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Formality in students' writing over time: empirical findings from the UK

Conference Paper Abstract

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Abstract

Producing texts which are context-appropriate is a characteristic of effective written communication. One of the challenges faced by language education in Europe and internationally is raising students' awareness of the situated nature of communication and developing students' ability to use language in a context-sensitive manner. A concept which is key to the discussions surrounding quality in students' writing is formality.

To date, formality has been researched mainly from a developmental and a sociocultural perspective. Studies examining students' usage of written language from a developmental viewpoint focused largely on identifying language features which differentiate novice from more mature writers (see Myhill, 2009; Perera, 1987). Findings point to a declining presence of orality in writing as students become more experienced writers. This declining presence is typically marked by patterns such as an increase in the use of subordination (see Allison et al., 2002; Harpin, 1986; Perera, 1984) and a higher level of lexical density and lexical sophistication (see Myhill, 2009; Perera, 1987).

From a sociocultural point of view, formality has been examined in the context of the ongoing public debate concerning the influence of informal electronic communication – primarily that of texting – on students' formal writing. Research investigating the implications of the popularisation of informal electronic communication among young people focused mainly on the intrusion of textisms, such as contractions (e.g. 'txt' for 'text'), symbols (e.g. @ for 'at'), omitted capital letters and emoticons into students' formal writing. The limited number of textisms detected in students' writing led researchers to conclude that students' formal writing is not susceptible to the influence of informal electronic communication (e.g. Grace et al., 2015).

While formality in students' writing has been examined from a developmental and a sociocultural perspective, it has been rarely approached diachronically. The scarcity of diachronic research on the topic of formality lies mainly in the absence of appropriate corpora, that is, corpora comprising examples of student writing from different points in time. Such research is essential as it can complement existing inquiries and generate valuable insights into the effectiveness of literacy policies and into the influence of the changing sociolinguistic landscape on students' written production. Seeking to bridge a gap in research, this study compared two student corpora consisting of 858 extracts of students' writing from 2004 and 2014. Its goal was to examine the extent to which the formality embedded in students' writing changed over time.