

**A Comparative Study of the Use of First Person Subject Pronouns in Chinese  
and Swedish Students' Argumentative Essays  
--A Corpus-based Research**

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# A Comparative Study of the Use of First Person Subject Pronouns in Chinese and Swedish Students' Argumentative Essays --A Corpus-based Research

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## Abstract

*Based on Michael Strumpf's definition of first person subject pronouns, this paper studied the use of "I" and "we" in 200 English argumentative essays in Swedish-Chinese English Learner Corpus (SCELC). Findings suggested that the frequencies of "I" and "we" in the Swedish subsets (SSEL 1-3) were higher than that in the Chinese subsets (CSEL 1-3). There were significant differences existing in the use of "I" and "we" between SSEL 1-3 and CSEL 1-3: Swedish English learners tended to use more "I" while Chinese English learners tended to use more "we". There was one similarity existing in the use of "I" and "we" between the two subsets: compared to "I", "we" was more preferred among both Chinese and Swedish English learners. This paper suggested that the reasons behind the similarities and differences were the culture backgrounds, ways of teaching, and the writers' identities between the two countries.*

**Key words:** first person subject pronouns; the Swedish-Chinese English Learner Corpus

## 1 Introduction

In the field of linguistic research, scholars and English learners usually present themselves as the identity of authors through the use of first person pronouns. As a result, there is an increasing interest in exploring the use of first person pronouns not only in academic writings but also in the writing of daily essays of English learners. In addition, "the use of first person pronouns becomes a vital rhetorical strategy that realizes the authorial presence in the academic writing" (Hyland, 2001, 2002).

Many scholars abroad and at home have paid their attentions to the use of first person pronouns in academic papers and devoted to relative studies mainly from the perspective of different disciplines, which have proved that the disciplinary variations can have impact on the use of first person pronouns. Hyland (1998) investigated the use of self-mention makers in 28 English research

articles (RAs) from the disciplines of Microbiology, Marketing, Astrophysics and Applied Linguistics. The results showed that self-mention makers appearing in Astrophysics RAs were much more than the rest three disciplines. Hyland (2001) carried out a research on self-reference and the use of first person pronouns in a corpus of 240 RAs in eight disciplines: Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Marketing, Philosophy, Sociology, Applied Linguistics, Physics and Microbiology. The results showed that among all the self-mentions occurred in RAs, 81% of them were pronouns, 16% were self-reference, and 2% were other ways of mentioning to the authors of the RAs. Besides, first person pronouns appeared more frequently in soft fields. Hyland (2002) made a comparison on the use of first person pronouns between 64 project reports written by Hong Kong undergraduates from the disciplines of Biology, Mechanical Engineering and 240 RAs from the disciplines of Biology and Physics written by experts. His results showed that the authors in RAs had a higher awareness to present themselves than students. Besides, the first person pronouns occurred more frequently in soft fields, which was in accordance with Hyland's research findings in 2001.

Kuo (1999) performed a research on first person pronouns in a corpus of 36 scientific journal articles from the disciplines of Computer Science, Physics and Electronic Engineering. The results showed that among first person plural pronouns, exclusive "we" occurred 65.5% mainly with the function of "explaining what was done". Inclusive "we" occurred 29.1% mainly with the function of "assuming shared knowledge, goals and beliefs". Ji (2010) made a comparison on the number, distribution, and function of first person pronouns in 21 RAs in both social science and natural science. The results showed that in the RAs of social science, the percentages of "I" and "we" were 37.24% and 33.3% respectively, which was approximately the same; while in the RAs of natural science, the percentage of "we" was 83.33%, which further proved that there were significant differences of the use of first person pronouns in RAs between soft fields and hard fields.

Apart from disciplinary differences, scholars abroad and at home have finished investigations of authorial references by analyzing the use of first person pronouns in the academic writings produced by the writers from different cultural backgrounds with different languages. Vassileva (2000) compared the use of first person subject pronouns "I" and "we" in academic writings from five languages: English, German, French, Russian, and Bulgarian. The result showed that the frequencies of first person pronouns in English articles were two times higher than that in the articles from other four languages. Zhang (2012) performed a research on "we", "us", and "I" in the introduction section of the theses by Chinese and Canadian graduates and found that the frequency of "I" used by Canadian writers was much higher than that by Chinese writers, but there was no significant difference in the use of "we" between them.

Besides, different language proficiencies are essential factors that can affect the use of English first person pronouns in academic writings. Some researchers abroad have compared the use of first person pronouns in the articles written by both native English speakers (NES) with those by non-native English speakers (NNES). For example, Martinez (2005) made a comparison of the use of first person pronouns in biology articles written by NES and NNES writers, which focuses on the distributions and discourse functions of first person pronouns in different sections: Introduction, Methodology, Results and Discussion. The results showed that the overall frequencies of first person pronouns in the NES articles was over two times higher than that in the NNES articles. In addition, there were significant differences of the use of first person pronouns in four sections of RAs.

From the above studies, it is found that the use of first person subject pronouns “I” and “we” is the most frequent and representative use among other kinds of first person pronouns. Therefore, this paper analyzes the similarities and differences of the use of “I” and “we” based on the 200 English argumentative essays in SCEL C.

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Research Subjects

The corpus used in this study is called SCEL C, which consists of 100 argumentative essays written by Chinese English learners and 100 argumentative essays by Swedish English learners on the same topic “Is it true that only rich countries can afford to worry about the environment?” The essays are about 200-word long, written with a 30-minute time limit in class without preparation in advance or access to any language tool when performing the task. CSEL 1-3 were produced by third-semester English majors at Wuhan University, and SSEL 1-3 by English I students at Stockholm University. Both groups of learners had learned English for about 9 years by the time they wrote the essays.

Table 1 shows the detailed information of SCEL C, such as the overall characters, words and sentences in the whole corpus as well as in the two subsets, the number of sentences that contain six main first person pronouns.

**Table 1 Detailed Information in SCEL C**

Item \ Corpus	CSEL 1-3	SSEL 1-3	SCEL C
Overall characters	116,539	118,749	235,288
Overall words	23,781	25,612	49,393

Overall sentences	1,511	1,368	2,879
Sentences contain <i>I</i>	103	256	359
Sentences contain <i>we</i>	171	258	429
Sentences contain <i>my</i>	32	33	65
Sentences contain <i>our</i>	114	100	214
Sentences contain <i>me</i>	5	7	12
Sentences contain <i>us</i>	43	42	85

## 2.2 Research Questions

According to the book *The Grammar Bible* written by Michael Strumpf (2004), personal pronouns indicate people speaking, spoken to, or spoken of. That is to say, each personal pronoun refers to a specific individual or group. Based on different forms and grammatical functions, first person pronouns can be divided into three categories:

**Table 2 The English First Person Pronouns**

Case \ Number	Singular	Plural
Subjective case	<i>I</i>	<i>we</i>
Objective case	me	us
Possessive case	my	our

Table 2 shows the three categories of first person pronouns according to their different cases. Particularly, the first person pronouns like “I” and “we” refer to the person or the group of person speaking and are called first person subject pronouns.

The three research questions which this study intends to answer are as follows:

1. What are the frequencies of first person subject pronouns “I” and “we” in Chinese and Swedish English learners’ argumentative essays?
2. What are the differences and similarities of the use of “I” and “we” in Chinese and Swedish English learners’ argumentative essays?
3. What are the reasons for the different usages of “I” and “we” between Chinese and Swedish English learners?

## 2.3 Research Methods

Both quantitative approach and qualitative approach of analyzing the data are employed in the study.

As for the quantitative approach, firstly, with the help of AntConc 3.4.3, which is an instrument for performing corpus linguistics studies and data-based researches, the frequencies of “I” and “we” in Chinese and Swedish English learners’ essays are calculated. Then, a Chi-square test of independence are performed so as to judge whether there are significant differences in the use of “I” and “we” between two subsets of the corpus. As for the qualitative method, based on the statistics in the quantitative analysis, firstly, the features of using “I” and “we” among Chinese and Swedish English learners are figured out. Then, the reasons behind the similarity and difficulties are speculated.

## 3 Research Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Comparison of Frequencies of “I” and “we” in SCEL C

With the help of three functions (Concordance Tool, File View Tool and Cluster) in software AntConc 3.4.3, the similar and different frequencies of “I” and “we” in the two subsets (CSEL 1-3 and SSEL 1-3) are compared as Table 3 shows:

**Table 3 The Frequencies of “I” and “we” in CSEL 1-3 and SSEL 1-3**

Frequency		Subset	
		CSEL1-3	SSEL1-3
The total amount of words (size)		23,781	25,612
I	Raw frequency	109	298
	Normalized frequency	4.58	11.64
we	Raw frequency	240	382
	Normalized frequency	10.09	14.92
In total	Raw frequency	349	680
	Normalized frequency	14.67	26.56

Table 3 shows that the frequencies of both “I” and “we” in the essays written by Swedish English learners (“I”: 298; “we”: 382) are higher than that in the essays written by Chinese English learners (“I”: 109; “we”: 240). According to Peteh-Tyson (1998), “First person pronouns manifest

the author's strong personal characteristics, they are usually used in oral English and should be avoided in argumentative writings. In the particular style of argumentative writing, the first-person pronouns are often used to state personal experiences, whereas their use should be limited within a certain range when expressing personal views." Therefore, the conclusion can be drawn that in argumentative writing, Swedish English learners tend to be more colloquial and use more first person subject pronouns to express their own viewpoints compared to Chinese English learners. Besides, Table 3 shows the similarity of Chinese and Swedish English learners' use of "I" and "we", that is, compared to "I", the plural form "we" is more preferred among both Chinese and Swedish English learners (Chinese: we-240 > I-109; Swedish: we-382 > I-298).

**Table 4 The Proportion of "I" and "we" among Six First Person Pronouns**

Percentage	Subset	CSEL1-3	SSEL1-3
	The amount of six first person pronouns	524	871
	The proportion of "I"	20.80%	34.21%
	The proportion of "we"	45.80%	43.86%

Table 4 shows the differences of Chinese and Swedish English learners' use of "I" and "we", that is, Swedish English learners tend to use more "I" (Swedish: 34.21% > Chinese: 20.80%) while Chinese students tend to use more "we" (Chinese: 45.80% > Swedish: 43.86%).

### 3.2 Chi-square Test of Independence of "I" and "we" in SCEL C

In order to prove that the differences found above (a. the frequencies of "I" and "we" in SSEL 1-3 are higher than that in CSEL 1-3; b. Swedish English learners tend to use more "I" while Chinese English learners tend to use more "we") are the significant differences existing in the frequency distribution of "I" and "we" between CSEL1-3 and SSEL 1-3, that is to say, there are significant differences existing in the use of "I" and "we" between Chinese and Swedish English learners, a Chi-square test of independence of "I" and "we" are performed with the help of the software SPSS 22.0.

**Table 5 Chi-square Test of Independence**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	10.090 <sup>a</sup>	1	.001		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	9.659	1	.002		
Likelihood Ratio	10.221	1	.001		
Fisher's Exact Test				.002	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	10.080	1	.001		
N of Valid Cases	1007				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 132.16.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Table 5 shows that the significant differences do exist in the frequency distribution of “I” and “we” between CSEL1-3 and SSEL 1-3, which means that the significant differences do exist in the use of “I” and “we” between Chinese and Swedish English learners ( $\chi^2 = 10.090$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

### 3.3 Discussion of the Research Results

#### 3.3.1 Discussion of the Similarity Found

##### 3.3.1.1 Grammatical Meaning

As for the grammatical meaning of “we”, it usually connects the author with his or her readers and shortens the distance between them, especially in argumentative essays in which the author expresses his or her own opinions or suggestions. By using “we”, the opinions or suggestions put forward by the author are easier to be accepted and become more convincing.

(1) We indeed need to work out a plan that changes how we live and think in the world today.

(SSEL 1-3)

In example (1), “we” ties the author and the readers together as a “community of interests” living on earth. Under this circumstance, the author calls for environment protection that “we” should make a plan jointly to change the living and thinking way of everyone. As a result, this suggestion is easier to be accepted.



- (2) What we should pay close attention to is that the contributors to the pollutions include both rich countries and poor countries.

(CSEL 1-3)

In example (2), the author connects the developing countries and developed countries, two different even opposite groups together by using “we”, which avoids many conflicts that results from different viewpoints. On this basis, the suggestions raised by the author can be accepted by people from different groups and become more convictive.

### **3.3.1.2 Topic Selection**

In this study, the required topic is about global environment protection. Consequently, both Chinese and Swedish English learners write their essays from the perspective of the whole world and human society.

- (3) We share the same land; we share the same sea; we share the same air; more important, we share the same earth.

(CSEL 1-3)

In example (3), “we” refers to the shared standpoints, experiences, concepts, beliefs or goals, that is to say, “we” are all living on one planet, protecting environment is the responsibility of every single person on earth.

### **3.3.1.3 Traditional Cultures and Values**

Generally speaking, Chinese culture is collectivism-oriented and collectivism is a traditional value from the ancient time. Chinese have always emphasized the importance of the group and society and tend to take the public as priority instead themselves. Therefore, Chinese English learners are used to express their own opinions from the standpoint of “we” to cater to the general value of the whole society.

- (4) No, we all can. We all have to work together and do whatever we can for a better environment.

(CSEL 1-3)

In sentence (4), “we” manifests the importance and necessity of solving environment by the joint effort of all social members. In other words, to cope with environment problems together concerns the duty and benefit of every single social member.

As for Sweden, it is a member of European Union and United Nations and advocates joint efforts of all social members. In many international issues, Sweden have tight communication and cooperation with other countries. Swedish people are absolutely not isolated but collaborative.

(5) But, rich or not - or poor or not, we all should and MUST care about the environment.

(SSEL 1-3)

In example (5), the use of “we” emphasizes all social members. No matter they are rich or poor, to deal with problem together is the most essential thing.

To conclude, based on the above in-depth reasons, both Chinese and Swedish tend to use more plural first person subject pronoun “we” than singular first person subject pronoun “I”.

### **3.3.2 Discussion of the Differences Found**

#### **3.3.2.1 Sense of Self-identity**

Swedish English learners have a stronger sense of self-identity inherited from their traditional culture or value, which is open, ambitious and individualism-oriented. As a result, they are more ambitious and eager to show their self-identity in essays. Influenced by traditional Chinese culture which advocates modesty a lot, Chinese learners are used to hide their identity of author in their essays so that they can become modest and accept appreciation in their own cultural environment.

#### **3.3.2.2 Teaching Methods**

In China, teachers always give students lectures, in which students are stilled with knowledge passively instead of expressing their own opinions. Compared with Chinese teachers’ teaching method, Swedish teachers are more likely to hold seminars, in which students are required to speak out their own creative ideas freely. As time goes on, resulted from the different teaching methods, Chinese and Swedish students have formed their own think pattern and habits, which leads to the difference of use of first person subject pronouns in their essays.

#### **3.3.2.3 Traditional Cultures and Values**

It is universally acknowledged that traditional western values focus on individualism. On the contrary, traditional Chinese values stress collectivism. The two values put emphasis on two completely contradictory aspects, which affects Chinese and Swedish ways of thinking: Chinese people tend to consider things as a member of a group, while Swedish people would like to consider from a more private perspective.

## **4 Conclusion**

The present research is a corpus-based comparative research. It finds that Swedish English learners use more “I” and “we” than Chinese English learners; the use of “I” and “we” are significantly different between Swedish and Chinese English learners, because the former tend to use more “I” while the latter tend to use more “we”; one similarity of the use of “I” and “we” between them is that compared to “I”, “we” is more preferred among both two groups of English learners. This paper also suggests that the reasons behind the similarity and differences found are the culture backgrounds, ways of teaching, and the writers’ identities between the two countries.

In daily teaching and learning activities, this paper suggests that, first of all, Chinese English learners ought to have a good knowledge of the basic uses and relative functions of “I” and “we” as well as master the proper use very well, especially in the field of argumentative writing. Chinese English teachers should play the role of guide, be cautious enough in teaching or guiding students, and prevent learners from overuse, underuse or misuse in writing. Then, learners should not avoid using “I” and “we” on purpose, on the contrary, they should express their own opinions and take responsibility for their opinions by using “I” and “we” in a proper way so that their writings can be more native and successful. Teachers should offer learners some background information about English native speakers’ using habits of “I” and “we” and encourage them to use “I” and “we” correctly. Besides, “having correct grammatical skills is not enough for writing training, the appropriate use of linguistic features in particular genres should receive equal emphasis” (Wang, 2009). So teachers need to help learners to acquire more genre knowledge, such as the specific characteristics of argumentative essays. In the end, awareness should be raised in the distinction between spoken language and written language. The teachers’ task is not simply to forbid learners from using first person subject pronouns, but to enable them to use alternative structures which express the same meaning, and, “above all, lead them to maintain consistency in academic writing style at all levels—lexical, syntactic, stylistic and content” (Wang, 2009).

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