

Authorial Pronoun We: Capturing Politeness in EFL Academic Writing

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Article History: **Abstract.** This study aims to decipher the use of authorial pronoun *we* as a politeness strategy in the EFL academic writing. The data consist of 56 published research articles taken from the Corpus of State University of Malang Indonesian Learners' English. The articles were written by Indonesian undergraduate students co-authored with their thesis supervisors. Attempting to categorize pronoun *we* into inclusive, exclusive, and ambiguous types in the co-authored texts, we identify seven functions of the authorial pronoun. The result unveils that the ambiguous authorial pronoun *we* appear to be the most frequently used politeness device to minimize face threatening acts (FTA).

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INTRODUCTION

Academic writing has become an ultimate means of communication to share the recent update of knowledge among academics. Academic writing, as suggested by Hyland (2010), bears interpersonal function which serves the communication between academics. However, academic writing culture, which seemingly impersonal or faceless as it is lack of 'personal' signals, has been mostly taken for granted to enhance the objectivity of research. This notion apparently yields the tendency of author(s) in hiding behind their texts. Reflecting on this issue, various studies have attempted to seek for evidence by examining impersonality in academic writing (Conrad, 2018; Kitagawa & Lehrer, 1990; Martínez, 2001; Myers & Lampropoulou, 2012). However, an extensive number of research studies have also stressed the importance of authorial presence in the texts. For instance, Hyland (2001) points out that despite a constraint in hard disciplines (e.g., natural science, engineering), the signals of authorial presence in the texts are commonly used in soft disciplines (e.g., social science, humanities) for various purposes such as self-promotion, identity projection, and engagement.

Among the roles of first person pronoun in academic writing, establishing an intimate relationship with readers has been discussed as a potential strategy of politeness in academic writing (Harwood, 2005; Hyland, 2005; Myers, 1989; Wang et al., 2021). Pioneering the work on unveiling various politeness strategies and features in academic writing, Myers (1989) initiated the discussion by

foregrounding his study on drawing the relationship between the writers and the intended audience in order to depict what sort of strategies might be suitable for effectively communicating with a certain audience (academic community). He attempted to extend the well-known Politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987) from speech acts into writing by the authors of research articles in the molecular geneticist discipline.

By firstly sketching the interaction which might happen between the writers and intended readers of the published articles, or equally as Speaker and Hearer in Brown and Levinson's terms, Myers (1989) found that minimizing FTA or (Face Threatening Acts) strategy in academic writing comprises the choice of authorial pronoun, hedging to build solidarity with the readers. He argued that authors' strategy in using pronoun *we* as a politeness strategy to include themselves in the criticism is one way to minimize FTA as it could mitigate the claim. This way, the authors could avoid any potential insults to the readers by making them part of the community while projecting their arguments in the text.

In line with Myers's work, Harwood (2005) continues the discussion and stresses the role of pronoun *we* as politeness device in written text. Taking a step further from Myer, Harwood proposed 3 semantic types of pronoun *we* in multiple-authored texts: inclusive, exclusive and ambiguous. Among these types, he highlighted the use of ambiguous *we* by authors as a potential political attempt to alternate between inclusive and exclusive types. In addition, he also insinuated the possibility of a negative politeness strategy in the way authors use the exclusive and inclusive pronoun *we* by eliminating "writer responsibility for an imperfect state of affairs" (2005, p. 348). This is illustrated by an example from Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990, p. 175) cited in (Harwood, 2005, p. 348), "We have not fully understood the medical implications of snuff-taking", where inclusive *we* dispersed the responsibility of knowledge limitation among the readers.

Despite the ongoing discussion on the functions of first person pronoun in academic writing, EFL authors still find them problematic (Luzón, 2009; McCrostie, 2018). Investigating the use of first person pronoun in academic reports written by Spanish students, Luzón (2009) unveils authors' difficulty in understanding the specific functions of the pronouns to project authorial identities. Meanwhile, McCrostie's (2018) study comparing the use of first person pronouns by native and non-native speakers reveals the overuse of the pronouns, which resemble spoken language, by the non-native speakers, particularly Japanese students. The previous studies have highlighted the difficulties of EFL authors in employing first person pronoun in unpublished writing. However, a study on how novice EFL authors utilize first person pronouns in research articles intended for publication has not yet been addressed even though a number of studies have also focused on first pronoun use in published writings.

Considering the possibility of extending the discussion and the gap of the previous studies on the use of authorial pronoun *we* by EFL authors, the present study aims to unveil the functions and semantic types of authorial pronoun *we* in

co-authored research articles intended for publication. In addition, we will also investigate whether there is a tendency of pronoun *we* as a politeness strategy to establish authorship while creating engagement by minimizing the potential threats to them and their potential readers.

RESEARCH METHOD

The data were taken from a readily available Corpus of State University of Malang Indonesian Learners' English (C-SMILE) which contains academic writings (theses and research articles) of undergraduate students. The students are non-native speakers of English majoring in English Language Teaching and English Language and Literature. In this study, we made a sub-corpus of C-SMILE containing 104 research articles (RA) with a total of 405.901 words. The RAs, written by the students co-authored by their thesis advisors, are the final projects of the students after passing their thesis exams. This project is part of the department's effort to familiarize the students with academic publication as they aim to publish them in a journal or at least on the department's website. Even though each article has the supervisor's name, the supervisors only act as an advisor instead of the writer. Hence, the article could be categorized as the work of novice authors.

This study employs quantitative and qualitative corpus-based analysis of the first person pronoun *we* using AntConc (Anthony, 2011). In order to find the authorial pronoun *we* in the data, we conducted a Key Word in Context (KWIC) search to find the frequency. Next, a preliminary analysis was done to distinguish the difference from *we* as authorial pronoun or non-authorial pronoun.

Excerpt 1

- a) The example of the sentence is '**We** go home'. (AAS3)
- b) As Paul C. Taylor argues, "a white dominated culture has racialised beauty, [in] that it has defined beauty per se in terms of white beauty, in terms of the physical features that the people **we** consider white [people] are more likely to have" (Taylor, 1999, 17). (NAIF2)
- c) In this present study the main target items to be analyzed are subject verb agreement (I, you, they, **we**, he, she, it), plural (noun+inflectional ending s/es), article (a and an) and verb-ing (progressive form). (FMGS2)

The occurrences of non-authorial pronoun in the corpus comprises example (1a), direct quote (2b) and object of analysis (1c). Table 1 below is the result of the result of preliminary analysis between *we* as authorial pronoun and non-authorial pronoun. We calculated the frequency of pronoun *we* according to each occurrence per item and per 10.000 words. Based on the analysis, the first person pronoun *we* as authorial pronoun occurs more than twice as many as the non-authorial pronoun.

Table 1. Frequency of Pronoun *We* as Authorial vs Non-authorial Pronoun

<i>We</i> as Authorial Pronoun (per item)	<i>We</i> as Authorial Pronoun (per 10.000 words)	<i>We</i> as Non-authorial Pronoun (per item)	<i>We</i> as Non-authorial Pronoun (per 10.000 words)
207	5.10	94	2.31

Following this result, we attempted to distinguish the inclusive and exclusive pronoun *we*, even though the distinction of inclusive and exclusive pronoun *we* is almost impossible to spot, ultimately in the co-authored texts (Harwood, 2005). However, looking at the patterns and context of use, we managed to divide pronoun *we* into seven functions which gave a clue whether the pronoun belongs to the three semantic types, inclusive, exclusive, or ambiguous, which have been previously introduced and implemented by previous studies (Harwood, 2005; Wang et al., 2021). Hence, qualitative analysis by looking at the context of every authorial pronoun *we* occurrences is essential as the next step of data analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative analysis of the contexts surrounding the occurrence of authorial pronoun *we* gives us insights on its role in five discourse functions, including assumption of common ground (2a), guide (2b), review of previous study (2c), generalization (2d), procedure (2e), acknowledgement (2f), claim (2g). These functions then become the baseline to determine whether pronoun *we* belong to one of the three semantic categories, inclusive, exclusive, and ambiguous. The inclusive denotes the writer and readers, while exclusive denotes the writers themselves and people who are directly related to them. In addition to the two, ambiguous appears as a relatively new category since it could act as inclusive and exclusive interchangeably as part of the authors' rhetorical strategy (Harwood, 2005).

Excerpt 2

- a) The researcher chooses past regular and past irregular forms as the target morphemes to be analyzed. As **we** know, Bahasa Indonesia does not have different form of action verb as it is found in English grammatical structure, such as past forms in past tense. (FRGS2)
- b) **We** can see in line 6 of sonnet 18, the sun is personified by addressing it "his" in "his gold complexion". (FBJA2)
- c) Connell (2005) says that **we** need at least a three-fold model of the structure of gender, by distinguishing relations of (a) power, (b) production and (c) cathexis (emotional attachment). R.W. Connell suggests us to use the term masculinities rather than masculinity to represent the differences and plurality. (HCMC2)

- d) First, on facebook there is application of creating event. **We** can create a certain event and invite our friends through facebook. (IFEK2)
- e) In short, after extracting information from the table, **we** find that 7 free blacks in the state owned from 20 and 84 slaves, as did Henry. (ISMC2)
- f) **We** the researchers would like to thank A. Effendi Kadarisman, Ph.D. for editing the article and making it publishable in English Language Education (ELE) on-line journal. (SANY2)
- g) Therefore, **we** can conclude that English is a popular language so that studying this language becomes significant in most countries. (BTML2)

Categorizing the seven functions into the three categories requires us to check every possibility of pronoun *we* convergence from inclusive to exclusive and vice versa. If the pronoun *we* has the possibility of the divergence, we categorize it as ambiguous, for instance Excerpt 2a in which pronoun *we* is used by the authors to make an assumption of common ground. Pronoun *we* in the phrase “as we know” could be viewed from inclusive and exclusive in the co-authored texts. The inclusive viewpoint denotes that the authors assume that the readers have the same background knowledge as the writers. On the other hand, it could also be seen from exclusive perspective that the authors inform what they know to the readers. The inclusive *we* is likely to benefit the authors if the readers have the same knowledge about Bahasa Indonesia, yet it could prone to threatening both faces (authors and readers) if the readers have no background knowledge about it. Here is where the ambiguity comes as a savior to save both authors and readers with the exclusive point of view.

On the other hand, if the process of divergence is impossible, we categorized them based on their characteristic of usage whether pronoun *we* refer to the authors and the readers (inclusive) or the authors only (exclusive). The inclusive comprises review of previous study and generalization. The occurrence of *we* in both functions addresses general audience including the writer and readers. Meanwhile, the exclusive *we*, which includes description of research procedure and acknowledgement, refers only to the authors as the researchers who conducted the study.

Table 2. Frequency of *We* based on Types and Functions

No	Type/Function	Occurrence (per item)	Occurrence (per 100.000 words)
1	Inclusive	58	14.29
	Review of previous study	16	3.94
	Generalization	42	10.34
2	Exclusive	5	1.23
	Description of research procedure	3	0.73
	Acknowledgement	2	0.49
3	Ambiguous	144	35.48
	Assumption of common ground	10	2.46

Guide	23	5.67
Claim	111	27.35

Table 2 shows that the occurrence of ambiguous *we* is significantly high compared to the other two types, inclusive and exclusive. The ambiguous type occurs 35 times every 100.000 words followed by inclusive and the very least exclusive type which only appear 58 and 5 times respectively.

The EFL authors use the pronoun significantly when delivering their arguments or making claims. As we can see in the Excerpt 2g, pronoun *we* could be seen from both inclusive and exclusive viewpoints. From the inclusive viewpoint, the authors could be seen as making a joint conclusion with the readers. On the other hand, it could also be perceived as the exclusive type since the authors are the conclusion maker and conduct the study. According to Harwood (2005), this ambiguity allows the authors to achieve both benefits of inclusive and exclusive types as each reader has their own tendency of how they perceive the texts. Hence, stating a claim with ambiguous pronoun *we* could possibly highlight the positive politeness since it has the ability to involve the readers in the conversation while avoiding the negative politeness imposed by the inclusive pronoun *we*.

The second most frequently used type is inclusive pronoun *we*. Even though the occurrence is less than a half of the ambiguous type, these findings strengthen the previous studies' findings on the importance of inclusive pronoun *we* in research article. As Harwood (2005, p. 347) suggests that performing engagement with the readers could be seen as a "manifestation of positive politeness", inclusive *we* in the corpus also plays the same role. However, it is important to note that on one hand, involving the readers could be positive politeness which improves the interaction between authors and readers, but on the other hand, it could also potentially jeopardize the integrity of the authors, particularly when making a generalization as in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3

Character education is a national movement in creating schools that foster ethical, responsible and caring young people by modeling and teaching good characters through emphasis on universal values that **we** all share. (NFF2)

In the above generalization, the authors must be aware that there is a possibility that the readers are from a different nation which has no such movement, namely character education. Hence, they need to be careful in determining the nation and the shared universal value in the next sentences. Otherwise, those readers could lose the context as they are not familiar with the movement.

Even though previous studies have emphasized that inclusive pronoun *we* have been widely exploited by students and journal article writers to develop interaction with the readers (Harwood, 2005; Wang et al., 2021), the significant use of ambiguous and the significantly low occurrence of exclusive pronoun *we*

seem to be the authors' strategy in minimizing FTA. Considering the background of the main authors, novice EFL writers who are about to receive their first degree, we can assume that they are faced with the daunting task of interacting with a wider academic community when their writings get published. Hence, it is important to have a low-risk strategy (Tang & John, 1999) when projecting their claims in order to convince their readers of the ideas proposed in their writing. Without this strategy, the authors could be prone to attacks from the academic community in the following publication. An ample of instances of the previous studies by Elbow (1999) in response to Ramanathan & Atkinson (1999) which was responded back by Atkinson (2000) could illustrate the interaction between readers and writers in published academic writing.

The high concerns of FTA, particularly among novice EFL writers, could be the result of the potential power differences between the authors and readers. In the previous example, the published scientific articles have become a series of dialogues between professional academics who have a long list of reputable publications which made them hold equal power as academics to persuade their readers or even followers. As Burke (2008, p. 207) stated, "Issues of power become foregrounded as they consider how certain texts and certain writers represent their knowledge claims and how these are recognised as il/legitimate and in/valid." In the case of EFL writers in this study, their power is far least significant compared to the professional academics since the research articles would be their first publication. This situation could likely be the implication of the EFL authors' choice of using exclusive type as the least preferred type. Hence, they could avoid the possibility of being seen as arrogant and mitigate the FTA while attempting to persuade the readers with their ideas.

CONCLUSION

Attempting to continue the discussion by Harwood (2005) and Myers (1989), this study has argued that politeness theory can be applied to examining the interaction between the writers and readers in academic writing through the first person pronoun *we*. We have identified seven functions of pronoun *we* and categorize them into three semantic types, inclusive, exclusive, and ambiguous. Among the three semantic types, we have discovered that ambiguous, referring to either the authors only or authors with the readers, has a significant presence in EFL research articles compared to the other two types, inclusive and exclusive. We have also argued that the overall choice of pronoun *we* used by EFL authors could be distinguished as a politeness strategy to mitigate the potential FTA.

Although this paper has been able to support the attempt to extend politeness application, the current discussion has not addressed the students' awareness of the impact of their rhetorical choice. The preference for ambiguous type has opened a new Pandora of discussion for future research pertaining pronoun *we* usage in research articles, particularly RAs written by EFL authors. Therefore, in terms of pedagogical suggestion, this study could encourage lecturers or writing instructors to raise their students' awareness that small elements in writing like

the choice of pronouns can make various impacts on the readers' reaction to their proposed ideas in the texts.

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