The Use of Interpersonal Resources in Argumentative/Persuasive Essays by East-Asian ESL and Australian Tertiary Students

Volume 1

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Author’s Declaration

I. This thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD degree
II. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used
III. The thesis does not exceed the word length for this degree
IV. No part of this work has been used for the award of another degree
V. This thesis meets the University of Sydney’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements for the conduct of research

Signature:

Name:

Date:
I dedicate this thesis to my family: my husband Dr IL-Kyu Lee, my three children Mee-Jin Lee, Mee-Eun Lee, and Jong-Do Lee.
Acknowledgements

I feel very proud to have completed this research at a relatively late stage of my life and as a second language writer. It has proven to be an extremely enjoyable exercise on the one hand and an excruciatingly painful journey on the other.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the use of the interpersonal resources of English in argumentative/persuasive essays (APEs) constructed by undergraduate international students from East-Asian regions (EAS), in particular, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, and also by Australian-born English speakers (ABS). High-graded essays (HGEs) were compared with the low-graded essays (LGEs) in order to identify the relationship between their deployment of interpersonal features and the academic grades given by markers. In addition, the essays constructed by the EAS writers were compared with those written by ABS writers.

A major complaint of academic staff about ESL Asian students concerns their lack of analytical, critical voice and formality in their arguments. The linguistic evidence for this explored in this thesis is based mainly on interpersonal systems of interaction and evaluation recently developed within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Iedema et al., 1994; Iedema, 1995, 2003, 2004; Martin, 2000a, 2003c; White, 1998, 2004; Martin and Rose, 2003; Macken-Horarik and Martin, 2003; Martin and White, 2005). Within interaction, the thesis draws on work dealing with the metaphorical realisations of commands in a bureaucratic administration context. Evaluation is based on appraisal theory, which is concerned with the linguistic inflection of the subjective attitudes of writers, and also their evaluative expressions and intersubjective positioning.

In order to explore the use of interpersonal resources from a perspective of writer and reader interaction, this study incorporates a social interactive model derived from ‘Interaction in writing’ alongside Bakhtin’s (1981, 1986) dialogic literacy. Under this broad interdisciplinary approach, the interpersonal aspects in APEs are examined from three main perspectives: Interactive (schematic structures), Interactional (the metaphorical realisation of commands), and InterPERSONAL meanings (the three main appraisal systems: ATTITUDE, ENGAGEMENT, and GRADUATION).

The sample comprised six overseas students and six Australian-born native English speakers. They were all participants in the English for Academic Purposes class in the Modern Language Program offered by a regional university in southern New South Wales. These students were required to write APEs as a part of their course. Discourse analysis was
applied to the essays at the genre, discourse semantic and the lexico-grammatical levels. Interviews were undertaken with markers to identify the relationship between text analysis results and markers’ comments on the essays and the grades.

The results indicated that students’ use of interpersonal resources is a good indicator for judging quality of APEs. The analysis reveals significant differences in the extent to which HGEs are interactive by showing awareness of audience in argument structure, and making interactional choices focusing on command and interPERSONAL choices of appraisal systems. These differences are reflected in the use both of strategies of involvement by being interactional, and strategies displaying distance by being formal. The differences are also reflected in the presentation of personal opinions by being evaluative and of intersubjective claims supported by evidence. While there were no significant differences between the EAS and ABS writers in terms of the argument structure, ABS texts are more interactional, having a high degree of authority and conviction characterised by a formal tone. ABS writers also display a stronger voice through frequent exploitation of GRADUATION resources of appraisal. Overall, it can be said that while EAS students display problems with raising their own voices in argument, ABS students display problems in supporting persuasion. Educational implications for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing curriculum design include the desirability of enhancing a context-sensitive approach in writing, raising audience awareness of language teachers in relation to the interpersonal use of English, and promoting the dialogic nature of argument by reconciling individual creativity with social voices and community conventions.
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Key to Acronyms used

ABS  Australian-born English speaking students
APEs  Argumentative/Persuasive Essays
APW  Argumentative/Persuasive Writing
EAP  English for Academic Purposes
ESP  English for Specific Purposes
EAS  Students from East-Asian countries
ESL  English as a Second Language
HGEs  High-graded essays
HRWs  High-rated writers
LGEs  Low-graded essays
LRWs  Low-rated writers
L1  English as a first language
L2  English as a second language
MGEs  Middle-graded essays
MRWs  Middle-rated writers
NESB  Non-English Speaking Background
R1  Rhetorical structure in the first language
R2  Rhetorical structure in the second language
SFL  Systemic Functional Linguistics