Iraqi university students' use of self-mention in writing

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Abstract

This study examines the use of self–mention in essays written by Iraqi EFL learners compared with essays produced by English native speakers. Self–mention, expressed through first–person pronouns and determiners, plays a central role in constructing authorial identity in academic writing. Drawing on Hyland's (2005) stance and engagement model and Tang and John's (1999) typology of authorial roles, two corpora were analyzed. A mixed–method approach combined frequency counts with functional categorization of self–mention into stance, guide, originator, and inclusive roles. The results indicate that both groups produced 31 tokens of self–mention, but Iraqi learners used them at a higher normalized rate (10.77 vs. 6.74 per 1,000 words). Native speakers preferred singular *I* for stance–taking and occasionally used guide functions to structure texts. Iraqi learners, by contrast, employed more inclusive *we* forms, aligning arguments with readers or broader communities, while rarely using guide or originator roles.Pedagogical implications include raising awareness of the strategic functions of self–mention and encouraging greater use of guide and originator roles in English academic writing.

Keywords: self–mention, Iraqi EFL learners, academic writing, stance, writer identity

ئزؤ ىلؤ كؤ بطؤ ذؤلعؤ ؤظؤعؤ ذ لآزك ايؤلأحؤبطؤ ايؤلأحؤبطؤوظؤى ةغىظؤ ذؤ ب

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طكك

تبحث هذه الدراسة في استخدام ذكر الذات في المقالات التي كتبها متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية عراقيون، مقارنةً بمقالات كتبها متحدثون أصليون للغة الإنجليزية. يلعب ذكر الذات، المعبَّر عنه من خلال ضمائر المتكلم والمحددات، دورا محوريا في بناء هوية المؤلف في الكتابة الأكاديمية. بالاعتماد على نموذج الموقف والمشاركة لهيلاند (٢٠٠٥)، وتصنيف تانغ وجون (١٩٩٩) لأدوار المؤلفين، تم تحليل مجموعتين من النصوص. دمج نهج متعدد الأساليب بين عدد التكرارات والتصنيف الوظيفي لذكر الذات إلى أدوار الموقف، والدليل، والمنشئ، والشامل. تشير النتائج إلى أن كلتا المجموعتين أنتجتا ٣١ رمزا لذكر الذات، لكن المتعلمين العراقيين استخدموها بمعدل معياري أعلى (١٠.٧٧ مقابل ٦.٧٤ لكل ١٠٠٠ كلمة). فضل المتحدثون الأصليون استخدام ضمير المتكلم المفرد للتعبير عن الموقف، واستخدموا أحيانا وظائف الدليل لهيكلة النصوص. وعلى النقيض من ذلك، استخدم المتعلمون العراقيون أشكالاً أكثر شمولاً من ضمير المتكلم، حيث قاموا بمحاذاة الحجج مع القراء أو المجتمعات الأوسع، بينما نادرا ما استخدموا أدوار الدليل أو المنشئ. وتشمل الآثار التربوية زيادة الوعي بالوظائف الاستراتيجية للذكر الذاتي وتشجيع الاستخدام الأكبر لأدوار الدليل والمنشئ في الكتابة الأكاديمية باللغة الإنجليزية.

طكك ذ ةطكف ةَح بـ: د طكئ ةۤ لـعۡ ىطككغبئلأمـ ك بـ كغبـ آج بـ ۤطك ذ بئلآقَنخ بۤ

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1. Introduction

Research has repeatedly shown that there are cognitive and social perspectives of academic writing. These are thought to display the writer's construct of knowledge particularly when the writer positions themselves within the borders of their disciplinary communities. One of the linguistic resources that highlight the writer's position is self-mention, where the writers make explicit references to themselves through the use of either first-person pronouns or possessive pronouns. Earlier research demonstrated that self-mentions could have stylistic motives. However, resent research has shown that these resources can play a significant role in the negotiation of the authorial stance and in engaging with readers through cultural and linguistic links (Hyland,

2005a, 2005b). Choosing between whether to explicitly include themselves in their texts or not, writers decide to create an authorial identity, often shaped by the norms and expectations within their perspective disciplinary communities (Ivanič, 1998; Tang & John, 1999). While Anglophone academic writing increasingly acknowledges the legitimacy of self-mention as a marker of authorial presence, many students—particularly those writing in English as a foreign language (EFL)—struggle with its use. Prescriptive advice in EFL contexts often discourages personal pronouns, promoting an impersonal style that may obscure writer responsibility or weaken argumentative clarity (Lee & Deakin, 2016). Cross-cultural research shows that learners' use of self-mention is mediated by L1 rhetorical traditions, which may favor impersonality or third-person references such as "the researcher" (Pho, 2013). Consequently, learners often display either avoidance of self-mention or formulaic and restricted uses that do not fully exploit its potential functions.

In Arabic-speaking EFL settings, these challenges are particularly salient. Studies have found that learners frequently underuse self-mention, relying instead on impersonal constructions, or else employ first-person forms only in limited methodological contexts (Bouabdallah, 2018; Al-Khafaji, 2019). Recent research on Iraqi EFL students further highlights this trend, showing restricted deployment of authorial roles and a preference for depersonalized references in academic abstracts and essays (Al-Azzawi, 2023). Such practices reflect both the influence of local academic traditions and limited exposure to English-medium scholarly discourse. However, systematic investigation of Iraqi students' use of self-mention remains scarce, despite the fact that constructing a visible and credible authorial identity is crucial for their academic success and participation in global scholarly communication.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining how Iraqi EFL learners employ self-mention in their academic writing. Drawing on frameworks of metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005a, 2005b) and writer identity (Tang & John, 1999; Ivanič, 1998), the research explores the frequency, functions, and rhetorical roles of self-mention in student texts, with attention to variation across levels, disciplines, and writing tasks. By investigating how learners negotiate authorial presence, the study aims not only to document current practices but also to identify pedagogical implications for supporting Iraqi students in developing a more confident and contextually appropriate academic voice.

2. Self-mention and authorial identity

Self-mention refers to the explicit presence of writers in their texts through first-person pronouns (I, we) and related determiners (my, our). It is part of metadiscourse resources used to construct stance and engagement with readers (Hyland, 2005a). By choosing whether, when, and how to self-mention, writers not only signal commitment and responsibility for claims but also construct an authorial identity within disciplinary conventions. Ivanič (1998) conceptualizes academic writing as an "act of identity," where linguistic choices reflect writers' positioning within a discourse community. Similarly, Tang and John (1999) demonstrate that first-person pronouns encode multiple roles, such as "I as narrator," "I as guide," or "I as originator," emphasizing that self-mention is multifunctional rather than monolithic.

3. Self-mention in expert academic writing

Research on published texts reveals that self-mention practices are discipline- and genre-specific. Hyland (2001, 2002, 2005b) shows that while traditional academic norms favored impersonality, writers across disciplines increasingly employ first-person pronouns to claim originality, highlight contributions, and enhance methodological clarity. Harwood (2005a, 2005b) further finds that authors strategically use inclusive and

exclusive we for alignment with readers, self-promotion, or distancing. Diachronic studies also suggest that the use of self-mention has not declined, as often assumed, but has in fact increased in certain fields, reflecting a broader shift toward visible authorial presence (McGrath, 2015).

Functionally, self-mention operates alongside hedges and boosters as part of stance bundles, enabling writers to project authority while engaging readers (Hyland, 2005a). For instance, "we argue" or "I propose" not only clarify authorial responsibility but also frame arguments persuasively.

4. Self-mention in learner and EFL writing

For EFL writers, self-mention poses particular challenges. Research indicates that students often underuse self-mention, leading to vague attribution of claims, or overgeneralize inclusive we, inadvertently creating unintended reader alignment (Lee & Deakin, 2016). Cross-cultural studies show that learners' choices are influenced by rhetorical traditions in their first language (L1), sometimes resulting in avoidance of personal pronouns in favor of impersonal forms such as "the researcher" (Pho, 2013). Tang and John's (1999) framework has been widely applied to learner writing, revealing that novice writers frequently adopt safer roles such as "I as narrator" while avoiding more assertive positions like "I as originator."

Instruction plays a key role in shaping these practices. Explicit teaching that legitimizes self-mention as part of academic stance has been shown to improve learners' ability to construct coherent arguments and take responsibility for claims (Hyland & Jiang, 2016).

5. Arabic-speaking and Iraqi contexts

Studies in Arabic EFL contexts demonstrate both conformity to and divergence from English-medium norms. Bouabdallah (2018), analyzing Algerian master's dissertations, found that students employed

inclusive/exclusive we strategically, though often influenced by local supervisory traditions. In a comparison of American and Iraqi student abstracts, Al-Azzawi (2023) observed differences in self-mention and stance markers, with Iraqi students less likely to adopt explicit authorial roles. Similarly, Al-Khafaji (2019) notes that Iraqi students frequently employ formulaic phrases or impersonal references rather than first-person pronouns, reflecting a perception that impersonality conveys academic formality.

Despite such findings, research on Iraqi EFL students remains limited. Existing studies suggest (a) an underuse of explicit self-mention in introductions and discussions, (b) reliance on formulaic first-person uses in methods sections, and (c) hesitancy to project authorial voice (Al-Khafaji, 2019; Al-Azzawi, 2023). These patterns mirror challenges faced by other EFL learners but are compounded by local academic traditions and limited exposure to Anglophone publishing practices.

The reviewed literature underscores that self-mention is a crucial resource for constructing authorial identity, but one that varies across disciplines, genres, and linguistic traditions. For Iraqi EFL learners, the evidence points to restricted and formulaic use of self-mention, likely shaped by cross-cultural transfer and perceptions of academic formality. However, large-scale corpus-based studies in the Iraqi context remain scarce, as do longitudinal investigations into how instruction might reshape learners' authorial practices. This gap highlights the importance of examining Iraqi students' writing to better understand how they negotiate academic voice and how pedagogy might support them in developing more confident, context-appropriate use of self-mention.

6. Research questions

The current study seeks to answer the following questions.

1. How frequently do Iraqi EFL learners employ self-mention (first-person pronouns and determiners) in their academic writing?

2. What functional roles (e.g., narrator, guide, originator, architect) do Iraqi EFL learners assign to self-mention in their writing?

3. How do Iraqi EFL learners' uses of self-mention reflect cross-cultural rhetorical traditions (e.g., impersonality or use of "the researcher") in comparison to Anglophone academic norms?

7. Data collection

Data for the current study were collected from two research sites. The first is the Department of English at the University of Babylon where Iraqi fourth stage students majoring in English were asked to write descriptive essays of about 200 words. The second research site is the Department of English Literature at University of Bath where senior students were asked to write descriptive essays of the same length (200 words). To establish a background of sameness, the two groups of participants were asked to write argumentative essays covering the same topics.

8. Data analysis

The analysis focused on self-mention, defined as the explicit linguistic presence of the writer through first-person pronouns (*I, me, my, mine, myself, we, us, our, ours, ourselves*) and possessive determiners. Following Hyland's (2005a) metadiscourse framework and Tang and John's (1999) typology of authorial roles, self-mention was investigated along three dimensions:

1. Frequency – the overall occurrence and normalized rate of self-mention per 1,000 words.

2. Forms – the distribution of singular (*I, my*) versus plural/inclusive (*we, our*) forms.

3. Functions – the rhetorical roles of self-mention, categorized as:

o Stance (e.g., *I think, I believe, in my opinion*),

o Guide/Architect (e.g., *I will discuss, In this essay*),

o Originator/Claim-maker (e.g., *I argue, We propose*),

○ Inclusive engagement (e.g., *we should, we need to*).

9. Results

The results of the data analysis will be presented in three sections, corresponding to the research questions presented above.

RQ1. Frequency of self-mention in Iraqi EFL and native-speaker essays

The analysis revealed differences in the overall frequency and distribution of self-mention between the two groups. Across the corpus of native-speaker essays, which comprised 4,601 words, a total of 31 self-mentions were identified, representing 6.74 instances per 1,000 words. In contrast, the Iraqi EFL learner essays, consisting of 2,879 words, contained the same number of self-mentions (31 tokens), but with a higher normalized frequency of 10.77 per 1,000 words.

A closer examination of pronoun choice indicates that the native-speaker corpus relied primarily on singular forms, particularly *I* (24 instances) and *my* (6 instances), with minimal use of *we* or *our*. By comparison, the Iraqi EFL learners distributed their use of self-mention more evenly: *I* (7), *we* (8), *my* (5), and *our* (5). This suggests that while both groups used self-mention resources, the native speakers tended to foreground the individual authorial self, whereas the Iraqi learners drew more heavily on collective or inclusive forms.

Impersonal substitutes for self-mention (e.g., *this paper, the researcher*) were infrequent. Only one occurrence was identified in the native-speaker essays, while none appeared in the Iraqi corpus.

RQ2. Functional roles of self-mention

Using a functional framework adapted from Tang and John (1999), the analysis classified self-mention into four roles: stance-taking, guiding/architectural, originator of claims, and inclusive engagement.

The native-speaker corpus demonstrated a strong preference for stance-taking functions, with 13 occurrences of expressions such as *I*

think, *I believe*, or *in my opinion*. A smaller number of guide functions were also found (2 instances), typically realized in statements such as *I will explain* or *In this essay*. No originator roles (e.g., *I argue, we propose*) were detected in this set, and inclusive *we* was absent.

In contrast, the Iraqi learners displayed a different functional profile. Although stance markers were present (7 instances), they were less frequent than in the native-speaker texts. Instead, inclusive *we* forms were comparatively more prominent (9 instances), used to align the writer with readers or the broader community (e.g., *we should, we need*). Guide functions were absent, and no clear originator roles were observed.

These results suggest that native speakers tended to construct authorial identity through individual stance, while Iraqi learners relied more heavily on collectivizing strategies.

RQ3. Cross-cultural comparison of rhetorical practices

The comparative analysis highlights cross-cultural differences in the rhetorical realization of self-mention. Native speakers showed a stronger orientation toward individualized stance through frequent use of *I* and evaluative expressions. Their occasional use of guide functions indicates an awareness of the writer's role as a text organizer.

By contrast, the Iraqi EFL learners demonstrated a preference for inclusive alignment through *we* and *our*, thereby diffusing individual responsibility and situating arguments within a collective framework. This collectivizing strategy reflects rhetorical tendencies identified in other EFL contexts, where impersonality or collectivization is often perceived as more appropriate to academic discourse than overt self-assertion. Furthermore, the absence of guide and originator roles in the Iraqi corpus suggests limited exposure to Anglophone conventions that encourage explicit textual organization and authorial claim-making.

10. Conclusions

This study investigated the use of self-mention in essays written by Iraqi EFL learners in comparison with essays by English native speakers. Three main findings emerged. First, in terms of frequency, Iraqi EFL learners employed self-mention at a higher normalized rate than native speakers. However, this frequency did not reflect greater authorial presence, as learners distributed their use across both singular and inclusive forms, whereas native speakers predominantly used the singular *I* to project a visible authorial identity.

Second, the functional analysis revealed differences in the roles assigned to self-mention. Native speakers relied on stance-taking *I* forms and occasionally guided readers through the text, while Iraqi learners emphasized inclusive engagement through *we* forms. The near absence of guide and originator functions in the Iraqi corpus indicates a restricted repertoire of authorial roles.

Finally, the cross-cultural comparison suggests that Iraqi learners' reliance on inclusive *we* and avoidance of explicit guiding or claim-originating roles reflects the influence of local rhetorical traditions and pedagogical practices that favor impersonality and collectivization over individual authorial assertion.

Overall, these findings underscore the importance of raising Iraqi learners' awareness of the rhetorical functions of self-mention in English academic writing. Explicit instruction could usefully address the distinction between *I* and *we*, highlight the legitimacy of "guide" and "originator" roles, and model contextually appropriate ways of projecting an authorial voice. Such pedagogical interventions would better equip learners to participate in Anglophone academic discourse while also allowing them to negotiate their own identities as writers.

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