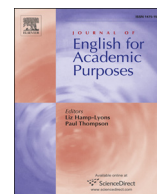


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## Recounting and reflecting: The use of first person pronouns in Chinese, Greek and British students' assignments in engineering



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### ABSTRACT

Chinese and Greek students are among the many international groups now studying at UK universities. While the written English of these groups has been extensively explored through the short argumentative essays comprising learner corpora, little research has been conducted on their assessed writing at undergraduate and Masters level. This paper reports on a study of Chinese, Greek and British student writing within the discipline of Engineering in five UK universities. Data is extracted primarily from the 6.5 million-word British Academic Written English corpus, supplemented by assignments from additional UK universities. The main aim of the study is to explore texts from students with different L1s and cultural backgrounds but within the same discipline and current educational system. First person pronouns were selected as a contained aspect of student writing for comparison, since these are a highly visible feature of a writer's identity construction (e.g. Hyland, 2002b), yet it is often claimed that L2 English students 'over use' these pronouns to the detriment of their writing (Lee & Chen, 2009). Findings indicate that the Chinese and Greek students make greater use of *we* in their writing within Engineering than British students and the paper explores the various functions of both *we* and *I*.

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## 1. Introduction

Written assessment remains the principal way in which students are judged throughout their university undergraduate courses (Lea, 2004; Lillis & Scott, 2007). Given that success or failure at undergraduate level is likely to have a great impact on the lives and careers of individual students, the ability to write in the preferred ways of the academy (and thereby achieve success in written assessments and ultimately receive a degree) is of considerable importance. However, relatively few large-scale studies have been carried out on assessed undergraduate writing from L1 English students in the UK, and fewer still have been conducted on L2 English student writing, despite the recent rapid growth in numbers of international students in UK universities (HESA, 2014). Two of the largest of these groups in UK universities are Chinese<sup>1</sup> students and Greek students (78,065 Chinese and

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<sup>1</sup> While it is recognised that the term 'Chinese students' refers to a range of geographical locations, dialects and ethnic groups, the majority of students in the study are from the PRC and share Modern Standard Chinese (known as Putonghua in the PRC) as the language of education. Moreover, the contextual data in the corpus used in this study details only the student's self-proclaimed L1 (for many Chinese students this is simply 'Chinese'), and does not request information on perceived ethnicity. The group termed 'L1 English' or 'British' students gave English as their L1 and undertook all or most of their secondary education in the UK.

13,220 Greek students in 2013–14<sup>2</sup>). While the written English of these groups has been extensively explored through short argumentative essays, relatively little research has been conducted on the extended writing produced at undergraduate and Master's level. This paper reports findings from a study of Chinese, Greek and British students' assessed writing within Engineering in five UK universities, using data extracted from the 6.5 million-word British Academic Written English corpus, with additional texts collected by the researchers. The aim of the study is to explore texts from students with different L1s and cultural backgrounds but within the same discipline and current educational system.

The investigation compares the use of *we/I* in each student corpus. Findings indicate that while all three student groups make greater use of *we* than *I*, the Greek students' use of *we* is far higher than the Chinese which in turn is higher than the British students' usage. The paper argues that differences in usage of first person pronouns between L1 groups are acceptable to university discipline tutors, since all papers in the study scored 60% or higher (see 2.1 for details of the dataset).

### 1.1. Literature review on student writing

Student writing from L2 English speakers has often been researched in terms of what it lacks or how it is different from L1 English writing and this deficit perspective has come to dominate corpus studies of L2 English writing in particular. Such studies frequently draw on short, argumentative essays such as the International Corpus of Learner English (Granger, Dagneaux, Meunier, & Paquot, 2009) or the Cambridge Learner Corpus (Nicholls, 2003). While the results of these 'learner corpus' studies provide useful insights into features of L2 English writing within these particular data sets, their findings cannot be unquestioningly generalised to other genres of writing, in particular to the extended pieces of literature-based writing required at undergraduate level.

A major area highlighted in the research into L2 English student writing is the use of language items which, in Granger's words (2004: 132), are considered to be 'either over- or underused by learners and therefore contribute to the foreign-soundingness of advanced interlanguage'. This 'overuse', 'underuse' or 'misuse'<sup>3</sup> of particular high frequency lexical items and multi-word expressions is usually compared to an L1 English academic writing 'norm' of professional academic writers (such as the British National Corpus). For example, several studies have referred to the 'overuse' of vague, general nouns such as *people, things, man, woman, world, new, important*, arguing that L2 English students may not have the lexis required for greater specificity (Cobb, 2003; Granger, 1998; Hinkel, 2003). Other linguistic features which have featured in the learner corpus literature include connectors (e.g., Bolton, Nelson, & Hung, 2002; Field & Yip, 1992; Paquot, 2010); informal language (e.g., Gilquin and Paquot, 2007; Wen, Ding, & Wang, 2003); and pronouns (e.g., Petch-Tyson, 1998: 107–118; Ringbom, 1998).

The literature on writing by the two L2 English student groups in this study adopts a similarly deficit approach. For example, Milton (1999: 226) reports that Chinese students tend to 'overuse' informal connecting chunks such as *on the other hand, (as) we/you know, in my opinion*; and Lee and Chen (2009) found that informal connectors such as *what's more and besides* and the first person plural pronoun *we* were used significantly more frequently by the L1 Chinese writers than in their reference corpus of L1 English student writers and professional writers. In her comparison of Greek students' writing in English in higher education to the writing of expert Greek academics, Koutsantoni shows that one of the student trends is to use 'expressions of obligation and necessity and modals' (2005: 113), mirroring one of the characteristics of research articles in Greek. She also found that in Greek students' writing, the 'density of emphatics is significantly higher than the density of hedges' (2005: 114) and that 'Greek students appear to see emphasis as the main proof of knowledge and expertise' (Koutsantoni, 2005: 117). While Koutsantoni's study clearly sees Greek student writers as falling short of the standard achieved by professional academic writers, she adds that this 'could result from an unawareness of the different functions of various scientific genres and their conventions' (Koutsantoni, 2005: 117).

### 1.2. Research on pronouns in academic writing

While the way authors construct their identity in their writing is complex and multifaceted, we argue that the use of first person pronouns is a highly visible and measurable aspect of the identity constructing process (Hyland, 2002a; Tang & John, 1999). Thus, many studies have appeared in the past few decades which have explored the use of first person pronouns by academic writers. Some have focused on researching pronoun use in expert writing in research articles and/or other published sources, such as Fløttum, Kinn, and Dahl (2006), Harwood (2005), Kuo (1999) and Martínez (2005), whereas others have focused on the use of pronouns by student writers more specifically, sometimes comparing it to expert writing. These studies include Luzón (2009), Tang and John (1999), McCrostie (2008), Hyland (1999, 2001, 2002a), Petch-Tyson (1998: 107–118), Ivanič and Camps (2001), Neff et al. (2004).

Many studies have compared L2 English students with L1 English students or with 'expert' writers (usually the authors of journal articles). It is commonly claimed that L2 English students (including L1 Chinese and L1 Greek) make greater use of first (and in some studies second) person pronouns in their writing than L1 English students or in comparison with 'expert' prose

<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1973/239/>, last accessed on 09/02/16.

<sup>3</sup> The use of the terms 'over/under/mis use' are prevalent in the learner corpus literature though are cast as 'descriptive, not prescriptive terms' (Gilquin and Paquot, 2007: 322).

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