Writing Across the Curriculum

Framing Your Research for Readers: Interaction, Engagement, and Stance

Shahin Moghaddasi Sarabi

What Does Writing Studies Research Say?

Until very recently, academic writing, especially in science and related disciplines, was generally assumed to be an impersonal and objective presentation of facts. This assumption has started fading away gradually thanks to the studies in rhetorical structure as well as linguistic features of academic texts.

Indeed, writing studies during the last three decades have established that academic writers and readers interact through written texts. When writers construct a persuasive argument for establishing their knowledge claims on a topic, writers should offer a credible representation of themselves and their research. Hyland (2005) argues that writers seek to achieve this "by claiming solidarity with readers, evaluating their material and acknowledging alternative views, so that controlling the level of personality in a text becomes central to building a convincing argument" (p. 173). Writers need to conceive of writing as 'dialogic' (Bakhtin, 1986) and seek to create a kind of "interaction and evaluation" (Hyland 2005) that is indispensible to writing in academic disciplines.

Academic writing involves more than facts; it involves 'positions', taking sides in relation to both the propositions discussed in the text, to existing research, and researchers who have published on those issues and propositions. So, academic writing is not only about ideas but also about connecting people and connecting people and ideas. Moreover, as Hyland (2005) argues, the rationale for writerreader interaction arises out of the fact that "readers can always refute claims" unless they are persuaded by a valid and effective argument. Accordingly, readers have "an active

and constitutive role in how writers construct their arguments" (p. 176). So, it is important for writers to predict, accommodate, and/or respond to possible concerns and reactions from potential audience.
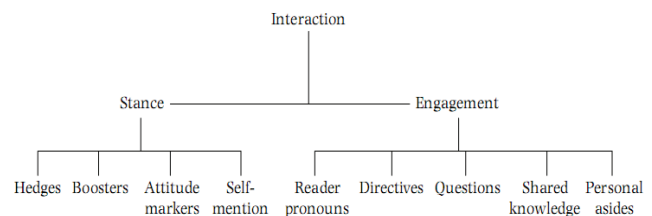
A model of interaction in academic texts:

The model (below) proposes that writers interact with their audience in two main ways or in Hyland's (2005) terms using the two sides of the same coin (p. 176). These are **stance** and **engagement**. Briefly defined, **stance** refers to the ways in which writers express themselves and their voice and communicate their opinions, evaluations, and commitments regarding the topic under research and the people who have already published on it. In taking a stance, writers may choose to expose their personal authority in intrusive ways or rather mask their involvement.

As the other side of the academic interaction coin, engagement denotes the ways writers acknowledge the active participation of their readers, seek their attention, respond to their concerns, and lead them throughout the text to their intended interpretations and conclusions. The following paragraphs elaborate on the key resources and linguistic markers by which stance and engagement functions are realized in academic texts.

Stance:

• **Hedges**: These present information as opinion. By hedging, a writer withholds absolute commitment to a proposition or claim, thus avoiding the risk of being refuted by the reader. Instances of hedges are: may, *might*, at least, *perhaps, seem, suggest, and appear*.

• **Boosters:** These are certainty markers. Writers use boosters to express their assurance over the knowledge claim or evaluation. Some linguistic boosters are: *clearly, obviously, surely,* highly, *it is clear that.*

• **Attitude markers:** These convey writers' affective attitudes to propositions. They may be realized as verbs *(prefer, agree, propos); adverbs (unfortunately, interestingly, hopefully)*; adjectives *(logical, remarkable, appropriate, sufficient).*

• **Self-mentions:** These concern use of first person pronouns and possessive adjectives (I, we, my, our)

Engagement

• **Reader pronouns:** Using pronouns such as *you, your,* and inclusive *we* help to acknowledge the readers' presence and get them onside.

• **Directives:** These require the reader to perform an action. Example: *note, let, assume;* necessity modals: *should, need to, ought;* It is ...: *It is critical to do;*

• **Questions:** Questions engage readers interest and curiosity, encouraging them to follow the argument the writer has structured in the text. Example: *Is it, in fact, necessary to choose between nurture and nature? My contention is that it is not.* Hyland (2005, p. 186)

• **Appeals to shared knowledge:** These are explicit markers where readers are asked to recognize something as familiar or accepted, as in the following example: *Of course, we know that the indigenous communities of today have been reorganized by the catholic church in colonial times and after,...* (Hyland, 2015, p. 183)

• **Personal asides:** These devices allow writers to briefly interrupt the argument to offer a comment on what has been said, as in the following example from Hyland (2015, p. 183): *And – as I believe many TESOL professionals will readily acknowledge – critical thinking has now begun to make its mark ...*

Suggestions For Graduate Supervisors:

It is important to note that the use of different interaction markers varies across disciplines. Supervisors might consider collecting samples which are more prevalent in their discipline and genre to give to students.

References:

Bakhtin, M. (1986) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist). Austin: University of Texas Press.

Hyland, K. (2005). Stance and engagement: A model of interaction in academic discourse. *Discourse Studies*, 2(7), 173 - 192.