

*Review*

## A New Perspective on Language-Level Writing Instruction

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Aull, Laura. *First-Year University Writing: A Corpus-Based Study with Implications for Pedagogy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Print. 239 pages.

The relationship between composition studies and language-level approaches to writing instruction has a tortured history. Institutional dealings between departments of linguistics and English studies (where most research on and teaching of writing emerged) have been fraught since the two areas of study emerged. As composition and rhetoric began to take shape as a field, language-level strategies like sentence-combining, tagmemics (Young, Becker, and Pike), and generative rhetoric of the sentence (Christensen) flourished briefly and then vanished under the weight of the growing emphasis on process-focused writing (Emig; Murray) and the somewhat later attention to cognitive approaches (Bereiter and Scardamalia; Flower and Hayes). Theoretical developments in the field of linguistics and attention to ideal—rather than actual—users of language also made it more difficult to incorporate language-level approaches into composition studies. Still, some scholars, particularly those who work with English language learners and speakers of dialects such as African American Vernacular, have continued to advocate for a rapprochement between the two areas. Laura Aull's ground-breaking book offers a promising new direction for achieving genuine collaboration. More importantly, it provides innovative and highly useful strategies for teaching first-year students.

A mixture of the theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical, this book attends to the needs of students in first-year writing (FYW) courses, noting that they can benefit from understanding academic conventions and considering “how to foster students’ awareness of how language-level patterns contribute to the success or failure of written academic texts” (12). Aull surveys the landscape of FYW and its general lack of attention to lan-

guage-level instruction and traces the history of the relationship between linguistics and composition. She concludes this survey of the past by offering genre studies as a space where language-level approaches and composition studies can come together. Her rationale is based on recent genre study in both fields where language-level tools have been used to deepen understanding of patterns in academic writing.

Genre studies in linguistics has included analysis of recurring moves in the introductions to research articles. These moves include establishing a territory, creating a niche in that territory, and occupying the niche (Swales). Move analysis such as this is accomplished through reading multiple texts and identifying patterns that emerge. Another tool of genre studies in linguistics is the automated text analysis, the computer-aided identification of specific words and phrases in a corpus or collection of thousands of texts. This form of analysis can identify in quantitative terms commonly used words, or lexical items, as well as collocations, or the words that surround them. This capacity makes it possible to discern recurring patterns of words and phrases that appear in written texts, whether those of students or academic specialists. Such analysis can be used to determine language-level differences between writing produced by varied groups of students or between students and professional writers. Features such as hedging or qualifying language, boosters or intensifying language, personal pronouns, transitional words, and reformulations have been used in linguistics-based genre studies to describe varying abilities of student writers, to compare their writing to that of academic specialists in their field of study, and to identify differences between writers in various disciplines (Hyland; Lancaster; Aull and Lancaster). Computers' ability to identify specific words and phrases in thousands of texts illuminates patterns that usually remain invisible to individual instructors.

Rhetorical genre studies, the other approach Aull discusses, is more familiar to compositionists via the work of Carolyn Miller, David Russell, Amy Devitt, and Anis Bawashi. Here, the emphasis is on whole-text rhetorical features such as context and audience along with the social actions that texts shape and are shaped by. Aull notes that this version of genre studies has not attended to language-level features, and she argues that bringing the two together in context-informed analysis of language features can yield information that will improve teaching and learning in FYW.

The most important part of Aull's book, then, is devoted to demonstrating what analysis that combines language-level and rhetorical genre studies looks like and how it can be used in FYW classes to demystify academic writing for students. After delineating the terms and tools of language-level analysis of student writing, including illustrations of computer-generated

word lists, she describes her study of two collections, or corpora, of essays written by first-year students as part of a directed self-placement process. In the interest of full disclosure, I need to acknowledge that one of these collections was created by the directed self-placement process I instituted at the Sweetland Center for Writing at the University of Michigan; I shared it with Aull, my former student, but I had no role in this study or in any other aspect of her book. The other collection or corpus was drawn from the directed self-placement system Aull established at Wake Forest University.

As part of her contextual analysis of these two collections of student writing, Aull compares the two institutions, the circumstances of composing, and the prompts—all focused on evidence-based arguments—that were used in each case. Then she shows how she used computer-assisted analysis to examine the use of self-mentions in these two collections and to compare them with collections or corpora of writing from the Contemporary Corpus of American English, a source of expert writing (Davies). She summarizes the major findings of this analysis:

- (1) most FY writers use first person pronouns more than expert writers, regardless of whether personal evidence was solicited by the prompt, but even more frequently when it was;
- (2) the FY writers use first person pronouns to mark evidence in various ways, including ways that do not mirror how expert writers use them;
- (3) when the FY prompt both solicited personal evidence and posed an open-ended question—rather than inviting a direct response to a source text argument—the FY references to personal evidence are higher, and they appear to be at the expense of references to the source text or author. (62)

Aull usefully contextualizes these findings by showing, for example, how “I will” can be used to highlight personal experience in what she terms text-external markers (more common among students) or to draw attention to reasons or examples in the text which she calls text-internal markers (more common among experts). These distinctions show how a combination of language-level and composition studies analysis can yield information useful for composition instructors and their students. Similarly, she analyzes the relationships between prompts and students’ varying use of self-references and, based on the differences she finds, observes that prompts that invite personal evidence or include open-ended questions are not the best way to help first-year students learn to write the effective evidence-based arguments required in many college classes.

Another dimension of Aull’s analysis of these two collections of student writing focuses on issues of scope and certainty. Here she compares how

students and more expert writers use words categorized as hedges (e.g., generally, possible, approximately) and boosters (certainly, decidedly, always). These features, along with text-internal markers and text-external markers, have both formal or language-level and rhetorical dimensions because they illuminate the rhetorical stance taken by writers as well as the means by which they construct that stance. Aull's finding that less able student writers use more boosters while more expert writers use a mixture of boosters and hedges may not be surprising, but both the claim and the solid empirical basis for it cast new light on the problems student writers encounter as they attempt to write evidence-based arguments. Instructors who criticize students for being too general may not be consciously aware of the patterns of boosters and text-external markers that underlie that critique. Likewise, students may be unaware of these features in their own writing just as (I have found) they are often surprised by their own over-use of *to be* verbs.

The larger issue raised by Aull's analysis of hedges and boosters centers on questions about epistemic commitment. Like many writing instructors, I lament the number of first-year writers who have not yet learned to distinguish between stating an opinion and making an argument. Aull suggests that students may not understand that an effective evidence-based argument calls upon the language of certainty and caution. She suggests:

One way we might help clarify expectations of academic argumentation for students, then, is to discuss how writers balance certainty and possibility through patterns of hedges and boosters. Sharing findings like those in this analysis might be one way to do so, because they reflect three relevant trends: the value of tempered claims in academic writing, some features shared by FY writers that are not shared by expert writers, and some language-level options for constructing balanced arguments. (97)

I can imagine that making these features visible to students could help them understand the difference between stating an opinion and making an argument.

In addition to describing her analysis of student writing and suggesting instructional implications of her findings, Aull includes a chapter devoted to applications that instructors can take into their classrooms. One deals with hedges and boosters as markers of caution and certainty, explaining how they work, offering discussion questions, and providing examples of texts that can be shared with students. Aull's second pedagogical application focuses on markers of argumentative scope. She explains how text-internal, text-external, and personal evidence claims work, again including sample texts along with questions for discussion. Reformulation markers

constitute the third application, and Aull shows how they reinterpret information or express it in a different way. Here too she includes questions for discussion along with texts that illustrate these markers. The final application centers on transition markers, and Aull includes the same apparatus of explanation, discussion questions, and sample texts. The detail included with each application makes it possible for instructors to take these materials directly into the classroom.

The last chapter in the book argues that making visible language-level features like the ones discussed here gives students access to discourses of power, especially because effective use of these features is often required in high-stakes writing assessment. Aull also assures her readers that attending to language-level features does not preclude considerations of context; the two can be complimentary, and attention to both does not require extensive training in linguistics.

While not every FYW course emphasizes the evidence-based argument, college writing does require students to be able to do this kind of writing. *First-Year University Writing* offers an innovative and accessible means of addressing some of the most challenging aspects of teaching students to write effective arguments. It offers clear demonstrations of how computer-assisted analysis can reveal patterns of language use that make real differences in writing. It shows how instructors can make these patterns visible to students. It offers hope that the long-standing differences between language-level and rhetorical approaches to writing can be redressed.

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