

Student Writers' Use of Evaluative Language in Undergraduate ELT Research Reports in Two Mexican BA Programmes¹

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Abstract

This article uses Wharton's (1995) call for professionalization in ELT as a frame to look at research report writing in ELT at undergraduate level in Mexico. The study analyzes the evaluative language (White, 2001) used by undergraduate student writers in a Mexican university in the introductions of their final research reports (*tesis* or *trabajo recepcional*). The analysis shows limited understanding of the dialogue that successful writers establish with their ideal readers in the wider ELT context and we argue that these undergraduate research reports target the local discourse community but not the wider community. We conclude that teacher educators in BA programs in Mexico are responsible for initiating their students into the ways the wider discourse community knows, does, thinks and acts.

Resumen

El artículo parte del argumento expresado por Wharton (1995) de que la profesionalización de la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera está ligada a cómo sus actores se relacionan con la comunidad discursiva del campo, tanto a nivel local como global. Argumentamos que el trabajo recepcional o tesis que los estudiantes en las licenciaturas escriben para graduarse es una oportunidad para iniciarse profesionalmente. El estudio analiza el lenguaje evaluativo (White, 2001) de 8 estudiantes de licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa en las introducciones de sus trabajos recepcionales escritos en inglés. El análisis apunta a una construcción poco desarrollada del lector "ideal" de su trabajo de investigación y una incipiente comprensión del diálogo entre los lectores globales y los escritores a través del texto. Concluimos que como profesionales que trabajan en licenciaturas en Lengua Inglesa somos responsables para iniciar a nuestros estudiantes en las formas de conocer, hacer, pensar y actuar de la comunidad discursiva del campo.

Introduction

In an article about the professionalization of English Language teachers, Wharton (1995) argues that one element of professionalization is becoming a member of a professional community or discourse community. As she points out, these communities can exist at both local and global levels, but to be heard in the wider professional discourse community, it is necessary to actively participate in it through, for example, publishing in "one of the established journals of the community" (Wharton, 1995, p.30). Furthermore, Wharton (1995) indicates that those involved in teacher training should be responsible for introducing new members to this community. However, the question remains as to whether participation through publication in the wider professional discourse community is being actively encouraged in English Language Teaching BA programs in the Mexican context.

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In many of these BA programs, students are required to write a research report (often referred to as a *tesis* or *trabajo recepcional*) in English in order to graduate. As Mugford & Sughrua (2007, p. 73) argue, the writing of this report requires from the student-writer “*professional competence in discipline-legitimated discursive practices*” and hence [the student] undergoes an initiation into the academy of TEFL teacher/researchers who, as in any discipline, will continually be impelled ‘to give a tangible and public demonstration that one has legitimacy’ primarily by “*textualizing one’s work*” (Hyland, 2000, pp.10, 17).

It can be assumed that gaining this legitimacy is achieved by BA students in their local discourse communities, that is, those associated with the individual BA programs in ELT and their respective institutions. However, to grow as professionals, these soon-to-be-graduates should be able to develop insights into the relevant issues being discussed in the wider discourse community and communicate in ways that are accepted within that community.

As teachers of research-related courses, it has come to our attention that student-writers have limited awareness of the expected ways of writing for the target community. Instead of situating their work within a disciplinary context, they seem to depend on the use of explicit personal valuations to appeal to their readers. In a sample of BA student research proposals, Busseniers et al. (2010) found that evaluative language was commonly used by student-writers to justify their choice of research topics.

Perales (2011) explains that through language choices, writers are able to construct a reader for their text. Writers build an *ideal reader* who is aligned with their own point of view (*ibid.*, pp.74-5) through using evaluative language without referring to the premises which support these valuations. This could mean that the presence of personal valuations in students’ research-related texts indicates that they view their readers as sympathetic to their personal beliefs. As Hyland (2001) states: “writers shape their texts to the expectations of their audiences” (p, 549). In order to be accepted in the target community, it is necessary for the writers to convince the expert reader that they know about the academic discussion and how things are done within the community.

To date, little is known about how Mexican undergraduate student-writers of research-related texts in L2 try to convince their readers that they are familiar with ways of interacting in the discourse community. The aim of this article is to gain insight into how the language choices of these student-writers contribute to their being accepted in the wider discourse community of their field. To do this, we analyzed the use of evaluative language in the introductions of 8 BA research reports in the field of ELT in a Mexican university.

Discourse community

In this article, we loosely define discourse community as a group of professionals, possibly of different nationalities and with different native languages, who use special ways of talking and writing for the purpose of knowledge sharing and building in a given discipline or field and who develop “special genres or community-specific variations of such genres” (cf. Swales & Feak, 2000, p. 151).

While it would be easy to think of discourse communities as uniform and unified groups, it is important to recognize that “discourse communities are not monolithic and unitary” (Hyland, 2004, p.9). They are discipline-specific and even within one single discipline there can be varying perspectives and ways of talking and writing. This can be noticed at

the local as well as the wider level of discourse community. For example, members of the ELT discourse community include practicing teachers, academics and researchers. Each of these groups has a particular way of looking at the issues included in the disciplinary dialogues, besides a variety of individual perspectives. Additionally, what we refer to as the ELT discourse community is strongly influenced by a range of discourse communities from other disciplines, such as Applied Linguistics, Education, Sociology and Psychology. Despite the complexity of the social relations in the contexts of the ELT discourse community, the concept is a useful one to understand the ways in which disciplinary dialogue takes place (Woodward-Kron, 2004, p. 141). Rafoth (1990) also suggests that the concept makes it possible for writers "to understand, not merely to imitate, conventions", adding that in this way they may "be able to unmask and hence have the possibility to weaken the control which they exert" and consequently have the opportunity "to change the structures of that system" (in Wharton, 1995, p. 29).

This concept of discourse community is the lens that we are using for this research, but it is not a concept that is universally used. Rather, it is a concept that has often been used by applied linguists and has been proved useful for the study of writing in academic contexts and for the study of writing for specific purposes (Borg, 2003, p. 399). Work from other perspectives uses similar, but not identical, concepts to refer to membership in professional communities. As has been pointed out by Johns (1997, in Borg, 2003, p. 399), it seems that even in Applied Linguistics, the term discourse communities is being replaced by the more definable sociocultural concept of "communities of practice" (Wenger 1998, p. 78).

Becoming a member of a community

Gee (1996, in Moje, 2010) explains that being accepted as a community member involves four aspects: knowing, doing, thinking and acting. Considering these terms in more detail, to become a community member, it is first necessary to know the field of the community, to know what can and cannot be done in the field, to be familiar with the ways of thinking of the community, and to be able to appropriately interact with the other members of the community. This requires developing skills which are situated in specific community cultures. Working on literacy skills alone is not enough to become a member of a community, as these skills always need to be situated within a specific culture (Moje, 2010).

These skills are developed through participation in the community (see the concept of *legitimate peripheral participation*, Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). It is, therefore, in the interest of undergraduates who aspire to become fully accepted members of this community to become involved in the practices of the community.

In the hard sciences, learners are initiated into the practices of the academic community from early on in their studies, through direct participation in research activities with established scientists, with the goal of publication. In ELT, however, this approach is seldom taken from the beginning of undergraduate studies. Common practice in ELT is the use of pedagogic or curricular genres for teaching and learning, in preference to reading journal articles, following and participating in academic debates, for example.

Can students become part of a discourse community without having been actively involved in it? If students do not have the knowledge of other members of the discourse community, is it possible for them to write in a way that would be accepted within the

discourse community? This presents an argument for the need to focus on reading and knowledge expansion before beginning research-related writing.

Writing for a specific disciplinary audience

As indicated by Hyland (2004), two key aspects of knowledge-creating genres, which include genres such as the research report, are to “acknowledge prior work and situate claims in a disciplinary context” and to “offer warrants for one’s view based on community-specific arguments and procedures” (p.12). These features reflect the perspective that no text exists in a vacuum, but rather, all texts are part of a dialogue. In other words, writers need to situate their own research issues within the issues that are being discussed in the disciplinary community. Additionally, their arguments and ways of arguing should be aligned with those valued in the community.

However, Perales (2011) points out that when reading opinion texts in English, students in a Mexican public university seemed unaware of the concept of specific audiences in these texts (p.76). He brings to our attention the fact that the reader as audience can take on many different roles, depending partly on the linguistic choices made in the text by the writer. When writing for specific discourse communities, the writer should be aware of “the linguistic mechanisms by which texts naturalise certain value positions and construct for themselves, ideal, model or compliant readerships.” (White, 2003, p.259).

The study

This study analyzed the introductions of eight BA research reports. The reports, written in English, were written as one of the options for graduation from two BA programs at the Universidad Veracruzana (six from the BA in English Language and 2 from the online BA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and were submitted in 2011-2012.

We chose to look at the introductions of these research reports because this is the section where the writers have to engage their readers, who are members of the local and wider discourse community in the field of ELT. Introductions are of key importance in convincing the readers of the relevance and worth of the work.

The analysis in this study focuses on evaluative language, and how this is used to convince the reader (interpersonal language). Thompson & Hunston (2000) define evaluation as “expression of the speaker or writer’s attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about” (p. 5, in Mauranen & Bondi, 2003, p.269).

In particular, we look at how the student-writers of our sample texts evaluated products and processes, referred to as appreciation. According to White (2001), “appreciation typically evaluates natural objects, manufactured objects, texts as well as more abstract constructs such as plans and policies” (p.7). Through appreciation, products and processes can be evaluated positively or negatively (e.g. *important, effective* vs. *controversial, difficult*). Appreciation can be considered as field-specific due to the fact that “the social valuation of one field will not be applicable or relevant in another” (White, 2001, p.14).

The values attributed to products and processes through the system of appreciation can also have varying degrees of force (e.g. explicit forms including *strongly, somewhat*, or implicit forms such as *like, love, adore*), and focus (e.g. *sometimes, can be, sort of*) which refer to the intensity and clarity of the values given (White, 1998). Force and focus, which

together are referred to as graduation, can be linked to appreciation in that they allow writers/speakers to strengthen or weaken the social values attributed to products and processes.

Aspects of graduation are more commonly referred to as intensifiers (Hinkel, 2005), boosters (Hyland, 2004) and hedges. These are all “communicative strategies for increasing or reducing the force of statements” (Hyland, 2004, p.87). It has been widely reported that L2 writers struggle with the appropriate use of these language features, often making “overexaggerated claims” when the use of more tentative language would be expected (Hinkel, 2005, p.31).

Results

When we analyzed the introductions to the undergraduate final research reports, we noticed that there were differences in how these student-writers interacted with the readers of their reports. Several of these introductions explicitly value the research projects and their outcomes positively, as can be noted in the examples below.

- It is important to carry out this type of study at a university level... (Intro G, p.1)
- It is very important to analyze and understand the findings of this type of studies. (Intro A, p.1)
- Students’ perceptions towards the use of the internet in their EFL classes will be of vital importance for designing and integrating this means in future curricula (Intro E, p.2)
- Instances of negative appreciation were also found in all of the introductions. However, these negative valuations, while having a strong impact on the reader, are often expressed implicitly:
- One of the greatest threats of teaching for standardized testing is that students are oriented to choose the correct answer rather than think for themselves and become critical learners (Intro D, p.1)
- We strongly believe that... most students do not use appropriate strategies for reading (Intro H, p.1)

In these introductions, appreciation, both positive and negative, is frequently used without supporting the values with literature which is considered appropriate in the field, suggesting that they are largely personal opinions, rather than reflecting arguments within the discussion of the wider discourse community.

The valuations in these introductions are frequently emphasized through the use of force:

- Motivation has a great effect on a student's capacity to learn. (Intro C, p.2)
- We strongly believe that... most students do not use appropriate strategies for reading. (Intro H, p.1)

There are also implicit examples of force, where the force is integral to the meaning of the lexical item used:

- Vocabulary is a fundamental aspect in the learning of a language. (Intro F, p.1)
- Instances of both forms of force in single utterances were also identified:
- Interviews are the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings. (Intro E, p.2)

Aspects of force, sometimes referred to as intensifiers, are typically found in spoken and conversational discourse (Hinkel, 2005). Additionally, intensifiers exaggerate the actual truth "in the perception of the speaker" (Hinkel, 2005, p.31). While force is used in some academic genres (Hyland, 2004), the informality and subjectivity that these student-writers display in their introductions indicate that they do not fully understand the accepted ways of acting (and writing) in the TESOL community.

Besides finding instances of force, there were examples within some of these introductions of focus being used to soften the valuations made. This is often referred to as hedging. The use of hedging is a conventional feature of academic writing in English, and hedges "appear to be particularly necessary in texts that include claim-making and/or expressing personal positions or points of view" (Hinkel, 2005, p.30). The examples below make use of modals of probability to soften the focus of their evaluations:

- If students view this test as useful, it might influence their results on the test. (Intro D, p.2)
- The curriculum of the English BA may not be fully focused on reading comprehension. (Intro G, p.1)
- Some texts used distancing strategies, a more complex form of focus, to soften the evaluative language used.
- Vocabulary learning strategies seem to be essential to enrich lexical knowledge. (Intro F, p.1)
- [Motivation] is seen as an important factor that improves both teaching and learning a language. (Intro A, p.2)

This use of focus to soften the claims made in these introductions suggests that these student-writers have acquired the use of tentative language as a textual convention of this genre. However, this raises the question as to what extent the use of such language is understood, or whether it is just being reproduced as a frequently taught requirement of academic writing. Wharton (1995) reminds us that "discourse community members should seek to understand, not merely to imitate conventions" (p.29).

Some introductions appear to indicate an awareness of the immediate audience and their beliefs, as can be noted in the example from Intro G, above. Their use of the hedging device 'may' in their implicit criticism of the BA curriculum suggests a concern to 'tread carefully' around subjects which their readers (and subsequent graders) may be directly involved in.

Further examples of this attempt to be sensitive to the reader can be found in the use of implicit appreciation when criticisms are made relating to the research context or the profession of English Language Teaching.

- the majority of English courses offered at my Language School do not often integrate Internet in the classes (Intro E, p.2)
- ..if we are to make improvements in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) profession.(Intro B, p.3)
- much still needs to be done by some English teachers to deal with this problem (Intro C, p.3)

These examples of consideration for the reader show some understanding of the discourse community at an institutional level, and could subsequently be applied when writing for a wider audience.

While our analysis so far has focused on the use of evaluative language, one of the introductions (Intro G) indicated a familiarity with the existing discussion surrounding the research topics. These student-writers established their territory partly by referring to the existing literature, rather than relying solely on evaluative language.

- Chavez (2005) states that Mexican people read mostly show business magazines and approximately one and a half book annually. However, there are few studies related specifically to implicit models of reading in Mexico. (Intro G, p.1)
- We started this study with three presumptions. The first presumption was the belief that the sample would show an interpretative or constructive implicit model, according to Hernández (2008). (Intro G, p.1)

These examples demonstrate that the student-writers of this introduction had read extensively about their research topic before writing and, therefore, were able to locate their study within an existing discussion of the wider discourse community. By doing this, they are clearly “situating claims within a disciplinary context” (Hyland, 2004, p.12).

Discussion/Conclusion

Returning to the concept of the *ideal reader*, we can ask ourselves about the identity of the ideal reader being constructed (either consciously or unconsciously) by the student-writers of the introductions analyzed. Considering the frequent use of appreciation resources without the backing of disciplinary literature, it can be assumed that their ideal reader shares their personal beliefs as writers. This could be explained by the limited familiarity of these student-writers with the wider ELT discourse community, due to the fact that, in the context where these introductions were written, little attention is being paid to reading, and even less so to the reading of research-related texts in the field.

Additionally, the idea of audience remains vague in the writing of pedagogical and curricular genres. Throughout their academic studies, students are generally expected to write for their teachers, without considering an audience beyond the classroom context. It is, therefore, logical, that in the writing of research reports, students continue to view their advisor as their single audience. The ideal reader constructed in these texts is consequently a teacher of their own university department, who knows and understands their context, and is generally thought to be sympathetic to the students’ own perspectives.

By limiting the potential readership to a local (or even departmental) audience, the opportunities for these student-writers to become accepted as members of the wider ELT discourse community are reduced. According to Wharton’s (1995) perspective, this implies that these students are not duly initiated as ELT professionals. A similar argument is presented by Kuloheri (2008), who calls for students of all university levels, including BA students, to be encouraged to publish as an integral part of their studies.

In order to allow students access to the wider discourse community, it is imperative for them to frequently and critically read discipline-specific research-related texts in order to learn about the current discussions and the ways in which dialogue is developed between members of the community in those texts. Besides reading, it also seems important that

students can picture their advisors as members of that community, in order to be able to initiate their own dialogue with the wider discourse community.

As Wharton (1995) states, "anyone who is involved in teacher education in Mexico has a direct responsibility for socializing new members into the emerging discourse community of the Mexican EFL profession." (p.27). One way this could be achieved is by inviting students to collaborate in their advisors' own research projects. By doing so, learning can go beyond the general aspects of writing (grammar, vocabulary, coherence, cohesion, etc.). It has the potential to enable students to actively participate in the ELT community, complying with Gee's (1996, in Moje 2010) four aspects for being accepted as a community member: knowing, doing, thinking and acting. Participation is not something that can be taught – it can only be gained through experience (Moje, 2010).

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