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Does EAP affect written L2 academic stance? A longitudinal learner corpus study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the longitudinal development of L2 academic 'stance' features resulting from instruction in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at a university in Hong Kong. We analysed the frequency and wordings of *hedges, boosters, attitude markers* and *self-mention* within a 205,682 word longitudinal corpus of essays and reports collected over a semester's instruction via pre-, mid- and post-instruction submissions, alongside data on submission grade. Data was analysed for frequency and wording differences alongside mixed-effect models to confirm the impact of instruction on the data. Results show significant longitudinal variation in the frequency of hedging, boosting, marking attitude and self-mention devices as the result of instruction, with a rise in the use of hedging and an overall reduction in the use of boosting and self-mention, serving to leave students with a more careful, narrower, less polarising and less personal range of expressions with which to convey their stance over time. We also present longitudinal genre-specific effects on stance features between essays and reports, and show how a longitudinal increase in hedges and boosters results in texts that receive a higher grade from teacher-raters. Our findings recommend explicit instruction of stance features as crucial in raising students' awareness of how to achieve persuasive academic writing.

1. Introduction

When transitioning to tertiary education, a crucial issue students in foreign language (L2) contexts face is the need to adopt an academic register, which, for many such students, is a considerable challenge (Hyland, 2016). In the context of the present study (Hong Kong), students lack the L2 proficiency to fully participate in tertiary education, often failing to understand lectures or write required coursework assignments (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Bruce & Hamp-Lyons, 2015). For L2 students (and to some extent, even students where the tertiary medium of instruction [MOI] is their native language), academic discourse is often regarded as "an alien form of literacy [… with] many students arriving at university thinking they have landed on Mars" (Hyland, 2016, p. 246). Many universities in both English and mother-tongue MOI contexts therefore provide language enhancement courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for freshmen L2 students, aiming to develop students' essential knowledge base of the general rhetorical features and structures of academic discourse. This is intended to allow students to enculturate into academic life as they progress through their studies.

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A key aspect of 'successful' academic discourse is that of the writer's ability to construct, support, defend and justify an argument on a given topic (Hyland, 2000, 2005; Lee & Deakin, 2016; Wingate, 2012). A now longstanding EAP research area is that of the determination and analysis of the linguistic features involved in successful argumentative discourse, focusing on the particular linguistic *stance* devices, or "writer-oriented features of interaction" (p. 178) used by writers to continually engage the reader (Biber, 2006; Hyland, 2005). Studies of the stance features involved in academic writing are now numerous (e.g. Hyland, 2000; Jiang, 2015; Jiang & Hyland, 2016) and have led to the creation of new EAP course materials focusing specifically on these features (e.g. Chang, 2010), as well as the bottom-up, linguistic derivation of 'successful' academic texts (Lee & Deakin, 2016). For pedagogy, Chandrasegaran (2013) has shown that deconstruction of sample texts by stance features alongside explicit teaching of rhetorical grammar for realising desired genre goals have improved students' stance-making abilities, while Tribble and Wingate (2013) have suggested that corpora should be exploited for student development of linguistic knowledge and skills needed for academic argumentation.

Yet, while a considerable amount of studies have compared stance-taking practice between L1 and L2 writers (e.g. Hinkel, 2005; Lee & Deakin, 2016), less is known regarding how L2 learners develop stance expression as the result of EAP instruction. Addressing this gap would open a window into the overall effectiveness of EAP instruction in producing successful academic writing. Given the scale of student numbers, text types and linguistic information required for an incisive and detailed appraisal of EAP and stance making, this paper reports on a longitudinal corpus-based study of stance presentation during in-sessional L2 EAP written production. We aim to determine how EAP instruction over time affects L2 development of stance features in EAP written essays and reports. We also provide accompanying data on learner variables so as to delineate the impact of EAP instruction from potential learner-internal factors influencing L2 stance development, as well as identify the stance features involved in teacher-raters' positive appraisal of 'successful' L2 academic texts. We begin by outlining the rationale behind longitudinal learner corpora for the investigation of learner stance development, before providing an overview of the linguistic features under investigation.

2. The need for longitudinal EAP corpus analysis

Corpora, or "a principled collection of language materials, spoken or written, compiled into an electronic database for the purpose of linguistic analysis" (Park, 2014, p. 27, see also; Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998; Sinclair, 2004) are now considered to have multiple affordances (Leńko-Szymańska & Boulton, 2015) for language learning and teaching, with the EAP field no exception. As mentioned, corpus-based explorations of stance features are now numerous (e.g. Hyland & Tse, 2004; Hyland, 2005). However, there remains a necessity to compile *longitudinal* corpora, so that "a thorough, in depth examination of development over time can be made" (Park, 2014, p. 39). The end goal of this endeavour is to generate data that allows teachers to "define areas that need special attention in specific contexts and at different levels of competence, and so devise syllabi and materials" (Gabrielatos, 2005, p. 6). Such corpora therefore provide insights into the language learning *process* rather than the end product, supported by fine-grained analysis of authentic L2 production.

Longitudinal corpus-based studies into EAP remain relatively scarce compared to their pseudo-longitudinal (i.e. by L2 proficiency cross-section) counterparts such as the Cambridge Learner Corpus (Nicholls, 2003) or the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English (ICNALE; Ishikawa, 2013). This is primarily because collecting longitudinal data "is a real challenge, as it is both time consuming and requires much planning ahead [… with] few research terms collecting such data types" (Meunier, 2016, p. 381). However, Granger, Gilquin, and Meunier (2016) note that longitudinal corpora are "showing a slow and steady rise" (p. 2) with projects such as the Longitudinal Database of Learner English (LONGDALE, Meunier & Littré, 2013), recent edited volumes including projects using longitudinal corpora (Castello, Ackerly, & Cocceta, 2016), as well as a special issue of the *Modern Language Journal* (Hasko & Meunier, 2013) covering such studies.

However, despite the recent popularity of longitudinal corpus methodology, data from EAP learners in the Asian context is relatively underexplored, as researchers have been slower to adopt the construction of such corpora, and existing longitudinal corpora lack much in the way of Asian L2 EAP discourse. For example, in what is currently the largest longitudinal learner corpus worldwide - the 32 million-word EFCamDAT longitudinal corpus (Geertzen, Alexopoulou, & Korhonen, 2013), of which nearly 19% of labelled as 'Chinese' - each submission has an average length of just seven sentences, much shorter and less specialised than would be seen in the majority of EAP production. A recent review of other longitudinal corpora (Meunier, 2016) has pointed out 11 such corpora, of which 10 contain data only from European sources. One exception is found in Crosthwaite (2016), whose study on Asian L2 EAP writing using Biber's (1988) multidimensional analysis determined that EAP instruction resulted in longitudinal linguistic variation in the direction of the established norms of an academic register. This variation included increased an emphasis on nominalisation and more careful, hedged, presentation of stance, and targeted written corrective feedback was highlighted as one of the key pedagogical advantages of this type of analysis.

However, the multidimensional approach in that and other studies takes a snapshot of the entirety of the linguistic features of student production and compares it against established statistical norms for a given register – in this case, academic discourse. This approach may be akin to cracking a nut with a sledgehammer, in that the nuance or power of the writer's presentation of the epistemic and rhetorical values as encompassed in the specific wordings and function used by the writer may be lost without a more fine-grained analysis of the actual linguistic features used by the writer. The key with

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