



# ‘I hoped to counteract the memory problem, but I made no impact whatsoever’: discussing methods in computing science using *I*

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## Abstract

This paper is a corpus-based study of how native speaker computing students and experts use the pronoun **I** when elaborating their methodology (‘methodological **I**). Using two corpora, (i) a student corpus of about 62,000 words of postgraduate computing project reports, written at the end of the MSc programme and roughly equivalent to the master’s dissertation; and (ii) an expert corpus of about 88,000 words of computing articles taken from prestigious journals, a quantitative analysis of the students’ and experts’ texts reveals that almost 80% of the personal pronouns found in the student corpus are of **I**, while the figure in the expert corpus is less than 3%. Over 400 occurrences of **I** in the student corpus, but only six occurrences of **I** in the expert corpus, were classified as methodological. A qualitative analysis of the data in the student corpus reveals how methodological **I** can help to achieve a range of textual effects. Methodological **I** is used to recount procedure step by step, to the extent that even unsuccessful stages of the research process are included. These failures are attributed to lack of knowledge, skills, or equipment. Working in concert with language which stresses the tight deadlines the students are obliged to meet, methodological **I** can promote the researcher by highlighting their resourcefulness in managing to get their project completed on schedule. Methodological **I** also helps the student writers to justify their procedure, showing it to be sound and rigorous, thus indirectly promoting the researcher by associating them with methodological diligence. However, even when the students feel

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obliged to record their procedural failures, methodological *I* can help them create a favourable impression on the reader by constructing them as tenacious neophytes whose repertoire of computing skills has increased considerably as a result of working on their research project. The study ends with the pedagogical implications of the findings for EAP teachers and students.

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## 1. Introduction

A number of studies (e.g., Bazerman, 1988; Bazerman & Paradis, 1991; Hyland, 1996, 1998; Prior, 1998) have demonstrated that academic discourse varies enormously, consisting of a plethora of disciplinary variations. Simply put, writers in different disciplines write differently: physicists do not write like sociologists who do not write like philosophers. And there is evidence that even within the same discipline practices may vary widely, particularly when the writing of students and ‘experts’ (i.e. lecturers writing journal articles) is compared (e.g., Crammond, 1998; Dudley-Evans, 2002; Harwood, 2003; Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Hyland, 2002b; Samraj, 2002, 2004). This is because student writing and expert writing are in effect two very different genres, making different demands on the writer. Given this variation, then, studies which compare and contrast student and expert writing in the same discipline are necessary. Specifically, this paper is a quantitative and qualitative corpus-based study of how and for what purposes postgraduate students and experts writing in the discipline of computing use the personal pronoun *I* when elaborating their research methodology (hereafter ‘methodological *I*’). After reviewing some of the research which investigates the variations between expert and student writing, I then focus on pronouns. Other corpus-based studies are discussed which show that personal pronouns can fulfil a number of pragmatic functions in academic prose. I then offer my own analysis, beginning with a quantitative analysis which compares the frequency and functions of pronouns in student and expert texts in general before focusing on frequencies of methodological *I* across the corpora. My qualitative analysis describes a number of effects the method pronouns help to create and illustrates these with extracts from my data. I also claim that some of the extracts rely on more than the pronoun to construct the effect they create, and include a discussion of cotext in my analysis. I end with a section on the pedagogical implications of my findings.

## 2. Expert writing and student writing

Researchers (e.g., Horowitz, 1988; Johns, 1988) pointed out some time ago that students are not required to do the same types of writing as their lecturers. According to Horowitz’s (1988) survey, typical student writing tasks include summarizing and

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