

**The Thai university student's fine-tuning of discourse in
academic essays and electronic bulletin boards:
Performance and competence**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Linguistics, Macquarie University

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DECLARATION

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged. All information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

The research presented in this thesis was approved by Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee, reference number: HE28OCT2005-D04353 on 6 February 2006.

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ABSTRACT

While natural interaction is one of the important components that lead to successful language learning (Vygotsky 1978, 1986), communication in classroom practice in Thailand is mostly teacher-centered and not genuinely interactive. Online group communication is different because it allows learners to exercise interpersonal communicative skills through interaction and meaning negotiation, as in reciprocal speech situations. At the same time it gives learners time to think and produce language without having to face the kind of pressure they feel in face-to-face classroom discussion. The language learner's competence is thus likely to be enhanced by opportunities to communicate online, and to be more visible there than in academic contexts, although there is a dearth of experimental research to show this. One way of investigating the pedagogical potential of bulletin board discussions is to focus on the interpersonal linguistic devices used in textual interactions (Biber 1988).

The purpose of this research is to find out whether students communicating online in bulletin board writing will exercise their repertoires of linguistic fine-tuning devices (hedges, modals, and intensifiers) more extensively than when writing academic essays. This was expected because hedges, modals and intensifiers are likely to be found in interactive discussions (Holmes 1983), while academic tasks do not create such an environment. Though hedges and modal devices are also found in academic genres (Salager-Meyer 1994, Hyland 1998), those used tend to be academic in function rather than communicative.

In order to compare the frequency and variety of the fine-tuning devices used by learners in the two mediums, data was gathered from 39 Thai students of English at Kasetsart University, from (1) their discussions in online bulletin boards and (2) their academic essays. Tasks were assigned on parallel topics in three text types (narrative, explanatory, argumentative) for both mediums. The amount of writing was normalized to create comparable text lengths. Measures used in the quantitative analysis included tallying of the types and tokens of the experimental linguistic items, with the help of the AntConc 2007 computer concordancer. Samples of written texts from the two mediums were also

analyzed qualitatively and compared in terms of their discourse structure (stages, moves and speech acts), to see which functional segments support or prompt particular types of pragmatic devices.

The findings confirm that in electronic bulletin boards the students exercise their repertoires of fine-tuning devices more frequently, and use a greater variety of pragmatic functions than in academic essays. This is probably because online discussion fosters interactions that are more typical of speech (Crystal 2006), and its structure allows for a series of interpersonal moves which have no place in academic tasks. Text-type also emerged as a significant factor: writing argumentative texts prompted greater use of modals and intensifiers than the narrative and explanatory ones. Thus students' communicative competence showed itself most fully in the argumentative online assignments, and was not so evident in academic and expository essays. Frequent use of modal and intensifying elements was also found to correlate with the students' English proficiency grades, and how regularly they wrote online. This incidentally shows the importance of exposure to L2 in language acquisition, and that lower-proficiency learners need more opportunities to exercise their L2 resources in interactive discourse, in order to develop competence in using them.

These research findings support Long's (1996) 'Interaction Hypothesis', that learners learn best in situations that cater for interaction; and Swain's (1985) 'Output Hypothesis', that learners need the chance to exercise their language naturally in a variety of contexts – through academic tasks as well as social interactions, which are equally important for language education. Extended performance opportunities undoubtedly feed back into the learner's communicative competence.

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