
Longitudinal Changes in Use of Engagement in University History Writing: A Case Study

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1. Introduction

In this study we track the writing development of a first-year student by examining her use of engagement¹ (Martin and White 2005) resources in argumentative writing during a one-semester history course. We focus our analysis on her use of several engagement moves that were found to be valued in argumentative writing in that course (see Miller, Mitchell, and Pessoa 2014). The engagement moves we examine allow authors to strategically incorporate their own perspectives in relation to other perspectives. Academic arguers must make claims against a background of already-existing perspectives (Martin 1989), and successful academic writers create a balance between introducing their own perspective, acknowledging the existence of other perspectives, and effectively estimating what their audience's assumed perspective will be.

Martin and White's (2005) system of engagement resources from their appraisal framework provides a useful tool for analyzing how authors manage this balance. Using engagement resources, authors position themselves in relation to prior voices about a particular subject. Following Bakhtin (1981), Martin and White (2005) describe the construal of voice in text as either monoglossic (single-voiced) or heteroglossic (multi-voiced). With monoglossic propositions, such as bare assertions or presuppositions, writers allow no room for alternative voices, projecting complete agreement onto the audience. With heteroglossic resources, writers acknowledge the existence of differing perspectives (expanding the dialogic space) or refute opponents while still keeping their viewpoint in play (contracting the dialogic space).

Previous research has found that engagement resources are important in argumentative writing (e.g., Wu and Allison 2005; Lee 2008; Ryshina-Pankova 2014), specifically argumentative

history writing (e.g., Coffin 1997, 2006; de Oliveira 2011). Coffin (2006) noted that as students progress toward writing analytical history genres, there is increased negotiation of alternative voices and acknowledgement of similar and opposing perspectives. Most of the studies of engagement in history writing, however, have focused only on discrete linguistic forms used to enact singular engagement resources. De Oliveira (2011) found that engagement resources used in expository history writing included projection using mental processes, concession using conjunctions (e.g., *but, even though, although*), and acknowledgement of alternative voices using modality. Similarly, Coffin (1997, 2006) found that persuasion in argumentative history genres is assisted through positioning alternative voices using modality (e.g., *X does not necessarily*) or by making categorical statements (e.g., *X clearly demonstrates*). These studies have concluded that integrating other's voices and perspectives with the author's own is a difficult skill to acquire.

Building on these studies, our previous research investigated how students make strategic and purposeful use of engagement resources for argumentation in history writing, finding that especially valued were the combined use of *Attribute* and *Endorse* moves, and *Concede* and *Counter* moves (Miller, Mitchell, and Pessoa 2014). *Attribute* is used to acknowledge another's voice (e.g., *according to X*), such as referring to a source text, and *Endorse* (e.g., *X shows, demonstrates*) to construe external voices as "correct, valid, undeniable or otherwise maximally warrantable" (Martin and White 2005: 126). *Concede* (signaled by *although, whereas, while, etc.*) and *Counter* (signaled by *even, only, still, etc.*) are used in conjunction to align a resistant reader to the author's position, as the concession "validates the reader's contrary viewpoint by acknowledging that it is understandable... [before showing that] the usual or expected implications do not arise from the conceded proposition" (Martin and White 2005: 125-126).

In our previous study of argumentative history writing (Miller, Mitchell, and Pessoa 2014), we found that more successful student writers (i.e., higher-graded essays) used these two sets of moves to construct an argument in relation to others' perspectives. These students used the expanding *Attribute* move to set up a direct textual reference, followed by the *Endorse* move to contract the dialogic space by telling the reader how to interpret the source text as support for the student's central claim. We also found that while most students used paired *Concede* + *Counter* moves, successful students used this move to project a consistent alternative position and strengthen their argument, whereas less successful students incorporated this move in ways that did not support, or often even undermined, their argument.

Building on our previous work, in this paper we investigate whether there is longitudinal development in the use of these engagement resources over time. We do this by analyzing a series of argumentative history essays by one student over a one-semester course, examining changes in her use of these engagement resources for supporting her argument. While there have been studies

that have focused on undergraduate writing development from an ethnographic perspective (see, for example, the work of Leki 2007; Sommers 2008; Sternglass 1997), fewer studies have been text-based tracing students' literacy development longitudinally (see Gardner 2008; Hewings 2004; Mahboob and Devrim 2013; Nesi 2009; Pessoa, Miller, and Gatti 2014 forthcoming; Woodward-Kron 2008). In the following section, we describe our methodology, followed by the results of our text analysis.

2. Methods

Our data are drawn from a larger four-year longitudinal study of academic literacy development at an English-medium university in the Middle East. The larger study focused largely on the academic literacy development of a group of 92 students during their undergraduate education, 15 of which were case studies who participated in extensive interviews throughout the four years. In their first year at the university, students took a writing-intensive world history course that emphasized, in addition to the subject matter, helping students develop academic reading, writing, and research skills. The data we analyzed in this paper is drawn from this course.

In the world history course, students wrote a series of six short (approximately 300-800 words in length) argumentative essays based on historical and academic readings, responding to one of several prompts supplied by the professor. Some source texts were primary sources while others were secondary sources. The source text titles and authors are included in the Appendix. The assignment rubric showed that students were expected to write argumentatively by having a clearly stated thesis statement and supporting this thesis statement with appropriate evidence from source texts, by making links between historical events or sources, and by being sensitive to biases and limitations in the sources. According to the history professor, many students experienced difficulty writing these essays, with many relying on narration and description rather than argument and analysis, particularly at the beginning of the semester (History professor, personal communication, January 26, 2010).

As a follow-up to our previous research described earlier, we report here the longitudinal writing development of one student, Karida², during this course. We selected Karida because she was one of the focal case studies in the larger study, providing us with interview data as well as her writing. We also chose Karida because her essay grades generally improved over the semester, which, based on our previous research, we thought might indicate improvement in her use of engagement resources. The prompts that Karida selected are in the Appendix.

Karida grew up in the Middle East, and spoke Arabic, English, and Swahili at home,

although she considered English her native language. She attended English-medium primary and secondary schools, and had high TOEFL scores when she entered the university. Nevertheless, she was not confident in her argumentative writing, saying that it was very different from writing in high school, which focused more on writing for tests.

Using the engagement system from Martin and White's (2005) appraisal framework, two of the authors coded the five³ short essays Karida wrote in the world history course, focusing in particular on her moves for inclusion of voices from source texts and management of alternative and opposing voices. Additionally, we include data from a one-hour interview with Karida, conducted by one of the authors. This interview focused on Karida's academic literacy development during her first year at the university, including her writing in the history course.

3. Results and discussion

We report here the findings of our longitudinal analysis of Karida's use of engagement resources. We first discuss her use of engagement resources to bring in and interpret voices from source texts, followed by a discussion of her use of engagement for managing alternative voices.

3.1 Inclusion and interpretation of the source text

Our analysis found that Karida showed considerable development in her incorporation of source texts into her essays over the course of the semester, particularly in her use of the valuable combination of Attribute and Endorse moves to introduce and interpret direct textual references.

Early in the semester, Karida referred very little to the source text. In the earliest essays that we analyzed (Essays 1 and 3), there is a complete absence of reference to either the source text or the source author. For example, she begins Essay 1 with the following paragraph:

Around 7 million years ago everyone used to nourish themselves by hunting and gathering wild plants. In Today's era people eat food that was produced for them. They specialize in other jobs while farmers produce food to sustain the rest of the non-producing society. Individual hunting and gathering as done in the past is dying out and within a couple of decades it will be completely gone soon.

Here, Karida obviously draws on a source text for the information she writes, which was about the transition of human societies from hunting and gathering to agriculture, but neglects to make any direct reference to where this information came from. As a result, it is difficult to distinguish what claim she is making based on the source text, and how the source text is being used to support her claim. Similar to this excerpt, in Essay 3 she also re-presents information

from a source text, but with no mention of the source and without any Attribute or Endorse moves to show where the information came from and how it supports her argument.

In Essay 4, the prompt asks for a comparison between two texts by Chinese philosophers, one by Confucius and the other by Han Fei. In this essay, Karida makes references to both source text authors, most often through Attribute moves such as *Confucius believes* and *According to Han Fei*. Though the use of these references may be affected by the task (i.e. the need to differentiate between the two authors being compared), it is still an improvement over the previous essays. While Karida does not ever directly quote or cite the source text, she does bring these authors' voices into her essay in the majority of her sentences, in some cases dedicating a following sentence to explaining the idea attributed to the author, such as in the following:

Confucius believed in an idea called Confucianism. This is a concept where people are governed my morals and virtue. That way they feel guilty with the wrongs and sins they have committed.

Here, Karida attributes a concept (Confucianism) to Confucius, and then goes on to explain this concept in the next sentence. In the third sentence, she then explains how this is relevant to her thesis (that a difference between Confucius and Han Fei was in *how they convince people to follow government*), although without an Endorse move to explicitly link the evidence from the source text with the thesis. Compared to her previous essays, which were almost entirely monoglossic, this essay shows considerable improvement in terms of use of engagement resources to incorporate and interpret sources, as she brings in outside voices in nearly every sentence, and she makes use of Attribute resources.

In the final two essays, Karida begins to anchor her claims with integrated citations. In Essay 5, she mentions the author of the source text in the topic sentence of her first body paragraph, includes direct quotations, and even uses the combination of Attribute and Endorse, albeit with mixed success. For example, in Essay 5, she executes the moves well in combination once:

Equiano and his sister were kidnapped... by Africans **as described in the quote** “[...] Here they tied our hands, and continued to carry us as far as they could, till night came on” (para.3). This is to prove that the cruelty began by those other than white people.

Though the Attribute move (*as described in the quote*) is somewhat ungainly, she effectively uses the source text to support her claim about it, followed by the Endorse move (*this is to prove that...*) that instructs the reader how to interpret the quotation as evidence for her overall claim

that whites do not hold complete blame for slavery.

Later in Essay 5, however, she uses the Attribute move, but does not follow it with a quotation or an Endorse move:

Equiano explains that on the ship they were flogged anytime slaves supposedly didn't behave, they went without food, and they were kept below deck where they were usually suffocated in sewage.

The attribution to the author, Equiano, is useful here; however, this sentence is the last in the paragraph, without any contraction of the dialogic space to impose her own meaning on the Attribution's significance to her central claim. In another instance, she incorporates both Attribute and Endorse moves, but with an infelicitous placement of the Endorse move:

Equiano notes that he would have rather have stayed a slave with his former African masters as illustrated "... and I even wished for my former slavery in preference to my present situation, which was filled with horrors of every kind, still heightened by my ignorance of what I was to undergo" (para.14) .

Rather than first incorporating the quotation and then explaining how the quotation supports her thesis by following it with *This illustrates*..., she uses a version of the Endorse move early, as further set up for the quotation. Thus, even before readers understand the quote, they are already being told how to interpret it, creating confusion about the quote's role in the development of the paragraph's claim.

In Essay 6, Karida demonstrates similar mixed success with her reference to and incorporation of the source texts. She does not mention the author's name until the first sentence of the final body paragraph. Previous to that moment, she experiments with a different style of referencing the text, merely including parenthetical citations to indicate the source of her paraphrases (which may be considered a type of Attribution move), followed by Endorse moves:

Although this did not contribute to the disasters within China, it still caused harm such as deforestation in other countries providing the timber. (p. 370-371). This shows that through trade, China's problems have become everyone else's problems as well.

Once again, Karida's Endorse move strengthens the argument by emphasizing the relevance of the quotation to her central claim. By the end of the semester, although she decidedly had not

mastered how to weave expanding and contracting moves together (Ryshina-Pankova 2014), we did see substantial improvement from the early essays, where she did not incorporate these resources at all.

3.2 Management of alternative voices

In our analysis of Karida's use of engagement resources to manage alternative voices, we also saw considerable development over the semester, particularly in her strategic incorporation of outside and alternative voices to advance her argument. As stated earlier, Essay 1 is nearly entirely monoglossic, although there are two instances of contrastive transitions (*on the other hand; in contrast*). With these exceptions, however, the rest of the essay merely reports information from the source text with a list of bare assertions, and includes no Concede + Counter moves or other management of alternative voices.

Essay 3 is similar in that it is dominated by the use of monoglossic resources that list information. However, it incorporates a few more heteroglossic moves, including four instances of Entertain (via modality), one instance of Deny, and two instances of Counter, including one concurring Concede + Counter⁴ move, seen in the following:

Although natural fires are helpful, agrarian fires will cause more fire-resistant plants to appear and other plants will not be able to reestablish themselves, like a forest cover that can prevent erosion.

This move is consistent with how Karida positions the reader in the previous paragraph, where she explains the benefits of agrarian fires. However, it does not advance her (rather unclear) central argument, and the move is not well integrated into the paragraph where it appears (the previous sentence is about lack of floods and soil depth, the following one about the disadvantage of mild winters).

In Essay 4, Karida includes one Concede + Counter move. This is done more effectively than before, especially given the constraints of the comparison-contrast rhetorical mode inherent in the assigned writing task. In this essay, Karida embeds the Concede + Counter move in an Attribution: "Han believes that **although** people may have morals, they may overcome these morals and act wrongly." Given that the previous paragraph explains how Confucianism relied on people's morals for a strong society, this Concede + Counter move is an effective way of comparing the two authors, and is especially strong given her thesis that the two authors' disagreement was based on their view of the power of morals. Karida uses the Concede + Counter move to place the source texts in conversation with each other, showing how Han Fei would counter Confucius's position.

In the final two essays, Karida uses Concede + Counter moves to position her reader consistently in a way that strengthens her argument. For example, in Essay 5:

Although white men **did** own many of the African slaves and they had ill-treated the slaves much more as compared to how an African would treat the African slave they owns. Thus since slavery was accustomed [gloss: already customary] it is only a small degree that which white people can be blamed for their slavery.

Though she does not transition between these moves with complete fluidity, she positions her reader as someone who would expect whites to be blamed for slavery by conceding this as an understandable position, and counters by explaining that slavery's prior existence in Africa indicates otherwise. She effectively addresses the question of the prompt and follows through in her essay to support the counter-expectational claim that whites *only* hold a small degree of blame.

In Essay 6, Karida includes three successful Concede + Counter moves, all of which demonstrate consistency between the positions she establishes for herself and her reader in the introduction. In the first body paragraph, she argues: “China **did** realize the danger it was in, thus many things were banned in China, for instance logging and fishing in certain areas. However, China still needed other material such as timber, so they had to import it instead.” Her concurring concession demonstrates her sensitivity to a reader who might think China's problems are not global problems, and her counter explains why this is not the case.

3.3 Interview data

In the interview (conducted after the end of the course), Karida commented on the importance in history writing of incorporating evidence from the source text, stating that “We know how to find evidence, if we say this happened [...], you need the evidence.” This was reflected in her writing in her transition from near complete monoglossia and lack of reference to the source texts in her early essays, to inclusion of direct and indirect quotations and citations of page numbers in her later essays.

Karida also spoke about not only referencing, but also interpreting the source text, another area where we saw development. She stated, “In history when you are writing a paper, you are not repeating what it said. For our class it is not only history, these are the facts, [...] It is more our interpretation.” Just as Karida's comments indicate that history writing should go beyond reporting “facts” to interpreting them, her writing increasingly used Endorse moves to interpret the source texts to support her argument.

4. Conclusion

From the analysis presented, we see that Karida did improve in her use of engagement resources to strategically incorporate and interpret the source text and manage alternative and opposing voices. This study builds on previous work (e.g., Miller, Mitchell, and Pessoa 2014; Ryshina-Pankova 2014) which has stressed the importance of looking not only at the simple presence or absence of individual engagement resources, but rather at the purposeful and strategic ways in which these resources are used in combination. Extending our previous research (Miller, Mitchell, and Pessoa 2014), which focused on valued strategic combinations of engagement resources, this study shows that not only are these valued, but students can improve in their use of these resources, even during a one-semester course. From the interview data, we also see that Karida seems to have had, at least retrospectively, an awareness of the rhetorical significance of the moves that these engagement resources enact.

Although Karida's developing awareness and use of these moves was achieved without explicit instruction, we note that in the absence of instruction, it took an entire semester for Karida to successfully implement these moves in her writing, and even then with limited success. Thus, we emphasize the important role of explicit instruction in use of engagement resources for including and interpreting source texts and managing alternative voices. With explicit instruction, many of the uses of engagement resources in Karida's writing that took an entire semester may have been achieved much earlier.

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Notes

1. Consistent with notation in Systemic Functional Linguistics research, small capital letters are used to distinguish appraisal systems as semantic systems.

2. A pseudonym.

3. We analyzed essays one, three, four, five, and six; essay two was missing from our data.

4. Karida used will in some Counters, which, according to Martin and White (2005: 98), is expanding rather than contracting, as it is "grounded in its own contingent, individual subjectivity" representing a proposition as "one of a range of possible positions". However, here, it functions pragmatically as a Counter in relation to the preceding Concede.

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