# Writer visibility in EFL learner academic writing: A corpus-based study

***James McCrostie***
***Daito Bunka University***

## *Abstract*

*This study examines the degree of writer/reader visibility in argumentative academic essays written by university-level Japanese learners. Previous studies by Petch-Tyson (1998) and Cobb (2003) concluded that non-native English speaker writing contains far more personal involvement than equivalent native English speaker writing and tends to resemble spoken language as a result. Echoing the findings of these previous studies, this study's findings show that academic essays written by Japanese learners contain far more writer/reader visibility features than similar native English speaker writing. In addition to these quantitative differences are several important qualitative differences that distinguish writer visibility in academic writing produced by native and non-native English speakers.*

## *1 Introduction*

Until relatively recently, few researchers demonstrated much interest in collecting or studying corpora of English learner language output. However, investigations into English learner corpora began to proliferate towards the end of the 1980's (Granger 2004). Within the last decade, many researchers have enthusiastically built and begun investigating learner corpora. The seminal 1998 monograph edited by Sylviane Granger, entitled *Learner English on computer*, helped establish contrastive interlanguage analysis as an accepted methodology for studying learner corpora. Corpora based comparisons of writing produced by different groups of English learners as well as by native English speakers help reveal which language features are over and underused by different groups of English learners. For those researchers and teachers interested in gaining more knowledge about writing produced by English learners, contrastive interlanguage analysis has become an important field of study.

Proponents of computer-based corpora research offer ease of replication as one of the methods' advantages. The authors of most of the research included in Granger's *Learner English on computer* intended their studies to be introductory, glimpses into the types of questions to ask of learner corpora and the answers one might expect to receive. For example, Petch-Tyson (1998: 117) cautioned that her study of writer/reader visibility in academic writing was "preliminary" and that "much research remains to be done and most of the questions remain unanswered". However, such qualifications seem to have been overlooked by subsequent authors. One recently published book (Hunston 2003), reviewing the field of corpus linguistics, contains a section entitled 'The evidence of learner corpora'. In it, the author discusses the findings contained in Granger's book, including the essay by Petch-Tyson, without any qualifying or limiting statements.

Even today, gaps remain in our understanding of authorial presence in academic writing produced by EFL and ESL learners. In particular, our knowledge of writer/reader visibility contained within academic writing by intermediate level students remains inadequate. While there have been a number of investigations into self-mention and personal pronoun use in published academic essays (see Hyland 1999, 2000, 2001; Harwood 2005), few have studied writer presence in academic writing by non-native English speakers and fewer still that have examined writing produced by learners below the high-advanced level.

This study aims to examine the degree of writer presence in English academic essays written by a group of Japanese EFL learners in order to replicate Petch-Tyson's (1998) study and re-evaluate her hypothesis that learner writing resembles speech written down. The primary objective of this study is to establish the degree of writer/reader involvement in English academic essays written by university-level Japanese writers and to determine how the degree and nature of this involvement compares with learners of other language backgrounds as well as in unpublished essays written by native English speaking university undergraduates.

## *2 Previous research*

In her article 'Writer/reader visibility in EFL written discourse' Petch-Tyson (1998) examined the tendency for academic essays written by even advanced, university level English learners to resemble talk written down. Petch-Tyson explored the degree of writer/reader visibility in argument essays written by four different L1 learner groups as well as native English-speaking university students. Previous research into the defining characteristics of spoken and written

discourse provided the background to Petch-Tyson's work (Olson 1977; Chafe 1982; Tannen 1982).

A central theme of this previous research is the idea that speakers communicate directly with their audience, whereas authors do not enjoy the same luxury, and as a result written texts need to be clearer and more intelligible to readers, who are disconnected in terms of place and time from the original context of writing (Chafe, 1982). According to Tannen (1982: 3, cited in Petch-Tyson 1998: 107) "the degree to which interpersonal involvement or message content carries the signalling load" helps distinguish between spoken and written language. Interpersonal involvement carries the signalling load in spoken language, whereas message content carries the load in written language. Of course, in real conversations and in real essays, the signalling load is rarely communicated purely by interpersonal involvement or message content. Nevertheless, English academic writing typically emphasizes the topic and evidence while downplaying the presence of the writer and reader.

Petch-Tyson (1998) examined the presence of features signalling writer/reader visibility most accessible by computer software, including first and second personal pronouns and references to the situation of writing or reading, in argument essays written by American native English speakers as well as French, Dutch, Swedish, and Finnish English learners. Petch-Tyson found that the four groups of non-native English speakers use features of writer/reader visibility two to four times the rate as native speakers. Learners especially overused first and second person pronouns in their writing.

More recently, a Canadian researcher's study of English essays written by Quebec French learners partly supported Petch-Tyson's findings (Cobb 2003). In a study that replicated some of the early contrastive interlanguage research contained in Granger (1998), Cobb covered some of the same ground as Petch-Tyson. Although, for reasons not fully explained, Cobb (2003) only examined the use of pronouns in learner writing. Cobb examined the number of first and second person pronouns in a corpus of English essays written by Quebec French learners and found that they make up 6.47 per cent of the words in the corpus. Since first and second person pronouns make up 0.89 per cent of the words in the native English speaker corpus and 2.04 per cent in the European French learner corpus examined in Petch-Tyson's (1998) study, it is obvious that Quebec French learners' writing contains an even higher degree of interpersonal involvement than that of many European English learners.

Other authors have investigated the use of personal pronouns and other features of self-mention in academic writing written by native English speakers. Hyland (1999, 2000, 2001) has researched and written extensively on the topic

of personal pronouns and self-mention in research essays. However, in all his studies only published work by established academics received examination. Hyland (1999: 118) argues that authors publishing in both the hard and social science disciplines utilize personal pronouns for three main purposes: to organize their arguments and essays, to discuss their research activities, and to show their position towards conclusions and theoretical viewpoints. One important difference between the hard and social sciences is that in the social sciences personal pronouns tend to collocate with words such as *argue* or *think* to discuss points of view on the subject whereas in engineering and science papers personal pronouns tend to describe experimental activities (Hyland 1999: 119).

In a second study of self-mention in academic articles Hyland (2001) examined 240 research articles from eight disciplines. He argues that self-mention proves common in academic writing and is used by academic authors to help "construct an intelligent, credible, and engaging colleague, by presenting an authorial self firmly established in the norms of the discipline and reflecting appropriate degree of confidence and authority" (2001: 216). The frequency of self-mention in published research articles varied according to discipline but proved common in both the hard and social sciences where academics must strive to craft a "credible authorial identity" (2001: 219).

Building on Hyland's findings, Harwood (2005) focused the attentions of his research on the self-promotional function of the personal pronouns *I* and *we* in published academic writing. Harwood examined ten articles from leading journals representing four different disciplines, giving a total of forty articles. He found that personal pronouns served a number of purposes but that, ultimately, they served as way for the author to promote themselves. Unfortunately, the lack of any meaningful quantitative analysis in Harwood's study makes it difficult to gauge what level of personal pronoun use remains acceptable and at what point it becomes unacceptable. It also remains impossible to compare the frequency of personal pronoun use by Harwood's English speaking academics with any other group of writers.

Apart from Petch-Tyson (1998) and Cobb (2003), few studies have examined unpublished, student academic writing, whether they are native or non-native speakers of English. One study by Tang and John (1999) examined the use of first person pronouns in 1,000-word academic essays written by 27 first-year Singaporean university students. The authors identified nearly identical roles for the use of personal pronouns as Hyland (1999, 2001) and Harwood (2005), although they used slightly different labels. All the students employed first person pronouns a total of 92 times in the 27 essays, though a single student's essay accounted for 16 of the pronouns. The most common role for pro-

nouns in these students' writing turned out to be using *we* or *us* as a label for a larger group of people, as in the example, "It resulted in the English we know today" (Tang and John 1999: S27). However, a single student's essay accounted for a third of pronouns used in this manner. Therefore, using pronouns to frame an essay and guide readers through the argument should be considered the more typical use of pronouns. Finally, unlike the published research essays examined by Hyland (2001), these students rarely used personal pronouns to give an opinion or to indicate the origin of new ideas (Tang and John 1999: S28).

Chang and Swales (1999) published one of the only studies to examine attitudes of non-native English speakers towards recent trends for scholars to use more informal features in academic writing. The authors of the study interviewed 37 non-native English speaking graduate students studying at English universities (Chang and Swales 1999). Even at their advanced level, most of the graduate students felt uncomfortable using informal features such as first person pronouns, viewing them as reserved for more senior scholars. Many of these graduate students also expressed the view that the increased use of informal features actually makes academic writing more difficult, as successfully mixing formal and informal features proves more demanding than a strictly formal style (Chang and Swales 1999).

Despite the number of studies into the use of personal pronouns and other writer visibility features in published and unpublished academic writing, investigations into the actual use of these features by non-native speakers remain incomplete. Similarly, more work needs to be done to compare unpublished academic essays written by native and non-native English speakers. Direct comparisons of published academic articles with non-native (and perhaps even native) English student writing are unfair. The authors published in academic journals might be best viewed as highly skilled Formula-1 racecar drivers and few people prove capable of handling such sophisticated and impractical vehicles. Highly advanced non-native English writers, such as graduate students writing theses in English, may feel comfortable driving the family sedan but not yet confident enough to get behind the wheel of a high performance sports car. Meanwhile, beginning and intermediate non-native English writers are drivers who just received their learner permits and in some cases do not see the point in learning how to drive at all.

## *3 Methodology*

The learner corpus analyzed in this study consists of 333 argument essays written by English majors at Kanda University of International Studies, Japan to ful-

fill course requirements (See Table 1 for a breakdown of the corpus). In order to collect the essays for research purposes, students received instructions from their teacher to e-mail copies of their writing assignments to an e-mail address set up to receive essays for this study.

*Table 1:* Breakdown of the Kanda Corpus

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **1st Year Students** | 197 essays | 112,220 words |
| **2nd Year Students** | 136 essays | 82,194 words |
| **Total** | 333 essays | 191,574 words |

First-year students wrote a total of 197 argument essays and the length of these essays ranges from 300 to 1,200 words; the number of words in the corpus of first-year student writing totals 112,220. Second-year students wrote 136 papers ranging from short essays, around 400 words to longer research papers of about 2,000 words; the number of words in the corpus of second-year student writing totals 82,194.

Students wrote about a plethora of topics but all the essays share some common characteristics. All the essays were written on analogous non-technical, argumentative topics that let students give their opinions or argue for or against a position. The essays making up the International Corpus of Learner English examined by Petch-Tyson (1998) and the corpus of student writing studied in Cobb (2003) cover similar non-technical and argumentative topics, making it possible to compare the Kanda University student essays with the student essays studied in Petch-Tyson (1998) and Cobb (2003). In order to compare the writing by this study's Japanese learners with the writing by European and North American learners from previous studies, the software WordSmith Tools was used to create a list of the same writer/reader visibility features examined in Petch-Tyson's (1998) study.

Short-term contracts for lecturers working at Kanda University of International Studies made it impossible to collect any longitudinal data on the learners. However, corpus studies often treat cross-sectional data as sequential even if the same subjects did not produce them. Such traditions were followed in this study.

## *4 Writing courses at Kanda University of International Studies*

At Kanda University of International Studies, students study two required writing courses: Basic Writing and Advanced Writing. All first-year students must take and pass Basic Writing with the goal of the course being to teach students

the fundamentals of academic essay writing. In the first semester, students are taught basic paragraph structure and in the second semester how to write five-paragraph essays with an introduction and thesis statement, body paragraphs with transitions and detailed support, and a conclusion. In their second year, students must take Advanced Writing, and are taught how to write research essays with references and citations. After the second year, there are no required writing courses at Kanda University and, overwhelmingly preoccupied with job hunting, very few third or fourth-year students enrol in courses with essay requirements.

Before examining this study's results, the term *advanced learners* requires clarification. Typically, descriptions of student proficiency for learner corpora studies tend to be vague and focus on descriptions of institutional status (for example, third-year undergraduate English majors) rather than the results of standardised or specific research-designed tests (Granger 2004). According to Petch-Tyson (1998) and the other authors published in Granger (1998), advanced learners are simply those students enrolled in the upper years of university. While relying on such descriptions remains the established practice in the field, it sometimes makes drawing firm conclusions from contrastive interlanguage analysis studies more difficult.

Of course, this use of the label *advanced* does little to inform readers as to learners' true English language and composition proficiency. For example, the Japanese university learners examined in the present study fall only one academic year short of the advanced label used in Granger (1998). However, the overwhelming majority of this study's Japanese learners have never received any instruction in English writing (academic or otherwise) or even any academic writing training in their native Japanese. Based on their performance on the university's in-house placement test, the students can be generally described as being at a false beginner to upper intermediate level. Kanda University administrators use an in-house produced English proficiency test to group students into classes according to their English ability at the beginning of each school year. The subjects in this study were selected from the intermediate level first-year classes and intermediate level second-year classes. While the learners are advanced in the sense that they are motivated English majors who have studied English for more than six years, their English level can typically be described as intermediate or upper intermediate but with most remaining relative novices in terms of their writing experience.

## 5 Results

An analysis of the 333 essays written by Japanese university students shows both similarities and differences to Petch-Tyson's (1998) findings (see Table 2). In order to make comparisons easier, Table 2 also includes the results for the American, Swedish (the group with the highest number of writer/reader visibility features), and French (the group with the lowest number of writer/reader visibility features) writers from Petch-Tyson's (1998) study. The results demonstrate that Japanese learners' essays, like the European learners in Petch-Tyson (1998), contain a very high degree of writer/reader visibility.

A breakdown of the data into first and second-year writing reveals more nuanced results than those discussed in Petch-Tyson (1998) and Cobb (2003). These data indicate a substantial improvement between first and second-year student writing. First-year students' writing contains 2,370 writer/reader visibility features per 50,000 words; about four times the number of features in native English speaker university student essays. This figure is comparable to the Swedish learners, the group with the highest number of writer/reader visibility features (2,265 per 50,000 words) in Petch-Tyson's (1998) study. However, by their second year, Kanda University students use far fewer writer/reader visibility features at 1,345 features per 50,000 words. While still at levels nearly twice as those present in native English speakers' writing, the figures fell to less than the French learners in Petch-Tyson's study, the group with the fewest number of writer/reader visibility features at 1,447 features per 50,000 words.

*Table 2:* Analysis of writer/reader visibility features

| **Feature** | **Japanese 1st Year** | **Japanese 2nd Year** | **Swedish** | **French** | **American** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total word count | 112,220 | 82,194 | 50,872 | 58,068 | 53,990 |
| **1st person singular pronouns** | 1833 | 805 | 448 | 367 | 167 |
| I, me, my, mine | | | | | |
| **1st person plural pronouns** | 2080 | 782 | 1,358 | 775 | 242 |
| *we, us, our, ours* | | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2nd person pronouns** | 681 | 310 | 227 | 257 | 76 |
| *you, your, yours* | | | | | |
| Total first/second | 4594 | 1897 | 2033 | 1396 | 485 |
| Person pronouns | | | | | |
| Total first/second | 2045 | 1155 | 1998 | 1202 | 449 |
| Person pronouns | | | | | |
| per 50,000 words | | | | | |
| **Fuzziness words** | | | | | |
| *kind/sort of* | 59 | 43 | 34 | 54 | 11 |
| *and so on, etc.* | 100 | 41 | 31 | 27 | 2 |
| **Emphatic particles** | | | | | |
| *just* | 151 | 65 | 54 | 48 | 66 |
| *really* | 291 | 82 | 31 | 28 | 31 |
| **Reference to situation of reading/writing** | | | | | |
| *here* | 5 | 11 | 43 | 20 | 17 |
| *now* | 60 | 23 | 62 | 100 | 41 |
| *this essay* | 63 | 45 | 17 | 7 | 2 |
| TOTAL features | 5323 | 2207 | 2305 | 1680 | 655 |
| TOTAL features per 50,000 words | 2370 | 1345 | 2265 | 1447 | 607 |

An examination of the use of first and second person pronouns in Japanese writing also shows the substantial reduction in use from first to second year. Visible pronominal references to the writer or reader make up 4.09% of the words in first-year student writing but fell to 2.31% in second-year student writing. This is still much higher than native English speaker writing but it remains a dramatic drop.

In addition to the overuse of pronouns the Japanese learners, especially the first-year students, dramatically overused vague expressions, such as *and so on* as well as emphatic particles, such as *just* and *really.* The extensive use of the expression *and so on* can be attributed to first language interference, as it is the literal translation of the Japanese word *nado*; a word extremely common in writ-

ten Japanese (though not in Japanese academic writing). The overuse of the emphatic words *just* and *really* is probably due to a lack of proper academic vocabulary required to emphasis a point.

## *6 Discussion of results*

Writing by novice English learners typically contains a high degree of oral features and personal involvement, especially the first-person voice (Milton 1999: 232). The essays examined here help show that this remains true even for learners at more intermediate levels. The results described above indicate that for these Japanese learners interpersonal involvement rather than message content carries most of the signalling load. When compared to the European learners in Petch-Tyson's (1998) study, the Japanese essays prove to similarly resemble speech written down. However, these Japanese essays also show the lack of knowledge of English academic writing conventions held by the learners.

While all the Japanese learners' writing contains much more writer/reader visibility features, and in particular more first and second person pronouns, than native English speaker writing, the effects of specific instruction seem to be positive when it comes to helping students conform to English academic writing conventions. In the second semester of the first year, all students at Kanda University of International Studies receive instruction in English academic writing discourse and explicit instructions to reduce the use of first person pronouns in academic writing, instruction that continues during the second year.

The nature of the writing assignment also plays a large role in increasing or decreasing the visibility of the student author. At Kanda University of International Studies, teachers require second-year students to write research essays. This forces learners to provide support for their arguments that is more substantial than mere personal opinion and emotion. The requirement to provide actual evidence to back up claims, instead of simply relying on personal conviction, undoubtedly helps to lower the number of writer/reader visibility features and especially first and second person pronouns in student writing.

The type of writing task appears to influence the amount of writer presence in academic writing produced by English learners in another way. The number of first and second person pronouns contained in the writing by Quebecois English learners far exceeded the number found in European or Japanese learner writing. Cobb (2003) found that first and second person pronouns made up over 6% of the words in the corpus. A per cent far higher than the 2.04% of the words in the corpus of European French writing (Petch-Tyson 1998) or the 2.31%

found in this study's second-year Japanese learners. However, the corpora of European learners from Petch-Tyson's (1998) study and this study's Japanese learners contained essays produced for class assignments. In contrast, learners wrote the essays contained in Cobb's (2003) corpus as part of a university entrance exam. It appears that the nature of essay exams as well as time constraints play a considerable role in increasing the number of personal pronouns used by English learners.

Of course, a single set of conventions for all English academic writing does not exist. What professors accept or disapprove of in academic writing depends largely on whether they are employed by science, arts, or social science faculties. Even then, departmental differences remain rife; customs perfectly acceptable to an applied linguistics professor would bring a pained frown to the face of a history professor. However, one recent trend has been towards an increase in the use of personal pronouns, self-mention, and other informal features in nearly every academic discipline, a fact reflected in many style manuals published after the 1980's (Chang and Swales 1999: 149; Hyland 2001: 210).

Nevertheless, many instructors still advise undergraduate authors to resist desires to exert the same authority as professors holding doctorates (Chang and Swales 1999). The fact that Singaporean students rarely used personal pronouns to state an opinion helps show that what is acceptable for Doctors of Philosophy with publishing experience is not always the same for undergraduates (Tang and John 1999). Furthermore, personal pronouns remain associated with informal speech, especially when written by non-native English speakers (Chang and Swales 1999; Milton 1999). As a result, the degree of acceptable writer/reader visibility features in essays written by novice and intermediate level EFL learners cannot be assumed to be the same as that in published essays.

In addition to the quantitative differences in writer/reader visibility found in native and non-native English speaker writing, there are several qualitative differences. For example, Petch-Tyson (1998) found both quantitative and qualitative differences in use of the first pronoun *I*. Petch-Tyson found that not only do non-native English writers use *I* far more often than native English writers but also that they normally use it to discuss either the writer within the essay or to express what they think or want to say. In contrast, native English speaking university students used *I* infrequently, and when they did, it occurred with past tense verbs to recount personal experiences included to support the writer's argument (Petch-Tyson 1998: 113-114).

The use of the word *I* in writing by the Japanese learners examined in the present study closely resembles the usage of *I* by the learners in Petch-Tyson's study. The Japanese learners overwhelmingly use *I* to express what they think.

In fact, *think* proved to be the most common collocate with *I* by a very wide margin in both first and second-year writing. Tables 3 and 4 illustrate examples of concordance lines using the word *I* from first and second-year student essays:

*Table 3:* Concordance of first-year student use of *I*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | important to influential in public. | **I think** it is important to be respected |
| 2 | that opinion and furthermore | **I want** to add one thing. Satisfaction |
| 3 | that cannot be bought with money | **I think** most people like traveling |
| 4 | shows there are many travelers here. | **I think** traveling in Japan is better |
| 5 | regardless of money. Also if | **I go** to a foreign country |
| 6 | is very important! At first, | **I believed** that it was not important |
| 7 | but it is not true. Recently, | **I think** that it is very necessary because |
| 8 | is unknown, how do you check it? | **I think** there are two ways. One is |
| 9 | opinion is not same as these views. | **I think** using books is better than the |
| 10 | our learning skill. Recently, | **I often** hear that many people especially |
| 11 | achievement has been decreasing. | **I think** there is a relationship between |
| 12 | will be able to understand why | **I said** that the bookworm is very |

*Table 4:* Concordance of second-year student use of *I*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | many people kill themselves easily. | **I can** watch news like them on TV all |
| 2 | some reasons why they live in park. | **I think** that one reason is that protection |
| 3 | from those events. First of all, | **I will** introduce about some events. The |
| 4 | so they are full of lots of joy. | **I think** the image comes from |
| 5 | the environment. To avoid this, | **I think** we need a time to teach about |
| 6 | finding something to make you fun. | **I think** they do not treat like that if |
| 7 | of opinions. In this essay, | **I'm going** to write about the three main |
| 8 | better at school or at home. Finally, | **I will** talk about the effect to our |
| 9 | Is that really what we have to think? | **I think** it is not enough; it is a wrong |
| 10 | give. It also relates to problem what | **I said**. If the child does not have his |
| 11 | they cannot come back to the home. | **I think** that having no jobs, no |
| 12 | boyfriends or girlfriends. When | **I was** a teenager, I also experienced |

The native speakers' concordance lines from Petch-Tyson's (1998: 113) study are illustrated in Table 5:

*Table 5:* Concordance of American university student use of *I* (Petch-Tyson, 1998)

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 them in the United States. | **I honestly** ran out of my room |
| 2 ran out of my room after | **I read** the above quote to ask |
| 3 statement grabbed my attention, | **I looked** through the rest |
| 4 it as a true argument. For all | **I know**, the author may have |
| 5 magazine Christianity today. As | **I was** researching my topic |
| 6 my topic, using infotrac 2000, | **I found** there were many |
| 7 Today. It was at this point that | **I realized** how popular of a |
| 8 within the community. | **I attended** school in the |
| 9 program called Chapter 220. | **I was** in seventh grade at |
| 10 in seventh grade at the time and | **I can** verify that the battle |
| 11 Wisconsin with my father when | **I was** twelve. On the way |
| 12 Finally, at the age of eighteen | **I gave** in to peer pressure |

These concordance lines demonstrate how the native speakers in Petch-Tyson's study use the first person pronoun *I* with past tense verbs to describe an event in the past. In contrast, both first and second-year Japanese students in the present study overwhelmingly employ *I* along with the word *think* in order to express an opinion or idea.

Furthermore, the Japanese learners examined in this study also use the expression *I think* in a qualitatively different way from Petch-Tyson's European learners. Petch-Tyson (1998) found that European learners frequently place expressions such as *I think* and *I guess* at the end of sentences, thereby creating an even more conversational tone. However, in all the essays examined for this study the phrase *I think* occurs 2,064 times, but students place it at the end of the sentence only 27 times in 24 separate essays. Furthermore, the phrase *I guess* occurs at the end of a sentence only once. The near universal placement of phrases such as *I think* at the beginning of sentences separates Japanese learners from the European learners in Petch-Tyson's study.

The use of phrases such as *I think* in the clause initial position also differentiates the writing by Japanese students of English from native English speaker writing. One study of published academic articles found that only about 45% of exclusive first person pronouns occurred in the clause initial position, although in the social sciences this per cent was slightly higher (Hyland 2001: 218). According to Hyland, placing the pronoun in the initial position gives it a special focus and makes it a significant part of the message (Hyland 2001: 218). While Petch-Tyson did not give any quantitative data on the use of pronouns in the clause initial position, an examination of the example sentences from the

corpus shows that the essays written by native English speaking university students did not often employ it in clause initial position. In sharp contrast, the learners in this study used pronouns in the clause initial position the vast majority of the time.

These quantitative and qualitative differences between self-mention in academic writing by non-native and native English speaking authors reflects in large part the different purposes performed by the same writer visibility features. Self-mention in EFL student writing does not perform the same purposes as in essays written by full-time academics. The principal use of personal pronouns in published research essays is explaining the work that the author carried out and setting out the research procedures performed (Hyland 2001: 220). Other purposes include: organizing the author's arguments, guiding readers through the essay, and, less frequently, to show their position towards different opinions and points of view. Even unpublished writing tended to follow these patterns. Essays written by Singaporean students mainly used personal pronouns to identify a larger group or to guide the reader through the essay. Only three students out of 27 used personal pronouns a total of four times to state a personal opinion (Tang and John 1999: S31).

In sharp contrast, the essays written by the students in this study overwhelmingly used personal pronouns in conjunction with the verbs *think* or *believe* to state a personal view or opinion. Only very rarely did the students use personal pronouns to guide the reader through the essay. When students did try to guide the reader they mainly used a single instance of *In this essay I will show…* in the essay's introduction. The essays examined in this study never used personal pronouns to describe research procedures because students did not have to explain any laboratory or investigative procedures.

The use of the same expressions by EFL learners and expert authors reflect the different purposes. Hyland (2000: 123) describes academic authors who employ expressions such as *I think* or *I believe* as showing "an overt acceptance of personal responsibility for a judgment" and a demonstration of "a confident and expert mind in full control of the material, making judgments and passing comment on issues of concern to the discipline". Similarly, Harwood (2005: 1212) argues that when researchers take responsibility for a claim by using personal pronouns in conjunction with verbs of thought or emotion such as *think* or *believe* they create an impression of "conviction and authority".

It remains doubtful whether anyone would argue that novice or even intermediate level EFL learners employing the same personal pronouns and expressions represent a confident and expert mind in full control of the material. Instead expressions such as *I think* provide examples of speech being written

down and a lack of understanding of academic conventions. The vast chasm in ability between novice non-native English writers and professional native English speaking academics require a different set of conclusions, even when researchers examine the same expressions and structures. Thus, while professional academics do use some of the same writer visibility features described in this essay as typical of oral speech, they employ them in different ways to fulfil different purposes.

Another issue that must be considered when examining writing by second language learners is interference from the first language. Petch-Tyson (1998: 117) speculates that the more overt authorial presence in learner essay writing "could be culturally induced". However she failed to provide any examples of how or provide any discussion of the role of L1 interference. Japanese learners' penchant for first and second person pronouns and other writer visibility features cannot be attributed solely to interference from first language academic writing conventions. For example, Japanese academics in most natural and social sciences consider the use of first person pronouns as lacking proper academic rigour. Instead, Japanese writers may use the term *hissya* (the author). Yet, students never used the expression *the author* or *the writer* to refer to themselves in the corpus examined for this study. Furthermore, Japanese academic writing generally avoids use of the word *nado*, which translates as *and so on* or *etc*.; yet these expressions proved popular in Japanese student English writing. Their presence can be almost certainly attributed to the fact that these expressions are common in Japanese conversation and non-academic writing.

Therefore, the virtual absence of training in academic writing conventions (in either the Japanese or English language) for most Japanese university students complicates the issue of first language interference. More problematic than the issue of first language interference is the lack of knowledge surrounding academic writing conventions in even the students' first language. The vast majority of Japanese students fail to receive any training in academic writing up to the completion of high school (Kobayashi and Rinnert 2002; Sasaki 2001). In the case of Japanese academic writing training, this trend continues for first-year students at Kanda University of International Studies. In their first and second year, students receive virtually no instruction on Japanese academic writing conventions; instead the curriculum focuses overwhelmingly on English proficiency classes. It seems that Japanese students simply write in an easier to produce, and more often practiced, spoken style rather than suffer from the negative influence of Japanese academic writing standards. It may be, as Milton (1999: 232) argued, that learners with a lack of experience and training in academic writing conventions in their native language overcorrect for "assumed

differences…in rhetorical patterns". Or it could also be, that the learners simply have no idea that an English academic writing style exists.

## *7 Conclusions*

The above results indicate that intermediate level learners produce academic essays with the same writer/reader visibility features as more advanced learners. The essays written by this study's Japanese learners contain a much higher degree of spoken language characteristics, especially first and second person pronouns, than comparable native English speaker academic writing. The over-abundance of such features may be one reason why English learner writing resembles speech written down. However, a comparison of first and second-year university student writing shows a dramatic reduction in this degree of writer/reader visibility after the first year. This reduction appears to reflect the effects of the writing instruction at the university, instruction that encourages students to reduce overt author presence in academic writing.

In addition to the similarities between intermediate and advanced non-native English speaker writing, quantitative and qualitative differences exist between the writer visibility features used by novice EFL learners and both published and unpublished native English speaker academic writing. These differences appear especially pronounced in the use of first person pronouns. The expression *I think* is often used in writing by Japanese English learners to give the author's opinion. In contrast, academic writing by American university students seems to use *I* plus past tense verb to recount personal experience and provide support for the essay's argument. Published English academic writing mainly uses personal pronouns to guide readers through the structure of an essay and its arguments and to recount research procedures. However, there is no reason not to believe that, after receiving proper instruction, learners could not use *I* and past tense verbs in a way similar to native English speakers. Learners will probably require training to increase their use of personal pronouns to frame an essay as well as instruction to reduce the personal pronouns used to discuss the author's opinions and ideas.

The similar results between this and previous EFL learner studies suggest that learners of various language backgrounds and even different proficiency levels have similar problems writing academic prose. These difficulties appear to stem from a lack of understanding of the rules surrounding academic writing, or from a lack of practice, rather than as a result of interference from first language academic conventions. As the improvement between writing by first and second-year students in this study shows, specific instruction appears to play a

dramatic role in reducing the number of writer/reader visibility features in learner writing. However, more studies, especially of a sequential design, are needed to fully understand this relationship between instruction and improvement. More work is also needed to better define the number and nature of writer/reader visibility features acceptable in English academic writing produced by both native and non-native English speaking students. Nearly a decade following Petch-Tyson's exploratory study more work remains to be done.

## *References*

Bonk, William. 2001. Predicting paper-and-pencil TOEFL scores from KEPT data. *Studies in Linguistics and Language Education of the Research Institute of Language Studies and Language Education, Kanda University of International Studies* 12: 65–86.

Chafe, Wallace. 1982. Integration and involvement in speaking, writing, and oral literature. In D. Tannen (ed.). *Spoken and written language: Exploring orality and literacy*, 35–53. Ablex: Norwood.

Chang, Yu-Ying and John Swales. 1999. Informal elements in English academic writing: Threats or opportunities for advanced non-native speakers?. In C. Candlin and K. Hyland (eds.). *Writing: Texts, processes and practices*, 145–167. London and New York: Longman.

Cobb, Tom. 2003. Analyzing later interlanguage with learner corpora: Quebec replications of three European studies. *Canadian Modern Language Review* 59(3): 393–423.

Dulay, Heidi and Marina Burt. 1974. Natural sequences in child second language acquisition. *Language Learning* 24: 37–55.

Granger, Sylviane. 2004. Computer learner corpus research: Current status and future prospects. In U. Connor and T. Upton (eds.). *Applied corpus linguistics: A multidimensional perspective*, 123–45. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi.

Granger, Sylviane (ed.). 1998. *Learner English on computer.* London and New York: Longman.

Harwood, Nigel. 2005. 'Nowhere has anyone attempted… In this article I am to do just that': A corpus-based study of self-promotional *I* and *we* in academic writing across four disciplines. *Journal of Pragmatics* 37: 1207–1231.

Hunston, Susan. 2002. *Corpora in applied linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hyland, Ken. 1999. Disciplinary discourses: Writer stance in research articles. In C. Candlin and K. Hyland (eds.). *Writing: Texts, processes and practices*, 99–121. London and New York: Longman.

Hyland, Ken. 2000. *Disciplinary discourses: Social interactions in academic writing*. Harlow: Longman.

Hyland, Ken. 2001. Humble servants of the discipline? Self-mention in research articles. *English for Specific Purposes* 20: 207–226.

Kennedy, Graeme. 1998. *An introduction to corpus linguistics*. Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman Limited.

Kobayashi, Hiroe and Carol Rinnert. 2002. High school student perceptions of first language literacy instructions: Implications for second language writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 11(2): 96–116.

Milton, John. 1999. Lexical thickets and electronic gateways: Making text accessible by novice writers. In C. Candlin and K. Hyland (eds.). *Writing: Texts, processes and practices*, 221–243. London and New York: Longman.

Olson, David. 1977. From utterance to text: The bias of language in speech and writing. *Harvard Educational Review* 47: 257–281.

Petch-Tyson, Stephanie. 1998. Writer/reader visibility in EFL written discourse. In S. Granger (ed.). *Learner English on computer*, 107–118. London and New York: Longman.

Sasaki, Miyuki. 2001. An introspective account of L2 writing acquisition. In D. Belcher and U. Conner (eds.). *Reflections on multiliterate lives*, 110–120. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Tang, Romana and Suganthi John. 1999. The 'I' in identity: Exploring writer identity in student academic writing through the first person pronoun. *English for Specific Purposes* 18: S23–S39.

Tannen, Deborah. 1982. The oral/literate continuum in discourse. In D. Tannen (ed.). *Spoken and written language: Exploring orality and literacy*, 1–17. Ablex: Norwood.