



# Textual voice elements and voice strength in EFL argumentative writing



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined how the quantity and diversity of textual voice elements contribute to holistic voice strength and essay quality. For the quantification of voice elements, this study used an automated processing tool, the Authorial Voice Analyzer (AVA), which was developed based on categories from Hyland's voice model (i.e., hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, reader pronouns, and directives). To explore the relationship between textual voice elements and holistic voice strength, as well as between voice elements and essay quality, this study analyzed 219 argumentative essays written by L1 Greek-speaking EFL students. The results suggested positive, but weak to moderate, correlations between textual voice and holistic voice strength; a regression model with three textual voice features explained 26% of the variance in voice strength scores. The results also indicated weak correlations between textual voice and essay quality. Interestingly, the textual voice features contributing to voice strength (boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions) were different from those contributing to essay quality (hedges). Interpreting these findings in relation to the context (timed argumentative writing in an EFL context), this study suggests implications for L2 writing assessment and pedagogy.

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## 1. Introduction

Voice has been regarded as an important construct in the context of U.S. secondary school writing (Beck, 2006; Matsuda & Jeffery, 2012); approximately 50% of the first language (L1) writing rubrics contain voice as an evaluation trait (Jeffery, 2009), and the majority of state standards and learning objectives include voice as a target construct for successful writing (Llosa, Beck, & Zhao, 2011). In second language (L2) writing, however, there has been a tendency to view voice as a peripheral construct that can easily be excluded from a list of target objectives in writing instruction. Regarding the lack of attention to voice in L2 writing, researchers have suggested some potential reasons such as L2 learners' greater need to develop syntactic or lexical skills than voice-related skills (Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003). It has also been suggested that the traditional notion of voice is based on an individualistic ideology, so voice as a pedagogical skill does not fit L2 learners with collectively-oriented cultural backgrounds (Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Matsuda, 2001; Shen, 1989). Shen (1989), for example, noted Chinese students' difficulty in writing English essays with first-person singular pronouns and individual voice. As a result, unlike many rubrics for L1 writing, the majority of existing L2 writing rubrics do not include voice as one of the target traits (Matsuda & Jeffery, 2012).

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Nevertheless, with an increasing interest in the value of voice as a measurable, disciplinary concept, researchers began to explore the role of voice in L2 writing (e.g., Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003; Hyland, 2008; Zhao, 2013, 2017). Particularly, for a theoretically grounded analysis of voice strength, Zhao (2013) developed and validated an analytic voice rubric on the basis of Hyland's (2008) voice model. In her following study, using this voice rubric consisting of three dimensions (i.e., ideational, affective, and presence dimensions), Zhao (2017) analyzed how voice strength scores contribute to the quality of L2 timed argumentative essays. This study found high correlations among the three dimensions of the rubric and, more interestingly, identified the ideational dimension, which concerns a writer's presentation of clear and unique ideas, as the most contributive factor. Based on these findings, Zhao emphasized the importance of fully developed ideas with a strong commitment in constructing a strong authorial voice and a high-quality essay.

While it is true that the clear presentation of well-developed ideas plays an important role in constructing authorial voice, this claim about the link between voice and idea development needs to be further explored. First, if a large portion of the contribution of voice to writing quality is actually the contribution of well-developed ideas and supporting details that have long been targeted as *content development*, it can be difficult to disentangle unique features of voice from traditional traits that have been included in most essay scoring rubrics. In addition, Hyland's voice categories, which served as the framework for Zhao's voice rubric development, are in fact text-based interactional metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005), suggesting the need to clarify what specific roles textual voice elements would play in constructing holistic voice strength. By exploring these issues, we can better understand whether and/or how quantity-based, textual voice elements contribute to quality-based, holistic voice strength.

To untangle the roles of textual voice elements and those of idea development, this study first explores how the quantity and diversity of textual voice elements influence holistic voice strength in L2 argumentative writing. Specifically, this study first quantifies lexico-grammatical voice features using an automated processing tool, the Authorial Voice Analyzer (AVA), and investigates the relationship between textual voice elements and holistic voice strength. Additionally, this study explores how voice features (textual voice elements and holistic voice strength) relate to holistic text quality to explicate the role of voice in the context of L2 writing.

## 2. Review of related literature

### 2.1. Text-oriented concept of voice

It is difficult to define voice clearly due to its elusive nature and varying concepts over time (see Matsuda, 2015; for a review). Early definitions of voice emphasized idiosyncratic and expressive features in writing (Elbow, 1981; Stewart, 1992); thus, high-quality writing was expected to express "the essential individuality of a particular writer" (Stewart, 1992). Later concepts of voice tended to place more emphasis on the role of social and cultural circumstances in voice construction (Ede, 1992; Prior, 2001). In such socially oriented perspectives, writers were considered to have multiple voices to fit different rhetorical situations (Yancey, 1994), and focusing on the writer-reader interaction with the text as a medium, much qualitative research explored writers' expression of authorial identity and voice (e.g., Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Ivanić & Camps, 2001; Matsuda & Tardy, 2007, among others), which led to a limited attention to the role of the quantity of textual voice elements in voice construction.

More recently, Hyland (2008) proposed a text-oriented concept of voice by relying on his own framework of interactional metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005). With a focus on interactional features of academic writing, Hyland (2008) suggested that "every successful academic text displays the writer's awareness of both its readers and its consequences" (p. 6), indicating the writer's responsibility to interact effectively with readers through a proper voice. His definition of voice, therefore, concerns the use of language that "establishes relationships between people, and between people and ideas" (p. 7). Hyland's voice model consists of *stance* and *engagement*. *Stance* concerns writer-oriented features of interaction, which help writers to clearly present their opinions and feelings in written discourse. *Stance* includes categories such as *hedges*, *boosters*, *attitude markers*, and *self-mentions*. *Hedges* are linguistic markers that writers use to express their uncertainty about a proposition and accept the possibility of other options (e.g., *could*, *may*, *more or less*, *probably*, *tend to*) (Hyland, 1998). On the other hand, *boosters* are markers that convey writers' confidence in what they argue or support, limiting the acceptability of other options (e.g., *definitely*, *extremely*, *indeed*, *very*) (Hyland, 2005). Unlike these epistemic categories, *attitude markers* express writers' affective attitude toward a proposition and convey various emotions such as surprise or frustration (e.g., *annoying*, *awfully*, *honestly*, *inferior*). The last category of *stance*, *self-mention*, concerns the extent of explicit presence of an author, which can be achieved through the use of first person pronouns (Hyland, 2001).

The other side of the model, *engagement*, involves the recognition of readers' presence and inclusion of readers as active discourse participants (i.e., reader-oriented textual features). *Engagement* includes categories such as *reader pronouns*, *directives*, *questions*, *knowledge reference*, and *personal asides*. Of these engagement categories, this study targets only *reader pronouns* and *directives* because other categories (i.e., *questions*, *knowledge reference*, and *personal asides*) have been shown to occur only to a limited extent in academic writing (Hyland, 2008; Zhao, 2013) and it is difficult to capture occurrences of these categories reliably from an automated approach (detailed explanations in the method section). More importantly, Zhao's voice rubric that this study uses to explore the relationship between textual voice elements and voice strength did not include these categories as its target construct due to their limited, skewed occurrences in the text, further justifying the present methodological decision. *Reader pronouns* are linguistic resources to explicitly invite readers into a discourse.

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