, such qualities are less easily discernable, but they are not absent. Negative qualities such as condescension, for instance, may be communicated by practices such as an excessive use of negative evaluation when referring to the work of others, or a dismissal of the validity of another's work without giving adequate evidentiary support. And where use of the first person pronoun may in many cases signal confidence and a willingness on the part of the writer to take ownership of the ideas in the text, the *over-use* of the first person pronoun may signal arrogance and egocentricity.

Similarly, positive personal attributes, leading to what Cherry (1988) would term a credible *ethos*, may be conveyed as well. Thus, for example, a quality such as intelligence may be conveyed through novel ways of progressing from one idea to another. A quality such as competence may be expressed by the inclusion of a wide range of references. And the use of hedges (wordings such as *may*, *perhaps*, *it appears*, *possible* which tone down the force of an utterance) may function to convey deference to one's readers and/or an open-ness to alternative viewpoints. (See Hyland 2000 for a further discussion of hedges.)

Taking everyday conversational settings as a starting point, then, it is possible to introduce novice academic writers to the notion that their *written* language can also convey personal qualities about themselves.

(2) Roles

Another dimension to the projection of identity in writing involves the taking on of roles within the text. Thus writers, by their discoursal choices, may show themselves to be writing in the capacity of "student" or "researcher" or "mother" or "American" and so on. Cherry (1988: 256-257) uses the term *persona* for these, which is an apt term with a useful plurality of meaning, ranging from its original meaning of "theatrical mask" to the dramaturgical notion of a stage role, and then its subsequent "broader sense of a social role".

It is important to highlight to students that the taking on of roles by writers may be done explicitly or implicitly. Thus, for example, an individual may reveal his/her student status explicitly by the use of such expressions as "As a student, I believe ...", or "we students think that …". However, the same student role may also be enacted through less direct means. Every time students use language in such a way as to reflect their student status (e.g. the citing of lectures as a source reference), they "construct" themselves in their writing as "students". (Further examples are given below.)

(3) Association with particular opinions and/or stances

Fulwiler in his 1994 article "Claiming My Voice" writes that it is the very *topics* about which he writes, and the particular stances he takes towards them that characterise him in his writing. According to him, he is identified "as much by a certain kind of argument as by an argument made in a certain kind of language" (Fulwiler 1994: 45).

Drawing on Fulwiler's insight, I suggest that becoming strongly associated with a particular viewpoint/topic is also a way of expressing writer identity in academic writing. It would certainly explain why it is possible for someone to say such things as "That argument sounds very Chomskyan" or "That sounds very much like Bakhtin". Such comments do not presuppose that the people who uttered them know either Chomsky or Bakhtin intimately, merely that they are familiar with

Chomsky and Bakhtin's work and know the *kinds* of arguments they would be likely to make.

Where student writing is concerned, this aspect of self-representation may be relevant in two senses. Firstly, students may reveal something of themselves in their writing in terms of the ideas with which they align themselves. For instance, students who argue against the testing of experimental drugs on animals align themselves with the wider societal group of animal activists, by virtue of using their discourse. (Association with particular ideas in this sense is associated with the "roles" students may assume in their writing.) Secondly, given the unique nature of student writing, where student-writers know their teacher-readers and vice versa, it is possible for opinions uttered in class to find their way onto the page. If particular students happen to stand out in class for the uniqueness of their viewpoint, and this is subsequently expressed in their writing, then this can also serve as their "badge of identity".

(4) Style of language

Conveying one's personality and identity may also involve having a particular linguistic style, a tendency to use metaphorical language, for instance, or multisyllabic words. Thus, a person who favours delaying the main verbs in his/her clauses through the use of clause subjects which are realised by long and complicated noun phrases may through his/her writing reveal sophistication of thought, or a mind capable of dealing with complex and intricate arguments. This aspect of self-revelation is evident also in the literary sphere, where aficionados of various writers are often able to identify works by particular writers based on the linguistic style of the writing. To give an obvious example, the archaic language of Shakespeare, for instance, is often recognised without much difficulty by anyone who has previously read Shakespeare.

(5) Style of presentation

Although in some ways tangential to the actual business of academic writing, the surface style of presentation that a person gives to his/her academic work may also be a form of self-representation. A student who consistently submits work in a bright blue file while his/her classmates merely submit stapled sheets of white paper clearly wishes to set himself/herself apart from the others – the blue file becomes in effect a mark of identification. Similarly, whether someone chooses to use the "standard" 12 point font size, in the "standard" Times New Roman or Courier fonts, or the "less standard" 10 or 14 point font sizes in Arial, Tahoma, or any other type face, reflects in some small way the kind of writer he/she wants to be seen as.

I am not suggesting here that these five categories are mutually exclusive watertight categories. (Notably, for instance, one's style of language may convey certain personal qualities, and one's association with particular ideas may position one in certain roles.) What I am suggesting here, however, is firstly, that there is enough in each of these five aspects of self to merit separate discussions, and secondly, that these represent useful and accessible ways of introducing the notion of self-representation in a beginner's EAP class.

Addressing the writer's identity in the EAP classroom – a brief demonstration of a discourse analytical approach

My purpose in this section is to give a brief demonstration of a consciousness-raising exercise which may be used in EAP classrooms. Specifically, I give some examples

of how various "aspects of self" may be highlighted to students through exercises centered around the analysis and discussion of actual academic texts.

The examples I present below have deliberately been chosen from a range of sources – some are from published writing, and others from unpublished undergraduate essays. Because of this, the examples also differ in terms of quality. While some may perceive this discrepancy in standard to be a drawback of this approach, I believe that there are advantages to introducing students to a range of genuine academic texts, and this I will take up in greater detail later. What I wish to emphasise now is that the focus of our discussions around the following texts is *not* intended to be what constitutes good or bad academic writing, but the various ways in which language works to convey aspects of a writer's identity.

In discussing the following examples, I have focused in each case only on one or at most two strands of self-presentation which stand out as most prominent. This does not mean the other strands are not in play, merely that one or two aspects of self are more striking in those examples. Similarly, I must emphasise that the points which I highlight below as being of possible interest to discuss in an EAP classroom are clearly not the only points of interest in each example. I trust EAP teacher practitioners will see many more salient points to which the attention of students may be drawn.

Example 1 – taking on a role

"I seek to show that in research articles, abstracts, book reviews, textbooks, and scientific letters, the ways writers present their topics, signal their allegiances, and stake their claims represent careful negotiations with, and considerations of, their colleagues. Their writing therefore displays a professional competence in discipline-approved practices. It is these practices, I suggest, and not abstract and disengaged beliefs and theories, that principally define what disciplines are" (Hyland 2000: 1).

Here, I would point out that expressions such as "I seek to show …" and "It is these practices, I suggest …" emphasise the writer's investment in his work. They signal a writer who is explicitly inhabiting the role of originator, a powerful role that implies the writer's willing ownership of the ideas forwarded in the text. This is the writer presenting himself as the person responsible for the new ideas that will follow in the rest of the text.

Example 2 – taking on a role

"Although I discuss only three students in this essay, my information about them is drawn from a two year period, when I interviewed eight seniors, four each a year, on a weekly basis" (Chase 1988: 15).

Comparing this with example 1, it is evident that the role being foregrounded by the writer here is not of a person who is originating a new idea, but of a person who is making transparent the research process. One might say that the writer is present here in the capacity of a researcher. Notably, for instance, the writer pairs the first person pronoun with the verb "interview" which is what Halliday (1994) calls a material process verb (or "doing" verb, as opposed to, say, a mental process verb or "thinking" verb). The researcher role is perceived by some as a strong and active role, especially

in the humanities, and writers eager to present themselves as capable of independent action may well contemplate foregrounding such a role in their writing.

Example 3 - highlighting personal qualities, and using a particular style of language

> *"It is therefore suitably apt to term the whole 'process' of NVEs [New Varieties of English] as a battleground of sorts, given the fact that a consistent norm comes head to head with a variant and fresh approach."*(Student Essay)

This extract is an excerpt from a first year undergraduate student's essay. His metaphorical style of writing made him stand out from the other students whose essays I was marking at the time. The question prompt had in fact asked the students to discuss the view that "NVEs can be likened to battlegrounds", thus providing students with a ready metaphor with which to structure their thinking. However, while most of the other students addressed the notion of NVEs as "battlegrounds", few if any took the metaphor a step further as this student did. The extended metaphor in example 3, moving from the idea of a battleground to the notion of two entities "com[ing] head to head", was to me an indication that I was dealing with a writer who was very inventive and showed good imagination.

Example 4 - Taking on three different roles simultaneously, (and, possibly, being associated with a particular viewpoint)

> *"The final variable in our typology of affect groups emotions into three major sets having to do with un/happiness, in/security and dis/satisfaction. The framework is based on my general observations of my young sons, when they were in their first stages of socialization (up to about 2 years of age), and in particular on a cycle of demands structuring my elder son's temper tantrums over a period of several months. During these tantrums he would insist on having baggy (his blanket), and then when it was proferred and rejected his bopple (bottle), and then when this was proferred and rejected Mummy or Daddy (whichever was not present), and then baggy again, then bopple … for up to an hour. If we take these primal screams as primitives, then a framework involving in/security (blanket), dis/satisfaction (bottle) and un/happiness (Mummy / Daddy) can be entertained" (Martin 2000: 150).*

Where examples 1 and 2 were fairly straightforward in that the roles inhabited by the respective writers were clear-cut and singular, example 4 presents a more complicated case. Here we have an instance where several different roles overlap, illustrating that not only can a writer shift from one role to another through the course of his/her writing, at times, a writer can actually foreground more than one aspect of his/her self at the same time.

What is going on in this text? I suggest that there are elements of a researcher in this extract, because of the references to "observations" made by the writer. (*Observation* is the nominalisation of the "doing" verb *observe*.) But more than that, I see elements of an originator in the text as well, because the writer writes of how he came up with his categories, and generally conveys evidence that the "typology of affect" is indeed his creation. However, aside from these two discoursal roles, there is one other, less common, role that is very dominant here, and that is the role of father. With references to his "young sons", "Mummy" and "Daddy", the father role is unmistakably present, and this interests me because this is an aspect of self that is not usually found in academic discourse. It occurs to me that it would be quite impossible

for Martin to explain how he came up with his categories without bringing in his role as father, and perhaps this justifies the inclusion of this rather non-traditional role.

This is possibly also an example where the writer may be identified based on his association with a particular viewpoint, though its usefulness as an example of this does rather depend on one's familiarity with that viewpoint in the first place. Martin is one of the key proponents of Appraisal Theory, a framework developed fairly recently out of systemic functional linguistics to explore the interpersonal dimension of language use. I would venture to say that most people who are familiar with Appraisal, on reading the writer's discussion here of his typology of affect (which is part of Appraisal), would at least hazard a guess that it might be Martin's work.

Example 5 - Highlighting personal qualities/characteristics, and taking on a role
"Over a muffin in the union one day, Bronwen and I were discussing the letter I would put in her file describing the class I visited. After we discussed her two classes and the challenges they presented to her, I asked her some questions about voice. She told me that this second semester freshman class was the first in which she had mentioned voice. I asked her what she meant by voice, and she replied that her definition depended a great deal on the paper in question. Since her students were writing argument, she felt it was important to help them avoid the sort of pseudo-objective voicelessness students often adopt when they move from the personal essay to the argument. For Bronwen, writing an argument with a voice meant "being objective yet passionate, being academic with a tone of feeling" (Gillespie 1994: 166).

Paula Gillespie in this article is investigating how different teachers talk about voice in their writing classes, and how they teach their students about it. In this extract, she is writing about a meeting she had with one of the teachers whose class she observed.

Given the fact that the entire extract revolves around Gillespie's interview of one of the teachers, it is evident that she is foregrounding her role as researcher. But her narrativisation of the event raises the question of how far writers can go in describing the research setting. I would suggest that the entertaining though unconventional reference to eating muffins in the union is included by the writer primarily to guide us into forming a certain impression of her. We may, for instance, ascribe qualities of friendliness or approachability to a researcher who conducts interviews over muffins. Thus the usefulness of that piece of information lies not in its ability to help us understand what went on in the interviews, but in its ability to quickly paint for the reader a picture of the kind of researcher Gillespie is, or wants us to think she is.

Example 6 - Shifting from an outsider role to an insider role
***"Exonormative standards result in schizoglossia and rob Singapore English users of any confidence they may have that English is indeed their language. Hence, it dawns upon one that adopting an endonormative standard {Singapore English} would be more prudent, since it is ours and therefore one that is close to our hearts …"* (Student Essay)**

In an example such as this, we might point out how an academic writer may in the course of writing slip into what I have elsewhere termed "complementary roles". This

occurs when the subject of our writing is very closely linked to one or more aspects of our selves or our experience, for instance, if the writer is a teacher who is also writing about classroom issues, or if the writer is an ESL speaker who is also doing research on ESL, or if the writer is from a post-colonial country doing research on non-native Englishes. It is common in such cases for writers to slip in and out of those roles, sometimes writing as insider, sometimes as dispassionate observer.

This example is from an essay written by one of my Singaporean students in response to a question on whether the use of Singapore English should be discouraged, and we see a marked shift in roles through even this very short extract. The student starts by positioning herself as an outsider, and refers to Singapore English users as "they". However, she quickly becomes an insider, and shifts to writing as a Singaporean – "it is ours", "one that is close to our hearts". In examining examples of this sort, it is interesting to ask ourselves which parts of our writing we explicitly take ownership of, and why we do so.

Pedagogic implications

Addressing the issue of self in EAP classrooms becomes important when we recognise that the manner in which writers present themselves in their texts has consequences in terms of how their writing is received and judged by their readers. If the aim of the EAP classroom (or one of its aims, at any rate) is to help students move towards success in academic writing, then this is an issue that needs to be attended to. I suggest that one possible way of introducing the issue of self-representation in writing to the EAP classroom is for teachers to sit with their students and talk through a selection of academic texts (a sample selection of which is given in this article), in order to raise students' awareness of how language works to convey aspects of their identity. It will be noticed that some of my examples are conventional academic texts and others are less so, some are polished, others not. I suggest that a mix of this sort, of recognisably conventional and somewhat unconventional academic texts, provides a useful springboard from which to launch a discussion with students about how self is portrayed in academic discourse.

Some may argue that it is pointless to show students in an EAP classroom the more unconventional examples of academic discourse, because while it is conceivable that such unconventional academic writing will be accepted by readers if the writer is known to be an established academic, it is usually the case that the same artistic license will not be permitted students. Students who write about eating muffins in the student union in their essays are liable to be thought of as not having sufficiently acquired the conventions of academic writing, and are often penalised for this. Is showing them such unconventional examples then tantamount to showing a prisoner a luscious meal he is not allowed to have?

From my point of view, it is *not* pointless to introduce students to a range of different academic texts, even if we are then obliged to point out to them that some may be deemed more appropriate than others under certain circumstances. Researchers such as Lillis (2001) have written about different ways of demystifying academic writing for students, of making it more accessible and understandable as a genre, especially for writers who are new to it, or who see it as a hurdle at the university to be feared. I suggest then what I have outlined in this article is one way of "demystifying" academic discourse for students, one way of removing for students the threatening and exclusionist quality so often associated with academic writing. Introducing students to the various possibilities within the academic genre will in my opinion serve to demonstrate that academic discourse is not a monolithic entity, and

that there are alternative discourses under the broad umbrella of "academic writing". Draper writes in a rousing final paragraph to her article that "[g]ood writing proceeds from a psychological openness to one's own voices and the voices of the world, from attitudes which are both creative and critical" (Draper 1983: 6). If adopting a practice such as the one outlined here in the EAP classroom kick-starts the imaginations of students, and enables them to see that there are both "creative and critical" aspects to academic writing, that there are various ways in which aspects of their selves can be reflected in their writing, then we might just see the emergence of a more open attitude towards academic writing by students, and this is surely a step in the right direction.

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