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Linguistics and Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/linged

Engaging with readers: Students' metalinguistic understanding of the use of pronouns in building reader-writer relationships[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 September 2022

Revised 20 April 2023

Accepted 20 April 2023

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Metalinguistic understanding

Metadiscourse

Reader pronouns

Writing instruction

ABSTRACT

Students' metalinguistic understanding of the written academic argument is important both to increase writer independence and inform writing instruction. This article draws on a study which investigated undergraduate students' metalinguistic understanding of the metadiscourse features in their own written arguments. The specific focus of the paper is to determine what metalinguistic understanding students express about the use of pronouns in written argument as engagement or stance markers to build a relationship with the reader. The analysis indicates many students believed the use of reader pronouns were inappropriate in written argument, often because this was what they had been taught. Students' metalinguistic understanding was shaped more by notions of formality and objectivity than by understanding of how pronouns play a role in reader engagement. The article argues that greater emphasis on the function of pronouns rather than the form, drawing on metadiscourse theory, and on generating metalinguistic understanding of the differing ways that pronouns function in written argument might better support writers in agentic linguistic decision-making.

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1. Introduction

The concept of metadiscourse as a linguistic resource for writers 'to help their readers connect, organize, interpret, evaluate, and develop attitudes towards [the writing]' (Vande Kopple, 1985, p.83) is now well-established, particularly in second language research and in the considerable body of research on English for Academic Purposes. Metadiscourse theory draws a distinction between language used to introduce, explain and develop ideas - the propositional content of the writing - and language used to point the reader to the structure and shape of the text, to engage the reader with the ideas in the text, and to signal the writer's stance towards those ideas. Thus it highlights that a key responsibility of a writer is not simply to express ideas or share information but to move beyond this to build a relationship with the implied reader which is supportive of the reader's navigation and interpretation of the text. Metadiscourse focuses on the language choices in the text

which mark reader navigation and interpretation: to an extent, then, metadiscourse as a concept is essentially text-orientated. However, its textual interests are directly concerned with the establishment of a reader-writer relationship, thus bringing together the text, the writer and the reader through the lens of the text.

A complementary lens is to consider the reader-writer relationship from the perspective of writers, and their metalinguistic understanding of how the textual choices they make express their own positionality in the text and engage the reader with their arguments. When we write, many of the decisions we make are simply linguistic, drawing on our implicit knowledge of the language and our understanding of the particular text type (Hulstijn & Hulstijn, 1984; Ellis, 2009). For first language writers especially, decision-making in writing is able to draw heavily on this implicit knowledge, for example of grammatical structures or typical collocations, and also on internalised knowledge, for example, of spelling or punctuation conventions. This can be more challenging for second language learners, for whom explicitness about how different language choices function in written text may be more important, generating metalinguistic knowledge. Indeed, Ellis (2009, p.13) argues that 'explicit knowledge can be viewed as a 'tool' that learners use to mediate performance and achieve self-control in linguistically demanding situations'. Arguably, for all

[☆] This paper reports on a study funded by the Qatar National Research Fund [Grant number: NPRP11S-1112-170006].

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writers, metalinguistic understanding of the structure and shaping of written text is important both to increase writer independence and to inform writing instruction.

This paper draws on data from a study investigating both students' use of metadiscourse in written argument in L1 Arabic and L2 English, and those students' metalinguistic understanding of the metadiscourse features. Specifically, here we consider pronouns, principally reader pronouns (eg *we*, *us*, *our*) as a means to engage the reader, but also self-mentions (*I*) as part of the expression of stance), and what students think is the purpose of these pronouns in their argument texts. The paper investigates the question of what metalinguistic understanding students express about the use of pronouns in written argument as engagement or stance markers to build a relationship with the reader. We argue that greater emphasis on the function of pronouns rather than the form used, drawing on metadiscourse theory, and more deliberative fostering of metalinguistic understanding of the differing ways that pronouns function in written argument to build a reader-writer relationship might help students to become more agentic and independent in the linguistic choices they make.

2. Conceptual framework

The argument offered in this paper is underpinned by two theoretical concepts, metalinguistic understanding and metadiscourse. Gombert (1992) defined metalinguistic understanding as including both the '*activities of reflection on language and its use*' and '*subjects' ability intentionally to monitor and plan their own methods of linguistic processing*' (p.13). In the context of writing, metalinguistic understanding represents the capacity of writers to reflect on and regulate the language choices in their evolving text, and is fundamentally concerned with writers and their linguistic decision-making in their own written texts. In parallel, metadiscourse focuses on texts, and '*the range of devices writers use to explicitly organize their texts, engage readers, and signal their attitudes to both their material and their audience*' (Hyland & Tse, 2004, p.156): in other words, the linguistic tools writers use to signal their stance towards the ideas in the writing and to signal the construction of the evolving text. Both concepts share the 'meta' prefix, meaning 'beyond', 'after', or 'among' from its Greek etymology (Merriam-Webster, 2019), signalling a different level of engagement with language and with discourse. Arguably, metadiscourse and metalinguistic understanding share a shift in focus from the content of the text to commentary or reflection on the text, either internally as with metadiscourse, or externally as with metalinguistic understanding.

2.1. Metalinguistic understanding

To an extent, clear definitions of metalinguistic understanding are fraught with problems, in part because the word 'metalinguistic' is an adjective, always requiring a noun for completion, which has led to a variety of noun phrases to be used in association with the adjective – for example, metalinguistic understanding; awareness; knowledge; activity; capacity; and behaviour. This linguistic point (see Myhill & Jones, 2015; and Camps, 2015), has the consequence that the noun phrases are sometimes used as synonyms of each other, whilst at other times, they refer to subtly differing concepts. Indeed, in a recent study, Moore states that the term 'metalinguistic awareness' is used '*interchangeably with metalinguistic knowledge and metalinguistic understanding*' (2021, p.179).

The definitional problem is compounded by the fact that the concept of metalinguistic understanding draws both on linguistics, which emphasises the use of metalanguage as a language to talk

about language, and on cognitive psychology, with its interest in thinking and mental processes (Gombert, 1992, p.8). There is considerable consensus in linguistics that metalinguistic activity places language as the focus of attention (Jakobsen, 1963; Cazden, 1976; Camps, 2015), and that it '*allows the individual to step back from the comprehension or production of an utterance in order to consider the linguistic form and structure underlying the meaning of the utterance*' (Malakoff, 1992, p.518). Gombert (1992, p.186) notes that metalinguistic understanding is '*conscious, intentional and explicit management of language*'. Crucially, then, metalinguistic understanding is explicit, in contrast with linguistic understanding which is '*implicit, holistic and content-directed*' (Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002, p. 431), thus making it verbalizable and available for reflection and discussion, either individually or in a pedagogical context.

From a cognitive perspective, Gombert foregrounds the thinking processes involved in metalinguistic understanding by arguing that it is '*a subfield of metacognition concerned with language and its use*' (1992, p.13). Metacognition refers to the capacity to reflect on one's own thinking and learning, and to plan and monitor learning processes as a consequence (Flavell, 1976; Mujijs & Bokhove, 2020). Because this study addresses language learning, we draw on both linguistics and cognitive psychology to define metalinguistic understanding as bringing into consciousness an attention to language, and monitoring language choices to create the meanings intended by writers. We consistently use the term 'metalinguistic understanding' because our interest is in what students understand about their use of metadiscourse in their own writing.

Although there is a substantial body of research about metalinguistic understanding, this is dominated by studies on aspects of language learning other than writing. For example, research has considered early oral language development in the first language (Gombert, 1992; Ely et al., 2002; Stude, 2007); reading development and comprehension (Downing & Oliver, 1974; Allan, 1982; D'warte, 2012), including comprehension difficulties (Tong et al., 2013); spelling (Carovalas et al., 2005; Bourassa et al., 2006); vocabulary (Nagy, 2007; Ramirez et al., 2013). Theoretically, much of this work draws on aspects of Gombert's taxonomy of metalinguistic development (1992), investigating phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic awareness, and to a lesser extent, pragmatic awareness. There is a large parallel body of studies on second and bilingual language learning (Cisero & Royer, 1995; Norbert, 1999; Roehr, 2008; Ellis, 2009; Barac & Bialystok, 2012). Although there is some research on early writing development (Camps & Millian, 1999; Martello, 2001; Lin et al., 2011), attention has tended to focus on orthographic and transcriptional components, rather than broader compositional and rhetorical issues or Gombert's textual taxonomic category.

However, a developing research output is investigating metalinguistic understanding of writing in older children and university students, both in L1 (Jones et al., 2013; Myhill & Newman, 2016; Lines et al., 2019; Macken-Horarik et al., 2018; Hardman & Bell, 2019; Moore, 2021; Healey & Gardner, 2021) and in L2 (Beauvais & Ryland, 2021; Pourdana et al., 2021; Calzada & Garcia Mayo, 2021). The L1 research represents an international shift from form-focused metalinguistic attention to a broader concern for the function of grammatical and language choices in writing, at lexical, syntactic and textual levels, and with a strong emphasis on rhetorical purpose. Although L2 studies have tended to concentrate more on metalinguistic understanding of grammatical forms, there has been a parallel shift to an interest in more functional approaches (Enright, 2013; Schleppegrell et al., 2019; Jou, 2019), drawing on Halliday's (1978) seminal work in Systemic Functional Linguistics. This shift is relevant to this paper as metadiscourse is also functionally-orientated, so metalinguistic understanding of metadiscourse calls for understanding not

merely of the grammatical forms of metadiscourse, but of how they function in argument text to build a relationship with the reader.

2.2. Metadiscourse and reader pronouns

The functional aspect of metadiscourse recognises that a given grammatical form, such as the first-person plural pronoun 'we', may or may not be serving a metadiscoursal function. Metadiscourse is internal to the text itself, standing beyond the propositional content of the text to comment on or signal the writer's position within the text. So the pronoun 'we' in an argument text could function as metadiscourse to engage the reader, or as part of a proposition in the argument, as exemplified below:

Metadiscourse: *If **we** do not take seriously the challenges of climate change, then **we** risk the futures of our children.*

Proposition: *Recently, my family visited Svalbard, in the Arctic circle, and **we** saw for ourselves the impact of climate change.*

Metadiscourse serves a rhetorical purpose, both in terms of 'the writer's management of the information flow to steer readers through a text' and 'authorial interventions which personally engage with the content and readers' (Hyland et al., 2022, p.2). Hyland links the concept of metadiscourse with Halliday's work on Systemic Functional Linguistics, foregrounding the function of language choices in crafting meaning in a text. Halliday and Hasan's (1976) notion of tenor, as the particular roles we take up in interaction, connects with metadiscourse in attending to the way particular language choices construct the reader-writer relationship in a given context. Hyland's interpersonal model of metadiscourse (2005) categorises the management of information as Interactive, and the authorial interventions as Interaction, subdivided into Engagement and Stance. It is in the latter two categories where pronouns play a role. Engagement markers invite readers to engage with the writer's ideas by actively including them as discourse participants, through, for example, questions to the reader or directives. Reader pronouns (*us, we, our, you*) directly address the reader - for example, 'You might wonder...' - or are inclusive, expressing a shared or collective engagement with the topic - for example, 'We know the dangers of social media...'. To an extent, engagement markers are reader-orientated, whereas stance is writer-orientated, revealing the writer's attitude and positionality towards the argument through hedges, boosters and attitude markers. The use of self-mention pronouns (*I, me*) are attitude markers, through which writers project themselves into the text, making their presence explicit.

Empirical studies investigating the use of pronouns do not all approach their research through the theoretical lens of metadiscourse, though many do refer to it. However, the majority of studies do have in common an interest in the way personal pronouns reflect authorial voice and identity, and how writers represent themselves in the text (see, for example: Chang & Swales, 1999; Kuo, 1999; Hyland, 2002). Some studies link personal pronoun use with formality, objectivity and being impersonal, often linked with student perceptions that argument as academic discourse should be 'dry, convoluted, distant and impersonal prose' (Tang & John, 2013, p.824). This aligns with the substantial body of research addressing how writers are inducted, or obliged, to appropriate a particular form of academic discourse (Ivanic, 1998; Lillis, 2019) in order to be successful. Taki and Jafarpour (2012), for example, found that English academic discourse makes greater use of reader pronouns and self-mentions than Persian texts, and argue that awareness of these differences would help Persian academic writers write articles 'which meet the standards of English journals' (p.167). Not all studies, however, point to pronoun use in terms of compliance to perceived norms of academic discourse. Hewings and

Coffin (2007)) found that students used first-person very deliberately to resist the impersonal voice of academic discourse, while Molino (2010), investigating Linguistics research articles, argued that writers made different choices about pronoun use for subjectivity or objectivity in relation to particular discourse functions, such as explaining procedures or illustrating data.

This notion of writers making different choices regarding pronoun use is a recurrent one, partly because a large number of studies are contrastive studies, particularly across languages, but also comparing first and second language users, novices and experts, and academic disciplines. Common to many of these is the recognition of the power of sociocultural influences on writers' decision-making, that 'the use of engagement features is culturally conditioned' (Khoutyz, 2013, p.17). A reluctance by Russian writers to use pronouns signalling informality, according to Grigoriev and Sokolova (2019) is attributable to a Russian preference for politeness in academic texts, and a consequent avoidance of informality which 'signifies a more personal approach, closer relation, and the wish to discuss expressed claims with the reader' (p.429). Whilst this is sometimes attributed to cultural differences in academic discourse (eg. Molino, 2010; Khoutyz, 2015) or across disciplines (eg. Harwood, 2005; McGrath & Kuteeva, 2012), others see this as linked to broader sociocultural differences linked to national identity. Of these, a number discuss the connection between pronoun use, authorial identity and individualist and collectivist cultures, building on earlier work by Ivanic and Camps (2001) and Hyland (2002). Chávez Muñoz (2014) suggests the greater use of personal pronouns in academic writing in English when compared with Spanish reflects the encouragement of 'the individualistic representation of one's identity' in English, in contrast to Spanish, where 'one's identity is typically constructed collectively' (p.27). This echoes the findings of Kim (2009) who argued that the differences in pronoun use in Korean and English reflected the preference for indirectness and collectivism in Korean culture. A more recent study, though based on a very small sample, also attributed the use of first-person singular or plural pronouns in argument writing with the collectivist culture of Arab nations (Chibi, 2021).

A relationship between collective and individual representation of authorial identity is also explored by Hewings and Coffin (2007)). Their analysis of student writing challenges previous research which suggested the use of 'I' establishes the strongest authorial presence. Instead, they outline how students can navigate the relationship with readers through the use of 'we' to adopt a collective view of readers and writer, and to 'widen the authority for the claim being made' (p.140). They also argue that impersonal 'it' clauses can also establish 'a powerful authorial presence, with writers not needing to mitigate their claims by signals of their personal involvement' (p.140). In similar vein, Thonney (2013) found that students, unlike experts, used 'I', not to express authority but to signal uncertainty and a lower relationship status with the audience. The expert/novice distinction here is repeated elsewhere, particularly with respect to native and non-native speakers (see, for example, McCrostie, 2008; Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2013; Lee & Deakin, 2016; Leedham & Fernandez-Parra, 2017).

What is evident from this review of conceptual and empirical work is that there is very little research which brings together metadiscourse and metalinguistic understanding of writing. Harwood's study (2007) of pronoun use is unusual in adopting an interview method to ascertain writer perspectives, but it is very small-scale, involving only 5 participants, and does not explicitly consider metalinguistic understanding. Nonetheless, Harwood argues that corpus studies 'can provide only a limited insight themselves as to the writer's intended effects of his/her text' (2007, p.49), and it does seem crucially important to know about both what language choices students make in their writing and what they understand about those choices. As noted earlier, the research ques-

tion informing this paper is: what metalinguistic understanding do students express about the use of pronouns in written argument as engagement or stance markers to build a relationship with the reader?

3. Methodology

To answer this question, the data presented here draws from a larger study, funded by the Qatar National Research Foundation, investigating students' use and understanding of metadiscourse in their own writing. The study was mixed-methods, comprising the collation and analysis of a corpus of student writing, and interviews with a sub-sample of the writers to elicit their metalinguistic understanding. The corpus component involved the creation of a learner corpus of 390 argument texts, written by 195 Qatari undergraduates, for whom Arabic was their first language and English a second or additional language. The students were all taking writing courses to support their academic writing in English. Their writing tutors were a mix of first and second language English speakers from Lebanon, Jordan, the United States, Britain and Sudan. The teaching of argument drew on understandings of argument common in the United States, such as the use of an introduction, body paragraphs, thesis statements, and a conclusion. They are also encouraged to consider the reader by attracting the reader's attention with a hook or a question, and appealing to the reader through emotive language.

Two argument topics (Task A and Task B) were selected to elicit the writing, and each student wrote one argument essay in English and one in Arabic. A cross-over design was used to avoid a task effect, whereby half the sample addressed Task A in English, and the other half addressed Task B, with this reversed for the Arabic written arguments. The corpus data was analysed using Docuscope, created by Kaufer and Ishizaki (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.). Docuscope is a text analysis tool which permits corpus analysis of rhetorical strategies. Importantly, it offers an authoring tool to create a customised dictionary for analysis, and in our study this was used to create a dictionary, enabling the analysis of metadiscourse.

3.1. Data collection: writing conversation interviews with students

This paper, however, draws principally on the qualitative data derived from the student interviews. A sub-sample of 41 of the students who provided texts for the corpus were interviewed twice, once about their English text and once about their Arabic text. The purpose of the interviews was to elicit data related to the over-arching project research question, What is the nature of Qatari L1 Arabic university students' metalinguistic understanding of metadiscourse and voice and their own use of the features in their writing? This paper focusses more specifically on a sub-question related to this over-arching question: namely, what metalinguistic understanding do students express about the use of pronouns in written argument as engagement or stance markers to build a relationship with the reader?

In general, research interviews are valuable tools for exploring complex issues such as metalinguistic understanding, because they allow the interviewer to 'press not only for complete answers but for responses about complex and deep issues' (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 506), and they give the interviewees the opportunity to respond 'using their own words' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 78), rather than being obliged to select closed responses on, for example, a multiple-choice questionnaire. In the context of metadiscourse and pronoun use, Harwood maintains that corpus-based studies have to rely on 'speculation on the analyst's part' to determine writer motivations for pronoun use whereas interviews help 'to shift the burden of interpretation from the researcher onto the writer' (Harwood, 2007, p.45). Specifically, for this project we adopted the discourse-based

interview (Odell et al., 1983; Lillis, 2009), what we have called Writing Conversation interviews (Authors, 2016), where interviewees are asked about their own writing, rather than writing in general. In writing research, one limitation of more generalised interviews about writing is that at best they can elicit rather broad or bland responses, and at worst, the re-voicing of what teachers or instructors say, believing this to be the 'right' answer. In contrast, because writing conversation interviews focus on actual texts present in the interview context, they permit a closer exploration of the metalinguistic thinking and decision-making which may have accompanied the composition of the text. In this way, a writing conversation interview

'may focus on a text type, text, or section/feature of a text: the specific focus at any one moment in time may be something as small as a specific use of a full stop, to patterns of vocabulary or grammar, such as the use of particular pronouns across a text, to a specific convention emblematic of academic discourse, such as the use of citations'. (Lillis, 2009, p. 203)

Accessing thinking processes is always a methodological challenge as thinking, by definition, occurs 'in the head'. Interviews can, of course, only access metalinguistic understanding which can be verbalised, and there is an ongoing debate in the research about whether it is possible to have metalinguistic understanding but not be able to verbalise it (see, for example, Camps, 2015). The choice of Writing Conversation interviews, focused on the student's own writing, is intended to open up space for metalinguistic thinking and verbalisation. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the capacity to verbalise metalinguistic understanding may be affected by familiarity with (or lack of it) this kind of talk.

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed which aligned with the taxonomy of metadiscourse informing the corpus analysis, and which comprised three main sections exploring *Interactive metadiscourse*, Engagement and Stance. We were aware that the interviewees were unlikely to know the metalanguage of metadiscourse as it is not part of the writing instruction courses at the university. Accordingly, the questions were framed in everyday, or more familiar language which addressed a metadiscourse feature without using the metadiscourse term. For example, we asked students 'How did you address your reader?', rather than asking 'Did you use Reader Pronouns?' Crucially, however, interviewers used the student texts to follow up these questions, particularly following through where metadiscourse was used to open up discussion about that example.

3.2. Data analysis processes

A hybrid coding methodology (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) was adopted, involving both top-down deductive coding and bottom-up inductive coding in order to answer the over-arching research question. The hybrid approach allowed us to capitalise on the benefits of each approach. The deductive analysis, whilst providing a less thorough representation of the data overall, allows for 'a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84), in this case to align the interviewing questioning with the corpus analysis coding structure. We developed a deductive codebook (see Table 3.1), using (Hyland, 2005) as the framework for analysis. This was used to search the interview data for student comments on each of the metadiscourse features analysed in the corpus study.

In contrast to the use of predetermined codes in the deductive coding, the inductive coding process ensured that 'the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves... without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). The inductive coding hap-

Table 3.1

The Deductive Codebook for Analysis.

METADISCOURSE	
Comments which show understanding of metadiscourse features, using metalanguage or everyday language	
INTERACTIVE	Interactive Resources are those features which the writer uses to manage the information flow to guide the reader through the text.
Code Glosses	Reformulation: <i>in other words, this means...</i> and Exemplification: <i>for example, for instance...</i>
Endophoric Markers	Non-linear: <i>Figure X, Table X...</i> and Linear: <i>In Figure X, In Table X... In this paragraph/section</i>
Evidentials	Reference to other sources: eg <i>according to x</i>
Frame Markers	Sequencing: <i>first, lastly</i> , Label stages: <i>all in all, in conclusion...</i> ; Announcing goals: <i>In this essay, this essay aims to... my purpose...</i> ; Topic shift: <i>now, move/moving on...</i>
Transitions	Connectives/Linking adverbials. Addition: <i>additionally, further/furthermore...</i> ; Comparison: <i>although, at the same time...</i> Consequence: <i>as a result, even though, the result is...</i>
ENGAGEMENT	
Reader-orientated. Engagement markers are the involvement of readers explicitly in the text. They address readers explicitly, or make a relationship with the reader	
Directives	Imperatives: <i>add, think about, examine .. PLUS It is important to; it is necessary to,...</i> Obligations: <i>must, have to...</i>
Interjections	<i>By the way; incidentally; Personal asides...</i>
Appeals to Knowledge	<i>As a rule; we know that; commonly; it is well-known that..</i>
Questions	Questions to the reader eg <i>How can this continue?</i>
Reader Pronouns	The use of personal pronouns to address the reader eg: <i>let us, we, our, you</i>
STANCE	
This refers to "writer-orientated features" which reveal the position of the writer toward the subject. For example, the ways writers comment on the accuracy of a claim, the extent they show their commitment to it, or the attitude they want to express to a proposition or the reader	
Attitude Markers	Attitude verbs: <i>agree, disagree...</i> Sentence adverbs: <i>amazingly, shockingly...</i> ; Adjectives: <i>amazing, important...</i> ; Self-mention flagging the explicit presence of the author eg <i>I, me...</i>
Boosters	Emphatics: <i>actually, obvious...</i> Amplifying adverbs: <i>certainly, never...</i>
Hedges	Attribute: <i>apparently, in general...</i> Reliability: <i>could, may...</i> Writer-orientated: <i>argue, claim</i> , Reader-orientated: <i>in my opinion, in my view...</i>

pened in two ways. Firstly, having completed the deductive coding process, two of the codes, Reader Pronouns and Transitions, had a disproportionately large number of data segments coded to them, and so further inductive coding permitted a more nuanced analyses of student comments on these two areas. Secondly, the full data set was inductively analysed to capture students' reflections on their writing which was not directly related to metadiscourse features, but provided insights which might inform what they said about metadiscourse (see Appendix 1). For example, one theme represented their views of the Reader-Writer Relationship, and another their thinking about Textual Organisation. Using this hybrid approach enabled us to ensure appropriate alignment between the interview and corpus analyses, but also to reflect the nuances and complexity of the interview data.

Three coders were involved in the analysis, using Nvivo, which followed Braun and Clarke's six steps (2006, p. 87), although it is important to note that steps 2–5 (generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes) were more iterative than sequential, involving frequent revisiting and refining of coding already completed. Particular care was taken to maximise shared understanding of the coding across the three researchers, so regular meetings were held to discuss the 'coding so far'. The initial six interviews were coded collaboratively, then we progressed to independent coding with meetings to check consistent attributing of data to codes and any new codes created. Each meeting triggered revisions of the coding and rechecking of data already coded. A final review was made of all the coding to check the clarity of code labels, the appropriacy of the definitions of each code, and that every data segment within a code was correctly attributed. Throughout the principles of constant comparison were adopted whereby:

'the researcher simultaneously codes and analyses data in order to develop concepts; by continually comparing specific incidents in the data, the researcher refines these concepts, identifies their properties, explores their relationships to one another, and integrates them into a coherent explanatory model' (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 126).

4. Analysis and findings

The deductive coding of the interview data, capturing students' metalinguistic thinking about their own use of metadiscourse, reveals considerable variability across the data set both in terms of the number of interviews which included metalinguistic comments on each of the focus metadiscourse items, and in the number of comments made. Taking Engagement, Interaction and Stance as broad categories, the spread of interviews represented and the frequency of comments is broadly similar: Table 4.1 shows the outcome of the Nvivo analysis in terms of the number of data segments attributed to each metadiscourse code following the deductive coding process. Additionally, Table 4.1 provides an indication of how many interviews are represented in each code to provide transparency about the representativeness of the data. However, Table 4.1 also indicates that at the level of the metadiscourse features, both Reader Pronouns and Transitions were discussed by more students and more frequently than any other metadiscourse. This article addresses students' metalinguistic thinking principally as revealed in their comments about Reader Pronouns, but will also draw in comments made about Self-Mentions in the Attitude Markers category, where relevant.

Reader pronouns include both the inclusive pronouns (*we, us* and *our*) and the direct address pronouns, 'you' and 'your', and are

Table 4.1

The descriptive statistics summarising the outcomes of the deductive qualitative analysis.

METADISCOURSE CODES	Number of Interviews Represented	Number of Occurrences
Engagement	68	150
Appeals to Knowledge	0	0
Directives	4	4
Interjections	1	1
Questions	16	22
Reader Pronouns	65	124
Interaction	71	180
Code Glosses	8	9
Endophoric Markers	0	0
Evidentials	18	31
Frame Markers	23	29
Transitions	62	111
Stance	78	184
Attitude Markers	31	46
Boosters	50	69
Hedges	57	70
TOTALS:	82	516

perhaps the most obvious, or common, method of reader engagement in written argument. This may account for the high number of student responses in this category. To explore student metalinguistic thinking in more depth, a further layer of inductive coding of the 124 responses attributed to Reader Pronouns (in Table 4.1) was undertaken to generate a more fine-grained understanding of these responses. The resulting themes from this inductive coding are outlined in Table 4.2 below.

In the presentation which follows, quotations from the student interviews will be identified using the student number attributed to them, for example, S4 or S33. In addition, letters A or E will be used to indicate whether the quotation is drawn from the interview about their English argument text or other Arabic text. So S27A refers to Student 27 talking about his/her Arabic text. However, it is important to note that in many cases, when students were talking about their English or Arabic text, they made cross-references to the text in the other language, so it is not possible to compare easily their responses to their English and Arabic texts.

Those comments attributed to the **Giving Examples and Unelaborated Comments** code were predominantly those where students simply identified the pronoun use in their writing with no explanatory comments, or where they made comments which sug-

gested very limited metalinguistic understanding of how reader pronouns function, either metadiscoursally or rhetorically. For example, one student said 'I do not differentiate between them much' (S5E) and another commented on his use of direct address, noting 'there was not enough time, and I did not intend to use it' (S36E). These comments provided little insight into students' metalinguistic thinking about their use of Reader Pronouns and will not be discussed further.

Hyland's taxonomy of metadiscourse discriminates between the use of Reader Pronouns as Engagement markers, and the use of the pronoun 'I' as a marker of Stance - a self-mention revealing writers' positionality towards their subject matter. The students, however, did not make this distinction, and frequently talked about the use of 'I' alongside discussing their use of pronouns. For that reason, we also include in the presentation of findings below, the student responses categorised under Attitude Markers which discussed their thinking about the use of a first-person voice.

4.1. Understanding that reader pronouns are inclusive of the reader

Table 4.2 indicates that the most commonly-articulated understanding of reader pronouns was that they are Inclusive of the

Table 4.2

An overview of the inductive coding themes for Reader Pronouns.

Reader Pronouns sub-codes	Definition	Number of Interviews	Number of Occurrences
Inclusive of the Reader	Comments which express a view that the use of personal pronouns includes the reader as part of a shared community or view.	32	40
Conversational and Engaging	Comments which suggest that personal pronouns are more conversational or engaging.	10	10
Direct and Indirect Address	Comments suggesting that the use of personal pronouns relates to direct or indirect address, linked with formality and informality.	28	34
Generalisation and Objectivity	Comments which explain choice of reader pronouns in terms of a generalised reader and objectivity.	7	8
Effect of Arab Culture and Language	Comments which explain the use of personal pronouns as a facet of Arab language, and particularly the collectivist Arab culture.	7	7
Influence of Instruction	Comments which indicate that the choice of pronoun use is a response to what the student has been taught.	9	11
Giving Examples or Unelaborated Comments	Comments which simply identified examples of reader pronouns or made generalised statements about reader pronouns	13	14

Reader. This sub-code comprised comments which express a view that the use of personal pronouns includes the reader as part of a shared community or view, and these comments do reflect metalinguistic understanding of the metadiscourse function of reader pronouns. In particular, the students felt the inclusive pronouns create a sense of shared experience or significance, where something *'is affecting all of us together. It's not just me'* (S1E) and where the pronouns serve *'to rally a community in a sense'* (S9E). Sometimes this relates to evoking a shared problem, *'this problem is not only your problem but also our problem—all of us'* (S4E), and the inclusive pronouns mean *'the reader and I are in the same place and in the same picture, we are all together'* (S8E). For others, the emphasis is more on shared responsibility – *'I need to include the community as a whole so that they feel responsible'* (S20A). Students also felt the inclusive pronouns are a way of *'connecting with the reader'* (S23E) to *'make the reader feel that he is with you'* (S26E); or as very explicitly expressed by one student: *'I am using the our to convince the reader, to give them a sense of connection with me as a writer'* (S35A). Occasionally, however, the recognition of how the use of *we, our* or *us* was inclusive of the reader, bordered on being more about ideational, or propositional content than the metadiscourse function: for example, one student said the pronouns were *'to show to the reader that he is a part of the community in which he lives and that everyone should pay attention, as harm can affect everyone'* (S33A), whilst another argued that *'I direct it to the people who will read it and the surrounding community and to feel that they are included in this concern, and this motivates them to take advice'* (S26A).

4.2. Understanding that reader pronouns are conversational and engaging

A smaller cluster of comments conceived of reader pronouns as Conversational and Engaging, linking the metadiscourse idea of engagement to the conversational style the reader pronouns establish. These comments are more specific than the broader view of pronouns as inclusive, detailing their understanding of a dialogic function in using reader pronouns. Two students felt the pronouns had a persuasive function, suggesting they were to attract the reader *'to my point of view'* (S37A) or *'I used (you) to make the reader feels that I am talking to him, to convince him with my message'* (S24B). More students spoke of how the pronouns were like *'talking to the audience'* (S12E) or *'talking to the reader'* (S13E), because *'I need to relate to him or her'* (S15B). There is a sense here of recognising how reader pronouns build a relationship with the reader. One student elaborated her perspective on this in detail:

I find writing to be almost like a conversation. So I want to engage with the reader usually, and I want to address them because it's very easy to say a speech and be like, oh, I'm talking to, you know, just a general group of people. And I feel like that sometimes can be not necessarily impersonal because like, it is an impersonal essay. But it is kind of, it makes it easier to get the reader to be engaged because you are addressing them specifically, and it is like, you are talking to them. And so they begin to answer back, I feel, in their own heads. (S9E)

These students' comments show understanding of how pronoun choices help to engage readers in a conversation – a written dialogue. Indeed one student observed that *'when you talk to the person [through reader pronouns], you attract him like he is talking to you'* (S36A). This echoes Hang and Hyland's argument that *'the most obvious indication of a writer's dialogic awareness occurs when he or she overtly refers to readers, asking questions, making suggestions and addressing them directly'* (2020:4).

4.3. Different understandings of the role of direct and indirect address in engaging the reader

Another substantial set of responses related to Direct and Indirect Address, which, in general, referred to the use of the second person pronoun to address the reader, although some students also spoke of inclusive pronouns as direct address. The responses in this code, however, signal divided perspectives on the use of pronouns for direct address in argument, and their purpose in the text. Some students explicitly recognised the direct address created by 'you' pronouns, saying, for example, *'I was addressing the reader directly'* (S4E) or that direct address can *'attract the reader and makes him pay attention to the subject and that this essay is addressed to him'* (S17E). One student saw it as a necessity: *'to be more direct, I have to address the public and the reader himself'* (S16E). Equally, however, some students eschewed using pronouns for direct address because they felt an *'indirect method'* (S1A) was more appropriate. For some, this was simply a statement of their practice, particularly the use of third person pronouns: *'I addressed him indirectly by using third person'* (S26A), and *'I use an indirect form to talk to the reader'* (S1A). Others expressed their use of indirect address more in terms of how they presented their writing to the reader, with one student noting that *'I presented the idea with credibility and transparency without speaking directly to the reader'* (S24A), and another saying *'I addressed the reader indirectly as humans, and I tried to attract the reader's attention to my writing, but I did not address him directly'* (S33A). For some, the choice not to use direct address pronouns seemed to be less related to the metadiscourse aspect of engagement with the reader, and more connected to a notion of the implied reader. The students' perceptions of a general readership, that *'this article is written to people in general'* (S14E), that *'the subject is not addressed to a single reader'* (S32A), and that the writer had no *'particular reader in my mind'* (S5E) seemed to prompt the avoidance of reader pronouns.

Students' explanations regarding the use of direct address pronouns also raised issues of formality and informality, which were unrelated to the metadiscourse engagement function of reader pronouns but linked to perceptions of the inappropriacy of informality in academic writing. Direct address of the reader was seen as an example of informality: *'They are not official, they are informal'* (S11E); they are *'informal or incorrect'* (S4A), and they should not be used in *'argumentative articles'* (S5E). One student signalled that they had been explicitly taught to avoid personal pronouns: *'this was counted as an informal language in high school. We learned that using you or me, or any type of these pronouns. Yeah. It can be counted as informal, so I did not use them'* (S4A). Another student felt that not using personal pronouns made the writing *'more professional and formal'* (S27B). In similar vein, one student explained the choice of the universal pronoun 'one' as being *'more formal'* (S40E).

4.4. Avoidance of reader pronouns to strengthen objectivity

Perhaps linked to these ideas of direct address, formality and informality are the notions of Generalisation and Objectivity, which formed a small set of responses. However, objectivity and subjectivity are not the same as formality and informality as it is perfectly possible to be both informal and objective. What is common to some of the comments in both the previous sub-code and this one is that for some students the choice of pronouns relates to perceived expectations of academic writing, rather than to a reader-writer relationship. Students felt the use of third person, thus avoiding reader pronouns, made their writing *'more objective'* (S27E) and was more appropriate *'for generalization'* (S33E). It was also viewed as a way *'to follow the academic style'* (S27B). These comments suggest a perception that reader pronouns are

not appropriate in academic writing, or undermine their argument by presenting it too much as a personal viewpoint, rather than a more detached perspective. It is worth noting here that the writing course these students were taking does not address the issue of objectivity. One student, however, argued differently about avoiding reader pronouns, maintaining that using the third person tones down the potential of making the reader feel personally attacked: *'if I address someone, I will address him in a negative way. The reader can feel that the speech is negative, because I am going to address him using a pronoun you. But when I write in general, the reader will understand the topic in a comprehensive perspective and not accusing him of a certain point'* (S41A).

4.5. Different perspectives on the use of 'I' in written argument

As noted earlier, the students' comments on Attitude Markers were strongly orientated towards consideration of the use of the first-person singular pronoun. Only two of the 46 coded data segments (see Table 4.1) were not about the use of 'I'. Many of these comments were concerned with the appropriacy of using 'I', not about its effect as a marker of the writer's stance, and reflected a view that the 'I' should not be used in argument writing. One student noted that *'I tended to avoid that'* (S7E), whilst others argued that it was too *'informal'* (S40E), *'informal or incorrect'* (S4A) or not appropriate to use *'because it is not a personal essay'* (S40A) – comments which echo student responses about reader pronouns, relating direct and indirect address to formality or informality. Some students felt that the use of first-person risked suggesting a bias: thus they avoided using it *'so as not to make the reader feel that I am biased'* (S14E). This sense of bias was linked to the effectiveness of the persuasion which might be undermined because *'the reader will feel that this information is only from my side'* (S26E). Instead using third-person voice *'makes the reader imagine that I am using facts and is convinced of what I am saying'* (S14E). These comments do suggest some metalinguistic understanding of the metadiscourse function of 'I', though principally in concluding that they eschew revealing their position to the writer through first-person voice.

Another cluster of comments focused on the idea of personal opinion expressed in writing. One lone voice justified her use of the first-person voice *'because the topic was personal to me'* (S34E), but more discussed their avoidance of 'I' because an argument text is not personal. For some, this meant restricting the use of 'I' to the introduction and conclusion where they felt their personal viewpoint was permissible: *'only at the beginning to clarify my personal opinion'* (S29E); *'at the end of the essay'* (S34E). One student, who had only used first-person voice in the introduction and conclusion, connected this with objectivity and subjectivity, reflecting that *'the topic is not subjective, so I wanted to be objective, but I tried to make it clear that I agree with the subject in the introduction and then I added my findings in the conclusion'* (S41E). Another student who had not used 'I' seemed to be explaining her decision on the degree of personal attachment to the topic, at the same time as suggesting she is expressing her opinion indirectly: *'I don't tend to use it that much in general, unless it's like a personal essay, but even in arguments to essays, I think for this one, in particular, it's because I'm not attached to the topic that much, so yes. So, I can have an opinion on this essay. Right. But it is, I do not necessarily, like, it is not a direct writer opinion'* (S9E).

Two students felt that the first-person singular pronoun engaged the reader: for one student, this was because the personal voice established a shared attitude between reader and writer, where *'what the author wrote represents an experience that the reader has to live as well'* (S17E). The other student spoke directly of engagement – *'I used 'I' to give a direct example to the reader and engage him with me. Using 'I' relates my narration more to the reader*

(S20E). This links with comments about using Reader Pronouns to be conversational and engaging, and establishing a form of written dialogue with the reader.

4.6. The effect of Arab culture and language on pronoun use

A small cluster of comments suggested that the decision about using reader pronouns in Arabic writing was an Effect of Arab Culture and Language. For one student, this seemed to be principally due to greater linguistic ease in Arabic, allowing him to *'explain my style and my point of view easier'* (S41A). However, five of the seven comments referred directly to their sense of an Arabic collectivist culture, giving primacy to the needs and interests of groups over individuals, with a strong group identity and sense of community: *'We are a collective culture who live together as a big family share happiness and grievances together. We live in a sense of community as Arabs; unlike the western culture who are not collective in nature'* (S35A). One student explained her perception of the link between Arab culture and choice of reader pronouns:

There is an effect in the Arabic language. In the Arabic language we use 'we' a lot, and in the culture as well. In the West, there is individual culture, so one person speaks and says 'I', but in the Arabic language, in general, we have an idea that we are all together and it is a beautiful idea. Of course, the group has its pros and cons. The negatives, for example, limit thinking outside the box, but here, let me talk about my writing here. Here I was influenced by the Arabic language first thing, and the second concern is so that the reader is with me, we are all one unit. (S23E)

This view was repeated by other students who believed that *'in Arabic it is desirable to use - we, we can, we do, we see ... it can be due to the collectivism like if we mentioned any verse in the Quran, and it could be close to the reader like 'you' and 'I' or 'us' (S5A), and that this choice to use 'we' is 'because our society likes plurality and collective action, and I am addressing the society as a whole - 'we' (S18A). These views are somewhat curious because they do not reflect the actual usage of reader pronouns in their Arabic and English texts found through the corpus analysis, where their use of reader pronouns was significantly higher in their English texts (see Table 4.3), although they did indeed use fewer self-mentions in their Arabic texts.*

Overall, the corpus analysis indicated that students used higher proportions of metadiscourse in general in English than in Arabic, and this was particularly marked in relation to Engagement markers: they were used more than four times as frequently in English essays (11.92 vs 2.60 per 1000 words), and the difference was statistically significant. However, only 7 students expressed this perspective about the relationship between pronoun use and Arab culture, and the discrepancy may simply be because their views are not shared by the rest of their peers.

4.7. The influence of instruction

Given that these students are all learning English as a second or other language, and are on a language course, it is perhaps not surprising that some students signalled that their beliefs about reader pronouns had been developed through the Influence of Instruction, and that their writing practices are *'the effect of our education'*

Table 4.3

A comparison of the frequency of pronoun use in the Arabic and English texts.

Pronoun Use	Arabic	English
Reader Pronouns (you; we; us)	130	931
Self-Mentions (I)	79	277

(S38E). Indeed, their tutors on the writing course do teach them to be formal by not using 'I' in their writing. Seven of the eight comments in this code reflected teacher admonition against the use of personal pronouns: for example, '*the instructor told that do not use I directly - say, for example, it is believed*' (S15E); '*I was taught that I should not use the first and third person pronouns*' (S31E); and '*teachers warned us not to use it*' (S32B). However, none of these students explained *why* they should not use these pronouns.

Students' explanations of their decision-making around the use of first-person pronoun 'I' similarly signalled a direct effect of instruction on their writing practices:

- *When we are writing argumentative essays, I remember we were asked not to use the first-person.* (S12E)
- *We do not mention them in the academic essay as they are not allowed to be used.* (S32E)
- *I have learned that even in academic essays, I do not talk about myself and on the academic side. When I write about a topic, I prove this topic, and not too biased and not to speak about myself, so I felt that the reference to the third person is better than the first-person pronouns.* (S14A)

One lone voice offered a different position on using pronouns, in relation to writing in Arabic, noting his teachers '*were telling us that we should put our personal opinion and address the reader in person*' (S31A). It is worth noting that in the wider inductive coding of the interview data, a significant top-level theme was The Role of Teachers (see [Appendix 1](#)): this comprised student comments which were not about metalinguistic understanding *per se* or metadiscourse, but which indicated how students' learning or experiences had derived from teachers and writing instruction.

5. Discussion

This paper set out to investigate what metalinguistic understanding do students express about the use of pronouns in written argument as engagement or stance markers to build a relationship with the reader. The analysis of the students' writing conversation interviews provides valuable insights into students' thinking about language use in their written arguments, and what metalinguistic understanding they express about their own use of pronouns. Overall, the students show very little metalinguistic understanding of metadiscourse itself, and how metadiscoursal features can shape a relationship with the reader. This is not surprising as the concept of metadiscourse and its associated metalanguage is not part of the writing instruction they receive. However, these students do reveal metalinguistic understanding of pronoun use, some of which does align with the metadiscourse functions. At the same time, the student responses highlight how language choices in writing are shaped by sociocultural influences, and by normative expectations of the argument genre.

5.1. Metalinguistic understanding of pronoun use

As outlined in the presentation of findings above ([Table 4.1](#)), the category of Reader Pronouns generated substantially more comments than any other Engagement markers. Indeed, 82% of all comments about Engagement concerned reader pronouns, and these comments occurred in 68% of the interviews. Equally, almost all the comments coded to Attitude Markers were about the use of first-person 'I'. Clearly, the use of pronouns in argument writing is an area of heightened awareness for these students, and their responses do indicate metalinguistic understanding of the choices they are making. Some of the students had explicit understanding that reader pronouns were more inclusive of the reader, engaging them dialogically with the writer – aligning with the metadiscourse theory. However, throughout the interviews, student con-

sideration of reader pronouns tended to be conflated with the use of first-person 'I' (self-mention) and with the use of the third person for objectivity and indirect address. They do not make the distinction made in metadiscourse between reader pronouns to engage the reader, and self-mentions to mark the positionality of the writer.

More evident, then, was metalinguistic thinking about pronoun use in general. Student discussion on this tended to address three interacting concepts which were informing their thinking: whether the reader should be addressed directly or indirectly; whether the pronoun choice affected formality or informality; and how objectivity or subjectivity were constructed by different pronouns. For some students, the choice of third person voice, rather than a self-mention (*I*) or reader pronoun (*we, us, you*) was felt to be a more objective, more formal and indirect mode of address, in line with the findings of a number of previous studies (for example, Tang & John, 2013; [Grigoriev & Sokoleva, 2019](#)). Such comments do connect with the nature of the reader-writer relationship, reflecting how the students feel they should be represented in the text. What is noticeable, however, is a strong tendency to talk about these concepts in binary terms, to counterpoint direct and indirect address, or objectivity and subjectivity, or formality and informality. None of the students considered these 'binaries' as continua which need to be managed by the writer in shaping the whole text: for example, no students showed recognition that both third person voice and direct address can be used in written argument, or considered how a reader might respond to over-use of self-mentions.

5.2. Sociocultural influences upon metalinguistic understanding of pronoun use

Many of the students tend to emphasize concerns with objectivity, formality and indirect address, and to conceptualize them in binary ways. This may reflect the influence of social context, both at the level of sociocultural expectations of academic discourse, and at the broader level of societal or cultural influences. [Khoutyz \(2015\)](#), drawing on findings from a study comparing the use of engagement markers in Russian and English academic writing, argues that '*academic discourse is a variety of institutional discourse that is deeply rooted in sociocultural context and is typically constructed under the influence of social roles ascribed to its participants*' (p.149). More recently, [Hyland \(2022\)](#) has summarised the range of studies over time which have illustrated differences in academic discourse which are cross-linguistic and cross-disciplines, reflecting different expectations of writing in different contexts. It is likely that many of the students' responses in our study similarly reflect the expectations of written argument in their academic context. Indeed, this is reinforced by their comments which signal the role of the teacher in shaping their understanding of how to write this kind of text.

It is possible, of course, that students' metalinguistic understanding of pronoun use is also shaped by broader cultural influences. [Hyland \(2002\)](#) found that L2 students from Hong Kong were reluctant to take an authoritative stance in their writing, avoiding the use of 'I', which he suggests may be because '*L2 writers from other cultures may be reluctant to promote an individual self*' (p.1111). This finding of the significance of cultural and national influences chimes with studies discussed in [Section 2.2](#), which highlighted, in particular, different pronoun uses in different languages, many of which relate to how the writer represents themselves in the text. Certainly, there are resonances between the findings of these studies and some of the students' perceptions of Arabic-English differences in pronoun use being attributable to the collectivist culture of Arabic society in contrast to the more individualistic culture of Western English-speaking societies. [Feghali \(1997\)](#) observed that Arab culture was collectivist rather than individualist, and as

a consequence, 'Arabic speakers are more group orientated and tend to use pronouns that express collectiveness such as "we" and "us" (p. 352), a claim echoed by Chibi (2021), and by some students in this study. What is surprising, then, in our results is that the students appear to be using reader pronouns so much less in Arabic, rather than more as might be expected given these points about the use of 'we' and a collectivist culture. At the same time, the students are neither unanimous nor consistent in what they say, and we should be cautious in over-emphasising the difference, particularly as some analyses of 'real-world' written arguments in Arabic and English suggest the distinctions are less clear-cut and that there is considerable hybridity (Al-Mamaari, 2017). Such over-emphasis of difference risks both cultural stereotyping and the teaching of argument not being fully aligned to writing practices in argument beyond the university.

5.3. Normative pressures and a focus on form

One specific, but powerful, socio-cultural influence relates to the nature of the writing curriculum and assessment, and the pedagogical practices which accompany it. The research on authorial identity has long noted how writers are pressured to conform to the expectations imposed by curriculum and assessment (Ivanic, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2019), and this may be particularly strong for L2 writers who are trying to appropriate different ways of writing. The students' comments frequently seemed to be an indirect reflection of what they had been taught was acceptable or unacceptable in academic argument, and the sub-theme, the Influence of Instruction, revealed the direct influence of teaching on their language choices and metalinguistic understanding. The inductive coding (Appendix 1) shows that students' metalinguistic understanding of the genre expectations of written argument was strong, reflected in the large number of data segments coded to Argumentation, and it may be this understanding which is shaping their responses. Their metalinguistic understanding of genre, however, tended to be somewhat formulaic, highly dependant on taught aspects, and perceptions of what they should or should not include, as evidenced in the Role of Teachers theme. It appears that students are being taught to use, or avoid, metadiscoursal elements, but not from a metadiscoursal perspective. It seems to be more about compliance to normative expectations of argument, with a particular emphasis on form – what forms they should or should not use in their writing. Although the student comments frequently linked pronoun use to objectivity and formality, they are not consistent about which pronoun choices establish objectivity or formality – they are more aware of their teachers' instructions about usage. At times, it is evident that adherence to these instructions is not always accompanied by understanding. For example, the student who observed that 'I was taught that I should not use the first and third person pronouns' does not seem to recognise that you cannot write argument without using either first or third person pronouns, or at least has not included impersonal 'it' in their thinking about pronouns.

It is important, however, not to position student compliance to normative expectations of pronoun use as a criticism of students or their teachers. The reality is that students' progress at university is dependant on success in written examinations, and it is not surprising that they are driven by a desire to know what they need to do in order to succeed. Similarly, their teachers may themselves be constrained by accountability for their students' results, and may have no voice in shaping the curriculum and assessment expectations which they are required to teach.

The point we make here is that a shift in pedagogical practices from a somewhat form-focused compliance to norms towards greater metalinguistic understanding of the functions of pronouns in written argument is likely to generate more sophisticated understanding of how to manage the reader-writer relationship and more informed decision-making about choice of pronouns. Informed decision-making is important because the conventions of academic discourse are constantly evolving, not monolithic and fixed. For example, Hyland and Jiang (2016; 2017) have found diachronic changes in academic discourse: increased informality in academic writing in the sciences, including increased use in first-person pronouns (2017); and a decrease in use of engagement markers (2016).

Conclusion

This article has considered students' metalinguistic understanding of the use of pronouns in written argument as engagement or stance markers to build a relationship with the reader, and has shown that, in general, their metalinguistic understanding is shaped more by notions of formality and objectivity than by understanding of how pronouns play a role in reader engagement. In discussing their students' resistance of impersonal discourses, Hewings and Coffin argue that 'we can no longer rely on apprenticeship or enculturation into academic and disciplinary practices via students reading only texts sanctioned by the professional disciplinary community' (2007, p.140). We suggest that greater emphasis on the function of pronouns rather than the form used, and on generating metalinguistic understanding of the differing ways that pronouns function in written argument might better support writers in agentic linguistic decision-making, rather than enculturation. This might helpfully be achieved by generating more opportunities in writing classrooms for metatalk (see for example, D'warte, 2012; Galloway & McClain, 2020; Edwards-Groves & Davidson, 2019), and particularly for functionally-focused metatalk, which engenders talk about the rhetorical purpose of language choices in writing. At the same time, this would familiarise students with discussing their metalinguistic intentions in crafting their own writing.

The capacity to produce competent written argument is not simply a matter of linguistic ability and performance, but also one of writer understanding of the rhetorical effects of the language choices make. Metadiscourse theory is not the only way to talk about pronoun use and the reader-writer relationship, but with its focus on the functional aspects of language choice, and the well-established metalanguage to describe those functions with some precision, it provides a valuable pedagogical tool for initiating and developing metalinguistic understanding. Being able to think about and discuss writing at a meta-level, and to reflect on the meta-level of written discourse fosters understanding which is explicit, which can be shared with, and shaped by, others, and which is useable within a community of writers. The potential of bringing together metadiscourse and metalinguistic understanding, both theoretically and pedagogically, is that it has the potential to create space for writers to think more strategically and independently about how they choose to signal their authorial presence in a text, and dialogue with readers.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Appendix 1. Final Inductive Coding Themes, Sub-Themes and Definitions

Name	Description
ARGUMENTATION	This theme captures comments by students which show understanding about the genre expectations of argument writing
<i>Argument and Counter-argument</i>	Comments which refer to the concepts of arguments, points, counter-points, rebuttals, comparisons and contrasts
<i>Emotional Appeal</i>	Comments which refer to the use or avoidance of emotive language or emotional content in argument
<i>Evidence and Examples</i>	Comments which refer to the use of evidence and examples, without reference to the metadiscoursal features of evidentials or code glosses. Includes explanations.
<i>Focus on content and ideas</i>	Comments on argument writing which relate more to the knowledge, ideas and content of the argument (such as personal experience). This includes comments on reading sources and researching ideas and information for the essay.
<i>Formality and Informality</i>	Comments which show refer to the use of formal and/or informal language in argument
<i>Rhetorical Features of Argument</i>	Comments which refer to rhetorical devices such as hyperbole; repetition; figurative language etc
<i>Textual Organisation</i>	Comments which show understanding of the linguistic organisation of argument at text level, including thesis statement, introduction, or conclusion
POSITION OF THE WRITER	Comments which relate to the writer taking up an objective or a subjective stance, or expressing their own opinion or viewpoint.
<i>Avoiding Expressing an Opinion</i>	Comments which refer to avoiding communication a point of view or an opinion
<i>Being Objective</i>	Comments which express the importance of being objective in argument and using facts
<i>Communicating Different Viewpoints</i>	Comments which indicate that the writer shows two or more sides to an argument
<i>Expressing an Opinion</i>	Comments which refer to the writer communicating their opinion or point of view in the essay
<i>Where viewpoint is expressed</i>	References which explain where in an argument the writer's point of view can be expressed
READER AWARENESS	Comments which show awareness of the reader and how writing needs to accommodate reader needs
<i>Clarity for the Reader</i>	Comments which reflect the need to support the reader through being clear about points and arguments
<i>Engaging the Reader</i>	Comments which express a need to engage the reader by attracting their attention, or making things interesting for them.
<i>Implied Reader</i>	Comments which explain the writer's perception of the implied reader
<i>Third Person Voice</i>	Comments which refer to the use of the third person to address a general reader
THE ROLE OF TEACHERS	Comments which relate to learning or experiences derived from teachers
WRITER PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR OWN WRITING	Comments which relate to the student's sense of competence as a writer (in L1 or L2), including the challenges and difficulties they face.
<i>Arabic influencing English</i>	Comments which indicate linguistic knowledge from Arabic is used when writing English argument.
<i>Challenges in Writing</i>	Comments which express the difficulties students face when writing, either in English or Arabic.
<i>Concern about standard of writing</i>	Comments which express concerns or anxieties about the quality of their written English or Arabic
<i>Difference between Arabic and English</i>	Comments which relate to student perceptions of the differences between Arabic and English, or no difference
<i>English Influencing Arabic</i>	Comments which indicate linguistic knowledge from English is used when writing Arabic argument.
WRITING	Comments which express metalinguistic understanding about writing in general
<i>Influence of Reading</i>	Comments which refer to how reading has helped with ideas, or understanding the text type; or references to not reading.
<i>Paragraphing</i>	Comments which refer to the paragraphing demands of argument writing
<i>Punctuation</i>	Comments which refer to student thinking about punctuation and its usage.
<i>Revision</i>	Comments which refer to the revision of writing and the nature of changes made
<i>Text Layout</i>	Comments which refer to visual aspects of text layout such as the use of bullet points, diagrams etc.
<i>Vocabulary</i>	Comments which relate to word choices, including noun phrases such as 'mobile phones'; and to revising words in a sentence eg 'I really agree' to 'I prefer'

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