Students' voice in essayist prose: A longitudinal study of metadiscoursal textual practice and awareness

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Abstract

The acquisition of academic writing poses challenges for students, who are often provided with little guidance. This article aims to analyze student writing in the early years of university education from a longitudinal perspective, focusing on a student practice – the essay – that is ubiquitous in academia, but roughly defined and rarely problematized. We selected a sample of eight students enrolled in social sciences and humanities programs at a Chilean university who participated in a three-year study to analyze the emergence of voice and positioning. Methodologically, we combined a qualitative analysis of the texts, students' perspectives on their discursive uses, and quantifications of linguistic occurrences in search of discursive positioning resources that contribute to the construction of voice in academic writing. The results show that almost all types of metadiscourse studied increase or become more refined over time, but few do so in a statistically significant way. In addition, participants adhered to simplified views about academic writing, which led them to believe that positioning should be avoided. Consequently, tensions emerge between the desire to express their voice and to meet the expectations of essayist prose. The findings point to the value of teaching metadiscourse to develop a metalinguistic mastery of resources and promote greater agency and the expression of voice in academic writing.

Keywords: Essayist prose, voice, student writing, metadiscourse, longitudinal study.

Resumen

La voz de los estudiantes en la prosa ensayística: Una mirada longitudinal y émica al posicionamiento

La adquisición de la escritura académica plantea desafíos para los estudiantes, quienes a menudo cuentan con poca orientación. Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar la escritura de los estudiantes en los primeros años de la educación universitaria desde una perspectiva longitudinal, en especial en una práctica estudiantil, el ensayo, omnipresente en el mundo académico, pero vagamente definida y rara vez problematizada. Seleccionamos una muestra de ocho estudiantes inscritos en programas de ciencias sociales y humanidades en una universidad chilena que participaron en un estudio de tres años para analizar el surgimiento de la voz autoral y el posicionamiento. Metodológicamente, combinamos un análisis cualitativo de los textos, de las perspectivas de los estudiantes sobre sus usos discursivos y cuantificaciones de ocurrencias lingüísticas en busca de recursos discursivos de posicionamiento que contribuyan a la construcción de la voz en la escritura académica. Los resultados muestran que casi todos los tipos de metadiscurso estudiados aumentan o se vuelven más sofisticados con el tiempo, pero pocos lo hacen de manera estadísticamente significativa. Además, los participantes presentan visiones simplificadas sobre la escritura académica, lo cual los lleva a creer que se debe evitar el posicionamiento. En consecuencia, surgen tensiones entre el deseo de expresar su voz y el de cumplir con las expectativas de la prosa ensayística. Los hallazgos señalan el valor de enseñar metadiscurso para desarrollar un dominio metalingüístico de los recursos y promover una mayor agencia y expresión de la voz en la escritura académica.

Palabras clave: Prosa ensayística, voz, escritura estudiantil, metadiscurso, estudio longitudinal.

1. Introduction

Writing shapes the modes of communication specific to each human sphere. At the same time, it serves as a means of certifying knowledge in the academic world. Moreover, it is the way in which students and other actors can assertively appropriate the forms of sharing and communicating knowledge. In this sense, it is a type of specialized knowledge and a social practice significant in higher education (Navarro, 2021).

The acquisition of writing at university, nonetheless, poses significant challenges for students. Moreover, they are not provided with a structured learning experience of writing; research suggests that students are faced to

different demands and formats of writing that vary from course to course, and few, often contradictory, cues are provided to guide academic writing acquisition (Lea & Street, 1998).

Unlike approaches that frame students' writing as a deficient version of expert writing, this article adopts a view of student writing as a legitimate practice and valid object of inquiry (Soliday, 2011; Ávila Reyes & Cortés Lagos, 2017; Navarro et al., 2022). Researching student writing provides insights into the social, discursive, and textual practices of student writers and their writing development in university. Among these phenomena, studies on voice and stance are significant as they reveal how students interact with written assignments and adhere to discourse forms across disciplines and stages of training, both in L1 and L2 writing (Lancaster, 2014, 2016; Aull, 2019; Wu & Paltridge, 2021; Navarro et al., 2022; L. Zhang & Zhang, 2023).

The concept of voice is polysemic and contentious, giving rise to controversies about its individual and westernized character, as well as the negative effects of an excessive focus on its study, due to an excessive attention to individuality over form and content (McCambridge, 2019; F. Zhang & Zhan, 2020). But sociocultural definitions reject individualistic definitions of voice. Matsuda and Tardy (2007), for example, define voice as an open array of discursive and non-discursive features that construct the reader's impression of the writer. According to this definition, as voice arises from a negotiation between reader and writer, it will not always be the same (Tardy & Matsuda, 2009). The concept of voice from a sociocultural perspective implies, then, a discursive and contextualized space for constructing meanings. Indeed, from a Bakhtinian perspective, voices are the social, historical, and ideological traces carried by wordings, and thus are closely linked to other discursive phenomena such as intertextuality (Lillis, 2011), which unfolds through the interplay of identity, content, and form of what is written. Voice is thus used "to signal connections between people's sense of identity, the content and form of what they write, and their capacity for what they understand to be key aspects of all three to be recognised or taken up" (p. 126).

In this article, we will operationalize one aspect of voice, namely, that performed by authors in the discursive construction of their perspective through a focus on metadiscourse. Castelló et al. (2011) start from Benveniste's original idea of how the enunciator appropriates the language

formal apparatus to state their position as a speaker. Thus, voice emerges as the discursive mechanisms for positioning an author in their text, which are closely linked to the discursive construction of identity, what Ivanič (1998), for example, has described as the dimensions of the discoursal and authorial self. Along these lines, the present study conceptualizes voice as a construct highlighting the author's presence through social practices and discursive markers (McCambridge, 2019). Among these discursive markers, we will inquire as other authors do into one of the main ways of positioning: the mechanisms of metadiscourse (Castelló et al., 2011).

Several studies identify the desire of students to express their points of view, use their own words, and feel that they own the content of their texts rather than "reproducing" other discourses, using vocabulary that does not belong to them or "backing up" their own ideas using other discourses (Lillis, 2001; Zavala, 2011). This resistance to conventions of academic writing emerges as a form of legitimate agency in the formation of students' discursive identities, but it poses a challenge for undergraduate students to develop an authorial identity and, consequently, a voice (Ávila Reyes, 2021; Navarro et al., 2022). However, most research on student discoursal resources of positioning, such as stance, do so based on a quantitative identification of discursive phenomena (Lancaster, 2014, 2016; Aull, 2019; Yoon & Römer, 2020), but seldomly complement this analysis with textual analysis or the perspectives of the writers themselves through techniques such as talk-around-texts (Lillis, 2008). Some exceptions to this rule are studies on voice and metadiscourse (McCambridge, 2019) and intertextuality (Harwood & Petrić, 2012; Fazel & Shi, 2015).

Regarding the development of voice resources at different educational stages, most studies analyze metadiscursive uses through a cross-sectional approach, that is, by contrasting discursive features in different years or stages of education in a discipline (Aull & Lancaster, 2014). Thus, longitudinal comparisons of the same students over time are uncommon.

This study utilizes a mixed design to explore how voice is developed by uses of metadiscourse in essays by social sciences and humanities students throughout their initial university years. It aims to enhance understanding of voice inscription in academic writing from the students' perspective, emphasizing sociolinguistic and educational implications.

2. The challenge of voice in essayist writing: The case of metadiscourse

Writer voice is particularly challenging in essay writing, a commonplace of university writing, whose definition is often fuzzy both for professors and students (Lea & Street, 1998). Therefore, we turn to the concept of *essayist prose*, a ubiquitous literacy practice in higher education, rooted in the Enlightenment tradition and its ideals of clarity and transparency. According to these ideals, it is assumed that language can simply encode meaning in a text (Lillis, 2013). Thus, a commonsense view emerges according to which academic language is expected to create an anonymous or depersonalized relationship with the reader, establish the author's rational and neutral identity, and develop a logical and verbal aesthetic value (Turner, 2018). However, these ideals of logical transparency, and the idea that academic and professional writing is objective and detached, are a simplification (MacDonald, 1994).

Indeed, academic essays are often assigned as texts in which the student must construct a point of view of his or her own, which is grounded in disciplinary literature, by developing independent reasoning (Nesi & Gardner, 2012). However, this also occurs in an asymmetrical rhetorical situation in which writing is used for knowledge certification. Therefore, students must demonstrate to the reader-teacher their conceptual mastery of the sources (Zunino & Muraca, 2012) while simultaneously presenting their own position. Thus, in the student genre of the academic essay, simultaneous expectations of positioning and objectivity converge, of constructing one's own reasoning and demonstrating mastery over other people's ideas, which often strain the use of voice regarding the ideals of neutrality in essayist prose.

In this study, voice is related to the sense of ownership of the text, in which aspects such as identity (Ivanič, 1998) and agency of the writer (Zavala, 2011) are intertwined. Thus, through mechanisms of voice inscription, writers not only construct themselves discursively but also shape their relationship and attitudes towards the texts they write. Voice can be discursively inscribed through a vast repertoire of resources in academic writing, including metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005a), pronouns (Benveniste, 1997), subjectivity mechanisms described in theories such as appraisal (Martin & White, 2005) and enunciation (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997), the discursive mechanisms of dialogism and intertextuality (Bazerman, 2004), or

broader aspects of form and content, such as sentence structure, organization, transition devices, word choice and argumentative strategies (Matsuda & Tardy, 2007).

The sole existence of these mechanisms of voice inscription defies the commonsense idea that academic writing is objective and depersonalized. However, the resources through which the author's voice can emerge are highly specialized and difficult to grasp for students. For example, by using linguistic resources for implication, distancing, or evaluation, writers can construct their voice in relation to other authors. Nevertheless, instead of deploying these strategies, students often resist academic citation, as if positioning their voice and citing were mutually exclusive procedures (Montes et al., 2022). This resistance is a response by students to the assumed objectivity of academic writing and commonsense ideas rooted in essayist writing practices; because academic writing is supposed to be depersonalized and objective, students resist a form they think is "hiding" their own voice (Ávila Reyes, 2021). Likewise, it responds to the lack of explicit instruction of textual mechanisms for the inscription of those voices, such as, for example, metadiscourse.

Academic writing, nonetheless, is defined by interaction, which entails adopting a point of view about what is discussed in the text regarding the community of cited authors and readers. This point of view can be expressed through a repertoire of metadiscourse resources, which will be the main object of analysis in this article. Metadiscourse is defined as a textual aspect distinct from the propositional dimension of discourse and embodying writer-reader interactions (Hyland & Tse, 2004), and it emerges as one of the primary forms of textual realization of interaction. In its interactional dimension, metadiscourse is a way of representing the author's perspective in written texts and engaging with the positions of others (Hyland, 2005a), thereby contributing to voice construction (Castelló et al., 2011).

This work focuses on stance and engagement among the many discursive resources for constructing a voice. According to Hyland (2005b), stance corresponds to the attitudinal dimension of interaction and refers to how writers represent themselves and their points of view through attitude markers, self-mentions, hedges, and boosters. Engagement, on the other hand, refers to how writers address readers regarding their points of view through an array of engagement markers such as questions or reader pronouns.

The main interactional discourse mechanisms involved in the construction of voice are defined and presented in Table 1 with excerpts from the corpus of this article (signaling participant and assignment quoted). These definitions exemplify items relevant to meaning potentials in Spanish.

Resource	Operational definition	Example from corpus
Self-mentions	Self-referential expressions, generally as conscious choices in expert writers, including possessive pronouns and adjectives.	Instagram invade tanto los aspectos de nuestra vida social como también los que van más allá de lo social, además de *incitarnos* a llevar una vida superficial y fingida. (AT1) (Instagram intrudes upon aspects of our social life and other aspects, in addition to *encouraging us* to lead a superficial and fake life.)
Attitude markers	Expressions that signal an affective attitude towards the texts' propositions.	Estas *alarmantes* cifras dejan al descubierto que en esta materia el hombre está en un segundo plano. (LT1) (These *alarming* figures reveal that, in this area, men are in the background.)
Boosters	Devices that allow the writer to make explicit and emphasize the information that is presented and that provides a sense of belonging to a community, taking a joint position in opposition to other alternatives.	El comunismo pretende que no existan clases sociales, por lo que *claramente* se puede concluir solo dentro de esta pequeña línea que es imposible que no haya una división de clases. (MJT1) (The aim of communism is for there to be no social classes, so *clearly* it can be concluded within this limited area that it is impossible for there to be no class division.)
Hedges	Expressions that indicate the withholding of commitment to a proposition, mitigating its truthfulness in order to recognize alternative perspectives.	Las redes sociales son un elemento fundamental en este proceso, dado que *podría considerarse* como un requisito para los jóvenes. (AT1) (Social networks are a key element in this process, since they *could be considered* a requirement for young people.)
Engagement markers	Expressions and devices that explicitly address the reader to include them in the discourse or get their attention, while anticipating doubts or objections and building shared knowledge.	*Nos damos cuenta* de que muy internamente *nos* componemos de tanto que no lo *podemos* observar naturalmente, sino que *necesitamos* microscopios. (VT2). (*We* note that internally *we* are composed of so much matter that *we cannot* observe it naturally, so *we need* microscopes.)

Table 1. Interactional metadiscourse implied in voice (sources: Hyland 2005a and Castelló et al. 2011).

Prior research suggests that the use of metadiscourse increases with academic expertise, from undergraduate to postgraduate levels (Hyland & Tse, 2004; Hyland, 2005a). Undergraduate students increase their overall use of these resources over time, but their use of boosters tends to decline (Aull & Lancaster, 2014), which in academic writing at higher educational stages is expressed as a higher proportion of hedges than boosters (Aull, 2019; Hyland, 2005a). This study seeks to describe to what extent these results can be observed in a corpus of texts from first and third year of university studies.

3. Methods

The current study utilizes a mixed qualitative-quantitative triangulation design (Creswell, 2014) involving eight undergraduate students in humanities and social sciences. These students were interviewed over three years to explore their academic writing experiences. Thematic coding was applied to identify participant reflections on positioning and stance, as well as

references to specific discursive items. Additionally, participants' use of metadiscourse in essays from their first and third years of college was compared using qualitative software and non-parametric contrast tests.

3.1. Participants

This study is part of a qualitative longitudinal (Dörnyei, 2007) research project that followed the trajectories of 24 regular and inclusive admission students from different areas of study in a Chilean university for three years. The sub-sample of the study is composed of eight students pursuing different programs in the social sciences and humanities, as shown in Table 2.

Participant (pseudonym)	Admission type	Discipline	First-year text (T1)	Third-year text (T2)
Vainilla (V)	Inclusive	Elementary pedagogy	Logbook on the university experience	Essay on "the biological self"
Mia (M)	Regular	Elementary pedagogy	Essay on music and cognitive development	Essay on urban segregation
Janis (J)	Inclusive	History	Historical essay on The Crusades	Historical analysis essay question
Menta (Me)	Regular	History	Essay on the marvelous in the Middle Ages	Essay on the Mapuche conflict
María José (MJ)	Inclusive	Law	Workshop on utopia and communism*	Essay on fundamental rights
Aria (Ar)	Regular	Law	Report on the independence of Chile	Essay on fundamental rights
Lizzy (L)	Inclusive	Social sciences	Essay on gender equity	Philosophy reading essay question
Andrea (A)	Regular	Early childhood education (changed program from Social sciences in third year)	Essay on the influence of social networks	Commentary on an academic text
		Total texts	**8**	**8**
		Total words	**13,126**	**9.122**

* Workshop *is being used as the literal translation to* taller, *which usually consists of a worksheet that prompts a written product.*

Table 2. Participants and sample.

4. Data collection

The study adopted an emic approach (Paltridge et al., 2016) regarding the data collection processes, through interviews that iteratively delved into topics that were relevant to the students and to understand and unpack from the participants' perspectives their different linguistic and discursive uses. This centrality of the participants' perspectives is also a way to avoid influencing the researchers' judgments about the students' experiences and texts in the data interpretation processes (Ávila Reyes, 2021). Indeed, the

topic of voice as positioning emerged as a student concern from the first encounters and, consequently, the researchers decided to pursue it as a focus for this study. Data collection involved six interviews per participant over three years, recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. Participants signed an informed consent form that outlined the study's scope, its voluntary nature, the option to withdraw without consequences, and the protection of participants' identities. Three encounters utilized the talk-around-texts method (Lillis, 2008), consisting of an unstructured conversation around the writing experiences of the text under discussion, with a semi-structured portion for each participant in which the researchers previously identified metadiscourse phenomena salient in the selected text. For this study, we focused on talk-around-texts interviews from the first and third years (identified as T1 and T2), totaling 16 interviews on students' experiences regarding academic writing.

Students submitted two writing samples at each meeting: one was chosen by each participant, and the other was an essay or assignment they thought of as being the closest to an essay. Although the essay has various definitions, which are often fuzzy as stated earlier, in this study we defined it as the analysis of a problem based on the contrast of different sources, which also has an argumentative nature since the author takes a position on the problem and the relevant literature (Zunino & Muraca, 2012). In some cases, the participants submitted samples that were far from that definition (for example, a journalistic article), which were not included and thus reduced the sample of this study to the eight participants who had the complete dataset, consisting of two interviews and two comparable essays in the first and third year. A textual corpus of 13,126 words (texts from 2018) and 9,122 words (texts from 2020) was thus constructed.

5. Data analysis

Interviews were thematically coded (Nowell et al. 2017) to identify participants' reflections on voice and positioning in their essays, which were linked to the textual excerpts analyzed or their general reflections. In the case of talk-around-texts, we matched the participant's comments to the relevant passages of the texts. We present this analysis using excerpts that represent saturated categories from the interviews and texts as sources for the analysis and interpretations.

To analyze the essays, we coded the metadiscursive resources using NVivo 12, with 20% double coding and reliability calculation (k = 0.8). In addition, a third researcher manually audited all occurrences. A qualitative, thick analysis of the metadiscourse in the corpus was performed. A thick description of metadiscourse is opposed to automated analysis. It involves identifying various potentially metadiscursive uses and, from the detailed examination of the items in context, determining whether they are metadiscourse and classifying them (Ädel & Mauranen, 2010). Once the items were classified and the reliability procedures applied, the normalized occurrence rates per 1000 words were compared with the Wilcoxon rank test, a non-parametric equivalent of a related samples t-test (Buskirk et al., 2013), to identify significant changes in the resources used between the first and third years.

Finally, findings from quantitative and qualitative sources were triangulated to construct a complex description of the development and learning of academic writing in the university context based on the participants' experiences and perspectives.

6. Results

In the sections that follow, we first present the qualitative results and then the quantification of metadiscursive items. Discussion offers a triangulation of the data.

6.1. Metadiscourse in essayist prose

One of the prominent findings from our initial encounters with students was the importance for them to feel their voices were reflected in their texts (Ávila Reyes, 2021). This was particularly evident in the case of the essayistic texts, where students repeatedly identified a struggle between writing "what the teacher wants" and feeling their identities represented confidently in the text. For example, Mia pointed out in the first-year interview that to get a good grade, both her perspective and meeting the teacher's expectations matter equally.

> Interviewer: And how do you get a good grade?
>
> Mia: By saying what the teacher wants to hear (...) because I know that's what the teacher was looking for (M1).

However, this perspective becomes more complex over time. For instance, towards the end of the study, another participant, María José, summarizes what it means to have succeeded in projecting one's own voice in an essay, surpassing her initial hesitations:

> Now I don't have that fear that I had in the first year or part of the second year. I feel that I am much clearer in terms of my thoughts and I have formed my own identity, in a way, in terms of the opinions I have on certain topics (MJ2).

But how exactly is this confidence and identity to which students refer gradually built over time? To account for this development, the students' perspectives on their discursive choices were examined through talk-around-texts to understand the meaning of metadiscursive uses found in texts and how these supported the development of an authorial voice. In what is next, excerpts from student texts regarding each of the metadiscourse features studied and interviews that develop these textual choices (identified with the participant's initial and source number 1 or 2) are presented in a temporal perspective, when appropriate. All highlights are ours.

First, we explore the use of **self-mentions**. We present an excerpt from the text of Andrea, a first-year Social Sciences/Early Childhood Education student, and her comments made during the conversation about that same text.

Assignment excerpt	English translation	Talk-around-texts
Podemos caracterizar a Napoleón como un personaje tirano, egoísta, violento, quien guiado por la avaricia permitió la miseria de su granja solo por velar por sus propios intereses. Es alguien que carece de ética y que no conoce la empatía. Este personaje es la clara representación de lo que provoca el abuso de poder, cómo este *nos* carcome y se apodera de *nosotros*. Es un fenómeno que está presente incluso hasta *nuestros* días, y probablemente lo seguirá estando por siempre. Es gracias a este personaje que la novela de Orwell puede ser considerada no solo como una crítica al comunismo, sino que al abuso de cualquier tipo de poder. (AT1)	*We can* characterize Napoleon as a tyrant, selfish, violent character who, driven by greed, allowed the misery of his farm only to safeguard his own interests. He is someone lacking in ethics and empathy. This character is a clear representation of the consequences of abusing power, how it corrodes *us* and takes hold of *us*. It's a phenomenon that persists even to *our* day and will likely continue indefinitely. It's thanks to this character that Orwell's novel can be considered not only a critique of communism but also of the abuse of any kind of power. Metadiscourse used: "We can", "us", "us", "our".	Funny, I never noticed that before. Maybe I do it all the time. I did it in both texts, and in neither was it intentional, so perhaps it's a style I didn't realize I had (A1).

In the talk-around-texts, the participant is asked if she was aware of having used the first person in these different forms: *podemos*, *nos*, *nosotros* and *nuestros*, to which the student responds that it comes naturally to her but she is not aware of using this voice. Earlier in the conversation, the student explained that the instructions requested an "impersonal style" and "avoidance of the first person," so it surprised her to have used it.

In her third year, the same participant offers an entirely different answer for the same phenomenon:

Assignment excerpt	English translation	Talk-around-texts
Es aquí donde *nuestro* rol como educadoras se vuelve esencial: somos *nosotras* las que estamos capacitadas para evitar estos estereotipos. Para esto, *debemos* poner en tela de juicio *nuestro* desempeño en el aula, sobre todo con temas donde imperan los estereotipos de géneros, tan importantes de erradicar. (AT2).	This is where *our* role as educators becomes essential: it is *us* who are equipped to prevent these stereotypes. For this, *we must* question *our* performance in the classroom, especially with topics where gender stereotypes prevail, which are so important to eradicate. Metadiscourse used: "Our", "us", "we must", "our".	I am interested in this subject, I am passionate about it and it gives me a lot to talk about, but in the other texts and comments I never (wrote) in the first person. At the end I put "the text awakens my desire to make a change" (...) In few (previous texts) I have spoken about the role of the educator or our role as future educators (A2).

This example shows that by the third year the participant has gained a greater awareness of using this resource. Indeed, her explanation shows that she sought to construct herself and her colleagues as social actors represented in the text. In this case, the personal commitment to the topic appears to motivate the textual choice of self-mention.

The alternative to self-mention is using third-person verb forms or non-personal subjects to create a distance between the text and its enunciator. As noted by first-year students, these impersonal forms are considered "the proper way" to write an essay and essayist prose in general. In some cases, this is almost an axiom learned in previous stages, as Janis, who is studying history, told us:

> I was taught in school when we were learning to write essays that you don't say "*I'm* going to do those things." In fact, you shouldn't say "*I'm* going to do such and such" at all, not even in written reports, but always in the third person. That's what I was taught in high school, that you always put it in the third person (J1).

In other cases, as pedagogy student Mia shared with us, this definition is inherent to the essay style, but it conflicts with the sense of ownership of the text:

> The essay is very formal. It has to be very formal and impersonal. Like you are presenting your point of view, but you can't say "I think this because"; you have to say "this is thought because". So this goes against… the way I am… I like my things to be mine (M1).

These opinions become more complex in the third year. María José, for example, questions the way she was taught to write essays in the first-year writing courses at university and begins to realize that some uses of the first-person can indeed have a place in this genre:

> Every time I write an essay, the third person voice has to be very clear because that was what I was taught, so whenever I wrote an essay in that course I could not say "I" or anything like that. But later I began to notice that (...) in several texts of university students, classmates, and friends from other universities, they let people write "I," "I think," or "our country," but not here, so I started inquiring and found out that essays could also be written using the first person (MJ2).

Although she questioned the expectation of the third person voice, she eventually accepted it:

> When I'm writing an essay, I am so used to the impersonal that I don't even think about it (...) It was very difficult for me initially, but now I am used to it (MJ2).

However, María José explained that she reserves the use of the first person to mark the commitment to her ideas, which shows the fluency that students progressively gain with this type of resource.

The student seems to have accepted the use of the third person, but the degree of linguistic awareness displayed is more significant in the excerpt from the second year. However, resistance to the use of the third person, expressed through Mia's comment that "I like my things to be mine," is not uncommon and emerged repeatedly throughout the sample. Lizzy's remarks are an excellent example of such resistance:

> I don't see anything wrong with talking like oneself but then this problem arises of who you are and that maybe you are not a valid source, so then you have to detach yourself a little (...) in the end, it is your work and thoughts so I don't really think it should be bad for your own voice to be expressed in the writing (...) But maybe if someone comes and talks to you about a topic, you tend to think: "who is this person?" Maybe it gives space for writers to express themselves more, but perhaps that is not as interesting in an academic text (L1).

In this interview excerpt, Lizzy, who is studying social sciences, resists the third person expectation: "I don't really think it should be bad for your own voice to be integrated into the writing," but she concedes that using self-mentions in student writing may refer to an unauthorized voice, leading to the question "who is this person?", and that these references to the author are not important in academic writing. Ultimately, the resistance emerges

when she assumes that the authorial voice is irrelevant to academic texts. These reflections are of great value because they arise from the tension between commonsense expectations about essay writing (and essayist prose in general) versus the complexity of the positioning resources necessary in tasks that demand the construction of the author's own voice.

In sum, students' discourse suggests that the university echoes the commonsense idea that academic writing should be impersonal, detached, and objective, despite their essays revealing a high use of self-referential expressions. At the same time, there is little awareness of the use of self-mentions or the third person, as marked primarily by an acceptance of what they consider to be the academic norm; however, metalinguistic reflection on the possibility of using self-mentions seems to become more complex over time.

The various detachment imperatives associated with essayist writing at university mean that **attitude markers** and **boosters** are not understood by participants as mechanisms for voice construction in their texts. The following excerpt presents both type of resources and the student's comments:

Assignment excerpt	English translation	Talk-around-texts
En cuarto lugar, para delimitar por jerarquías cada derecho y a la vez comprender mejor lo planteado en esta tesis, es de *vital importancia* comprender cuáles son las necesidades, intereses o valores que se deben considerar como derechos.	Fourthly, in order to delineate each right by hierarchies and simultaneously better understand the arguments presented in this thesis, it is of *vital importance* to comprehend which needs, interests, or values should be considered as rights.	I am very categorical in these concepts when I am writing or completing an assignment based on a topic so important to me (...) and when I was writing the essay, I was thinking about it all the time (...) it is of "*vital importancia*", meaning that it is "very important" to understand that it is necessary to emphasize this (MJ2).
Así es como varios autores van dando sus aportes con respecto a la materia de derechos fundamentales y, *claramente*, se puede ver una preocupación por delimitar estos derechos, de analizarlos y, de alguna forma, mostrar la necesidad de jerarquizarlos y poner un orden dentro del sistema jurídico.	This is how several authors contribute to the subject of fundamental rights, and there is *clearly* a concern for defining these rights, analyzing them, and, in some way, demonstrating the need to prioritize and establish an order within the legal system.	Perhaps I accidentaly wrote "*claramente*"... I felt that their concern about framing those rights could "clearly" be seen (MJ2).
Finalmente, es de *vital importancia* reconocer unas palabras de Mary Glendon que expresan *claramente* lo dicho anteriormente.	Finally, it is of *vital importance* to recognize some words from Mary Glendon that *clearly* express what was said earlier. Metadiscourse used: "vital importance" and "clearly".	Truly, I do not remember. Maybe I accidentally wrote it, or maybe I was so excited that I wrote "*claramente*" (MJ2).

In these examples, the student's preferred mechanisms for constructing her point of view are attitude markers and boosters. However, awareness of their use is relatively low when compared, for example, with the same participant's comments on self-mentions. Thus, we can observe a lack of metalanguage to explain metadiscourse uses, and repeating what the text says rather than elaborating on its use. This low use of metalanguage is common

to other linguistic resources and has been previously reported in results from this longitudinal study (Ávila Reyes et al, 2021). It can also be hypothesized that the student thinks it is wrong to use boosters, as she said twice that maybe writing "*claramente*" was accidental. Overall, this example suggests the great potential of the teaching and learning of the variety of metadiscursive resources for acquiring an agentive mastery of voice in the process of writing academic texts, which would challenge the idea of academic writing as "objective" and "impersonalized," while expanding the ways in which students can integrate their own ideas.

On the other hand, **hedges** are hardly ever used, and for that reason they were less thematized as salient features in the talk-around texts. Their main instantiation in discourses was through the modal verb "poder" (can) or its noun "posible" (possible) (for example, "se puede decir", "se podría afirmar", "es posible concluir", etc.). When we asked Menta, a history student, to reflect on the use of expressions such as "*se puede analizar*" (it can be analyzed) or "*se puede concluir*" (it can be concluded) in her interaction with the reader, she kept referring to the use of persons, formality or implicitness of her opinion rather than to the use of hedges itself:

Assignment excerpt	English translation	Talk-around-texts
Se *puede* analizar, a través de la película "Mala Junta", dirigida por Claudia Huaiquimilla (2016), mapuche, reflejando gran parte de su infancia en la película, la discriminación a la que se ven expuestos los niños mapuche (…)	Through the film "Bad Influence," directed by Claudia Huaiquimilla (2016), who is Mapuche herself and reflects much of her childhood in the film, *it can be* analyzed that the discrimination to which Mapuche children are exposed (...) Metadiscourse used: "it can be".	Maybe writing it in the first person shows that I am the author and that I am conveying an idea, and this (the third person) is more… I don't know if it is more "formal," but it is not explicit that it is my opinion (...) Maybe it is just my way of writing and I got used to it, so I don't notice it when I write it anymore (Me1).

A final resource to consider are **engagement markers**. We included textual operations that actively involve the reader in coding engagement markers. Among the resources used, in addition to addressing the reader through pronouns, the use of rhetorical questions stands out in titles such as *"¿Son las matemáticas un asunto de género?*" (Are mathematical skills an issue of gender?) (AT2), as well as to dialogize the arguments presented in the writing *"¿qué tan justificados están estos pensamientos?*" (How justified are these thoughts?) (MT2) or to introduce the arguments themselves *"¿ 'Por qué', se preguntará el lector?*" (The reader will ask himself 'Why?') (MeT2).

This kind of resource was generally used with greater ease longitudinally. For example, in the first- and third-year texts of Janis, a history student, we can establish the following comparison:

Assignment excerpt T1	Assignment excerpt T2
"Podemos decir con esto que la Cruzada de los pobres comenzó siendo una guerra justa (…) ¿Qué fue lo que produjo este cambio en la mentalidad del cruzado pobre? (…) Esas son preguntas que *tendremos que dejar para otra oportunidad*" (JT1).	*A modo de conclusión*, surge la interrogante de ¿es posible progresar sin la necesidad de causar tanta destrucción? Podríamos decir que si nada hubiera sucedido no estaríamos aquí, pero ¿realmente sería justo?
(Thus, we can say that the Crusade of the poor began as a fair war (…) What produced this change in the mentality of the poor crusader? (…) *These are questions that we will have to leave for next time*.	(*By means of conclusion*, the question arises, can we progress without causing so much destruction? We could say that if nothing had happened, we would not be here, but would it be fair?)

Both texts use rhetorical questions that appeal to readers in the conclusions. While the first-year text ends with a sentence that is unusual considering what is expected in the academic register, in which the reader is directly addressed through a reference to the situation of reading (this time/next time), the participant adapts the resource in the third year, making the interlocutor part of her closing reasoning and marking this with a frame-marker (by means of conclusion).

6.2. Metadiscourse in longitudinal perspective

We present a contrastive analysis of the phenomena of positioning through interactional metadiscourse with a longitudinal approach. Table 3 compares the frequency of the use of these resources in essays written in the first and third years of university by the same group of students.

Metadiscourse item	First year (T1)	Third year (T2)
Attitude markers	11.34	13.13
Self-mentions	12.93	15.33
Hedges	3.98	3.59
Boosters	7.13	13.61
Engagement markers	6.72	15.48*

Table 3. Interactional metadiscourse (each text 1000 words).

Thus, it can be seen that for this group of students, the use of attitude markers, self-mentions, and boosters increased over time, although without a statistically significant difference ($p > 0.05$). These results show that students slightly increased their use between first and third year. Nonetheless, the use of engagement resources grew in a statistically significant proportion ($z = 2.100$, $p = 0.036$), measured with the non-parametric Wilcoxon rank test. Finally, hedges remain relatively similar in magnitude over time, characterized as the least used feature in the sample.

Thus, results show that interactional metadiscourse increased overall, as stated by previous studies (Hyland & Tse, 2004; Hyland, 2005a). A different pattern is shown by the mitigation-reinforcement ratio since the tendency in the literature is that hedges are used more in specialized discourse than boosters (Aull, 2019; Hyland, 2005a), which is the opposite of what occurred in this sample and could indicate the need for further instruction in this regard.

Furthermore, the fact that attitude markers, self-mentions and boosters do not grow in a statistically significant manner may signal that these resources have not been acquired and mastered enough so as to represent a significant increase, despite students' remarks regarding desire for ownership of their texts that was reviewed in the qualitative results. Nevertheless, this is consistent with the qualitative findings, which show that students feel that self-mentions are not an adequate resource for academic writing, and they display little metalinguistic awareness regarding the use of other ways of developing subjectivity, such as attitude markers and boosters. Hedges, in turn, are the least frequent metadiscursive device used in the sample and the qualitative inquiry showed little awareness of this resource at all, with vague reference to issues such as formality or implicitness of opinions. Thus, it is no surprise that this low usage did not change over time.

Engagement markers were the only resource that showed statistically significant growth in this sample, reaching more than double the number of occurrences in the third year compared to the first. Interestingly, we found evidence in the qualitative analysis that this resource is used with greater ease even by the same student, which may indicate that students did learn how to use it and adapt its use to the academic register.

7. Discussion

In this article, we aimed to investigate the acquisition of voice through a longitudinal approach, bringing together a textual analysis of the positioning mechanisms with inquiries of an emic nature, such as the talk-around-texts, in order to understand from the perspective of student-writers the meaning of the various uses of discursive resources of metadiscourse: Attitude markers, self-mentions, hedges, boosters and engagement markers.

The results of the analysis show, from the qualitative data, that students elaborate further over time their metalinguistic reflections on the use of

first-person or impersonal expressions. However, they do not manage to gain a similar mastery concerning other resources such as boosters or attitude markers. Additionally, evidence of more fine-grained uses of engagement markers in the text is discussed. The study's quantitative data indicates that participants progressively utilize more positioning resources in their texts during their initial university years. This acquisition aligns with their desire to express their own voice in writing, which is, in turn, constrained by academic writing imperatives or common-sense definitions of essayist prose. This contradiction may account for the limited increase in the use of stance discursive mechanisms over time.

From a longitudinal perspective, the overall results allow us to identify that: (a) students make greater use of positioning resources, with the exception of hedges, and that the use of engagement markers grow in a statistically significant manner over time; (b) they are able to articulate their discursive options with greater clarity, although always with an incipient metalanguage; (c) they negotiate and accommodate the demands of academic writing, even if these are not made explicit by teachers; and (e) they learn over time to shape their positionings and opinions in essays, even in contravention of commonsense imperatives of objectivity and detachment.

While textual analysis provides insights into the use of these resources during intermediate stages of academic training, the interviews highlight the value of incorporating participants' perspectives to comprehend discourse usage within their contexts. They also shed light on participants' motivations, doubts, tensions, and challenges when expressing opinions and reasoning through academic writing, which is often mistakenly thought to suppress the writer's involvement.

This study offers useful insights for the teaching and development of academic writing in the humanities and social sciences in higher education. First, we need to problematize the commonsense definition of essayist prose in general and the essay in particular. Students frequently reveal the tension between the depersonalized writing "demanded by academia" and the need to develop an opinion of their own. This tension is reinforced by the incomplete and contradictory instructions of teachers throughout college, as well as on the content of high school or first-year courses on academic writing. Either way, the expectations about the genres requested by professors should be made explicit and become part of the pedagogical repertoires at the university level, specifying not only a genre or its evaluative parameters, but also its

communicative purposes, potential audiences, and associated linguistic resources; in short, helping the student to understand what a text is being written for and, therefore, what degree of positioning and involvement of the writer is required. These pragmatic and contextual dimensions of discourse would make it possible for students to resolve the tensions that emerge when developing their positioning in this type of writing.

Finally, the data from this study strongly suggests the need to include in the teaching of academic writing a wide and varied repertoire of resources, so that students can understand the ways in which they can textually express their positions in academic writing, far beyond the use or omission of the first person. This teaching should be framed within a metalinguistic reflection on the expressive functions of these resources, which would enable a progressive mastery of discursive options for students to express their voice with agency and rhetorical savviness, while considering the contextual conditions of the various academic genres that they are assigned during their studies.

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