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Recounting and reflecting: the use of first person pronouns in Chinese, Greek and British students' assignments in Engineering

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Abstract

Chinese and Greek students are among the many international groups now studying at UK universities. While the written English of these groups has been extensively explored through the short argumentative essays comprising learner corpora, little research has been conducted on their assessed writing at undergraduate and Masters level. This paper reports on a study of Chinese, Greek and British student writing within the discipline of Engineering in five UK universities. Data is extracted primarily from the 6.5 million-word British Academic Written English corpus, supplemented by assignments from additional UK universities. The main aim of the study is to explore texts from students with different L1s and cultural backgrounds but within the same discipline and current educational system. First person pronouns were selected as a contained aspect of student writing for comparison, since these are a highly visible aspect of a writer's identity construction (e.g. Hyland 2002b), yet it is often claimed that L2 English students 'over use' these pronouns to the detriment of their writing (Lee and Chen 2009). Findings indicate that the Chinese and Greek students make greater use of *we* in their writing within Engineering than British students and the paper explores the various functions of this pronoun.

Keywords

Student writing; EAP; Engineering; first person pronouns; Chinese students; Greek students; British students.

Highlights

- All three student groups make more frequent use of *we* than *I* in Engineering assignments
- Greek and Chinese students make higher use of *we* than British students and British students make higher use of *I* than Greek and Chinese students
- The Greek students' use of *we* is far higher than the Chinese students'
- Chinese, Greek and British students use *we* for different purposes
- These findings hold true across different groupings of genre families

1   Introduction

Written assessment remains the principal way in which students are judged throughout their university undergraduate courses (Lea 2004; Lillis and Scott 2007). Given that success or failure at undergraduate level is likely to have a great impact on the lives and careers of individual students, the ability to write in the preferred ways of the academy (and thereby achieve success in written assessments and ultimately receive a degree) is of considerable importance. However, relatively few large-scale studies have been carried out on assessed undergraduate writing from L1 English students in the UK, and fewer still have been conducted on L2 English student writing, despite the recent rapid growth in numbers of international students in UK universities (HESA 2014). Two of the largest of these groups in UK universities are Chinese[1] students and Greek students (78,065 Chinese and 13,220 Greek students in 2013-14[2]). While the written English of these groups has been extensively explored through short argumentative essays, relatively little research has been conducted on the extended writing produced at undergraduate and Master's level. This paper reports findings from a study of Chinese, Greek and British students' assessed writing within Engineering in five UK universities, using data extracted from the 6.5 million-word British Academic Written English corpus, with additional texts collected by the researchers. The aim of the study is to explore texts from students with different L1s and cultural backgrounds but within the same discipline and current educational system.

The investigation compares the use of *we/I* in each student corpus. Findings indicate that while all three student groups make greater use of *we* than *I,* the Greek students' use of *we* is far higher than the Chinese which in turn is higher than the British students' usage. The paper argues that differences in usage of first person pronouns between L1 groups are acceptable to university discipline tutors, since all papers in the study scored 60% or higher (see 2.1 for details of the dataset).

1.1   Literature review on student writing

Student writing from L2 English speakers has often been researched in terms of what it lacks or how it is different from L1 English writing and this deficit perspective has come to dominate corpus studies of L2 English writing in particular. Such studies frequently draw on short, argumentative essays such as the International Corpus of Learner English (Granger et al. 2009) or the Cambridge Learner Corpus (Nicholls 2003). While the results of these 'learner corpus' studies provide useful insights into features of L2 English writing within these particular data sets, their findings cannot be unquestioningly generalised to other genres of writing, in particular to the extended pieces of literature-based writing required at undergraduate level.

A major area highlighted in the research into L2 English student writing is the use of language items which, in Granger's words (2004:132), are considered to be "either over- or underused by learners and therefore contribute to the foreign-soundingness of advanced interlanguage". This 'overuse', 'underuse' or 'misuse'[3] of particular high frequency lexical

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[1] While it is recognised that the term 'Chinese students' refers to a range of geographical locations, dialects and ethnic groups, the majority of students in the study are from the PRC and share Modern Standard Chinese (known as Putonghua in the PRC) as the language of education. Moreover, the contextual data in the corpus used in this study details only the student's self-proclaimed L1 (for many Chinese students this is simply 'Chinese'), and does not request information on perceived ethnicity. The group termed 'L1 English' or 'British' students gave English as their L1 and undertook all or most of their secondary education in the UK.

[2] Source: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1973/239/, last accessed on 09/02/16.

[3] The use of the terms 'over/under/mis use' are prevalent in the learner corpus literature though are cast as 'descriptive, not prescriptive terms' (Gilquin et al., 2007:322).

items and multi-word expressions is usually compared to an L1 English academic writing 'norm' of professional academic writers (such as the British National Corpus). For example, several studies have referred to the 'overuse' of vague, general nouns such as *people, things, man, woman, world, new, important,* arguing that L2 English students may not have the lexis required for greater specificity (Granger 1998; Cobb 2003; Hinkel 2003). Other linguistic features which have featured in the learner corpus literature include connectors (e.g., Field and Yip 1992; Bolton et al. 2002; Paquot 2010); informal language (e.g., Wen et al. 2003; Gilquin and Paquot 2007); and pronouns (e.g., Petch-Tyson 1998; Ringbom 1998).

The literature on writing by the two L2 English student groups in this study adopts a similarly deficit approach. For example, Milton (1999:226) reports that Chinese students tend to 'overuse' informal connecting chunks such as *on the other hand, (as) we/you know, in my opinion*; and Lee and Chen (2009) found that informal connectors such as *what's more* and *besides* and the first person plural pronoun *we* were used significantly more frequently by the L1 Chinese writers than in their reference corpus of L1 English student writers and professional writers. In her comparison of Greek students' writing in English in higher education to the writing of expert Greek academics, Koutsantoni shows that one of the student trends is to use "expressions of obligation and necessity and modals" (2005: 113), mirroring one of the characteristics of research articles in Greek. She also found that in Greek students' writing, the "density of emphatics is significantly higher than the density of hedges" (2005: 114) and that "Greek students appear to see emphasis as the main proof of knowledge and expertise" (Koutsantoni 2005: 117). While Koutsantoni's study clearly sees Greek student writers as falling short of the standard achieved by professional academic writers, she adds that this "could result from an unawareness of the different functions of various scientific genres and their conventions" (ibid.).

1.2   Research on pronouns in academic writing

While the way authors construct their identity in their writing is complex and multifaceted, we argue that the use of first person pronouns is a highly visible and measurable aspect of the identity constructing process (Tang and John 1999; Hyland 2002a). Thus, many studies have appeared in the past few decades which have explored the use of first person pronouns by academic writers. Some have focused on researching pronoun use in expert writing in research articles and/or other published sources, such as Flottum et al (2006), Harwood (2005), Kuo (1999) and Martinez (2005), whereas others have focused on the use of pronouns by student writers more specifically, sometimes comparing it to expert writing. These studies include Luzón (2009), Tang and John (1999), McCrostie (2008), Hyland (1999, 2001, 2002a), Petch-Tyson (1998), Ivanič & Camps (2001), Neff et al (2004).

Many studies have compared L2 English students with L1 English students or with 'expert' writers (usually the authors of journal articles). It is commonly claimed that L2 English students (including L1 Chinese and L1 Greek) make greater use of first (and in some studies second) person pronouns in their writing than L1 English students or in comparison with 'expert' prose and that this 'over-use' detracts from the effectiveness of their writing (Lu 2002; Cobb 2003; McCrostie 2008; Lee and Chen 2009). However, conflicting results were uncovered by Hyland (2002a) in his comparison of personal pronouns in 64 Hong Kong student undergraduate and professional research articles. Hyland found that the latter were four times *more* likely to use first person pronouns than were the student writers, though usage was largely confined to "low stakes functions" (Hyland 2002b: 354) such as signposting or explaining procedures. Hyland (2002b: 353-354) provides two main reasons for first person pronoun avoidance. On one hand, students "are taught not to bring their

own opinions into their texts". On the other hand, students feel "uncomfortable with the personal authority" that the use of *I* implies.

One possible reason to explain the avoidance of (the equivalent of) *I* in student writing in Greek and Chinese cultures may reside in the fact that both have often been defined as 'collectivist' (Shen 1989; Koutsantoni 2005; Pouliasi and Verkuyten 2012). By contrast, the UK is described as one of the top three 'individualist' cultures in the world (Hofstede 1980b). *Individualism* is the term often used to describe "societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family" (Hofstede 1980) whereas *collectivism* is used to describe "societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive groups which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (Hofstede 1980). Individualism and collectivism are not mutually exclusive but rather a matter of degree (e.g. Green et al. 2005): some cultures may typically show more individualist traits than collectivists ones and vice versa. However, individualism and collectivism can be helpful to explain why people do things the way they do them in certain contexts. In Hofstede's words (1980b: 50), we "are all culturally conditioned" and we "see the world the way we have learned to see it". For example, in China "'I' is always subordinated to 'We' – be it the working class, the Party, the country, or to some other collective body" (Shen 1989). This may be one of the reasons why there are studies which report that students (i.e. the focus of our study) from collectivist cultures, who are just beginning to familiarise themselves with the writing ways of academia in the UK, feel uncomfortable about writing their assignments using *I*. This can be attributed to the fact that "[f]irst-person pronouns are a powerful way of projecting a strong writer identity, and this individualistic kind of stance seems to clash with beliefs and practices that value more collectivist forms of self-representation" (e.g. Hyland 2002b: 354). However, much more research would be needed in this area and it would have to take into account that British students also have a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Academic writing conventions may differ from one culture to another and there are at least as many sets of conventions for academic writing as there are academic disciplines. It was traditionally claimed that the writing in technical and scientific disciplines in particular should "be as exact as the directions for firing a missile" (Britton 1974: 129), although the criteria for academic writing are much less prescriptive nowadays. In order to narrow the focus of this research, we compare written assignments at undergraduate and Masters level from three student groups (L1 English, L1 Chinese and L1 Greek) in the discipline of Engineering. This discipline was selected as we had a large volume of Engineering data available to us which was produced within the same timeframe and which achieved a 2:1 or higher. We focused solely on subject pronouns, i.e. *I, we*, because we did not find sufficient occurrences of object pronouns, i.e. *me, us,* in our collected assignments to make any useful recommendations or conclusions.

1.3   Engineering as a discipline

Technical and scientific writing "differs from literature in that more than one interpretation is unacceptable" (Britton 1974: 129). As Brekke (2004: 626) puts it, "[t]he gravitation toward objective *Darstellung* is seen in the abundance of impersonal constructions, particularly the passive, and in the relative paucity of personal pronouns, emotive adjectives, etc.". In practice, however, achieving total objectivity even in technical and scientific writing is very difficult because "almost everything we write says something about us and the sort of relationship that we want to set up with our readers" (Hyland 2002b: 352). This can be

applied to every writer in every discipline, from expert writers of research articles to novice L2 English writers of undergraduate university assignments.

The term Engineering covers a wide spectrum of fields and subfields ranging from Mechanical Engineering to Civil Engineering and Chemical Engineering, for example. As Leedham puts it, "as a 'hard' physical science, Engineering is concerned with cumulative knowledge and understanding in areas such as the design, building and improvement of structures, machines, systems and materials" (Leedham, 2015: 107]. Thus, in Leedham's words, "[t]he application of knowledge is ... of paramount importance" (ibid.).

Given the variety of fields and subfields within Engineering, it should not be surprising that students are required to write assignments in a wide range of genres. This is also related to the fact that Engineering "aims to produce professional engineers" (Gardner 2008: 27) and as such they have to be able to produce documents ranging from design plans to various types of report. However, for the academic purposes of some of the modules in engineering courses, students are also required to write more reflective pieces, such as essays for ethics modules or narrative accounts of their group project work (ibid.). This paper first examines first person pronoun use in Engineering assignments from the three student groups, and then narrows this to consider usage within individual genres within the discipline (see 2.1).

2   Data and methodology

2.1   A corpus of student assignments

The data for this research consists of student assignments in Engineering extracted from the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus (Nesi 2011). The 6.5 million-word BAWE corpus is the first widely-available corpus containing texts from undergraduate students across a range of disciplines from four UK universities (Coventry, Oxford Brookes, Reading and Warwick). As the volume of L1 Greek data is rather scarce in the BAWE corpus, we added more L1 Greek data from other available university sources at the time, particularly Swansea University. The additional data was collected following the same criteria as for the assignments in BAWE but focusing on Engineering disciplines only: work submitted at a UK university for assessment at either undergraduate or postgraduate level in an Engineering degree, individually authored and 'proficient', i.e. receiving the equivalent of the UK degree classifications of Upper Second (merit, awarded for 60%+ in the participating universities) or First (distinction or 70% plus). Jointly authored assignments were excluded. The dataset used in this study is shown in table 1.

	L1 English	L1 Chinese	L1 Greek	TOTAL
No. of texts	143	57	31	231
No. of words	434,822	185,121	85,929	705,872
No. of students	31	18	22	71

Table 1: Total number of words, texts and students

In contrast to the majority of previous studies of L2 student writing in English, the data in this study consists of authentic undergraduate writing and has the same external conditions of writing and collection as the comparison dataset of L1 English undergraduate students'

writing. All results are given as normalised figures to enable like for like comparison across the student groups.

2.2   Methodology: quantitative functional analysis

The first stage of the study was to simply count the instances of first person pronouns in the writing of each student group (see Table 2 in 3.1)[4]. All occurrences of each pronoun from each student corpus were retrieved through the software package WordSmith Tools v.5 (Scott 2014). Following this, we classified each of the approximately 1,700 occurrences of *we* and *I* into one of five functional groupings. The detailed, contextual information required to carry out the classification was generated through expanded co-text concordance lines and plot dispersions to view the range of usage within each dataset.

Devising a taxonomy of functions is a common means of discerning uses of first person pronouns (Harwood 2005; Mayor 2006; Hewings and Coffin 2007; Rai 2008; Harwood 2009). For example, in their seminal study, Tang and John (1999) employed six categories of first person pronouns: representative, guide, architect, recounter of research process, opinion-holder and originator. Later researchers have used similar taxonomies, depending on their investigative needs.

Five functional categories were iteratively developed, based closely on Tang and John's (1999) classification since this was devised for student writing and, for the most part, fulfils the identified purposes of the pronouns in the current dataset. However, since Tang and John's study was limited to 27 texts from a single genre (and just 92 instances of *we/I*), some deviations from their classification were needed. One important difference is the distinction made in this study between *we* and *I* in the classification. A further difference is that a 'reflective' use was added as this purpose of writing was salient in many of the BAWE texts. The resulting five categories are *we/I* as representative, guide, recounter, opinion-holder, and reflecter. These are discussed and exemplified below:

Representative

The first category is the use of a pronoun to refer to a group (hence excluding the first person singular); this could be an inclusive use pointing to humans or society in general (e.g. 'This proves that there is only so much energy *we* can extract from the wind at any particular velocity) or an exclusive use within a smaller discipline community, serving to 'signal shared disciplinary understandings with the reader' (Hyland 2005: 370) ('For example, *we* can use the red, green and yellow LEDs to indicate if the temperature is above or below 30°C.').

Guide

The writer as guide steers the reader through the assignment ('In this section, *I* will explain our group's original objectives and strategy'). Tang and John distinguish between 'guide' and 'architect', describing the former role as the writer appearing to stand apart from the writing, whereas the architect signposts the writing for the reader. In practice, these roles are difficult to distinguish and are amalgamated in this taxonomy.

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[4] While we are aware that pronoun use in both Greek and in Modern Standard Chinese and other varieties of 'Chinese' differs from usage in English and is non-compulsory, the students in this study are advanced users of English and recognise the obligatory nature of pronoun use in subject position.

Recounter

Recounting involves describing the procedures carried out within the task of an assignment and is often accompanied by past tense verbs ('firstly *we* measured out an area', '*I* have also calculated these factors'). Use of *I/we* to recount often occurs in sequence as a student reports one procedure after another ('*we* increased the load torque… *we* recorded …. *we* could achieve a table of data').

Opinion-holder

'Opinion-holder' merges Tang and John's categories of 'opinion-holder' (expressing a view) and 'originator' (presenting or signalling new 'ideas or knowledge claims') (Tang and John 1999: 29). Originating knowledge is described by Tang and John as "the most powerful role" (p.29) that a writer can portray, and hence is comparatively infrequent in student writing when compared to professional academic writing. Indeed it is difficult to find any instances in the categorized lines, hence potential instances are merged with the opinion-holder category (e.g. 'The peaks occur roughly where *we* expected them to…', 'In conclusion *I* would recommend acquiring the Peugeot.').

Reflecter

The new category of *we/I* as reflecter was added to demarcate pronouns used when students review the process of carrying out the work for the assignment or look ahead to future plans ('I was a bit worried when *we* did not get plenty of questions, and I felt that I had failed my group'; 'Consequently, I have begun to seriously undertake completion of extracurricular goals,'). Longer pieces of research writing often included acknowledgement sections ('Last but not least, I wish to thank my family'). Similar 'reflecter' categories are also used by Thompson (2009) and Rai (2008).

Difficulties in classification

During the classification phase of the study, we examined approximately 1,700 concordance lines (i.e. all instances of *we/I*) in order to determine which of the five categories was the most dominant. Inter-rater reliability was checked by an initial working through of lines by both researchers, double classifying of 1 in 10 lines as well as discussion of all unclear examples. Despite these checks, we often had difficulty in classification. For example, in the example below, the second instance of *we* was classified by one researcher as 'recount' (since it recounts the step) and by the second as 'reflective' (as the author looks back on the procedure and comments with the benefit of hindsight). After discussion and reading the wider co-text, we decided that the 'reflective' function was the more dominant.

(1) *Steps: we were separated into two teams and each team took different values of angles between the strings and the plate as well as of the weight of each roller .these two was all* we *needed to proceed with mathematical formulas (Text ID: 8256a[5])*

It is important to note that we aimed to ascribe each instance of a personal pronoun to a single, primary functional classification. This inevitably leaves some classifications open to question as a secondary function could often be construed. For the current purposes, however, a monofunctional classification provides the most coherent means of analysing the texts.

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[5] Each student is denoted by a 4-digit number and each text by the student number plus a letter.

3 Results

3.1 Overall instances of *we* and *I*

This section recounts the number of instances of *I* and *we* found in student writing across the different student groups and also classifies these in terms of functional groups. Findings normalised to 10,000 words are given in Table 2, with raw results in brackets.

	English Engineering	Chinese Engineering	Greek Engineering
We	10.17 (442)	25.01 (463)	51.32 (441)
I	6.09 (265)	1.57 (29)	5.94 (51)
TOTAL	16.26 (707)	26.58 (492)	57.26 (492)

Table 2 Occurrences of we/I in the datasets: normalised to 10,000 words (raw results in brackets)

The table shows that *we* is the preferred pronoun for each of the three student groups. While L1 English and L1 Greek students employ *I* to a similar extent, the Chinese students have a far lower usage. Here, it should be borne in mind that the total raw instances for Chinese use of *I* are just 29.

The most striking finding is the frequent use of *we* in the Chinese and Greek students' written work. The Chinese students' use of *we* is over two and a half times higher than the British students', and the Greek students' use of this pronoun is twice the rate of the Chinese students'. While high, these findings for the L2 student groups are notably lower than those of Luzón (2009) who reported that a group of 55 multi-authored papers by Spanish EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students of Engineering use *we* 103 times per 10,000 words, that is, double the occurrences of the Greek students here (though note that all papers in the current study are single-authored). In the present study, it should be remembered that all three student groups were submitting undergraduate and Masters written work of a high standard, as judged by their discipline lecturers.

Following this broad count of total instances of first person pronouns, the next step was to categorise all concordance lines into groupings based on the functions of the pronouns.

3.2 Functional categories of *we* and *I*

The 1700 concordance lines were examined and each placed into one of five categories (as described in 2.2). The resulting comparative categories are shown in Figures 1 (*we*) and 2 (*I*).

Functions of *we*

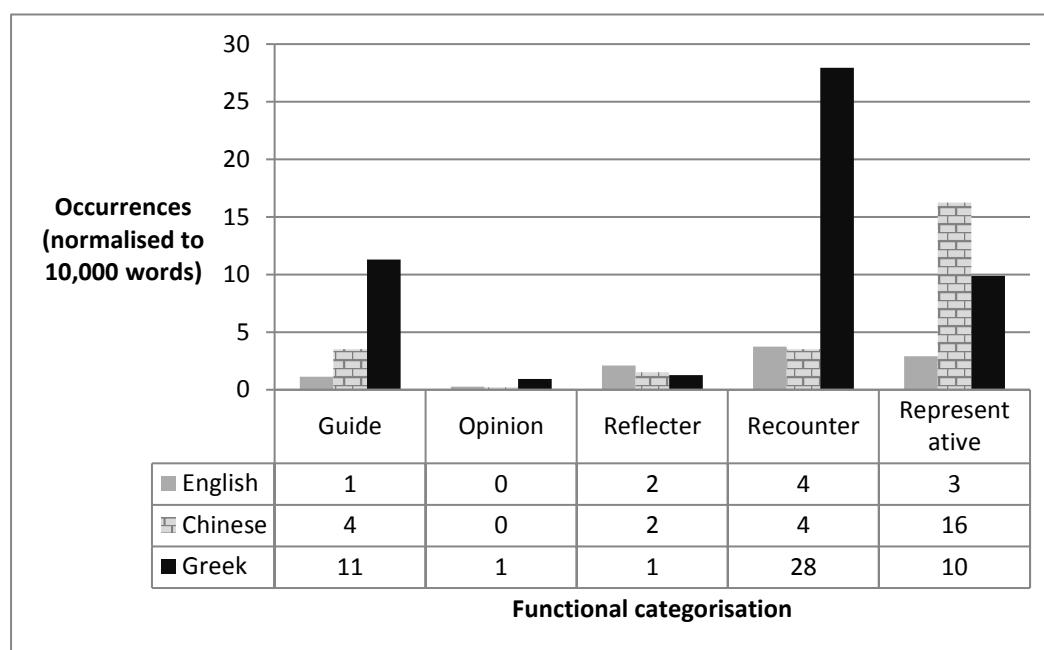|	Guide	Opinion	Reflecter	Recounter	Represent ative
English	1	0	2	4	3
Chinese	4	0	2	4	16
Greek	11	1	1	28	10

Functional categorisation

Figure 1: Functional categorization of *we* in the corpora

Figure 1 illustrates the high usage of *we* as guide, recounter and representative by Greek students, and the use of *we* as representative by Chinese students. We will consider each student group in turn.

Examination of plot view of the Greek data revealed that a single student, ID 8043, submitted four texts and together these texts account for over one-third of occurrences of *we* (176 of the total of 441 instances). However, even if this student's work were to be excluded, the Greek student data remains the highest in use of *we.* Examples (2)–(7) provide two instances from the Greek data of each of the three functional categories.

Guide
(2) *As we can see in the above figure, if Reynolds is below 5… (8043a)*
(3) *With these values calculated we can go back to equation (20) and find the value of… (8060a)*

Examples (2) and (3) steer the reader through the writing, helping us to focus on the relevant figure (2) or follow the calculations (3).

Recounter
(4) *we choose w in order to have a value for the period T more suitable for our calculations. (8043d)*
(5) Furthermore, with the same procedure, *we obtain the relations from the applied tensile load… (8013d)*

The recounter examples describe the procedures carried out by the student, usually reporting back on a group activity. In (4) the student reports a group choice taken within a series of steps in a procedure. Example (5) similarly recounts a methodological process.

Representative
(6) *We are asked to calculate an approximation of the numerical integration of the above-mentioned equation… (8020a)*

(7) *We want to evaluate compressive and tensile strength by testing cube, cylinder and…*
(8256a)

In the final pair of examples, each student is reporting back on group activity. In (6) the instance of *we* could indicate a group activity or it could refer to the class who are individually asked to perform the calculation. In (7), the student appears to be writing as a part of a group of students evaluating the strength of components.

Also marked in the representative category is Chinese students' use of *we.* In the examples which follow, this usage may relate to the student group working together on the module (8), the student group in the role of manufacturer (9) or engineers more generally.

(8) *We used the project management knowledge from this module to constitute the whole project process. (0159e)*
(9) *So, as an automobile component manufacturer, we should integrate to their supply chain management.(0168b)*
(10) *We know that transmission efficiency and transmission effectivity are two essential aspects to study MIMO system. (7002a)*

Functions of *I*

Use of *I* was similarly categorised with the results normalised (Figure 2).

Functional category	Guide	Opinion	Reflecter	Recounter
English	1	1	4	1
Chinese	0	0	0	1
Greek	2	0	4	0

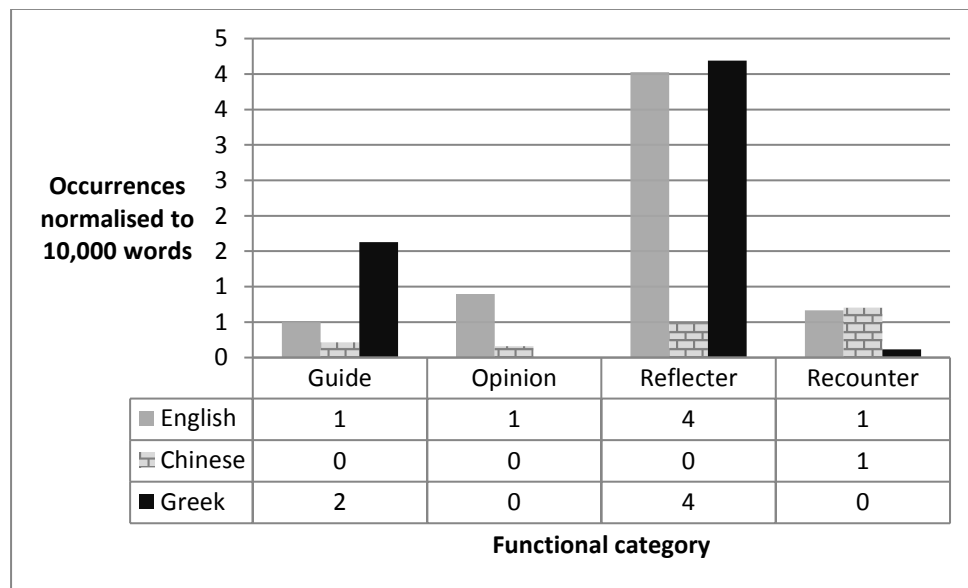*Occurrences normalised to 10,000 words*

Figure 2: Functional categorization of *I* in the corpora[6]

Figure 2 shows that British and Greek students make greatest use of *I* in the reflecter category. For the British students, this appears to be reflection on their development as engineers:

(11) *I would have to be independent and be brave enough to take risks. (0424c, 'reflective piece' from module 'Starting and Running a Business')*

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[6] Note that instances of *I* as representative (of a wider group) is rare in Engineering

(12) *I am particularly proud of (and interested in) the financial section of the plan. (0342c,*
    (module as in example 11))
(13) *At the same time as doing this I will be constantly increasing my proficiency in MATLAB.*
    (0341d, Data Analysis and Visualisation from module Modelling and System Dynamics
    Laboratory)

Examination of a plot diagram in WordSmith reveals that 0424c above and a further three assignments account for, in raw terms, 126 of the 175 L1 English reflecter uses of *I.* Use of *I* to reflect is also found at the ends of assignments as students reflect on the work carried out.

In contrast, no single Greek text accounted for more than 10 (raw) instances of *I* in total. This time, the first person singular is largely confined to disclaimer statements; interestingly, these statements are not limited to undergraduate or Masters level theses (14, 15) but are also found in assignments classified as other genres (16, exercise). For example:

(14) *I declare that I am the sole author of this dissertation. (8005a)*
(15) *First of all I want to say big thanks to my supervisor <anon> for the support and guidance*
    that he has give to me to understand and complete my thesis. (8011a)
(16) *Apart from where referenced, I confirm that I have not received help from… (8022c)*

While not a rigidly standard piece of boilerplate text, these declarations are clearly taken from writing provided to the students and should thus not be regarded as students' own words, though they still choose to include this text while others do not.

Clearly, the purpose, audience and style of writing of an assignment help to determine the way in which it is written. Following Swales' definition of genre as "a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes" (1990: 58) the set of 'student assignments' is too broad a category to consider without further division. In 3.3 we consider ways of grouping the texts in the corpora before then analysing the use of first person pronouns within these genre-determined groupings.

3.3   Genres, genre families and genre categories

To divide up the Engineering assignments, we followed the genre classifications described by Gardner and Nesi (2013), and outlined here. Gardner and Nesi first classified each BAWE text as a particular genre within a discipline in an iterative process of reading each assignment, classifying, and checking for consistency. The resulting discipline-specific genres were then grouped to form 13 'genre families' which cut across disciplines and disciplinary groupings for the purpose of permitting "ready comparisons across disciplines" (Gardner 2008: 20). For example the genre of 'product development overview' (found in Engineering) 'business review' (Business), and 'system/process overview' (Computing) are part of the genre family of 'explanation' in that they all "demonstrate understanding of the object of study; and the ability to describe and/or assess its significance" (Heuboeck et al. 2008:48).

Finally, Nesi and Gardner (2012) classified the 13 genre families into five broader genre categories[7] which recognise the functions required of university student writing. The rest of this paper draws on these groupings.

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[7] Note that Nesi and Gardner (2012) use the term 'social functions' where we have preferred 'genre categories'.

- demonstrating knowledge and understanding (**DKU**) - subsuming the explanation and exercise genre families,
- developing powers of informed and independent reasoning (**IIR**) - critiques and essays,
- developing research skills (**DRS**) - research reports, literature surveys, methodology recounts,
- preparing for professional practice (**PPP**) - problem question, proposal, design specification, case study,
- writing for oneself and others (**WOO**) - narrative recounts, empathy writing.

Thus, 'genres' are subsumed within 'genre families' which in turn are part of the larger group of 'genre categories'. Genre families within each genre category are related groups; for example, the explanation and exercise genre are educational groupings designed to display students' knowledge. In the genre category 'developing research skills', smaller genre families work towards the larger genre family of research report.

By applying Gardner and Nesi's (2013) classification of university student writing to our corpora, we can gain some additional insights into the data. The ensuing analysis points to trends in student writing, rather than conclusive facts, given the relatively small size of the corpora and the fact that categorising the data was at times a particularly subjective task.

Genre categories across the datasets

A comparison of the five genre categories across our three student datasets reveals that the Chinese texts contain proportionally more texts in 'preparing for professional practice' while Greek texts contain proportionally more texts within the genre category 'developing research skills' (Figure 3).
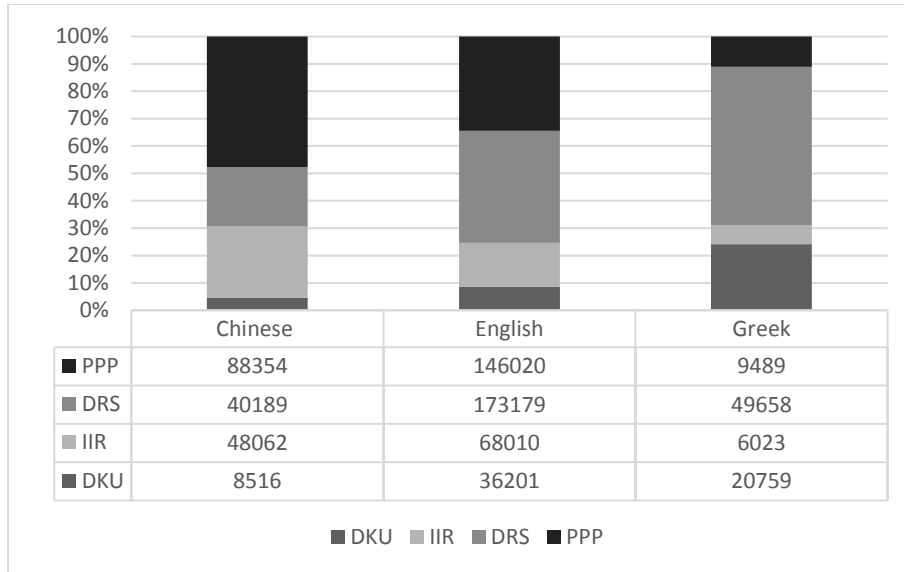
	Chinese	English	Greek
■ PPP	88354	146020	9489
■ DRS	40189	173179	49658
■ IIR	48062	68010	6023
■ DKU	8516	36201	20759

■ DKU ■ IIR ■ DRS ■ PPP

Figure 3: Data within each function of writing category per student group (as %)[8]

The remainder of this section features a comparison of data in these two categories (PPP and DRS) in order to reveal differences across the data sets when the assignment type is accounted for.

Preparing for professional practice

The genre category Preparing for Professional Practice (PPP) comprises problem questions, case studies, design specifications and similar genres which assist students in writing "more like professionals in their chosen fields" (Nesi and Gardner, 2012: 170). While this category is important in all disciplines, it is particularly relevant in Engineering as an applied, professional field in which students have to outline problems and design solutions.

A comparison of the use of *we* solely in PPP reveals low levels of first person plural usage across the Greek and British student data (totals of 3 and 7 occurrences respectively, normalised to per 10,000 words) with a much higher total for the Chinese data (29 occurrences) due to a spike in the representative category (Figure 4).

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[8] The category of 'writing for oneself and others' (WOO) only featured in the British students' writing and accounted for just 11,412 words of data. It is thus not included in the figure.

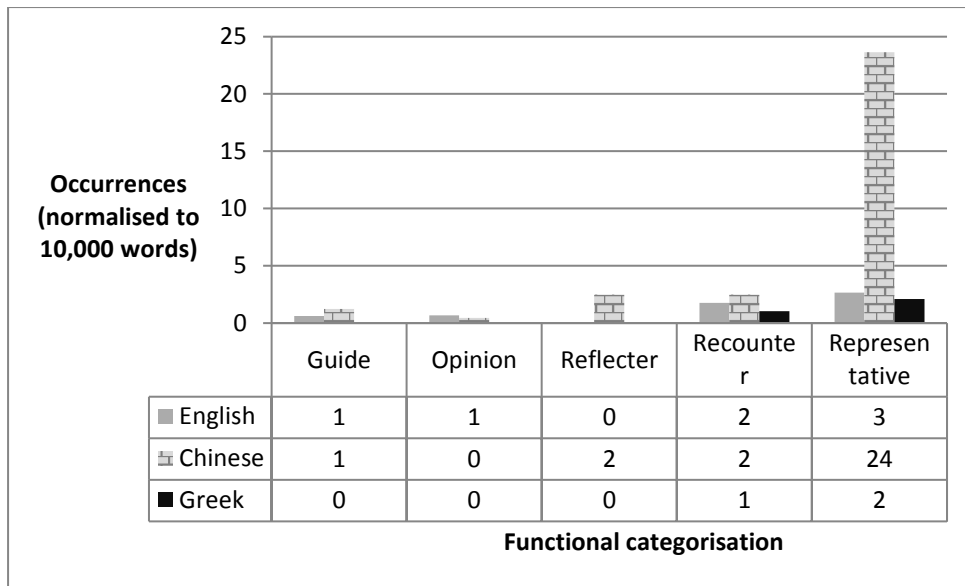| Functional categorisation	Guide	Opinion	Reflecter	Recounter	Representative
English	1	1	0	2	3
Chinese	1	0	2	2	24
Greek	0	0	0	1	2

Figure 4 Functional categorisation of *we* within PPP assignments

This high use of *we* as representative accords with the overall data for Chinese student writing, as shown previously in Figure 1, and occurs across the range of PPP texts. Examples (17) – (18) below illustrate the type of writing in PPP texts: students use *we* to represent their project group in a case study for a module called 'Logistics and Operations Management':

(17) *We also decided to adjust inventory level to adequate level, (0168a)*

And within a proposal for a module entitled 'International Joint Venture':

(18) *We both obey the Amazonia's law and the international law. Taxation: only one tax policy. (0223c)*

PPP assignments in Engineering help students to practise defining a problem, planning subsequent actions and suggesting solutions. These activities may be carried out within an apprenticeship genre such as a proposal or design specification, or may comprise an entire real-life case study. Figure 4 shows that Chinese students use *we* throughout this genre category to describe the group's activity. The Greek student data is limited in PPP, but the British students have a remarkably low level of usage of the first person plural. Examination of L1 English student texts suggests that instead of *we* to describe actions, decisions and group dynamics, this student group uses passive constructions. Text 0228e is a case study written by an L1 English student, evaluating a fire protection business known as 'Kidde plc'. The assignment contains no first person pronouns, but instead uses the passive:

(19) *All figures are taken from the Kidde-best file (0228e)*
(20) *On comparing this value to their peers it can be shown that this is far more than any of them.*

While text 6159g (L1 English) makes use of passive structures (21)-(22) and a single instance of *we* (23), this proposal assignment on intelligent buildings also includes use of the first person singular (24)-(25):

(21) *These documents can be transferred in a number of different ways,*
(22) *The kitchen shall be equipped with all the modern day appliances,*

(23) *With regard to the use of electronic technologies we can split them into four groups:*
(24) *The type of building I choose to build shall be a domestic property.*
(25) *But I don't want to compromise my main objective.*

While student 6159 appears more 'present' in the assignment than the previous L1 English author, they appear as an individual and not as a member of a group.

Developing research skills

As with PPP, the genre category of Developing Research Skills (DRS) is a pedagogic grouping. Texts within this category have the purpose of displaying to the reader-assessor that the writer is accomplished in either a whole research report or thesis, or in aspects of this: the literature survey, the methodology recount or similar. With proportions very similar to those in the overall corpus (see Figure 1), the Greek use of *we* as guide and recounter is far higher than for the other two student groups (Figure 5).

Occurrences (normalised to 10,000 words)

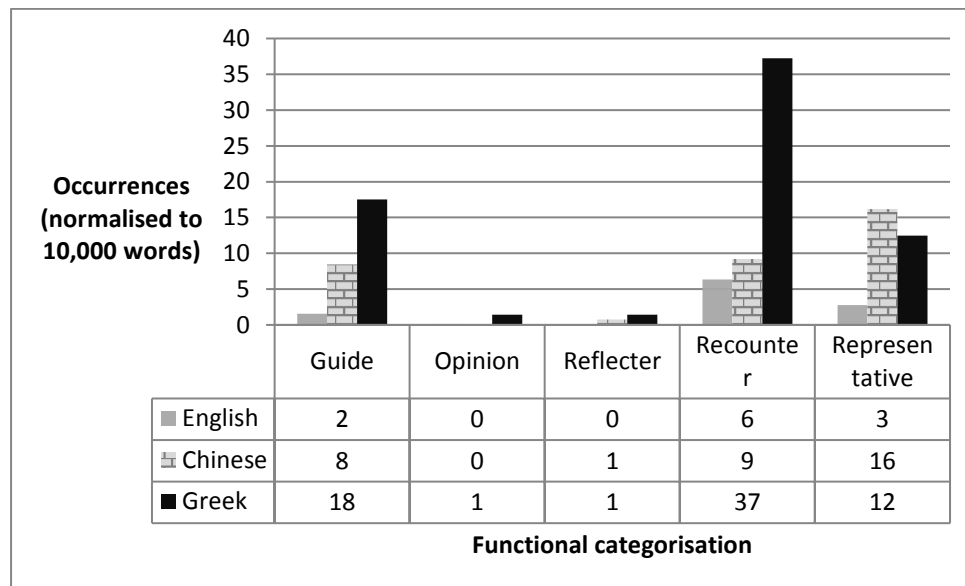|	Guide	Opinion	Reflecter	Recounter	Representative
■ English	2	0	0	6	3
▥ Chinese	8	0	1	9	16
■ Greek	18	1	1	37	12

Functional categorisation

Figure 5 Functional categorisation of *we* within DRS assignments

While DRS accounts for the majority of texts in the Greek subcorpus, the use of *we* within this category is still far higher than for other student groups. Examples for the high usage shown by Greek students (guide, recounter and representative categories) and Chinese students (representative) were provided and discussed in 3.2 (examples (2)-(10)). Here, the discussion focuses on how student writers carry out these functions of writing *without* the use of *we.*

Again, the L1 English writers make greater use of the first person singular to guide the reader through the text where the Greek and Chinese students might use the plural:

(26) *In this report I will construct mathematical models to predict the displacement… (0341b).*

As discussed in the PPP category, it appears that students not using *we* for particular functions make greater use of the passive voice for a range of functions:

(27) *In this report the past performance of the engineering company Renold PLC **will be analysed** through the use of financial techniques… (0329g – guide function)*
(28) *The three-phase induction motor **was connected** to a dynamometer (0028a - recounter)*

Where *we* is used, it is often used more sparingly. Writer 0347 (text e) announces

(29) *From investigation, we have proved that the oximeter picks up… (0347e)*

And continues, without recourse to *we,* in the next line:

(30) *It is vital to remember that the oximeter probe…(0347e)*

For the L1 Chinese students, an additional means of expressing their intentions without the use of *we* is achieved through lists. For example, in text 0357a, the writer provides the entire method (within a methodology recount) as a numbered list containing instructions:

(31) *1. Make sure the compressed air supply is connected… Adjust the pressure… Connect the Filter Regulator…*
2. To carry out the exercise, connect the pneumatic elements in the assembly panel by…
3. Switch on the air supply to check…. (0357a).

This removes the need for any pronoun to be used. Interviews with lecturers in Engineering conducted by Leedham suggest that a list within the method section is viewed as clear and concise (Leedham, 2015: 112).

The comparisons of student assignments reported on in this section suggest that, in terms of first person plural usage in our dataset, L1 appears to vary independently of genre. One possible reason for the high use of *we* by L1 Chinese and Greek students is their collectivist cultures, in comparison to the more individualist culture experienced by L1 English students educated in the UK. This theory is tentatively explored in the next section, and suggestions are given for further research.

4   Conclusions and future research

This paper has explored the use of first person pronouns in a corpus of Engineering assignments at undergraduate and Masters level written by L1 Greek, Chinese and English students in UK universities. We set out to compare how the differences in L1s and backgrounds might influence the way they write their assignments, using personal pronouns as a focus because these are a highly visible aspect of a writer's identity construction. Overall, we found that L1 Chinese and L1 Greek students use *we* more than L1 English students and that L1 English students use *I* more than the other two student groups, though all student groups make far greater use of the first person plural over the singular. These differences in first person usage remained when the data were limited to particular genre categories of assignment, suggesting that they result from L1 language, culture or education rather than simply being a feature of the genre.

More specifically, each group used the first person pronouns for different functions. Greek students used *we* mostly to recount and occasionally to represent and guide, and used *I* in very few instances and mostly to reflect. British students also used *I* mostly to reflect. Chinese students used *we* almost exclusively to represent and *I* mostly to recount. Both Chinese and Greek students made a significantly higher use of the representative function than British students. Overall, British students made sparing use of *we*, preferring passive constructions in cases where *we* might have been used. When British students used *we,* it was used as a recounter but marginally more frequently than the other categories.

When taking into account the assignment type, nearly half of the Chinese assignments were in the Preparing for Professional Practice genre category, where the use of the representative *we* stood out. The other half was divided between assignments in the Developing Research Skills and Informed and Independent Reasoning, with a smaller group

of assignments in the Demonstrating Knowledge and Understanding genre category. The Greek data largely belonged to the Developing Research Skills genre category, where the guide, recounter and representative functions stood out. As with Chinese students, British students made extensive use of the Preparing for Professional Practice category but unlike Chinese students, they made more use of the Developing Research Skills category, as did Greek students. Throughout the British data, the use of *I* is more widespread than *we.*

Our findings have pedagogical implications which we hope will contribute towards providing useful insights on teaching students from these backgrounds. These findings may be helpful to English for Academic Purposes tutors and to university lecturers, particularly in Engineering. Students from these backgrounds should be encouraged by lecturers early on to learn that the use – or absence - of first person pronouns does not appear to detract from the effectiveness of their writing for assessment in UK universities. Although in the past students were urged to write technical papers in an objective and impersonal manner, thus avoiding *I* and *we*, we have found that this is no longer the case when the assignments report on the work carried out by the students themselves. As all the assignments in our data obtained an Upper Second score or higher (60%+), this would suggest that it is possible for students from these backgrounds to succeed in this type of writing. We believe that it is important to recognise the different cultural backgrounds and values students bring to academic study.

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Appendix: Raw data

	Guide	Opinion	Reflecter	Recounter	Represent ative
▪ English (442)	49	12	92	163	126
⊟ Chinese (463)	65	4	28	65	301
▪ Greek (441)	97	8	11	240	85

Raw data for Figure 1: Functional categorization of *we* in the corpora