
Analysis of Two EFL Writing Genres Using Appraisal Theory

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Abstract: *EFL students must master the technicalities of English and learn how to construct arguments in the language. This means that they need to be able to use their emotions to create the desired impression. Appraisal Theory can be used to study their success in this aspect of language acquisition. This study examined word usage in two short essays by EFL students. One asked them to describe the location they had visited, and the other asked them to compare two such locations. Overall, most students made limited use of appraisal terms, but this was more common in the comparative essay, suggesting that the task structure encouraged such usage. Implications for further research and teaching of ESL are also considered.*

Keywords: appraisal theory, EFL, emotions, genres, writing,

INTRODUCTION

Students study English as a Second (or Foreign) language for various reasons, including being part of their academic studies, preparation for future work, or simply given its value as an international language (Li, 2017; Ng & Ng, 2015; Vonkova, Jones, Moore, Altinkalp, & Selcuk, 2021). Some studies have reported greater ease with oral text (either as a speaker or listener) or written text (either as a writer or reader) text (Chicho, 2022; Prodhan Mahbub Ibna & Habil, 2021). One particular challenge is how to express emotions in a second language (Pérez-García & Sánchez, 2020) compared to their ability to recognize them in the presented texts. A further challenge arises when students are asked to write using a different voice, effectively cite existing sources (Mori, 2017) or construct an argument that leads the reader to their desired conclusion (Lv, 2015). All these situations create demands that go beyond simple technical competence in English (Ahmed, 2019; Mohamed & Zouaoui, 2014).

Appraisal Theory (J. R. Martin & P. R. White, 2005; McEachrane, 2009; Roseman & Smith, 2001) draws on the framework provided by System Functional Linguistics (O'Halloran, 2008, 2011) and is particularly useful for understanding the role of emotions, both as a tool to express meaning and as a means to interpret presented information. However, there are practical challenges in its use when applied to text. One is the level of analysis, which can range from complete sentences to word usage (Hofmann, Troiano, Sassenberg, & Klinger, 2020) leading to challenges in approaches to coding (Troiano, Oberländer, & Klinger, 2023; Wei, Wherrity, & Zhang, 2015). However, even at the theoretical level, Appraisal Theory has also seen significant variations in the basic terminology used to explain the basic structure and model (Aian, 2017; Mirzaaghabeyk, 2022).

This study considers some of these problems as well as the advantages of Appraisal Theory when applied to the use of emotions in text. A group of ESL students at a University in Saudi Arabia was asked to write two short essays (approximately 10 sentences). One was to describe a city they had (or would like to) visited, and the other was to compare two locations (again, they have either visited or would like to visit). The analysis was supported by the use of AntConc (Anthony, 2014) to count word incidence (Wang, 2017) and then a database was constructed by allocating terms to the various concepts within the Appraisal Theory. This was then manually revised as there were examples of what appeared to be a form of appraisal (such as 'new'), but actually being used in the context of a conventional proper name (in this case 'New York').

The students were at a similar stage in their wider studies but varied somewhat in their competence in ESL. As a result, the expectation was to find more use of emotion (both to describe and to lead an argument) in comparative rather than descriptive essays.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students studying ESL are faced with several challenges. Some barriers are technical, such as grammar or punctuation (Ahmed, 2019) but others include meeting the norms of a particular setting. Thus, the English usage for an academic paper (Mori, 2017) presents particular issues, not just in terms of tone but also in building an argument rather than just setting out factual issues. Many students will meet this challenge at the time they still learn their primary language and possibly come to terms with the underlying subject matter (Patekar, 2021) so they may have limited competence in this style of writing, even in their native language.

Thus, writing skills are a significant part of ESL learning (Alkhalaf, 2020; Yang, 2016) especially given the importance of the social context (Vygotsky, 1962) both for the author (in terms of meaning making) and any potential reader (in terms of comprehension). Furthermore, unlike speech, writing often lacks immediate feedback compared to speech. This gap is more important if there is an expectation that they will capture and convey emotions (Mohamed & Zouaoui, 2014). This complicates the process of moving beyond a technical language grasp, as emotions are an important part of both meaning-making and how we convince others to accept a given argument (Lv, 2015). However, presenting emotions in an English

language setting faces the additional problem of understanding emotions, and their use to build comprehension by a reader can be culturally specific (Alramadan, 2020), Students with relatively weak English may struggle to reflect these differences (Liu, 2013).

A structured element of writing is a common tool for assessment and language development, and appraisal theory helps in moving from a focus on grammatical structures to how emotions are set out (Wang, 2017; Yang, 2016). However, this may be more a feature of assessment than student preparation, with insufficient attention being paid to this aspect of language acquisition (Patekar, 2021). Student use of evaluation in their writing can be indicated using any or all adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and even nouns depending on the context. However, the context is important in that a given word can be essentially descriptive in one framework, yet can be judged in a different framework (Pérez-García & Sánchez, 2020).

To improve students' usage of emotion in their writing, it is essential to understand how it interacts with the core issues of grammar and vocabulary (Azizmohammadi & Barjesteh, 2020). Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1978) focused on the semiotic content of language (O'Halloran, 2008; Soo-Guan Khoo, Nourbakhsh, & Na, 2012) and which helps capture the importance of how writing can be used to create an emotional response. Appraisal Theory (J. R. Martin & P. R. R. White, 2005) developed these concepts and broke down the process into Attitude, Engagement and Graduation.

Attitude captures the process of understanding a text and the emotional response. This response can either be intended by the author or attributed by the reader. As a result, emotions emerge from our appraisal of the text and, where relevant, any resulting action choices (which can be emotional such as pleasure, anger, or frustration). White (2005) characterized this appraisal framework as "the language of attitude, arguability and interpersonal positioning" with an emphasis on mapping feelings. Engagement (Wang, 2017) focuses on the strategies used to express feelings or arguments, while graduation tends to see the core semiotic choices being modified. In writing, this often takes the form of adjectives and adverbs that shift the meaning of nouns and verbs, respectively.

In practice, Appraisal Theory has a number of internal frameworks, and some applications use different titles, such as affect, Judgement, and appreciation for this process (Aian, 2017). A further complication is the use of a variety of coding systems when applied to textual analysis (Wei, et al., 2015). Wang (2017) generated a list of appraisal words but found it difficult to fit these categories into standard classifications. A further problem that complicates the use of Appraisal Theory (Troiano, et al., 2023) is that these concepts clearly interact and modify each other when they are used in practice. Some studies have suggested that different strands are more or less important, depending on the context. Engagement is particularly important if the focus is on the use of external voice – either as a literary construct or use of sources (Mori, 2017) but in other cases, the expression of emotion is more important (Wang, 2017) which places emphasis on attitude and how emotion is captured in the concept of affect.

RESEARCH METHODS

All 16 students in this study were studying ESL at a Saudi University, and were at a similar stage in their wider academic studies. They were asked to write two short essays: the first was to ‘write a paragraph (minimum 10-sentence long) comparing two cities you like to visit or you visited in the past.’ The second was similar but ‘Write a paragraph (minimum 10-sentence long) describing a place you like to visit or you visited in the past.’ Not all students managed the set length, and the shorter submissions were only four sentences, but most met the set criteria. It is worth noting that there was nothing in the set task to stop a student from simply focusing on the experience they would like to have at some stage in the future.

The expectation was that the first task would produce more instances of graduation, as the scope for the use of comparative descriptors such as ‘larger’ or ‘more’ became important as they built their argument. As such, the incidence of attitude should be similar in both essays, as both require the expression of emotions to show why they value (or would value) the chosen location.

One challenge in analyzing texts in terms of Appraisal Theory is to find an appropriate level of analysis. Some studies (Soo-Guan Khoo, et al., 2012) break the text down into variable blocks, sometimes not even the size of a discrete grammatical section. This allows considerable detail in terms of the interplay between the speaker and audience but creates problems in turn. First, the decision to select this or that block is a judgement in itself and may fragment meaning into too small elements. An alternative is to focus on complete sentences (Aian, 2017) and code each in terms of various categories. The final version largely relies on individual word usage, and then applies a degree of judgement to exclude some instances. The advantage of the latter is that it captures the relative richness of students’ vocabulary and their ability to meld emotion, evaluation, and argument in their work (Wang, 2017). In this study, this was considered to be the appropriate level of analysis.

Students’ word usage was coded in three steps. AntConc 4.24 (Anthony, 2014) was used to generate a simple list of the words used. These were then coded as to whether or not they fitted Appraisal Theory, and, if this was the case, divided between Attitude, Engagement and Graduation. In this case, no use was made of sub-categories below this level (J. R. Martin & P. R. White, 2005). The final step was to consider the word usage in this context. This led to the removal of some words as while they may be evaluative or indicative of emotion in isolation, this is not the case when they are combined with other words. Given the focus on places they would like to visit, most of the words eliminated formed part of proper place names such as ‘New’ York.

For this study, there was no account of the quality of the actual submission; instead, the focus was on the use of appraisal-related terms, and whether this varied according to the task.

FINDINGS

Student work was divided into two categories according to the set tasks. The first was the request to compare two locations and the second was the focus on describing a location. The word counts for the

two tasks were very similar (1645 for the comparative task compared to 1651 for the descriptive task), suggesting that the students were equally at ease with both parts of the assessment. As noted above, suitable words were coded as the main elements in Appraisal Theory, but no use was made of the sub-categories often proposed for a more detailed analysis.

Appraisal Terms	Comparative Essays	Descriptive Essays
Attitude	21	18
Engagement	3	4
Graduation	8	6
Total Word Count	1645	1651

Table 1. Use of Appraisal Terms in the Two Essays

Out of almost 3,300 words used in the essays, less than 2% (60 in total) were coded in terms of Appraisal Theory. As is to be expected, the great majority of the excluded word use was related to English grammatical terms ('a,' or 'the') and beyond these two 'and' was frequently used. In combination, these three words alone comprised over 800 instances (close to 25%). Outside the words coded as part of appraisal theory, the least common were those with very specific meanings, such as 'mountains.'

Typical words coded as attitude were 'atmosphere,' 'beauty,' 'experience,' 'traditional,' and 'rich' (the single most often used descriptor). For graduation, the typical terms were 'bustling, different, unique,' and 'new.' In a small number of instances, a word that appeared as a form of Graduation such as 'new' was removed from the count as its appearance was in fact part of a proper name such as 'New York.'

Engagement is rarely used. In this case, the students mostly did not try to encourage the reader to accept their choices, arguing that their choices were particularly valid. Equally, there was limited use in the comparative essays of arguments as to why one was better than the other. If the few instances of engagement are set aside, then there are 53 instances of appraisal with these heavily weighted attitudes. Graduation was slightly more common in comparative essays (27.6% of the appraisal terms compared to 25%), but the difference was minor.

Examples of the use of attitude from the comparative essays include:

- They offer *very* different *experiences* (Student 4, in this case, both an instance of graduation and attitude);
- captivating visitors with their natural *beauty* (Student 7)
- offers an insight into the Kingdom's *rich* history (Student 10)

From the descriptive essay, examples include;

- traditional *culture* and modern technology (Student 2)
- The city's *vibrant cultural* scene is reflected (student 7, two relevant words in this sentence).
- dreamed to visit new places and *explore* different cultures (Student 12)

When placed in context, there was little difference in the words used to construct Attitude, even though appraisal terms appeared more often in the comparative essays (55% were to be found in the comparative essays and 45% in the descriptive essays). This finding is significant and suggests that the overall task role has a strong influence on the chosen language. In effect, being expected to compare led some students to make more use of emotional framing in their writing.

While the focus here is not on an evaluation of the student work, it is worth noting that the weakest submissions (both from the same student) lacked any use of Appraisal being made up of purely descriptive, short sentences such as “It has different terrains, which leads to different climates.” This offers some support for the wider argument (Yang, 2016) that the ability to build an argument and use emotional terms is a measure of the relative richness in language acquisition.

DISCUSSION

ESL students engage in their studies for a variety of reasons. Some are seeking to improve their English as part of their wider academic studies, others see it as a useful social and cultural tool, and others that it opens future work options. None of the students studied English as their primary academic focus. Given that the two short essays differed explicitly in terms of one asking for ‘comparison’ and the other ‘description’ what stands out in both is the relative paucity of appraisal related words. Some of this is a reflection of standard English usage, but in the main, the students used descriptive terms – in one case, to exclude any appraisal.

The subject matter may have heavily influenced the relative lack of engagement. They were not explicitly asked to argue the case for their choices or to convince the reader to visit the locations they identified. Thus, in this respect, the form of the task had a bearing on the type of semiotic resource used. On the other hand, the students were encouraged to write what could be seen as their natural voice. They did not need to adopt the expectations of academic writing and, in particular, as mentioned above, they were not asked to make an argument or lead the reader to accept their conclusion.

Thus, their primary usage of appraisal was to determine why they had chosen particular locations. This led them to rely on attitude as the most appropriate semiotic mode. There is some evidence that the comparative task led to a greater use of graduation, but this was still limited. Even in the comparative essays, less than half (some used more than one instance) made use of graduation in their writing despite the notional task inviting comparisons. The students broke this essay into two discrete sub-sections, each dealing with a separate destination rather than comparing them. Where comparison occurred, it was usually in terms of listing what was available in one or the other and sentences such as:

“As for Las Vegas, I felt the humidity and rush immediately. There were not as many mosques and halal food places compared to Birmingham” (Student 6, comparative essay).

were rare in the text, whether studied at the sentence or the word level. In general, this essay stands out in that it integrates the two chosen locations and seeks to use graduation to set out the emotional response.

CONCLUSION

ESL students face the challenges of mastering technical English (grammar, vocabulary, etc.), as well as their usage in a variety of settings. This can include the specific need to find a different voice when writing academic English for citing sources and using existing material as well as meeting the expectations of that mode. This study examines how students reflect on emotions in their writing and follows other studies, suggesting that this is a challenge.

Here, the students were allowed to use their own voices and even their own imagination to say why they liked (or would like) the three places. Two were compared; for the third, the task was to describe it. In practice, the use of appraisal terms in comparative compared to the descriptive writing was essentially the same as both were dominated by essentially descriptive word forms.

One reason for this may be a lack of real experience, but they were allowed to pick any location and many opted to focus on places within Saudi Arabia. Thus, they were essentially allowed to write about something they had either first-hand knowledge of or, presumably, a particular interest in. This suggests that competence in language usage influences how much and how readily they could shift from descriptive to emotional or evaluative language.

This study adds to those that suggest that language and subject competence (Lv, 2015; Wang, 2017; Yang, 2016) are reflected in the vocabulary used. However, the various datasets used for this line of research are relatively limited, often self-selecting, and often use small samples. The use of IT tools such as AntConc is valuable for the initial analysis of large groups of texts, but a fuller study still requires secondary coding. In turn, especially if the focus is on individual words, there is a need for a further step to ensure that actual usage does not significantly alter apparent usage. Here, as an example, ‘new’ was often an evaluative term, but in a number of instances it was actually part of a place name.

This leads to a considerable degree of judgement in these studies and, thus, a need for care in both data analysis and interpretation. Standard approaches, such as using a second coder, are effective for capturing any clear errors but still embed a degree of judgement in the analytic process. In the context of Appraisal Theory, this variation becomes important given the different nomenclature sometimes used and the often reported problems of moving from using it as a theoretical construct to applying it in practice.

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