

Original Paper**Language use in English academic writing by a tertiary overseas student**

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Abstract

This study attempts to explore language resources in English academic writing. For students, especially those who are non-native speakers of English, it is difficult to express their findings and/or opinions in an academic essay while following an appropriate style. However, students are required to write several academic essays for assessment in order to complete degrees.

The aim of this study is to examine linguistic resources, especially lexico-grammatical resources, in a high score text which was written by an overseas student. Appraisal theory within Systemic Functional Linguistics is a framework to accommodate 'analyses of stance as positioning in relation to values and voices in a text' (Hood, 2004 p. 13). The result shows that lexico-grammatical resources in the high-score text have similar features to those in published articles and high-score writing in IELTS. To be recognized as appropriate English academic writing and to demonstrate a clear understanding of English academic writing, it is necessary to show logic and objective opinions rather than emotions or personal opinions. This suggests that it would be helpful for novice writers to know appropriate lexico-grammatical resources to improve their writing.

Key words: EAP, SFL, ESL, EFL

Introduction

English academic writing is important for students in order to complete their courses, especially in western universities, because students are required to write several essays in order to assess students' understanding. Although the importance is widely recognized by practitioners, students, especially from overseasⁱ, who are not familiar with English academic writing, confuse these assessments because it is difficult for novice writers to write an English academic essay in the appropriate style. Universities offer various forms of assistance such as a writing class or an individual consultation for students.

English academic writing is famous by its focus on genre (Hood, 2004). Following an influential study on genre of academic writing (Swales, 1990), many researchers explored various area of academic writing such as studies of the generic structures of academic texts (Paltridge, 1997) and studies on teaching resources (Swales & Feak, 1994, 2000).

Appraisal theory within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides us with 'a means for theorizing the relationship of language choices to semantic functions' (Hood 2004). Researchers applied Appraisal theory to many fields such as casual conversation (Eggins & Slade, 1997), news articles (White, 2002) and English for Academic Purpose (EAP) (Coffin & Hewings, 2004; Hood, 2004; Nakamura, 2009). Applications of Appraisal theory to EAP are a comparative study between published article writers and novice ones (Hood, 2004), a study of linguistic recourses of an IELTSⁱⁱ writing section (Coffin & Hewings, 2004; Nakamura, 2009).

This study explores an essay written by an overseas student using Appraisal theory and how her lexico-grammatical resources affected her score.

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Theoretical framework

SFL this study will adopt regards language as a meaning-making resource (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Broadly speaking, there are two orientations in linguistics. One is a formal explanation of language, and the other is a functional explanation of language. The differences between them can be seen in the understanding of language. While the formalists regard language primarily as a mental phenomenon, the functionalists regard it as a social phenomenon. While the formalists study language as an autonomous system, functionalists study it in relation to its social function in context or external. SFL is a functional approach which Halliday (Halliday, 1978, 1985, 1994) developed and the approach is succeeded by researchers (Hasan, 1984; J. R. Martin, 1992; Matthiessen, 1995). Specific attributes of SFL are Stratification, Metafunction and System.

Firstly, Metafunction is one of the characteristics of SFL. SFL interprets language as a stratified system. Figure 1 postulates ‘the internal language structure of language as tristratal consisting of semantics, lexicogrammar and phonology’ (Hasan, 1996, p. 105).

As Figure 1 represents, semantics is realized by lexicogrammar and lexicogrammar is realized by phonology/graphology. The concept of stratification makes it possible to capture language resources in a context which traditional grammar does not take into account.

Secondly, one of the key characteristics is metafunction. Metafunction is an ideal to grasp language functions. Halliday (1994, p. xiii) argues that “all languages are organized around two main kinds of meaning”. These condensed functions of language are the construal of experience and the enactment of social process. These functions are called ideational metafunction and the interpersonal metafunction respectively. Further, in order to weave these functions together, language needs to create relevance to context. This third function of language is the textual metafunction. Figure 2 attempts to illustrate these three metafunctions of language.

Metafunction enables us to refer to language as a simultaneous system by capturing the functions of language.

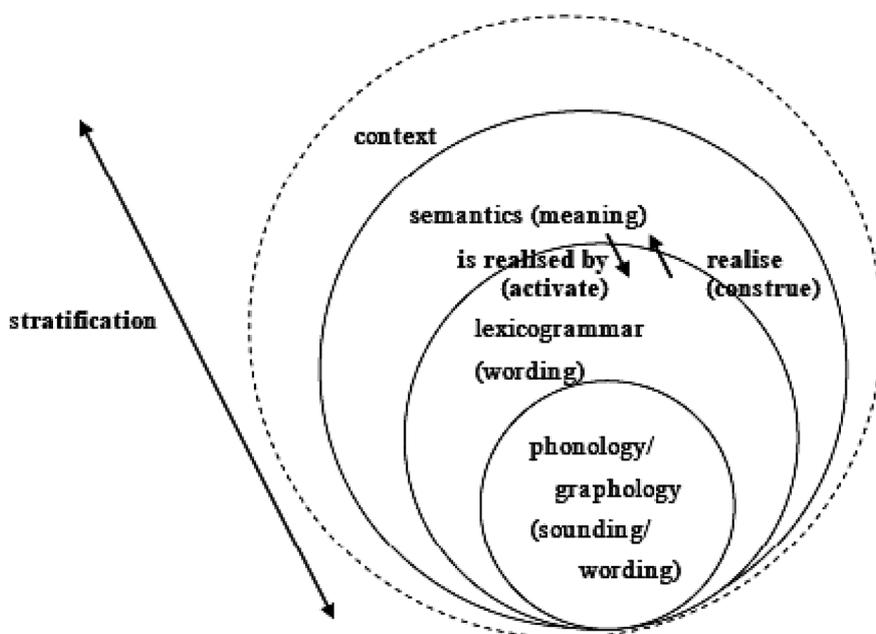


Figure 1 Stratification

(based on Hasan, 1996)

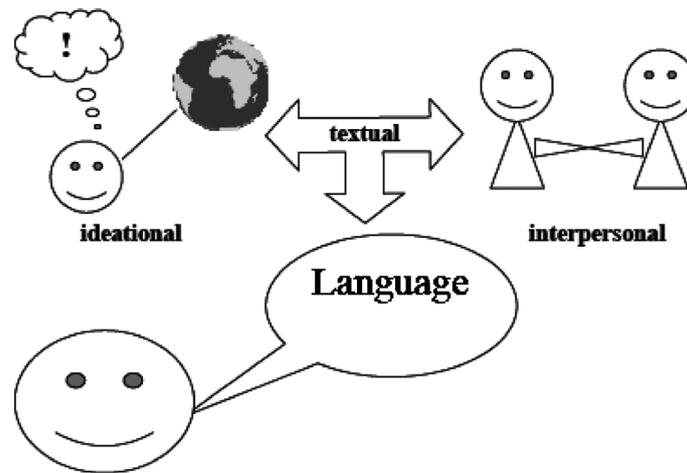


Figure 2 Metafunction

(Mizusawa, 2008)

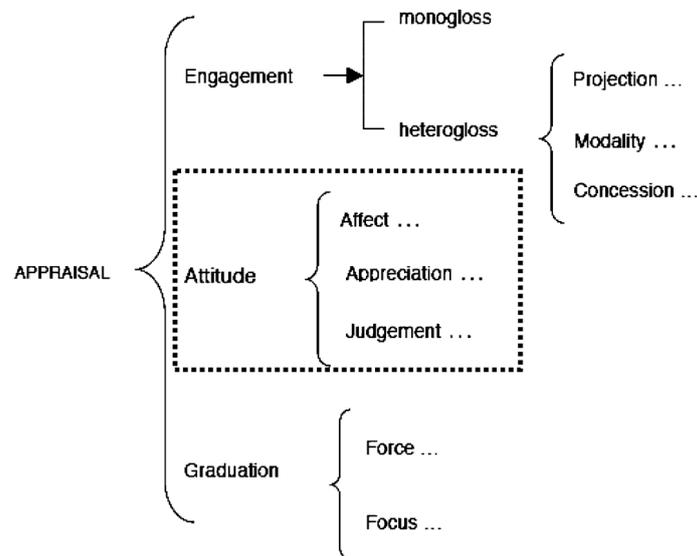


Figure 3 System of Appraisal

(J. R Martin & Rose, 2003)

Thirdly, SFL provides priority to System. System is a way of representing the paradigmatic axis of language and displaying language as meaning potential (Halliday, 1978). Meaning potential is formalized in system networks. Figure 3 represents a system network of Appraisal that this study will utilize.

The round brackets represent simultaneous options while the square brackets represent a single option. For example, in Figure 3, the primary options of APPRAISAL are Engagement, Attitude and Graduation. These options can co-exist. Further options of Engagement, however, monogloss or heterogloss cannot co-exist since the square bracket is used.

Engagement is a resource for expanding and constructing other voices than a writer of a text. Attitude is a resource for showing attitudinal values. Graduation is a resource for grading meanings. This study especially focuses on Attitude among the first primary options of Appraisal.

Further options of Attitude are Affect, Judgement and Appreciation. Affect is the expression of feel-

ings or emotions, Judgement is related to attitudinal values of character and behavior, and Appreciation is related to values of things. Example 1 indicates lexico-grammatical resources of these three options. The following excerpt was a part of the text that this study analysed.

Secondly, the **inequity** [appreciation -] of Government **assistance** [appreciation +] schemes contributes [judgement +] to the Government inability [judgement -] to solve the housing crisis [affect +].

Example 1: Examples of Affect, Judgement and Appreciation

In this excerpt, Affect is highlighted in bold fonts, Judgement is underlined, and Appreciation is enclosed by a square. Words such inequity or assistance are resources for Attitude as Appreciation because words are used to express values of things. Words such as contributes and inability are resources for Attitude as Judgement since these words are used to express values of character and behavior. Words such as crisis are resources for Attitude as Affect since these words are used to express personal feelings and emotions.

Appraisal theory within SFL is a framework of interpersonal metafunction at the level of semantics (Hood, 2004; J. R. Martin, 2002; J. R. Martin & Rose, 2003; J. R. Martin & White, 2005; White, 2001). Appraisal theory makes it possible to find a writer’s evaluation encoded in linguistic resources. Figure 4 maps the location of Appraisal theory in the stratification and metafunction models.

As Figure 4 illustrates, Appraisal theory is a semantic category which is realized by lexico-grammatical resources. Lexico-grammatical resources in Appraisal theory are realized both explicitly and implicitly. This study focused on explicit realization of Attitude. The reason why this study focuses on Attitude is because Attitude makes it possible to explore writers’ values encoded in a text.

Data

The essay this study will analyze was written by an overseas student who is a non native speaker of English. She is one of the students who took the subject being offered to overseas students in order to improve English academic writing and oral presentation skills. Overseas students are recommended to

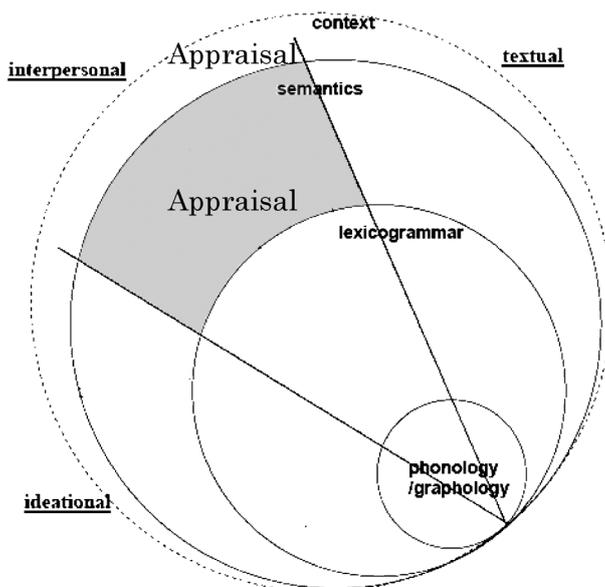


Figure 4 Location of Appraisal in metafunction and stratification (based on J. R. Martin & White, 2005)

take this subject at the early stage of their studies.

The students were required to write a short essay (500–800 words) within 135 minutes as a final exam. The essay question had been presented just before the exam started. The question was that ‘support your answer with argument’. In the essay, students have to present their position toward the government policy based on two articles that were provided to the students one week prior. One is an article on government policy. The title of the article was ‘‘Housing Affordability Fund: The Guidelines’ (Australian Government, 2008). The other is an article against the government policy. The title of that article was ‘Submission to Senate Inquiry into Housing Affordability’ (ACOSS, 2008). The students have to show their positions toward the government policy in their essays.

The highest score among 37 students was 102 out of 120 (equates to 85 out of 100) while the lowest score was 40 (equates to 33 out of 100). This study analyse the highest scored essay. This essay was chosen because it would offer the best example of English academic essay.

Methods

The text is divided into clauses. A clause is a set of words that have one processⁱⁱⁱ. A clause is a unit when data at a lexico-grammatical level is analyzed in SFL. As exemplified in Example 1 and Example 2 presented in the previous pages, attitudinal resources in the essay are highlighted, and these resources are divided into three options Affect, Judgement and Appreciation. At the same time, each resource is divided into either positive (+) or negative (–)^{iv}.

Result

There are several tendencies in the text. A strong preference for the use of Judgement and Appreciation was demonstrated. Lexicogrammatical resources for Appreciation and Judgement amount to twice as many as those for Affect. In addition, Affect does not hold any negative value, while Judgement and Appreciation hold negative value frequently. Table 1 summarizes the result.

Regarding Judgement, negative values are used far more than positive values. On the other hand, Appreciation shows the similar level of negative and positive values.

Another feature characterizes the text. Extensive use of nouns evoking Attitude is also found throughout the text. For example, the writer frequently employs nominalization such as inequity, inefficiency, inability, affordability, exclusion and contribution. Example 2 is an extract from the text.

The reasons for this include the **inefficiency** [judgement –] and **inequity** [judgement –] of **assistance** [appreciation +] provided for first home buyers, and **exclusion** [appreciation –] of indigenous population from the housing market.

Example 2: Nominalization of resources evoking attitude

In this excerpt, the nominalization that realizes Attitude is highlighted in bold fonts. The considerable use of the nominalization makes the text distinctive.

Table 1 Attitudinal values in the student’s text

Attitude	Affect		Judgement		Appreciation	
	positive	negative	positive	negative	positive	negative
number of resources	14	0	9	18	15	17
total	14		27		32	

Discussion

The results reveal several reasons for the high score. These are the frequent use negative Judgement, the strong preference of Appreciation, and the considerable employment of the nominalization.

Firstly, there seems to be many resources that evoke negative Judgement because the position of the text is against the government policy. The student that wrote the text explicitly judges the government policy. This feature of the text satisfies the requirement of the learning policy at a tertiary level. Uni Learning in University of Wollongong (2006) proposes that students at a tertiary level are required to express a judgement in their writing. The student presents her judgement on the government policy in an appropriate way.

Secondly, the text shows the extensive use of resources evoking Appreciation rather than Affect. The preference to Appreciation over Affect is a significant feature of academic writing (Nakamura 2009, Hood, 2004a, 2004b). Appreciation enables the shift from a personal attribute to institutionalized one (J. R. Martin, 2000). As a result, the use of Attitude as Appreciation could reduce subjectivity in a text. Further, Nakamura (2009) demonstrates that the difference between a high score and a low score in IELTS is expressed in the choice of Appreciation and Affect. Appreciation tends to be used in a text with a high score, while Affect tends to be used in a text with a low score. Thus, the dominant deployment of Appreciation over Affect would be one of reasons why the text could get a high score.

Finally, the frequent occurrence of the nominalization makes the text outstanding. As Example 2 indicates, the writer employs the various nominalizations. Nominalization is “the single most powerful resource for creating grammatical metaphor” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 656). Nominalization functions to technicalize and rationalize a text (Ravelli, 2003). In addition, one of the effects of nominalization is “[it] loses its original *raison d’être* and tends to become...a mark of prestige and power” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 657). Thus, the considerable use of the nominalization adds proficient features to the text.

Conclusion

This study attempted to explore linguistic resources, especially lexico-grammatical resources, of the high score text written by an overseas student. The expression of the writer’s stance toward the question is important for English academic writing. This is an essential requirement at a tertiary level.

The analysis shows several features that characterized the high score text. The features are the use of Appreciation over Affect, the explicit demonstration of Judgement and the employment of the nominalization. These features are similar to those that the previous studies (Hood, 2004; Nakamura, 2009) argue. To be recognized as an appropriate English academic writing and a clear understanding, several characteristics are pointed out. Encoding Attitude as Appreciation rather than Affect is preferred. This choice makes it possible to change personal feelings or emotions to de-personalized ones. Similarly, the frequent use of the nominalization is deployed. The nominalization also functions to reduce subjectivity of a text and offers an authorization with a text. In sum, to express a clear writer’s stance while refraining subjectivity is an important factor to obtain a high score.

Appendix: A full text of the highest-scored essay

Many Australians have lost the hope of owning their own home as the housing crisis is getting worse day by day. To deal with this problem, Government has decided to invest up to \$512 million on the Housing Affordability Fund which promises to lower the cost of new homes. However, it is not very likely that the Government would be able to solve the crisis with this fund alone. The reasons for this include the inefficiency and inequity of assistance provided for first home buyers, and exclusion of indigenous population from the housing market.

Firstly, the inefficiency of Government's assistance for first home buyers makes it less likely that the Housing Affordability Fund can solve the crisis. Government grants are not targeted to the right group of people. For example, most people who receive the First Home Owners Grant (FHOG) are people earning an income above the average level (ACOSS, 2008). This makes housing more unaffordable for lower income households who are mostly affected by the crisis. Therefore, the inability to access the FHOG by many low income earners makes it difficult for the government to solve the crisis.

Secondly, the inequity of Government assistance schemes contributes to the Government inability to solve the housing crisis. One example of such a scheme is First Home Saver Accounts, through which the savers enjoy low tax and a Government contribution amount (ACOSS, 2008). Although it is encouraging for first home savers, it is not equitable because "low income Australians receive a lower Government contribution than higher income earners" (ACOSS, 2008, p. 5) address the issue of inequity, it will not be able to provide affordable housing for low income earning Australians.

Another factor that hinders the success of Housing Affordability is the exclusion of many indigenous people from home ownership and private rental market. According to ACOSS (2008), not enough money is invested in Aboriginal housing and many aboriginal people are not included in private rental markets. The Australian Government (2008) promises to improve housing affordability for home buyers, but makes no statement about any benefits of the fund to indigenous population. While all social and economic income groups are affected by the housing crisis, Government's failure to address the special needs of different social groups makes the Fund less effective.

In conclusion, the government's response to the housing crisis fails to address many major problems in the crisis. The Housing Affordability Fund does not deal with the main causes of the housing crisis like the inefficient mechanisms used in previous Government assistance schemes. Also the Fund makes no claim to provide equal opportunities for affordable housing to low income groups or indigenous social groups. Therefore, the Housing Affordability Fund is ineffective in solving the housing crisis in Australia.

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ⁱ The word overseas here means countries other than Australia.

ⁱⁱ IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is ‘the world’s proven English test. Over 1.2 million candidates take the test each year to start their journeys into international education and employment’ (IELTS, 2009).

ⁱⁱⁱ A process here almost equates to a verb in terms of the traditional grammar.

^{iv} The words Positive and Negative are defined in a writer’s assessment of people, places, things, happenings and the state of affairs. For example, ‘praising’ is regarded as a positive assessment, while ‘blaming’ is regarded as a negative assessment by the writer.

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