Corpus-Informed Materials Development for Teaching Stance in ESL Writing

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Abstract

This study explores how stance is expressed in ESL learners' and native speaker students' argumentative essays by comparing small-sized NNS (none native speaker) learner corpora and NS (native speaker) corpora. Then, corpus-informed materials were development based on the findings to help L2 writers compose in a more academic fashion when they express authorial stance. Total 23 stance expressions were investigated: nine modal verbs, four stance adverbs, and ten stance lexical verbs. The result of the corpus analysis showed that the ESL learners tend to overuse certain modal verbs and lexical verbs to express their authorial stance: *can, will, should, think + that* clause*, and believe + that* clause. This result contrasts to Time Magazine Corpus search results that showed combinations of various stance expressions used together. The corpus-informed materials have nine exercises in total, including awareness raising activities, exercises for recognition and deeper understanding of stance expressions, and finally reformulation and rewriting tasks. Some pedagogical implications were suggested to develop and use corpus-informed materials language classrooms.

Background

L2 writers tend to use limited number of options to express authorial stance-taking (e.g. overusing modal verbs rather than lexical verbs), use more boosters than hedges, thus having difficulties to fine tune their voice in expressing appropriate stance. This lack of competence to manipulate a repertoire of stance devices may affect the evaluation of the ESL learners' academic competence, ultimately resulting in a failure to get academic or professional opportunities. Therefore, the corpus-informed materials developed in this project are expected to help L2 learners write in a more academic fashion.

Research Questions

- How differently is stance expressed in ESL learners' and native speaker students' argumentative essays?
- What kind of classroom materials can be made to promote L2 writers' appropriate stance making, using learner corpora and online corpora?

Methods

Participants and Corpora

The NNS learner corpus for this study was built up from the argumentative/persuasive essays of the students in PIE level 4. There were 30 students, mostly Arabic native speakers and a few Chinese native speakers, aged from 17 to 25.

The size of the NNS learner corpus is 12, 451 words from 45 essays, with each essay of 250 to 300 words. The argumentative essays are about controversial social issues related with animals, such as animal testing and hunting regulations in Arizona. Students were to support one position on the given issue and they were not explicitly taught lexico-grammatical features to express stance. The NS corpus is also from the persuasive/argumentative essays written by

American students aged from 17 to 19, taking freshman composition classes (e.g. ENG 105) at the same university. The size of NS corpus is 51,902 words out of 45 essays, with each essay having 1,100 to 1,400 words. Students are from various academic disciplines and the topics of the essays vary. Although the length and topics of the argumentative essays in NNS and NS corpora are different, they can be still considered comparable because the general similarity of genre and text types proposes little difference in the language requirements of the tasks.

Procedures

First, The NNS and NS learner corpora were built up and analyzed, using AntConc 3.2.4w, a concordance software. Out of the list of common lexico-grammatical features used for the stance analyses by Biber (2006b), 23 lexico-grammatical stance features were examined, including nine modal verbs, four stance adverbs, and ten stance verbs + *that* complement clauses. The raw frequency of these stance expressions were counted, normalized (per essay and per 500 words), and compared between the NNS and NS corpora to find the difference in using stance expressions. In case of the stance verbs + *that* complement clauses, concordance lines for each stance verb were carefully examined, and only those that were followed by complement *that* clauses, with or without the complementizer *that*, were counted. The reason for this decision is that stance words especially with *that*-complement clauses can be most clearly identified because the stance expressed is grammatically connected to a proposition whereas it is more challenging to identify stance words that are not as explicitly expressed grammatically (Gray & Biber, 2012).

Next, corpus-informed materials were development based on the results of corpus research. To begin with, five stance features were selected that L2 learners overused most: *can, will, should, think + that* clause*, and believe + that* clause. Then, these stance expressions were investigated in Time magazine corpus and COCA academic section to be compared with ESL

learners' uses. Using concordance, some salient patterns of stance expressions by expert writers were found out, and this information was incorporated in class materials development.

Results

Corpus Analysis

Total 23 stance expressions were investigated: nine modal verbs, four stance adverbs, and ten stance lexical verbs. The result of the corpus analysis showed that the ESL learners tend to overuse certain modal verbs and lexical verbs to express their authorial stance. The table below shows the use of stance features by ESL Students and NS novice writers. We can easily notice that ESL learners are overly dependent on five stance features: *can, will, should, think + that clause,* and *believe + that clause*. This result is in lines with the findings by Biber (2006b) that modal verbs are the most frequent, followed by stance complement clauses and then by stance adverbs in all registers (chapter 5).

Furthermore, the table shows that L2 writers tend to use more boosters such as, *always*, than hedging expressions like *probably*. *Maybe* is also a hedging expression but it should be taken into consideration that a single author used the expression *maybe* four times in the same essay. Hedging expression like *possibly* (9 counts)*, perhaps* (2)*, and roughly* (2) appeared in native speaker corpus, although seldom used except *possibly*, but none of them appeared in our ESL learner corpus. ESL writers' use of modal verbs also showed their preference for boosters; modal verbs such as *can, will,* and *should* may generally be thought to deliver stronger modality, than modals like *could, may, might,* and *would,* which seem to deliver moderate stance.

Table 1

Use of Stance Features by ESL Students and NS Novice Writers

	stance features	ESL raw frequency	ESL frequency (per 500 words)	ESL frequency (per essay)	NS raw frequency	NS frequency (per 500 words)	NS frequency (per essay)
1	**can**	132	5.29	2.93	144	1.39	3.20
2	**could**	8	0.32	0.18	45	0.43	1.00
3	**may**	4	0.16	0.09	74	0.71	1.64
4	**might**	6	0.24	0.13	21	0.20	0.47
5	**must**	8	0.32	0.18	26	0.25	0.58
6	**should**	92	3.69	2.04	113	1.09	2.51
7	**have to**	14	0.56	0.31	34	0.33	0.76
8	**will**	96	3.85	2.13	140	1.35	3.11
9	**would**	4	0.16	0.09	227	2.17	5.04
10	**certainly**	1	0.04	0.02	3	0.03	0.07
11	**always**	7	0.28	0.16	19	0.18	0.42
12	**probably**	0	0.00	0.00	2	0.02	0.04
13	**maybe**	9	0.36	0.20	3	0.03	0.07
14	**say**	6	0.24	0.13	23	0.22	0.51
15	**know**	14	0.56	0.31	6	0.06	0.13
16	**explain**	1	0.04	0.02	1	0.01	0.02
17	**see**	1	0.04	0.02	8	0.08	0.18
18	**suggest**	1	0.04	0.02	8	0.08	0.18
19	**understand**	1	0.04	0.02	1	0.01	0.02
20	**believe**	35	1.40	0.78	56	0.54	1.24
21	**think**	44	1.76	0.98	18	0.17	0.40
22	**agree**	1	0.04	0.02	4	0.04	0.09
23	**imagine**	1	0.04	0.02	2	0.02	0.04

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

Extensive research showed that learners of English tend to use only a small number of stance expressions and use more boosters than hedges, having problems to fine tune their voice when they express their point-of-views. Also, the result of this study showed that PIE learners are overly dependent on a handful of expressions to make authorial stance. Therefore, the corpus-informed materials developed in this project may help L2 learners in PIE write in a more academic fashion, using a variety of stance expressions.