

The Use of First Person Pronouns in Turkish EFL Students' Argumentative Essay Writing

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Abstract

This study aimed to find out to what extent and for what roles Turkish EFL students use first person subject pronouns in their argumentative essays by taking the general view that formal writing should be clear from first person pronoun use into consideration. Another aim of the study was to compare the students with their native speaker peers. In order to conduct the necessary analysis, the data consist of 309 essays written by 165 first year and 144 fourth year students in the argumentative genre. The essays were collected from an ELT (English Language Teaching) Department of a state university. The results showed that Turkish students preferred *we* much more than *I* in their essays when compared to their native speaker peers. The students used *we* in the function of *generic*, *which* somehow correlates with the most frequent function of *I* because it helps the writers to reason their arguments. The results also showed that Turkish students used personal pronouns primarily as the opinion provider, which is consistent with the findings of earlier research on other EFL learners.

Key Words: *Personal pronouns, first person pronoun use, Turkish ELT students, foreign language writing*

Tartışmacı Deneme Yazımında Türk EFL Öğrencilerinin Birinci Şahıs Zamirlerini Kullanımı

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin tartışmacı yazınlarında birinci kişi özne zamirlerini ne ölçüde ve hangi rollerde kullandıklarını saptamaktır. Çalışmanın diğer bir amacı da Türk öğrencileri anadili İngilizce olan akranlarıyla birinci kişi zamiri kullanımı bağlamında karşılaştırmaktır. Gerekli analizleri yapmak için 165' i 1. Sınıf, 144' ü 4. Sınıf İngilizce Öğretmenliği öğrencilerinden olmak üzere 309 tartışmacı kompozisyon toplanmıştır. Sonuçlara göre Türk öğrenciler anadili İngilizce olan akranlarıyla kıyaslandıklarında "biz" öznesini "ben" öznesinden daha çok kullanmışlardır. Sonuçlara göre Türk öğrenciler birinci kişi zamirlerini temel olarak görüş bildirme rolüyle kullanmışlardır ve bu sonuç alanda yapılmış önceki çalışmalarla uyumludur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kişi zamirleri, 1. kişi zamirleri, Türk İngilizce Öğretmenliği Programı öğrencileri, yabancı dilde yazma*

1. Introduction

The purpose of the study is to describe the use of first person pronouns by EFL writers in their writing of argumentative essays and to discuss the presence of pronoun use within the context of formal writing. Moreover, contrary to what is taught in textbooks (Callies, 2013), the controversy exists whether first person use can be regarded appropriate instead of being regarded informal and inappropriate in formal writing (Hyland & Jiang, 2017; MacIntyre, 2017). The use of personal pronouns, particularly the use of *I* and *we* is believed to be against the requirements of objectivity and formality in writing (Chang & Swales, 1999). The first person pronoun use is strictly prohibited and students are warned to avoid from using them during their undergraduate education (The OWL at Purdue, 2013). The reason why students are banned from using first person pronouns can be to help students to be objective and formal in their writings. If the list of informal features identified by Chang and Swales (1999) is examined, it is clearly seen that first person pronouns occupy the first place. However, although it varies among the disciplines and genres, the importance of such pronouns in helping the writers to state their opinions, and arguments has been put forward in many studies (Chang and Swales, 1999; Hyland, 2001, 2002a and Harwood, 2006). And these pronouns also help the writers in persuading the reader and organizing their texts. It is reported that students' avoidance of using *I* often leads to clumsy sentences and heavy reliance on passive voice; in other words, this makes writing worse, not better (Troyer, 2017). Despite the debate around whether the students should be allowed to use first person pronouns in writing, there is little research conducted on the issue.

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Therefore, in this descriptive study, the aim is to describe whether Turkish EFL students used the first person pronouns (*I* and *We*) in their argumentative essays; if so, to show to what extent and in what ways they have used the first person pronouns.

The corpus used in this study were collected from 1st and 4th year university students. The analysis showed if there was a difference between Turkish EFL students and native speakers in terms of first person pronoun use in argumentative writing.

2. Literature Review

First person pronoun use in EFL setting is generally studied with a manner of comparison of non-native writers with native writers or two non-native groups with each other. In one of the studies conducted in this regard, Leedham and Fernandez-Parra (2016) looked at the use of *we/I* in student corpus, compiled from Chinese, Greek and British students studying engineering at five UK universities. The objective of the study was to explore texts of students having different cultural backgrounds and different native languages but studying at the same discipline. As first person pronouns are among the features of writer identity, they were chosen for comparison. They are claimed to be overused by L2 English students. They used British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus in the study. And they also collected data following the same criteria as for the assignments in BAWE for some scarce data. The functional analysis followed in the study was taken from a previous study which classified 5 functions of first person pronouns.

The findings of the study showed that Chinese and Greek students used *we* more while L1 English students used *I* more. The surprising finding was that all the students used first person plural pronoun more than first person singular pronoun. In order to eliminate the genre effect, the researchers limited the data to the particular genre and claimed that the reasons for the differences would be L1 culture, the language itself or the education rather than the genre.

MacIntyre (2017) aimed to describe how EFL writers use personal pronouns in their essays and to suggest a pedagogical approach to their teaching. In his study, he examined the personal pronoun use of 17 university students from Japan in their argumentative essays over a 14-week course. There are also qualitative data collected through interviews with the participants to discover the previous writing experiences of the students.

The results highlighted that the students used 'I' much more frequently. Some students were seen to have used no first personal pronouns while a few of the students used far more personal pronouns than their friends. The researcher attributes this variation to the essay topic and personal characteristics of the students. Another reason for this variation is claimed to be the writing experience of the students. When we look at the extracts from the interviews we can clearly see that all of the students were instructed not to use personal pronouns. However, although the students report so, it is interesting to see that they have used personal pronouns in their essays.

Çandarlı, Bayyurt and Martı (2015) conducted a study in Turkish context with the aim of analysing authorial presence markers in the argumentative essays of Turkish and American students. They compared the features of stance in L1 and L2 essays by Turkish learners of English with those in essays by monolingual American students according to Hyland's interactional metadiscourse model (2005).

The study revealed that students preferred more authorial presence markers in their Turkish essays than the English essays. The Turkish students' use of first person singular pronouns showed resembling features in their Turkish and English essays, which was attributed to the students' cultural background and previous writing instruction that discouraged them in using the first person singular pronoun in their writing. The students were reported to have stated that they were constrained by the thought of their being 'just students'

Khedri (2016) adopted an interdisciplinary approach to compare the use of authorial presence markers in a corpus consisted of 40 research articles (about 300,000 words) from various disciplines. The researcher looked at the frequency of first person plural pronoun use and the rhetorical functions of these uses.

The researcher reported that the use of pronoun use was higher in soft-texts such as applied linguistics articles. Soft-science researchers were claimed to be in need to ask for credit for their contribution to the field. On the contrary, hard science papers there were not that much explicit references. Among the four sets of data, the pronoun *we* was the most frequent indicator of explicit authorial presence.

Luan and Zhang (2016) investigated the use of first person subject pronouns in 200 English argumentative essays in Swedish-Chinese English Learner Corpus (SCELC). That comparative research found that Swedish English learners used these pronouns more than Chinese English learners. The Swedish English learners used more "I" while the Chinese English learners used more "we". Both groups preferred "we" more when compared to "I". The researchers of this study suggest that learners should be using first person subject pronouns in a proper way instead of avoiding using them to express and feel the responsibility for their own opinions. It was also suggested that teachers could cover in their classes why and how English native speakers use first person pronouns in their writings.

Another study analysed and compared the use of *I* in the argumentative writing samples of native speaking and non-native speaking L2 English learners in Korea (Chang, 2015). The researcher stated that the first person

pronouns have three discourse functions first person pronoun (essay commentator, experience provider and opinion provider).

It was found that Korean learners used first person pronoun more than native speakers of English in general. However, the pronoun use per essay was not higher among Korean learners. The findings of this study was contradicting with the previous studies and this was attributed to essay genres of the studies.

A master thesis written on the first person pronoun use focused on the author identity concept of Russian learners of English (Zolotova, 2014). She investigated the overuse, underuse and misuse of first person pronouns in English L1 and L2 writing. The main aim of this study is to contribute to the existing knowledge about writer/reader visibility in English L2 writing.

The researcher looked at the argumentative essays written by Russian students from 4 different corpora. The functional analysis of first person pronouns builds on the classifications by Petch-Tyson (1998), Herriman (2009) and Hyland (2002a).

The participants in this study used personal pronouns more often than Dutch and French (the frequency of 70.69 and 62.69 per 10,000 words respectively), but less than Finnish and Swedish (the frequency of 98.23 and 88.06 per 10,000 words respectively). As for first person plural, Russian learners are last but one, with only Swedish learners overusing the pronouns at a higher rate of 266.94 per 10,000 words.

This study confirmed that the 'we' perspective was dominant in L2 writing. In Hyland's (2002a) terms, Russian learners overuse the pronoun *I* in low-risk functions, whereas the pronoun *we* is overused in high-risk functions. Another finding of the analysis was that Russian learners overused the pronouns *I* and *we* as part of text-organizers.

The use of personal pronouns in academic discourse is a controversial issue in many studies. Some claim that personal pronouns are a key feature for creating a successful academic discourse (Hyland 2002a, 2002b; Tang and John 1999; Kuo 1999; Ivanic and Camps 2001). Others argue that such discourse should be objective and follow the conventions of Anglo- American rhetoric, which traditionally presupposes that interlocutors are not explicitly visible in written discourse (Spencer and Arbon 1996; Gong and Dragga 1995; Arnaudet and Barrett 1984). A traditional view of the problem implies that academic writing should be objective and there is no place for personal pronouns. Personal pronouns signal interaction and involvement with the audience when less attention is paid to the organisation of discourse.

Therefore, this study aims to show to what extent and in what ways Turkish EFL learners use first person pronouns in their argumentative essays. It is expected to shed light on whether the students follow the traditional Anglo-American rhetoric, which bans students from using first person pronouns in writing by showing the frequencies of first person pronouns in general and by classifying these uses according to the classification of Tang and John (1999). The native speaker comparison was based on the reports of similar studies on first person pronoun use of native English speakers. With this regard this study sought answers to these questions:

- How frequently do Turkish EFL learners use the first person pronouns (*I* and *we*) in their argumentative essays?
- In what ways do Turkish EFL learners use the first person pronouns in their argumentative essays?
- Are there any differences in the use of first person pronouns between Turkish EFL learners and native English speakers?

3. Methodology

Two learner corpora used in this study had been prepared in 2016 for an MA thesis. There are 78,413 words in the corpus, 37,969 words in the 1st year students' essays; 40,444 words in the 4th year students' essays. For the corpus, the essays were collected from the ELT Department of Anadolu University. To enrol in the program, the students are expected to get sufficient scores on national university entrance examination. In one section of this entrance exam, students are expected to answer 80 multiple-choice questions in a language test. The sections of the language test measure the students' vocabulary knowledge, basic grammar competency, reading comprehension, sentence completion, translation, and paraphrasing skills.

The students studying ELT at Anadolu University have two compulsory writing courses (Written Communication, Academic Writing and Report Writing) in their first year. The students learn how to write a paragraph, how to write an essay, essay types, and APA style in these two courses. The students also learn paragraph and essay writing in preparatory school. Therefore, the students are familiar with the essay type.

Students are required to get sufficient scores to be able to enter the universities. For example, in 2015, 418,598 was the minimum point for the ELT department of Anadolu University. The university entrance scores of the students are not calculated only from their performance on language test. However, by looking at their exam scores, it is possible to assume that students are more or less at the same language proficiency levels. That is, the students were not given a separate language proficiency test for the study.

Moreover, in order to study in their departments, students have to prove that they are at a certain language proficiency level. The Global Scale of English (GSE) is applied at the Anadolu University School of Foreign Languages. According to GSE, the exit level is A level. Students enter a proficiency exam after finishing A level. There are language skill sections (reading, language use, writing, listening, and speaking) in the proficiency exam. Students have to get at least 60 out of 100 to pass the preparatory school. Considering that all the students of ELT department had passed that exam, it can be concluded that they all have similar proficiency levels.

The datasets include 309 argumentative essays written by 144 fourth year and 165 first year students. They wrote an argumentative essay for the prompt below. The topic was chosen from the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS). That corpus is made up of essays written by native English students and it consists 324,304 words in total. As LOCNESS comprised of argumentative essays in general, argumentative essay and the topic below were chosen instead of other essay genres.

Write a well-developed argumentative essay on the topic below:

Technology and Imagination

Some people say that in our modern world, dominated by science, technology and industrialization, there is no longer a place for dreaming and imagination. Discuss your opinion about this statement.

Figure 1. Writing Prompt

The study was conducted in the second semester of 2015-2016 academic year. The 1st and 4th year students wrote the essays in their classes under the supervision of their teachers, in their writing and translation courses respectively. The students were informed clearly that the essays were going to be used to create a dataset and they were not obliged to write. The allocated time was 60 minutes and dictionary use was not allowed in essay writing. The essays were then converted into text (txt) files for the corpus analysis conducted in a software (AntConc.).

4. Data Analysis

In the present study, the first person subject pronouns *I* and *we* were examined in the database compiled from 1st and 4th year Turkish EFL learners. In order to answer the research questions, the first phase of the analysis was to find out the frequencies of these pronouns in the database. To do this, a software (AntConc) developed by Laurence Anthony (2014) was used. This software enabled to make search in the database and gave frequencies of the target pronouns in the database.

For the second phase, the instances with target pronouns were analysed and classified according to the functions of *I* in the argumentative writing derived from the literature by Yeon-Chang (2015). The functions she distinguishes base on the studies of Ryoo (2010), and Tang and John (1999). These functions were preferred because other classifications were mainly based on research articles and thesis and the current focus is on undergraduate students' writing rather than those academic ones.

Categories	Functions
Essay commentator	Introducing the organization of the essay Introducing essay topics/purposes Providing additional explanation
Experience provider	Providing factual experience/description Providing hypothetical experience/description Providing emotional experience/description Providing cognitive experience/description
Opinion provider	Adopting a certain position Providing the writer's idea/opinion/argument/judgment

Figure 2. Functions of *I* in EFL Writing

The *essay commentator* function resembles to *the architect* of the essay in Tang and John's (1999) study. We see the same function in Ryoo's (2010) study as well with the function of goal statement and guidance. In this role the reader is guided, and introduced to its organization, purposes and topics. It is regarded the least powerful among the three roles in terms of authorial presence, which shows the identity of the writer in the text (Tang & John, 1999).

The *experience provider* is the indicator of writer's own experience on a topic or it a piece of information about the writer. Providing information/experiences category of Ryoo (2010) coincides with this function.

The opinion provider substitutes the *opinion-holder* and *the originator* functions defined in the study of Tang and John (1999). With this role the writer states his/her position by giving his/her own judgements, arguments, and opinions. This role is vulnerable to criticism as it reflects the strongest authorial presence in a text (Tang & John, 1999).

The other target pronoun of the study is *we*. And this pronoun was analysed whether being *exclusive*, *inclusive* or *generic* according to Herriman's (2009) classification.

For the third phase of the study, the baseline data representing native English speakers' writing, were reported from Yeon-Chang's (2015) study. He used LOCNESS as primary data. LOCNESS contains essays written by native speakers of English studying at American and British colleges and it has 324,304 words in total. There are two components in the corpus, argumentative essays and literary-mixed essays. The researcher chose only argumentative essays to be able to control the genre effect and to make a direct comparison with learner corpus, which is also suitable for the present study. In his study Yeon-Chang (2015) only looked at the use of *I*, therefore, the results were not given in for the analysis of *we*.

The baseline data for the first-person pronoun *we* came from the study of Zolotova (2015). She used LOCNESS to compare Russian students' argumentative essays. Therefore, for this comparison, her reports were taken. The only problem with her reports is that she did not take only argumentative essays from the LOCNESS, she just used all the essays in it.

5. Results

In this section the results were reported addressing to each research question. For the first research question, the frequencies of the first person pronouns in the corpora were reported together with the descriptive statistics of the corpora. The first question was: How frequently do Turkish EFL learners use the first person pronouns (*I* and *we*) in their argumentative essays?

In order to answer this research question, the corpus was put into AntConc and the frequencies of the pronouns were noted down. As it is seen in the table below the corpus has 78,413 words in total, 37,969 of which come from 1st year students' essays and 40,444 of which come from 4th year students' essays (Table 2). When these essays were searched through AntConc, we found that the first person pronouns used by 1st and 4th year Turkish EFL students were close to each other. 1st year students used *I* 253 times and *we* 962 times. On the other hand, 4th year students used *I* 278 times and *we* 983 times. However, when we look at the table of frequencies it is seen that both student groups used *we* far more than they used *I*.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Learner Corpus

	Number of Essays	Total Words	Average words per student
1 st Year	165	37,969	230
4 th Year	144	40,444	281
Total	309	78,413	253

Table 3. Pronoun Frequencies

	1 st Year Essays	4 th Year Essays	Total
<i>I</i>	253	278	531
<i>We</i>	962	983	1945
Total	1215	1261	2476

For the second research question, "In what ways do Turkish EFL learners use the first person pronouns in their argumentative essays?" the instances in the essays were analysed. The reports are in two fold, first the results for *I* is provided, then the results for *we* is provided. As can be followed in the table, the students used *I* mainly to provide their opinions (Table 4). The essay genre's being argumentative may have led this because in this essay type the writers are required to provide opinions and persuade the reader accordingly. The expressions used with the first-person pronoun *I* were also listed below. It was found that most of the instances were with the verb *think* and with its synonyms. There were also other instances of stating opinion.

Table 4. Functions of *I* in the corpora

Categories	1 st year corpus		4 th year corpus		LOCNESS	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Essay commentator	11	4.3	21	7.5	61	9.4
Experience provider	32	12.6	43	15.4	348	53.9
Opinion provider	210	83.0	214	77.1	237	36.7
Total	253	100.0	278	100.0	646	100.0

Table 5. Expressions used with I

Clusters for First-Person Pronoun I
I + to be sure / afraid / aware
I believe / I strongly believe
I think / I don't think
I totally agree with
I agree
I wish
I doubt
I feel
I guess
I realize
I remember
I suppose
I say / I can say
I mean
I mentioned above
I partly/completely disagree
I used to be
I would like to

The instances of *we* were analysed and classified according to classification mentioned in the methodology part. The results showed that the students used *we* much more in the function of *generic*. This function somehow correlates with the most frequent function of *I* because it helps the writers to reason their arguments.

Table 6. Functions of *we* in the corpora

Categories	1 st year corpus		4 th year corpus	
	N	%	N	%
Generic	712	74.0	774	78.8
Inclusive	174	18.0	130	13.2
Exclusive	76	8.0	79	8.0
Total	962	100.0	983	100.0

For the 3rd research question, "Are there any differences in the use of first person pronouns between Turkish EFL learners and native English speakers?" In order to find out whether there is a difference two two-proportion Z tests were conducted for the first-person pronoun use, one for the pronoun *I* and one for the pronoun *we*. The Z test is used in comparing two proportions to check whether the difference between groups in frequency is significant or not. The statistics yielded a significant difference between Turkish EFL learners and native English speakers in terms of first-person pronoun *I* use. Therefore, it can be said that Turkish students differ from English and American students significantly.

Table 7. Z test scores for I

		Pronoun Use	
		Total Words	I-use
Corpora	Student	78413	531
	LOCNESS	149629	646
Total		228042	1177

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	59.701	1	.000		
Continuity Correction	59.227	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	57.416	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	59.701	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	229219				

The second Z test was conducted to find out whether there is a difference between groups in terms of first-person pronoun *we* use. It was found that there is again a statistically significant difference between Turkish EFL students and native speakers in terms of first-person pronoun *we* use.

Table 8. Z test scores for *we*

		Pronoun Use	
		Total Words	We-use
Corpora	Student	78413	1945
	LOCNESS	322444	935
Total		400857	2880

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4128.005	1	.000		
Continuity Correction	4124.997	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	3093.435	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	4127.995	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	403737				

6. Discussions and Conclusion

This study aimed to take the picture of first-person subject pronoun use in Turkish EFL argumentative essay writing. It is a corpus-based descriptive study as it shows the frequencies of the target pronouns in the essays. These pronouns were also analysed and classified according to the framework explained in the methodology section. The subject pronoun *I* was classified under three functions, *essay commentator*, *experience provider*, and *opinion provider*. The subject pronoun *we* was also classified under three functions, *generic*, *inclusive*, and *exclusive*. This study also sought answer for the question whether Turkish students differ from American and English students in terms of pronoun use. To be able to do this, two two-proportion Z tests were conducted.

The results showed that Turkish students used personal pronouns primarily as the opinion provider, which is consistent with the findings of previous studies conducted with other EFL learners such as French, Dutch, Swedish and Japanese students (McCrostie, 2008; Petch-Tyson, 1998), but not with Ryoo's (2010) study.

In Ryoo's (2010) study, the students used first person pronouns mainly for providing information/experience and giving opinions; and making claims were following the information providing function. Ryoo (2010) had looked all the personal pronouns in her study, not only *I*, therefore this can be noted as the difference maker. This finding is also not consistent with Tang & John's (1999) study, in which the representative and the guide function were more than the opinion holder function. This difference may be resulted from the essay genre of that study because they looked at explanatory writing. In explanatory writing, the writer does not show his identity as in the argumentative essay. That is, it can be argued that the essay genre is a strong predictor of first person pronoun use and first person pronoun functions in the writing.

In line with other studies on EFL students, this study also showed that the students relied heavily on the verb *think* while stating their opinions (McCrostie, 2008; Unaldi, 2013; Aijmer, 2002; Granger, 1998). It was not among the objectives of this study but when the instances with subject pronoun *I* were looked into, it was obviously observable. As pointed out by Petch-Tyson (1998), *I think* is overused in the sentence initial position by the learners.

Another finding of the study was that Turkish EFL learners used subject pronoun *we* more than subject pronoun *I*. It was also proven in the study of Petch-Tyson (1998) and Zolotova (2015). This study also confirmed that the 'we' perspective was dominant in L2 writing. Turkish students' using *we* more than *I* was the case of the study of Çandarlı, Bayyurt and Martı (2015). They attributed it to the cultural background of Turkish students and the writing instructions they had taken. It is known that the students are told not to use personal pronouns in their writing. Therefore, when the students need to use a personal pronoun they have a tendency to prefer *we* over *I* because *I* takes the focus and gives all the responsibility to the writer.

The difference between EFL students and native speakers is consistent with the other studies (Leedham and Fernandez-Parra, 2016).

It has been demonstrated previously that L2 students avoid from using personal pronouns in academic writing (Hyland, 2002a). When we look at this study, it can be implied that L2 learners still have an avoidance in using first person pronouns in their argumentative essays when compared to native speakers. This has been the focus of some studies before and it was put forward that the students have taken conflicting or inappropriate instruction from their teachers and textbooks on the use of first person pronoun (Harwood, 2005; Hyland, 2001, 2002; McCrostie, 2008). This sometimes leads students to sound unnatural and ineffective. As previously suggested by

Hyland (2002a) and Tang and John (1999), the teacher should raise the awareness of their students about the discursive usage of the pronoun according to genres, disciplines and discourse communities (Ivanic, 1998; John, 2009, 2010).

In this study, the questions are not based on judging students' personal pronoun use in their essays. The aim was to describe to what extent they used personal pronouns and in what ways they used these pronouns. These pronouns are, by all means, widely used even in academic studies although there are instructions on not using them. Therefore, this study can be regarded as a piece of evidence that students cannot avoid using them in their writing even though the argumentative essay genre restricts the writer. It also reports the findings of other studies conducted with native speakers, which claims that personal pronoun use is a fact in L1 writing and L2 writing.

The major limitation of the study was the lack of baseline data. In order to get over this limitation, previous studies reporting native speakers' writing frequencies were used. For further studies, I can recommend people to expand the analysis of discourse functions of the first person pronouns. It may also give some insight if other pronouns are studied and analysed in detail.

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