

## **Exploring Authorial Presence through the Use of First Person Pronouns: Evidence from a Saudi University**

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### Abstract

Authorial presence in academic writing is a fluid and multi-faced concept with its construction a troublesome challenge for both L1 (first language) and L2 (second language) writers of English. Authorial presence is particularly challenging for NNSs (Non-Native Speakers) who tend to avoid overly presenting their ideas, expressions and thoughts in their writing. This paper uses a specialized corpus of 45 student essays from a female multi-disciplinary university in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to identify and examine the presence and use of first person pronouns in shaping the author's presence in academic writing. Findings show that learners use a wide range of first person pronouns to show their presence in academic texts and that these pronouns partner important verb, noun and prepositional phrases to achieve varying degrees of authorial power and presence. The paper concludes with pedagogic implications and suggestions for EAP (English for Academic Purposes) writing instructors who hope to tackle the use and function of first person pronouns more confidently in their classrooms.

**Keywords:** authorial presence, Arab learners, corpora, academic writing

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## 1. Introduction

### *1.1 Problems students face with authorial presence*

Authorial presence in academic writing is defined as the degree of author visibility or “authoritativeness” that writers are prepared to show when supporting and expressing their attitudes, judgements and assessments (Navratilova, 2013). Hyland (2005) believes successful academic writers adopt a point of view and in order to make that view heard or their presence felt, they need to develop a writer-reader dialogue. This dialogue or interaction is achieved in two overlapping ways: “Engagement” where writers connect with readers and recognize their presence by including them as discourse participants and focusing their attention on certain parts of the text and “stance” or textual voice where writers show their own judgements and opinions. Engagement is achieved by using reader pronouns (e.g. you), personal asides (the writer interrupts the flow of the text to comment on the developing argument), appeals to shared knowledge (assuming writer and reader share the same knowledge), directives and asking questions. In contrast, stance is achieved through hedging, attitude markers and self-mention (Hyland, 2005). Hyland (2005) notes that the linguistic choices a writer makes are often deliberate and the presence or absence of explicit author reference is a writer’s conscious choice to show a particular stance in the text.

Authorial presence is seen as a moving concept with writers changing their presence within or across different texts. The challenge of creating a presence in written texts is relevant to both first language (L1) and second language (L2) speakers of English but is particularly challenging for L2 writers (Hyland, 2002a). L2 writers have mixed beliefs about showing strong authorial presence in their texts with some believing it is too strong a role for them to adopt and many believe, from teacher instruction, it should not be overused (Hyland, 2002a; Sanko, 2014). L2 writers also view academic writing as stylistically difficult enough without the added burden of showing their presence in it (Clark, 1992, cited by Tang & John, 1999).

The influence of L2 writers’ deeply ingrained cultural values and personal experiences also complicate, confuse and influence the degree of authorial presence (Ivanic & Camps, 2001; Hyland, 2002a). Ivanic and Camps (2001) and Hyland (2002a) note that some cultures are uncomfortable giving their opinions and having a voice. Hyland (2002a) makes reference to the collective culture in Asian countries where people are not normally expected to critique respected professionals nor deviate from commonly held beliefs.

In a similar manner to Hyland (2005), Tang and John (1999) note that certain linguistic features and devices can play a key role in the degree of presence the author adopts with the choice of these features revealing how writers see themselves in a text and how they view the writing task. This includes the use of passivisation and nominalisation as well as the use of first person pronouns. First person pronouns have been extensively studied in L2 contexts from a frequency perspective with some students avoiding their use (Chang & Swales, 1999) while others overuse them and produce texts that are overly conversational (Sanko, 2014). The role of first person pronouns to achieve different degrees of authorial presence has included studies spanning different L1s, disciplines and contrasts between L1 and L2 use (Chang, 2015; Harwood, 2005; Hyland 2001, 2002a & 2002b; Kuo, 1999; Martinez, 2005 & Tang & John, 1999).

## 2. How first person pronouns achieve authorial presence

### 2.1 Uses from 'expert' writers

The literature differentiates between 'expert' and 'novice' writers with 'expert' writing considered to be writing done by scholars or advanced undergraduate or graduate writers. 'Expert' writers contrast with 'novice' writers who are early undergraduate students (Chang, 2015). Research on pronoun use in 'expert' writing far outweighs that of 'novice' writing and has focused on genres such as journal articles and postgraduate theses from various disciplines. Studies such as: Harwood (2005), Hyland (2001; 2002b), Kuo (1999), Luzon (2009) and Rezvani and Mansouri (2013) have all studied 'expert' writing and found a wide range of pronoun uses. Pronouns have been used to: State a goal, state knowledge claims, state hypotheses, state results and findings, express opinions, hedge claims, propose theories, give reasons or indicate necessities, organise a text and construct the author's identity as a member of a particular discourse community (Hyland, 2002b; Kuo, 1999 & Luzon, 2009). Kuo (1999) highlights that these functions vary in their power with functions such as giving reasons, stating knowledge claims and proposing theories stronger than functions that merely organise the text and that the writer modifies these functions at different times in the text.

### 2.2. Uses from 'novice' writers

In contrast to 'expert' findings, the research conducted on 'novice' writers is numerically limited but provides an interesting insight into how 'novice' undergraduates use first person pronouns in their writing. The taxonomy summary in Table 1 details the previous findings on how L2 novice writers use pronouns in their academic essays.

**Table 1**

#### *Previous taxonomies for L2 'novice' writing*

	<u>Functions</u>	<u>Explanation</u>	<u>Example</u>
1	<b>Representative</b> (Tang & John, 1999)	Assumes the writer and reader share the same knowledge and discourse communities	The differentiation of British & American English causes <u>us</u> to ponder about the right form of standard English (Tang & John, (1999)
2	<b>Guide/Commentator</b> (Chang, 2015; Ryoo, 2010; Tang & John, 1999).	The writer guides the reader through the essay and as a commentator the writer may give extra explanation or introduce the essay's purpose.	As <u>we</u> examine the various classes of loan words from French, <u>we</u> can see the different ways French civilisation and culture has influenced English (Guide). (Tang & John, (1999))  To prevent school bullying, <u>I</u> have two suggestions towards school system (Commentator). (Chang, 2015).

3	<b>Architect</b> (Tang & John, 1999)	Organizes, structures and outlines the material in the essay.	<i>I</i> will concentrate on the period Renaissance and its influence on the English language (Tang & John, (1999)).
4	<b>Opinion holder</b> (Tang & John, 1999).	The writer shares an opinion, view or attitude.	Looking back at Kashwant Singh's words, <i>we</i> can describe from this period that English did indeed absorb the language it came into contact with (Tang & John, (1999)).
5	<b>Originator/giving opinions &amp; making claims</b> (Ryoo, 2010; Tang & John, 1999).	The writer formulates thoughts and ideas in the writing – creating the content.	To <i>me</i> the phrase embodies the whole evolution process of the language to its present day status (Originator) (Tang & John, (1999)).  <i>I</i> think what matters is that they need to have confidence when talking to foreigners (Giving opinions & making claims). (Ryoo, 2010).
6	<b>Stating a goal or purpose</b> (Ryoo, 2010).	The writer outlines the goal or purpose of the essay.	<i>I</i> have 3 suggestions here to make a better university (Ryoo, 2010).
7	<b>Information/experience provider</b> (Chang, 2015; Ryoo, 2010).	The writer gives factual, hypothetical, emotional or cognitive experience.	<i>I</i> heard some university have good systems to help those students (Ryoo, 2010).
8	<b>Stating a desire</b> (Ryoo, 2010)	The writer states a future desire regarding the development of the topic.	<i>I</i> want our university to have many public relations to high school students (Ryoo, 2010).
9	<b>Expressing self-benefits</b> (Ryoo, 2010).	The writer highlights the benefits received from writing the essay	Because of this assignment, <i>I</i> had a chance to think about it (Ryoo, 2010).

Kuo (1999)'s reference to degrees of power is also developed by Tang & John (1999)'s continuum of authorial presence which found that learners were not confident enough in their writing and rarely used the strongest functions of 'opinion-holder' and 'originator'. Learners were wary of critiquing someone else's views and then moving on to give their own opinion on the issue. Tang & John's (1999) findings support those of Chang and Swales (1999) whose students were also uncomfortable using personal pronouns in their writing and viewed their use as exclusively the right of experienced scholars. Tang and John's (1999) findings also support the view from students that academic writing is confusing and that the conflicting views from

different instructors on pronoun use fail to increase their confidence in academic writing (Hyland, 2002a).

On the other hand, Tang and John's (1999) findings contrast heavily with those of other scholars including Chang (2015); Ryoo (2010) and McCrostie (2008). McCrostie's (2008) learners used personal pronouns more frequently than NSs (Native Speakers) but their use declined as students moved through their academic studies leading McCrostie (2008) to view their overuse as a developmental problem. However, in contrast to Tang and John (1999), Ryoo's (2010) students were comfortable using pronouns to give opinions on the work of others and their own opinions of the topic.

Table 1 highlights a marked difference in the functions used in 'expert' writing and 'novice' undergraduate writing with pronoun use much narrower in scope in 'novice' writing than the uses found in 'expert' writing. This is evidenced by the noticeable absence of functions such as: comparing approaches, giving reasons and stating knowledge claims which were found in Hyland (2002b); Kuo (1999) and Luzon (2009). Table 1 indicates that the findings of Chang (2015); Ryoo (2010) and Tang and John (1999) are more likely to be found more frequently in the present study because the genre specific uses from research theses and papers are not applicable to the genre of essay writing (Chang, 2015).

While Table 1 highlights the lack of consensus on the pronouns found in student essay writing there are also differences in the terminology used to document pronoun uses. The different terms from different scholars share some similarities with Tang & John's category of 'guide' equivalent to Chang and Ryoo's 'commentator' role. However, the apparent overlap in Tang and John's explanation of the 'originator' makes other similarities difficult to note. The functions of 'opinion-holder' and 'originator' are defined separately in their continuum but are then discussed together in the findings with the findings for 'originator' not made clear from those of the 'opinion-holder'. Similarly, there appears to be overlap between the 'guide' and 'architect', a point they also note and the examples given seem to demonstrate very similar functions. In agreement with Chang (2015) these issues highlight the need for clearer more distinguishable functions which will assist instructors in teaching the different uses to learners.

This previous research on 'novice' L2 writing suggests educators and researchers need to understand where 'novice' writers currently are in their writing proficiency in order to help them ultimately reach 'expert' level. Therefore, examining L2 writing serves as a way of finding gaps and then working on bridging those gaps through instruction and encouraging independent study.

Previous L2 research all focused on small groups of Asian learners and while very insightful, it highlights the need to investigate authorial presence with a greater range of L1s, learner groups and classroom settings given the cognitive, social and cultural factors that are involved in writing. One such group worthy of study is those who have Arabic as their native language because they represent a group that traditionally struggle with academic writing (Crompton, 2011; Khuwaileh & Shoumali, 2000). They also represent a learner group who are traditionally seen as knowledge receivers but not knowledge synthesizers with strong critical thinking skills. These learners also face the expectation of learning by memorization and show little engagement with the content being learnt (Shukri, 2014).

### ***2.3 Research purpose and relevance***

The present study uses a specialized learner corpus of English essays written by female Arab learners at an English-medium university in Saudi Arabia to investigate how students use the first person pronouns: “I”, “we”, “us”, “me”, “my” and “our” to achieve authorial presence and how these pronouns perform different functions. The functions of these pronouns will also be subject to linguistic analysis to see if they appear alongside different linguistic patterns. The identification of the different pronoun functions and their linguistic clusters or patterns enables instructors to build these into their teaching of EAP writing courses and provide learners with a greater array of linguistic tools to express themselves and strengthen their writing ability.

### ***2.4 Research Questions***

The research has the following exploratory questions:

1. How frequently do the first person pronouns: “I”, “we”, “us”, “me” “my” and “our” appear in the learner corpus?
2. What are the roles and functions of the first person pronouns? Are there any differences between the pronouns’ roles and functions?
3. What linguistic patterns occur alongside these pronouns?
- 4.

## **3. Methodology**

### ***3.1 Writing classes at the university***

Students are required to take academic English writing courses as a mandatory requirement of their degree programmes. These courses focus on writing essays, research proposals and papers. The course under study involved intensive essay writing over one 15 week semester. Students were required to write the following essay types: Cause and effect, comparison and contrast, classification and process analysis. The study focuses on cause and effect essays because they were a core component of the course and illustrate a typical expository essay written on the course as a whole. Student assessment consisted of in-class timed writing, portfolio and homework tasks and a final essay and related presentation. The portfolio tasks involved analysing texts in terms of how writers show engagement with their audience and how they show themselves in their writing. Students planned, drafted and edited their essays before submitting them for grading. All essays had to be a minimum of 500 words and follow a 5 paragraph structure and include references in APA (American Psychological Association) style.

### ***3.2 Participants***

Participants were in their first or second year of their major programs. They represented various disciplines including law, architecture and digital media. All students were native Arabic speakers with Saudi Arabian, Egyptian and Syrian nationalities all represented. Students’ exposure to English outside class took the form of social media interaction, listening to music and watching movies. The students had very little exposure to formal academic English outside the classroom and had previously only written English dialogues and stories. Students’ overall proficiency level was deemed to be high Intermediate based on their level of study and given the fact all students had previously studied and passed the university’s Preparatory Year Program (PYP), which provided them with intensive skills-based instruction.

### ***3.3 The value of corpora and NNS texts to EAP courses***

The use of NS texts in corpus creation and for studying linguistic features has been welcomed and supported with Krishnamurthy and Kosem (2007); Luzon (2009) and Thompson (2006) all believing NS texts to be good models for NNSs who aspire to become ‘expert’ writers in their academic communities. However, the use of NNS texts is also important as they can provide vital information on what is problematic for learners and what specific areas they need to improve on (Luzon, 2009). I take the view that NNS texts can be used as an initial point of discovery which helps identify where learners are in their writing proficiency and then NS texts can be used to guide NNSs in their quest to become expert writers in their discourse community or discipline. NNS texts equally hold immense potential in helping instructors deliver classes that target identified weaknesses and aid further writing development.

### ***3.4 Corpus creation***

Participating students were asked to read and sign a British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) influenced consent form. The consent form reassured students that their participation was voluntary, it would not affect their grade in any way and they were free to withdraw from participating at any time.

Throughout the semester students were asked to submit their uncorrected draft essays by email. Students decided on their topic by using one of the prompts provided in the essay guidelines (See Appendix A). After submission, the essays were ‘cleaned up’ to remove the final reference list, to avoid the inaccurate inflation of the frequency list, and their front covers which included student names and identification numbers, which were not appropriate since essays were to remain anonymous in the corpus. The use of full texts as opposed to sections of a text has been debated however the corpus used full texts to give a potentially fuller linguistic analysis (Thompson, 2006). The essays in the corpus had a range of grades from A+ to C- with no submissions awarded a ‘D’ grade or lower. The grading rubric is detailed in Appendix B. The grading rubric reflects the course learning outcomes in that students were expected to build a coherent argument throughout their essays. The final corpus consisted of 45 essays which were converted to plain text files (.txt) and analysed using Mike Scott’s WordSmith version 6.0 (n.d).

### ***3.5 Procedure***

All occurrences of the first person pronouns were obtained using the ‘wordlist’ function of WordSmith which produced a frequency word list (See Appendix C). The ‘concordance’ function in WordSmith produced a concordance list for each pronoun which allowed each pronoun to be coded in its naturally occurring context. The entries for each pronoun were coded into distinct functions based on the taxonomies of Chang (2015); Ryoo (2010) and Tang and John (1999) in Table 1. In alignment with Chang (2015) and Tang and John (1999), the ‘essay commentator’ and ‘representative’ both include more than one identifiable function. The ‘essay commentator’ includes introducing the essay’s organisation, the essay topic and goal and providing further explanations (Chang, 2015). The ‘representative’ includes the assumption of shared knowledge and that the writer and reader share the same discourse community (Tang & John, 1999). The reason for grouping uses under an umbrella term like ‘representative’ is to make it easier to teach the uses to students as separate groups (Chang, 2015). The ‘cluster’ and ‘patterns’ functions were used to determine the linguistic patterns that appear with the pronouns with the pattern function detailing the collocates (words that are often found together) and their

frequencies. The cluster function builds on this by providing a more detailed look at the relationships between words and shows multi-word units or “lexical bundles” which can highlight the semantic prosody (positive or negative connotations) associated with these bundles (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999).

#### 4. Results & Discussion

##### 4.1 Word types

The wordlist from the 45 essays produced the following descriptive picture:

**Table 2**

##### *Descriptive statistics for the learner corpus*

Tokens	Types	Type/Token ratio	STTR	Mean word length	Sentences
23,473	3,378	14.65	46.22	4.67	1,367

The tokens show the total number of words in the corpus. Types represent the total number of different word types with the type/token ratio signalling how varied the vocabulary use was. Both the types and type/token ratios are low meaning this learner group uses a narrow range of vocabulary. The Standardized Type/Token Ratio (STTR) provides a comparison of all the essays included in the corpus despite their varying word counts. The STTR ratio and the mean word length also show students have a narrow vocabulary range and prefer to use short, repetitive words.

##### 4.2 The frequency and use of pronouns

The corpus shows that all of the pronouns appear in varying degrees of frequency. The most commonly used pronoun was “I” with 146 occurrences followed by “my”, “we”, “our”, “me” and “us” with 68, 66, 35, 29 and 26 occurrences respectively (See Appendix 3). However, the relative frequencies of the pronouns are: 42.22%, 28.89%, 46.67%, 26.67%, 26.67% and 28.86% respectively (See Appendix C). These frequencies show that while there are more instances of “I”, “we” appears in more texts showing individual writers used it more than “I” overall. It also highlights that individual writers may use “I” far more frequently than “we” within a single text.

**Table 3**

##### *A summary of authorial presence roles*

		Pronouns					
	<u>Role</u>	I	My	We	Our	Me	Us
1.	Essay Commentator	20	3	10	0	0	0
2.	Stating a desire	2	6	0	0	0	0
3.	Giving an opinion/making claims	11	4	0	0	6	0



4.	Giving experience/information	111	54	28	0	23	0
5.	Representative	2	0	28	35	0	25
6.	Stating a benefit	0	0	0	0	0	0
7.	Architect	0	0	0	0	0	0
	<b>Pronoun Totals</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>25</b>

When coding the data not all occurrences were used to show authorial presence. This was most evident with “*us*” because student errors in punctuation meant the occurrence of US to mean U.S (United States) was present in the data. In a similar manner, two occurrences of “*my*” were not used to show presence but to show possession:

(1) “*I* need to buy and collect books to build my own personal library” (Text 5).

(2) “*I* was with my sisters in a café shop, *I* heard sound of gunfire” (Text 16).

These examples highlight the complexity of coding from a corpus and the need for manual coding even if computer-aided software is used because in this case “US” was wrongly classified.

#### 4.2.1 Essay commentator

The essay commentator was shown by “*I*” in a signposting attempt to tell the reader what will be discussed in the essay or to refer back to points the writer previously made:

(3) “Thirdly, the last effect *I* will discuss in this essay is having a good or better mood” (Text 33)

(4) “All what *I* wrote above are just about student” (Text 22).

“*We*” was also used to refer back to what was said before:

(5) “In the end, we conclude that television has had an impact on our daily life” (Text 45).

The commentator is an important function as it shows the writer has a clear understanding of the essay’s goal and direction. In addition to this, the ability to remind the reader of points already made is crucial to building an argument throughout the paper and making sure the argument flows smoothly. When “*I*” was used in this function, it clustered with “*will*” to signal what the essay intended to cover. When “*we*” was used, it clustered and partnered phrases such as: “*In this essay we*”, “*we can say that*” and “*in the end we*” where the writer treats the reader as sharing the reading experience and through other past tense verbs such as “*discussed*” suggests the two parties have equal status and the action is shared. These show different approaches to the essay with some writers using “*I*” in an assertive role to demonstrate what they achieved in the essay while the use of “*we*” suggests an almost shared responsibility between the reader and writer.

Students also used “*my*” to state the goal of the essay in a similar fashion to those instances found by Ryoo (2010):

(6) “In my essay I am going to talk about the causes of why students cheat” (Text 37).

This occurrence shows the writer takes responsibility for the essay and takes ownership of it more than the use attributed to “we”. Both Chang (2015) and Tang and John (1999) found evidence of these pronouns being used in this role. However, while Tang and John (1999) view the ‘guide’ or commentator as a weak function, I believe this is an essential function that students must be taught because it reminds the reader of key points, focuses on what comes next and moves the reader through the essay and continually builds an argument

#### 4.2.2 Stating a desire

Stating desires was shown by the use of “I”. Students used these pronouns to state present or reflective desires or needs related to their topic:

(7) “I wish I could stop being addicted to caffeine products” (Text 31).

Example 7 also suggests that the phrase: “*I wish I could...*” functions as a way of reflection at the end of the point the writer makes. Example 7 uses “I” to perhaps signal to the reader that this example is highly personal and that the writer engages with the task through personalization. In personalizing the task and topic perhaps the writer also makes the topic more tangible for the reader to understand. When “I” was used to state a desire, it clustered or patterned emotion or state verbs such as “want”, “need” or “wish” in the present tense. This represents a narrow range of verbs but also shows writers did not explicitly express desires in the future as no future state verb forms were found with the pronouns.

#### 4.2.3 Giving opinions/making claims

Giving an opinion or making a claim was shown by “I”, “my” and “me”:

(8) “In my opinion, the long time spent in watching TV could be replaced by another useful thing” (Text 6).

(9) “In conclusion, I feel it is a must for every person who loves knowledge and research” (Text 5).

(10) “For me, I previously did not like to work in a group” (Text 16)

Giving opinions/making claims was not as frequent as other functions and while, Chang (2015) and McCrostie (2008) found the clusters and patterns of “*I think*” and “*I feel*” common, they were much less common in this study with 7 and 3 occurrences respectively. The more popular “*I feel*” was used to show the writer’s opinion as was “*I think*”. However, “*I feel*” occurred in the initial sentence position and was followed by “it” on 3 occasions suggesting that writers follow the pattern of making a point and then giving their opinion on it. In contrast, “*I think*” occurred in different positions namely the initial and middle position and was followed by either “*that*” or a countable noun such as “*grades*” to show the writer’s personal opinion. The clusters and patterns associated with “*my*” indicate that it was used with the countable nouns of “*opinion*” and “*perspective*” to show the writer’s opinion. This alongside the instances of “*think*” and “*feel*” shows that students use a richer range of expressions to show their opinion than those found in previous research (McCrostie, 2008). It also suggests that students not only rely on Sanko’s (2014) colloquial “*in my opinion*” but use other terms such as

“*perspective*” in their writing. The low frequency of giving an opinion or making a claim was also found in Tang and John’s (1999) study where students were reluctant to give their opinions, go against the teacher or challenge written authority. The low occurrence of giving opinions or making claims suggests that students are reluctant to explicitly show a strong stance or position in their writing. This low presence needs addressing because the ability to critique and challenge others’ work is an essential academic skill for success (Hyland, 2005; Shukri, 2014).

#### 4.2.4 Experience/information giver

The experience/information giver was the most popular with all pronouns except “*our*” and “*us*” performing this function. This was not surprising given that undergraduate students have underdeveloped academic skills and rely on their own personal experiences to give supporting information. The results show a clear distinction between the pronouns being used to talk about past and present experience:

(11) “I was with my sisters in a café shop, I heard sound of gunfire” (Text 16).

(12) “In summer vacations, we gather our neighbourhood children and manage a summer camp for them” (Text 2).

(13) “This movie taught me how to solve problems in different ways” (Text 16).

The clusters and patterns also revealed that students used the past simple clusters “*When I*” and “*I was*” to signal the use of past or present experience to support the main points of the essay. In a similar manner “*me*” was also found with the present verbs “*tell*” and “*makes*” and the past irregular verbs of “*gave*” and “*taught*”. “*My*” was also used and clustered countable personal nouns:

(14) “My family used to run reading contests during summer vacations at home” (Text 23).

“*My*” also clustered or patterned other countable nouns such as: “*studies*”, “*apartment*”, “*family*”, “*brother*” and “*university*” to indicate the giving of experience supports the essay’s main points and shows, like stating a desire, that there is a high degree of personalization in the essays presumably because of their reliance on experience as supporting information. This function was not found by Tang and John (1999) but occurred frequently in McCrostie’s (2008) and Ryoo’s (2010) studies. The presence of this function may be task and genre dependent because if students do not make reference to other authority or are prevented from using sources they are forced to rely on personal experience.

#### 4.2.5 The representative

The representative was performed by “*we*”, “*us*” and “*our*” and its high frequency is not surprising since it is the safest option for novice writers to show authorial presence in its weakest form (Tang & John, 1999). The representative showed variation with students sometimes using pronouns to talk about the population at large and what we all share in common or a much narrower use was found to refer to a more specific discourse community:

(15) “And instead of working on our assignments we spend our time watching television and leaving these assignments till midnight or even till the day after that” (Text 45)

(16) “The statistics on bulimia tell us that are most common in women during their late teens and twenties” (Text 35).

Students also used pronouns to show the assumption of shared reader and writer knowledge:

(17) “We all know the saying “too much of something is never good for you” (Text 12).

These examples show writers choose to target a general or specific audience with knowledge assumptions depending on the intended audience. The high frequency of the representative shows students attempt to show engagement through these pronouns and treat readers as discourse participants who engage, through the text, in a dialogue with the writer and this feature is one of the hallmarks of successful academic writing (Hyland, 2005).

The use of “*us*” also shows engagement as writers view themselves as equal in the essay process. The writer by using “*us*” suggests this essay is a shared experience in that both the writer and reader are, by reading, learning about the topic. “*Our*” alongside “*us*” did not display lexically rich clustering or patterning with “*our*” used with plural nouns that demonstrated personal shared knowledge or commonalities between the reader and writer such as “*our families*”, “*our children*”, “*our daily lives*” and “*our world*”. The cluster and patterns of “*on us*” and “*for us*” reveal the common use of “*us*” + prepositions to signal assumed shared knowledge and shared discourse communities. This common occurrence contrasts with the other pronouns which occur alongside verb and noun phrases.

#### ***4.2.6 The absence of functions***

There were no occurrences of the architect or stating a benefit which were found in previous studies. The absence of the architect may be due to its closeness in description to the guide, a point also noted by Chang (2015). The lack of stating a benefit suggests that students did not use pronouns to reflect on the task in their writing. This may be culturally bound as students coming from a traditional Saudi education system may not have experience of showing their thoughts in writing (Shukri, 2014).

### **5. Conclusions and pedagogical implications**

The study found that students used the pronouns to show different degrees of authorial presence. Students most frequently used “*I*” to give information or experience. The other pronouns were used to commentate, give opinions/make claims, give experience or information, state a desire and act as a representative. The pronouns all partnered different nouns, verbs and prepositions with “*us*” and “*our*” the least lexically rich with more preposition patterns than noun and verb patterns. The findings also show differences in how the writer perceives their relationship with the reader and how confident they are in communicating their intended meanings. The uses of “*I*” and “*we*” showed a tendency to either take responsibility for the information or share that responsibility with the reader.

Although the essay topics were similar to Tang and John's (1999) in that students had to choose topics from a designated list, students had to engage with the task by using both their own knowledge and information from sources they had read. Given this, there is a surprising lack of evidence showing that students used pronouns to challenge or agree with the sources. This apparent lack of critical awareness may be linked to the group's culture in that they are often seen as knowledge receivers rather than be original thinkers or critique the information they receive (Shukri, 2014). However, further research with the data may show critical awareness through the use of other linguistic features. The need to acquire strong critical skills is particularly important at the university under study as many go from a course of basic essay writing to writing research papers where the dynamics shift from relying on using personal experience to using and critiquing academic sources for their own research. The option of using pronouns to critique sources should be taught early in students' academic lives to give them a wide range of linguistic options in their writing. Students' awareness of correct pronoun use and balancing personalization and source use can be increased by analysing sample target texts and using consciousness raising tasks with corpus data from 'expert' writing to provide guidance to students (Luzon, 2009).

This study produced a small corpus of essays and the results may serve as a catalyst for future research that spans different gender investigations, different proficiency levels, different grades and possibly sub-corpora that longitudinally track learners' pronoun use as they advance through their academic studies and they may receive more instruction on the conventions of academic writing (McCrostie, 2008). Similarly, research should be conducted on students when they have more task and topic freedom and it should be recognized that since they were being graded, they may have felt insecure about their writing and avoided giving their opinions. Also, this study could not use a larger 'expert' writing reference corpus to compare its findings given that 'expert' writing does not usually include cause/effect essays. This comparison would have further validated the study's findings as well as provided students with examples of model pronoun usage.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A –Essay Prompts & Guidelines

This essay will account for **10%** of your final course grade. Please read the instructions below carefully.

Choose **one** of the topics below and write a cause or effect essay. Your essay should be at least **500** words and include references to materials you have read.

1. The influence of a book or movie on your life
2. The effects of the pressure on students to get good grades.
3. The effects of peer pressure (pressure from friends)
4. Why some students cheat
5. The effects of music downloading on the music industry

Submission is via **Moodle**

Your essay must have a front cover which is typed, and include your full name, ID number and section number.

Late submission will be subject to a deduction of 5 marks per late day (including weekends).

### Appendix B - Essay Grading Rubric

**Table 4**

#### *Grading rubric for students*

	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	Well-developed introduction	Introduction creates interest.	Introduction adequately explains the background, but may lack detail.	Background details are a random collection of information, unclear, or not related to the topic. Thesis is vague or unclear.
<b>Background/History</b>	engages the reader and creates interest. Contains detailed background information.	Thesis clearly states the position.	Thesis states the position.	
<b>Thesis Statement</b>	Thesis clearly states a significant and compelling position.			



<b>CONCLUSION</b>	Conclusion effectively wraps up and goes beyond restating the thesis.	Conclusion effectively summarizes topics.	Conclusion is recognizable and ties up almost all loose ends.	Conclusion does not summarize main points.
<b>MAIN POINTS</b> Body Paragraphs	Well-developed main points directly related to the thesis. Supporting examples are concrete and detailed. The text is developed with a consistent and effective point-of-view, showing the story in detail.	Three or more main points are related to the thesis, but one may lack details. The text shows events from the author's point of view using some details.	Three or more main points are present. The text shows the events, but may lack details.	Less than three main points, and/or poor development of ideas. The text is undeveloped, and tells rather than shows, the story.
<b>ORGANIZATION</b> Structure Transitions	Logical progression of ideas with a clear structure that enhances the thesis. Transitions are mature and graceful.	Logical progression of ideas. Transitions are presented equally throughout essay.	Organization is clear. Transitions are present.	No discernible organization. Transitions are not present.
<b>STYLE</b> Sentence flow, variety Diction	Writing is smooth, skilled, and coherent. Sentences are strong and expressive with varied structure. Diction is consistent and words well chosen.	Writing is clear and sentences have varied structure. Diction is consistent.	Writing is clear, but sentences may lack variety. Diction is appropriate.	Writing is confusing, hard to follow. Contains fragments and/or run-on sentences. Inappropriate diction.
<b>MECHANICS</b> Spelling, punctuation, capitalization	Punctuation, spelling, capitalization are correct. No	Punctuation, spelling, capitalization are generally correct,	A few errors in punctuation, spelling, capitalization. (3	Distracting errors in punctuation, spelling, capitalization.

errors. with few errors. or 4)  
(1 or 2)

### GRADING

13-15 points (A-A+)

10-12 points (B-B+)

7-9 points (C-C+)

1-6 points (D)

0 points (F)

### Appendix C– Pronoun frequency

**Table 5**

*Pronoun frequency in the corpus*

N	Word	Frequency	%	Texts	%
1	THE	944	4.02	45	100
2	AND	687	2.93	45	100
3	TO	658	2.80	45	100
4	OF	643	2.74	45	100
5	A	500	2.13	45	100
6	IN	421	1.79	45	100
7	#	417	1.78	31	68.89
8	IS	408	1.74	44	97.78
9	THAT	292	1.24	44	97.78
10...	FOR	234	1.00	45	100
21..	I	146	0.62	19	42.22
55...	MY	68	0.29	13	28.89
57...	WE	66	0.26	21	46.67
99...	OUR	35	0.15	12	26.67
131...	ME	29	0.12	12	26.67
148...	US	26	0.11	13	28.26