

Language and Stance in English 105 Papers: An Analysis of Genre, L1, and Scores

Hillary Gale, Chelsea Jordan, & Nicholas Rhea

Northern Arizona University

### Abstract

Freshmen at NAU are required to take a composition course, and they must pass this course in order to graduate. In the composition class they are asked to write multiple essays for different purposes. Therefore, students must adapt their writing to match the expected writing for the particular genre. Through corpus analysis in language differences in two essays, the Review and the Rhetorical Analysis, we have identified concrete language features which express stance that would be beneficial to teach so that students are prepared to pass composition courses. For instructors of non-native English speakers knowing the linguistic features of successful academic writing is beneficial so that instruction can be better designed to teach students how to be successful academic writers. The results from this corpus analysis highlights specific lexicogrammatical features that should be taught to emerging academic writers, especially to non-native English speakers who are unfamiliar with genre conventions in English academic writing.

### Language and Stance in English 105 Papers: An Analysis of Genre, L1, and Scores

Students, both native and non-native English speakers, at Northern Arizona University (NAU) are required to take freshman composition (English 105) as part of the university graduation requirements. Because this class is a requirement for all students, it includes students that have varying university majors and therefore students need to learn basic academic writing skills. Additionally, NAU offers many Mainstream sections of English 105 as well as sections in the Program of Intensive English (PIE) for certain non-native English speakers. The goal of the English 105 program is to give all students a foundation in academic writing and thus the writing assignments are designed to give students a wide range of academic writing experience.

In the English 105 class students complete 5 writing assignments including a Review and a Rhetorical Analysis. The Review paper requires students to write about a recent experience and evaluate the experience from a personal point of view. The Rhetorical Analysis essay requires students to critically analyze the rhetorical situation of a text using rhetorical elements such as rhetorical appeals, strategies, or patterns.

The Review and the Rhetorical Analysis essays both involve the students taking a stance on their topic; however, the Review requires more personal stance whereas the Rhetorical Analysis requires a more objective academic stance to be used. In this study, we have compared the Review and Rhetorical analysis essays and use of stance in Verb Complement Clauses (VCCs) and modals. These features were examined and compared by L1 as well as high and low scores. Results could be used to inform pedagogical decisions in all sections of English 105 classes at NAU.

### Research Questions

1. How do 105 students express stance across registers?
2. How do 105 students express stance in high scoring papers v. low scoring papers?
3. How does L1 affect language use and stance expressions in student academic writing?

### Methods

The full corpus was comprised of 116 texts which were tagged for part of speech (POS) by TagAnt. The corpus was divided into several sub-corpora according to class type (Mainstream or PIE), genre, grade received, and L1. Both the Mainstream English 105 sub-corpus and the PIE English 105 sub-corpus were divided by assignment type: the Review and the Rhetorical Analysis.

The Mainstream English 105 corpus consisted of 86 texts from two English 105 classes, with 43 each of Review and Rhetorical Analysis. The two sub-corpora were further divided into two more sub-corpora apiece based on the grade the essay received. The high scoring Rhetorical Analysis sub-corpus consisted of 22 texts, the low scoring Rhetorical Analysis sub-corpus consisted of 14 texts, the high scoring Review sub-corpus consisted of 31 texts, and the low scoring Review sub-corpus consisted of 7 texts. Papers which received a high B were not included in any of the sub-corpora, because it was unclear whether they should be considered truly high scoring or truly low scoring. 12 texts in total were eliminated.

The PIE English 105 class consisted of 30 texts, with 14 in Review and 16 in Rhetorical Analysis. Each of the genre sub-corpora were further divided by L1, so the Review was split into a corpus which consisted of 5 native Arabic speakers and a corpus which consisted of 9 native Chinese speakers, while the Rhetorical Analysis was split into a corpus of 6 native Arabic speakers and a corpus of 10 native Chinese speakers.

Once the corpora were split, they were analyzed separately using AntConc concordancing software with the concordance line feature and the n-gram feature. We used AntConc to look at different linguistic features which are known to express stance (Staples & Reppen, 2016; Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, E., 1999). The features we focused on were VCCs and modal verbs.

## Results

### Modal Verbs

In order to determine how students express stance based on L1 and genre, we analyzed modal use for the following sub-corpora: native speaking Review, native speaking Rhetorical Analysis, non-native speaking Review, and non-native speaking Rhetorical Analysis.

The most interesting findings in regard to use of modal verbs is the use of *can*, *would*, and *will*. *Can* was used with the highest frequency by non-native students in the Rhetorical Analysis. One reason for this may be that Chinese speakers used *can* with a higher frequency than the Arabic students due to possible L1 transfer, as the functions of *can* are similar in the Chinese language.

The modals *would* and *will* show an opposite distribution across L1 sub-corpora and genre sub-corpora. *Will* is seen most often in the Review essays from the non-native speakers. At first glance, there seems to be no significant differences in the way the modal verb is used except in frequency across both genre and native/non-native speakers. However, upon closer examination, while *will* is used to express the future by both native and non-native speaking students, non-native students also use *will* to narrate events in the past (e.g., “first, they will give you some important information”; “he also told us that there *will* be many types of rice”), which native speaking students do not do.

*Would* (which is seen most frequently in native-speaking Review essays) does show a noticeable difference in the way it is used between native and non-native speakers in the Review essay. Native English speakers seem to use *would* as a summarizing function in the Review (e.g., “In the end, I *would* conclude that Bun Huggers is an impressive little burger joint”; “Overall, the theme made it a wonderfully fun restaurant that I *would* recommend for all families”). Non-native students, on the other hand, use *would* as a way to describe their experience (e.g., “the waiter *would* fill my glass”). This is not to say that PIE students aren’t also using *would* as a summarizing function, but they are not using it to summarize their evaluation as frequently as Mainstream students are. The use of *would* in the Rhetorical Analysis seems to show no noticeable difference in the way it’s being used by native or non-native speakers, as both are using it to describe what the author did or what effect the author’s choices might be having on an audience.

### Verb + that Complement Clauses

In order to further examine how students express stance, we analyzed the frequency of VCCS as well as the most frequent verbs that control the clauses across genre, L1, and the different classes (PIE and Mainstream). There is a noticeable difference in frequency of use of

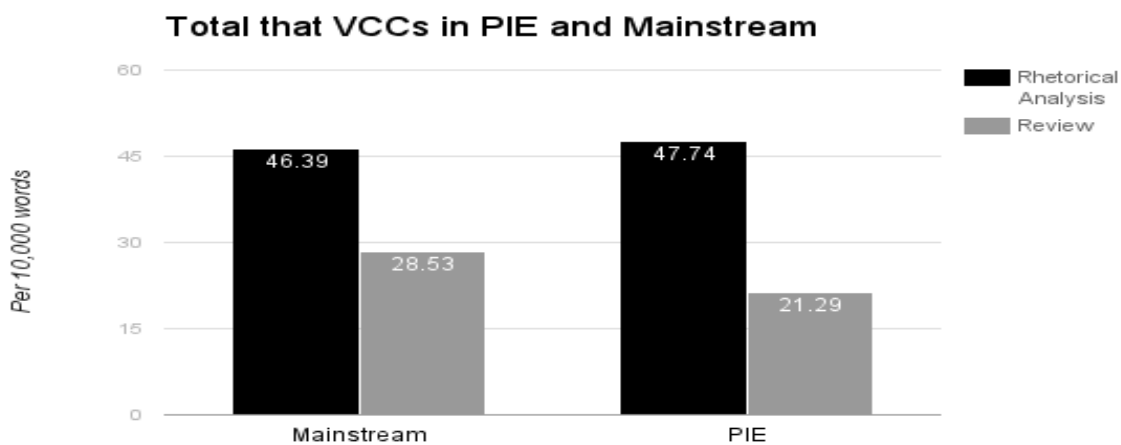


Figure 1. Total VCC use by register.

VCCs between the two genres, as the Rhetorical Analysis has a much higher use of VCCs (Figure 1). There is no significant difference in frequency of VCCs across the different classes (PIE and Mainstream). This indicates that there are differences across genre, but not across L1.

The verbs that control VCCs are different based on the genre of the papers. In the Rhetorical Analysis the verbs *show*, *state*, *prove*, and *explain* are more frequent than in the Review. Whereas, the verbs *say*, *know*, *think*, and *feel* are more frequent in the Review than in the Rhetorical Analysis. This is most likely due to the purpose of the essays. Since the purpose of the Rhetorical Analysis is to evaluate a concrete entity the verbs are more impersonal (e.g., “The second ad is meant *to show* that Donald Trump is not a viable candidate.”). The review is an evaluation of an experience or event, so the verbs collocate with more personal pronouns (e.g., “*I personally feel* that the rapping styles are different” and “*I feel* that this is a fairly reasonable price.”).

We also examined The VCCs used by students at the PIE. It was found that *think* was used with high frequency in the Review. Additionally, *think* was found to be the only stance verb that was used by both Arabic and Chinese speakers in the Review essay. It was also found that there was a larger variety of verbs used by both Arabic and Chinese speakers in the Rhetorical Analysis essay than in the Review essay with the Arabic speakers used a larger variety of verbs as the head of VCCs in both the Review and Rhetorical Analysis essays. These results could be due to the fact that the Rhetorical Analysis essay was later in the semester than the Review essay. It could also be that the Rhetorical Analysis genre leads to a higher use of VCCs.

When comparing students at the PIE to Mainstream students it was found that *infer* was only used by PIE students in the Rhetorical Analysis. *We can infer that* is used by the PIE students as a manner of summarizing previous information as well as using tying previous

information to an argument (e.g., “And since this information is all about logical statistics and facts, then *we can infer that* it is considered as logos”). In the review PIE students used less of a variety of verbs to control VCCs, heavily relying on the verb *think*. Mainstream 105 students used more verbs that were not used by PIE students such as *show*, *state*, and *prove*. These results are probably due to educational contexts. The PIE students may have been taught *infer* explicitly, while the Mainstream students have not and are instead using the language they have been taught throughout their education.

There were also differences of use of VCCs across all three L1s. There only three common verbs that controlled VCCs in both essays across the three L1s were, *believe*, *say*, and *think*. Arabic speakers used *say* a lot more than the other L1 groups. This indicates that L1 may influence what verb is used based either on transfer or language proficiency.

A noticeable difference between the use of VCCs by high and low scoring essays in both the Mainstream and PIE 105 classes was found as shown in Figure 2. This data suggests that the quality of academic English writing is correlated with the use of VCCs. Additionally, it is interesting that this finding is the same for both native and non-native speakers, so teaching students to use VCCs might be effective to teach to both English-speaking groups to help



improve their academic writing.

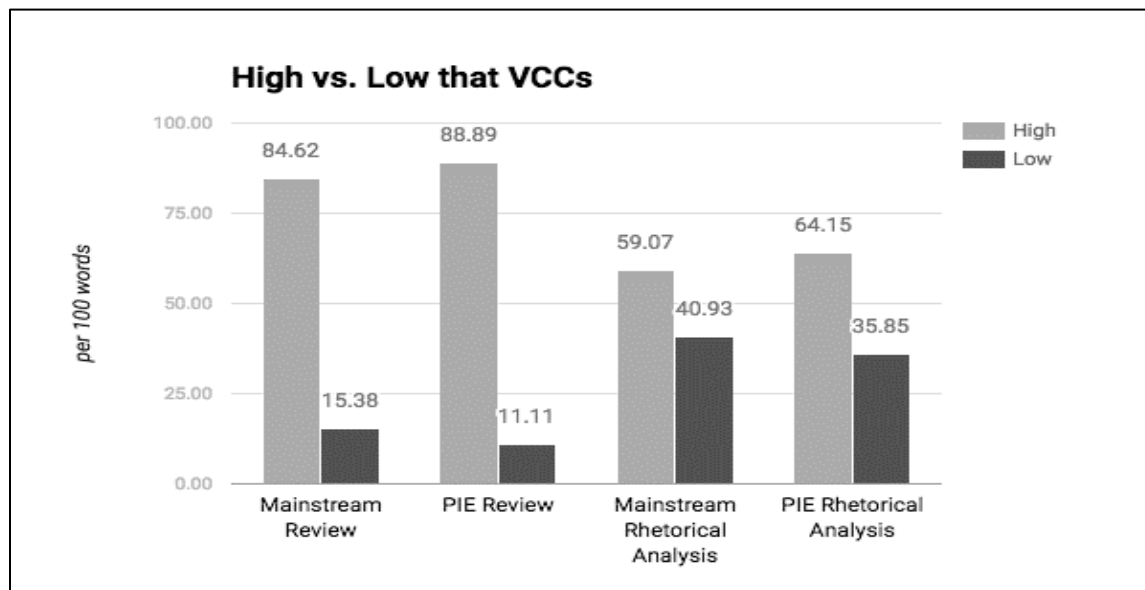


Figure 2. Use of VCC by high vs. low scores.

### Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

In conclusion, our small corpus analysis showed some interesting trends used in evaluative papers for English 105. There are more differences than similarities across genres, L1, and grade received in regard to lexical bundles and stance expressions. The trends found can be used in future English 105 classes to teach students not only the features of a well-written essay but also the features of good academic writing.

Knowing and understanding the features of a what constitutes a successful essay will help composition teachers know what to include in lesson plans and materials development. Instructors of English 105 in the PIE will be able to provide specific examples of language seen in successful papers. Additionally, by comparing the papers across L1s, teachers will be able to supplement students' language deficiencies with specific lessons tailored to their needs so that students are continuing to develop towards a more native-like lexicogrammatical performance.

Teachers will also be able to teach students to identify and use specific features of student academic writing. This will in turn help PIE students gain important meta-knowledge about language and writing that they can use in their future writing projects in mainstream university classes. With the results from this small corpus analysis future PIE English 105 instructors will be able to better teach students to adapt their writing to different academic genres (in this case the Review and Rhetorical Analysis essays) in order to be successful academic writers.

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