

**Stance in the Academic
Writing of Zimbabwean Students
Using English as a Second
Language**

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Abstract

Undergraduate learners writing in English as a Second language have to deal with a two-pronged challenge- expressing themselves in a second language and adjusting to the writing conventions characteristic of university. One challenge students face when writing at university level relates to the need to show where they stand in relation to some of the facts they present in their academic papers, a practice known as stance-taking. The present research explored the writing of undergraduate learners from a variety of academic disciplines at a single university (Solusi University) to establish how they deployed stance while operating in a second language. Data was gathered through collection and subsequent analysis of essays from students in five faculties at Solusi University. Purposive stratified sampling was used to select the essays that were used for analysis. The sampling ensured that all the faculties were represented in the data used as the corpus of the study. In addition, the researcher ensured that the different study levels were equally represented in the final sample. The deployment of stance in academic papers demonstrates an appreciation and engagement with material which is not superficial but such is only possible where learners would have understood the language in use. The present research argues that learners do not take stance because they have not really comprehended material presented in a second language and they may not be positioned to write in a manner that is acceptable in the genre. This paper thus suggests that English as a Second language users ought to be taught to write in a manner that is acceptable in the 'academic writing' genre.

Keywords: *Stance, stance-taking, academic writing, English as a second language*

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Introduction

Academic writing in English in Africa has frequently investigated topics such as cohesion and coherence, grammar, and stylistics, but there has been little attention paid to the element of stance. Only recently have studies in this area begun to emerge. Despite an increase in output on this topic, the African continent has lagged behind in such research, despite the fact that it is highly relevant given the continent's English as a Second Language situation. The continent's eerie silence on this subject can be attributed to a number of factors, including the serious challenges that learners already face in terms of sentence construction, tense use, grammar, and so on as they engage in conversation in what is, for most, a second language (Chikara, 2021). The learner in most cases is allowed to fossilise without achieving some aspects of writing that are deemed important in academic settings, and this compounds the challenges of the ESL writer who is operating in an L2 context. As a result, there has been concern about whether the learner has achieved basic communicative competence and whether they demonstrate a basic appreciation of the content taught in the classroom (Chikara, 2021). As a result, issues like stance taking have been overlooked in academic writing pedagogy in Africa. Stance has to do with expression of writer attitude toward a subject that writers will be writing (Cox, 2017). This is done mainly through use of metadiscourse markers like hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers, self-mentions, and evaluative adjectives (Swales & Feak, 2001). Additionally, authors use metadiscourse markers to engage with their imagined reader in order to forge and establish a relationship with them and exert influence over them in a variety of ways (Adel, 2006).

Literature Review, Theoretical Framework and Contextualisation of Study

Stance-taking

Stance-taking has become the buzzword in recent Western research on academic writing. The work of Lancaster (2011, 2012, 2014, 2014; Lancaster & Aull, 2014) has been the most influential thus far where he has delved into issues of how students generally take a stance, face challenges with presenting stance and how educators can be able to identify stance. Lancaster has not been a lone voice as many other scholars have dealt with the subject from a variety of perspectives as attested by Englebretson (2007). According to Englebretson (ibid) these scholars have dealt with the notion of stance either implicitly and explicitly. The broad approaches taken to tackle the subject have seen several fields and sub-fields converge. As a result, there has been work on stance undertaken by scholars who are inclined toward theory and perspective such as Systemic functional Linguistics, Discourse-

Functional Linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis and Interactional linguistics amongst others.

For scholars new to stance taking, the discipline may appear to be shrouded in mystery as scholars in the discipline have frequently taken it for granted that their audiences understand what is. As a result, there are so many papers (academic and non-academic) which address the notion of stance, yet the authors may not know that they are doing so. Stance has to do with speaker/ writer positioning and in the context of academic writing (which is the focus of this paper) it has to do with how writers position themselves relative to a constellation of positions given in their papers (Chikara, 2021). Jaffe (2010) posits that stance-taking is in-fact one of the most important things we can do with words since it has to do with the assigning of value to objects.

In seeking to define stance Henderson and Barr (2011) posit that it has to do with the expression of attitudes, feelings, judgements and commitment concerning a message. The expression of these is found in the choice of lexical items that the learners then use in their writing. The lexical items that may be used to express stance would thus include adjectives that show an evaluation or reporting verbs. This, however, is not a simple task for users of English as a Second Language. These writers' formulations are frequently in the form of formulaic expressions and sequences which are usually the result of language drilling. This has frequently caused scholars to pose questions of consciousness on the part of such writers who engage in writing as a product and not as a process.

Students writing in a second or foreign language face numerous challenges. These challenges have been well documented and there have been several attempts at helping address these. Some of these challenges have to do with issues of cohesion and coherence where students fail to write essays that demonstrate the much talked about flux and fluidity that often defines the high scoring student from those who fail to score high.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory argues that when we work with language our primary aim is to achieve particular ends through the way we use language. A framework has since been devised within SFL for the analysis of language and the ends to which the language is used. The very notion that SFL theory is a theory that addresses language, language use and the purposes behind language use and choices implies that we can use the frameworks suggested in the theory to identify instances of stance in discourse.

Interaction with studies on academic discourses points to the notion that while students face challenges with attribution and grammar, these do not contribute as much as does their inability to present essays that are “reader-oriented, evaluation ridden, dialogic, multi-voiced, and contextualised” (Lee & Kamler, 2008; Chang, 2010, 2012). Aspects of being reader-oriented, evaluative, dialogic and having a multi-voiced approach in one’s academic essay writing is what has come to be called “stance taking” in contemporary academic discourse. Several authors have ventured to define what stance taking really entails and a multiplicity of definitions have been proffered. Stance may (according to Du Bois, 2007 in Englebretson, 2007:140) be seen as a form of social action which involves dialogicality, intersubjectivity, the social actors (who enact stance) and the frameworks of linguistic structure as well as the sociocultural value that these structures invoke (Jaffe, 2010; Englebretson, 2007). The notion of dialogicality that Du Bois speaks of relates to the manner in which the interlocutor’s words derive from and further engage with words that have been spoken before. In other words, as students engage in the process of constructing academic essays, they are engaging themselves in dialogue where they are constructing texts in response to questions that have been posed by their academic mentors. They are further engaging in dialogue with authors of texts that they will use or consider as they compose responses to questions.

Current conversations in tertiary education point to the notion that while students face challenges with attribution and grammar, these do not contribute much in terms of their success as does their ability to present essays that are “reader-oriented, evaluation ridden, dialogic, multi-voiced, and contextualised” (Lee and Kamler, 2008; Chang, 2010, 2012). Aspects of being reader-oriented, evaluative, and dialogic and having a multi-voiced approach in one’s academic essay writing is what has come to be called “stance taking” in contemporary academic discourse.

The process of constructing texts in which one takes a position relative to propositions (stance taking) is one of importance in academia hence, the argument that a study on stance-taking would inform the improvement of the overall academic writing skills of university students.

The transformative knowledge churned out by universities is in the form of written documents and in the course of their writing, students often have to take a position with regards to the subject matter at hand (Chang, 2012). It is expected that they move from a mono-vocal position in their writing where they present opinions and perspectives as straightforward and uncontested and employ “careful analysis,

interpretation, juxtaposition and reasoned evaluation” (Lancaster, n.d.). In addition, Shchemeleva (2015) argues that students are expected to write critically and use facts encountered in their reading to come to conclusions. He further states that as students do so they are in fact finding their voice, which may be premised on other thinkers’ research, hence the common call for a need to cite. In the expression of their own voices, students use several linguistic resources that indicate their personal standing with regards to previous studies and issues in focus (Shchemeleva, 2015).

Stance is usually marked through self-mention (the use of the pronoun “I”), or deployment of reporting verbs, verbs of argumentation, and epistemic modals, adverbs and adjectives used for hedging and boosting (Shchemeleva, 2015). Taking on critical-analytic work requires the use of specialised language and, for many students, unfamiliar resources of language and this is shown in the manner their academic essays come across (Chang, 2010).

Academic Writing Challenges of Students in Zimbabwe and the Broader Context

Zimbabwean students experience a lot of challenges upon entry into tertiary education institutions as these colleges and universities have expectations (in terms of academic writing) that are radically different from those at Secondary and High school (Gonye *et al.*, 2012b; Chikara, 2021). These challenges emanate from a gap between the writing expectations at the two different levels. This gap was previously meant to be addressed through the introduction of English and Communication Skills as an extra subject at Advanced level. This has, however, failed to address the challenge as established by Mufanechiya (2012). Schools do not give emphasis to the teaching of the subject and not much effort is put in by students and teachers alike since the subject does not count when one seeks admission into university and only three subjects consisting of the student’s “core” combination are considered. As a result, teachers at university often complain about the writing ability of their students. Some complaints are universal and are usually that the students ‘do not know how to argue’, ‘cannot present ideas clearly’, ‘speak in monologic voices’ (Bartholomae, 1986; Hyland, 2006; Irvin, 2010; Flowerdew, 2012; Correa & Domínguez, 2014; Graff & Birkenstein, 2014; Hyland & Hyland, 2017) amongst other complaints. Other complaints include teacher assertions that students cannot spell or present material that is neither cohesive nor coherent. Students also fail to produce text that is attributed (Neville, 2010) and this is despite the introduction of citation software programs like Mendeley, CiteULike, RefBase and Zotero.

Of the challenges identified in student writing, the most glaring challenge is the student's ability to "speak" as is expected by their lecturers (Bartholomae, 1986; Hyland, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2017). It is also apparent from students' responses to accusations over their ability to speak as is expected by their lecturers that a discord truly exists. Zimbabwean university students, like their counterparts in the rest of the world, usually argue that they have not been adequately armed with such skills (Gonye *et al.*, 2012b; Efiritha *et al.*, 2014). One of the most critical challenges exhibited by student writers is an inability to take a stance in their writing and such a challenge has been attributed to not having been specifically been armed with such skill (Shchemeleva, 2015).

The challenges students face in their writing have been extensively documented but a survey of literature documenting the writing challenges students face will show that the emphasis given to the ESL writer has not been as extensive with some researchers failing to acknowledge that the ESL user faces a multiplicity of challenges with the language and users of English in at university level cannot be treated as a single homogenous group.

Gonye, Mareva, Dudu, & Sibanda (2012a) have explored the challenges that students in Zimbabwe face with their academic essays. Similar studies have also been conducted in South Africa (Cekiso, Tshotsho & Masha, 2015; Dorrit & Zeller, 2010; Nel & Müller, 2010; Pineteh, 2013; Tshotsho, 2014; Tshotsho & Cekiso, 2015; Tshotsho, 2006). These studies in a southern African context however concentrated on facets such as issues of cohesion and coherence, how home background affects performance in the target language, the effect that historical backgrounds have on performance in the target language or how teacher deficiencies affect student performance in the target language. These studies, however, do not address the question of the stance-taking challenges that English as a Second Language users face.

The Zimbabwean Linguistic Context

Zimbabwe is a multi-lingual nation with sixteen languages being officially recognised as national languages in the country's constitution. Of these sixteen languages English is the most dominant as it is used in government, education and commerce most. Though the country does not have a specific document on linguistic policy in Zimbabwe in which policy issues on language are addressed, these issues are addressed through the constitution and Education policy documents.

The English language came to the Southern African nation with the advent of colonialism as the country was colonised by the British in the 1860s. History records that the British came into the country through

the Southern border from South Africa where the British had established themselves firstly in the Cape. Explorations for gold indicated the possibility of a second rand and so the British moved northwards into what is now Zimbabwe in search of the precious mineral. This movement implied a spread of the English language as well. The people north of South Africa already spoke their own Bantu languages with 'Shona'⁹ and Ndebele being the most dominant. Beyond these two dominant languages, thirteen other languages according to the Constitution's fourth section are recognised as official languages (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). These, however, have limited and localised use compared to Shona and Ndebele.

English, from Grade four, is recognised as the official language of instruction as well as a taught language alongside the local languages. This implies that the Zimbabwean student learns at least two languages up to Ordinary level (a period of at least eleven years) with English being one of those. Despite such a long period of learning the language, failure rates (which can be taken to be indicators of competence) are still high and emphasis is on comprehension and creativity when performing in the language. At Ordinary level the student is examined using two tests: Paper 1 asks students to write creative essays on set topics while Paper 2 is mainly comprehension and students are given passages and then asked questions meant at establishing how well they understood the passage. The Ordinary level Paper 1 also includes the argumentative essay which is examined alongside other forms of essays. Reports from the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) indicate the prevalence of vocabulary drilling by teachers with one report advising teachers to "desist from giving pupils vocabulary to memorise as it stifles creativity" (ZIMSEC, 2011:12). Though English is the language of instruction in Zimbabwe, there are obvious challenges regarding learners' communicative competence in the language.

The home situation of most learners in the Zimbabwean context is such that native languages are used most in the home setting alongside English in urban settings. Most rural settings use indigenous languages more, because of the population demography in such locales. English is used to a lesser extent in these locales.

At university level, students use English most, but cases of code switching are not uncommon as educators have been known to code switch at all the levels of the education system in Zimbabwe especially where they feel their mentees have not quite comprehended them owing

⁹ Shona is the result of a merging of several languages which were then deemed to be varieties of the same language owing to their mutual intelligibility (Doke, 2005).

to the choice of language. This creates challenges for the student as the examination process is exclusively in English.

Research Questions

This paper sought to answer questions that centre on the means employed by students in taking stances. As such, the following questions were formulated:

1. Which linguistic devices do ESL learners use in arguing their point of view in written discourse?
2. Do learners realise what is expected of them in their writing?
3. Are there subtle differences in the stance taking of learners from different disciplines in Higher Education?

These questions will be answered using the tools to be highlighted later on in the study when the methodology is discussed in detail. The questions will be answered by means of generating further sub-questions which should help answer the questions above fully.

Methodology

The researcher invited students of Solusi to participate in the study by means of responding to a questionnaire which sought to establish how well versed with the concept of stance taking the learners in question were. From those who volunteered to participate in the study the researcher then ensured representativeness by purposively sampling final participants. In addition to this, the researcher collected essay assignments from willing respondents. These were then subjected to close scrutiny in which the researcher sought to identify language that the learners used to show stance such as the use of self-mentions or the deployment of metadiscourse markers such as hedges, boosters, attitude markers or engagement markers.

Findings and Discussion

The following table summarises results pertaining to the conscious knowledge of stance taking techniques by the learners who participated in the study.

Table 1: Awareness of Stance-taking Techniques

Are you aware of the following stance taking techniques?	Yes	No	Not Sure
1. Hedging	14	24	42
2. Self-mention	73	-	7
3. Boosters	33	6	41

4. Attitude Markers	6	43	31
5. Engagement Markers	8	42	30

These responses show that some of the stance taking techniques were not known to respondents while self-mention proved to be the most widely known means of taking a stance amongst the respondents. A significantly high number of the respondents were not sure what hedging was and the same was also witnessed when learners were asked what boosters were. The table above also shows that at least half of the respondents were not aware of attitude markers and engagement markers.

Additionally, an analysis of the essays submitted by students yielded the results documented in Table 2 below. Column 1 has the code names that were given to the learners. Column 2 tells us how many words were in the student's essay. Columns 3 up to column 7 document (in terms of count) the interactional metadiscourse markers that were found in each of the essays and Columns 8 to 12 document the interpersonal metadiscourse markers found in each of the learners' essays.

Table 2: ESL Students' Use of Metadiscourse Markers

Respondent	Word Count	Interactional Marker						Interpersonal Marker			
		Trans.	Frame M	EvidentialM	Endoph.M	Code Gloss	Hedges	Boosters	Att. Mk	EngageM	Self Men
Lnr 1 Hum	865	4	0	9	3	2	0	0	6	8	0
Lnr 2 Hum	980	3	2	6	0	0	4	0	8	1	0
Lnr 3 Hum	1947	8	3	4	6	1	6	8	72	0	0
Lnr 1 Sci	997	5	1	1	0	1	3	0	11	0	0
Lnr 2 Sci	803	0	1	3	2	0	3	3	0	0	0
Lnr 1 Theo	2196	7	1	21	0	0	16	11	38	0	0
Lnr 2 Theo	2500	2	1	0	0	0	10	6	55	1	0
Lnr 3 Theo	4527	1	1	28	0	2	3	10	43	0	0
Lnr 4 Theo	1407	2	0	8	0	3	0	5	20	0	0
Lnr 1 Educ	1190	1	2	10	0	10	3	0	21	0	0
Lnr 2 Educ	2852	11	2	5	0	0	0	0	38	0	0
Lnr 3 Educ	1696	9	1	12	0	1	13	3	23	0	0
Lnr 4 Educ	1806	11	1	11	1	6	1	5	6	0	0
Lnr 5 Educ	1852	1	1	6	0	0	4	5	13	6	4
Lnr 6 Educ	2232	3	3	8	0	0	6	6	13	4	2
Lnr 7 Educ	1818	1	3	7	1	2	8	3	12	4	2
Lnr 1 Bss	1874	5	0	9	0	3	3	1	16	0	0

Respondent		Interactional Marker						Interpersonal Marker			
Lnr 2 Bss	1227	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	14	0	0
Lnr 3 Bss	924	2	1	6	0	0	6	3	8	3	0
Lnr 4 Bss	1372	1	1	14	0	0	7	6	10	2	0
TOTAL		81	27	169	13	29	87	85	427	29	8

Key

Lnr: Learner

Hum: Humanities

Sci: Sciences

Theo: Theology and Religious studies

Educ: Education

Trans: transition markers

frameM: frame markers

Evidential Markers

Endo: Endophorics

Code Gloss

Hedges

Boostrs: Boosters

Att. Mk: Attitude marker

EngageM: Engagement marker

Self Men: Self Maention

Metadiscourse markers can relate to either form or function. Of the metadiscourse markers tabulated above, columns three to seven mainly relate to textual features while columns eight through to twelve relate to interpersonal functions. The interpersonal metadiscourse markers point to the number of times the learners used language in such a way as to point out that they were involving themselves directly in the discourse.

The table above highlights the different metadiscourse markers that are at the disposal of the learner. We sum how each of these were used by the learners who participated in this study.

a) Hedges

The study defined hedges as metadiscourse devices that authors employ to scale back their adherence to claims. When students were writing their essays, they occasionally used words or phrases like "seems," "may," or "probably," among others, to indicate that they did not want to make a firm commitment to an argument. In this survey, students utilized them rarely, with students from the Faculty of Theology having the highest utilization rates across all faculties. The corpus employed hedging words like "possible," "may," "could," "may," and "appears" as examples. The majority of the time, stance positions were used before hedges. The students utilized these indicators to "fuzz" up their commitment to stances and ideas (Crosthwaite, Cheung, & Kevin, 2017). This approach was favoured by learners since it provides space to argue that they are not really committed to the position if questioned.

Since the student operates from a beginner position in comparison to the mentor, an outright alignment with a position would probably be undesirable. As a result, they would decide to avoid having strong opinions and to just give information that has been supported. This is consistent with the basic idea of CDA, according to which the interpersonal connections between the interlocutors may be seen to affect how they use language. In this instance, the lesser interlocutor (learner) opts to refrain from endorsing opinions that the mentor may not share.

(b) Boosters

On the other end of the scale, boosters were employed by students to demonstrate their fervent support for specific viewpoints. They preceded attitude adjectives in the syntactic formulation of these words, much like hedges do. Boosters, being adjectival, gave more credence to the claims that these ESL writers were making. The Faculty of Theology, a faculty where rhetoric and argumentation were major components of the content presented, had the highest number of tokens for this metadiscourse marker in terms of usage.

Learner 1 Theology deployed more boosters over the least number of words in an essay than any other learner with Learner 3 Humanities whose essay was more opinion laden than objective by evaluators having the second highest booster marker deployment rate.

Boosters were utilized by the students for evaluation purposes and helped to demonstrate how strongly each learner felt about a subject.

When compared to hedges however, there were less tokens for boosters and this could be aligned with the position above that the choices for hedges owes to the inferior position of the learner. Using the same

argument as that above it could be posited that there were low tokens of this marker owing to the relationship between the interlocutors involved in the academic exchange.

(c) Self-mentions

According to Ivanič and Camps (2001), self-mention is perhaps the simplest approach to indicate that someone is about to take a position and would immediately indicate that they are about to contribute to the conversation. By using personal pronouns, authors employed this marker to blatantly portray their own interpretation of phenomena.

It was clear that this scenario may be linked to divergent views on the overt display of personal ideas in academic texts because these markers were among the least often used tools for showing attitude in the learners' essays. According to University of Northern Carolina (2023), using personal pronouns when writing academic articles is explicitly discouraged because it is believed that doing so renders the texts less objective.

One of the main reasons this marker wasn't used in nearly all the essays was the disapproval of the usage of personal pronouns in some literature. However, a significant factor could be the belief that because of the learners' inexperience, their point of view was irrelevant. All they thought they required was to demonstrate that they had understood taught concepts by reproducing scholarly arguments.

Using Fairclough's CDA approach, it is possible to interpret this lack of self-mentions as a demonstration of the three dimensions of discourse in action, with the text choice illustrating the discursive behaviors one might anticipate whenever communication takes place in a society that clearly devalues youth in any form of interlocution.

(d) Engagement Markers

When using engagement markers, writers used phrases like "notice that," "you can see that," and "consider" to directly address their readers. The learners initially stated that they were mostly uninformed of what engagement markers were, and this was also seen in their constructions because there were so few of these markers in the writings that were examined for this study. As a result, the majority of the students' writings lacked the conversational quality that makes it evident that the writer wants to speak to the reader.

This, when viewed from the Critical Discourse perspective reflects a significant awareness of the idea that evaluators possessed more authority and could not truly be reasoned with; as a result, most

constructs just aimed to communicate "facts" and did not present any competing position.

(e) Attitude Markers

Most ESL students were unaware of what attitude markers were. In the study, these were characterized as statements or phrases that explained how people thought about a certain topic. Examples of this include the use of phrases like *inevitable*, *inevitably*, *obviously*, *tragically*, *most crucially*, and *definitely* at the beginning of sentences to indicate that the author has given the sentence some thought and has reached a conclusion.

These markers were often used in the essays of the students. They came in the form of resources for appraisal. The most obvious and well-liked way for ESL learners to demonstrate their position is by using resources of appraisal, according to research. This was demonstrated by the various expressions of appreciation included in the students' writings.

The learners in the current study used evaluative tokens in the form of adjectives mostly. These would reveal underlying views, such as how a writer would instinctively scale and assign value to what they deemed "important." In the same way, they would indirectly diminish the value of an object on the other end of such a scale. These assessments were common in the essays written by ESL students. In their writings, students frequently evaluated their own attitudes, as was evident to us. In some instances, the quantity of these resources was so great that the writers' objectivity was called into question. Nevertheless, the sources were a mirror of the author's perspective because they effectively provided the clearest indication of how the author felt about specific phenomena.

Conclusion

The study established that learners using English as a Second Language did not sufficiently deploy stance in their writing and this was a result of a superficial understanding of academic writing. The failure to adequately deploy stance was apparent through the limited use of metadiscourse markers which are meant to help writers show authorial presence when writing. It is thus recommended that more emphasis be put on teaching learners using English as a Second Language in Higher education contexts. This will enable the students to sufficiently engage texts and be able to be evaluative in their writing so as to sufficiently broaden knowledge and enhance the impact that education can have on communities.

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