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Representations of Self in Reflection Essays of Philippine University Students¹

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ABSTRACT

In the Philippines, there are few, if any, studies of student compositions that investigate the use of language as an effective, efficient, and creative means of expressing the self. This study is an attempt to contribute to knowledge about student writing in the Philippines. In particular, the study aims to describe the various ways freshman students from a private university in Manila represent themselves in their reflection essays, a writing task required in the core humanities courses of the university. Two sets of compositions, one written in the English language and another in the Filipino language, are analyzed for ways in which self-representation is realized by the student writers. As the study focuses on how the Filipino students represent themselves in their essays, both English and Filipino compositions were examined for grammatical/lexical features and for the types of speech act verbs employed in the essays. More specifically, the study investigates the use of (1) first person referencing, (2) modals, and (3) types of illocutionary points. The results of the investigation reveal that for both English and Filipino compositions, student writers have a tendency to (1) limit their use of first person referencing, with fewer first person pronouns employed in the Filipino corpus; (2) limit the use of modals, with fewer modals observed in the Filipino corpus; and (3) employ more assertive illocutionary points than declarative points, and fewer commissive and expressive points in both English and Filipino compositions. From the results, one may conclude that (1) the student writers involved in the study do not seem to present themselves as active subjects or agents in the writing process, and (2) the reflection essay may be a useful tool for writing pedagogy and student formation.

KEYWORDS: *Composition studies; Speech acts; Teaching writing*

Writing is not simply the mechanical act of communicating a message. Writing constructs not only the object of writing, but the subject as well. When one writes, one ultimately presents or re-presents the self. Ivanič and Camps (2001) note that there is “no such thing as ‘impersonal’ writing” (p. 5). Each act of writing, regardless of the topic of the written piece, is an act of conveying messages about the self. When one writes, one draws from one’s own repertoire of experiences. Ivanič has argued that the “lexical, syntactic, semantic, and even

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the visual and material aspects of writing construct identity, just as much as do the phonetic and prosodic aspects of speech, and thus writing always conveys a representation of the self as a writer." (Ivanič and Camps, 2001, p. 5)

For those who teach writing to students in their formative years, an investigation of students' composing behavior may reveal valuable insights into student writers' voices and identities. Such a study may be utilized for applications to second language writing pedagogy in the Philippines, as well as to the formation of young learners. This is one such study that attempts to investigate the composing behavior of Filipino students.

More specifically, this study addresses how freshman college students in a Philippine university represent themselves in reflection essays. Do the student writers express themselves as active and engaged participants in what they write about? Do they see themselves as passive and detached from issues they address in their writing?

The study attempts to investigate the composing behavior of Filipino student writers in the two official languages of the Philippines—English and Filipino. Composition studies are not a popular area of research in the Philippines. There are only a few published studies of student compositions in the Philippines. Even fewer, if any, studies in the Philippines take a comparative view of English and Filipino compositions.

Self-representation, Identity, or Voice in Writing

The issue of self-representation, identity, or voice in student writing has been the subject of much discussion in second language teaching and learning. Atkinson (2001) describes the term voice as "an exceedingly complex concept—one which any single treatment can only scratch the surface of." (p. 107). He observes that in English composition instruction, L1-oriented paradigms of voice tend to dominate, consequently excluding or marginalizing second language writers. Such paradigms, Atkinson observes, seem to be premised on the ideology of individualism or the assumption that

"...individuality is the fundamental fact of our being, and that the (or at least a) fundamental purpose of sensitive, humanistic writing instruction should therefore be to allow for the full expression and further development of that individuality." (p. 108)

Matsuda (2001), in his analysis of the online diary of a Japanese writer, begins his discussion of voice by stating that L2 writing research has been biased towards describing the features and functions of a target language, English for example, with the view of teaching these features and functions to second language learners. Matsuda notes that such bias contributes to the neglect of the study of "...concepts that deal with divergent aspects of discourse practices, such as style, idiolect, and voice, have been largely disregarded." (p. 36) His study of the linguistic features of Japanese electronic discourse demonstrates that an understanding of voice in writing may shed light on some writing difficulties experienced by L2 writers. Matsuda concludes that individual voice is constructed by putting together (in an

amalgamation) various discursive features that are socially available to a writer. These discursive features may not be transferable from one language to another. Thus, in order to construct their own voice, second language writers “need to develop a personal repertoire of discursive features and strategies” (Matsuda, 2001, p. 51) in the target language.

In their analysis of three case studies of L2 writers, Hirvela and Belcher (2001) argue that L2 students are “multilingual writers who are not voiceless.” (p. 88) When these students enter an academic writing course, they are exposed to a new set of conventions, or “academese,” which are unfamiliar to the students. These adjustments that students make may be perceived by writing teachers as representing a lack in proficiency in the target language, or even, the inability of L2 students to construct their own identity or voice. In addition, as students try to adopt these unfamiliar conventions, these students may sometimes feel that they have lost their own identity or voice. L2 teachers should be cautioned about such situations that may hamper the successful learning of a target language. It is important to keep in mind that L2 students do not come to a writing class *tabula rasa*. Hirvela and Belcher (2001) assert that L2 students

“...possess their own resources in the struggle to reconcile competing expectations for voice and identity, and that, once that reconciliation occurs, there can be a certain appreciation for the acquisition of a new identity as a writer.” (p. 88)

The notion of identity or voice is not exclusive to writing, as Ivanič and Camps (2001) argue. Voice as self-representation is integral to human activity; it must not be approached as “an optional extra.” (Ivanič & Camps, 2001, p. 4). Because of this, Ivanič and Camps recommend that writing programs adopt a more critically aware approach towards voice so that this may be used to guide students in constructing identity. Ivanič and Camps assert that identity issues are

“... so fundamental to writing that failure to address them from the outset can only hinder learning and, conversely, that setting these issues at the centre of learning is likely to promote it.” (p. 31)

Clearly, issues of identity, self-representation, and voice are not to be ignored in writing research, more so when L2 writing pedagogy is involved. How do Filipino student writers present themselves in a writing task? Do they assert their voice through their writing projects? These are questions the present study hopes to address.

The Study

The setting of the study is the Loyola Schools of the Ateneo de Manila University, a Jesuit university established in Manila, Philippines in 1859. Two sets of freshman college compositions were selected for this study. Each set consists of 15 compositions; one set was written in English and the other set in Filipino. For both sets of compositions, the same writing prompt was given in the two languages. The student-writers, whose ages range from 16 to 19, reported that

their first language was Tagalog/Filipino² and their second language was English. The study generated 4,059 words in the English corpus and 5,045 words in the Filipino corpus.

For the writing task, the students were asked to compose an essay using the instructions below:

In English—Reflect on the quotation “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence therefore is not an act, but a habit.” Write an essay that demonstrates how this quotation is true or not to you.

In Filipino—*Pagmuni-munihan ang kawikaang “Nakilala ang sarili sa kagawian. Kinagagawian ang kagalingan at hindi nakukuha sa isang iglap lamang.” Sumulat ng sanaysay na nagpapatibay kung totoo o hindi sa inyo ang kawikaan.*³

The writing task is an attempt to simulate a “typical” writing project in the university where students, regardless of fields of specialization, are asked in their core humanities courses (e.g., Literature, Philosophy, Theology) to reflect on applications of theoretical concepts and abstract ideas to their personal lives. Such writing projects are identified in the university as reflection essays, which require “a thoughtful reconsideration of some subject matter, experience, idea, purpose or spontaneous reaction, in order to grasp its significance more fully” (Loyola Jesuit College, n.d.). The practice follows the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP), an approach promoted in Jesuit-run educational institutions. Following the IPP, the act of reflection is defined as

“...the process by which meaning surfaces in human experience ... At this level of reflection, the memory, the understanding, the imagination and the feelings are used to capture the meaning and essential value of what is being studied, to discover its relationship with other aspects of knowledge and human activity, and to appreciate its implications in the ongoing search for truth and freedom..” (Loyola Jesuit College, n.d.)

This study seeks to explore how Filipino students represent themselves in their reflection essays. In order to do this, both the English and Filipino corpora were examined for grammatical/lexical features and for the types of speech act verbs employed in the essays. In particular, I looked at the following: (1) first person referencing, (2) use of modals, and (3) types of illocutionary points.

These features of written texts were also investigated by Hartford and Mahboob (2001, 2004), as well as by Madrunio (2004), in their studies of the discourse of complaint letters by Asian writers. In these studies, the researchers focused specifically on linguistic manifestations of politeness and directness in the complaint letters. In contrast, my study is interested in how the student writers represent themselves in their reflection essays.

² For this research project, the terms “Tagalog” and “Filipino” are used to refer to the same language. In the Philippines, the national language referred to as “Filipino” is based on another Philippine language, Tagalog, which is used predominantly in Luzon, including Metro Manila.

³ The quotation “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence therefore is not an act, but a habit.” is attributed to Aristotle. In Manila, the quotation is seen in greeting cards, gift shops, posters, gym signage. I wish to thank Professor Gary Devilles of the Ateneo de Manila Filipino Department for translating the writing prompt, as well as for allowing me to conduct this study in his Filipino class.

Results and Discussion

The study generated 4,059 words in the English corpus and 5,045 words in the Filipino corpus. For the English corpus, this represents an average of 270 words per composition, and for the Filipino corpus, an average of 336 words. Clearly, the student writers in this study tended to write longer essays in the Filipino language. This result is consistent to expectations, as sentences in Filipino tend to be longer than in English.⁴

First person references

A study of personal referencing, particularly, of the use of the first person pronouns in the compositions, may lead to insights about how the student writers represent themselves. The occurrence of first person pronouns in written texts may signify many things, such as, the student writer's ownership of the ideas in the composition, an assertion of the student writer's presence in the text as both the subject and the object of reflection, and his or her claim to authority over certain issues.

For the English corpus, investigating personal reference simply requires identifying "I" and "we" in the texts. In contrast, for the Filipino corpus, the task of isolating the first person pronoun as subject or doer of the action is not as simple. Unlike English, which is a nominative-accusative language, Tagalog-based Filipino is described as an ergative-absolutive language⁵. Thus, the first person pronouns (those that indicate the student writer as subject or doer of an action) for the Filipino compositions were identified as in Table 1.

Table 1

Personal Pronouns in the Filipino Language

Pronouns	Absolutive	Ergative
First person singular	<i>Ako: Ako ang bumili ng pagkain.</i>	<i>Ko: Binili ko ang pagkain.</i>
	I bought the food.	
First person plural inclusive	<i>Tayo: Tayo ang magbabayad ng utang.</i>	<i>Natin: Babayaran natin ang utang.</i>
	We are paying the debt.	
First person plural exclusive	<i>Kami: Kami ang nagdala ng mga bulaklak.</i>	<i>Namin: Dinala namin ang mga bulaklak.</i>
	We brought the flowers.	

⁴ In an interview, Filipino linguist Ricardo Nolasco, former Chair of the Commission for the Filipino Language (*Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino*), argues that the Filipino languages do not provide for mono-syllabic content words, thus the tendency for sentences to be longer. Another Filipino language scholar and university professor Michael Coroza notes that Filipino students tend to write in a wordy, roundabout manner, and do not usually edit their essays for conciseness.

⁵ This category of the Filipino language being an ergative-absolutive language is highly contentious. Some Philippine linguists argue that the Tagalog language, which is the basis for Filipino, is nominative-ergative.

It should also be stressed that for this investigation, no distinctions are made between the singular and plural pronouns. The reason for this is that the writing prompt, which the students were asked to reflect on, made references to both the individual experience (*Write an essay that demonstrates how this quotation is true or not to you.*) and the collective experiences (*“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence therefore is not an act, but a habit.”*).

In noting personal referencing, the English and Filipino corpora generated the following results from the reflection essays:

- For the English compositions, a total number of 542 personal pronouns in the corpus was recorded; 245 were first person pronouns and 297 were second or third person pronouns (see Figure 1).
- For the Filipino compositions, a total number of 440 personal pronouns in the corpus was recorded; 108 were first person pronouns and 332 were second or third person pronouns (see Figure 2).

When the two sets of compositions are compared in terms of first person referencing, we find that there is a tendency for student writers of Filipino to use

Figure 1

Personal Pronouns in the English Compositions

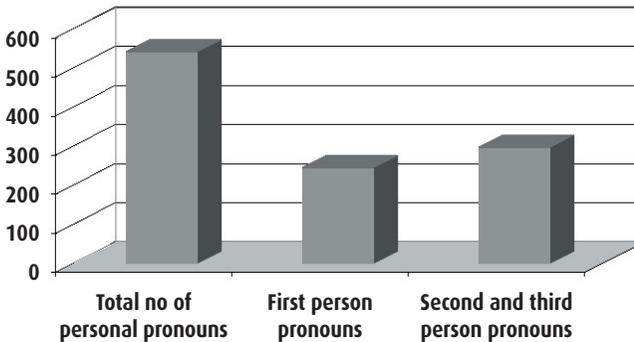
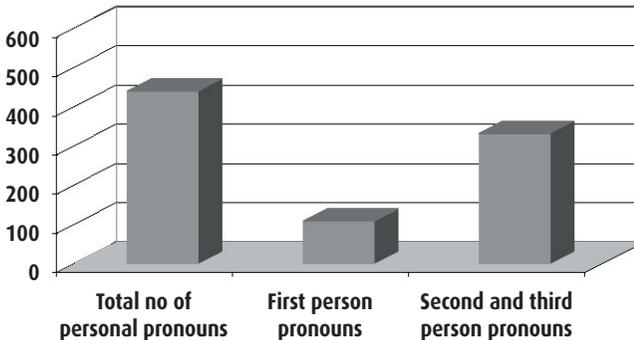


Figure 2

Personal Pronouns in the Filipino Compositions



fewer first person pronouns compared to second and third person pronouns. However, if we look at the bigger picture and consider the total number of words in the corpora, we find that in both English and Filipino, the student writers make less frequent use of first person pronouns compared to second and third person pronouns. In the English compositions, out of a word count of 4,059, only 6% were first person pronouns. For Filipino, out of a word count of 5,049, only 2% were first person pronouns.

Use of modals

Other than first person references, another linguistic feature that might provide some insights into representations of self in student compositions is the use of modals. In both the English and Filipino languages, modals assign a particular mood to a proposition. These words present conditions of possibility or necessity in a statement.

In this study, the modals that are analyzed are those that are meaningful to the subject "I" or "we" in the compositions, in particular, those that appear where first person referencing also appears. In the English compositions, out of 245 phrases with first person reference, 16% made use of modals. In the Filipino compositions, out of 108 phrases with first person reference, 11% made use of modals; see Table 2.

For the English compositions, the modals *can*, *could*, *have to*, *may*, *must*, *should*, *will*, and *would* were recorded with the following occurrences; see Table 3.

Table 2
Occurrence of Filipino and English Modals in the Corpora

Corpora	Occurrence of modals	Percentage of total phrases with first person pronouns
English compositions	39	16%
Filipino compositions	12	11%

Table 3
English Modals and Meanings

Modals in English	Occurrence	Meanings
Would	12	Repetition of past action; associated with politeness
Can	10	Possibility or ability
Could	5	Possibility
Will	4	Certainty or intent
Have to	3	Obligation
Must	3	Obligation
May	1	Option
Should	1	Recommendation
Total	39	

Table 4

Filipino Modals and Meanings

Modals in Filipino	Occurrence	Meanings
<i>Dapat/kailangan</i> (must)	6	Obligation
<i>Maaari/puwede/kaya</i> (can)	6	Possibility or ability
Total	12	

It is interesting that the modal “would” appears on top of the list for modals in the English compositions. That the modal “would” is most frequently used is consistent with what Philippine sociolinguist Ma. Lourdes Bautista (2000) discovered in her study, namely that Filipino writers tend to use “would” as a marker of politeness in their writing. It is also noted that, in contrast to the higher frequency of the politeness modals, the modals for obligation and recommendation appear less frequently.

For the Filipino compositions, we find the modals *maaari*, *puwede*, *kaya*, *dapat*, and *kailangan* with the following occurrences as in Table 4.

The modal count in the English compositions does not seem to reveal similar findings in the Filipino compositions. It is interesting to note that in the case of the Filipino corpus, the student writers express obligation and possibility/ability in equal frequency.

Illocutionary points

Other than examining first person referencing and the use of modals in the English and Filipino corpora, an investigation of the illocutionary force of clauses and phrases may also reveal some insights into self-representations of the student writers. Searle and Vanderverken (1985) present five types of Illocutionary Points namely, assertive, commissive, declarative, directive, and expressive. The five of Illocutionary Points are described as follows:

- (1) *Assertive*: Presents the actual state of affairs; speaker believes the proposition; sincerity condition is present; states something the writer thinks is true or false (to some degree). (For example: “It’s your mom.”)
- (2) *Commissive*: Commits to bring about the state of affairs; the writer commits to a course of action, or declines that course of action
- (3) *Declarative*: Brings into existence the state of things; the writer causes a change in reality by the speech act itself; the writer must have the authority to change things; involves performative verbs
- (4) *Directive*: Attempts to get someone to bring about the state of affairs; the writer attempts to get the reader to perform or commit to some action.
- (5) *Expressive*: Communicates an attitude or emotion about the state of affairs (“I believe...” “I feel...”); the writer expresses feelings or other psychological affects regarding the situation (“I’m tired.”).

Vanderverken (2001) assigns the five illocutionary points described above to four discursive goals, as follows:

- (1) *The descriptive goal*: This goal is evident in discourses that serve to describe how certain objects are in the world. Speakers/writers with descriptive goals make their own assertions regarding the objects considered. The role of assertive illocutionary acts is central in such descriptive uses of language.
- (2) *The deliberative goal*: This goal is found in discourses that serve to deliberate on what speakers and hearers should commit themselves to doing in the world. The deliberative goal is both commissive and directive. This means that deliberations also serve to commit speakers to some future action, as well as to attempt to commit hearers/readers to reciprocal future actions in the world.
- (3) *The declaratory goal*: Such goal is manifested in discourses that serve to transform the world by way of successful declarations. In order to pursue this kind of discourse, speakers and writers must have the authority to do certain things by way of saying/writing that they do. Declaratory illocutionary acts play a central role in the declaratory use of language.
- (4) *The expressive goal*: This goal is found in discourses that serve to express the mental states and attitudes with regard to objects and facts of the world. The main illocutionary acts of such discourses are expressive acts.

Given the nature of the reflective act, one expects that student writers would not employ directives in their reflection essays. Directives are illocutionary acts usually found in letters and instructions. Instead, one expects that the other speech acts, namely, assertive, commissive, declarative, and expressive, would be utilized.

As expected, no directive was used by the student writers in the English compositions. Instead, it was found that in the English corpus, the highest occurrence of illocutionary points was the assertive type, followed by the declarative type (see Figure 3).

For the Filipino compositions, the same composing behaviour is exhibited, with assertive as occurring most frequently, and directives as not being used at all (see Figure 4).

Figure 3

Illocutionary Points in the English Compositions

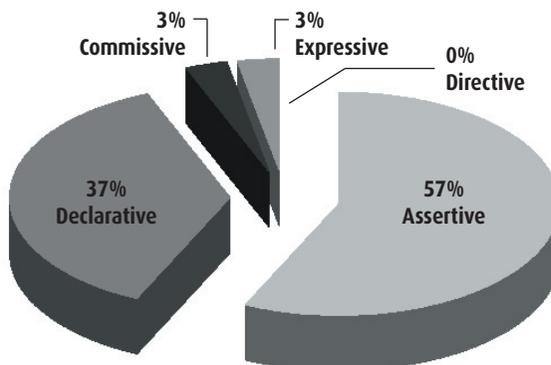
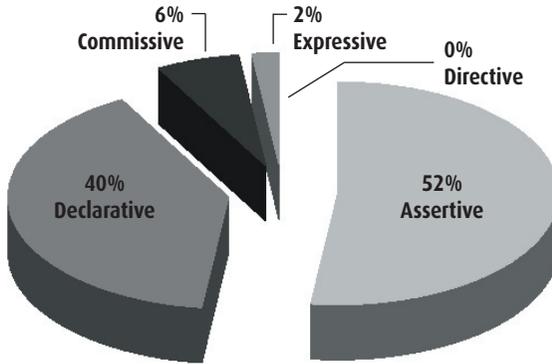


Figure 4

Illocutionary Points in the Filipino Compositions



In sum, the student writers tend to exhibit similar behavior in composing a reflection essay in English and Filipino. In both corpora, the student writers make use of more assertive illocutionary points, compared to declaratives, which are illocutionary acts associated with the descriptive and the declaratory discursive goals. In both corpora, no writer makes use of directives, which is expected, because the writers were composing an essay, and not a letter, which usually has a clearly defined reader. In addition, for both corpora, the student writers do not make full use of commissive and expressive points, which are illocutionary acts associated with the deliberative and expressive discursive goals.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study of representations of self in English and Filipino reflection essays reveals that for both English and Filipino compositions, student writers have a tendency to use fewer first person referencing. Comparing the English and Filipino compositions, less frequent first person referencing is employed for the Filipino corpus.

A similar composing behavior is observed in the use of modals. There is a tendency to use few modals in both sets of compositions. In addition, less use is observed for the Filipino corpus. For illocutionary points, there is a tendency for the student writers to employ more assertive illocutionary points than declarative points, and fewer commissive and expressive points. There also seems to be a similar composing behavior for English and Filipino writing.

From the results above, one may conclude that the student writers involved in the study do not seem to present themselves as active subjects or agents in the writing process.

These student writers tend to limit their use of expressions of ability, obligation, intent, and certainty, which are expressions that reflect agency. The student writers in the study also tend to focus on the present state of affairs

more, rather than on creating change or committing to change the present state of affairs. They are inclined to exhibit attitudes of passive recipients of actions rather than potentially active agents of change.

This phenomenon may be attributed to the relatively young age (16 to 19 years) of the university students who participated in the project. Compared to most education systems throughout the world, basic education in the Philippines requires fewer years (only 10 years in the public schools and two additional years, Prep and Grade Seven, in the private schools). Thus, university students in the Philippines are relatively young compared to students from universities in other parts of the world. Given the limitation of this study, it would be interesting to find out if university students in the higher levels, such as the juniors and seniors, would demonstrate similar composing behavior. One wonders if expressions that indicate agency would actually increase for more mature students.

There is another possible explanation for the relatively low occurrence of expressions of agency among the student writers involved in this study, and this has to do with the student writers' social class. The students involved in this study belong to the relatively affluent population of Philippine society, as may be suggested by the fact that they study in a relatively expensive private, Catholic university in Manila. Thus, these students may be manifesting the typically conservative attitude of the members of the middle and upper-income classes. In addition, this conservative attitude is one that is associated with the student writers' generation. Student radicalism in the Philippines climaxed in the mid-1980s with the ouster of Ferdinand Marcos. The EDSA People Power Revolution may have been an event that the students' parents and teachers had participated in, but it was certainly a period before these student writers were born.

Another finding of this study lies in the usefulness of the reflection essay as a tool not only for writing pedagogy, but for student formation as well. With the knowledge that students tend to present themselves as passive objects in their reflection essays (regardless of the language of the essay), teachers may consequently need to direct their teaching towards the development of a more critical and creative stance in writing. One specific strategy is to encourage student writers to use more first person pronouns in their writing so that there is greater ownership of ideas. In fact, the frequent use of the first person pronoun should be the norm for reflection essays as the reflective act requires the application of theoretical concepts and abstract ideas to personal lives.

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