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Giving Personal Examples and Telling Stories in Academic Essays

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To help ESL writing teachers and curriculum designers focus instruction on appropriate exemplification in academic prose, this paper examines the frequency of overt example markers and particular types of examples provided in native speaker (NS) and nonnative speaker (NNS) academic essays. To this end, the analysis compares frequency rates of example markers, first and third person pronouns, and the occurrences of past tense verbs in over 1,000 university placement essays of NS and advanced and matriculated NNS students. The results of the study demonstrate that NNS texts employ these features at significantly higher rates than NS texts. The findings further show that NNS students rely primarily on recounts of past personal experiences, incorporated as examples with the purpose of supporting the essay thesis. The preponderance of personal examples in NNS texts shows that many NNSs transfer from L1 to L2 rhetorical paradigms of constructing evidence in formal written text. However, an additional issue arises in light of the fact that current methodologies for the teaching of writing and composition encourage personal narratives as a means of providing evidence and proof for a thesis, even though personal examples are rarely considered to be appropriate in academic discourse in disciplines outside the teaching of writing. Due to the similarity of approaches to providing evidence and proof in non-Anglo-American rhetorical traditions and current methods for teaching writing, it appears that writing pedagogy may actually compound the effects of L1 to L2 transfer of rhetorical paradigms identified in NNS texts.

In L2 instruction on academic writing, giving examples to explain or elaborate on a particular point is often viewed as a desirable practice. Providing examples allows writers an opportunity to clarify and support their positions in various types of argumentative prose or supply detailed information in expository texts to enhance textual clarity. A vast majority of current L2 instructional texts encourage writers to exemplify their points and provide examples of the type of examples students should use. In most textbooks on academic writing, examples, among other types of rhetorical evidence, are described as a common means of supporting the writer's position in argumentative academic prose, such as essays or research papers. For instance, Holten and Marasco (1998), Raimes (1999), Reid (2000), and Smoke (1999) indicate that providing contextually relevant examples and illustrations represents a reasonable and valid means of thesis support in explaining one's position on an issue. Smalley and Ruetten (2000) elaborate on the number of examples in an essay ("three or four extended examples [illustrations]" [p. 137]) as well as the types of examples appropriate in an academic text ("representative examples, examples that fairly support the thesis" [p. 140]).

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Experts on teaching L2 academic writing consistently point out that the examples employed in written academic discourse need to be representative of general points and ideas discussed in support of the writer's thesis. The types of examples included as supporting illustrations also need to be varied and to rely on materials such as pertinent facts, statistics, descriptive details, and elaborate explanations (Raimes, 1999; Smalley & Ruetten, 2000). Practically all instructional texts supply samples of appropriate examples that can be used as evidence in academic prose and argumentation discourse. Although giving examples is a common explanatory and thesis support strategy in constructing persuasive text in English, in reality college-level L2 writers rarely employ this strategy successfully and in accordance with the guidelines identified in L2 composition instruction (Dong, 1998; Hvitfeldt, 1992). In fact, in many cases, the strategy is counterproductive and leads to nonnative speakers' (NNSs) composing L2 texts that seem to be particularly un-academic with high frequencies of discourse and text features incongruous with common characteristics of written academic discourse in English (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Johns, 1991, 1997; Jordan, 1997).

This paper examines the frequency of overt and marked examples and the types of examples provided in NS and NNS academic essays. The study is based on an analysis of a large corpus of L1 and L2 student academic texts (1,087 essays/ 327,802 words) and compares NS and NNS frequency rates of exemplification markers, first person pronouns, and occurrences of the past tense in examples and illustrative stories intended to support the writer's position in argumentation essays. The findings of this study are intended to help ESL writing teachers and curriculum designers focus instruction on appropriate exemplification of points and ideas in academic prose.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF ACADEMIC GENRE AND EXEMPLIFICATION IN ENGLISH

Much research on written academic discourse and text that has been carried out since the 1960s points to a good deal of variability in feature uses across different academic genres. It may be difficult to claim that uses of text features in student essays or papers display many similarities to those in published academic articles. However, surveys of student written assignments in university courses carried out in the 1980s and 1990s show that specific types of writing tasks expected even of undergraduate students are not particularly distinct from many other academic subgenres, for example, critiques, proposals, summaries, and position-based argumentation assignments based on course content (English, 1999; Horowitz, 1986a; Johns, 1981, 1997; Ostler, 1980). In addition to such out-of-class assignments, investigations of student academic writing tasks at both undergraduate and graduate levels find that most academic courses include in-class essay tests and exams (Horowitz, 1986b; Jordan, 1997). The most comprehensive study to date of writing tasks in academic degree programs was carried out by the Educational

Testing Service (Hale et al., 1996) in eight large universities in the U.S. and Canada, and the results demonstrate that 82% of all undergraduate and 40% of graduate courses in social sciences and humanities require in-class essays ranging in length from short answer writing tasks to five pages. In physical sciences and engineering, 26% of undergraduate courses also require in-class writing, as do 59% of those taught in English departments.

Johns (1997) emphasizes that prompt-based in-class essay exams and tests in the disciplines are "a ubiquitous pedagogical genre" (p. 93). According to Johns, essay tests, similar to other academic writing tasks, necessitate students' familiarity with the written discourse and text conventions expected in practically all academic genres. Although research has identified differences in the contents of out-of-class written assignments and in-class essay tests (Horowitz, 1991; Johns, 1997), student in-class essays, whether content-based or content-free, are evaluated based on common characteristics of academic discourse and text features: logical organizational structure, relevance of arguments to the essay's main point(s), the prominence of main ideas that are clearly stated, effective supporting material, and appropriate uses of academic vocabulary and grammar (Connelly, 2000; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Hamp-Lyons, 1991; Johns, 1991, 1997; Kennedy, Kennedy, & Holladay, 1993; Ostler, 1980). Johns (1997) calls these "recurring features" (p. 27) of the academic genre and text; that is, "formal features of text in this genre do not appear to vary considerably from class to class, nor ... have the genre requirements varied much since the mid-1980s" (p. 29).

Research into academic text, however, identifies examples as relatively rare: Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan's (1999) analysis of large corpora of written academic text identified only approximately 900 overt exemplification markers (*e.g./eg, for example,* and *for instance*) per one million words (0.09%). Personal examples are rarer still (Swales & Feak, 1994), as evinced by a reduced use of first person pronouns in academic prose, that is, 0.6% of all words in the corpus (Biber et al.). In fact, Swales' (1990) analysis of written academic genre found that academic texts are often expected to project objectivity in presenting information and depersonalize text by various lexical and syntactic means. Citing Bizzell (1982), Swales argues that the teaching of writing and "student writing in colleges and universities should not be viewed as an individually-oriented, inner-directed cognitive process" (p. 4), but as tasks in discourse and text construction within the conventions of communicating knowledge within the norms of the academic community. According to Bizzell, teachers of L2 writing need to prepare students to write in the disciplines because academic writing is a socially-situated act that extends far beyond the writer's analysis of his or her inner explorations and thoughts. Echoing these observations made fifteen years earlier, Jordan (1997) calls for explicit teaching of features of formal and academic discourse and text, and stresses that personal pronouns, personal tone, and personal references should be avoided. In this sense, giving personal examples in the context of academic prose may seem to be especially out of place.

In particular, Hyland's (1999) extensive study of academic text in general and persuasive academic discourse in particular shows that social and linguistic conventions of argumentation are highly depersonalized with slight variations, depending on the discipline. According to his findings based on a large corpus of academic texts, the prose in philosophy included the highest rates of first person pronouns of 6.5 per 1,000 words (0.65%), followed by texts in marketing and applied linguistics with 6.2 (0.62%) and 4.8 (0.48%) occurrences per 1,000 words, respectively. Although in Hyland's analyses and in the other research findings examined below, uses of first person pronouns in formal academic prose do not always mark personal examples, the comparative rarity of these features in academic text evinces scarcity of personal references overall.

EXAMPLES IN WRITTEN DISCOURSE IN NON-ANGLO-AMERICAN RHETORICAL TRADITIONS

Evidential information in support of the writer's position (but not necessarily the writer's thesis) is expected in many rhetorical traditions other than Anglo-American. In his detailed overview of the rhetorical structure of Chinese formal prose, Kirkpatrick (1997) identifies several established paradigms, such as the four-part *qi-cheng-zhuan-he*, *ba gu wen* (the classical eight-legged essay), and other more contemporary discourse and text essay structures. He specifies that all essay paradigms are expected to contain reasoning, elements of argumentation, and "the proof or the evidence" (p. 241). The organization of the discourse can follow two basic types of reasoning—"inductive, which proceeds from example(s) to a conclusion, and deductive, which proceeds from 'the truth' or conclusion to the examples" (p. 241). Hence, according to Kirkpatrick, in formal written prose, examples actually represent the evidence or proof in support of the general "truth" at the beginning or at the end of the essay.

Maynard's (1998) analysis of the discourse structure in Japanese formal written prose also identifies several similar rhetorical patterns of idea organization. Essays can be constructed along the three-, five-, or four-part organization formats, which are typically inductive. All essay patterns include topic hierarchies with the topic (but not necessarily the thesis) stated at the beginning, followed by descriptions of subtopics and topic development, and finally the general conclusion. According to Maynard, the topic and subtopics require the writer to provide evidence for the validity of his or her position, and the evidence takes the form of concrete examples. Furthermore, examples can also be employed in support of definitions, explanations, problem statements, or as "data leading to evidence" (p. 55). The author specifies that examples comprising a clear and "explicit presentation of thoughts" (p. 60) are the key for the rhetorical organization of formal written discourse even at the high school level of writing instruction in Japanese. Because in writing the purpose is to explain the writer's own thoughts and opinions, the examples provided in evidence of the topic can be derived from the writer's

personal experiences, observations, or narrative to explain his or her point of view.

Similar to Chinese and Japanese rhetorical constructs of the necessary evidence for the essay's main topic, in Vietnamese persuasive writing, exemplification is intended to provide the basis for the validity of the writer's purpose. In his analysis of the discourse paradigms in Vietnamese, Nguyen (1987) observes that traditional Vietnamese discourse construction follows that adopted in the Chinese rhetorical tradition. The author reports that according to many sources, the philosophical and educational ties between Vietnam and China were so strong that for centuries the Vietnamese considered themselves to be a part of the Chinese school of thought and the classical rhetorical tradition. In their study of Vietnamese students in U.S. universities, Murray and Nichols (1992) found that successful university-level writers personalized the contexts of their essays and felt free to discuss their experiences in academic texts.

Personalized references to the writer's own feelings and thoughts are also considered to be common and acceptable in formal written discourse in other rhetorical traditions, such as Malay and Indonesian, which are similar in many respects (Prentice, 1987). Hvitfeldt (1992) reports that her Malay students often included lengthy accounts of personal conversations and anecdotes in formal essays and research papers. She further notes that for many writers, the idea of truth results from everyday experience, and personal examples can be just as valid as the information obtained from literary sources. Hvitfeldt comments that ESL students from Japan, China, and Korea demonstrate greater personal involvement with examples and text through the use of first person references and more references to the writer's experiences. According to her findings, NNS students often rely on less academically oriented forms of argumentation support when they are not familiar with or do not know how to use the conventional academic forms.

In her examination of ESL students' academic texts in English at the university level, Dong (1998) similarly found that Chinese and Korean speakers frequently transfer strategies for rhetorical proof in academic discourse from L1 discourse paradigms. She explains that providing various types of examples as evidence in academic prose is not only a prevalent strategy for supporting the thesis, but also a means of establishing rapport with the reader to create common ground and solidarity with the goal of persuasion. According to her students' accounts of how to construct academic discourse in their L1s and in English, examples are appropriate in both discourse traditions: "a piece of good writing often has main ideas and details by using examples" (Dong, cited student text, p. 97). However, Dong indicates that Chinese and Korean university students reported confusion regarding the types of examples that could be used in academic prose in English.

EXAMPLES AND ILLUSTRATIONS IN WRITING INSTRUCTION IN ENGLISH

Many strategies adopted in the teaching of L2 writing to nonnative speakers (NNSs) are derived from those developed for the writing instruction of native speak-

ers (NSs). In the late 1970s and 1980s, several influential studies were published that advocated the applicability to L2 writing pedagogy of teaching methodologies created for teaching L1 writing to NSs (Spack & Sadow, 1983; Zamel, 1982). For instance, Zamel's (1983) paper claimed that "ESL writers, like their native language counterparts, experience writing as a process of creating meaning," explore their ideas and thoughts on paper, "discovering in the act of doing so not only what these thoughts are, but also the form with which best to express them" (p. 168). However, Zamel's research on the similarities between L1 writing processes of NSs and L2 composing strategies of NNSs was based on her findings dealing with self-reports of only six students, who were speakers of five different languages. In subsequent studies, other methodologists for teaching L1 writing to NSs also found appealing the idea of employing L1 writing pedagogy to NNSs (Reid, 1993; Spack, 1988) because it had intuitive validity and was grounded in the research of the full-fledged discipline of composition and rhetoric, based on studies developed, however, for a different type of population.

The prevalent writing instruction methodology for NSs places a great deal of importance on self-expression, self-exploration, discovery of personal meaning, and experiential prose (Connelly, 2000; Spack, 1988; Zamel, 1983) within the contexts of academic tasks. According to the instructional approaches for teaching L1 writing to NSs, giving extended examples, including those from personal experiences, as support for the thesis is considered to be a common technique noted in many writing guides and instructional texts (Beason & Lester, 2000; Hacker, 1994; Kennedy, Kennedy, & Holladay, 1993; Lunsford & Connors, 1997). Hacker (2000) states "examples, perhaps the most common pattern of development, are appropriate whenever the reader might be tempted to ask, 'For example?'" (p. 40). According to Hacker, "illustrations are extended examples, frequently presented in story form....When well selected, however, they can be a vivid and effective means of developing a point" (p. 40). Similarly, Beason and Lester (2000) indicate that to explain their ideas clearly in writing and to address the expectations of the audience, writers should answer the following questions in their compositions: "What could I say about my own experiences with this subject that would also matter to my readers? What would interest them because they have had similar experiences they could relate to mine?" (p. 394).

Although personal narratives are certainly not considered requisite in argumentative or expository essays, some university-level textbooks for academic writing strongly advocate providing personal examples as evidence in supporting the thesis. For instance, Connelly (2000) explains several advantages of using personal observations and experiences as evidential information: "like personal observations, accounts of your own life can be convincing support" (pp. 80-81). He also highlights the advantages of including personal stories and experiences in academic texts and states that "personal experiences can be emotionally powerful and commanding because the writer is the sole authority and expert. ... Individual accounts can humanize abstract issues and personalize objective facts and statistics" (pp. 80-81).

However, as noted above, numerous studies of formal academic text outside of writing and composition instruction have demonstrated that personal examples are difficult to find. As Johns (1997) notes, little has changed in the formal features of written discourse and text in academic genre since the mid-1980s. It is also interesting to note that some student textbooks published prior to or in the early days of the process-based pedagogy for teaching academic text production which are still in print (Arnaudet & Barrett, 1984/1990; Weissberg & Buker, 1990) actually advise against using personal examples.

Thus, following the methodology for teaching L1 writing to NSs, L2 writing pedagogy instructs students in colleges and universities that the use of personal examples and illustrative stories (Hacker, 2000) represents an acceptable means of supporting the writer's position in argumentation and exposition texts. However, because most NSs have far greater (native) language proficiency in English than most NNSs (however advanced), NS students' familiarity with academic discourse and text conventions may similarly greatly exceed that of NNSs with higher academic standing. Specifically, novice NS writers in colleges and universities have had a far lengthier and linguistically more advanced exposure to academic discourse and language uses in texts. For this reason, NS uses of examples and extended illustrative stories may demonstrate the conventions of academic text differently than those identified in NNS academic texts.

That is, NS and NNS writers in the academy may understand the place, purpose, and extent of personal examples differently. In this case, the acceptability of personal examples and experiences advocated in process-based writing instruction exacerbates the L1 to L2 transfer of rhetorical strategies that are not necessarily appropriate in Anglo-American academic written discourse and text.

THE STUDY

This study examines the ways in which speakers of such languages as English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, and Vietnamese employ examples and illustrations in their academic essays in English. In particular, the study focuses on the frequency rates of overt exemplification markers in essay texts, listed in full, (*as*) *an example, for example, for instance, in* (*my/our/his /her/their*) *example, like, mainly, namely, such as ..., that is* (*to say*). Biber's (1988) and Biber et al.'s (1999) examinations of spoken and written corpora point to the fact that exemplification is far more common in speech than in formal written text. While most marked examples include whole clauses and even short descriptions, those marked by, for instance, *mainly, namely,* or *such as* can be as short as appositive noun or adjective phrases (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985). Many composition and writing textbooks recommend that examples be used when writers need to convey their ideas clearly and explicitly or when they believe that the audience would not be familiar with the events, activities, or concepts discussed in the text (Hacker, 2000; Raimes, 1999; Smoke, 1999).

To investigate the types of examples employed in student essays, the uses of all forms of first and third person pronouns (including singular, plural, subjective, and objective) and the occurrences of the past tense are also examined. Biber's (1988, 1995) analyses of large English-language corpora indicate that first person pronouns serve as markers of interpersonal discourse and direct involvement of the writer, and they are usually more characteristic of spoken rather than written registers.[1] Biber's investigations also identify third person singular and plural pronouns as markers of imprecise reference to persons and objects removed from the writer's immediate view. In academic writing instruction, the use of third person singular and plural pronouns is considered to be advisable because they impart formality and objectivity to academic prose (Hacker, 1994; Smoke, 1999). According to Halliday and Hasan (1976) and Quirk et al. (1985), first and third person pronouns are common in expository prose and in past tense narratives that recount experiences or activities.

In various academic genres, the past tense is used in discussions of observations and methods, in study results and conclusions (Swales & Feak, 1994), as well as in examinations of academic work and events from a historical perspective (Swales, 1990). However, none of the past tense uses in student placement essays were associated with such discourse segments.

By means of the analysis of exemplification markers, first and third person pronouns, and past tense occurrences together, the study attempts to determine whether NS and NNS students provided similar types of examples and illustrations to support their thesis statements in argumentation or exposition essays that are commonly required in placement and diagnostic tests.

The Students

The essays were written by 1,087 students during placement and diagnostic tests, administered to NS and NNS students alike in four U.S. universities. All students were admitted to degree programs and were enrolled in mainstream classes. All students were given 50 minutes, that is, one class period, to write the essays.

The NNSs had achieved a relatively high level of English language proficiency, and their TOEFL scores ranged from 520 to 603, with a mean of 577. Of the NNS students, 78% were holders of U.S. associate degrees earned in various community colleges and were admitted as transfers at the junior level in four-year comprehensive universities. These individuals had received at least three years of ESL and composition instruction in the U.S., as they had completed at least a year in academic intensive programs, followed by two years of community college training. Of the remaining students, 16% were first-year students and 6% graduate students. All first-year students were graduates of U.S. high schools, and the majority had spent at least three years in the U.S. The graduate students had similarly completed their ESL studies in U.S. EAP programs and had resided in English-speaking environments for periods between 18 and 29 months.

The essays analyzed in the study were written by 881 NNS students. They included: 190 speakers of Chinese, 184 speakers of Japanese, 166 speakers of Korean, 158 speakers of Vietnamese, and 183 speakers of Indonesian. The 206 NS students in the study were enrolled in required first-year composition classes and included graduates of U.S. suburban high schools in three states on the east and west coasts and the Midwest.

THE DATA

The essays were written in response to one of five prompts:

(1) Some people believe that when parents make their children's lives too easy, they can actually harm their children instead. Explain your views on this issue. Use detailed reasons and examples.

(2) Many people believe that grades do not encourage learning. Do you agree or disagree with this opinion? Be sure to explain your answer using specific reasons and examples.

(3) Some people learn best when a classroom lesson is presented in a serious, formal manner. Others prefer a lesson that is enjoyable and entertaining. Explain your views on this issue. Use detailed reasons and examples.

(4) Many educators believe that parents should help to form their children's opinions. Others feel that children should be allowed to develop their own opinions. Explain your views on this issue. Use detailed reasons and examples.

(5) Some people choose their major field of study based on their personal interests and are less concerned about future employment possibilities. Others choose majors in fields with a large number of jobs and options for employment. What position do you support? Use detailed reasons and examples.

Of the total, 216 essays were written on Prompt (1), 208 on Prompt (2), 215 on Prompt (3), 219 on Prompt (4), and 229 on Prompt (5). The distribution of essays among the five prompts was proximate for all students, as presented in Table 1.

Data Analysis

To determine whether NS and NNS students similarly employed exemplification markers, first and third person pronouns, and past tense verbs, the number of words in each of the 1,087 essays was counted, followed by a count of the occurrences of each of the markers, pronouns, and tenses. For example, NS essay #1 for Prompt 1 consisted of 250 words and included one exemplification marker (*for example*). To determine the percentage rate of exemplification markers used in the essay, a computation was performed, (i.e., 1/250 = 0.4%) and then repeated for 30 occurrences of first person pronouns (30/250 = 12%). The computations were performed separately for exemplification markers, first person pronouns, third person pronouns, and the past tense verbs in each of the NS and NNS essays.

Because the number of essays written to each prompt by each L1 group of

Table 1:
Distribution of Student Essays by Prompt

L1 Group	Prompt 1 Parents	Prompt 2 Grades	Prompt 3 Manner	Prompt 4 Opinions	Prompt 5 Major
NSs	44	36	40	47	39
Chinese	39	39	39	34	39
Japanese	32	35	34	41	42
Korean	32	33	33	32	36
Indonesian	35	35	37	35	41
Vietnamese	34	30	32	30	32
TOTAL	216	208	215	219	229

students was proximate, the analysis of example uses in students' texts was carried out based on pooled data for all essays combined. Non-parametric statistical comparisons of the NS and NNS data were employed because the majority of the percentage rates were not normally distributed. The Mann-Whitney U Test was selected as a conservative measure of differences between the NS and NNS data. The Mann-Whitney U Test compares two sets of data based on their ranks below and above the median (e.g., NS percentage rates of first person pronouns in essays written to the same prompt and those of Chinese speakers, then those of NSs and Japanese speakers, then NSs and Korean speakers, etc.).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The medians, ranges, and results of statistical tests for exemplification markers, first and third person pronouns, and past tense verbs are presented in Table 2. The analysis of the exemplification data from student essays shows that NNSs employed far more example markers, first person pronouns, and past tense verbs in their academic texts than NSs did.

Exemplification Markers

These data demonstrate that, regardless of their L1s, NNS students employed example markers at rates more than twice those of NS writers in their essays. In fact, as is also apparent from range values, in some essays of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean speakers, nearly 3% of all words marked examples.

Table 2
Median Frequency Rates for Exemplification, Pronouns, and Past Tense Verbs in NS and NNS Academic Essays (%)

Markers/L1s	NSs	CH	JP	KR	VT	IN
Example markers	0.21	0.50**	0.49**	0.51**	0.51**	0.57**
Range	2.08	3.03	2.86	2.86	2.70	2.78
First person pronouns	2.29	3.41*	4.57**	3.49*	3.26*	3.68*
Range	15.41	17.65	20.59	13.68	21.76	18.21
Third person pronouns	4.03	4.89*	4.57	4.35	4.62	5.25*
Range	18.75	24.34	19.08	19.05	19.00	17.26
Past tense verbs	1.74	3.21**	3.52**	4.55**	2.78*	2.89*
Range	11.88	16.67	13.02	11.82	10.71	11.46

** 2-tailed $p < 0.05$
* 1-tailed $p < 0.05$

In NS and NNS academic essays, the extent of examples in many cases determines the type of text that students compose: In many cases, lengthy personal narratives included as examples can actually comprise the entire essay. Academic essays are often expected to include a thesis statement and specific supporting arguments, such as facts, examples and illustrations, expert opinions, and valid, reasoned generalizations (Hacker, 1994). Axelrod and Cooper (1996) note that examples should be chosen with care to be representative, specific, and relevant because in argumentation essays their purpose is to "lead readers to accept the general claim" advanced in the essay (p. 223). Kennedy, Kennedy, and Holladay (1993) specifically address "writing competency exams" and dealing with writing tasks in which writers have little choice of topics. They explain that writers need to include "logical argument and solid evidence," without "being vague or general" but "personal" to describe "something you have observed or experienced" (p. 287).

Following the approach adopted in L1 and L2 writing instruction of presenting examples, both NSs and NNSs included them in their texts. For example,

> (1) For me, for example, I prefer a class which is more enjoyable and more interesting because I won't fall asleep, feel nervous, and the class will be more

> lively. ... I feel nervous when I take a serious, formal class. For instance, I had a quiz every day in class, and the teacher was very strict. I started to feel nervous and started to get a headache every time when we had a quiz. So, my mother gave me medicine for my headache but it didn't help. My friends also didn't like the serious class with all the quizzes. (Chinese)

In (1), the writer attempts to present herself as a typical (representative) student and refers to her preference for an enjoyable class as an example. Then when she begins to explain why she feels nervous when taking a formal class, she marks her narrative with *for instance*, thus creating an example within an example structure. Other writers included detailed accounts in their examples:

> (2) For example, I had an experience which made my classroom effort up to very high. I was not doing well in my sophomore class. I liked to study history a lot, but I did not make a lot of effort in the classroom because the lesson was always in a formal manner and the class was always quiet. However, in my next history classroom, I started to get better grades and I enjoyed the class a lot because it was very exciting and enjoyable. The teacher told us many interesting stories and showed movies about history. Students really liked this teacher in my next class. Most of all, students liked the movies because they were a lot of fun. (Korean)

In (2), the personal narrative, marked as an example, serves as a support for the thesis that enjoyable classes are preferable to the serious and formal classes when at the end of the narrative the writer generalizes from her own experience to that of other students in the class. In this way, the writer creates a discourse structure that Maynard (1998) called "data leading to evidence" that extends beyond the student's personal experience and is applicable to other students.

On the other hand, NSs presented more examples of specific issues associated with the topic and fewer personal narratives than NNSs did:

> (3) For example, the assignment of writing an essay is definitely a task that should be taken seriously. The act of writing the essay may seem difficult or even boring. How a person perceives the topic of the essay and the ideas they use is what can make writing the essay enjoyable. (NS)

In this text, the writer exemplifies a point she is making regarding a writing assignment instead of providing a personal experience with a writing task. When NSs included personal examples in their essays, the narratives were comparatively short:

> (4) For instance, my senior math class had both sides. The teacher would open up with a class discussion on the homework from the previous night and then follow with an explanation of the day's assignment. I found this to be a particularly good balance, and it has been the best method a teacher has used in class for instructional purposes, as if a compromise of the two sides. (NS)

The text in (4) describes a personal experience, but it does not come in the form of a narrative. Rather, it briefly mentions the main point of the example and provides a statement that refers back to the topic.

First and Third Person Pronouns

Further evidence that NNSs in all L1 groups relied on personal firsthand experiences in supporting their argumentation positions is clearly apparent from the significantly higher median rates of first person pronouns in L2 texts than in those written by NSs. In fact, in some texts of Japanese and Vietnamese speakers, first-person stories and narratives represented large portions (if not most) of their academic essays: Over 20% of all words in their essays consisted of first person pronouns. Excerpts (5) and (6) below were selected from those written to the same Prompt 1 (see above), and both include first person experiences as examples. Excerpt (5) is written by a NNS and (6) by a NS:

> (5) I can answer this issue because I was raised this way, and my life is a good example. My parents always helped me and I didn't have to think a lot of things. They decide what I am going to do. They totally controlled me and I didn't care about it. But one day I was sent to an American high school by myself without having any idea what I was going to face. For example, I didn't know how to cook. I didn't know how to do laundry or how to study. I could get over those problems but I still have a problem which is I can't decide what I want for myself. I have never decided by myself about my life. Until my parents tell me to do something, I don't do anything because I don't know what to do. For instance, the other day, my mom told me to be a psychologist so I thought I was going to major in that, but my dad told me to be a doctor, so I changed my mind. I thought I was going to major in pre-med. I don't know what I want to be or what I want to major in. My friend told me it happens because my parents control me. ...For example, homework or other works which children are supposed to do by themselves but they ask their parents to do. They don't learn anything. (Japanese)

Excerpt (5), in fact, contains several intertwined personal recounts and only indirectly alludes to the issue of whether parents should or should not make their children's lives too easy. That is, the NNS writer in (5) did not provide an explicit connection between her past-time narrative and the issue raised in the prompt.

On the other hand, in many cases, personal accounts as examples in NS texts, as in (6), included generalizable personal situations to support the thesis. As has been mentioned, however, NSs and NNSs may have different interpretations of how to employ personal examples in support of their thesis in written discourse because NSs have far greater familiarity with academic conventions than NNSs even with higher academic standing.

> (6) For example, in my own experiences, my parents provide for everything and anything I need, and most of the time what I want. They teach me what it means to be responsible. I don't ask for much from them, but when I do, they try to give that to me. My parents make my life very easy, but it has, in no way, affected or harmed my life. (NS)

In (6), unlike (5), the NS student generalized from her experience by means of present-tense constructions and connected her explanation to the topic at hand. Furthermore, it is important to note that NS and NNS accounts of experiences substantially differed in length.

Third person examples and generalizations were employed at similar rates in the essays of NSs and Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese speakers, but the Chinese and Indonesian speakers' texts included them at significantly higher rates. It is important to note, however, that generalizations and third person narratives occupied a prominent place in the essays of NS and NNS students alike: Fully one fifth to one third of all words in most student texts consisted of third person pronouns. In the essays of Chinese students, the range alone represents 24%. Excerpts (7), (8), and (9) are selected from essays on the same Prompt 5, with (7) written by a NNS student and (8-9) by NS students:

> (7) Here is an example. I know a Chinese journalist who selected biochemistry as her major because her parents thought it's easy to find a job for students majoring in that field. She spent 12 years getting her Ph.D. in this field. But after she got it, she suddenly realized that she made a big error. She had no interest in biochemistry. So, she determined to give up everything she got through 12 years' hard studying and transferred to journalism, which her interest lies in. (Chinese)

On the other hand, NS third-person examples included expanded subtopic argumentation points rather than stories as thesis support.

> (8) For example, a biology major does not necessarily have to love to study plants or animals. A biology degree can lead to so many different careers. With a biology degree one can go on to be a doctor, teacher, veterinarian, or an environmentalist. It's up to the student to find a way to make his personal interest a part of his career. (NS)

> (9) For example, if one is sincerely interested in their job, more dedicated work is shown in all they do. They actually care about what they are doing at work and the effect it will have on others. Examples of such situations can be seen at many levels, from the President of the United States to the person who scrubs the floors at a fast food restaurant. (NS)

Excerpts (7) and (8, 9) present third-person accounts that display distinct interpretations of the purpose and types of exemplification in academic text. While (7)

recounts an experience of the writer's friend who changed careers, the text in (8) exemplifies a specific case in choices of careers without personal examples.

Past-tense Verbs

The fact that NNS students employed past-time narratives as a means of supporting their argumentation in academic texts becomes particularly clear in the significant divergences between NS and NNS median frequency rates for the uses of past-tense verbs. Specifically, the median rates in the essays of Japanese and Korean speakers exceeded those of NSs more than two-fold, while the rates in the texts of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Indonesian speakers were approximately 60% higher than those in NS prose. The excerpts from student texts written to Prompt 2, "Grades," in (10) and (11), as well as (1), (2), (5), and (7) above, include substantial past-time narratives and accounts of experiences:

> (10) The first reason that explains that grades do not encourage learning is the people's situation. For example, I studied Accounting really hard. I used many ways to learn something from the subject, such as had a tutor help me, formed a study group, asked the teacher, and did my homework. One hour before the test, I got a phone call from my friend. She told me that my cousin had a car accident. I couldn't concentrate on doing my test. As a result from that situation, I got a bad grade. I learned something even though I didn't get a good grade. The grade can't be the measurement for how far people know or learn about the subject.
>
> The second reason is the ability or talent can't be measured by a grade. For example, the final grade in my brother's math class was average. He had a talent in math which could be seen in his work. Unfortunately, the teacher was not really fair to him, maybe just for some reason that my brother was late one time. At the end of the quarter, there was an advising session where all students came, and other people could tell that my brother got a bad grade. That's why I agree that grades do not encourage learning. (Indonesian)

The excerpt in (10) contains three example markers and recounts two past-time experiences, one a first-person and the other a third-person narrative. Two example markers flag beginnings of accounts, and the third (*such as*) highlights a listing of activities. Both past-time narratives are presented as evidence to support the student's thesis that grades do not encourage learning. In fact, of the 33 verbs in (10), only 11 are used in the present tense, and the remaining 22 are in the past.

On the other hand, in (11), a NS explains why grades do not encourage learning without relying on a past-time narrative, and the text in (11) includes no past tense verbs.

> (11) In my opinion, grades do not encourage learning. The reason is that when people receive an assignment grade, it tends to harm them. If a student is given a low or failing grade, it will often times produce an ill will toward the person giving the grade causing problems later. If a student is given a high grade, then he or she believes that their work is fine even if they miss a few key points needed to study later.

> I believe that an evaluation would be more helpful than grades. An evaluation would let a student know what areas to work on and which areas are alright. The evaluation would be less of an emotional strain between the teacher and student. If a person were given a bad evaluation, he or she would know that they are in need of help with their studies. Even if an evaluation is taken the wrong way, it tells the student what needs to be worked on rather than assigning a simple number to mark the percent of the material learned. (NS)

The text in (11) argues against grades based on specific points presented along the lines of *if..., then ...* constructions. Furthermore, while rejecting grades in courses, the excerpt discusses an alternative. Because personal narratives or accounts of past experiences were not employed in the NS text in (11), it appears to be more depersonalized and objective than the text in (10).

The issue of whether NNSs employ the past tense in contexts similarly to NSs has been discussed in earlier research on the meanings and functions of the past tense in discourse (DeCarrico, 1986; Guiora, 1983; Hinkel, 1997; McCarthy, 1991). The findings of several studies point to the complexity of past tense meanings and uses that can be highly conventionalized in formal academic prose. However, it appears that an additional factor in NNS uses of the past tense in academic texts may stem from the L2 writers' reliance on accounts of past-time personal experiences and narratives, which are often considered to be inappropriate in formal academic discourse (Johns, 1997; Jordan, 1997; Swales & Feak, 1994).

A related consideration in regard to the uses of personal examples and illustrative narratives is whether NNSs are actually taught how examples can be constructed in academic essays and what represents appropriate exemplification in formal prose. All NNS students whose essays were analyzed in this study had received years of writing instruction in U.S. high schools, colleges, and universities. As the data in Table 2 show, however, matriculated and proficient L2 learners, most of whom are enrolled at the junior level in four-year universities, do not seem to have rhetorical means of supporting their argumentation positions beyond accounts of personal experiences and examples. Furthermore, given the prevalence of exemplification in the almost 900 L2 academic essays in this study, it is apparent that NNS students are not even aware of the fact that their choice of argumentative support in writing competency exams is not very common in formal academic texts. Although such an observation would not be surprising in regard to students new to English-speaking academic settings (Hvitfeldt, 1992), it seems to be particularly discouraging when made about students who have completed their training in L2 writing and composition.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of a large corpus of NS and NNS academic essays (327,802 words) shows that academically advanced and proficient NNS students employ exemplification markers at rates more than twice those identified in the essays of

NSs. Furthermore, the comparisons of median rates for first person pronouns in NS and NNS essays also demonstrate that NNS texts contain significantly higher median rates of these referential features. These findings point to the fact that speakers of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Indonesian who have completed their training in ESL and writing courses rely on accounts of personal experiences and stories as a means of thesis support in formal essays significantly more frequently than NS students do. In addition, third person pronouns usually associated with generalized statements and accounts of third person experiences were found at significantly higher median rates in the formal writing of Chinese and Indonesian speakers than in those of NS students. In similar contexts, however, most NS examples included generalized subpoints as thesis support.

Another important finding of this study is that the essays of NNSs greatly relied on extended past-time narratives in constructing written academic discourse in English. In particular, the median frequency rates of past tense verbs in the texts written by speakers of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean were approximately two times higher than those in NS texts. The median rates of past tense uses in the essays of Vietnamese and Indonesians exceeded those of NSs by more than half. Earlier studies have established that NNSs often have difficulty with meanings and uses of the past tense in English and that they employ it in contexts where NSs do not. The prevalence of past tense uses in L2 personal narratives in academic texts clearly indicates that further research is needed to determine what specific contexts lead to NNS usage of the past tense in written discourse.

There is little doubt that content-free prompts common in in-class essays intended to gauge students' writing skills often require students to support their opinions based on their personal experiences. Although such prompts may tend to lend themselves to accounts of personal stories and narratives, the findings of this study show that NS students did not rely on personal narratives to provide evidence for their positions nearly to the extent that NNS students did. Therefore, ESL writing instruction may need to focus explicitly on the differences between personal narratives and generalizations from personal experiences, such as those identified in the essays of NS students without any college- or university-level training in writing and composition.

In many rhetorical traditions in addition to the Anglo-American, evidence and proof are expected to support the main point of a formal essay. However, what represents valid and reasonable means of supporting the essay topic or thesis differs substantially among rhetorical paradigms and academic genres. While in Anglo-American academic discourse in various disciplines, including humanities, personal examples are hardly ever used, writing and composition instruction for college and university students actively advocates employing personal examples and experiences as evidence and thesis support in argumentation essays.

In addition, in rhetorical and discourse traditions in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Indonesian, examples often serve the requisite purpose of providing evidence and proof for the validity of the essay's main topic and rhetorical support by means of subtopics and extensive exemplification. Thus, the pre-

dominance of past-time personal examples and narrated experiences may be an outcome of L1 to L2 transfer of discourse paradigms and construction when speakers of these languages use extensive exemplification in their academic essays in English.

An important issue arises, however, in regard to how evidence and proof are presented to learners in L2 writing and composition instruction that touts personal examples and narratives as evidence and thesis support in academic argumentation discourse. In light of the fact that self-exploration, self-discovery, and the writer's personal authority on the topic at hand are considered to be necessary and sufficient qualities to produce an academic essay, inner-directed and individually oriented thoughts (Bizzell, 1982; Swales, 1990) appear to have taken the place of proof and evidence commonly expected in academic discourse. Thus, given the similarity between the types of appropriate evidence and rhetorical proof in many non-Anglo-American discourse traditions and process-centered teaching of L2 writing, it seems clear that NNSs' L1-based approaches to composing formal essays in English can only be compounded by self-oriented writing instruction. In fact, it may be that speakers of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Indonesian need little instruction in how to include personal examples in their academic essays in English because, as the results of this study show, they already have the necessary skills.

Pedagogical Implications

Although the teaching of writing is often carried out in academic ESL programs and composition classes for NSs and NNSs alike, in general terms, college and university students spend comparatively little time in composition classes. Most of their tenure in academic institutions is devoted to studies in the disciplines, such as humanities, sciences, business, and the like.

In academic courses other than writing, students are seldom expected to provide personal experiences as evidence and thesis support, unless they are verifiably experts on the subject. In most academic assignments in the disciplines, students are expected to study and read and demonstrate in writing their knowledge of material external to their inner thoughts (Leki & Carson, 1997). To prepare students for the demands of courses in the disciplines, it is important that in addition to the assignments based on multiple drafts and revisions of out-of-class papers, L2 learners are taught how to prepare for prompt-based essay exams, similar to those discussed by Horowitz (1986b), Ferris and Hedgcock (1998), and Johns (1997). Essay exams often require such academic writing skills as summarizing, paraphrasing, and supporting the thesis by means of information found outside of one's personal experience. These skills can and should be developed in writing courses and tasks.

One of the most productive activities in developing students' academic argumentation skills is to ask students to identify and state their position on a topic, and then to assign an essay in which writers must argue for the opposing point of

view. In this way, when students are less personally involved with the subject matter, they are more open to the construct of objectivity and depersonalization in academic discourse.

Another assignment in academic argumentation and thesis support can focus on problem/solution rhetorical argumentation, as in (11) above (Swales & Feak, 1994). In this case, the goal is to work not so much with students' identifying solutions to problems as with outcomes of the writer's solutions. Students can be asked to present their solutions as if already actually implemented and then describe in detail a few specific situations that may transpire. To help students develop skills for constructing effective rhetorical support, the instructor may ask a series of questions specific to the topic and assign writing tasks that identify the solution's viability. For example: If course grading in universities is abolished, what designation should appear on a student's transcript (often necessary for employment)? When a student receives a failing grade on an assignment, the grade provides a clear indication that an improvement in his or her work is urgently required. If different instructors have different wording in their evaluations, some students may not understand the urgency of the situation. On the other hand, if instructors provide similarly worded evaluations, are these different from the grading system currently in place?

Most proponents of the process-based approach to teaching writing believe that a high-quality product of writing can be attained if students learn about the writing process and improve their own processes involved in writing beginning with inner explorations for ideas and examples. While there may be little doubt that it is interesting and important to learn about the writing process of experienced writers, thus far research has provided little evidence that the process of experienced writers can actually be productively taught to novices. Furthermore, few studies have been carried out to demonstrate whether the skills attained in learning the writing process can be transferred to writing academic prose in, for example, history, sociology, or economics.

It is essential that teachers of writing undertake to learn about the writing tasks and the types of papers that students are expected to produce after their ESL and composition training is completed. In fact, many such investigations were carried out in the 1980s (e.g., Horowitz, 1986a, b; Johns, 1981; Ostler, 1980), and much has been learned about the writing tasks expected of students in the disciplines. Because ESL and writing teachers' jobs are to provide their students knowledge and skills on which they can rely in their subsequent studies, it seems difficult to understand why teachers of writing would not set out to teach what their students need to know and need to be able to do.

NOTE

[1] According to Biber, et al. (1999), in published academic texts, the occurrences of first person plural pronouns *we/us* in such structures as when *we consider...* or *it is clear to us...* represents 3,000 per one million words (0.3%). Such uses of first person pronouns were also rare in student essays.

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