

Authorial Stance-Taking and Engagement by Iranian PhD Candidates of TEFL: Perceptions and Challenges

Abstract

The current study aimed at investigating the perceptions of Iranian PhD candidates of the role of stance making and engagement in writing their dissertations and the challenges they face in this area. The participants of the study included 15 Iranian PhD candidates. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews to understand PhD candidates' perceptions of the importance of stance taking and the challenges involved. It was found that PhD candidates had positive perceptions of stance taking by pointing to the benefits of stance taking, expectations of academic societies, and their own identity as an authority in the field. They also pointed to three types of challenges including the challenge of linguistic deficiency, challenge of skill deficiency, and challenge of genre knowledge when writing their dissertations. The results were discussed and their implications were presented.

Keywords: Authorial stance, Engagement, Writing, Academic writing, Perceptions.

Introduction

Over the past decades, academic writing has gradually lost its old form representing impersonal form of discourse and showing one-sided stream of information. It has become an action comprising two sided and interactive flow of information between the writer and the reader. The recent view considers academic writing as a persuasive attempt to use the language to affirm, create and converse social relations. Writers try to show a reliable solidarity with readers and they respect alternative viewpoints so that monitoring the level of personality in a text becomes focal to construct a persuasive debate and reasoning (Hyland, 2005). Despite the urgent need and centrality of taking control of writers' authorial stance to fulfill requirements of rhetorical elements in academic writings has focused on lexico-grammatical elements. It is clear that as an important language skill, i.e. writing plays an essential role in learning a foreign language. This has been the focus of recent studies (e.g., Crystal, 2003, Leki, 2003, Ibnian, 2011, Zainal&Husin, 2011). According to Zainal and Husin (2011), writing can be characterized as the acquired procedure whereby an individual puts experiences into text. This allows the writer to uncover, generalize, illustrate, and impart feelings and ideas. It requires the enhancement of thinking capabilities. Along the same lines, Applebee (1984) and Emig (1977) characterize writing as the externalization and remarking of thinking. They assert that separating writing from the intentions and perspectives of the writer runs counter to the reflective nature of writing.

Accordingly, gaining the ability to write in English as a foreign language is viewed as an inevitable professional educational topic. Lack of competency in writing can cause troubles for EFL learners including lack of skill in communication through formal correspondence, applications, forms etc. Such writing skills are demands of current life style and are needed for social survival. In addition, those who want to peruse further tertiary education also need to have acceptable writing skill for academic survival.

Due to the fact that the number of PhD students in the field of EFL are increasing in Iran, it is really essential to understand about academic writing strengths and weaknesses of these students. In most disciplinary contexts, the shift is from a relatively mono-vocal situation in a writing, where ideas and perceptions are perceived as directly and mostly obvious, to a more multi-vocal position, where they begin to identify argumentation as a covered and compound exercise, demanding careful investigation, clarification, juxtaposition, and logical assessment (Derewianka, 2009, Hood, 2004). Stance, attitude (Biber, 2006) and evaluation (Hunston & Thompson, 2000), have been used frequently to refer to making interpersonal meanings. Hyland (2008) and Martin and White (2005) discovered that published writers used more appreciation for making evaluation, student writers used more affect, for making emotional evaluation, and judgment, for expressing personal opinions. Similarly, Barton (1993) also had found these writers conveyed their opinions through such linguistic resources as affect and judgment. Charles (2007) described an approach to advanced academic writing, the composition of doctoral dissertation for international students, which combined lexico-grammatical and rhetorical-discursive guidance to really tackle the challenges they faced. The combination of discourse and lexis points to the importance of the need to tackle both linguistic and discursive aspects in writing, particularly advanced tasks. Charles (2007) focused on advance writing of the international students committed to compose doctoral dissertation. He combined lexico-grammatical and rhetorical-discursive guidance to alleviate the problems these students were challenging with. This focus on the lexico-grammatical and rhetorical-discursive points to the importance of both linguistic and discursive aspects in writing, especially for advanced tasks. To the best knowledge of researcher, no study has been undertaken on Iranian EFL students in terms of taking stance in their academic writings.

Many studies have focused on the students' writing. Some of them have taken a linguistic approach, for example, textual cohesion, as well as information flow and thematic organization (Ahangari, 2014). Although a majority of these studies provide us with insights on textual aspects of writing quality, they present little information on how students' writers proceed with encoding their knowledge of composition as a process of interpersonal interaction.

What is observed in Iranian context of EFL writing course is that there is a focus on general writing principles and practices and the lack of knowledge and skill in taking stance may lead to unfruitful or non-academic writing? Despite the urgent need to prepare the graduate and postgraduate students for more academic and critical writing in which students should analyze, criticize, argue and take stance to current state of knowledge, to the best knowledge of the researcher, no serious attempts are seen in academic writing courses in Iranian universities to cover such areas of writing.

The final point is pertinent to the discipline and stance taking. Among various contextual factors that have the potentials to affect stance taking by academic writers, the current study targeted the discipline (applied linguistics). In other words, it was attempted to reveal the status of stance taking in PhD dissertation of students in applied linguistics. Based on information from previous studies, stance taking or having voice is different across disciplines, for instance between hard and soft sciences due to differences in epistemologies of knowledge (Hyland, 2000, 2001, Charles, 2003). Accordingly, ongoing research on nature of stance taking in various discipline including TEFL would be rewarding in terms of its contribution to the current literature and our understanding.

Another issue related to effect of contextual factors can be the effect of local preferences of the sub-communities within major discourse communities. Although Iranian PhD students in applied linguistics belong to the big family of applied linguists, there is a possibility of unique ways of stance taking in their writings due to cultural differences. Therefore, the current study would further reveal

the effect of sub-community on the nature stance taking by Iranian PhD students in TEFL.

Research Questions

RQ 1: What are the participants' attitudes towards the importance of stance taking and engagement in writing a dissertation?

RQ 2: What challenges do participants encounter in stance taking and engagement during writing their dissertations?

Research Method

Participants

The participants of the present study were selected from among a population of PhD students at different branches of Iranian universities since, due to availability and manageability reasons, it was not possible for the researcher to choose a purely randomized number of participants. To do so, the researcher contacted PhD students from different universities and won their approval to participate in the current study. To this aim, 15 PhD graduates were selected for the purpose of the present study.

Hyland's Framework of Operationalizing the Stance

Based on text analysis of research papers in eight different fields of the study, Hyland (2005) proposed a model for interaction in academic discourse. Various terminologies like stance, evaluation, hedging etc. (Hyland, 2008) have been used to capture the writer's voice. The studies focusing on writer's voice have viewed this concept from different angles focusing on notions like hedging devices to express possibility (Hyland, 1998b), self-mention (Hyland 2001) and reported speech (Hyland 2000). All these features, although very revealing about stance taking, touch on a particular aspect of stance. Therefore, the current study made use of the model by Hyland (2008) which was more elaborate and more theatrically supported (Hyland, 2008). More recent models like the one by Zhao (2010, 2013) revolved around the three main dimensions: (a) presence and clarity of ideas in the content, (b) manner of idea presentation, and (c) writer and reader presence (Zhao, 2014, p. 2). However, the model proposed by Zhao (2010) was based on the one by Hyland (2008) and only measures authoritative stance in argumentative writings which was not suitable for other writing genres. Therefore, it was concluded that it was still safer to use the model proposed by the Hyland (2008) which had a wider scope and is more general.

Hyland's model (2008) contained two dimensions namely, stance and engagement. However, in the present study, the focus was on the stance dimension which was the attitudinal dimension of Hyland's model. The attitudinal dimension of the model included features for expressing writers' personal position, judgment and opinions (Hyland, 2008). The complete picture of Hyland's model is seen in Figure 1.

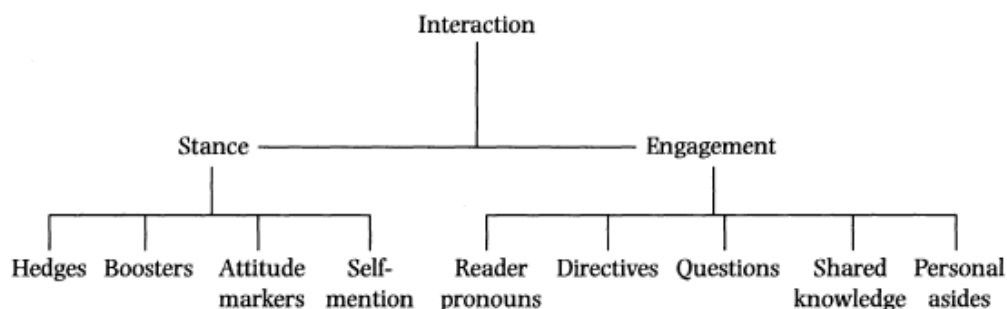


Figure 1. Hyland’s model of discourse interaction (adopted from Hyland, 2008)

As seen in Figure 1, the stance dimension was composed of 4 elements of Hedges, Boosters, Attitude markers, and Self-mention. Hedge devices such as “possible”, “might”, and “perhaps” allow writers to avoid being too absolute. On the other hand, boosters are words such as “like”, “obviously”, and “demonstrate” clearly express writers’ opinion and provide an indication of writer’s solidarity with readers based on shared information. According to Hyland (2005, p. 180), “attitude markers indicate the writer's affective, rather than epistemic, attitude to propositions, conveying surprise, agreement, importance, frustration, and so on, rather than commitment”. Attitude markers can be signaled by “attitude verbs (e.g. agree, prefer), sentence adverbs (unfortunately, hopefully), and adjectives (appropriate, logical, remarkable)”. Finally, self-mention is the use of personal pronoun and possessive adjectives. This is to signal the “propositional, affective and interpersonal information” (Hyland 2001 as cited in Hyland, 2005). For the complete list of stance markers, readers were suggested to study the list of stance marker in Appendix A. This model and its components were elaborated on by the researcher to the participants to guarantee their familiarity with the issue under investigation in the present study.

Semi-structured Interviews

A set of questions (Appendix B) was prepared for a semi-structured interview to investigate the perceptions of the participants of taking stance in their thesis chapters. In order to ensure the content validity of the interview questions, they were shown to two PhD holders in the field of TEFL in line with Brown (2007). To explore the perceptions of the participants, 15 students were interviewed by the researcher. All the interviews were recorded using a recording function of a cell phone (Samsung Galaxy J5) in order to prevent the loss of the data. The interview contained 5 questions targeting participants’ perceptions of how they take stance in writing their theses as well as the challenges they face while writing their dissertations.

Procedure

After contacting the participants in each group (PhD students), the researcher briefed the participants on the purposes of data collection. To this aim, Hyland’s (2008) model of discourse interaction and its components were elaborated on by the researcher to the participants to guarantee their familiarity with the issue under investigation in the present study. Any questions from participants were answered and ambiguities were removed through adequate explanations in terms of

why and how the data were used. The participants were also assured that the collected data were used just for research purposes. Finally, the participants of the study were interviewed to probe their perceptions and challenges regarding the use of stance and engagement as well as the challenges they faced in their writings.

Results

Addressing the First Research Question

The first research question sought to explore the participants' attitudes towards the importance of stance taking and engagement in writing a dissertation. In order to investigate this question, qualitative analysis of respondents' answers to the interview questions was carried out. The first interview question was about respondents' ideas about how challenging is stance taking in writing. Based on respondent's ideas, they found stance taking challenging, but in terms of linguistic challenge. They found it challenging in terms of though organization and the concepts they need to put forward for stance taking. Some of the responses are as follows:

Yes, it is challenging. When you want to show your position with regard to a particular issue you need to have to be knowledgeable enough about that issue and know how start and end an argument.

Well, it is not that much difficult to write how you think about a topic. However, you need to have some valid information and sometimes real statistics to based your ideas on some facts. To simply say that you agree or disagree is not enough and you should provide reasons for your opinions and thoughts.

As it is seen in the above examples, it seems that PhD candidates do not have problem with linguistic aspects (such as stance markers and engagement markers) of stance taking and were more concerned about the conceptual aspect of stance taking. PhD candidates' answers were also in line the findings of the first research question. Earlier it was found that most of the linguistic elements of stance taking were present in the dissertations of the Iranian PhD candidates.

The second interview question was about candidates' ideas about contribution of stance to writing. The answers of the interviewees were affirmative in that all of them unanimously agreed that stance taking significantly contribute to their writings. Some of the answers are as follows:

It is quite clear that stance staking contributes to the quality of writing. We as PhD candidate need to have our own voice when writing. Simply gathering information and reiterating them is useless as long as you cannot reflect your own perspective.

Yes, it contributes to our writing. Reasoning, and arguing about our own view is part of our work. It is the nature of scientific community to express personal way of looking at issues. However, this personal outlook should be flexible and based on facts and reliable information.

In response to the third interview questions respondents repeated their previous answers and said that when stance taking is considered significant in writing then it will make your writing effective. Some of the answers are as follows:

Of course it will make your writing effective. Effectiveness is dependent on expectation of

scientific community and as long as personal voice is considered an importance part of academic writing then stance taking is considered effective.

That is clear that stance taking make our writing effective. When you as a PhD candidate cannot add anything to the current knowledge about a particular issue then you're writing may not considered an effective writing. Such texts without any stance taking cannot contribute anything to the science.

The fourth interview question was about how stance marking matters to them. All PhD candidates unanimously agreed that stance taking is important to them and it is one of their concerns to make effective and appropriate use of stance taking while writing their dissertations and articles. Some of their accounts in this respect are as follows:

It matters to me a lot. Even more than anything else when trying to organize my composition. To me the most part of any dissertation is the part requiring to argue for your own perspective and convince your readers that you are making an important contribution to the field.

Stance taking is essential part of academic writing and I have always tried to better myself in stance making. It is not an easy task to take stance in an appropriate way and you need to as convincing as possible.

In another question, participants were asked to comment on their likes and dislikes about stance making. They repeated their concerns regarding the use of stance taking in writing and stated that it is an integral part of any scientific writing including dissertations. They expressed their likes for stance taking but also commented that it is a challenging tasks and they sometimes are under pressure when trying to reflect their voice. Some of the responses are as follow:

Well it is my wish to properly reflect my position when writing and absolutely like it. It is the ultimate part of a writing and shows the excellence in writing. I have always wanted to have my voice in writing.

Yes, I like it. I like to write with a tone of myself but I should admit that is really difficult to express your own way of thinking about a particular issue. You need to be very competent in writing and have a very organized and logical mind.

With regard to the last question that asked the participants to comment on whether stance making caused their writing look more professional and influential or not they expressed similar ideas as in previous questions. They again highlighted the importance of stance taking, its role in scientific community, and its challenges. They event told that when they look back at their writing when reflecting their own ideas, they feel that the writer has more authority in writing. Some of the answers are as follows:

Yes of course. When you write in a manner that shows your stance it seems more professional. You have feeling the write has more authority and has good command of topic. Personally, I feel more confident when reflecting my own views. I like to be seen an active writer who has his own tone rather a passive one just repeating others' opinions.

Of course it makes your writing professional and influential. As I said earlier it is an essential part of scientific writing and your expected to have your own contribution to the topic. Therefore, when

take stance while writing your dissertation your dissertation would be more academic and professional.

Addressing the Second Research Question

The second research question was about the challenges participants encounter in stance taking and engagement during writing their dissertations. Based on participants' answers, 3 areas of challenges with regard to stance taking were identified. These areas included linguistic (proficiency) challenges, skill challenges, and genre challenges. Each of these challenges are defined in Table 1.

Table 1. Areas in which participants feel challenges when writing their dissertations

Kind of challenges	Description
Linguistic (proficiency)	It refers to challenges pertinent to language knowledge of the writers.
Skill	It refers to the challenges pertinent to the skills needed to take stance.
Genre	It refers to the challenges pertinent to the genre knowledge needed to take stance.

With regard to linguistic challenges, Iranian PhD candidates reported that although they have good language proficiency they still suffer from enough linguistic knowledge to take stance in a creative and acceptable manner. They pointed to the fact that their English language knowledge still needs to be enhanced to be able to write more easily and creatively. Some of their responses are as follows:

One of the big challenges is out English language proficiency. We are neither native speakers nor a perfect second English language speaker. It is not questionable that before being familiar about how to take stance we need to have perfect English language knowledge which allow us to write more native like, more accurately and appropriately, and more complicatedly.

English language proficiency is one of the factors PhD candidates still suffer from. Although they have acceptable level of language proficiency, they lack the fluency to allow them write fluently and smoothly.

The second challenge was the one relate to the needed skill for taking stance. PhD candidates stated that they sometime feel quite confused and exhausted when trying to give some personal tone to their writing. They cannot decide where to start, how to start and how to evaluate the correctness of their expressions. Some of their responses are as follows:

Personally I don't have the confidence about how to take stance when writing. I think PhD candidate need to know how to take stance. In other words, they need specific training about various ways they can use for stance taking when writing dissertations.

One of the challenges in stance taking is that we have not been trained how, where, and when to take stance. We need to be skillful in taking stance and know specific strategies for taking stance.

The last category of challenges is the genre challenge. In this category participants raised their concerns regarding the steps and strategies when taking stance. This category of challenge is labeled genre challenge because participants talked about the various steps and parts in stance taking. To be more specific, PhD candidates stated that they need to exactly know how to start stance taking, how to expand and how to conclude. These steps are similar to the way various genres like academic genres are structured. Some of the PhD candidates' responses are as follows:

Like most academic genre we need to know how stance taking structure develops and concludes. For instance, when writing an abstract we know how to open the abstract and how to justify the study and highlights its significance and how to conclude it. In the same way we need concrete and specific pattern to know how stance taking is developed and concluded.

We have passed several writing courses but none in stance taking. May be the most similar genre of writing to stance taking is argumentative writing in which you argue about your ideas, give reasons and document them and try to convince your reader in the best method possible. Similarly, it would be much more fruitful if we know specific steps of stance taking.

Discussion and Conclusions

The current study sought to examine the Iranian PHD students' attitudes towards the importance of stance taking and engagement in writing a dissertation. Moreover, the challenges the participants encountered in stance taking and engagement during writing their dissertations were also probed. It was found that PhD candidates had positive perceptions of stance taking by pointing to the benefits of stance taking, expectations of academic societies, and their own identity as an authority in the field. This positive perception may come from their consciousness regarding the value of stance taking in academic communities. This consciousness could have been raised from their own observation that personal voice is valued in academic publications or from what they have learned in their courses. With regard to the former one, it should be noted that PhD candidates have to read many academic and specialized materials during their education. Such exposure can raise their awareness regarding the value of stance taking in academic work. Furthermore, PhD candidates particularly in the field of applied linguistics pass certain courses containing theoretical discussion of English for Specific Purpose which familiarize them with expectations of discourse community from academic writing including stance taking. Other studies have also reported that PhD candidates pass courses related to English for Academic Purposes courses with a focus on rhetorical consciousness-raising (e.g. Belcher, 2004, Casanave, 2003, Swales & Feak, 2000).

One more aspect of the current study dealt with challenges PhD candidates suffer from when attempting stance taking in their dissertations. They pointed to three types of challenges including the challenge of linguistic deficiency, challenge of skill deficiency, and challenge of genre knowledge. The challenge of linguistic deficiency was about the fact that Iranian PhD candidate in spite of their good command of English were suffering from adequate English language proficiency. This seems a logical problem as most of Iranian PhD candidate learn English as a foreign language. Fareed, Ashraf, and Bilal (2016) have reported that their Pakistani students were suffering from linguistic deficiency. That is while Pakistan is an ESL country in which English is considered a second language and majority of the Pakistani people are good English speakers. One thing that add to the challenge of linguistic deficiency is the difficulties of L2 writing. Writing is a very challenging skill requiring

accurate knowledge of language. According to Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) writing has been a major concern for both English language teachers and learners. The second challenge was reported as skill challenge. In other words, PhD candidates felt that they don't have the needed skill to take stance fluently and confidently. They could feel overwhelmed and could not start stance taking without hesitations. In post graduate courses, PhD candidates in applied linguistics receives lot of lecture on the theories of language learning, and language skills without any practical course teaching them how to write academically based on some concrete guidelines.

Another challenge reported by the PhD candidates was the genre challenge which pointed to the fact that they were not familiar with the structure of stance taking. In other words, they are not familiar with different parts of stance taking and their functions. This awareness of PhD candidates regarding generic structure of stance taking may come from their familiarity with the concept of genre and academic genre in particular. Most of Iranian PhD candidates in applied linguistics pass courses on ESP which contains topics of genre and academic writing. The genre approach to writing has been the subject of research among applied linguist (Cheng, 2008, Hyland, 2007, Paltridge, 2007). Paltridge (2007) has asserted that many writing problems come from writing conventions and patterns as most learners are not aware of such patterns and conventions. Most researchers believe that genre information should be given to the learners explicitly otherwise they may follow their own understanding of writing which may not in line with the contextual conventions of different genres (Freedman, 1993, 1999, Freedman & Medways, 1994 Paltridge, 2007).

Acknowledgement

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Appendix A

List of engagement and stance markers (Hyland, 2005)

Engagement Markers
Reader pronouns: let us, let's, one's, our, (the) reader, us, we, you, your
Interjections: by the way, incidentally, key
Questions:?
Directives(Imperatives): add, allow, analyze, apply, arrange, assess, assume, calculate, choose, classify, compare, connect, consider, consult, contrast, define, demonstrate, do not, don't
Directives(Obligation modals):have to, must, need to, ought, should

Stance Markers
Attitudinal Markers: agree(s), agreed, disagree(s), disagreed, expect(s), expected, prefer, admittedly, amazingly, appropriately, astonishingly, correctly, curiously, desirably, expectedly
Boosters: actually, believe(s), believed, beyond doubt, certain, clear, definite, demonstrate(s), demonstrated, doubtless, establish(es), established
Self-mention: I, me, my, mine, our, us, we, the author, the author's, the researcher, the researcher's, the writer, the writer's
Hedges: about, almost, apparent, apparently, approximately, around, broadly, certain amount, certain extent, certain level, essentially, estimate, estimated, frequently, generally, guess, in general, in most cases, in most instances, largely, mainly, mostly, often, on the whole, quite, rather X, relatively, roughly, slightly

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Do you think taking stance in writing is challenging? Can you explain with more details?

Do you think taking stance contributes to your writing?

Do you think stance making makes your writing effective?

Does stance-making matter to you?

Do you like to take stance in your writing? Why?

Do you think stance making has caused your writing more professional and influential?