

**Enhancing expressions of attitudes:
Achieving equity for international students in everyday communication**

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Abstract

International students from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) often have problems expressing attitudes precisely and effectively in English. Not being able to express what they think and feel prevents international students from adjusting easily to the host culture and integrating socially with the locals, including local students. Current ELICOS programs often neglect attitudinal language. This article suggests one way of enhancing international students' fluency and confidence in everyday communication through analysis of the language used in a narrative extract. Teaching and learning activities focus on scaffolding students' proficiency in using evaluative language (Martin & White, 2005).

Introduction

International students and language-related problems in everyday communication

Recently, increasing numbers of students from eastern and south-east Asian countries where English is not the means of everyday communication have chosen Australia to pursue their tertiary and postgraduate education (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). For these students, achievement of a high level of English language proficiency is as important as completing their degrees. The English proficiency level of international students not only underpins their academic success but also their sense of 'security' when living and studying in an English-speaking country (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland & Ramia, 2012). In other words, low levels of language proficiency affect students' psychological adjustment and their levels of acculturative stress (Rose & Martin, 2012; Thomson & White, 2008).

Apart from factors such as cultural differences and personality, inadequate language skills often create barriers for international students in communicating with local people and other international students. As a result, students with low levels of language proficiency often feel very lonely, and tend to isolate

themselves in their language groups. When the number of people in their language group is small, it is even harder for them to meet and mingle with other local and international students and to feel secure and comfortable living and studying in Australia.

Before enrolling in an Australian university, international students either undertake an academic module IELTS test or attend ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) classes to provide evidence of their English language proficiency. In both contexts, teaching mainly focuses on academic language in order to prepare international students for university study. The ‘outside the classroom’ aspects of language use are too often neglected in these courses, which is partly the reason why students who attain the required English proficiency level still struggle with everyday communication. Some of the difficulties international students encounter with oral communication include understanding spoken English and expressing themselves precisely and effectively in conversational settings.

This study addresses international students’ ability to express their attitudes in English effectively. While recognising the important role played by spoken communication, it focuses specifically on building the attitudinal language repertoire of international students.

Snapshot of Vietnamese students’ capacity to express attitudinal meanings

Many international students whose English proficiency test scores are higher than required (e.g., IELTS scores of 6.5 or above) still have difficulties in expressing their attitudes precisely and effectively in conversations about a range of topics. This claim is supported by a small study which was conducted among four Vietnamese students enrolled in postgraduate studies in different disciplines in two universities in Sydney. Among these four students, two had an IELTS score of 7.0 with the speaking score not lower than 6.5. The other two had an IELTS score of 6.5. To collect data for the study, the students were asked to participate in a guided casual conversation in English discussing three topics: cross cultural experience, language education and minority languages. The data were analysed for features of attitudinal language using the Appraisal Framework developed by Martin & White (2005).

Pseudonyms have been used in this paper to refer to the four students who participated in the study.

The Appraisal Framework

From the systemic functional linguistic perspective, language makes three types of meanings: ideational, textual and interpersonal (Halliday, 1989). Ideational meanings express the speaker’s or

writer's experience of reality. Textual meanings shape how the information flows and hangs together in a text. Interpersonal meanings are construed in the interaction between the speaker, or writer, and the audience, including how they negotiate their relationship by taking different speech roles and expressing their evaluative stance.

The Appraisal Framework relates to the interpersonal meaning of language. It is used to study how evaluative stance is achieved through language use. In other words, the theory focuses on how speakers and writers express their attitudes, including their feelings, their judgements of people's behaviour, and their evaluations of natural and social phenomena.

Attitudes, according to Martin & White (2005), can be organised into three categories: Affect, Judgement and Appreciation. Affect refers to resources for expressing different types of feelings such as happiness (e.g., 'I like it'), security (e.g., 'I was shocked'), satisfaction (e.g., 'It was my pleasure to do it') or inclination (e.g., 'I've been longing for home'). Judgement deals with resources for judging characters and behaviours in terms of *social esteem* and *social sanction*. Judgements of social esteem can be broken down into normality (e.g., 'It is very strange of him to act that way'), capacity (e.g., 'He's a clever man') and tenacity (e.g., 'He's determined to keep going'). Judgements of social sanction can be viewed in terms of veracity (e.g., 'He's a liar') and propriety (e.g., 'My landlord is a generous person'). Appreciation is concerned with resources for evaluation of significance (e.g., 'It was a remarkable contribution to our field') or the relative harm or benefit of phenomena (e.g., 'Tropical storms are always damaging'). Attitudes can be positive or negative and expressed implicitly or explicitly.

Speakers or writers can amplify the 'volume' of the attitudes expressed by up-scaling or down-scaling gradable items through the intensification of quality (e.g., 'He's very smart') or process (e.g., 'He looked closely at the book') or through quantification of number, mass or extent (e.g., 'It's a huge problem'). This phenomenon is termed *force*.

Attitudes can also be amplified by softening or sharpening non-gradable items such as 'friend', as in 'He's a real friend'. This phenomenon is termed *focus*. Resources for amplifying Attitude are categorised using the system of Graduation.

An Attitude and Graduation system within the Appraisal Framework illustrating basic choices of meanings is presented in Figure 1 on the following page. A detailed representation of appraisal choices can be found in Martin & White (2005).

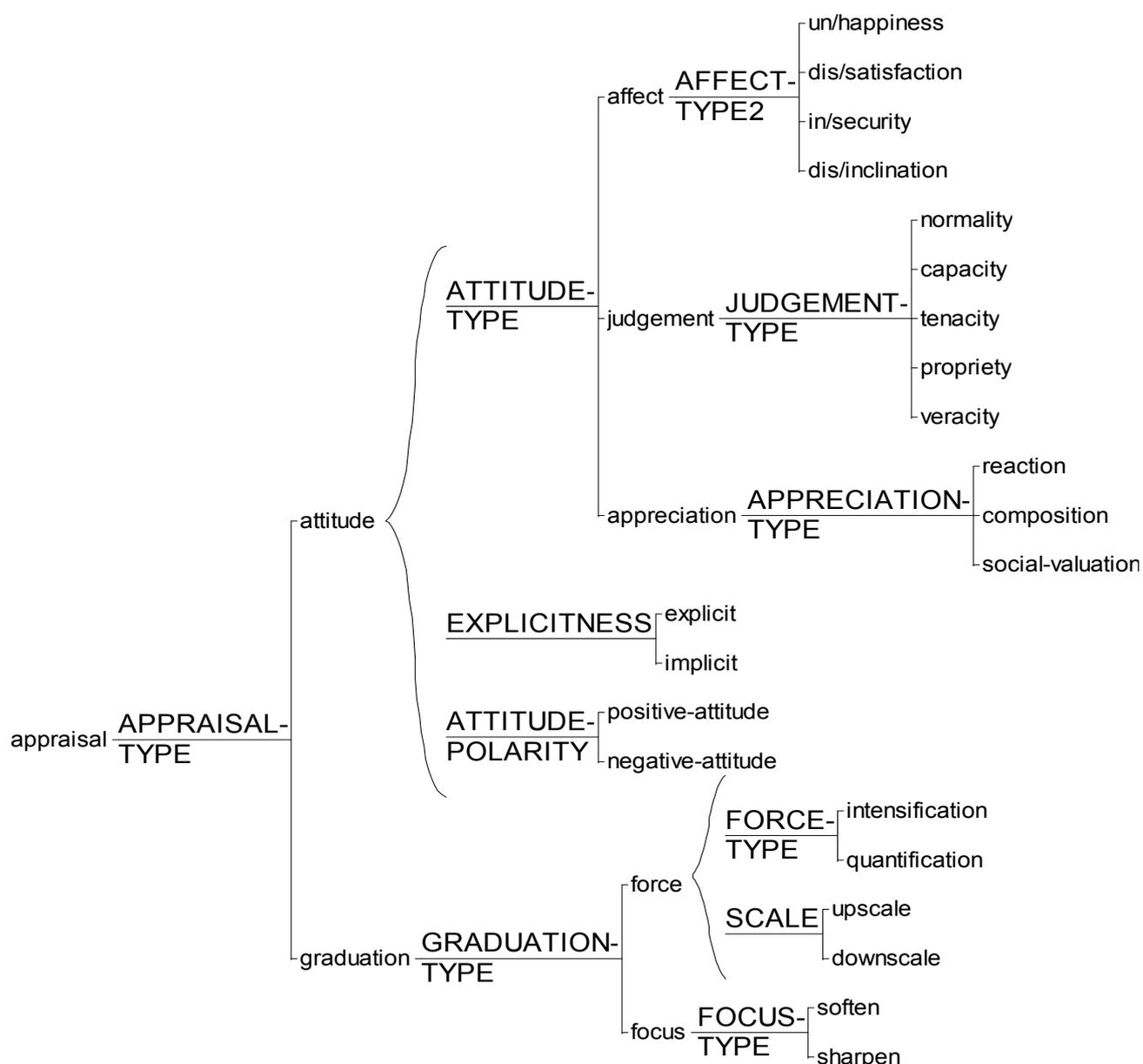


Figure 1 – The system of Attitude and Graduation within the Appraisal Framework
(adapted from Martin & White, 2005)

Findings from the study revealed that, although the participants met the academic language proficiency requirements, their attitudinal language repertoires were still very limited. When expressing attitudes explicitly, their language was limited to very basic *core meaning* vocabulary such as ‘good’ (e.g., ‘My Korean was not good’), ‘nice’ (e.g., ‘My teacher was very nice’) and ‘kind’ (e.g., ‘People there were very kind’). In addition, these words were often used repeatedly throughout their conversation. These attitudes were amplified, but again the resources used were limited. The main category of Graduation the participants used was Intensification (rather than Quantification), which was realised by isolated grammatical items (e.g., ‘very’ and ‘really’) rather than other resources such as infused manner lexical items (e.g., ‘smash’, ‘gigantic’). Table 1 presents a snapshot of the use of

evaluative language in the speech of Dai, one of the participants whose English proficiency test score was IELTS 7.0.

Dai: ... and brought me to the university. And what I could find was that the atmosphere was very very clean and they have very big roads and their infrastructure is very good, very impressive. When I went to the university, another *impressive* thing is that the uni has a very big main gate and I think the designer followed European and it looks very very marvelous and also the campus, very big campus.

Table 1 – A snapshot of the participant’s evaluative language use

In the extract in Table 1, Dai was asked for his impressions of living overseas. His attitude towards ‘the university’ was quite positive. However, his language of appreciation was limited to a few very basic words such as ‘big’, ‘good’ and ‘clean’. The word ‘big’ in particular was used repeatedly, three times within a very short excerpt. A non-core meaning word, ‘impressive’, was also used repeatedly, twice in this instance. The only means Dai used to amplify attitude was the isolated grammatical item ‘very’. This is an illustration of the participant’s lack of language resources for expressing attitudinal meaning.

From the findings of the pilot study, it appears that international students with high English proficiency test scores like Dai still need language support in everyday communication in order to express their feelings and opinions precisely and effectively. Current ELICOS programs do not take this into account. It is important that ELICOS programs adequately prepare students with language for everyday communication beyond academic contexts. Enhancing students’ ability to express their attitudes effectively should be included in ELICOS programs because, when they are unable to do this, international students are disadvantaged in many ways. Furthermore, the teaching of evaluative language lays a foundation for students to use such language in their future studies.

To demonstrate analytical and critical thinking in persuasive and literary texts, as required in the Western academic tradition, students need to be equipped with evaluative language resources. One way to include the study of evaluative language in ELICOS programs is to focus on narratives as a starting point for raising students’ awareness about, and later their use of, this aspect of language.

Raising awareness of evaluative language: Reading narratives

Narrative texts provide a useful context for teaching and learning about evaluative language because they show how attitudes can be expressed in written language, through the voice of the narrator, and in spoken language in the conversations between characters.

Narratives are stories that entertain and educate. In narratives, complications occur in the lives of one or more characters and these complications are resolved (Martin & Rose, 2007; Rothery & Stenglin 1997; Rose & Martin 2012). In a narrative, a reader is invited to engage with the characters from two perspectives: ‘empathy’ and ‘discernment’. According to Macken-Horarik, empathy is the ‘emotional solidarity with or understanding of the motives of a given character’ while discernment is the ‘adjudication of the ethical values adopted by a given character’ (Macken-Horarik, 2003: 286-287). In other words, these terms refer to the ways language is used in narratives so readers ‘feel with’ a character (empathy) or ‘stand over’ a character to judge their behaviours in terms of morality or ethics (discernment). These ways of engaging readers are achieved through the use of evaluation realised by attitudinal language.

The structure of a narrative often comprises five stages: orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution and coda (Martin & Rose, 2007; Rothery & Stenglin 1997; Rose & Martin 2012). In a narrative, evaluation can occur at any point and in any form (Carter, 1998). It can be expressed through comments made by the narrator or the characters (e.g., ‘This was the strangest feeling’) or it can be implicit in non-verbal responses reacting to the ongoing events (e.g., ‘I never prayed to God so fast’). Evaluation can also be part of characterisation, where what and how characters feel, say and do reflects the personality of the characters, and invites the empathy or discernment of readers.

The use of evaluative language in narrative is illustrated in an extract from the novel *The Call of the Wild* written by Jack London and first published in 1903. *The Call of the Wild* is a story about dramatic changes in the life of a dog named Buck. The story is set in North America during the Klondike gold rush which occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, a time when sled dogs were in high demand. After Buck, a domesticated dog, is stolen from his master, he is sold as a sled dog to work in the Yukon gold fields. The lessons he learns from the struggle to survive and challenges from other dogs, humans and nature lead him to follow his natural instincts – or the ‘call of the wild’ – and he becomes a leader of the wild dog pack. The chosen extract (see Appendix) occurs at the beginning of the complication stage of this novel when Buck, the dog who is the ‘hero’ of the story, has just been stolen from his home in California. The extract depicts his reaction to being snatched away from his loving master. The way the storyteller describes Buck’s reactions reveals his contrasting attitudes. From his master Buck had learned to trust humans but this contrasts with his reaction to the cruelty of his kidnapper.

A summary of the resources used in the extract to realise Buck’s attitudes is outlined in Table 2. Buck’s attitudes are depicted both explicitly and implicitly, coupling with resources for amplifying his attitudes. In the table, all underlined words are evaluative language realising Attitudes, with ‘Aff’

standing for Affect and ‘Jud’ for Judgement. Explicit attitudes are in plain font, and implicit attitudes are in *italics*. Positive attitudes are marked with a plus sign (+), and negative attitudes are marked with a minus sign (-). Graduation resources are in **bold**. The up-scaling volumes are marked with an upward arrow (↑), and the down-scaling volumes are marked with a downward arrow (↓).

| Text | Primary target of evaluation | Attitudinal terms | Graduation resources |
|--|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Buck had (1) <u>accepted</u> the rope | Buck | (1): (+) Aff: Explicit security/trust | ‘outreached’ Force: ↑ • intensification • infused manner lexical item ‘menacingly’ Force: ↑ • intensification • infused manner lexical item ‘merely’ Force: ↓ • intensification • isolated grammatical item |
| with (2) <i>quiet dignity</i> . | | (2): (+) Jud: Implicit normality | |
| To be sure, (3) [<i>it was an unwonted performance</i>]: | | (3): (-) Aff: Implicit insecurity/distrust | |
| but he had learned to (4) <u>trust</u> in men he knew, | | (4): (+) Aff: Explicit security/trust | |
| and (5) [<i>to give them credit</i>] | | (5): (+) Aff: Implicit security/trust | |
| for a (6) <u>wisdom</u> | Human | (6): (+) Jud: Explicit capacity | |
| that (7) outreached his own. | | (7): (+) Jud: Explicit capacity | |
| But when the ends of the rope were placed in the (8) <i>stranger’s</i> hands | Buck | (8): (-) Aff: Implicit insecurity/distrust | |
| he (9) <u>growled menacingly</u> . | | (9): (-) Aff: Explicit unhappiness/antipathy | |
| He had merely intimated his (10) <u>displeasure</u> , | | (10): (-) Aff: Explicit dissatisfaction | |
| in his (11) <u>pride</u> | | (11): (+) Jud: Explicit normality | |
| (12) [<i>believing that to intimate was to command</i>]. | (12): (+) Jud: Implicit capacity | | |
| But to his (13) <u>surprise</u> | Human | (13): (-) Aff: Explicit insecurity | |
| (14) [<i>the rope tightened around his neck, shutting off his breath</i>]. | | (14): (-) Jud: Implicit impropriety | |

Table 2 – Resources for realising Buck’s attitudes

As shown in Table 2, Appraisal items are woven into the short excerpt in a particular pattern. The building of Buck’s character begins by displaying his trust in humans, then his distrust, but later trust again. These contrasting feelings are realised explicitly by lexical items such as ‘accepted’ (trust), and implicitly through the choice of ideational meaning such as ‘give them credit’ (trust) and ‘an unwonted performance’ and ‘stranger’ (distrust). However, the distrust Buck soon develops initiates a

series of feelings of unhappiness expressed explicitly through words such as ‘growled’ and ‘displeasure’. Buck’s disillusionment is revealed when the creature he used to trust turns out to be brutal and merciless towards him. The merciless behaviour is implicitly expressed through the choice of ideational meaning contained in the description of how ‘the rope tightened around his neck, shutting off his breath’. Buck’s attitudes are amplified by the deployment of Force for Intensification. The attitudes are up-scaled by the use of infused manner lexical items ‘outreached’ and ‘menacingly’, and down-scaled by the grammatical item ‘merely’.

Enhancing the use of evaluative language: Writing narratives

Writing narratives prepares students for using evaluative language in authentic contexts. There are several things a teacher can do to build up gradually students’ capacity to use this aspect of language. Firstly, to practise recognising evaluative resources, students can be asked to read a short narrative and to find words or groups of words which reveal how the writer wants readers to evaluate characters. They can organise the evaluative resources they find using a grid such as the one in Table 3 (Feez & Joyce, 1998: 32).

| Character | Physical qualities | Personal qualities | Thoughts and feelings | Action | Overall attitude |
|------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| Buck | | pride | trust | ‘accept’ give them credit | positive |
| The two men | none given | wisdom merciless | | ‘(the rope) tightened (around his neck), shutting off (his breath)’ | negative |

Table 3 – Recognition of evaluative language in narratives

To practise producing evaluative language, students can be asked to retell the story, taking the opposite view from the author, first in spoken, then in written language (Feez & Joyce, 1998). To move the activity towards a less controlled and more communicative task, students can be asked to transform a character’s thoughts and feelings into monologues or dialogues. With the excerpt used in this article, for example, students can be asked to imagine that Buck could speak and to think about what he would say when he lost his trust in humans. The monologues and dialogues can be the basis of performances in which students add paralinguistic features like intonation, voicing and facial expressions.

In more authentic situations, students can be given a scenario (e.g., a short film) before being asked to say what they feel about the characters and explain why. This activity can involve students in both speaking and writing. To produce language features closer to an everyday spoken context, a more

communicative activity can be designed for students. For example, students can be asked to read or view a news story about a current event before they express their opinions about that event. Many more activities could be designed for students, shifting focus from recognition to production, and from controlled classroom practice to more authentic communicative contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, enhancing international students' ability to express their attitudes effectively provides them with the interpersonal linguistic resources they need to interact with the local community. This can contribute to equitable personal and social outcomes for international students living and studying in an English speaking country. Understanding how evaluative language is used in narratives helps students to build their evaluative language repertoire, and to use this repertoire in real life contexts. The Appraisal Framework is a very useful toolkit which teachers and students can use to achieve this goal. Using this toolkit to teach about the use of evaluative language in narratives can be a valuable starting point for this challenging work.

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Appendix

Extract from *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London

Buck had accepted the rope with quiet dignity. To be sure, it was an unwonted performance: but he had learned to trust in men he knew, and to give them credit for a wisdom that outreached his own. But when the ends of the rope were placed in the stranger's hands, he growled menacingly. He had merely intimated his displeasure, in his pride believing that to intimate was to command. But to his surprise the rope tightened around his neck, shutting off his breath. (1903: 17)

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