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Focus on Academic Writing Practices

A note on (dis)appearances: Authorial presence and reflexivity in Scenario Journal research articles 2014-2023

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This is a research note on academic writing practices in our field, whose purpose it is to serve as a foundation for discussion. It provides a brief introduction into researcher reflexivity, my own positioning towards the topic, and a numerical thematic overview of authorial presence (pronouns, third-person terms, and their semantic functions) in data-based research articles published in the Scenario journal over the last ten years. I do not draw conclusions, but from the angle of researcher reflexivity, I submit questions with respect to clarity of premises and ethics, for possible consideration by future authors in our field.

1 Introduction

This project emerged from reading research articles published in *Scenario* in recent years in bulk. I was reading them for their content, but as an applied linguist, I began to notice the wide spectrum of choices authors made about the extent and quality of their own representation in their writing, from constant presence to almost complete absence and from consistent use of "I" to an occasional appearance of the author as "the researcher" or, in German, "die Versuchsleitung". From my experience of colleagues in the field of performative language teaching and learning as well as from the articles themselves, I knew that many authors occupied multiple roles: as author and researcher in most cases, but often also as the teacher or workshop leader in the teaching context presented in the study. I began to wonder how, as (a sample of) a field, we write ourselves in and out of our own research and teaching, and particularly how we address the ethical question of handling our teacher-researcher (TR) identity and more generally, our own critical positioning in our writing. That is where this project had its starting point.

I should stress that I do not intend to advocate for one specific way of representing oneself in scientific writing; I am aware there are geographical, institutional, methodology-specific,

topic-specific, and field-specific practices and probably a host of other conventions that feed into each author's choices (some are listed, with sources, in Dontcheva-Navràtilovà 2013). It is impossible to tell from the data set in this study which aspects were relevant to a given author at the time of writing – or if they related to those aspects willingly or resignedly –, nor am I even convinced that it would be possible for authors themselves to tease the factors apart. The data also include one of my own published articles, so it is clear that I am not outside of the field of reference here; looking back, I can only surmise what my own motivations were for writing in the way I did – perhaps an amalgamation of my German and quantitative background, my age, gender, and race, the feeling of community I developed with my language students in a US context, training in qualitative linguistic research and the basic idea of reflexivity, imitation of other scientific writing I had read, and a certain liking for telling stories.

Rather than discussing causalities or evaluation then, my goal is to provide a superficial overview of the 'state of affairs' around authorial presence and reflexivity and pose questions that might be helpful for us to consider as future authors. Our community encompasses a remarkably diverse set of backgrounds – performers, language teachers of all levels and in all kinds of contexts, theater educators, linguists, and academics from a variety of other disciplines, to name just a few; and we come from all over the world. The only thing we all have in common is that we write academic text that concerns learning situations where fictional realities are played out to some extent.

All learning and research contexts involve power relations, and with a rise in migration, an increasing number of the environments we work in involve groups that are ethnically or racially diverse and involve stratified social and educational status; this particularly includes work being done with, for, and by refugees, immigrants, and displaced people. In older research traditions like anthropology, where these kinds of power differentials within groups and between researcher and 'the researched' are common, the ethics involved have been discussed at least since 1967, when Malinowksi's private diary (Malinowski 1967) was posthumously published by his wife. This eminent anthropologist had created a credible representation of researcher objectivity in his academic work, but the diary included openly racist comments about the studied culture which, if known, might have undermined the credibility of his work (Nazaruk 2011). The diary, originally a record for self-analysis, galvanized

discussion about the explicit positioning of the researcher, now known as researcher reflexivity:

> Reflexivity is commonly viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome and how much of that should be visible in published study reports. (Berger 2013, p. 2)

The concept has been a subject of intense debate, since both extremes have been shown to have deleterious effects: no representation is associated with the erasure of biases and preconceptions that influence research reporting, as with Malinowski; overrepresentation has been said to lead to scientific 'navel gazing', where the reader learns more about the researcher's own psychological processes than about the subject, and where critique and generalizability arguably become impossible (Santos Alexandre 2022; but see a nuanced discussion in Ploder and Stadbauer 2016). The fragile consensus appears to be that there is no generally applicable 'right choice' about the extent of researcher reflexivity that should be demonstrated, but that the question should be in every researcher's mind and choices about representation should be made transparent in published work, so that the reader can draw informed inferences as to possible effects on the study process and in particular on data collection, analysis, and interpretation (e.g. Breuer 2003).

For transparency's sake: I agree with this, and I generally come from a position of critical theory, which Neelands describes as a stance that presupposes

> … that both positivism and scientism seek to reduce essentially human and practical problems to a technical level in which spurious claims to scientific objectivity are used to mask, conserve and naturalise both the power of the powerful and the powerlessness of the powerless. (Neelands 2006, 23)

This viewpoint informs my interest in the data at hand.

In educational settings involving performance, it is very often the case that the teacher (or workshop leader) is directly involved in the action, so that neutrality is not an option; in fact, qualitative research itself has been described as a performance (Collins 2022) because of the various roles the researcher takes up. How, then, to report on research done in this setting? In theater, there has been some discussion of this (Ackroyd 2006). There has also been important critical self-reflection on the power dynamics and effects of social justice-oriented

theater/performance projects (Snyder-Young 2013), as there was in the special edition of *Scenario* addressing the RISE manifesto (2021, issue 15.2).

However, here, like elsewhere, the discussion about theater-related studies where reflexivity and critical self-awareness are perceived to be insufficient is still ongoing (Blackmore 2019).

2 Methodology

2.1 Corpus and extraction of data

The corpus for this note consists of the 98 full-length research articles published in the Scenario journal during the years 2014-2023. Excluded therefore were publications like reviews, reports, practice windows, and literature excerpts. I first surveyed what types of articles were present, since it seemed likely that an article entirely focused on theory would approach authorial presence differently than one reporting on a project led by a TR. I arrived at six categories of articles: theory articles, position papers, introductions of a technique or practice without reference to data, quantitative studies, qualitative studies, and what I call project reports. The latter two terms are distinguished by the fact that project reports are more informal case studies, focusing on the process of one project or teaching context with only minor presence of data and little explanation of methodology used; the qualitative studies focus more on the formal study process than on the individual project and give a systematic account of their methodology. My expectation was that self-representation would differ based on article type as well as team authorship and status as a designer (rather than a teacher), so I tracked these factors as well, but as it turned out designer status did not matter for the outcomes.

Table 1 shows the distribution of the article types in the corpus, as well as the distribution of TR situations among them.

Types of articles	Number (% of total)	Teamwork	Designer	Teacher researcher yes/no/unclear (% of type)	TR discussed (n/a = isn't TR) yes/no/*n/a (% of type)
THEO	16 (16.3)			/	/
PRAC	13 (13.3)				
POSI	6 (6.1)				

PROJ	26 (26.5)			21/2/3 (80.8/7.7/11.5)	3/21/2 (11.5/80.8/7.7)
QUAL	30 (30.6)			21/8/1 (70.0/26.7/3.3)	9/13/8 (30.0/43.3/26.7)
QUAN	7 (7.1)			3/2/2 (57.1/14.3/28.6)	0/7/0 (0/100/0)
TOTAL	98 (100)	36	33	Y:45	Y:12

Table 1 Article types

The articles reporting on data were most relevant, since this was where the TR conundrum would surface. For closer investigation, I therefore chose quantitative (QUAN), qualitative studies (QUAL), and project reports (PROJ) as my data set of 63 articles.

To arrive at chunks of data for coding, I tracked authorial presence by searching digitally for the following features: first person pronouns (cf. Dontcheva-Navrátilová 2013) as well as designations that defined the author in the third person (such as "the researcher"). With the latter, I began with a handful of terms I remembered reading. Since there are articles in both English and German, I searched for both sets of pronouns (details in Table 2) and tried to use roughly equivalent terms for the term searches, adding new terms as I came across them while reading. For each token, I recorded at least the surrounding phrase, extending to at most a sentence if I felt the contextual meaning would get lost otherwise. Table 2 presents the basic representation of the linguistic items in the data set. The prevalence of "I/we" over object cases and possessives is consistent with previous research results (Dontcheva-Navrátilová 2013, p. 23).

item	tokens
I/ich	878
Me/mich/mir	95
My/mein-	459
We/wir	557
Us/uns	68
Our/unser-	217
Author-/Autor-	41
Teacher-/Lehr- (persons only)	87
Researcher-/Forsch-/Versuchsleit-	43

Table 2. Basic linguistic search items and their distribution in the data set.

Apart from pronouns, there was a large spectrum of third-person terms authors used to describe themselves. By far the most common in order of frequency were teacher/Lehr-,

researcher/Forsch-/Versuchsleit-, and author/Autor-. Used less than 20 times in the data set or just in one article were the actual name(s) of the author(s), investigator, leader, Leitung[2], tutor, supporter, mentor, facilitator, instructor, pedagogue, educator, Lektorin, Dozierende[3], trainer, workshop leader, catalyzer, synthesizer, designer, planner, listener, observer, reporter, participant-observer, teacher/organizer, author/researcher, collaborator, artist, performer, performance artist, teacher-artist, teaching artist, theater practitioner, community artist, comedian, and student.

2.2 Themes

While I was copying out chunks, I made notes of semantic functions the author references served in the text. These became my initial coding items, which were later refined in several stages. For reasons of space, the final codes are not spelled out here, but they formed the basis for generating overarching themes that were addressed by the data items. Table 3 shows the themes I found most helpful in sorting the data.

Categories	**Total %**	**Samples**
Study-related items	1102 *44,2%*	interpret my findings (50)
Generic items	107 *4.3%*	at least once in our lifetime (34)
Teaching-related items – agency	292 *11.7%*	I asked students to create a voice recording (6)
Teaching-related items – no implied agency	267 *10.7%*	the class I was assigned (4)
Teaching-related items – total	559 *22.4%*	
Personal Items – positioning	500 *20.1%*	I wanted to further highlight (80) the teacher himself, a native English speaker (11)
Personal Items – reactions, emotions	126 *5.1%*	I view it as a massive success (6)
Personal Items – course corrections, questioning, learning	98 *3.9%*	I now set clear supportive guidelines (33) learning about my own culture (74)
Personal Items – total	724 *29.1%*	
Critical Awareness	248 *10.0%*	how could we balance ethics and imagination (78)

		tied to my own sense of privilege and power (39)

Table 3. Themes and examples (for Personal items only)

It should be noted that original codes did not always merge with a particular theme. For example, Code 1 (Background) was most often associated with the Study theme, but there were a few items that I decided were better sorted into Personal ("the basis of my actual skills as a teacher", 11), and some emotional expressions like "I hope" – usually strongly Personal – actually functioned as deprecating claims associated with the study ("as I hope to show", 11).

Table 3 shows that by far the most frequent function of self-identifiers was connected to the Study theme, which is perhaps to be expected in a research paper. Generic items were relatively uncommon, and teaching-related items were well represented, although if contextual information tokens are subtracted (e.g. "the class I was assigned", 4), there remain remarkably few items where the teacher clearly initiates action in the classroom (e.g. "I asked students to create a voice recording", 6).

However, the second-largest group after the study-related items are the personal items. Their prevalence initially suggests that as a field, we talk about our personal viewpoints a great deal. However, that is not entirely the case. First, fully 340 instances of the 724 originate in just four papers (33, 11, 80 and 61). Second, Personal items all identify perspective, but they vary strongly in reflexivity. The typical item is something like "I wanted to further highlight" (80). Only a few times is there actual positioning in the critically reflexive sense, as e.g. referring to oneself "as a bilingual" (80) or "as a researcher-participant" (99) for purposes of noting the possible impact of one's own positioning. This led to a new category within Personal items that I call "critical self-awareness"; the preceding two quotes are examples of the items collected into this category; it contains items from all subthemes listed above.

3 Preliminary observations and questions

The following general observations can be made on the basis of the numerical information.

- About half of data-based articles use pronouns for authorial presence minimally or not at all.
- For non-TR authored articles, only about a quarter used pronouns, otherwise there were third-person terms or no mention at all; for TR authored articles, personal pronouns were used throughout in about 60% of cases.

- Quantitative studies have very low authorial presence, which is consistent with conventions in the field (Mertler 2006, p. 108).
- While most TR authors mention their TR status in passing, few of the articles actually discuss the ethics of having several roles at once: overall just 19% of all TR articles, with qualitative studies providing (some) discussion at nearly three times the rate of the project reports. For 10% of the articles in the data set, TR status cannot be determined in the text at all, and for several others the status is implied rather than named.
- The pronoun "we" (plus "us" and "our") is used in various ways in the data. It can indicate the following entities:

  1. The team of authors ("We retrospectively explore…", 98)
  2. The team of teachers/designers, of which the author is one ("My co-teaching artist and I discussed how we…", 99)
  3. Humans/society in general ("the society in which we live", 50)
  4. Teachers, language teachers, artists, other subgroups with the assumption that both author and reader belong to them ("how we as educators can…", 51)
  5. TR and learners collectively ("we were the clocks in the painting", 51)

  This is consistent with previous research, where "we" is identified as a "shifting signifier" (Wales, 1996, p. 62), but Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990) note that we may still obscure and manipulate allegiances by the choices we make as authors when we use the pronoun.

These observations suggest to me that the following questions might be considered both at the individual authorial level and potentially as conversations to engage (further) in with colleagues in our field.

- What are our theoretical assumptions about scientific writing? And on the basis of a given theoretical position, how (much) do we want to show authorial presence, and where in the text? This is also relevant for theory articles, although they are not separately discussed here.
- How much reflexivity concerning our own multiple roles do we want to present? I found it disconcerting that so few of us in TR situations address the ethical concerns involved.
- How much do we want to own our choices in the classroom? While choices about study design are documented well in the data, classroom agency patterns are more often obscured by stylistic choices (passive voice and generic phrasing). Especially for studies

where agency, power differentials, and democratization are at issue, who actually takes decisions and how open the space is for student initiative may matter.

The wider question that rose in my own mind after assembling this data set was: How much public representation of our power as well as our uncertainties do we want to/can we afford to engage in? There are authors who trace their own positioning, decision-making processes, the consequences, and their learning experiences in their messy reality, but only a handful.

I do not mean to say that the public negotiation of critical self-awareness and positioning needs to be done consistently throughout each article; navel-gazing is still a valid concern, and convention and institutional constraints of various kinds often point us in the opposite direction. But I would like to suggest that being clear about our power and our choices, as well as documenting the processes of questioning, going through insecurity and "trepidation" (93), and re-assessing can be extremely valuable for readers who are negotiating that squishy thing we call drama pedagogy (or whatever term we each use) along with the diversity of our various environments. These strategies would arguably make our assumptions and thinking processes more accessible for readers from backgrounds different from our own; they would model the difficult task of orienting ourselves in ethical quagmires we all have to navigate, lower the psychological barrier to sharing for others, and open the door to collaborative learning and creative development. Judging by the conversations I experienced at the *Scenario* conferences over the years, collaborative and creative learning is, after all, what we are all about.

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