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“This is what I know:” Use of the first person in sixth grade argumentative writing

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ABSTRACT

Although many secondary teachers prohibit use of the first person in academic writing, little empirical evidence exists linking first person use with writing quality. This study examined first person use in 111 brief argumentative essays composed by sixth grade students (ages 11–14) in American public schools. It first analyzed the ways in which students use the first person, and then investigated whether there is any association between first person use and overall quality of writing. Findings suggest that students used the first person frequently, often in its more assertive forms, and that there is no association between use of the first person and quality of argumentative writing. Implications for instruction are that teachers should not ban the use of the first person, but should teach students how to use it more effectively.

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1. Introduction

Science magazine’s advice to authors suggests that they should “use active voice when suitable, particularly when necessary for correct syntax (e.g., ‘To address this possibility, we constructed a λZap library. .,’ not ‘To address this possibility, a λZap library was constructed. .’)” (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2015). Despite this explicit endorsement of the use of first person pronouns in published academic writing, many American secondary school teachers, backed by textbooks and style guides, advise student writers not to use the first person (Callies, 2013; Hyland, 2002a,b). This prohibition is recognized in postsecondary settings as well: the Purdue University Online Writing Lab states that “the use of first-person point of view is usually avoided in academic writing” (The OWL at Purdue, 2013). Many other university-based online writing resources acknowledge that students have likely been taught that first person pronouns, singular or plural, are inappropriate in academic writing (e.g., Duke Thompson Writing Program Writing Studio; The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill). Yet, to my knowledge, no empirical research has explored the advantages and disadvantages of first person use in student writing. Instead, this common ban on the first person seems to be based on “some vague preconceived notion that academic writing should be distant and impersonal” (Tang & John, 1999; p. S35).

At the same time, writing instructors complain that student writing is dry or shallow and lacking in “voice” (Hyland, 2002b). Teachers presumably ban the use of the first person in an attempt to help their students better approximate the formal and objective tone associated with academic writing (Duke Thompson Writing Program Writing Studio; Pack). However, students’ efforts to avoid using “I” often lead to clumsy sentence structure and heavy reliance on passive voice; in other words, avoiding the first person often seems to make writing worse, not better.

Perhaps “surprisingly, given the conflicting advice and strong feelings it seems to generate, the role of the first person has received relatively little empirical study” (Hyland, 2002a; p. 1092). Despite the debate around whether students should be allowed to use “I” in academic writing, almost no evidence exists to address the relationship between use of the first person and quality of writing. The existing research base on first-person use focuses primarily on postsecondary students learning English as a foreign language, with virtually no attention to younger native English speakers working to develop an academic voice within the constraints of the American public school system. Therefore, the present study examines the use of first person pronouns in brief argumentative essays authored by a diverse group of sixth grade students (ages 11–14) enrolled in schools in Massachusetts. The study first describes the ways in which adolescents use the first person, and secondly exam-

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ines the relationship between their use of these pronouns and the quality of their writing.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Quality of argumentative writing

The recently adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS; 2010) call for students in grades six through eight (middle school) to develop the ability to write in a variety of genres for a variety of purposes. Yet only 27% of eighth graders performed at or above the proficient level in writing on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education, 2012), and only half of middle school teachers feel adequately prepared to teach writing (Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, & Morphy, 2014). Of the three purposes for writing discussed by the CCSS – "to persuade, to explain [and] to convey experience" – persuasive writing has been shown to be the most challenging for middle schoolers (Common Core State Standards, 2010, p. 5; Prater & Padia, 1983). Yet this genre is critically important to college and career readiness. An examination of fifth grade writing indicated that argumentative essays were written with greater lexical diversity and in a higher register than informative or narrative texts (Olinghouse & Wilson, 2013). However, a recent survey of middle school teachers revealed that in more than half of American classrooms, students engaged in persuasive writing less than three times a year (Graham et al., 2014).

Much contemporary scholarship in argumentative writing is grounded in Toulmin's (1958) model of argument structure (Nielsen, 2013). Toulmin put forth that an argument consists of: a *claim*, *data* to support that claim, *warrants* "to show that, taking these data as a starting point, the step to the original claim or conclusion is an appropriate and legitimate one," *backing*, which consists of further facts or data that may be called upon to support the warrants if they are questioned, *rebuttals* to the claim, and *qualifiers* such as "probably" and "presumably" (p. 98). Reznitskaya and Anderson's (2001) argument schema applies a similar framework to evaluate the quality of argumentation, stating that "a basic argument consists of a conclusion supported by at least one reason. Advanced arguments will contain multiple reasons, qualifiers, counterarguments, and rebuttals" (p. 321). The argumentative writing rubric used by the Massachusetts state standardized test is in agreement. According to this 6-point rubric, an essay scoring three, or just below proficient, includes "basic supporting details – only one reason or very simple reasons in support of claim," while an essay scoring a five "takes a clear stance and supports it with multiple strong details," and an essay receiving the highest score of six "persuasively refutes the counterargument" (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2009). Thus, research and practice converge to define a high-quality argumentative essay as one that presents a clear claim, multiple pieces of data to support the claim, and persuasive rebuttals of relevant counterarguments.

However, these criteria make no mention of the use of first-person pronouns. In a rare look at first-person use as it relates to writing quality, Monahan (2013) selected eleven sixth-grade science argumentative essays which stood out to her as being particularly well "voiced," and used grounded theory to identify salient characteristics of these essays. One of the three prominent themes associated with voice was use of the first person. In other words, in contrast to the beliefs of many middle school teachers, Monahan found that first person use was *positively* associated with essay quality. Thus, while a number of features of argumentative writing are explicitly articulated in the CCSS (2010), and attain a level of consensus among researchers and practitioners, the question of whether or not to use the first-person pronoun still generates much debate.

2.2. Authorial roles

One important consideration, often unacknowledged in these debates, is that the first person is not monolithic, and may be used differently in different contexts. Clark and Ivanič (1997) propose that writers may use first person to take on three possible subject positions. First, with *the autobiographical self*, an author uses the first person to reflect upon and share his or her life history. Secondly, *the discoursal self* is concerned with the self-representation an author creates through language; for instance, a writer may use the first person to claim membership in an academic disciplinary community. Finally, in drawing on *the self as author*, a writer uses the first person to establish his or her authorial presence and to convey authority on a topic. The first person, then, may be used to share personal experiences, to position oneself relative to the reader, or to present "statements of value or belief" (p. 157).

Based on this work, Tang & John (1999) created a framework ordering authorial roles along a continuum; from least to most powerful authorial presence, authors use "I" in the following ways:

1. "I" as representative: first person used as "a proxy for a larger group of people," usually described as "we" or "us"
2. "I" as guide: first person used to draw the reader's attention to points within the essay, such as "let us now examine. . ." or "we can see that. . ."
3. "I" as architect: first person used to denote the speaker as the one who crafted the piece of writing, as in "in this section, I will discuss. . ."
4. "I" as recounter of research process: first person used to describe the steps the author took in the research being discussed
5. "I" as opinion-holder: first person used to denote the author as one who holds an opinion, often paired with words signaling cognition, such as "I think. . ."
6. "I" as originator: first person used to signal the author's ideas or claims

Tang and John's framework, however, neglects perhaps the most obvious use of first person, Clark and Ivanič's (1997) autobiographical self. Petch-Tyson (2014) found that nearly half the occurrences of first person in essays written by native English speaking college students were used in recounting past experiences. Berman and Nir-Sagiv (2007) suggest that texts at the highest level of discourse construction involve genre blurring, or embedding "narrative-like insertions" into expository texts (p. 100). Likewise, the CCSS (2010) explicitly states that students should "know how to combine elements of different kinds of writing – for example, to use narrative strategies within argument" (p. 41).

Thus, writing oneself into the text may strengthen arguments; Carbone and Orellana (2010) provide examples of the way in which seventh-grade student writers position themselves as members of specific communities to draw on pathos in their argumentation, and Radcliffe (2012) claims that her "students" use of anecdotes helped offset some. . .formulaic writing" in expository and persuasive essays (p. 23). Clearly, this type of argumentation through autobiography is impossible without use of the first person.

2.3. Students' use of first person

The existing research base on the use of first person in writing is inconclusive, and is focused mainly on postsecondary students learning English as a foreign language. Some research suggests that English language learners at the university level overuse the first person as compared to native speakers (Callies, 2013; Cobb,

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