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Voice in Short Argumentative Texts Written by Undergraduate Learners of English

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Abstract

The present study explored the intensity level of authorial voice in relation to the quality of argumentative writing. 42 undergraduate learners of English as a foreign language (36 girls and 6 boys) spent 45 minutes to individually complete in-class position-taking writing tasks for three weeks. Their overall academic writing quality scores assigned based on portfolio assessment were studied in relation to their voice expression quantified using a voice intensity rating scale (VIRS). Findings indicated that, among the components of authorial voice, only “assertiveness” showed a positive moderate relationship with academic writing quality ($r=0.45$, $p\leq 0.05$). In the follow-up qualitative analyses of voice-expression strategies, interviews with participants whose voice intensity had been rated either as the strongest or as the weakest showed nine strategies for voice expression. At the sentence-level, high-voice participants most frequently used intensifiers to express assertiveness, while low-voice writers tried to use other lexico-grammatical tools. At the text-level, both high-voice and low-voice participants were concerned about the effect of the topic on their voice expression. The findings imply that undergraduate English as a foreign language writers do try to express voice and that the required strategies can be one of the targets of EFL writing research and instruction.

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1. Introduction

Academic writing provides valuable opportunities for the expression of identity even though some language learners practice what Gemmell (2008) calls “robot writing” and “parrot back” what they have heard in classes or read in other texts. The wide and detailed analysis of identity construction and expression in multi-faceted, context-sensitive, and social approaches to second language writing (L2 writing) is a valuable research trend in recent related publications that try to tackle this problem. Expression of identity through writing especially through academic writing is central to some of the debates and discussions by L2 writing researchers (Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995; Elbow, 1999; Hyland, 2002). Phrases such as “Individualism in writing” (Elbow, 1981, 1999) and “Self-representation” through writing (Ivanic & Camp, 2001) try to capture the ways in which writers manifest their identity in writing. In the socio-constructivist view of L2 writing, self-representation and authorial presence “are central to the ways of looking at written text as social interaction, where readers and writers negotiate meaning” (Hyland, 2012, p.1).

In L2 writing research, works on ideological expression in writing, authorial presence in texts, and writer’s rhetorical and stylistic considerations have related the expression of personal opinions with the overall quality of first and second language writing. Stewart (1992), for example, asserted that the basic quality of good writing in one’s first language was the presence of the author in the text. Similarly, in the context of L2 writing, Matsuda (2001) found that difficulties that Japanese students faced in expressing voice in English written discourse “was due to their unfamiliarity with voice-expression strategies available in English” (p. 35). The concept of “voice” used as the independent variable of the present study may be one of the determinants of the quality of written texts produced by Iranian undergraduate EFL learners as well. It, therefore, needs to be investigated further in the context of EFL writing.

Second language (L2) writing research addresses writing in different second or foreign language learning contexts. Because of the role of English as a lingua franca of the world, the lion’s share of published research in this area has looked at the English language as

the second or foreign language. The concept of voice has been studied mainly in learning contexts where English is a second language. The impetus for this work comes from the idea that if studies of L2 writing in second language contexts point to and explore the concept of voice, EFL writing researchers can similarly ask whether, how, and with what intensity EFL learners express voice in academic writing in English as a foreign language. The search carried out for the present study revealed that there was a noticeable gap of empirical studies on the possible relationship between voice and the quality of writing in undergraduate EFL academic writing. Research on the representation of individualized voice in EFL writing is needed to inform EFL writing teachers about the strategies that EFL learners use to project their identity onto their writing and the techniques that they can employ to do this efficiently in English. Hyland (2012) expresses concern for the lack of empirical studies identifying the requirements and criteria for the development of an explicit social constructivist instruction of voice in EFL university level writing. He points to the significance of the set of linguistic and cognitive voice strategies available to writers.

To contribute to the recent debates on authorial voice in L2 writing and to make up for some of the gaps in voice research in Iranian EFL writing contexts, the present study aimed to explore the intensity level of authorial voice expressed in argumentative writing by a group of undergraduate EFL learners and to explore some of the strategies that such learners use to express this voice.

2. Review of Literature

The concept of voice in EFL academic writing is one that has been recently conceptualized in different ways. Researchers working on voice in L2 writing (e.g. Hyland, 2012; Ivanic & Camp, 2001; Matsuda & Trady, 2007; Stapleton, 2002) assert that the concept gained its momentum in social sciences as a construct in the works of Bakhtin (1981) and Keristeva (1986). As stated in Wertsch (1991, p. 51), Bakhtin believes that voice or “a speaking subject’s perspective, conceptual horizon, intention, and world views” applies both to written and spoken communication. Recent researchers, however, have conceptualized voice in ways that may not be the same as this original conceptualization. For instance, Elbow (1995) identified five types of voice that are represented in writing; sounds in a text, dramatic voice (character representation of author through the text), distinctive voice, voice of authority, and resonant voice.

These are rather expressivist definitions of voice which are followed by social-constructivist definitions recently in focus in L2 writing research.

In a more social definition of the concept of voice, Ramanathan (1999) states “the core notion underlying this social practice seems to be that, as individuals, we all have essentially private and isolated inner selves, which we give outward expression to through the use of a metaphorical voice” (in Matsuda & Tardy, 2007, p. 236). Similarly, Johnston (1996) states that voice refers to “the amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive features that language users choose, deliberately or otherwise, from socially available, yet ever changing repertoires” (p. 40). As Matsuda and Trady (2007, p. 236) explain, “voice” is one of the terms used in L2 writing research to capture the sense of identity in written discourse. Helms-Park and Stapleton (2003) explain the notion of voice in L2 writing through defining four components of voice: assertiveness, self-identification, reiteration of central point, and authorial presence. Based on the most recent sources available to the researchers, voice is multi-faceted and “there should be a threefold characterization of voice as diverse, distinctive, and dynamic interpersonal and textual process” (Hyland, 2010, p. 9).

In addition to the diversity that exists in the available definitions of voice in L2 writing, in contemporary academic writing research and instruction, there have been controversies and heated debates over the characteristics and possible consequences of the concept of voice. One controversial issue is the assumption that cultures that prioritize collective values over individualism lack individual voice in L2 writing (see Atkinson, 1997; Fox, 1994; Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003; Hinkel, 1999). Stapleton (2002) believes that voice can be perceived in the sense of identified discursive features associated with individualism found in written texts in some cultures (p. 178). He claims that “Learning to write in English requires learners to project an individualized identity, or to infuse their writing with voice, while stating or implying that doing so is an alien notion in some L2 cultures” (p. 180). The above argument may imply that learners from some cultures do not or cannot express voice through writing. For example, centralized social systems that emphasize collectivism may negatively affect voice expression by undergraduate EFL writers or may affect the deployment of voice expression strategies. In his work on difficulties that Japanese learners face in constructing voice in English written

discourse, Matsuda (2001) states that “difficulties Japanese students face are not due to incompatibility with their cultural orientation but to different ways in which voice is constructed in Japanese and English as well as lack of familiarity with the strategies available in English” (p. 35). Unlike proponents of the above-mentioned view, a second group of researchers regards voice expression in writing in different societies as independent of culture. Kachru (1999) believes that the representation of voice is visible in World Englishes. Some researcher also stress that all writers, regardless of cultural diversities, have voice both in individual and social perspectives (Ivanic & Camp, 2001; Prior, 2001).

In spite of the unclear role of culture in writers’ voice expression, many researchers stress the significance of the concept in L2 writing. These proponents (e.g. Bowden, 1995; Elbow, 1994; Hirvela & Belcher, 2001) suggest that voice is an integral part of writing and that it should be an essential component of second language writing pedagogy. As Stewart (1992) asserts, “the fundamental quality of good writing is the presence of the individual writer...” (p. 283). Consequently, research on the nature and characteristics of the relationship between voice and overall quality is a major concern in voice research (Zhao & Llosa, 2008).

The research-related issue of the operationalization and measurement of voice in academic writing is also controversial because researches have to clarify exactly what the components of this construct are and how each can be captured through research instruments. As implied by the definitions of voice and by previous research attempts, voice is a construct that is probably best studied qualitatively. Quantitative attempts for measuring voice through rating scales that characterize it as mature and immature (Yeh, 1998), or as appropriate and inappropriate (Deremer, 1998), do not seem to capture the essence of what is understood as voice in writing. These attempts were criticized by Helms-Park and Stapleton (2003) for not targeting just voice but mixing it with other qualities in writing. Park and Stapleton (2003) instead developed the “Voice Intensity Rating Scale (VIRS)” based on their careful isolation of features of voice from the literature. Using this instrument, they classified elements of voice into two levels and four scales: a) Sentence level Scales including *Assertiveness* (established through linguistic devices such as hedges and intensifiers) and *Self-Identification* (established through the use of first-person pronouns and using active structures) and b) Paragraph level Scales including

Reiteration of Central Point (how often and how explicitly the main argument is rearticulated) and *Authorial Presence and Autonomy of Thought* (overall presence of the author's voice)

Inspired by the work on voice reviewed here, our study addressed the following two research questions in relation to undergraduate argumentative academic writing in English as a foreign language: (Argumentative texts were used because of their high frequency and significance in university writing practices).

1) Are components of voice in EFL writing determined through Helms-Park and Stapleton's (2003) Voice Intensity Scale significant correlates of high quality EFL writing?

2) What are the sets of strategies EFL writers employ to express their voice through argumentative writing? Are authors of high and low quality EFL texts significantly different in terms of voice strategies?

3. Method

The present study involved the measurement of undergraduate EFL learners' academic writing quality, the assignment of voice intensity scores to their argumentative written products, and the exploration of strategies that they employed to realize the components of voice in their writing. It, therefore, necessitated a quasi-mixed study design in which the qualitative data collected through a survey was reinforced by interview data on voice-expression strategies. The quantitative phase was a correlational study of voice and writing quality and the qualitative phase was the deeper interview study of four voice components to seek the strategies that the participants employed to express their voice in writing

4. Participants

Participants consisted of 42 (36 girls and 6 boys) undergraduate learners of English as a foreign language enrolled in two EFL academic writing classes at the English Department of the University of Kashan. There were 48 learners in the two classes, six of whom failed to provide the data required in the study because they were either absent in data collection sessions or they did not consent to participate in the interviews. The participants had been admitted to the Bachelor's degree program in English based on their performance on the university matriculation exam (Konkur) and they were taking their English courses at the time of the study.

The participants were asked to indicate their previous formal learning experiences in L1 and L2 writing. None of them had experienced training in writing outside the formal education system. In their L1, all learners had studied basic rules of correct writing as part of Persian language courses at high school and one Persian writing course at university. In English, they had all successfully passed one course in the basics of academic writing in the first year of their undergraduate studies and they were taking the second course at the time of this study. Based on the requirements of their writing course, taught by one of the researchers, the learners had to submit one essay following the rhetorical pattern taught each week. In the two classes, they were learning how to write three- five- or seven-paragraph essays following comparison/contrast, cause/effect, and process/chronology and other forms of organization.

5. Writing Tasks

Four weeks after the beginning of the writing course, when students had been familiarized with the course requirements and the nature of the writing activities, the collection of writing samples from the participants started. From week 5 to week 7 of the course meetings, the learners spent 45 minutes of the total class time (90 minutes) each week to individually complete in-class writing tasks to show their learning of the course materials. For these three tasks, they were asked to clearly state their positions on a controversial issue and to follow paragraph and essay organization principles taught in the course. Assignments for other weeks were completed through multiple in-class drafting, out of class writing, or cooperative writing. The three topics used for data collection were the following:

1. Mercy-killing or euthanasia (there are some people who agree and others who do not agree with euthanasia).
2. The positive and negative influences of TV programs (some argue that the negative effects of TV programs on youths are more than the positive ones).
3. The educational values of computers (some people say computers facilitate education but do not necessarily enrich it).

The learners completed the three writing tasks as part of their class requirements and handed the final draft to the teacher for feedback and scoring. They were unaware of the quality of voice that was to be checked in the analyses of their products. However, they had already learned that they were supposed to hand in their best draft

because it contributed to their final score on the course. During the ninth week, permissions were sought from the learners to include their papers for analyses in the study and three samples written by each of the 42 participants were filed for analyses in the study.

5.1 Writing quality assessment

The main dependent variable of our study was the writing quality score that we could assign to each participant. Even though we could use the English part of the university matriculation exam that they took, administer a version of Test of Written English, or use ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel, & Hughey, 1981), we preferred to wait until week 16 at the end of the term and to obtain each learner's overall writing quality score which was assigned based on portfolio assessment. This final score was based on the average of all scores assigned to weekly assignments, scores assigned for the essay writing exam administered by the course instructor, and scores assigned to extra writing sample that some learners chose to write for teacher's feedback.

5.2 Voice intensity rating scale (VIRS)

The researchers used VIRS (Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003) to measure the independent variable of the study, i.e., the expression of voice in the writing samples collected from the participants. This is an analytic rating scale for voice expression in writing. It has been constructed by Helms-Park and Stapleton (2003) based on the key components of voice found in the related research literature. The scale includes the four voice components of assertiveness (quantified as the frequency of hedges and intensifiers in a passage), self-identification (shown by the use of first-person pronouns and grammatical voice), reiteration of central point (measured by the re-articulation of the central idea), and authorial presence and autonomy of thought (measured by the degree to which the author clearly expresses his or her own views). The instrument was used without any modifications to assign an overall voice intensity score between 0-100 to each of the 126 writing samples collected for the study (three samples written by each of the 42 participants). The instrument defined four equally weighted levels for assertiveness, self-identification, reiteration, and authorial presence each weighing 25 scores. For the use of the scale with the intended sample, expert opinion was sought from two EFL writing instructors, both of whom

suggested no modifications. The Cronbach Alpha reliability for the scale was 0.86 ($p \leq 0.05$).

5.3 Interview protocol

In order to study the components of voice in more details and to see whether the participants' perspective of voice could add any details to the raters' analyses of voice in a written passage, an interview protocol (Appendix) was designed and used for data collection from a few participants whose voice intensity had been rated either as the strongest or as the weakest. The interviews were carried out in the first language of the learners to ensure that language was not a problem for the expression of ideas. The resulting data were used for qualitative analyses. The interview protocol was prepared based on the guidelines provided by Yin (2010). It included parts on interview details, expression of consent, the purpose of the interview, and 12 main questions. There were three questions for each of the four components of voice examined in the quantitative part of the study. One question sought the participants' views on their expression of the components of voice. Another question was about their (dis)agreement with the raters' idea of their expression of voice. The final question on each component was about the interviewees' idea on the use of tactics for expressing each component of voice. These semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were independently analyzed on a sentence-by-sentence basis by two of the researchers who coded the responses based on themes related to each component of voice.

6. Procedures

Three argumentative essays were obtained from each of the 42 participants, resulting in a total of 126 writing samples. Bio-data from the original copies were removed to mask the identity of the authors and photocopies were made of all of them. Then, samples collected from the two classes were reshuffled and divided in half for the two selected raters to score for voice. The raters used a copy of the Voice Intensity Rating Scale for this purpose. They were trained in using the scale since they discussed it while scoring five samples for voice intensity under the supervision of the research team leader. The raters exchanged halves and scored all of the remaining samples until for each sample two voice scores were recorded. Based on the Spearman–Brown Prophecy Formula, inter-rater reliability for the ratings of voice intensity was 0.78 ($p \leq 0.05$).

The mean of the two voice intensity scores assigned by the two raters was calculated as the voice score of each writing sample and the mean of voice intensity scores received by each participant on his or her three samples was taken as the participants overall voice score.

Having recorded voice scores for each writing sample and for each individual, the researchers collected the integrative final scores on writing quality and carefully recorded these in data sheets that were then computerized for analyses using PASW descriptive and inferential statistics. The overall voice scores received by the 42 participants (i.e. the mean of the average voice score on the participant's three samples) were ranked and three of the highest and three of the lowest were selected for in-depth qualitative analyses of voice strategies through semi-structured interview. When the participants were contacted, only six girls consented to be interviewed and recorded and the male interviewer chose to leave the door open in the interview room as he was recording because of the limitation in opposite-gender relations. This might have negatively affected recorded voice quality that made the job of transcribing difficult. The transcriptions were carefully recorded and studied by the researchers; their contents were analyzed; and they were coded based on the themes that emerged.

7. Analysis and Findings

7.1 Relationship between voice and quality

Descriptive statistics on components of voice for the entire sample as well as for the male and female sub-samples of learners indicated that these undergraduate learners received the highest mean voice score on the component of assertiveness and the lowest mean on the component of self-identification. As the findings summarized in Table 1 show, group mean scores were 57.37 for assertiveness, 55.23 for authorial presence, 49.94 for reiteration of central point, and 41.46 for self-identification. This is another way of saying that the expression of voice was most frequently seen by the raters in the use of hedges and intensifiers in written passages that expresses the "assertiveness" component of voice. On the contrary, the use of first-person pronouns and active grammatical voice for "self-identification" was the least frequently used technique for the expression of voice in EFL argumentative writing.

Table 1. Mean scores on components of voice in EFL argumentative writing (N = 42, 36 girls 6 boys)

Components of voice	Group Mean (SD)	Mean for boys	Mean for girls	Chi-square value	Sig
Assertiveness	57.37(6.67)	62.8	57.2297	24.84	0.52
Authorial presence	55.23(13.01)	58.4	54.2027	16.97	0.71
Reiteration of central point	49.94(8.05)	55.2	49.2297	26.11	0.42
Self-identification	41.46(8.46)	38.8	41.8243	27.69	0.22

For the three voice components of assertiveness, authorial presence, and reiteration of the central point, the six male learners received higher means and female learners gained a slightly higher mean only for self-identification. However, Chi-square analyses performed to test the comparisons between male and female learners pointed to no statistically significant gender-related differences in mean score on voice components. This might, of course, be due to the gender composition of the sample (6 male participants and 36 females).

The study of voice intensity levels in relation to the quality of academic writing (final teacher-assigned portfolio-based scores on writing quality) indicated that for the learners' overall mean score on voice, a very weak positive correlation existed with academic writing quality ($r=0.19$, $p \leq 0.05$). Among the components of voice, only "assertiveness" showed a positive moderate relationship with academic writing quality ($r=0.45$, $p \leq 0.05$). In other words, component-specific results and the overall results summarized in Table 2 below showed some positive relationships between voice intensity of the texts written by undergraduate EFL writers and the quality-based EFL writing achievement scores that they gained at the end of the term.

Table 2. Correlation of voice intensity and the quality of writing

Voice Components	Correlation	Significance
Assertiveness	.451(*)	.023
Self-identification	.196	.214
Central Point	-.055	.728
Authorial pres.	.080	.617
Overall voice	.19	0.024

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

7.2 Voice expression strategies used by undergraduate EFL writers (Research question two)

In order to qualitatively discover some of the strategies used by EFL learners in expressing voice through writing, the researchers transcribed 30-minute interviews with three high-voice intensity and three low-voice intensity writers identified in the quantitative phase. Following guidelines offered by Yin (2010), the authors used a three-level coding scheme to summarize the data. The highest coding level was the four components of voice identified in Helm-Park and Stapleton (2003). Then the raters assigned first-level codes primarily on a sentence-by-sentence basis. The emerging themes were finally determined based on the codes. As Table 3 shows, the interviewees referred to nine strategies in their expression of voice in their passages. At the sentence level, the high-voice participants most frequently used intensifiers to express assertiveness (n=37) and the low-voice writers tried to use more lexico-grammatical tools (n=19). At the text-level, both the high-voice and the low-voice participants were concerned about the effect of the topic on their voice expression. Moreover, low-voice writers were more doubtful about the necessity of expressing voice through writing. In Table 3 below, further details on each of the discovered themes are represented.

Table 3. Frequencies of themes and subsets in high/low quality writings

Voice components as third-level codes (Based on Helm-Park & Stapleton, 2003)	Second-level codes: Themes emerging from the interviews	codes for 3 high voice interviewees	codes for 3 low voice interviewees	Total first level codes
Micro-level or Sentence-level (assertiveness and self-identification)	Making confident assertions using intensifiers	37	12	49
	Using linguistic and textual tool	26	19	45
	Juxtaposing others' views	4	11	15
	Avoiding repetition and redundancy	3	7	10
Macro-level or Text-level (reiteration and authorial presence)	Considering the topic of writing	12	41	53
	Doubting the suitability of voice expression	12	18	30
	Expressing perceptions and interests	7	21	28
	Forgetting audiences	1	5	6
	Forgetting intentions	0	5	5
Total		102	139	241

Results of the interview data provided by the two subsets indicate that writers of quality scripts projected stronger assertion in contrast to low-quality writers who showed weaker assertion in their writings. The assertion strategies retrieved from the interview data are presented below with extracts from the interviewees' utterances.

7.3 Considering the topic of writing

The most frequently-mentioned theme in relation to the expression of voice was the effect of the topic of the task on the learners' expression of voice. This theme appeared 53 times in sentence-by-sentence coding. The participants thought that topics of these tasks (educational values of computers, influences of TV programs, and euthanasia) were very controversial and that it was not very easy for them to take sides very easily. This theme was referred to 12 times by one of the participants rated as high voice intensity and four times by another rated as low voice intensity writer. The researchers' understanding was that learners could not stay focused on a position while they knew that there were many possible distracting counterarguments. One of the participants with high voice intensity based on the VIRS said:

...it depends on the topic of the text I write. If I write about girls, I will enumerate the positive points only.....that's because of the topic, I think. It was because of the topic of computers and ICT....you know, we read both about their negative and their positive effects. It is difficult to say which one has more proponents.... I don't like the subject and I have no information about euthanasia; It is difficult to say thing about the topics I have little information about....I want topics that are closely related to my own interests for example the necessity of hejab...[S.4 HVI]

7.4 Making confident assertions by using intensifiers

The second most frequent theme was the theme of making strong assertions about one's position. The participants showed it by purposefully using intensifiers. The following are some of the examples that the interviews in both high-intensity voice and low-intensity voice groups used to intensify their positions:

... I mean the decisions should be made very carefully about peoples' lives.... I use topics like these all the time. Then I seriously argue with friends on campus [S.6 HVI].

They are mostly aggressive scenes....I can write well against them....Not to exaggerate about myself, I have a strong ability to write their ideas. My words are derived from their words and I seriously disagree at the end... [S.3 LVI].

7.5 Using linguistic and textual tool

The interviewees repeatedly expressed the fact that, in addition to hedges and intensifiers, they tried to use other linguistic devices such as the grammar of the sentences or the meaning load of the words to express their authorial voice. Here are some examples:

...I gave a brief but to the point explanation of what I thought was wrong.... I classified views on TV programs for the youths in my own new way [S.6 HVI].

I concluded in one sentence only and here I said what I thought. The rest is what others say about computers.... I changed their ideas to English but I don't know if mercy-killing is good or not after all. [S.3 LVI]

Sometimes I don't have the courage to write about these in English or even say what I think in English. When I feel I have to say something which is totally different from what the class discusses, I switch to Persian and say everything. Most of the time I show them how they are wrong.... Sometimes I am feel English structure or word choice problems may not convey what I think [S.5 LVI]

7.6 Doubting the suitability of voice expression

The transcript of the interviews indicated, in many places, that EFL learners did not understand that they were actually expressing their voice in their writing. The codes from which this theme emerged were observed in both high voice intensity and low voice intensity groups. They expressed hesitation about the suitability of voicing out their own ideas in their texts and showed no eagerness to claim the possession of the text. Below are some examples:

Is it something psychological? And do you mean my own voice is constructed in the text as I am

writing? It is good to use others' ideas and express yourself? [S.2 HVI]

Do they (raters checking the sample using VIRS) mean my writing...., it has identity representation? ...I don't know, was it directly mentioned or understood...? I don't know what to say. [S.5 LVI]

7.7 Expressing perceptions and interests

The rereading and reexamination of the writing sample written by the interviewees while having them think aloud about their voice expression revealed that they tried to give expression to what they had seen, heard, or perceived in other ways. They also attempted to voice out their own interests when writing about argumentative topics. The following extracts clarify this:

I like these (thrillers). ...I try to emphasize all of the positive points....Can I also say that it is my favorite program and I defend it? [S.6 HVI]

*This (part of my views on euthanasia: *do this to terminally ill and you will realize how nice to say goodbye after you do all that you can) is limited to what I saw, heard and experienced..... My relatives looked after this lady for 11 years and all of them were at her bed when she was dying.... [S.1 LVI]*

7.8 Juxtaposing others' views

One of the interviewees, whose voice intensity score was among the lowest, believed that she should just juxtapose contrary views on the topic of the essay and letting the reader make judgments. So, she tried to compare people who argued against the use of computers with those who enumerated the benefits of computers on a point-by-point basis without even mentioning at the end which group she herself voted for. Here are some extracts from her interview:

These are their opinions.... I tried to refer to the idea in each side. ...and can we say our own ideas here? How do we compare? You mean we should not mention others' opinions? [S.5 LVI]

7.9 Avoiding repetition and redundancy

Some of the interviewees thought that it was not a desirable feature of their writing to repeatedly refer to themselves and their thoughts on the topic of the writing task. That is why they tried to avoid identifying themselves:

I know I have used it (I think, I believe) a lot. They have been repeated many times. It is not good to use it so much. May be I should use them sparingly....I am not used to doing this. [S.6 HVI]

7.10 Forgetting audiences and intentions

The themes emerging from the interview showed that EFL learners sometimes forgot who they were writing for during the composing process and used linguistic manifestations of voice without intending to convey their own voice:

I know my classmates and teachers read the passages, but I think I write something that I like. I want to like it when I read it myself. I think we don't have a close relationship with the audience. Most of the time the teacher does not mention any target audience andWe may not be interested in some audiences and not say exactly what we think. [S.5 LVI]

8. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study showed that EFL learners did try to express voice through writing in English. However, for the participants in this study, voice expression was seen most frequently in the use of hedges and intensifiers in written passages for the expression of assertiveness. In other words, the present study showed that EFL learners tended to express voice more in this voice component. This finding was confirmed in our qualitative phase as well. Partly due to what we think could be the negative transfer of training, our learners did not use first-person pronouns and active grammatical voice for "self-identification" and hence rated lowest on this voice component. The study also pointed to a significant relationship between the voice components of "assertiveness" and academic writing quality. Voice intensity of texts written by EFL learners represented here as their level of assertiveness was found to be a correlate of the teachers' evaluation of writing quality. In the qualitative phase of the study, previous findings were strengthened and the researchers observed that high-voice participants frequently used intensifiers to express voice.

These findings confirm previous understandings that all people give expression to their inner selves through writing in one way or another (Ramanathan, 1999). The study showed that our EFL

learners were no exceptions. It seems that their interlanguage systems do not have to be at an advanced level of development to give them the discursive and non-discursive resources required for voice expression. Such resources are ever changing (Johnston, 1996). The findings also question the validity of the argument that voice expression through academic writing may be specific to cultures that prioritize individualism (Stapleton, 2002) and point to the presence of voice in the writings of the selected sample.

The quantitative finding that the level of assertiveness is related to the overall quality of academic EFL writing offers some evidence for the instructional relevance of voice that Zhao and Llosa (2008) were looking for in the related research. Moreover, our qualitative findings, pointing to some strategies that EFL learners use for voice expression, reinforce Matsuda's (2001) observation that EFL writers' problems in voice expression through academic writing are not rooted in their culture but are due to their unfamiliarity with L2 voice expression strategies.

Based on this study, we conclude that EFL learners at an undergraduate level do have some authorial voice to express through writing, even though the strategies that they use to do so may not be adequate. We also conclude that some of the data necessary for decision-making in the evaluation of the overall quality of academic writing may come from voice expression strategies. EFL learners, therefore, need to be aware of such strategies in acceptable academic discourse in different contexts. Successful voice expression strategies need to be discovered, enumerated, modeled, and highlighted in writing tasks so that learners are sensitized to their presence and techniques of realization.

This study was limited to argumentative writing tasks. Data providers were also limited to intact non-random undergraduate EFL writers. The findings and conclusions, therefore, need to be cautiously considered in relation to academic EFL writing in other genres or by learners and writers at other levels of ability. If the learners had been asked to write a short story instead of position-taking samples or if they were EFL advanced writers commenting on their peer-reviewed published work, the set of strategies discovered for voice expression might have been different. This research trend is recent and future research can follow up with these and other related issues.

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