

# Voice features in academic texts – a review of empirical studies

## *Abstract*

The term voice is frequently used in current writing research. This review gives an overview of empirical studies which aimed to identify voice features in academic texts written by students and/or professional writers. The purpose of this article is to show how the understanding of voice and the aims and approaches used in the studies are intertwined. Many studies build on Hyland's (2008) interactional model which has contributed to insights into voice-related issues in academic writing. However, the overemphasis on linguistic features, such as the use of first person pronouns, entails the risk that research on voice ignores content-related features that might be more relevant in the construction of voice. In addition, this review emphasizes the need to relate voice features to the specific context where the writing occurs. The reader-based approach used in the studies by Matsuda and Tardy (Matsuda & Tardy, 2007; Tardy & Matsuda, 2009) or the combination of different methodological tools, as used by Dressen-Hammouda (2014), allows taking into account contextual aspects such as the insider knowledge of the disciplinary community and/or the genre, thus demonstrating how the writer's voice is always embedded in ways of knowledge making and writing traditions.

Keywords: academic writing, voice features, levels of voice, contextual aspects, co-constructing of voice

## **1. Introduction**

The term voice is frequently used in writing research and in writing pedagogy. Researchers are investigating voice and voice-related issues, teachers are trying to 'teach voice', and students and other writers in academic settings are struggling to demonstrate their voices in their writing. During the last decades there have been an increasing number of scientific articles which discuss and/or do comprehensive research on voice. However, the use of the term has led to confusion, not only in writing pedagogy and in textbooks for composition, as Bowden (1995) demonstrated, but also in writing research. Both previous and newer writing studies have pointed out that the term voice is diffuse and problematic, and used to "mean almost anything" (Elbow 1994 in Hirvela & Belcher, 2001, p. 84). The term is understood and used in different ways and in different contexts, such as writing at school and writing in higher education. In some research on English as a Second Language (ESL), the term voice is used to take up issues of power, accusing Western writing culture of favoring an individualized voice (Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Stapleton, 2002); however, these discussions about voice are often limited to the use of 'I' and the presence of the writer in the text. The confusion in the discussion about the importance of voice is not only that the term voice is understood in different ways, but that some researchers take a common understanding for granted and fail to clarify their interpretation of the term.

Tardy (2012) describes voice as "a somewhat controversial concept in academic writing" that contributes to "scholarly disputes over the role it should play in the academic writing classroom" (p.

34). Sperling and Appleman (2011, p.71) note that some researchers are apologetic about using the term. While some writing researchers criticize the “overemphasis on voice” (Stapleton, 2002, p. 188) in writing research and pedagogy, others point out its usefulness, although acknowledging the problems tied to it (Lillis, 1997; Phan & Baurain, 2011; Yancey, 1994).

One reason for different meanings of voice is that the meanings are based on different theoretical concepts and different research interests: “The recent literature on academic writing shows an open discussion about the meaning and importance of the construct of academic voice which varies according to the perspective adopted” (Castelló, Iñesta, Pardo, Liesa, & Martínez-Fernández, 2012, p. 98). Discrepancies in the understanding of the concept voice are, for example, visible in the articles by Stapleton and Helms-Park (2008) and Matsuda and Tardy (2008) in which they respond to each other’s points of view: Whereas Helms-Park and Stapleton (2003; 2008) are concerned with ‘individualized voice’, Matsuda and Tardy (2007; 2009) regard voice as socially constructed, emphasizing the importance of the reader in the construction of voice.

The different meanings or understandings of voice will influence the questions the researcher asks and the methods s/he uses in empirical studies; these will have an effect on the results. While many studies have used text analysis to identify certain features of voice in academic texts, other studies have used interviews/talk about texts to focus on thoughts and interpretations of writers’ struggles with voice in academic writing (e.g. Ivanič, 1995, 1998; Lillis, 1997, 2009). The latter studies often use an ethnographic approach in order to understand voice-related issues in student writing. Ethnographic studies are often related to *academic literacies* research where the focus is on dimensions such as power relations and identity issues which give valuable insight into aspects surrounding student writing. Lillis and Scott (2007, p. 21) emphasize the importance of academic literacy research, but recognize that ethnographic approaches can obstruct detailed analysis of texts.

While acknowledging the importance of the context in which writing occurs, the purpose of this review is to highlight studies that aimed to identify features of voice through analysis of texts, and thus raise consciousness about how the presuppositions about voice, the questions raised, the data and the methods used in the analysis of the data have an impact on what we (can) find about voice. Thus, this review does not aim to arrive at a definition of voice but to show how different approaches and methods in empirical research contribute to different aspects and understandings of voice.

Although parts of the complex field of research on voice have already been reviewed (Bowden, 1995; Correa, 2009; Javdan, 2014; Prior, 2001; Sperling & Appleman, 2011; Tardy, 2012; Yancey, 1994), no review has systematically presented the contributions that analyses of texts have made to our understandings of voice. The focus of previous reviews has been on theoretical perspectives that have contributed to different concepts of voice. Bowden (1995) and Correa (2009), for example, reviewed the use of the term voice from a writing pedagogy perspective. Bowden (1995, p. 174) analyzed composition textbooks in the 1960s and 1970s, presupposing that textbooks influence most students’ and teachers’ knowledge and understanding of writing theory and pedagogy. Emphasizing voice as a metaphor, he shows how voice is described and understood in the textbooks. Teaching was also the focus of Correa (2009) in her review in which she addressed the problems of students who participate in English as a Second Language (ESL)/English as a Foreign Language (EFL) academic writing courses. She drew historical lines as she described and discussed “how notions of

academic writing, text, and voice have changed over time and how these changes have influenced (ESL) and (EFL) writing approaches and methodologies” (Correa, 2009, p. 103).

While Bowden and Correa focused on voice related to writing pedagogy, Prior (2001), Tardy (2012), and Sperling and Appleman (2011) focused on theoretical perspectives of voice. Prior (2001) explored “an alternative understanding of voice” (p. 57), drawing on perspectives from Voloshinov and Bakhtin, describing how voice considered as dialogic offers “resources for getting beyond the binary of the personal and the social” (p. 79). In a similar way, Tardy (2012) outlined ‘Current conceptions of Voice’ in the anthology *Stance and voice in written academic genres* (Hyland & Sancho Guinda, 2012). Although she referred to some empirical studies, her focus was on different aspects of voice as related to different theoretical perspectives. In addition, she highlighted two studies “that have taken a reader-based approach to researching voice” (Tardy, 2012, p. 41). Sperling and Appleman (2011) also reviewed theoretical perspectives on voice (drawing on concepts of Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Elbow, Chafe, Gee). However, their focus was not on writing in an academic context nor did they aim to provide a systematic overview of current research.

The aim of this review is to outline existing empirical research to find out how analyses of texts have contributed to the study of voice. It presents studies and their purposes, the data and methodological approaches used, and the understandings of voice which are expressed both explicitly and more implicitly (see table in the online appendix). We address questions such as: What kind of questions do existing studies ask? What kind of data do they use? What kind of categories, if any, do they use? Where are agreements, contradictions, tensions or gaps in current writing research when it comes to the concept of voice? Thus, this review can also provide implications for further research on voice.

## 2. Method

To identify relevant literature for this review, a systematic search in online databases e.g. LLBA/ProQuest and Scopus was conducted, using the search terms *voice* and *academic writing*. In order to limit the scope of the review, the search was reduced to *voice* in the ‘abstracts’/‘anywhere except full text’, and *academic writing* ‘anywhere’. In the first selection process, the abstracts were read and those that did not meet the inclusion criteria described below were excluded. The selected articles were then printed in full text and read thoroughly. Additional relevant publications were found through this reading process and included in the review. The anthology *Stance and voice in written academic genres* (Hyland & Sancho Guinda, 2012) was found in the databases (as a book review), thus articles in the anthology that met the inclusion criteria, were included.

The inclusion criteria were the following:

- Empirical studies concerned with voice as a central term, that aimed to identify voice features in academic texts (students’ texts and professional academic writers’ texts)
- Studies that used voice as one category in their analysis of texts even if their main focus was not on voice
- Studies that were accessible in English
- Studies that researched voice in academic writing, i.e. writing in an academic context

Studies that focused on voice as a grammatical phenomenon, i.e. 'passive voice', were excluded.

A limitation of the selection process is the possible omission of publications of important authors who have contributed to current understandings of voice, but who might not be included in the databases. On the other hand, this selection has possibly led to including new researchers' work that was not previously visible. We are also aware of the overrepresentation of the studies published in the above mentioned anthology, published in 2012. Further limitations are that researchers who have not used the term voice, but have written about relevant issues related to voice, are not included in this review. For example, the voice-related research on plagiarism and writers' use of citations (e.g. Davis, 2013; Pecorari, 2006) were excluded in spite of their relevant contributions. The same is true for research on writing and identity (e.g. Ivanič, 1995). Reviewing all of these issues would be beyond the scope of this review.

The aim of the thorough reading process was to identify similarities and differences regarding the main purpose(s), the data and methodological approaches used, and the explicit and implicit understandings of voice that became visible (see table in the online appendix). The aim was not to give an all-embracing account for all empirical studies on voice, but to gain insight into trends in current research on voice that use analysis of texts to find features of voice in academic texts.

### **3. Characteristics of the studies reviewed**

As mentioned, the focus in this review is on empirical studies whose method is mainly analysis of academic texts; these studies attempt to identify features in the text which contribute to 'voice'. The table in the online appendix provides an overview of the included studies in chronological order.

Although it is neither possible nor desirable to 'categorize' the selected studies, we have organized this review in line with the aspects of voice that were the focus of the reviewed studies: social and cultural aspects of voice, writer positions, and developmental aspects of voice. Further, linguistic features which the studies identified as 'voice features' are presented and discussed. Finally, the reader-based approach used in two studies is examined, and considered with regard to future research.

#### *3.1 Social and cultural contexts of voice*

A number of studies have explored voice with the aim to investigate variations related to the social and cultural context, for example how the disciplinary field, the language or the genre have impact on the writer's voice (see table 1). A study that investigated "Cultural identity in academic prose" compared scientific articles in three different languages and three different disciplines (Breivega, Dahl, & Flottum, 2002; Flottum, 2006, 2010). They found that the impact of the discipline was greater than the impact of language on the writer's voice. Cross-cultural differences were investigated by Dontcheva-Navratilova (2012) who analyzed master theses written by German and Czech students of English, and found "that Czech novice writers opt for more explicit writer visibility and use a considerably higher rate of author-reference pronouns and *it*-clauses than German novice writers" (p. 315). However, these features were mainly related to less powerful authorial roles (as organizer of the text or recounter of the research process) in the Czech students' texts; the German

students used the same constructions in order to express claims and opinions. Lorés-Sanz (2011) also examined “the interplay of cultural and disciplinary factors” (p. 173) in research articles within the discipline of Business Management, written by L1 and L2 writers in English and in Spanish. Focusing on the use of first person pronouns, she found most author visibility in the English texts written by L1 writers and least in the Spanish texts written by Spanish writers.

Variations of different ‘disciplinary voices’ were also highlighted in the study by Hyland (2008), who compared specific interpersonal features that construct authorial voice in research articles in different disciplines. Using his interactional model as analytical tool (see section 3.4), he found more stance markers in the ‘soft disciplines’ than in the ‘hard sciences’. He explained these findings in relation to the different disciplinary communities’ ways of knowledge construction.

Other studies of variations in disciplines have focused on specific parts of research articles. Both Pho (2008) and Stotesbury (2006) focused on abstracts. Pho compared abstracts in the fields of applied linguistics and educational technology, and showed similarities regarding various linguistic features of authorial voice/stance. Stotesbury studied subfields within economic sciences and found more impersonal stance in the humanities abstracts than in the natural sciences abstracts. Silver’s (2012) analysis of introductions from three different disciplines (microbiology, history of science, art history) showed significant variations in the ways the writers construct their voice. Using Swales’ CARS model in the analytical approach, Silver described two main voices: a paradigmatic and a narrative voice (p. 203). The paradigmatic voice was most common in introductions from microbiology where the authors created their research space through “objectivist, empirical ‘reminders’” (p. 207). In contrast, the narrative voice was found in introductions from history of science and art history where the writers were “engaging the readership and experimenting with alternative forms of rhetoric” (p. 213).

Cultural impact from a different angle was shown in Gross and Chesley’s study (2012). They showed how contextual aspects such as industrial funding might influence the writer’s voice. Analyzing the use of hedges in research articles, they found that researchers presented their results “in a way that encourages readers to give more credence to their claims than their evidential base permits” (Gross & Chesley, 2012, p. 90), i.e. they found fewer hedges in articles with industrial funding than in those without.

Another sociocultural aspect that has impact on the writer’s voice is genre (e.g. Bondi, 2012; Kuhl & Behnam, 2011). Bondi’s comparison of academic textbooks and journal articles revealed that evaluative language and the voice of the ‘Academic Arguer’ is more prominent in journal articles whereas the voice of the ‘Recounting’ and ‘Interpreter’ is conspicuous in textbooks (see section 3.2). Although voice was not the main focus in the study by Kuhl and Behnam, their analysis of different academic genres (research articles and different types of textbooks) in applied linguistics, showed how “contextual and institutional forces” have an impact on “the production and reception of academic genres” (Kuhl & Behnam, 2011, p. 131).

While some of the reviewed studies explicitly aim to show the influence of the genre on the writer’s voice, other studies do not discuss the impact of the genre in the presentation of their results. This might lead to questionable conclusions about voice since the type of text used as data in a study is an important aspect when discussing voice features. The reader’s expectations concerning the writer’s voice and the voice the writer wants to create will differ depending on the type of text, the

audience and the purpose of the text. Is the text written in a composition class with the purpose to improve writing and language skills? Or is the text a part of disciplinary writing where the writer is trying to appropriate the knowledge in the field and become a member of the discipline, developing his/her disciplinary voice? Are the texts reflection texts, or assignments that are written and evaluated in order to get a grade? Different genres offer or allow the writer to use different voices. The voice will be different in a typical school genre compared to the voice in a scientific article. The voice constructed in rhetoric and composition classes will differ from voices constructed in a content class because they are constructed in different contexts with different purposes and readers, and thus related to different identities and relationships. One can question whether a writing task such as that described in the study by Helms-Park and Stapleton (2003) is meaningful for getting information about 'overall quality' and 'voice intensity' in L2 writing where the students were supposed to write about a subject "that was designed to stir debate" (p. 251). Likewise, using writing samples from a task which is limited in time and opinion-based without using source texts as data (as in the study by Zhao 2012) in order to measure voice strength is problematic. Thus, general conclusions about voice that do not take contextual aspects into account are questionable.

**Table 1**  
Social and cultural contexts of voice.

Author, year	Approach
Breivega, Dahl, & Fløttum (2002)	Compared the impact of the disciplinary field vs the impact of the language on the writer's voice in scientific articles in 3 different languages and 3 different disciplines
Fløttum (2006)	Compared the impact of the disciplinary field vs the impact of the language on the writer's voice in scientific articles in 3 different languages and 3 different disciplines
Stotesbury (2006)	Explored research article abstracts in economic sciences
Hyland (2008)	Explored the frequency of writer-oriented features (stance) and reader-oriented features of interaction (engagement) in research articles in 8 disciplines
Pho (2008)	Analyzed abstracts of research articles in the areas of applied linguistics and educational technology
Fløttum (2010)	Compared the impact of the disciplinary field vs the impact of the language on the writer's voice in scientific articles in 3 different languages and 3 different disciplines
Kuhi & Behnam (2011)	Analyzed different academic genres: research articles, handbook chapters, scholarly textbook chapters, and introductory textbook chapters in applied linguistics
Lorés-Sanz (2011)	Investigated first-person pronouns across languages (English and Spanish) in research articles within the discipline of Business Management written in English as L1, and in English as L2, and in Spanish by Spanish academics
Bondi (2012)	Compared academic textbooks and journal articles within the discipline academic history
Dontcheva-Navratilova (2012)	Analyzed master theses written by German and Czech students of English
Gross & Chesley (2012)	Examined hedging patterns in biomedical articles
Silver (2012)	Investigated research article introductions from 3 disciplines (microbiology, history of science, art history)

### 3.2 Voice as writer positions/roles

Studies which focus on writer 'positions' or 'roles' (see table 2), exploring various ways writers represent themselves in their writing, show how it is possible to highlight different types of voice used for different purposes (Bondi, 2012; Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2012; Fløttum, 2010; Ivanič & Camps, 2001). Ivanič and Camps (2001) build on Halliday's division of the main functions of language, and identify three types of positioning: *ideational*, *interpersonal* and *textual*. Ideational positioning is related to how writers position themselves to the topic they write about (similar to what is called 'stance' in some other studies), while interpersonal positioning refers to the way

writers interact with their readers. Textual positioning is related to “the mode of communication itself” (Ivanič & Camps, 2001, p. 28).

In other studies, voice as writer position is revealed through the roles a writer takes on. Through identifying first person pronouns in combination with verbs, Fløttum (2010) identifies how the author appears as *Writer*, *Researcher*, *Arguer*, and *Evaluator*. For example *I summarize* or *I describe* position the author as *Writer*, while *I argue* or *I claim* position the author as *Arguer* (p. 271). In a similar way, Bondi (2012) analyzes different roles of the writers in academic history with reference to Coffin (1997 in Bondi, 2012, p. 107): the *Recounter*, the *Interpreter*, and the *Academic Arguer* which signal different authorial voices. The *Recounter* mostly gives a “narrative account of events” (p. 106), and the *Interpreter* explains these events, while the *Academic Arguer* evaluates statements, or draws in current discussions in the field (p. 109). Dontcheva-Navratilova (2012) presents the following roles of the author as related to different degrees of authority, expressed by personal and impersonal structures: the author as *Representative* (member of a larger community), as *Discourse-organiser* (guiding the reader), as *Recounter of the research process* (commenting on the collection of data and research procedures), as *Opinion-holder* (expressing attitudes and elaborating arguments), and as *Originator* (putting forward claims and commenting on findings).

The different positions or roles of the writer described and identified in these studies can give valuable insight into the differences between novice and more experienced writers – for example investigating developmental issues of voice. We would suggest that the position of the *Writer* and the *Recounter* will be more visible in a novice writer text whereas the positions of the *Researcher*, *Interpreter*, *Representative*, and *Arguer* are probably more prominent in texts written by more experienced writers. Novice writers tend to – and are expected to – account for existing knowledge in the field, whereas experienced writers are concerned with elaborating arguments and placing their arguments in current discussions in the disciplinary community, contributing to new knowledge in the field. Bondi (2012) points to an interesting aspect in the discussion of the development of the disciplinary voice when comparing authorial voices in textbooks and in research articles – questioning how useful textbooks are as models for writing: “what makes them easier for students to read ‘may make it harder for them to deal with other text types they encounter later in a scientific career [...] because they get no sense of how facts are established’” (Myers 1992 cited in Bondi 2012, pp. 103-4).

**Table 2**

Voice as writer positions/roles.

Author, year	Positions/roles analyzed
Ivanič & Camps (2001)	Ideational, interpersonal and textual positioning
Fløttum (2010)	Writer, Researcher, Arguer, and Evaluator
Bondi (2012)	Recounter, Interpreter, and Academic Arguer
Dontcheva-Navratilova (2012)	Representative, Discourse-organiser, Recounter of the research process, Opinion-holder, and Originator

### 3.3 Developmental aspects of voice

Studying developmental issues regarding voice, two longitudinal studies showed how the writer’s voice might shift over time (see table 3). Pérez-Llantada (2009) analyzed “the preferred linguistic realisations of authorial voice of four non-native English (Spanish) scholars both as novice and expert

writers” (p. 192) with a time span of 10-15 years between their publications. Dressen-Hammouda (2014, p. 15) examined six researchers in geology over a period of 10 years.

Different research methods and conclusions reflect different assumptions about how the writer develops voice. Pérez-Llantada (2009) emphasizes “individuality as a key in the research construction processes” (p. 192), focusing on personal pronoun references, considering *I*-constructions as markers for an involved authorial voice. Because of the variation in the results, i.e. different researchers used the features in different ways both as novice and as expert, she draws the conclusion “that academic communication is a highly personal affair” (2009, p. 195). In contrast, Dressen-Hammouda (2014) shows how the development of the disciplinary voice is related to the increasing expertise in the disciplinary field; through qualitative analysis within an ethnographic approach she identified 13 indexes/categories which she used in the analysis of texts in the field of geology. Focusing on quite different features in the texts, these two studies show how different methodological approaches result in different conclusions and different theoretical concepts of voice.

**Table 3**

Developmental aspects of voice.

Author, year	Approach
Pérez-Llantada (2009)	Analyzed texts of 4 non-native English scholars both as novice and expert writers with a time span of 10-15 years
Dressen-Hammouda (2014)	Examined 6 researchers in geology over a period of 10 years

### 3.4 Linguistic features of voice identified in the studies

The great variation in linguistic features that the studies focused on when analyzing voice revealed different understandings and underlying assumptions about voice (see table 4). Many studies used Hyland’s (2008) interactional model as basis for the analysis of voice features, some of them selecting certain features of the model. Hyland distinguishes between the dimensions *stance* and *engagement*, relating both to the concept of voice. He relates *stance* “to the writer’s ‘textual voice’ or community recognized personality”, and “the ways writers present themselves and convey their judgements, opinions, and commitments” (Hyland, 2008, p. 7). According to Hyland (2008), *stance* is realized in a text through linguistic features such as hedges, boosters, attitude markers and self-mention. *Engagement*, on the other hand, refers to the writer’s dialogue with the reader, how the writer includes the reader in the text, “as discourse participants, and guide them to interpretations” (Hyland, 2008, p. 7). This orientation towards the reader is realized through features such as reader-mention, directives, questions, knowledge reference and asides. Especially self-mention and hedges are features that many studies used in their analysis of voice (as shown later in this section).

The terms *stance* and *voice* seem closely connected. Hyland (2012) considers *voice* broader than *stance* “as it concerns the control of features which readers recognize as legitimate and authoritative” (p. 136). Several studies mention and identify *stance* as part of *voice*, and sometimes the terms are used interchangeably, as for example by Pho (2008) who uses both the term ‘authorial voice’ and ‘authorial stance’, “i.e. expression of the writer’s judgments or attitudes towards a proposition or an object” (p. 232). Thompson (2012) describes *stance* as an aspect of *voice*, “as it contributes to the impression of the writer in the text” (p. 132). Stotesbury (2006) seems to understand *voice* as “personal stance”, expressed by the use of first person pronouns.



As mentioned above, a surprisingly large number of studies are concerned with the use of first person pronouns. In some studies the use of first person pronouns was the main category in the analysis of voice (Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2012; Hewings & Coffin, 2007; Lorés-Sanz, 2011; Nunn, 2008; Pérez-Llantada, 2009; Stotesbury, 2006), while other studies used them as one category among others (Breivega et al., 2002; Flottum, 2006; Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003; Hyland, 2008; Ivanič & Camps, 2001; Kuhl & Behnam, 2011; Zhao, 2012). Some of the studies emphasize the importance of first person pronouns as for example Lorés-Sanz (2011) who claims that they “play a key role in the modulation of the writer’s voice in academic texts” and “can help construct a credible image for writers” (p. 174). Likewise, Pérez-Llantada (2009) and Stotesbury (2006) seem to consider the use of first person pronouns as a signal for a strong authorial voice. In contrast, Hewings and Coffin (2007) suggest that *it*- constructions allow a more impersonal stance, and thus can convey a more powerful authoritative voice. At the same time they point out that the use of *I*, combined with verbs of “mental perception” as *think* or *believe*, can invite the reader to discussion, giving the reader the possibility to have a different view, where the verb indicates that what follows is the writer’s subjective opinion.

The focus on first person pronouns as a feature of voice seems to have contributed to the confusion about the concept of voice and to reducing voice to debates about the use of *I*. Stapleton (2002), for example, criticizes the “overemphasis on voice” (p. 188), presupposing that the use of the first person pronoun is considered as a signal for a powerful voice in existing writing research. On the one hand he criticizes the focus on the use of *I* as a key element of voice in writing research, but at the same time he seems to consider the use of *I* as a powerful tool to express voice when using it in his own conclusion: “I made this choice on the hope that by introducing it [I] in this section, somehow, readers would feel my voice as I was reaching the heart of my argument” (Stapleton, 2002, p. 188). The contradictions in his reasoning seem to be similar to the studies mentioned above. These studies demonstrate the confusion and ambiguity that come from limiting the concept of voice to first person pronouns.

In a similar way, the identifying of hedges has caused problems in the analysis of voice. In the study by Zhao (2012), the raters sometimes considered the lack of hedges as a marker for a strong, authoritative voice, whereas they described writers as confident authors when they used hedges “in a more sophisticated way” (p. 209). Thus, hedges can be a signal for both a weak and a strong voice. In addition, the decision about what kind of words should be included in the analysis of hedges might be problematic as well – sometimes a word that appears as a hedge does not have the function of a hedge, or conversely, an expression functions as a hedge even if the words themselves are not defined as hedges. Helms-Park and Stapleton (2003) categorized hedges as a marker for a weak voice that showed no commitment to assertions. A more balanced ranging is presented in the study by Pho (2008) who showed how hedges, i.e. modal verbs, might have different functions in different moves in the abstract. An interesting contribution to the use of hedges is the study by Gross and Chesley (2012) who describe hedges as a way to demonstrate the researcher’s commitment to “social norms for scientific conduct” (p. 97) when researchers present findings with caution, showing “the desire to embody in their prose the organized skepticism the scientific community so values” (p. 85). These studies show that categorizing and measuring the frequency of predefined categories in order to evaluate voice strength is questionable. Even Zhao (2012) who was concerned with “whether and how the strength of an author’s voice in written texts can be reliably measured” (p. 201) concluded her study by pointing out that qualitative evaluation is better than

frequency-based rubrics when measuring voice strength. Analyzing the kind of certain features, i.e. the way certain features are used – for example what kind of hedges are used, in which part of the text, in which genre, and in which context – is probably more useful than counting the frequency of these features.

Of the many studies that built on Hyland's model in their analysis, some added features that are not described in the model. Zhao (2012) and Helms-Park and Stapleton (2003) added a category that included the *reiteration of central point*, i.e. how clear the main argument is expressed in a text. In addition, these two studies added the category: *the overall presence of the author's voice* which goes beyond the sentence level.

Another feature identified in some studies was the use of other voices. Breivega et al. (2002) and Fløttum (2006, 2010) analyzed how writers position themselves through the use of other voices, both explicitly through references, and implicitly through the use of *not* and *but*. Likewise, the study by Castello et al. (2012) included the category "dialogue with referenced authors" (p. 104) in their analysis of academic voice as one feature of text quality in their study of undergraduate revision processes. In the Voice Intensity Rating Scale that Helms-Park and Stapleton used, one category also comprised the use of 'countervoices' (2003, p. 249), looking for how clearly writers separate their own view from an opposing one, and thus displaying a strong voice. Components that go beyond the word and sentence level, are also shown by Thompson (2012), who demonstrated how writers "maintain a voice of authority in their writing by skillfully modulating the interplay between averral and attribution" (p. 124).

Thompson (2012) proposed a three-level model of stance and voice when examining PhD theses, and aimed "[t]o illustrate the gradations of voice" (p. 120) at different levels in the text, i.e. the proposition level and intermediate levels. As mentioned above, he shows how writers create an authorial voice when using other voices (the interplay between averral and attribution) at the proposition level. At intermediate levels, Thompson analyzed the use of metadiscourse (showing textual coherence, i.e. clear connections between propositions and sections), and the evaluation of one's achievement in the conclusion or summary chapter and showed how these features contribute to create a voice of authority in PhD theses.

To sum up, the variations of voice features identified in the different studies reflect the differences in the understanding of the concept voice. On the other hand, they demonstrate "the amalgamative effect" (Matsuda, 2001, p. 40) of the use of different features which lead to the construction of voice, showing the holistic nature and complexity in the concept of voice. In addition, the different ways certain features are categorized and interpreted might also contribute to confusion about voice.

An important question is also related to the purpose of finding certain voice features when analyzing texts. For example, while Ivanič and Camps (2001) aimed to raise "critical awareness about voice" that "can help learners maintain control over the personal and cultural identity they are projecting in their writing" (p. 3), Zhao (2012) intended to support students "to write with a strong authorial voice and use that voice appropriately and effectively in their writing" (p. 220). These aims indicate different consequences for writing pedagogy: while the first implies different possibilities and gives the writer a choice, the latter indicates that there are certain, general features for a strong voice that are teachable and learnable. Even if the construction of the writer's voice is always constrained,

“framed by the options our disciplines make available” (Hyland, 2008, p. 20), Ivanič and Camps (2001) point out that “the individual can exercise the power to conform to or resist the social forces that are privileging one voice type over another” (p. 7) which is only possible through making visible and increasing the writers’ awareness of how different features can lead to different voices they can use in different contexts.

**Table 4**  
Linguistic features of voice identified in the studies.

Author, year	Approach
Ivanič & Camps (2001)	Examined lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical features such as noun phrases, evaluative lexis, modality, first person reference, linking devices
Breivega, Dahl, & Fløttum (2002)	Analyzed linguistic features associated with writer manifestation (first person pronouns), writer promotion (lexical words such as <i>new</i> , <i>recently</i> , <i>results</i> ), and manifestation of voices of other researchers (references to other voices)
Helms-Park & Stapleton (2003)	Used “ <i>Voice Intensity Rating Scale</i> ” with 4 major components: assertiveness (hedges and intensifiers), self-identification (first person pronouns), reiteration of central point, authorial presence and autonomy of thought (including the use of “countervoices”)
Fløttum (2006)	Identified first person pronouns in combination with verb or verb construction (rhetorical roles when authors refer to themselves – see table 2)
Stotesbury (2006)	Examined mainly use of first person pronoun
Hewings & Coffin (2007)	Examined mainly use of first person pronoun (pronouns <i>I</i> , <i>we</i> and <i>it</i> constructions)
Hyland (2008)	Used the “interaction model”, identifying stance features (hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mention) and engagement features (reader-mention, directives, questions, knowledge reference, asides)
Nunn (2008)	Examined mainly use of first person pronoun
Pérez-Llantada (2009)	Examined mainly use of first person pronoun
Fløttum (2010)	Analyzed personal pronouns in combination with verbs (identifying rhetorical roles), and references (the presence of several voices/points of view)
Kuhi & Behnam (2011)	Used the interactional model: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions (stance markers)
Lorés-Sanz (2011)	Examined mainly use of first person pronoun
Castelló, Iñesta, Pardo, Liesa, & Martínez-Fernández (2012)	Analyzed clarity of author’s voice and point of view, use of resources for handling, emphasizing, use of first person, dialogue with referenced authors
Dontcheva-Navratilova (2012)	Examined mainly use of first person pronoun (personal pronoun structures and impersonal <i>it</i> -constructions)
Gross & Chesley (2012)	Investigated use of hedges (such as modal verbs, adverbs and lexical verbs)
Hyland (2012)	Used parts of the interactional model, analyzing features such as reader pronouns, questions, and directives
Thompson (2012)	Analyzed different levels: interplay between averral and attribution, metadiscourse (guiding the reader), evaluation of achievement/contribution of own research
Zhao (2012)	Analyzed stance and engagement features, building on Hyland’s interactional model (added: central point articulation and the overall impression the raters have got of the voice strength)

### 3.5 The importance of the reader in the construction of voice

Hyland’s interactional model has contributed to insights into voice-related issues in academic writing. At the same time, the use of a model with predefined categories can entail the risk of taking these categories of voice for granted, ignoring other features that might contribute to the construction of the author’s voice. In addition, the dialogic nature of language is not taken into account: how meaning – and voice – are created in the interaction between the writer and the reader who are “co-constructing voice at a particular space and time” (Tardy, 2012, p. 40). This co-constructing of voice is always related to issues of identity and power relations which will influence both the writer’s creating and the reader’s perception of the author’s voice.

The studies by Matsuda and Tardy (Matsuda & Tardy, 2007; Tardy & Matsuda, 2009) highlight the importance of the reader in the construction of the author’s voice (see table 5). Instead of using predefined categories, i.e. defining voice features *a priori* and then identifying these features in the data where the researcher defines voice, Matsuda and Tardy entrusted the reader with the identification of voice features. They analyzed the statements and assessments of peer reviewers, using written reviews as well as interviews as data for their analysis (Matsuda & Tardy, 2007), and thus identified certain features which seem to be important in the construction of the author’s voice. Among other features, the readers mentioned *breadth of knowledge*, *theoretical lens*, *rhetorical moves*, and *representation/positioning of other scholars in the field* – features which go beyond the word and sentence level and which are related to the content of the text.

Similar to Tardy and Matsuda (2009), Dressen-Hammouda (2014) argues for “creating *a posteriori* categories based on the empirical analysis of context, rather than *a priori* categories based on pre-existing, socially decontextualized categories” (p. 16). She points out that the perception of the voice is related to insider knowledge. Only through thorough examination of the context and the practices in the disciplinary community is it possible to get access to and identify these features.

Two other studies mention the reader’s role in the construction of voice in a more implicit way. The verb ‘sound’ in the title *I am how I sound* in Ivanič and Camps’ article (2001) presupposes a reader who hears the sound of the author’s voice: “this positioning is recognized by readers insofar that they share the same sociocultural context” (p. 6). Likewise, Helms-Park and Stapleton (2003) briefly mention the reader, even if they are not otherwise concerned with the reader’s importance in the construction of the writer’s voice in their study. In their presentation of the *Voice Intensity Rating Scale* in the appendix, they mention the reader in one of the rating categories: “*The reader feels that the author is expressing his or her special views on the topic*” (Helms-Park & Stapleton 2003, p. 260, italics my emphasis), thus indicating the importance of the reader when constructing the writer’s voice.

Including readers and getting insight into the “implicit knowledge and interpretations people share in a disciplinary community” (Dressen-Hammouda, 2014, p. 16) can give valuable insight into the complex processes which lead to the construction of the author’s voice. Both the writer and the reader bring with them ‘their voices’ and voice types from their culturally available resources which will influence their construction of the writer’s voice: When reading the same text, a reader from science will probably construct a different authorial voice than a reader from the humanities. Likewise, a reader who is experienced in a disciplinary field will probably construct the writer’s voice in a different way than a novice in the field. They will have different expectations to the author’s voice related to their previous experiences, to their values and expectations to academic writing, especially to the concept of voice in academic texts – values and expectations which are shaped by their participation in certain discourse communities.

**Table 5**

Studies that highlight the importance of the reader.

<b>Author, year</b>	<b>Methodological approaches</b>
Matsuda & Tardy (2007)	Two reviewers identified voice features in an author’s manuscript. In addition, the reviewers and the manuscript author were interviewed.
Tardy & Matsuda (2009)	Editorial board members of writing-related journals completed an online survey, based on the voice features identified by the readers in the previous study (2007).

#### 4. Voice in different discourses of writing

Different assumptions regarding voice lay the ground for different premises for and outcomes of the research. In this review, the different approaches to voice can be related to what Ivanič (2004, p. 224) calls different “discourses” of academic writing. Ivanič (2004) defines discourses of writing “as constellations of beliefs about writing, beliefs about learning to write, ways of talking about writing, and the sorts of approaches to teaching and assessment which are likely to be associated with these beliefs” (p. 224). Lea and Street (2000) and Lillis (2003) distinguish between the discourses of *study skills*, *academic socialization*, and *academic literacies* that result in different approaches to teaching and assessment of writing in higher education.

The approach used by Matsuda and Tardy (Matsuda & Tardy, 2007; Tardy & Matsuda, 2009), and Dresen-Hammouda (2014) can also be related to *academic literacy* research as mentioned in the beginning of this article. These studies take the context into account when focusing on the reader and/or the insider knowledge of the disciplinary field, thus emphasizing the dialogic nature of writing where dimensions such as social relations and disciplinary identity play an important role in the construction of voice.

These different discourses of writing can also shed light on concepts and approaches to *voice* – and on the *research* on voice. Studies which are concerned with measuring predefined linguistic features seem to consider the use of voice features as an individual *study skill* that can be taught and is transferable from one context to another. The teacher provides students with tools that they can use in their writing in order to create a strong voice. The main interest in writing research might then be to identify these voice features in different texts in order to measure and to teach voice strength – an approach which is related to what Lillis and Scott (2007, p. 13) call a *normative approach*.

In contrast, studies which emphasize social aspects of voice, aiming to find similarities and differences in different disciplines might belong to the *academic socialization* perspective which takes into account the context as for example the culture, the discipline, the genre or the language, i.e. social aspects of voice. Thus, the focus in writing research and writing pedagogy is more on the disciplinary becoming, the socialization of the student who is in the process of becoming an acknowledged member of the disciplinary community through learning the appropriate genres of the community.

Within an academic literacies approach (Lea & Street, 2000; Lillis & Scott, 2007) the focus is more on aspects which influence the writing as for example identity, power, and social relations, trying to find explanations for why writers write as they do instead of identifying ‘bad’ or ‘good’ writing/a strong or weak voice. In contrast to the skill and socialization approach which lead to reproduction and maintenance of academic practices and conventions, the academic literacies approach emphasizes the dialogic nature of language where differences are acknowledged/kept in play, and the students’ experiences, interests and voices are valued. This approach is a *transformative approach* (Lillis & Scott, 2007) that challenges existing writing conventions. Within the transformative approach of academic literacies research it is not enough to analyze and identify voice features in a text; it is also necessary to conduct interviews and talk about texts which highlight the context, discussing “the struggles to sustain identity as writers while accommodating the demands of the university” (Le Ha, 2009, p. 134). These studies often aim to raise critical awareness and help learners to take control over their writing and their voice, giving them the possibility to make choices about what kind of voice they *want* to project in their texts.

It is important to mention that the different approaches are not mutually exclusive (Lea & Street, 2000, p. 33; Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 13). However, the academic literacy approach is more concerned with the context in which a piece of writing occurs/is situated, and is interested in issues how to create spaces for the students' voices where they can challenge established conventions and "take control of their *becoming* path" (Le Ha, 2009, p. 143).

The different approaches are also pointed out by Sperling and Appleman (2011) who distinguish between two premises for research on voice: voice considered as a "quality of language" that can be taught, and voice as a "lens for understanding reading, writing, and learning processes" (p. 70). The latter allows investigating and understanding how different voices are negotiated related to the context, to the genre, to the position of the writer and the reader, and how different voices can be created in the same text.

### 5. Different levels of voice features – implications for further research

The approaches of Matsuda and Tardy (Matsuda & Tardy, 2007; Tardy & Matsuda, 2009) and Dressen-Hammouda (2014) open up for further research on voice that might include voice features that have been ignored in previous research. While Hyland's much used interactional model has contributed to valuable insight into linguistic features on the word and sentence level, the creation of *a posteriori* categories might lead the attention to features beyond the sentence level.

Zhao (2012), for example, points out that Hyland's model "fails to address more global features of a text such as the presence, clarity, and uniqueness of a central point being communicated to the readers" (p. 219). She points to "the idea and content related dimension" (2012, p. 208) in the perception of voice revealed in think aloud and interview sessions in the qualitative analysis in her study where the raters who categorized voice features were concerned with the overall impression and paid attention to *what* and *how* the writers wrote – something which was difficult to capture through identifying of linguistic features. The raters mentioned, for example, *inclusion of details* and *creative use of examples* (Zhao, 2012, p. 209) – features in a text which might reveal more about the writer's voice than the use of reader pronouns, questions and directives which Hyland (2012) described as "the most explicitly engaging rhetorical elements of authorial voice" (p. 139) in his study of final year reports of undergraduate students. Likewise, Thompson (2012) suggests "that it is useful to see both voice and stance as existing on a number of levels, ranging from the proposition through to the whole text" (p. 119).

The results of this review show a need for research that takes into account different levels in the text when analyzing voice features. In addition to linguistic features related to form, future research should develop methodological approaches and analytical tools to capture content-related features as well, and focus more on features as for example reasoning and argumentative strategies, breadth of knowledge, clarity, or uniqueness of a central point, or how writers use others' voices to create their own disciplinary voice. The development and the displaying of own voice is always related to other voices. Therefore it might be useful to analyze how different writers use sources and to what purpose: what are they *doing* with other voices? Instead of counting certain words, it might be more useful to develop categories for analysis that capture the writers' *activities*, what writers are trying *to do* and *how* they do it. In the analysis of introductions, for example, one could use Swales' CARS-model (Create A Research Space, Swales, 1990) and investigate how different writers establish and

occupy their niche. Establishing a niche for one's own research involves using other voices that already exist in the specific field of research. Likewise, occupying the niche requires that writers clearly show the importance of their own study – thus, creating an authoritative voice.

Examining these features can give valuable insight into how the writer's voice gradually develops "out of others' words that have been acknowledged and assimilated" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345), i.e. how writers develop knowledge and their own voice in relation to established knowledge and writing conventions in the disciplinary field.

The results from the studies by Matsuda and Tardy (Matsuda & Tardy, 2007; Tardy & Matsuda, 2009) indicate that content features might be more important than form features when the reader constructs the author's voice. The overemphasis on form features as revealed in this review – as for example the focus on first person pronouns or hedges and boosters – can lead to misunderstandings about voice as the following statement indicates:

The fear I have is that this overemphasis on voice will leave new learners of English with the impression that provided they write with a strong voice, teachers will praise their writing regardless of whether their arguments are poorly constructed or their reasoning weak or fallacious (Stapleton, 2002, p. 188).

In future research, capturing content-related features will be important in order to avoid the risk that research on voice is limited to form features and discussions about the use of first person pronouns.

Even if "an exhaustive list of features that may contribute to voice [...] is unlikely to be possible nor is it necessarily desirable" (Tardy, 2012, p. 45), it is important for writers on different levels to know more about how certain features contribute to a certain impression of the writer's voice – and how both the writer and the reader contribute to the construction of the writer's voice.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this review was to show different approaches to, and views on, voice in current writing research. The purpose was not to polarize current discussions on voice, but to make visible how different approaches and methods in writing research can be used – and combined – in order to get more insight into voice-related issues. However, this review has shown that it is necessary to consider the context, agreeing with Dressen-Hammouda (2014) who states that voice features can only be identified "with regard to the specific sociocultural context that creates voice" (p. 15). The question is not whether there is a voice or not – most of the studies seem to agree that there is no voiceless text – the question is rather what kind of voice is required or appropriate in the specific context – depending on the genre, the discipline, the level, the writing situation – and how these aspects of voice are embedded in various ways of knowledge making, epistemologies and different writing traditions. Getting access to this insider knowledge in the specific discipline where the writing occurs is necessary to understand the complexity of the concept voice.

Matsuda and Tardy's reader-based approach (Matsuda & Tardy 2007, Tardy & Matsuda 2009) has opened up for dimensions in the construction of voice that have been ignored in previous research. Similar to Dressen-Hammouda (2014), Matsuda and Tardy have shown that the perception of voice

is related to knowledge that members of the disciplinary community share. Studies of voice through analysis of texts should thus include analyses of the context and investigate how dimensions such as for example the writer's and the reader's experiences and their familiarity with the discipline, social relationships, the genre, and disciplinary practices have impact on the construction of the writer's voice. Insight into the processes which surround the writing and the reading processes is crucial in the understanding of voice as concept in writing research and in writing pedagogy.

Instead of aiming to reach agreement about the concept of voice, it might be more fruitful to search for "newer ways to mean" as Lillis puts it (2003, p. 199) – which also can be related to our understanding of the concept of voice:

Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future (Bakhtin, 1984 cited in Lillis 2003, p. 198).

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