Referential, vague or impersonal? Pronominal reference and identity. Evidence from the academic writing of Italian students of English

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Abstract: The issue of authorial stance has been the topic of much research. A rather obvious way to claim authorial presence is to use first person reference and the corresponding determiners. However, not only is the I emerging from the text plural, but different genres are associated with differing degrees of I-ism, and these conventions vary from culture to culture. In this paper I explore the issue of authorial stance in connection with identity by focusing on the use of the first person pronouns and their respective determiners in the academic writing of Italian students of English. The study shows that referential, vague and impersonal uses of personal pronouns are intertwined in a complex way and create shades of impersonality in a heteroglossic space in which a reconstruction of the self takes place.

Key words: heteroglossia, identity, library research paper, self-reference, subject pronouns

1. Introduction
It is widely acknowledged that writing is an act of identity. It is also widely acknowledged that writer identity is a complex phenomenon, consisting of various intertwined aspects and as such fluid and multiple (cf. Harris 1987; Ivanič 1994, 1995, 1998; Tang & Suganthi 1999; Van De Mieroop 2007), and that several linguistic facts contribute to the expression of identity in a text.

The way writers represent themselves in texts has been widely discussed by Ivanič (1998) whose identification of aspects of identity interacting in writing is among the most often quoted in the literature on the subject. The author (1998, Ch. I) identifies four types of identity, the first three referred to the aspects of the identity of an actual writer writing in a particular context, and the fourth having to do with the abstract prototypical identities available in the socio-cultural context of writing:
- the autobiographical identity, related to the writer’s life history;
- the discoursal identity, representing the voice the writer gives in the text;
- the self as author, referred to how much writers establish their authorial presence in their writings;
- the possibilities for self-hood, having to do with the fact that writers construct a discoursal self, not out of an infinite range of possibilities, but within the range of possibilities supported by the socio-cultural and institutional context in which they are writing.

In this paper I focus upon the third type of identity, namely ‘self as author’. The issue of authorial stance, namely how much writers feel themselves to be not just writers but also authors with the authority to say something, has attracted and has been the topic of various research studies in recent years (cf. Cherry 1988; Tang & Suganthi 1999; Hunston & Thompson 2000; Bondi 2002; Hyland 2002a, 2002b).
A rather obvious way of claiming authorial presence is to use first person reference and its corresponding determiners. However, as Hyland (2002b) and Martínez (2005) underline, not only has this phenomenon received little empirical study – especially as far as Italian L1 is concerned – but also, as Ivanič (1995: 25) correctly points out, “even this is not so simple as it might seem, because the nature of this claim to authorship depends on what, exactly, the ‘I’ is portrayed as doing” (cf. Ádel 2006).

The irreducible plurality of the ‘I’ in the text has been the topic of much debate, especially within literary and composition studies. In an interesting paper on Barthes and Coles, for example, Harris (1987) underlines how both authors argue against a romantic view of the self as an ‘essence’ and reject the idea of the self as fixed to underline its plural nature. This same idea is expressed by Bakhtin (1981, 1986), Singer (1989), as well as by Kamberelis & Scott (1992).

Although, as I have previously mentioned, the issue of identity in writing has been the focus of much research in recent years, less attention has been paid to students as authors (Hüttner 2008), much more so in relation to EFL Italian students. This paper addresses this deficit.

As Ivanič (1998) points out, self as author is, however, not separate from the other selves. Indeed, how much a writer positions him/herself as author is to a great degree the product of the other selves. To make the picture more complex, it must be recalled that the extent of this agency in the process of subject-positioning is also determined by previous experience in participating in discourses and genres1 and such an experience is fundamentally cultural in nature in that there are influences that go beyond the local discoursal situation (cf. Bamberg 1997; Archakis & Tzanne 2009). This complexity of considerations means that identity construction in texts is not smooth and simple but rather an area in which a possible struggle among the various identities is liable to take place, much more so when the language in which the writer engages is not his/her native language.

Indeed, as research has shown (Cadman 1997; Ramathan & Atkinson 1999; Hyland 2002b), the identity implied by the use of personal pronouns can be problematic for L2 writers as students might bring with them a literacy supporting identities that are different from those supported by the discourses and practices of the discipline and the L2 in which they are writing.

The hypothesis underlying the study is that a complex interaction of conventions, norms and rules belonging to national, academic and classroom cultures are intertwined in the texts under analysis in a heteroglossic space in which a reconstruction/renegotiation of the self takes place.

2. Data and procedure
This study is based on the analysis of a corpus of 20 A and B grade single-authored essays, each of about 4,000 words in length2. The academic assignment was part of the

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1 The notion of ‘genre’, together with that of ‘discourse community’ represents a key concept in the study of academic discourse, as well as a contextual setting for discussing my data. However, it deserves a separate discussion. Suffice it to say here that I will, to a great extent, follow the idea of genre as a recurrent social practice – and, as such, performing a social action – linguistically realized through texts, as has emerged, among others, from Bakhtin (1986), Swales (1990, 2004), Miller (1984), and social constructionism (cf. Giddens 1984).

2 All together, therefore, the corpus approximately consists of 80,000 words. These numbers are not exact because students handed in their essays on paper. However, in the task assignment it was clearly stated that each essay should be about 4,000 words in length and, given that, as emerged during the informal sessions, the students were quite insecure in this writing task, they tended to respect the number of words specified in the directions for writing that had been given to them.
course requirements of a graduate class I conducted on Second Language Acquisition at the University of Perugia, Central Italy, in the academic year 2007-2008. Students, all majoring in Foreign Languages, were given a list of topics covered during the lectures and asked to write an essay on one of them.

The students had all completed undergraduate degrees in Italy. This means that they had the experience of writing their final BA dissertation. However, in Italy, in most cases, even in those cases in which the students major in English, final dissertations are written in Italian. Besides, differently from the Anglo-American academic tradition, courses do not require any considerable amount of academic writing. Exams are most often taken in oral sessions, which means that sometimes, for Italian students, the task of writing a final BA dissertation is the only academic writing experience they encounter in their academic career, and this experience is basically in their L1, i.e. Italian.

As for students’ language competence, at the time the essays were written, students enrolled in the course were attending C1 language classes as well.

The procedure for the analysis of data combines quantitative as well as qualitative methodologies (cf. Van de Mieroop 2007) in that, first, subject pronoun occurrence has been counted; then, subject distribution has been divided into a typology of authorial roles following Hyland (2002b). Hyland (2002b: 1099) classifies the distribution of author pronouns and respective determiners in the students’ corpus he investigates following a functional-pragmatic approach. The functions he identifies are: stating a goal/purpose, explaining a procedure, stating results/claims, expressing self-benefits, and elaborating an argument.

- Stating a goal/purpose refers to the way the writer’s intention is signalled within the text;
- explaining a procedure to the presentation of the methodological approach followed in the research;
- stating results/claims to the making of a knowledge claim;
- expressing self-benefits to the comments on what one may personally gain from the research project;
- elaborating an argument to the setting out of a line of reasoning to justify conclusions.

Given that the context is the one discussed above, I expected that subject pronouns would be underused and that, when used, a preference for ‘we’ might emerge. However, although I did not expect students to make themselves very visible in the text, I was interested to see when in the text, and how and why, they chose to make themselves visible. Thus the micro-level of reference system had to be linked with the macro-level of text patterning since both contribute to giving hints about authorial identity.

In the next section I will carry out my analysis as follows: at the micro textual level I will look at the co-text in which the pronoun occurs. More precisely, I intend to observe semantically the verb construction it is combined with, the lexical choices made at the sentence level, and pragmatically – at the speech act level – the action the author is performing by using it. In doing this, Hyland’s framework will be used as an overarching guiding framework. At the macro textual level, I will consider the generic structure of the essay as consisting of sections and will see where in those sections authorial presence is manifested (cf. Van Dijk 1980, 2001).

3. Analysis of data
Before embarking on the analysis of pronouns it is necessary to specify the rhetorical organization pattern of the genre under analysis. Such a genre can be defined as ‘library
research paper’ (Cooper & Bikowski 2007) in that, more than reporting an original experiment, it synthesizes multiple bibliographic sources, at the same time analyzing and evaluating the research quoted, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Macrostructure of library research paper**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Typical macrostructure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>library research paper</td>
<td>synthesis of multiple sources</td>
<td>Introduction * Review of Literature (Analysis and Evaluation) * Conclusion*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* * * means ‘is followed by’

The ‘Review of Literature’ is obviously the main macro move within the text. Its function is supposed to be that of reporting existing literature on a specific topic establishing links among sources and evaluating them. Although the genre under analysis is not a research article proper, Hyland’s functions (cf. §2) can be applied to this genre. I see only a marginal application of ‘explaining a procedure’ in that in Hyland’s framework for ‘procedure’ is meant the procedure of a research study carried out by the author him/herself, whereas in the cases under analysis the focus of the paper is not an individual/original research study. However, the function has been kept and used with a slightly different meaning, namely, to refer to the use of self-mention to give a pattern to the paper, more than to refer to the use of self-mention to explain the methodology followed to carry out a research study. ‘Stating results/claims’ has also to be intended in a different way. Certainly, also in the cases under analysis, students are interpreting results and are making claims, but these are results and claims made on someone else’s research, not on their own.

Let us now turn to the various functions of 1st pers. PRO. in connection with the moves the genre consists of. The analysis shows that *I* and *we* are both used in the corpus but, quantitatively, the 1st pers. pl. PRO. is preferred, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Type of reference used in the papers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference Type</th>
<th>n. (papers)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st pers. sing. PRO.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st pers. pl. PRO.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No PRO.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference shift <em>I&gt;we&gt;I</em></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitatively, pronouns are both used in specific sections of the paper. However, *we*, being sometimes used referentially, sometimes impersonally and sometimes vaguely (Kitagawa & Lehrer 1990), seems to express richer shades of impersonality. Indeed, as Myhill (1997: 800) rightly points out, “we can distinguish between a wide variety of functional circumstances associated with one type of agent defocusing or another”.

### 3.1 First person singular pronoun

At the beginning of the paper, in the Introduction move, the 1st pers. sing. PRO. is used in two cases to state the purpose of the paper.

(1) As a Foreign Language student *I* have experienced many ways of learning a foreign language. So, in this paper *I* would like to discuss the role of the strategies which are supposed to facilitate the learning process. [I11]
However, sometimes, the purpose is not even stated and the students go on outlining the structure of the essay (‘explaining a procedure’) using the 1st pers. PRO. with a metadiscoursal function.

(2) I will start my paper with a brief description of the development of English as a lingua franca and, after outlining the main differences between multilingualism and bilingualism, I will define cross-linguistic influence and language transfer. Moreover, I will discuss some psycholinguistic findings about cross-linguistic influence in third language acquisition. Finally, I will describe two important models, namely Green’s ‘Inhibition Control Model’ and Grosjean’s ‘Bilingual Model of lexical Access’. [I17]

Indeed, this is the function the pronoun is generally used for, not only at the beginning of the paper but throughout the papers in general, pointing to a tendency towards using pronouns in those contexts in which their function is less threatening for the student.

In the following passage, for example, although some kind of commitment towards the action taken is certainly visible – much more so when I17 makes a proposal – still, the commitment has to do more with formal and organizational issues than with a discussion of content issues.

(3) So far, I have tried to explain how the gap is created in the human mind and the most suitable items to fulfil this gap. Now I will focus my attention on the way in which a non mother tongue is activated while the other languages remain stealthy. I propose the analysis of an experiment based on the interaction among three languages. [I17]

‘Elaborate an argument’ is sometimes realized using the 1st pers. PRO. What is interesting about this pronoun function is that it takes a different shape in the Review of Literature move and in the Conclusion.

Very rarely is this pronoun used with this aim in the Review of Literature move – where it would be expected to be found. In this section of the paper, consistently with Hyland’s findings, students tend to disguise their responsibility and to avoid giving opinions. When the pronoun is used, the argument is often elaborated in an expert-like way, as in example (4) – in which the pronoun is used in combination with a cognition verb to express a specific stance towards the topic –, sometimes in a student-like way as in example (5).

(4) I believe it could be quite difficult to classify strategies and to trace a map of their occurrence for single language tasks because they take into account myriads of variables that each individual combines differently. [I4]

(5) Conscious learning is easier to distinguish, since learners can talk about what they know and even demonstrate what they learn. I can articulate the rules, structures, forms, and functions of a second language that I am learning. However, before I began to learn another language, I did not know that I was using the ‘subjunctive’ or the ‘perfect tense’. Nor was I able to understand the main idea of a paragraph. For these reasons I believe that both conscious and unconscious processes are involved in the learning of a language. [I3]
I3 uses the 1st pers. PRO. but in each case in a different way. The first two pronouns (*I can articulate...; I am learning ...*) are impersonal and could be reworded using an indefinite pronoun as *one can articulate, one is learning* without changing the essential message of the text. In fact, following Kitagawa and Lehrer’s (1990: 742) distinction between vague and impersonal uses of personal pronouns, “An ‘impersonal’ use of a pronoun applies to anyone and/or everyone. A ‘vague’ use applies to specific individuals, but they are not identified or identifiable by the speaker”. According to this definition, sentences (a)-(b) (ibidem: 741-742) are examples of impersonal – not vague – use of personal pronoun because (i) they convey the idea of the generality of the action being talked about (quasi-universal quantification: for every X), and (ii) they can be replaced by an indefinite pronoun:

(a) *You* have to examine manuscripts, use *your* mind, come up with possibilities, respond to characters in situation. In a lot of ways, it’s like working on *your* own work.
(b) Thus, in order to be able to take the subway in New York *I* simply need a ‘taking a subway’ script or frame, if *I* have one, and supply now relevant specific information about the situation.

On the other hand, example (c) (ibidem: 743) is a case of vague use of the personal pronoun. In fact, (i) it is not a generalized or generalizable truth (quasi-existential quantification: there is an X), and (ii) substitution with an indefinite pronoun (e.g. *one*) would sound at the very least strange:

(c) *You’re – I don’t mean you personally – you’re going to destroy us all in a nuclear war.*

The same considerations apply to the 1st pers. PRO. as in examples (d)-(e) (ibidem: 745):

(d) *We* are obliged to make the world a better place. (impersonal)
(e) *We* ought to do something to reduce the bureaucracy at *our* university (not you and me personally). (vague)

To go back to the text under analysis, after the impersonal introduction, I3 moves on by using a first person narration of her past experience (*I began, I did not know, I was using*) – and thus a properly referential pronoun – to give support to what she is stating as a universal truth. Finally, and as a consequence of what she has previously said, she expresses her opinion combining the pronoun with an epistemological verb (*I believe*). The argument is therefore elaborated through three steps in which the presence of the student in the text appears in a kind of *crescendo* from a general truth, to an exemplification using a narrative-argumentative passage, to the final proper argumentation.

In the Conclusion move, students rarely express their opinion about the research they have discussed in the paper. What they tend to do is rather to give or do not give support to what they have read, reflecting upon their personal learning experience.

(6) *In my experience, I can say that the best way to learn a language is to go abroad. I spent 9 months in France working as a language assistant in a school. At the beginning of my experience, I had to cope with difficulties such as the spoken language speed and colloquial language. In the end, I reached the point in which the language had become automatic.* [I2]

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3 However, as Kitagawa & Lehrer (1990: 747) underline, a vague or impersonal interpretation of *we* is largely dependent on the nature of the predicate.
What is interesting in (6) is that the student’s experience is focused upon and an account of that experience in narrative style follows. She2 talks about the 9 months she spent in France and the consequences this stay has had on her language competence. In this paper, if on the one hand the student gives an account of current research on learning strategies, on the other – and more precisely, in the final section – she reflects on her learning strategies, reporting her experience of learning a foreign language.

Narration is not used to emphasize events, as its primary discourse function would suggest, but with a secondary function, i.e. to explain ideas and to reflect upon something. Narratives are mostly embedded in the concluding section of the paper and are used to recount ‘small stories’ (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008). These ‘small stories’ become the sites in which identity work is conducted. Here students are negotiating an identity of students-trying-to-become-experts, by showing that they are able to express some kind of critical thinking. However, their critical thinking, because of their not being sure of the topic under analysis, is exercised not on the subject of their study but on what they can command better, namely their personal experience.

Textually speaking, expository sections in which the agent/student undergoes continuous defocusing, alternate to narrative-argumentative multi-type (cf. Virtanen 1992) sections in which the agent/student is foregrounded. This would suggest that in the heteroglossic space of the library research paper, centripetal forces represented on the one side by the rules of expert scientific writing requiring impersonalization, exposition, and argumentation are counterbalanced by centrifugal forces having to do with the non-expert status of the writer striving towards expert models but revealing her identity as non expert in the use of the 1st pers. PRO. associated with narrative-argumentative passages that are clear examples of multi-type types of texts in which textual hybridity is the alter ego of writer’s hybrid identity. In other words, students are learning to enact the role of experts. However, while trying to do this, they still voice themselves as students.

3.2 First person plural pronoun

1st pers. pl. PRO. is quantitatively more often used and, qualitatively, the distribution within the papers’ moves is more varied and, as such, more complex and difficult to categorize in a precise way.

The vague use of the 1st pers. pl. PRO. and its determiners is most often associated with the pronoun performing a metadiscoursal function and is found throughout the paper, not only in the Introduction and Conclusion moves as the 1st pers. sing. PRO. However, as we shall see, there are shades of vagueness in this use.

In the Introduction move pronominal forms are used to state the purpose of the paper, as in (7).

(7) The purpose of our research is to discuss the various strategies by which an individual can learn a second language. [15]

However, it can also be used with a different purpose right from the beginning of the text, as shown in (8).

(8) Today, we can recognize three different approaches to SLA: linguistic, cognitive and socio-cultural. While working on this paper, we found various studies and

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4 Bamberg & Georgakopoulou (2008: 381) define ‘small stories’ as “fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world […]”
applications of task-based learning, but in our opinion it is difficult to collocate these studies in one of the above-mentioned approaches. [I9]

In example (8) a 1st pers. pl. PRO. appears as the opening sentence of the essay in what could be identified as a ‘stating results/claims’ move. In this case the pronoun is used vaguely in that those who do recognize the existence of three different strands of research in Second Language Acquisition are a specific group of experts, namely a subgroup of mankind, certainly not every human being, and thus the introductory we cannot be analyzed as being impersonal. However, in the sentence immediately following, the perspective changes: the 1st pers. pl. PRO. clearly becomes referential in that here the reader, or any unspecified other, is excluded from the reference and a small story about the author is introduced before an opinion, clearly belonging to the author of I9, is expressed.

It is much easier, on the other hand, to analyze pronominal choice in order to state a goal/purpose or to outline the structure of the paper so as to guide the reader through the text (‘explain a procedure’), namely with a metadiscoursal function. In this disguise the 1st pers. pl. PRO. is used both in the Introduction and in the Review of Literature move, as the following examples show.

(9a) In the first section of this paper we will introduce the topic. In the second, we will deal with some case studies. We will also shortly comment upon linguistic corpora and their role in SLA. [I9]

(9b) We continue our study on strategies by analysing the results of another experiment carried out by Chamot. In this case our attention focuses upon native English-speaking students learning a foreign language. [I5]

Here one cannot say that the 1st pers. pl. PRO. is vague because both speaker and addressee are clearly identifiable. Moreover, the agentivity of the student, though reduced through the use of the plural form, clearly emerges from the texts. It is the person who writes that continues the study, focuses her attention upon something, goes on to discuss something else, etc.

‘Elaborate the argument’ does not seem to be realized through the use of 1st pers. pl. PRO. that is instead used to describe the literature and to make general statements.

(10) As we shall see, we also make use of a variety of other processes to learn something. We use our mind, but also our feelings and our social and communicative skills in active ways. [I16]

Still in the Review of Literature move, with the function of ‘Explaining a procedure’, the 1st pers. pl. PRO. is very often used impersonally in combination with a modal verb, as the following examples show.

(11) In the analysis of task-based vocabulary learning, we have to consider three essential conditions for vocabulary learning. [I7]

If we take into account that, as already mentioned, the choice between a vague or an impersonal use of pronouns largely depends on the predicate (Kitagawa & Lehrer: 1990), the use of modality would seem to suggest an impersonal use of the 1st pers. pl. PRO. possibly paraphrased as one cannot but ... and as such understandable as a generalizable truth.
Finally, in the concluding section, the 1st pers. pl. PRO. is generally used to summarize what has been done in the paper. Very rarely is it used to express an opinion about something.

(12) Through our research, we have tried to analyse the most important and efficient learning strategies in Second Language Acquisition. [I5]

3.3 Summary
As expected, both 1st pers. sing. and pl. PRO. are not widely used and both are mainly used to state a goal or purpose or to explain a procedure, namely in those functions in which such a use is less threatening for the students.

I is less used than we and has a more limited distribution in that it appears mostly in the Introduction and in the Conclusion move of the papers. I is also sometimes associated with the narrative past in the recount of ‘small stories’, especially in the Conclusion move. Indeed, narration seems to be a preferred form of textualization in general and not only in the excerpts containing personal pronouns.

We is quantitatively more often used and qualitatively more varied in that, not only is it used referentially, vaguely and impersonally, but it also tends to appear in all three moves the texts consist of. A systematicity emerges in the use of the 1st pers. pl. PRO.: the more threatening the function, the more impersonal the pronoun gets. When no threat is involved, the pronoun tends to be referential. The metadiscoursal use is structurally similar to the 1st pers. sing. PRO. in that future and present perfect constructions with expositives are preferred. However, differently from the 1st pers. sing. PRO., in this case modality is also used. When the pronoun appears in the ‘stating results/claims’ function, it is again associated with modals but is not used in the way it is in expert writing, i.e. it is not used to impose any claim on the reader. It appears, rather, to underline the possibility of the fallibility of the statement being hedged and betray, therefore, an uncertainty about what is being said.

4. Discussion and Conclusion
As expected, students are reluctant to accept the connotations of authority and personal commitment implicit in the authorial pronoun. It can be said that a tendency towards agent defocusing characterizes all the texts analyzed. Pronoun usage contributes to creating such a demotion.

However, this is not the whole story. Certainly, agent defocusing is pervasive, but pronouns are still used. The reader might have noticed that one third of the papers used in this study, for instance, contain a 1st pers. sing. PRO., and I would dare to add that some interesting uses of subject pronouns emerge from the corpus. I refer, for example, to the use of the 1st pers. sing. PRO. combined with the narrative mode of textualization and used at the beginning of the paper to give reasons in relation to the choice the student has made regarding the topic, and at the end of the papers to give support to (the very few) opinions expressed. This is intriguing in the light of the fact that it is rare, if not non-existent, in Italian to intervene in the text in this way.

Let us see how all this can be explained. When using the 1st pers. sing. PRO. Italian students are positioning their authorship in a way that somehow tries to imitate the English model in which authors tend to be present in the text in a more direct way and the prose is not completely author-evacuated. Research carried out by van Hell et al. (2005) and Reilly et al. (2005) has shown that adults tend to adopt a more personal orientation in expository texts. However, (i) personal orientation can mostly be found for those functions such as ‘stating a goal/purpose’ or ‘explaining a procedure’ in which
no threat of criticism is apparent; (ii) although Italian students appear to use accounts of personal experiences (1st pers. sing. PRO. associated to narrative passages) in these – pervasively expository – texts in rhetorically consistent and communicatively appropriate ways, genre expectations are obviously not completely satisfied. They produce, thus, divergent texts that slip out of the discursive practice of the genre. In the continuum student-expert, these are the uses that I think more clearly betray their identity both as students and as Italian students. In fact, these somehow naïve attempts at positioning their authorship in the text in a more Anglo-Saxon way can be explained by the fact that the style of Italian BA level dissertations – the only academic writing experience, as I said at the beginning, that the students have had – is still very formal and a lot of traditional conventions and formulas are used and, above all, prized (cf. Hofstede 1980; Holliday 1999).

Much more at ease are they when using the 1st pers. pl. PRO. It is not by chance that this pronoun is used throughout the texts, not only in some specific sections of them. In these cases, although agentivity tends to be defocused – and pluralization is obviously a means to do this – referential uses are still present, albeit in metadiscoursal function, and vague uses of subject pronouns betray an attempt on the part of the student to portray him/herself as ‘one of the group’ who shares the same knowledge or the fallibility of possible claims, the second interpretation being the more likely, given the formality and indirectness that also characterizes Italian academic writing.

If any pedagogical implication can be drawn from the present small scale study it certainly has to do with the necessity (i) “to become aware of how academic conventions position students and be sensitive to the struggles of novice writers seeking to reconcile the discursive identities of their home and disciplinary cultures” (Hyland, 2002: 1111), and (ii) to focus more on the development of genre competence within communicative competence, not only by making the students aware of certain rhetorical preferences (included their own in the L1), but also by clarifying the social, cultural and educational factors that lie behind specific social practices, genres being indeed examples of social practices.

References


