

Writer Visibility in TESOL Research Articles by Japanese Writers

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Reference Data:

Kawaguchi, K., Ohta, R., & Ito, T. (2016). Writer visibility in TESOL research articles by Japanese writers. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *Focus on the learner*. Tokyo: JALT.

First-person pronoun usage in research articles is a complex issue in writing instruction. Recent corpus-based research has shown that first-person pronouns are one of the resources that writers use to establish visibility in their writing, which is in turn closely related to presenting findings successfully and gaining approval from the discourse community. However, some Japanese EFL teachers seem to instruct students to avoid the first person. The present study addresses this writer visibility issue by investigating first-person pronouns used in 2 journals in the field of TESOL: one based in Japan and the other in the US. The corpus used for analysis comprised 63 articles from issues of these journals published at three points of time in the past 20 years. The analysis showed that frequencies of first-person pronouns in the Japanese journal were significantly lower, and the range of communicative functions served by first-person pronouns was narrower.

研究論文中の第1人称代名詞の使用はライティング指導では複雑な問題である。最近のコーパスに基づく研究では、第1人称代名詞は論文中で著者の存在を確立するために使う言語的リソースの1つであり、その結果、研究成果を成功裏に提示しディスコースコミュニティで承認されることと緊密に関連があることが示されている。しかし、日本人の英語教員の中には論文では自分自身に言及しないよう指導する者もいるようだ。本研究では日本と米国で出版されたTESOLの分野の二つの学術

誌で使用されている第1人称代名詞使用を調査することによりライターヴィジビリティという問題をとりあげる。分析に用いたコーパスはこれら学術誌の過去20年間の3つの年代からとった論文、各63編から構成されている。分析の結果、日本で出版された学術誌中の第1人称代名詞の頻度の方が低く、代名詞が果たすコミュニケーション上の機能の範囲が狭いことがわかった。

Research articles (RAs) have traditionally been viewed as impersonal based on the idea that their primary purpose, particularly for those presenting experimental research, is to report findings objectively (Kuo, 1999; Salager-Meyer, 1999; Swales, 1990). Therefore, many writing teachers advise that first-person pronouns, both singular and plural, be avoided regardless of whether they are used as exclusive pronouns (referring to the author only) or inclusive pronouns (referring to the author and others, including readers, people in the profession, or people in general) in academic writing and research papers.

However, recent corpus-based research on first-person pronouns has indicated that writers are increasingly establishing authorial presence by using exclusive first-person pronouns in their RAs, thereby making themselves more visible than before. Several studies have confirmed that the degree of *writer visibility* varies in different disciplines. Hyland (2001) found that average frequencies of first-person pronouns in humanities and social sciences were higher than those in science and engineering. Furthermore, some researchers have found that first-person pronouns are used for various communicative purposes (Harwood, 2005; Hyland, 2001, 2002a; Kuo, 1999). Kuo identified 12 discourse functions of first-person pronouns, such as proposing a theory, showing commitment, and emphasizing a personal contribution to the discourse community, and also demonstrated how the use of these pronouns helped writers to successfully present their research results to gain approval from a discourse community.

Regarding L2 writing, a number of researchers have suggested that a lack of understanding of the strategic use of first-person pronouns may cause underuse or overuse of first-person pronouns in academic and research paper writing. Some of the researchers investigating academic writing by L2 students and RAs by novice and expert writers who

were nonnative English speakers (NNES) have reported underuse of first-person pronouns (Hyland, 2002a, 2002b; Martínéz, 2005; Tang & John, 1999; Vergaro, 2011), while Natsukari (2012) and Luzón (2009) observed overuse. These studies, however, agree that how much self-representation writers think appropriate may be influenced by not only the discipline but also their linguistic competence, cultural background, view of the RA, or any of these.

To our knowledge, there are no studies investigating first-person pronoun usage in RAs written by Japanese researchers except our preliminary study (Kawaguchi, Ito, & Ohta, 2015). The results of this study suggested that Japanese expert writers in the field of TESOL, most of whom teach English as a foreign language at college or university, tend to avoid self-mention in their RAs. This avoidance of first-person pronouns may be attributed to the writers' traditional view of the RA, a cultural background in which modesty is considered important, and the influence of the Japanese language, in which nominative pronouns such as *I* and *we* are often omitted. Whatever the reason, this is problematic when these experts teach research paper or academic writing to their students since, as Hyland (2002b) pointed out, "If we simply assume that academic writing is universally impersonal, we disguise variability, and this may have the effect of preventing our students from coming to terms with the specific demands of their disciplines" (p. 352). It is, therefore, essential that Japanese writing teachers are aware of the various norms of writer visibility practiced in different discourse communities.

The aim of this corpus-based study was to investigate writer visibility, focusing on first-person pronoun usage in RAs in two journals assumed to reflect the writing of Japanese and native speakers of English (NES). To achieve this, we created two corpora: one consisting of 63 articles written by writers from a Japanese journal, 21 articles each from three different periods over the past 20 years, and the other consisting of the same number of RAs from an international journal from the same three periods.

Research questions were as follows:

RQ1. How has the use of first-person pronouns in each journal changed over time?

RQ2. Are there any differences in frequencies of first-person pronoun use and its discourse functions between the two journals?

We hope that this study helps raise writing teachers' awareness of the chronological and cultural differences in the use of first-person pronouns as a rhetorical strategy in their discipline, TESOL.

Method

Two corpora were created from two journals: *JACET Journal* (JJ), a leading journal in the field of TESOL published in Japan, and *TESOL Quarterly* (TQ), an internationally recognized journal published in the United States. In addition to their high status in the field of TESOL, we chose the two journals because both require authors to conform to the requirements of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. Therefore, we assumed that authors of both journals followed the same guidelines and that any differences in first-person usage derived from journal-specific practices or preferred patterns of usage in different academic discourse communities. Sixty-three RAs were taken from JJ to create a corpus with three subcorpora for three different periods of time: JJ 1990 (1989-1991), JJ 2000 (1999-2001), and JJ 2010 (2009-2011). Similarly, the other corpus comprised 63 RAs taken from TQ, with three subcorpora: TQ 1990 (1989-1991), TQ 2000 (1999-2001), and TQ 2010 (2009-2011). Each period for JJ and TQ was represented by 21 RAs. *JACET Journal* was published once a year until 1991, with seven to eight RAs in each issue. Therefore, we selected seven RAs from each year's issue(s) so that each year's sample had the same number of RAs. The primary criterion for selecting each RA was the names of the authors, that is, Japanese names for the JJ corpus and Western names for the TQ corpus. We also referred to biographical data. When there were more than seven RAs for a given year, we selected seven RAs randomly. In this way, we assumed that the JJ corpus reflected the writing of NNES writers and the TQ corpus reflected that of NES writers. The size of each corpus can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Corpora Used for Analysis

Journal / time	# of RAs	Total # of words	Mean article length
JJ / 1990	21	79,006	3,762
JJ / 2000	21	82,793	3,943
JJ / 2010	21	94,224	4,487
JJ Total	63	256,023	4,064
TQ / 1990	21	118,187	5,628
TQ / 2000	21	162,693	7,747
TQ / 2010	21	166,301	7,919
TQ Total	63	447,181	7,098

Note. JJ = *JACET Journal*; TQ = *TESOL Quarterly*; RA = Research article.

Using *AntConc* (Anthony, 2007), a concordancing software, we searched for first-person pronouns (*I, my, me, we, our, us*) in the articles, manually removed cases that were not exclusive, and counted the occurrence of each pronoun in each corpus. The distinction between inclusive and exclusive use of plural first-person pronouns was sometimes very difficult. Before the analysis, we discussed ambiguous cases and made sure that the three of us had the same criteria for selecting exclusive pronouns. Next, we examined the frequencies of exclusive first-person pronouns. Then we investigated first-person pronoun distribution across different sections of the articles: abstract, introduction, method, results, discussion, and conclusion. Since not all texts had the IMRD (introduction, methods, results, and discussion) structure, we made a list of typical examples of nonstandard formats found in our corpora and decided how to separate them. For instance, when the results section and discussion section were merged, we classified it as a discussion section. Finally, all the results were compared to see if any differences in frequencies of first-person pronoun use existed between the three time periods and between RAs in JJ and TQ.

The discourse functions of *I* and exclusive *we* used in 14 RAs published in the year 2011 were analyzed using a list of discourse functions that had been used in our preliminary study (Kawaguchi, Ohta, & Ito, 2014). The list comprised 14 discourse functions, 10 of which were taken from Kuo's study (1999), three from Luzon's (2009), and one function (#6) that we added. We examined the context in which each pronoun occurred and identified its function. The 14 discourse functions were as follows:

1. Explaining what was done
2. Stating a goal or purpose
3. Showing results or findings
4. Hedging a proposition or claim
5. Showing commitment or contribution to research
6. Illustrating how the authors developed concepts, defined terms, or designed a system
7. Proposing a theory or approach
8. Guiding the reader through the text
9. Emphasizing or calling the reader's attention
10. Expressing a wish or expectation
11. Giving a reason or indicating necessity
12. Justifying a proposition
13. Comparing approaches or viewpoints
14. Stating conclusions

Results and Discussion

Analysis of First-Person Pronoun Frequency

Table 2 shows the totals of exclusive first-person pronouns and those of all first-person pronouns in each corpus. Since article length varied, Chi-square tests were conducted with combinations of each pair in the corpora to see if the differences observed were statistically significant. In order to avoid an inflated Type I error, a conservative alpha level was adopted by performing a Bonferroni adjustment for the multiple comparison.

Table 2. Raw Frequency of First-Person Pronouns in Each Corpus

Journal / time	# of first-person pronouns		Total # of words
	exclusive	total	
JJ 1990	191	301	79,006
JJ 2000	165	271	82,793
JJ 2010	69	112	94,224
TQ 1990	443	796	118,187
TQ 2000	702	750	162,693
TQ 2010	687	760	166,301

Note. JJ = *JACET Journal*; TQ = *TESOL Quarterly*.

Table 3 shows the results of the Chi-square analysis for JJ. The frequencies of first-person pronouns in the 1990 and 2000 articles were significantly higher than those in the 2010 articles. On the other hand, no statistical difference was observed for each pair in TQ (Table 4). As shown in Table 5, in each period, TQ writers used more exclusive first-person pronouns than JJ writers. These findings suggest that more writers of TQ may have found first-person pronouns to be an acceptable device to establish writer visibility than JJ writers, and that this view seems not to have changed much over time. On the other hand, less use and decreasing frequency of first-person pronoun use in JJ might reflect an increasingly conservative editing policy, or may indicate that many JJ writers are more hesitant to use exclusive pronouns in their RAs.

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Table 3. Results of Chi-Square Analysis: JACET Journal

Subcorpus	χ^2	p	df	Significance	Higher
JJ 1990 & JJ 2000	3.13	.076	1	n.s.	
JJ 1990 & JJ 2010	77.70	< .001	1	significant	JJ 1990
JJ 2000 & JJ 2010	49.92	< .001	1	significant	JJ 2000

 $\alpha_B = .003$
Table 4. Results of Chi-Square Analysis: TESOL Quarterly

Subcorpus	χ^2	p	df	Significance	Higher
TQ 1990 & TQ 2000	5.27	.022	1	n.s.	n.a.
TQ 1990 & TQ 2010	2.46	.117	1	n.s.	n.a.
TQ 2000 & TQ 2010	.62	.432	1	n.s.	n.a.

 $\alpha_B = .003$
Table 5. Results of Chi-Square Analysis: JACET Journal and TESOL Quarterly

Subcorpus	χ^2	p	df	Significance	higher
JJ 1990 & TQ 1990	26.57	< .01	1	significant	TQ 1990
JJ 2000 & TQ 2000	83.40	< .01	1	significant	TQ 2000
JJ 2010 & TQ 2010	235.35	< .01	1	significant	TQ 2010

 $\alpha_B = .01$

Table 6 presents normalized frequencies of exclusive first-person pronouns per 1,000 words. As the choice of whether to use a singular or plural pronoun is determined by the number of authors, we looked at the normalized frequency of exclusive first-person pronouns by author (Tables 7 and 8). As can be seen in Table 6, in both journals the highest frequency was observed for the plural subjective pronoun *we* in all three periods and the lowest for *me*, except in the JJ 2010 articles. A noticeable difference between the two journals is that the use of *I* and *we* decreased in JJ but increased in TQ. More use of *I* in TQ may point to the possibility that the singular pronoun *I* is becoming more acceptable

in RAs. On the other hand, it should be noted that the frequencies of *I* in single-authored RAs were lower than those of *we* in multi-authored RAs in both journals (Tables 7 and 8).

Table 6. Normalized Frequency of Exclusive First-Person Pronouns per Case (per 1,000 Words)

Time	I	my	me	we	our	us	Total
JJ 1990	0.38	0.08	0.06	1.09	0.67	0.14	2.42
JJ 2000	0.43	0.21	0.00	0.95	0.35	0.05	1.99
JJ 2010	0.08	0.00	0.02	0.54	0.02	0.06	0.73
TQ 1990	0.86	0.22	0.04	1.55	0.89	0.19	3.75
TQ 2000	0.55	0.07	0.02	2.66	0.87	0.15	4.31
TQ 2010	1.12	0.35	0.07	1.61	0.85	0.12	4.13

Note. JJ = JACET Journal; TQ = TESOL Quarterly.

Table 7. Normalized Frequency of Exclusive First-Person Pronouns in Single-Authored RAs (per 1,000 words)

Time	I	my	me	we	our	us	Total	Number of RAs
JJ 1990	0.60	0.12	0.10	0.06	0.02	0.00	0.90	13
JJ 2000	0.63	0.30	0.00	0.33	0.14	0.05	1.46	13
JJ 2010	0.13	0.00	0.03	0.35	0.00	0.07	0.59	14
TQ 1990	1.59	0.41	0.08	0.56	0.59	0.20	3.44	10
TQ 2000	1.20	0.16	0.05	0.04	0.01	0.00	1.47	10
TQ 2010	2.25	0.70	0.14	0.02	0.00	0.01	3.13	10

Note. JJ = JACET Journal; TQ = TESOL Quarterly; RA = Research article.

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Table 8. Normalized Frequency of Exclusive First-Person Pronouns in Multi-Authored RAs (per 1,000 words)

Time	I	my	me	we	our	us	Total	Number of RAs
JJ 1990	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.85	1.79	0.38	5.01	8
JJ 2000	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.32	0.81	0.04	3.16	8
JJ 2010	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.87	0.06	0.06	0.98	7
TQ 1990	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.71	1.24	0.17	4.12	11
TQ 2000	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.85	1.58	0.27	6.71	11
TQ 2010	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.19	1.70	0.23	5.12	11

Note. JJ = JACET Journal; TQ = TESOL Quarterly; RA = Research article.

Table 9 shows first-person pronoun distribution across different sections of the RAs. Writers in both journals used first-person pronouns in all the sections except abstracts in the 1990 and 2000 JJ articles. In most cases, the use of pronouns in discussion sections was the highest. This seems plausible since that section is where writers typically examine results obtained, draw conclusions from them, and emphasize the validity of findings. It is intriguing to observe that the use of first-person pronouns in the abstract section suddenly increased both in the JJ 2010 and TQ 2010 articles. However, this might be explained by the appearance of the 6th edition of *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* in 2009 (American Psychological Association, 2009). In this edition the command “Use the third person rather than the first person” for the abstract, which was present in the 5th edition (2002), has been removed.

Table 9. Distribution of Exclusive First-Person Pronouns Across Different Sections of RAs

Time	Abstract	Introduction	Methods	Results	Discussion	Conclusion
JJ 1990	0.0%	16.2%	20.4%	3.1%	46.1%	14.1%
JJ 2000	0.0%	21.2%	26.1%	6.1%	37.6%	9.1%
JJ 2010	4.2%	18.3%	18.3%	21.1%	22.5%	15.5%
TQ 1990	1.4%	16.0%	20.5%	16.9%	37.0%	8.1%
TQ 2000	0.4%	27.2%	22.2%	19.1%	24.8%	6.3%
TQ 2010	3.8%	19.8%	26.6%	3.3%	36.8%	9.6%

Note. JJ = JACET Journal; TQ = TESOL Quarterly; RA = Research article.

Analysis of Discourse Functions (I and We)

Table 10 shows the results of the discourse function analysis of *I* and exclusive *we*. While JJ had only 24 occurrences of *I* and *we* (2 of *I* and 22 of *we*), TQ had 256 occurrences (103 of *I* and 153 of *we*). In both journals, *I* and *we* were used most frequently for *explaining what was done* (JJ: 50%; TQ: 45%) with distributions throughout the articles. *I* and *we* were also used frequently for *illustrating how the authors developed concepts, defined terms or designed a system* (JJ: 17%; TQ: 22%) in introduction, method, and discussion sections. These results indicate that both NNES and NES writers used *I* and *we* mainly to highlight the importance of their roles in research. It is difficult to generalize how the rest of the occurrences of *I* and *we* (eight in total) were used in JJ because they were used for six different communicative purposes, most of which had only one occurrence. On the other hand, the remaining cases of *I* and *we* in TQ (84 occurrences in total) were used for 10 different communicative purposes; seven of them had more than five occurrences. These results may suggest that NES writers attempted to make themselves more visible by establishing an interactive relationship with the reader by *guiding the reader through the text* or *emphasizing or calling the reader's attention*, making themselves sound humble by *hedging a proposition or claim*, or asserting themselves as a responsible or authoritative author by *showing commitment or contribution to research*.

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Table 10. Discourse Functions of *I* and Exclusive *We* in Relation to Discourse Functions in 2,011 RAs

Discourse function	JJ (count)	%	TQ (count)	%
1. Explaining what was done	12	50.0	115	44.9
2. Stating a goal or purpose		0.0	17	6.6
3. Showing results or findings	1	4.2	6	2.3
4. Hedging a proposition or claim		0.0	11	4.3
5. Showing commitment or contribution to research		0.0	9	3.5
6. Illustrating how the authors developed concepts, defined terms, or designed a system	4	16.7	57	22.3
7. Proposing a theory or approach	1	4.2	7	2.7
8. Guiding the reader through the text		0.0	12	4.7
9. Emphasizing or calling the reader's attention	3	12.5	13	5.1
10. Expressing wish or expectation	1	4.2	4	1.6
11. Giving a reason or indicating necessity	1	4.2	2	0.8
12. Justifying a proposition		0.0		0.0
13. Comparing approaches or viewpoints		0.0		0.0
14. Stating conclusions	1	4.2	3	1.2
Total	24	100.0	256	100.0

To sum up, overall, NNES writers in JJ used first-person pronouns less frequently than NES writers in TQ, thus making themselves less visible than TQ writers. However, the tendency to avoid first-person pronouns was not uniformly observed for both singular and plural first-person pronouns in both journals; *I* was generally used less frequently than *we*. This is probably because *I* may sound too authoritative, too personal, or even “face-threatening” (Hardwood, 2005, p. 344). This is supported by the fact that some writers of single-authored RAs used *we* instead of *I*, especially in the JJ 2010 and TQ 1990 articles (Table 7). Considering the use of *I* from a chronological viewpoint, we observed a contrasting trend within each journal; the frequency of *I* was the lowest in the JJ 2010

articles but the highest in the TQ 2010 articles. It seems that NES writers are increasingly using *I* as an acceptable resource to establish writer visibility, while NNES writers are not.

These tendencies among NNES writers are supported by the results of a survey conducted in our previous study on the perceptions of first-person pronoun use in RAs (Kawaguchi, Ito, & Ohta, 2015). The study revealed that many Japanese TESOL and linguistics researchers, who also teach English, hold a traditional view of the RA: More than 70% of respondents said that they avoided the use of *I*, and no less than 57% of them thought that RAs should be objective and writers should use passive voice or impersonal subjects such as *this paper*. However, some of them also said that they needed to follow the conventions practiced in their relevant discourse communities. Despite the differences in frequencies of the first-person pronoun between JJ and TQ, both sets of writers used first-person pronouns in all sections of the RAs, thereby foregrounding visibility throughout the papers.

Furthermore, the discourse function analysis of the 2011 articles revealed that the qualities of writer visibility expressed through the use of first-person pronouns were somewhat different; both sets of writers of the two journals presented themselves mainly as doers of research, but NES writers also made themselves visible as a writer to guide the readers through the text and as an *arguer* or *evaluator* (Flottum et al., as cited in Luzón, 2009) so as to present their research findings successfully. This suggests that it is important to consider not just how many times but in what context first-person pronouns should be used in an RA.

Conclusion

We investigated first-person pronoun use as one of the ways of establishing writer visibility in TESOL RAs in articles in two journals assumed to reflect the writing of NNESs and NESs. The statistical analysis revealed that the frequencies of first-person pronouns by Japanese writers were significantly lower than those by NES writers, and the total frequency decreased over the two decades studied. These results suggest that the Japanese writers preferred to make themselves less visible in the journal published in Japan. The analysis of discourse functions indicated that both Japanese and NES writers mainly used first-person pronouns to stress the importance of their role as a researcher, but apart from that role, Japanese writers used first-person pronouns with a narrower range of communicative purposes while NES writers used the pronouns to present themselves in a variety of roles as a writer and a peer researcher to establish reciprocal communication.

Several factors suggest caution before applying these findings to Japanese writers in general, however. First, the size of the corpus may not be big enough. Furthermore, the

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study did not examine if the degree of writer visibility changed depending on the type of research method (quantitative or qualitative). Finally, just examining work published in journals does not tell us directly about writers' practices and preferences. Thus, further study could look not just at published papers, but at the drafts, how writers wrote them, and how they decided whether to use first-person pronouns. As for diachronic changes, further examination of issues published in different years across the two decades will be needed before generalizing the tendencies observed in this study.

To close, writers, NNES writers in particular, need to be aware of the changing and varying conventions regarding writer visibility in each discourse community, one of which is the strategic use of first-person pronouns in RAs.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (KAKENHI No. 24520705). We would like to thank two anonymous reviewers and our content editor for their valuable comments to improve this paper.

Bio Data

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