
**WRITING WITH ATTITUDE: A REVIEW OF A CORPUS-DRIVEN ANALYSIS OF
STANCE EXPRESSION IN LEARNER AND PROFESSIONAL DENTISTRY
RESEARCH REPORTS**

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ABSTRACT: *It is universally acknowledged that academia requires certain professional standards when it comes to writing, and because not all disciplines focus on teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP), some writing pieces do not make sense or create a meaningful purpose for the readers. Medical students, for instance, are a good example of this stated argument, as most of them often lack the proper skills required for academic writing. It is of paramount importance to know how to write proper, academic English since academic writing is mainly offered as a pre-requisite or a ticket to any employment, promotion and/or enculturation to the profession. Little attention has been given to medical research reports as well as stance-making and writing with attitude in the medical prose. Luckily, this paper aims at reviewing an article mainly focusing on the dentistry discipline, and how dentistry undergraduates often struggle whenever it comes to writing in this research genre. The article being reviewed is by Peter Crosthwaite, Lisa Cheung, and Feng (Kevin) Jiang entitled, "Writing with attitude: Stance expression in learner and professional dentistry research reports." It has been published in the Journal of English for Specific Purposes by Elsevier publications, and was officially available online on March 4th, 2017. Using a corpus-driven approach, this study highlights how both undergraduate students of dentistry and professional practitioners epistemologically and rhetorically display the findings of their written reports and how the meta-discourse used for these functions emphasizes students' awareness and engagement with disciplinary specificity of writing in dentistry. It explores how writers express themselves and their professional thoughts in their research reports. Such expressions include stance in academic writing, evidentiality, attitude, and presence, as well as more focus on enculturation into the profession; as in English in the dentistry discipline.*

KEYWORDS: corpus linguistics, stance expressions, learner corpus, English for specific purposes, dentistry, contrastive interlanguage analysis, review paper

INTRODUCTION

Personally, I find this topic very interesting to investigate on a wide scale, and very relevant to what most of the medical students face while writing, based on firsthand experience, since I teach dental students and witness some bizarre errors and mistakes in the academic papers they turn in for grading. Based on the need to cross-examine how dentistry students handle the stance-making practice within the discipline compared with professional practitioner, the present study under review assembles its sample of participants on dentistry undergraduates at a university in Hong Kong. Noting that dentistry is a practical and professional field that is tied closely with problem-based learning (PBL), it shows the need for skilled communicators using proper structures. Given

this information, inspecting learner and professional writers' stance expression in dentistry research reports would determine the degree of a discipline-related English course in the process of learner enculturation into the dentistry field, as shown by "the frequency and wording of the stance features present" (Crosthwaite et al., 2017). Some research questions were posed, as follows:

- 1) How do professional and learner writers manage the presentation of *stance* in their respective dentistry research reports?
- 2) To what extent do student writers of PBL research final-year dentistry reports demonstrate evidence of enculturation into the dentistry profession, as evidenced by their use of stance features when compared against that of professionally written research papers?
- 3) What are the implications for pedagogy regarding the outcome of the analysis of stance features across learner PBL research reports and those of professionally-written research papers?

The article adopts a corpus-based approach to learner and professional stance analysis of electronic texts. The authors compiled a collection of searchable, electronic texts to be analyzed for frequency, lexical, and morpho-syntactic features, which could be used as components or strands of *stance* under investigation. To compare learner and professionally written corpora, the authors used the Contrastive Inter-language Analysis (CIA) as their methodology to discover the undiscovered yet. Then, they shifted to the professional dentistry corpus, which is a 500, 000-word corpus of scholarly, academic writing compiling recent research articles in a very specific, prominent journal – *Community Dental Health*.

The findings of the study were mainly presented as a cross-corpus comparison since more than one corpus was used in the research design. Theoretically, the results showed that professional practitioners tend to put more emphasis on the limitations of their studies, unlike the learner writers who tend to focus on the recommendations of their studies for further researches. It was also noted that the recommendations sections of texts in the learner corpus are almost three times longer than those of the professional corpus. Practically, the findings were all shown in the form of tables and figures as a cross-corpus comparison, including four figures and 11 tables. In short, based on the figures and tables displayed in the original article under review, all the results are specifically classified. An overall interesting, common finding that grabbed my attention is that the frequency difference in all -- hedges, boosters, self-mentions, and attitude markers -- between the learner and professional reports is *by section*. The detailed findings of each feature are showcased in each figure or table, since it was all fieldwork and no theoretical explanation would do it justice.

The study aimed to explore three research questions to contribute to the literature. Regarding RQ1 (how do professional and learner writers manage the presentation of stance in their respective dentistry research reports?), the results of the corpus analysis have shown that learner writers very frequently hedge and use boosters to support their claims, seeming heedful, attentive, and confident when considering certain claims by themselves or by others. In contrast, professional writers do not use such huge amount of hedges and boosters, most probably because they already practice writing and are *already* professionals at what they do. Regarding RQ2 (to what extent do student writers of PBL research final-year dentistry reports demonstrate evidence of enculturation

into the dentistry profession, as evidenced by their use of stance features when compared against that of professionally written research papers?), the results of the corpus analysis have demonstrated that the learner writers are at a certain phase of their inter-language development, when compared to the professional writers, who use a narrower set of attitude markers, boosters, hedges, and self-mentions. Regarding RQ3 (what are the implications for pedagogy regarding the outcome of the analysis of stance features across learner PBL research reports and those of professionally-written research papers?), the results recommend exposing learner writers to professional texts, such as those found in the professional corpus, and letting them check the stance attitude which is used. Thus, learner writers would have the chance to write with the “right” attitude, diminishing the gap between their style of writing and that of the professionals. In short, the results of this study showed that the use of stance markers in the professional corpus would be the main focus of the English-in-the-Discipline (ED) course at the university in the next academic year. Utilizing such results pedagogically, the tasks of the classroom would be mostly based on multiple-choice questions, gap-filling practice, quizzes, etc. to be uploaded to the course’s online platform. Yet, a titanic amount of work remains to be done regarding enculturating learners to the profession before they graduate and become professionals.

Through reading the article and reviewing it, the research design was applicable to me since the methodology is familiar to me because of the class materials. Since my professional career includes teaching dentistry students firsthand, I checked the results demonstrated by this study to be more careful in the classroom and notice my own students’ frequencies of stance markers. I used the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to validate the results seen in the tables; COCA supported the findings and confirmed that dental students need to be more careful when it comes to academic writing and using stance expressions. Moreover, the results confirmed the importance of corpus-driven analysis in discourse studies, pedagogy, and teaching methodologies. Added to that, this study could relate to Hyland’s (2000) article entitled “Hedges, Boosters and Lexical Invisibility: Noticing Modifiers in Academic Texts” that was previously discussed in class. The findings of this study have demonstrated the differences between the two writer groups and how they each use the stance markers to express themselves in writing. On a more personal note, I re-read all my students’ submitted work and started giving more attention to the stance markers they have used so far, then used the search syntax on COCA to search for certain hedges and self-mentions from Hyland’s article to note the frequency to compare the American users with Egyptian users. I only did this to enhance my understanding for my professional career.

Concluding this review, I, as a reader and a critic, am satisfied with the professionalism of the three authors. The entire study was well-organized and followed a proper line of thought so that the readers do not get confused or lost while scrolling up and down for all the tables and figures. The study was highly focused on a certain purpose and directed the three research questions with a triangulation of different corpora to generate reliable findings. However, I have found two limitations while critiquing this study. The first is a lack in the meta-data about the sample of participants. Their demographic information such as age/gender, etc., English test scores, dentistry modules scores, and what exactly is being studied could have enhanced the study’s findings. The second is the choice of only *one* journal of professional research reports. Using more journals could have resulted in even more reliable findings. On that note, the acknowledgement of such

limitations at the very end of the article is an added plus to the research overall. With this in mind, collecting data for future research would be more reliable if researchers triangulate more designs into the process of enculturation into the profession; therefore, setting a path to a criterion-referenced set of guidelines encompassing what learners *need* to achieve before graduating and facing their professional working life.

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