11 Describing and Teaching Speech Act Behaviour: Stating and Changing an Opinion

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This study intends to investigate the process of stating and changing an opinion as it is conducted by non-native writers of English. In the process, the study will bring together two strands of usually unrelated research: (1) learners' performance of speech acts in a second language (a branch of second-language acquisition research), and (2) the way in which functions are expressed by skilled writers of Scientific and Technical English (a branch of research on English for Specific Purposes). The central question for us here is, given the goal as described in (2), what is learners' behaviour as described in (1)?

In their academic course work, English-second-language (ESL) students are sometimes called upon to provide a critical review of the work of others and to offer their own view. This sort of review, sometimes called a 'review of the literature', is basic to academic writing, particularly writing for publication. On the face of it, a critical review of the literature would seem to be a very simple proposition. However, research on the grammar and rhetoric of Scientific and Technical English has shown that such a 'review of the literature' can be deceptively complex: the frequency and distribution of the functions expressed, and the structural conventions used to express those functions may be far from obvious, even to non-specialist native speakers (cf. Swales 1990: 137–66) for an excellent review of research on Scientific and Technical English article introductions.

Myers (1989) suggests that politeness strategies are used to mitigate two central impositions expressed in scientific writing: claims made by the writer and denials of claims made by others. To express an opinion is to make a claim (particularly central in ‘establishing a niche’, in Swales' (1990: 141) terms) and to make a claim is to impose one’s opinion on others. The centrality of these two functions, and their impositional nature, require the sophisticated use of politeness strategies, which in turn result in the use of

the variety of speech acts and stylistic features characteristic of scientific writing. The complexity of those features is still being described by researchers, and certainly remains to be taught explicitly to non-native speakers of English.

An additional problem is that the task of performing a critical review of the work of others, with an offering of one's own view, may be culturally difficult for non-native speakers. We have observed many such learners, when confronted with such a task, to simply report views without interpretation and without taking a stand on the matter. The responses of such learners, when asked about their difficulties, suggest to us that they are often quite aware of the impositional nature of the speech acts they are being asked to perform, and simply opt out of performing them (Bonikowska, 1988).

Part of the problem is that by expressing a view, writers are performing speech acts or functions, and acceptable use of speech acts in an academic context may not be overtly clear to non-natives. For example, skilled academic writers may be apologetising for an earlier view, but may do it through a speech act strategy that seems more like a displacement of responsibility onto the scientific community than an individual acceptance of responsibility (a positive politeness strategy, in Myers' (1989: 7–8) terms). Instead of acknowledging responsibility for previous views, skilled writers make it appear that they were victims of circumstance — that 'the field' imposed this view upon them. Myers cites Blake (1983) who dismisses all earlier viewpoints, including his own, this way: 'Thus none of the current ideas on the relation of coding sequences to protein function and structure seems fully correct' (Blake, 1983, cited in Myers, 1989: 8).

Non-natives may not even realise that the writer is changing a position and offering an apology, however covert, for having taken a previously erroneous position. It may also be the case that the speech act is stated by means of language forms that non-natives have trouble interpreting. For example, the writer may use a negative politeness strategy, employing a hedge so as to play down the discrepancy between what s/he had claimed in the past and what s/he ascribes to at the present moment. This hedge may be in the form of a modal with impersonal subject — e.g. 'one might now construe that...', or even a passive, 'it could now be surmised that...'.

What non-native writers, their ESL instructors, and their instructors in academic courses have come to realise is that just because non-native writers of English are good writers in their native language does not mean that they will be effective writers in English. As Kaplan (1988) and others have pointed out, the non-native writer may not be aware of the frequency and distribution of written functions, nor may they be aware of the structural conventions used for expressing these functions. Certainly, as we have already pointed out, the work of Myers (1989), Swales (1990) and others...
indicates that these features, as used by skilled writers in various academic fields may be quite complex.

The job of the ESL student in interpreting and then presenting conflicting views in the academic literature, then, is complex. While reading text in order to comprehend opposing views, ESL students need to identify the functions performed by the speech acts involved (e.g. making a claim, disagreeing with a colleague’s opinion, apologising for an error in one’s own earlier claim, suggesting further research). They may also need to identify sometimes subtle language forms that writers use to express these functions (e.g. mitigation to tone down a statement — ‘a somewhat helpful view’).

Then in preparing a written statement, the ESL students are faced with choosing speech acts that are socioculturally appropriate — for example, knowing if and when to apologise for a previous opinion. If they deem it appropriate to apologise, they need to know which strategies or semantic formulas within the apology speech act set to use (see Olshain & Cohen, 1983). For example, they might use expression of apology (‘I am sorry’) and acknowledgment of responsibility (‘I misjudged the importance of...’), but would be unlikely to include the strategy of promise of non-reoccurrence (‘I will never do that again’). In addition, the students need to have at least some control over the language forms that are considered sociolinguistically appropriate at the given level of formality. Whereas ESL students may be aware of the proper speech acts to use and the semantic formulas appropriate for realising the given speech act in the given context, they may still fail to select the appropriate language forms to convey these speech acts.

It has been suggested that Asian students are taught to represent text meticulously and to respect each text, but not to take sides, to criticise them — ‘the criticism of a neophyte’ (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). Ballard & Clanchy would suggest that Japanese students may justify the bases for differing interpretations of source material but will not test or evaluate these interpretations, as the intention is to achieve harmony. While these students may develop arguments through implication, these arguments are likely to go unrecognised by American readers of their university essays (1991:33). The concern for harmony apparently has deep roots in the Eastern approach to communication, more so than in that of the West. According to Cushman & Kincaid, ‘The Western perspective is seen by the East as that of preserving political, social, and economic freedom for the individual’ (Cushman & Kincaid, 1987).

Myers’ (1989) research indicates that this view about how Eastern and Western perspectives differ, may not apply so simply to the subculture of Western science:

I will assume in the subculture of science: (1) that the social distance between individuals — D — must be treated as very great; (2) that the relative differences in power between individuals — P — are supposed to be small, but (3) that the community as a whole is supposed to be vastly more powerful than any individual in it. Thus...one researcher must always humble himself or herself before the community as a whole. Of course in reality scientists have a network of informal contacts, collaborations and long-standing personal commitments that do not require great social distance. But none of this is to emerge in print...everyone must present themselves as equally the humble servants of the discipline. (1989: 4)

Thus, for Western academics, the complex task is to present themselves in print as humble servants of the scientific community, while at the same time asserting individuality: expressing their unique opinion, making claims, and discounting the claims of others. The use of politeness strategies which involve hedging, use of the passive, modals and other structural conventions described by Myers (1989) permits Western academics to make claims while simultaneously presenting themselves as servants of the scientific community.

This paper reports on conduct an experiment aimed at determining the manner in which ESL students express and change opinions in their academic writing, and the extent to which the skills associated with expressing and changing an opinion in this context can be taught. The research questions investigated in the current study were as follows:

(1) How can the written speech act of stating an opinion and then changing it be characterised amongst natives?
(2) How can the speech act of changing an opinion be characterised amongst non-natives? What similarities and differences are there between native and non-native respondents?
(3) What are the effects of training on the production of the written speech act of changing an opinion?

The study is interdisciplinary in nature in that it combines reading comprehension, writing skill, and sociolinguistic awareness as well. The study has scholarly value in that the field of literacy is currently looking at the relationship between reading and writing in academic settings. It has even been suggested that at times it is difficult to draw the line between reading and writing. Furthermore, there has been a keen interest over the last decade in the role of speech acts in discourse, especially regarding the more complex speech acts such as apologising, complaining, and requesting, since considerable language proficiency is called for in order to understand and to execute them effectively.

At the more applied level, the importance of such research for the training of non-native English-speaking academics cannot be overempha-
sised. There is a need to better understand the sources of difficulty for non-natives in preparing reviews of the literature, and there is a commensurate need to generate training materials that would help to rectify the situation by dealing with such issues in the ESL courses that these students take.

Design

Sample

Twenty-five students in the two most advanced reading/composition classes of the 1992 Summer Intensive English Language and Orientation Program (SIELOP) at the University of Minnesota participated in the study, one class of thirteen as a treatment group and another class of twelve as the control group. The Treatment Group was comprised of six German speakers, four Japanese speakers, and one Korean, Chinese, and Italian speaker respectively. The Control Group also consisted of six German speakers, two Japanese speakers, and one Korean, Thai, Serbo-Croatian, and Arabic speaker respectively. There was also a comparison group of ten native speakers, all teachers at the Minnesota English Center.

Instrumentation and data collection procedures

All three groups received a pre-test in which they were given two brief articles with conflicting views on an academic theme — namely, research comparing the male and female brain. The first, ‘Brain Structure Explains Male/Female Differences’, was excerpted from an article appearing in the New York Times (Goleman, 1989), and the second, ‘Brain Structure Does Not Explain Male/Female Differences’, was excerpted from a book dealing with biological theories about women and men (Fausto-Sterling, 1985). The texts were both about 1,300 words long.

The ESL students were told to role-play a professor who had taken a public stand in favour of the views expressed in one article, but who now had found irrefutable evidence to favour the views expressed in the second article. The students could choose which article would represent their initial position and which their current position. Hence, the student as ‘professor’ was given the task of writing a brief article for an academic journal or newsletter, summarising both views (approximately 80 words per summary), noting that he or she had changed his/her opinion and now ascribed to the second view, and apologising for having previously ascribed to the first view. The task took them approximately 1 hour.

Given the complex nature of the task, the students were given their papers back for the purpose of revision if they did not complete the task as requested — i.e. if they took a position but did not indicate that this was a change of opinion. This procedure was utilised to reinforce the notion that academic writing is usually accomplished through the writing of various drafts, in a process-oriented manner. Thus, one of the investigators read all papers and supplied the students with a brief critique, indicating what portion of the task was misinterpreted or omitted and requesting that the student revise the task.²

The Treatment class of ESL students then received training from their regular classroom teacher on how to write reviews of the literature and how to take a stand in such cases. Parts of five class sessions were devoted to the training, and the students did some of the work out of class. Among their training materials was Leki’s (1989) chapter on ‘Responding to Written Arguments’, which chapter presents two brief texts with conflicting views and then guides students through the summarising of both positions and the formulation of a personal stance on the issue. The students were also trained in the use of appropriate speech acts in their written literature reviews, based on a content analysis of the responses collected from the ten native-speaking ESL teachers/teacher trainees performing the same task.³ The control group received the regular summer course.

Five weeks later, the students were once again asked to perform the same task. This time the two articles with conflicting views were, ‘The Greenhouse Effect is Potentially Disastrous’, excerpted from an article in The Nation (Steel, 1984) and from USA Today (1986), and ‘The Greenhouse Effect is Exaggerated’, excerpted from an article by Landsberg (1984).⁴

Data analysis procedures

Two raters rated the responses on the written tasks in scrambled order so that the raters were unaware of whether the response was from the Treatment or the Control group. The order of pre-test and post-test tasks was also scrambled and the raters were told not to pay attention to the content of the responses. They focused on the language in the responses which could be used to identify the respondent’s position. They rated the responses on a scale of from 4 to 1 for their performance on the task:

4 = Good — a position is stated and then a change of position is stated.
3 = Fair — the two positions are there but one or both may have to be inferred.
2 = Poor — just one opinion was stated and no change of opinion.
1 = Very poor — the respondents did not perform the task. For example, all they did was to summarise one or both of the texts.
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(g) A comment: 'we can’t go on insisting that there are no differences...any more than we could try to cling to the idea that the earth is flat...'

(b) collective or individual responsibility: 'it has become clear that many of us in the scientific community erred when we rejected those early explanations for...'

'what can we do?'

How can the speech act of changing an opinion be characterised amongst non-natives? What similarities and differences were there between native and non-native respondents?

A comparison of semantic formula or strategy use

For the most part, the non-natives used the same semantic formulas or discourse strategies as did the natives. This is not so surprising since the basic moves were specified in the task itself. Thus, the non-native data often included a time frame for the first position, a statement of the first position, a logical connector of concession, a time frame for the new position, an expression of a new opinion, and an explanation or justification for the change of opinion.

With regard to the expression of the new opinion, the non-natives used all three of the sub-strategies used by natives: direct expression of change of opinion, indirect expression of change of opinion, and focus on current opinion. Concerning the explanation or justification for this new position, the non-natives also used all three sub-strategies used by the natives: the writer as agent in the change of opinion, lack of evidence prompting the change of opinion, and new evidence causing the change of opinion.

There were two strategies that some natives used that none of the non-natives used and then there was one strategy used by non-natives and not by natives. One of the strategies used only by natives was that of offering a personal evaluative comment — which Cohen, Olshain & Rosenstein (1986) found to serve as a social lubricant in projective oral discourse6 in rough moments: 'I am embarrassed to say, I found much of the research to be shoddy and the claims unwarranted...'. 'but we can’t go on insistence that there are no differences...any more than we could try to cling to the idea that the earth is flat...' 'This sort of strategy is, in Myers’ (1989) interpretation of the Brown & Levinson model, an unmitigated face-threatening act of criticism, and as such it would probably be unusual to find such a bald statement in print in a professional journal (although such phrasing might be more likely in a letter to the editor of such a journal). The other strategy was that of evoking collective responsibility: 'How wrong we were!' 'it has become clear that many of us in the scientific community erred when we rejected those early explanations for...'

'what can we do?' In these instances, the responsibility is shifted off the shoulders of the individual scholar and instead placed upon a larger, more amorphous group of academicians. This strategy is described by Myers (1989):
One way of making a criticism while minimising the [face-threatening act] is for writers to use pronouns that include themselves in the criticism. Besides the WE that means the writers, there is a WE that means the discipline as a whole. . . . Crick uses the . . . device when drawing lessons from the split gene episode. Lacking evidence we had become overconfident in the generality of some of our basic ideas (Crick, 1979). (Myers, 1989: 7)

The strategy used only by non-natives was that of explaining or justifying their first position: 'The statements... seemed to be very strong, and so we thought that... ' (German speaker), 'We used our best equipment, our best specialist... We could not give consistent foresight... ' (German speaker), 'My observation were strengthened by the scientific investigations of... ' (German speaker). 'In #1, he shows some evidence which... So #1 is more reliable than #2 for me' (Japanese speaker). None of the natives felt compelled to explain or justify the position that they were now refuting. Perhaps it was a deliberate strategy of the natives not to call more attention to their previous position than they had to. The non-natives, on the contrary, occasionally did this.

A comparison of the linguistic forms used

Perhaps the most conspicuous difference with respect to form was in the choice of logical connector of concession. The natives used forms like however, despite, and in spite of. The non-natives used but almost exclusively. In fact, there were 22 instances of the use of but and only four uses of other connectors — all in the Treatment Group and all in post-testing. Three of these were appropriate — the use of however twice and the use of despite once. But one of the respondents who did use however correctly (a native Chinese speaker), used but and nevertheless incorrectly, perhaps in making an exaggerated effort to use connectors:

However, new studies and reports let me doubt my earlier position. The E.P.A. says that the greenhouse effect has the potential to destroy civilisations, in contrast to other environmental problems. But [underlining added] the officials will first deal with this problem if it is upon us. Nevertheless, it is necessary to act against the greenhouse effect before it is too late.

The author probably meant consequently or hence instead of but, and clearly rather than nevertheless. In both cases he has created an opposition that is not warranted, given the rest of the text that he generated. This result is reminiscent of the unpublished study by Jisa & Scarcella (1982) which demonstrated how non-natives felt so compelled to use connectors they had learned that they made more use of them in their essay as additives or in contrast per t-unit than did natives (36% vs. 21%). They also often used them incorrectly.

Then with respect to expressing a change of opinion, the non-natives were more abrupt in doing so than were natives. Several natives used hedges or mitigators both in explicitly stating their change of opinion ('although I am not quick to make judgments, and by nature examine the facts carefully before taking a stand, I have on this issue had to change my view...' and in focusing on their current opinion ('I now tend to agree more with the argument that...'). Non-natives, on the other hand, simply came right out with the change statement ('I changed my mind... ', 'I changed my attitude... ', 'I have change my opinion...') and/or with their current opinion ('Now I think... ', 'Now I agree with X's stand...').

What were the effects of training on the production of the written speech act of changing an opinion?

The interrater reliability for the two raters was high: $r = 0.91$ on the pre-test, and $r = 0.94$ on the post-test. The ratings were averaged and a t-test analysis for independent groups was performed on the data. The results showed that the Treatment and Control Groups did not differ significantly in pre-testing, but that there was a significant difference in post-testing in favour of the Treatment Group (Table 11.1).

| Table 11.1 Mean differences in ratings of pre-test and post-test tasks |
|------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
|                        | Pre-test |       | Post-test |       |
|                        | Mean    | S.D.  | Mean    | S.D.  |
| Treatment (N = 13)    | 3.25    | 1.03  | 3.50    | 0.82  |
| Control (N = 12)      | 3.04    | 1.12  | 2.46    | 1.27  |
| $t = -0.47$; df = 22   |         |       | $t = -2.46^{*}$; df = 23 |

*$^p < 0.05$

In addition, a t-test of the gain scores was performed in order to adjust the post-test scores for the effect of pre-test performance, and once again the Treatment Group came out significantly ahead (Table 11.2).

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<th>Table 11.2 Mean differences in gain scores</th>
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<td>Mean Gain Score</td>
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<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
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<td>Control</td>
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<td>$t = -2.44^{*}$; df = 22</td>
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*$^p < 0.05$
Discussion and Conclusions

This study set out first of all to describe the speech acts of stating and then changing an opinion, both among native and non-native users of English. The findings for what amounted to a relatively small-scale study still constitute a beginning in this direction. Among the natives, there was a tendency to indicate the duration of the previously held opinion and when the new view took effect. Then there was a brief statement of the first opinion, followed by a logical connector of concession. Then there often appeared a statement of the new opinion and an explanation or justification for it, occasionally with a time frame for the new opinion.

For the most part the non-natives used the same semantic formulas or discourse strategies as did the natives. There were two strategies that some natives used that none of the non-natives used and then there was one strategy used by non-natives and not by natives. One of the strategies used only by natives was that of offering a personal evaluative comment, and the other was that of evoking collective responsibility. The strategy used only by non-natives was that of explaining or justifying their first position. None of the natives explained or justified the position that they were refuting.

With respect to the form that the message took, the most conspicuous difference was in the choice of logical connector of concession. While the natives used forms like however, despite, and in spite of, the non-natives used but almost exclusively. Then with respect to expressing a change of opinion, the non-natives were more abrupt in doing so. Several natives used hedges both in explicitly stating their change of opinion and in focusing on their current opinion. Non-natives, on the other hand, simply came right out with the change statement and/or with their current opinion.

As to the effects of the Treatment, there seem to have been some systematic effects, both in terms of a greater awareness as to the speech acts that the Treatment students needed to perform and in terms of the carrier language they were to use to convey these speech acts. Although the significance of the difference was not high (0.05), the sample was small, and the treatment was relatively brief, the findings about the positive effects of training in the use of speech acts in written academic discourse are consistent with those for training in the use of speech acts in oral language (Olshain & Cohen, 1990; Billmyer, 1990).

The research aims originally included a focus on the nature of the respondents' summaries for each of the texts, as well as their handling of their opinions. This broader focus proved to be too ambitious in that the students had enough to do simply dealing with the stating of an opinion and then expressing a change of opinion. A few of the students in each group, both in pre- and post-testing, did not provide summaries of the two articles, but launched directly into a discussion of their opinions. In rating the responses it became clear that the issue was not how well the respondents summarised the two texts but of greater interest was how they articulated their position and then their change of position. The performance of the speech act then was the major concern.

We must remember that although the selected texts were relevant to the topics being discussed in the ESL courses at the time of the pre- and post-testing (i.e. 'learning' and 'the environment', respectively), the passages were not directly connected to the respondents' field of study. This lack of context expertise could have worked to the detriment of those less comfortable with the scientific nature of the subject matter. For this reason, a recommendation for follow-up research would be that the respondents perform such tasks using texts from their respective fields of expertise. Future research of this type could also gather data samples from the non-natives in their native languages in order to determine the influence of L1 discourse patterns on the writing of L2 text. The current study also provided insights as to whether systematic interventions to teach given speech functions would be of value. In this study, there seemed to be value in providing a treatment, but only after an empirical study of what ESL teachers would write, and comparing that to what the ESL students wrote.

Notes

1. We would like to thank Susan Gilbert and William Flitte, the two ESL teachers who participated in this study. We would also like to thank the students. In addition, we acknowledge the feedback we received from Thom Upton, Jim Lantolf, and George Yule.
2. On the pre-test, four papers were revised, two from the Treatment Group and two from the Control Group. However, on the post-test only two papers were revised — both the Treatment Group.
3. Actually, eight of the natives did the task with the pre-test passages and two did it with the post-test passages.
4. In both this and the previous task, the passages reflected the theme being addressed in the classroom at the time — 'learning' in the first case, 'the environment' in the second.
5. This represents a classic strategy according to Myers (1989).
6. For example the respondents in the Cohen et al. (1986) study wrote down their responses in a discourse completion task presumably the way that they would say them.