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AUTHORIAL PRESENCE IN ENGLISH THESIS WRITING: VIETNAMESE WRITERS' VIEWS ON SELF-REFERENCE

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Abstract
Writer identity or authorial presence has drawn tremendous attention in the past decades; however, previous studies tend to focus on corpus analyses of self-reference use in research articles written by established researchers. It is important to understand not only how self-reference devices are used, but also why they are used by novice writers such as students, especially those who use English as a foreign language. Research in this area, however, is still limited. To address this research gap, the present study examines Vietnamese students' perceptions of self-reference in English research writing. Data were collected from 141 Master's students at different thesis writing stages: Pre-writing, Writing, and Completed, through questionnaires and interviews. Results of Chi-square tests show no significant differences across the groups in their perceptions of self-reference and rhetorical functions. While students widely accept indirect self-reference, uncertainty remains regarding first-person pronouns. Many students avoid "I" due to concerns about objectivity, shaped by academic norms, institutional expectations, and prior exposure to research. The study highlights the need for targeted writing instruction that considers disciplinary and cultural influences.

Keywords: authorial presence, perceptions, research writing, self-reference, Vietnamese writers

Introduction
There has been an increasing interest in authorial stance in academic writing in the past decades (e.g., Abdeljaoued, 2026; Hyland, 2005; Li & Wei, 2026; Pho, 2013; Sugiharto, 2025; Wang & Zeng, 2021). One of the aspects of authorial stance that have drawn the most attention from researchers is writer identity or authorial presence, i.e., writers' use of self-reference to claim their authority or identity (Hyland, 2005). In this aspect, scholars often distinguish between *self-mention* and *self-reference*. *Self-mention* typically refers to explicit reference to the author through first-person pronouns such as *I, we, my, our* (Hyland, 2001, 2005). Some studies also consider third-person noun phrases such as *the author* or *the researcher* as *self-mention* devices (Wu & Zhu, 2014). *Self-reference*, the focus of this study, in contrast, is an umbrella term that comprises both explicit and implicit devices to

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refer to oneself. It includes self-mention as well as more indirect strategies such as abstract noun phrases (e.g., *this study*, *this paper*) or passive constructions, which can conceal the author's presence (Khedri & Kritsis, 2020).

Previous studies have examined the use of self-reference devices across disciplines and cultures, and they revealed significant differences in both frequency and rhetorical function. For instance, soft science writers have been found to use first-person pronouns more frequently than their hard science counterparts (Hyland, 2001; Khedri, 2016). Cross-cultural research has shown that native English writers tend to use self-mention devices more frequently than non-native writers (Li & Wei, 2026; Martínez, 2005; Vassileva, 1998). Additionally, more implicit strategies, such as the use of third-person phrases (e.g., *the author*) or passive voice, have also been found as a way of minimizing authorial presence (Khedri & Kritsis, 2020; Wu & Zhu, 2014).

Although it is important to study the actual use of self-reference devices in academic writing, many scholars have emphasized the need to explore writers' perceptions of self-reference to understand the motivations and restrictions behind their rhetorical choices (Casanave, 1995; Harwood, 2006). Some studies have interviewed experienced scholars (e.g., Harwood, 2006; Lee, 2013), whereas some others have examined students' views; however, those that explored students' perceptions mostly involved undergraduate students and focused on authorial stance in general rather than self-reference specifically (Çandarlı et al., 2015; Mora, 2017; Uba, 2017). Master's (MA) students' perceptions of self-reference use in academic writing are generally underexplored, and those that focused on this group of writers often have limited sample sizes or methodological scope. Investigating this group of writers can provide us with a better understanding of how writers' perceptions of self-reference evolve from undergraduate students to more experienced students like postgraduate students. Compared to undergraduates who are inherently more novice and tend to imitate or agree with their lecturers or supervisors, MA students may have more confidence to decide how they want to show their authorial stance, yet they are still in the process of developing their writer identity.

Furthermore, little research has investigated this issue in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context as Vietnam, where cultural and institutional factors may impact students' beliefs and practices toward self-reference. To address this gap, the present study aims to gain a deeper understanding of Vietnamese MA students' use of self-reference by investigating their perceptions of this practice in theses written in English. Specifically, it examines students' views on the appropriateness of self-reference use, their understanding of the rhetorical functions of self-reference markers, and the factors that influence their use or avoidance of such markers. The present study contributes to the literature on writer identity in academic writing by combining quantitative and qualitative methods to provide insights into student perceptions.

Self-reference use

The use of self-reference in general, self-mention in particular, especially first-person pronouns and their derived forms such as '*I, we, me, us, my, our*', has drawn tremendous attention from researchers. Hyland (2001), for example, examines the use of self-mention in a corpus of 240 research articles across eight

disciplines. The study revealed significant variations across disciplines, with authors in social sciences and humanities using more first-person pronouns than those in hard sciences. Similarly, based on the analysis of a dataset of 40 research articles in four disciplines, Khedri (2016) also found that soft sciences writers tend to use more exclusive first-person plural pronouns than those in hard sciences.

The use of self-mention has been investigated not only in research articles written by native speakers of English, but also cross-linguistically and cross-culturally. Research in this aspect generally shows that native English writers tend to use first-person pronouns more frequently than those writing in other languages (Vassileva, 1998) or those written by non-native English writers (Martínez, 2005). More recent studies of self-mention in research writing have moved beyond the investigation of first-person pronouns to include other less explicit forms of self-mention or self-reference such as the use of third-person noun phrases (e.g., *the author, the researcher, the writer*) (Gerrard, 2026; Wu & Zhu, 2014).

Other even more indirect or implicit forms of self-reference have also been explored. For example, based on the analysis of first-person plural pronouns and impersonal authorial references such as abstract rhetors and passive structures in a corpus of 160 research articles across four disciplines, Khedri and Kritsis (2020) found that writers in applied linguistics and psychology favored the use of exclusive first-person plural pronouns, whereas those in chemistry and environmental engineering tended to use more passive structures. Such impersonal authorial references can also be considered 'self-reference' though less explicit and visible than first-person pronouns.

Discourse functions of self-reference

In addition to investigating the frequency of self-reference markers, previous studies have also explored their discourse functions. One of the most influential models of discourse functions of authorial reference was developed by Hyland (2002). Based on a corpus analysis of 240 research articles and 64 undergraduate theses in various disciplines, Hyland (2002) proposed five functions of self-mention, ranging from the 'least threatening' to the 'most threatening': *expressing self-benefits, stating a purpose, explaining a procedure, elaborating an argument,* and *stating results/claims*. Many researchers have adopted or adapted this taxonomy from Hyland (2002) in investigating functions of different self-mention devices in academic writing. Harwood (2006), Menkabu (2017), and Xia (2018), for example, confirmed the use of self-mention for those functions as identified in Hyland (2002), but they also added one other function, namely *defining a term*.

Most of the previous studies of self-reference, however, tend to base on corpus analysis and mainly focus on the genre of research articles. Corpus analyses of frequency and functions of self-reference in academic writing provide us with information about how these markers are used. However, as argued by Casanave (1995) and Harwood (2006), simply employing corpus-based data "does not provide researchers with the necessary insight into the writers' thought processes and decisions that shape the way the text turns out" (Harwood, 2006, p. 425). Research into why self-reference markers are used can give us insights into this important marker of authorial stance or voice in academic writing, which can inform the instruction of research writing in the Vietnamese as well as global contexts.

Writers' perceptions of self-reference

Apart from corpus-based analyses of frequency and functions of self-reference use, a few studies have explored writers' perceptions of self-reference. Similar to the trend of self-reference research as reviewed above, these perception-based studies have primarily examined expert writers of research articles. For example, Harwood (2006) interviewed five political scientists at a British university regarding their beliefs about appropriate and inappropriate use of first-person pronouns in journal articles. Similarly, Dobakhti (2011) interviewed four established researchers in the field of applied linguistics at a university in Malaysia about their first-person singular pronoun use in the Discussion sections of journal articles written in English. Both of these studies show that self-reference is shaped by disciplinary conventions and methodological choices. From a different perspective, Lee (2013) interviewed native Chinese academics to obtain insights into their use of first-person pronouns versus depersonalized forms in research articles written in Chinese. The findings reveal that Chinese scholars tend to favor inclusive plural pronoun 'we' and passive voice to meet publication expectations.

Apart from established researchers' views, previous studies have also shown interest in students' perceptions of authorial presence in academic writing. However, studies in this area tended to focus on undergraduate students' views on this issue in either argumentative essays (e.g., Çandarlı et al., 2015; Escobar & Fernández, 2017; MacIntyre, 2017; Mora, 2017) or dissertations (e.g., Hyland, 2002, 2008). Çandarlı et al. (2015), for example, based on discourse-based interviews with ten undergraduate students, found that the use of first-person singular pronouns in Turkish students' English essays was influenced by power relationship as well as contextual factors such as the writing instructions that they received previously or their instructor's expectations. Similarly, Hyland (2002, 2008) found that many Hong Kong undergraduate students avoided the use of 'I' due to its "individualistic identity" (Hyland, 2002, p. 1091).

Studies of students' perceptions have also explored doctoral students' views of authorial voice (e.g., Lehman & Sułkowski, 2023; Peng, 2019; Uba, 2017). However, these studies tended to investigate doctoral students' perceptions of authorial voice or stance in general. For example, Uba's (2017) interview of six PhD students in accounting in Nigeria revealed that their lack of authorial stance can be attributed to institutional practices that discouraged students to make themselves explicitly present in their writing, the absence of clear guidelines regarding the use of stance makers, or the unequal power relations between the PhD students and their supervisors.

Similar to studies of PhD students, the few studies that investigated MA students' perceptions tended to focus on their views of authorial voice or stance in general (e.g., Darwish, 2019; Menkabu, 2017; Zhao & Liu, 2021). Among these, Menkabu's (2017) study explored students' perceptions of various stance and engagement markers, including self-mention as a stance marker following Hyland's (2005) model. Through discourse-based interviews with 15 MA students in Linguistics and Literature (mostly Arab EFL students), Menkabu (2017) identified several factors which may influence students' use of stance and engagement markers, such as disciplinary community, cultural background, previous education, personality differences, stylistic preferences, and supervisors' advice. His study can be seen as the most relevant to our present study. However, his study only sought

students' perceptions of appropriate use of various self-reference markers through sample sentences. A more detailed investigation of students' perceptions and of a larger sample would be necessary to achieve a better understanding of the topic.

In addition, as pointed out above, most of the studies that explored writers' perceptions of self-reference use tended to employ interview-based approach. Little research employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide both a wide and in-depth understanding of writer's use of self-reference in academic writing. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to how students' perceptions may vary according to different stages of thesis writing, namely the pre-writing stage, the writing stage, and the completion stage. MA students who are at different stages are likely to differ in their exposure to research writing and their familiarity with the writing genre. Exploring how MA students' perceptions of self-reference evolve through these different stages will give us a more complete understanding of how students gradually build up their awareness of conventions and their confidence in self-reference use. Such understanding will in turn have important implications for instructors, supervisors and administrators. The present study thus aims to gain a deeper understanding of Vietnamese EFL students' use of self-reference by conducting questionnaire surveys and interviews on their perceptions. The research questions are stated as follows.

1. What are Vietnamese students' perceptions of the use of self-reference in theses written in English?
2. Are there differences in perceptions of self-reference use among students of the three groups: Pre-writing, Writing, and Completed?

Method

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to explore students' perceptions of self-reference use through both questionnaire and interviews. Questionnaire was used to gain more data for the study, while interviews can help us achieve a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions.

Participants

The study was conducted within an MA in TESOL program at a large university in the south of Vietnam. This program was chosen as it is one of the few MA programs in Vietnam that require students to write their thesis in English. As mentioned in the Introduction, the study aimed to investigate how students' perceptions of self-reference vary across the three stages: pre-writing, writing, and completion. The comparison will allow us to examine how writers' perceptions develop over time rather than view the perceptions of MA students as static. Thus, we decided to recruit not only participants who had completed their MA thesis but also those who were writing up their MA thesis and those who were doing coursework and had not started their thesis yet. For those who had completed their thesis, we only contacted those who completed their thesis in the last five years because their experiences and perceptions would be more recent and relevant to current research writing practices. The questionnaire was sent to all the students of these three groups. We received responses from 141 participants. Details of the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information of the questionnaire respondents

		Frequency	Percent
MA Cohort	K2023	46	32.6
	K2022	22	15.6
	K2021	26	18.4
	K2020	20	14.2
	K2019	13	9.2
	K2018	14	9.9
	Total	141	100.0
Thesis status	Completed	37	26.2
	Writing	57	40.4
	Pre-writing	47	33.3
	Total	141	100.0

Twelve students among the questionnaire respondents were selected randomly from those who expressed their availability for interviews. We conducted four focus group interviews with three interviewees for each group, ensuring a mix of differing opinions. Initially, we planned to have only three groups: Completed, Writing, and Pre-writing. However, since the pre-writing group consisted of two intakes, one from September and the other from December, we interviewed them separately to avoid influence. There were thus six interviewees for the pre-writing group. The information of interview participants can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic information of the focus group interview participants

Focus group	Number of interviewees	Interviewees
Completed group	3	S1, S2, S3
Writing group	3	S4, S5, S6
Pre-writing group	6	S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12
Total	12	

Instruments

Questionnaire

Since most previous studies of writer's perceptions of stance markers or self-reference words mainly employed interview as a research instrument as reviewed in the Introduction, the questionnaire in our study was developed mainly based on the interview questions from previous studies such as Menkabu (2017), or Uba (2017). However, since these studies mainly explore stance markers in general (including self-mention), we had to modify the questions according to the focus of our study, which is self-reference use. For example, instead of asking the participants about the appropriateness of first-person pronouns only, we also asked our participants about other forms of self-reference (both explicit and implicit self-reference). To be specific, apart from demographic information questions, the main part of the questionnaire explores four main areas: (1) students' knowledge of 'self-reference'; (2) students' perceptions of self-reference in research reports in applied linguistics and language teaching; (3) students' perceptions of rhetorical functions of self-reference in research reports; and (4) sources of influence on students' use of self-reference. The structure of the questionnaire can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. Structure of the questionnaire

Section	Focus	Items
Background information	Cohort, Stage of thesis writing	A1-3
Self-reference use	Students' knowledge of 'self-reference'	B1a-b
	Students' perceptions of self-reference use in research reports applied linguistics and language teaching	B2a-f
	Students' perceptions of rhetorical functions of self-reference in research reports	B3a-f
	Sources of influence on students' use of self-reference	B4a-j

The main part of the questionnaire (Part B. Self-reference use) included different question types. Initially, we used dichotomous Yes/No questions, but after piloting with six students, we added '*It depends*' or '*Not sure*' to the 6 items in question 2 based on their feedback. The other questions were kept as in the original version. To gain insights into the students' perceptions, we invited the respondents to add explanations to their answers instead of just *Yes* or *No* (see Appendix A for more details). However, it should be noted that these were set as optional, so it would not discourage the respondents from completing the questionnaire. As such, it is deemed necessary to supplement the questionnaire with interviews so we can explore students' perceptions in-depth.

Interview protocol

As mentioned above, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with four groups of students to elaborate on their responses in the questionnaire survey. The guided questions thus followed closely the structure of the questionnaire, particularly questions 2, 3 and 4, i.e. whether they think the use of different self-reference devices is appropriate and why; which self-reference device they used/would use in their thesis; for what function they used/would use self-reference devices and why; whether they received any instructions on how to use self-reference in their thesis (see Appendix B for more details). Follow-up questions were asked depending on each interviewee's response.

Data collection and analysis procedures

Questionnaire data

After obtaining Research ethics approval from the University (ERB application number 14-2024), we collected data via Google Forms and in-class survey. Google Forms was used to reach students who had completed their thesis or coursework, though we anticipated a low response rate. For cohorts K2022 and K2023, still in coursework, surveys were conducted during breaktime. For both methods of data collection, we first explained the purpose of our study and all the conditions for data collection according to the Ethics approval. We also emphasized that all the data would only be used for research purposes and would be kept confidential. The Google Forms closed after two weeks, yielding 88 responses, while 53 were collected on paper, totaling 141 responses.

After the data were collected, all the responses from hard copies were entered into SPSS Statistics 26 and all the responses via Google Forms were extracted in the form of an Excel file, which was then imported into SPSS. Since most of the

variables are nominal type of data, we mainly report the results in the form of descriptive statistics, i.e. frequency and percentages. In addition, Chi-square tests were employed to identify variations across the three groups of students (i.e., completed, writing, and pre-writing).

Interview data

As mentioned above, we conducted four focus group interviews. All the four groups were interviewed in July 2024; one online via Google Meet in the evening as the participants could not meet during the day; the other three offline at the university. Each session lasted about an hour and was conducted in Vietnamese for clearer expression. At the beginning of each interview session, the study was explained to the interviewees and they were asked to sign the consent forms. During the interview, one researcher asked questions while the other took notes, with recordings made using a Sony voice recorder.

The interviews were then transcribed and translated into English, and anonymized using codes (e.g., S1, S2). Both researchers reviewed the transcripts separately and then discussed with each other to finalize the key themes, which were used to supplement the questionnaire data in answering the research questions.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Students' perceptions of self-reference use from questionnaire data

Table 4 presents the students' familiarity with the concept and their knowledge of alternative expressions.

Table 4. Students' knowledge of self-reference

Item	Response	Completed (N = 37)		Writing (N = 57)		Pre-writing (N = 47)		Total (N = 141)	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Heard the term	No	7	18.9	17	29.8	15	31.9	39	27.7
	Yes	30	81.1	40	70.2	32	68.1	102	72.3
Know alternative terms	No	21	56.8	38	66.7	40	85.1	99	70.2
	Yes	16	43.2	19	33.3	7	14.9	42	29.8

As can be seen in Table 4, the majority of students (72.3%) reported having heard the term *self-reference*, while the percentage of students that had never heard of the term was 27.7%. Among the three groups, the completed group exhibited the highest level of awareness, with 81.1% recognizing the term. In contrast, only 70.2% of the writing group and 68.1% of pre-writing group were familiar with it.

Although most students were aware of the concept, fewer students (29.8%) demonstrated their acknowledgement of alternative terms. Again, the completed group showed the highest familiarity, with 43.2% being aware of alternative terms. This percentage dropped to 33.3% among the writing group and only 14.9% among the pre-writing group. These findings indicate that students' familiarity with *self-reference* and its alternatives increases as they progress in their thesis-writing journey. However, even among those who had completed their theses, there is still a significant proportion not aware of alternative terms.

Being aware that merely having heard the term and knowing its alternatives does not necessarily mean a sufficient understanding of the concept, we decided to further examine how students perceive the use of specific self-reference devices in research reports in applied linguistics and language teaching (ALLT). Table 5 presents students' perceptions of the appropriateness of first-person pronouns in research reports in the field of ALLT.

Table 5. Students' perceptions of first-person pronoun use in research reports in ALLT

Item	Response	Completed (N = 37)		Writing (N = 57)		Pre-writing (N = 47)		Total (N = 141)	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
The use of 1st-person singular pronouns is appropriate.	Yes	12	32.4	23	40.4	16	34	51	36.2
	No	8	21.6	6	10.5	11	23.4	25	17.7
	It depends	11	29.7	24	42.1	15	31.9	50	35.5
	Not sure	6	16.2	4	7	5	10.6	15	10.6
The use of 1st-person plural pronouns to refer to a single author is appropriate.	Yes	7	18.9	7	12.3	4	8.5	18	12.8
	No	23	62.2	32	56.1	30	63.8	85	60.3
	It depends	4	10.8	12	21.1	4	8.5	20	14.2
	Not sure	3	8.1	6	10.5	9	19.1	18	12.8
The use of 1st-person plural pronouns to refer to multiple authors is appropriate.	Yes	25	67.6	44	77.2	29	61.7	98	69.5
	No	4	10.8	2	3.5	3	6.4	9	6.4
	It depends	4	10.8	8	14	10	21.3	22	15.6
	Not sure	4	10.8	3	5.3	5	10.6	12	8.5

As can be seen in Table 5, only 36.2% of the students recognized first-person singular pronouns (*I, me, my*) as appropriate in ALLT research. 35.5% of the students reckoned it depends; 17.7% rejected them; and 10.6% were unsure. Despite their acceptance in this field, this recognition rate is surprisingly low. The writing group had the highest approval (40.4%), and context-dependent responses were 42.1%, which suggests a nuanced understanding of disciplinary norms. Regarding using first-person plural pronouns (*we, us, our*) to refer to a single author, 60.3% of the students rejected; 12.8% accepted; 14.2% said it depends; 12.8% were unsure. Rejection was highest in the pre-writing group (63.8%), followed by the completed group (62.2%) and the writing group (56.1%). However, the use of first-person plural pronouns for multiple authors was widely accepted (69.5%), with only 6.4% rejecting them, 15.6% saying it depends, and 8.5% unsure. The writing group had the highest approval (77.2%), whereas 21.3% of the pre-writing group believed that it was context-dependent, Overall, students' acceptance of self-reference use in ALLT varied. *We* for multiple authors was widely accepted, whereas *I* for single authors remained divisive. The findings suggest that writing experience enhances students' awareness of disciplinary norms.

Table 6 presents students' perceptions of the appropriateness of third-person noun phrases (NPs), inanimate NPs, and passive structures in research reports within applied linguistics and language teaching.

Table 6. Students' perceptions of 3rd-person NPs, inanimate NPs and passive structures in research reports in ALLT

Item	Response	Completed (N = 37)		Writing (N = 57)		Pre-writing (N = 47)		Total (N = 141)	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
The use of 3rd-person NPs is appropriate.	Yes	31	83.8	54	94.7	44	93.6	129	91.5
	No	1	2.7	0	0	0	0	1	0.7
	It depends	5	13.5	2	3.5	2	4.3	9	6.4
	Not sure	0	0	1	1.8	1	2.1	2	1.4
The use of inanimate NPs is appropriate.	Yes	33	89.2	51	89.5	41	87.2	125	88.7
	No	2	5.4	2	3.5	0	0	4	2.8
	It depends	1	2.7	2	3.5	4	8.5	7	5
	Not sure	1	2.7	2	3.5	2	4.3	5	3.5
The use of passive structures is appropriate.	Yes	30	81.1	49	86	37	78.7	116	82.3
	No	3	8.1	1	1.8	0	0	4	2.8
	It depends	3	8.1	6	10.5	7	14.9	16	11.3
	Not sure	1	2.7	1	1.8	3	6.4	5	3.5

Figures from Table 6 show that most students (91.5%) recognized third-person NPs as appropriate in ALLT, with only 0.7% rejecting them and 6.4% saying it depends. Acceptance was highest in the writing group (94.7%), followed by the pre-writing (93.6%) and completed (83.8%) groups, suggesting some uncertainty even among experienced students. A similar trend can be observed for inanimate NPs, with 88.7% of the students approving, 2.8% rejecting, and 5% considering context. Acceptance was relatively consistent among the three groups, with 89.5% of the writing group, 89.2% of the completed group, and 87.2% of the pre-writing group. Passive structures were reckoned to be appropriate by 82.3% of the students; only 2.8% rejected them; and 11.3% said it depends. Acceptance of passive structures was highest in the writing group (86%), followed by the completed group (81.1%) and the pre-writing group (78.7%). It can be said that students exhibited a high level of acceptance for third-person NPs, inanimate NPs, and passive structures in ALLT. Despite minor differences among the three groups, the findings suggest that students generally recognize such features as conventional in academic writing. Although only a small percentage of students are unsure about the appropriateness of those self-reference markers, further instruction on academic writing conventions is still needed.

Table 7 presents the results of students' evaluations of the potential rhetorical functions that self-reference markers can serve in research reports.

Table 7. Students' perceptions of rhetorical functions of self-reference in research reports

Item	Response	Completed (N = 37)		Writing (N = 57)		Pre-writing (N = 47)		Total (N = 141)	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
To state a purpose	Yes	18	48.6	33	57.9	33	70.2	84	59.6
	No	19	51.4	24	42.1	14	29.8	57	40.4
To explain a procedure	Yes	11	29.7	27	47.4	22	46.8	60	42.6
	No	26	70.3	30	52.6	25	53.2	81	57.4
To state results or claims	Yes	12	32.4	30	52.6	19	40.4	61	43.3
	No	25	67.6	27	47.4	28	59.6	80	56.7
To express self-benefits	Yes	20	54.1	37	64.9	29	61.7	86	61
	No	17	45.9	20	35.1	18	38.3	55	39
To elaborate an argument	Yes	14	37.8	28	49.1	18	38.3	60	42.6
	No	23	62.2	29	50.9	29	61.7	81	57.4
To define a term	Yes	9	24.3	22	38.6	13	27.7	44	31.2
	No	28	75.7	35	61.4	34	72.3	97	68.8

As can be seen from Table 7, using self-reference to *express self-benefits* received the highest agreement, with 61% of students recognizing this function. This function was followed by *stating a purpose* (59.6%), and lower agreement was found for other rhetorical functions. To be specific, only 42.6% of students recognized the use of these markers in *explaining a procedure*, and 43.3% considered it appropriate for *stating results or claims*. Similarly, 42.6% acknowledged its function in *elaborating an argument*, whereas only 31.2% recognized the use of self-reference for *defining a term*.

In terms of differences across the three groups of students, the pre-writing group showed the highest acceptance of self-reference for the function of *stating a purpose* (70.2%), whereas both the writing group and the completed group showed the highest recognition for the function of *expressing self-benefits*, at 64.9% and 54.1%, respectively. Remarkably, the completed group consistently showed lower recognition than the writing group across most categories, suggesting that students who are still in their writing process may have a greater awareness of these rhetorical functions. These findings suggest that students may have a limited awareness of the broader rhetorical roles self-reference can play in academic writing. Table 8 presents the results regarding the sources that influence students' use of self-reference devices.

Table 8. Sources of influence on the use of self-reference

Item	Response	Completed (N = 37)		Writing (N = 57)		Pre-writing (N = 47)		Total (N = 141)	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Supervisor(s)	Yes	19	51.4	30	52.6	13	27.7	62	44
	No	18	48.6	27	47.4	34	72.3	79	56
Lecturers	Yes	19	51.4	35	61.4	23	48.9	77	54.6

Item	Response	Completed (N = 37)		Writing (N = 57)		Pre-writing (N = 47)		Total (N = 141)	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	No	18	48.6	22	38.6	24	51.1	64	45.4
Ex-master's students	Yes	5	13.5	13	22.8	7	14.9	25	17.7
	No	32	86.5	44	77.2	40	85.1	116	82.3
Friends/ colleagues	Yes	14	37.8	10	17.5	9	19.1	33	23.4
	No	23	62.2	47	82.5	38	80.9	108	76.6
Previous theses in your field	Yes	23	62.2	41	71.9	30	63.8	94	66.7
	No	14	37.8	16	28.1	17	36.2	47	33.3
Books	Yes	18	48.6	26	45.6	25	53.2	69	48.9
	No	19	51.4	31	54.4	22	46.8	72	51.1
Journal articles	Yes	23	62.2	44	77.2	38	80.9	105	74.5
	No	14	37.8	13	22.8	9	19.1	36	25.5
Websites	Yes	4	10.8	10	17.5	12	25.5	26	18.4
	No	33	89.2	47	82.5	35	74.5	115	81.6
MA thesis guidelines	Yes	13	35.1	21	36.8	14	29.8	48	34
	No	24	64.9	36	63.2	33	70.2	93	66
Others	Yes	0	0	0	0	2	4.3	2	1.4
	No	37	100	57	100	45	95.7	139	98.6

Table 8 shows that journal articles were the most influential source, with 74.5% of students from three groups acknowledging their impact. Previous theses in the field were also recognized as an influence (66.7%), followed by lecturers (54.6%). Other sources of influence included books (48.9%), supervisors (44%), and thesis guidelines (34%). Friends or colleagues were also considered as an influential source (23.4%), whereas websites (18.4%) and ex-master's students (17.7%) were mentioned less frequently. The pre-writing group showed the highest reliance on journal articles (80/9%), followed by the writing group at 77.2%, and the completed group at 62.2%. Apart from journal articles, previous theses in the field were also recognized as an equally influential source by the completed group (62.2%). The results suggest that students at all stages of research writing tend to rely heavily on published academic works and existing theses as models for self-reference use. This reliance may reflect the students' need for concrete examples to guide their writing. The fairly low reliance on supervisors and MA thesis guidelines suggests that students may not be able to find advice related to the use of self-reference from these sources.

To determine whether there are significant differences in learners' perceptions of self-reference in research reports among the three groups, we conducted Chi-square tests. Table 9 summarizes the results of Chi-square tests for the questionnaire items.

Table 9. Chi-square test results for differences among the three groups of students

Section	Item	Chi-square	df	Sig.
Students' perceptions of SR use in research reports in ALLT	The use of FPSP is appropriate.	6.318	6	.388
	The use of FPPP to refer to a single author is appropriate.	7.668	6	.263
	The use of FPPP to refer to multiple authors is appropriate.	5.581	6	.472[a]
	The use of TPNP such as "the writer(s)" is appropriate.	7.895	6	.246[a,b]
	The use of inanimate NPs (e.g., This study) is appropriate.	4.257	6	.642[a]
	The use of impersonal syntactic structures such as passive voice is appropriate.	7.919	6	.244[a]
Students' perceptions of rhetorical functions of SR in English research reports	To state a purpose	4.109	2	.128
	To explain a procedure	3.378	2	.185
	To state results or claims	3.96	2	.138
	To express self-benefits	1.127	2	.569
	To elaborate an argument	1.691	2	.429
	To define a term	2.542	2	.281

Note: *ALLT: Applied linguistics and language teaching; FPPP: 1st-person plural pronoun; FPSP: 1st-person singular pronoun; NP: noun phrase; SR: self-reference; TPNP: 3rd-person noun phrase*

Table 9 shows that no significant differences were found across the groups regarding their perceptions for the appropriateness of self-reference use. Similarly, for students' perceptions of the rhetorical functions of self-reference in research reports, none of the Chi-square tests yielded significant results. The results suggest that the three groups had similar views on the rhetorical roles of self-reference. Overall, the results indicate that students generally shared similar perceptions of self-reference use.

Students' perceptions of self-reference use from interview data

The interview data reveal varying perceptions regarding the use of first-person singular pronouns (*I, me, my*) in research reports. Several participants (5 out of 12) expressed reluctance to use these pronouns due to academic conventions and institutional expectations. One participant shared, "I was taught to avoid using first-person pronouns when writing the thesis" (S2), whereas another noted more specifically that his decision was influenced by his writing lecturer who advised against first-person pronouns, particularly for theses. Many students (8 out of 12) reported that their choice was shaped by reading previous theses, which predominantly used implicit authorial forms such as "*the author*." Three students also pointed out the influence of disciplinary norms, stating that while social sciences may permit explicit forms of authorial stands, natural sciences often discourage it to maintain objectivity. They also pointed out that qualitative research in social sciences and humanities disciplines allows more explicit self-reference compared to quantitative studies. One student remarked, "In action research, the use of 'I, me, my' is acceptable" (S5), explaining that personal involvement is

inherent in such methodology. Another participant shared, "My thesis was quantitative, so I avoided 'I' and used 'the author' instead" (S6). Others suggested that although writers should avoid first-person singular pronouns in results sections for objectivity, discussion sections could benefit from explicit personal stance.

Institutional guidelines and cultural background also influenced students' choices. Three participants mentioned that explicit self-reference markers (i.e., *I, me, my*) were more commonly found in research reports written by Western writers, whereas publications from Asian countries tended to favor impersonal structures. One student observed, "I have read publications from Asia where authors avoid 'I, me, my,' whereas European researchers use them to present their stance" (S8). Others linked this practice to broader cultural tendencies, suggesting that collectivist cultures might prefer impersonal structures or self-reference markers to maintain objectivity. However, although many students avoided first-person pronouns, they acknowledged the practical benefits of using them. Some argued (5 students) that "*I, me, my*" could make their writing clearer and more concise, especially in research articles with strict word limits. One participant noted:

> *Using 'I, me, my' saves space compared to 'the researcher,' which can sometimes be ambiguous as it may not be clear whether 'the researcher' refers to the writer of the thesis or another researcher in a study reviewed in the thesis* (S3).

Other interviewees viewed self-reference as a way to assert their academic identity, particularly in fields like ALLT. As one participant stated, "To me, this should be encouraged as part of the recognition of self. I see no reason for why a researcher hides his/her self" (S11).

The preference for inanimate subjects such as "*this study*" and the use of passive voice were widely acknowledged as strategies to maintain an objective tone. Several interviewees reported that they were explicitly taught to use these structures and that they observed their prevalence in academic articles. One interviewee explained, "As far as I know, these noun phrases are encouraged because they make the paper more objective" (S9). Others pointed out that although passive structures help emphasize actions or results, excessive use of such structures may lead to ambiguity as it is not clear who carried out the action. Interestingly, three students shared that they noted a shift in their perceptions over time. Before completing their theses, they largely followed the conventions found in academic papers, that is, avoiding explicit self-reference markers for safety in thesis defense. However, after gaining more exposure to research, they reconsidered their stance and recognized that first-person pronouns could enhance clarity and authorial presence. One participant reflected, "At first, I avoided 'I, me, my' to be safe, but after reading more research, I think it is fine to use them to express my viewpoint" (S2).

These qualitative findings align with the questionnaire results reported in the previous section, that students' perceptions of self-reference use varied depending on their research approach, disciplinary and institutional expectations, and cultural influences. Whereas some students strictly followed traditional academic norms, others gradually adopted a more flexible stance especially when there is no explicit advice against self-reference use from supervisors or thesis guidelines.

Discussion

The findings from this study provide important insights into students' perceptions of self-reference use in research writing, highlighting both students' awareness of conventional academic practices and their uncertainty. The quantitative results show that students generally shared similar views on self-reference use, with no significant differences across the three groups. These findings suggest that self-reference is perceived in a fairly consistent way among students at different stages of the writing process. The results indicate that although students have a strong preference for indirect self-reference (e.g., third-person noun phrases and inanimate noun phrases), they are not so certain about the acceptability of first-person pronouns. Students expressed their concerns that first-person pronouns may make their research writing appear less formal and objective. This finding echoes previous studies that found similar apprehensions among undergraduate and doctoral students in ESL (English as a second language) contexts (Hyland, 2002, 2008; Uba, 2017).

One of the key findings of this study is that students' familiarity with self-reference increases as they progress in their thesis-writing journey, especially evident in their recognition of the term "self-reference" and its alternatives. Students who had completed their theses exhibited the highest level of awareness. This finding supports findings from previous research (e.g., Menkabu, 2017; Peng, 2019), which suggests that academic writing conventions can be acquired gradually through exposure and practice. However, even among the completed group of students, there are still some knowledge gaps, particularly regarding alternative self-reference expressions. This suggests a need for more explicit instruction on academic writing conventions at the early stage of their writing process in MA courses such as Proposal Writing or Research Writing, as well as through supervision meetings with supervisors.

The study found that students of the three groups have a strong preference for inanimate subjects. This finding reveals that students' perceptions of self-reference use in ALLT reflect the findings of previous studies (e.g., Hyland, 2002, 2008; Lee, 2013) which highlight the role of disciplinary norms in shaping authorial presence. In ALLT, where personal engagement is more accepted, students demonstrated a certain degree of willingness to use first-person pronouns, although some showed uncertainty. This trend is consistent with Harwood (2006) and Dobakhti (2011), who found that even experienced native researchers in the field of Political Science and Applied Linguistics exhibit hesitation when using first-person pronouns due to concerns about the objectivity requirement of research reports. This trend in ALLT appears to align more closely with soft disciplines, where personal engagement is more acceptable than in hard disciplines, which tend to favor greater impersonality (Abdeljaoued, 2026).

The interview data also revealed a growing awareness of the appropriateness of self-reference in different contexts. Several students acknowledged that the acceptability of first-person pronouns may depend on research methodology and disciplinary norms. Qualitative research such as action research and disciplines within the social sciences and humanities were perceived as more authorial, whereas quantitative studies and natural sciences tended to discourage authorial presence (Hyland, 2001; Khedri, 2016). This perspective suggests that students are

becoming more aware of disciplinary conventions, which may influence their writing.

This study also showed that students widely rejected the use of first-person plural pronouns (*we, us, our*) in research reports written by single authors like theses. This shows an awareness of common academic conventions when it comes to representing a single author in academic texts. However, the low acceptance rate of first-person singular pronouns, even within ALLT, indicates a reluctance to assert a strong authorial stance in students' writing. This may be attributed to the fact that MA students are novice writers in the field. More broadly speaking, however, this may be influenced by cultural factors, as seen in Lee's (2013) study of Chinese academics, where a preference for non-personalized forms was linked to a collectivist writing tradition in many Asian EFL contexts (Li & Wei, 2026). In Vietnamese research writing, the use of *tôi* ("I") to refer to oneself seems to be uncommon, especially in traditional or formal contexts. Writers may avoid explicit forms of self-reference to maintain a sense of modesty, which aligns with community-oriented norms. This cultural norm could help explain why some MA students in the present study hesitate to adopt an explicit authorial stance, even when specific disciplinary conventions may allow it.

The strong preference for third-person noun phrases and inanimate noun phrases highlights students' inclination toward indirect self-reference use. Students (90%) viewed these markers as appropriate in ALLT, and this reinforces the idea that the students perceive them as more formal and objective. This aligns with prior findings (Çandarlı et al., 2015; Hyland, 2002), which suggests that novice academic writers tend to adopt impersonal authorial stance to comply with perceived academic standards. Additionally, students' high acceptance rate of passive constructions (82.3%) reflects an ongoing and strong belief that passive structures contribute to objectivity. However, qualitative data from students' response indicate an underlying tension between the perceived objectivity of indirect self-reference and the clarity of direct self-reference. Those who rejected passive constructions argued that active voice would be preferable in certain cases where clarity is required. This contradiction suggests that while students generally recognize the formal conventions of research writing, they still struggle to balance between clarity and convention.

One other significant finding was that the students have the tendency to acknowledge certain functional roles of self-reference markers while showing lower recognition for others. For instance, a large number of students recognized the use of self-reference for *expressing self-benefits* and *stating a purpose*, but fewer students related it with *explaining a procedure, stating results, elaborating an argument*, or *defining a term*. This shows that although students understand some fundamental roles of self-reference, their awareness of rhetorical functions of these markers is still limited. From another perspective, the avoidance of self-reference for *stating results* or *elaborating an argument* shows that the students are not as authorial; as pointed out by Hyland (2002), these functions are more authorial compared to functions like *expressing self-benefits*.

The results also reveal that journal articles and previous theses emerged as the most significant references for students' self-reference use in research reports. This finding highlights the important role of academic models in shaping students' academic writing practices. The reliance on published research articles suggests that

students look to authoritative sources to guide their writing choices. Understandably, students in the earlier stages of research writing showed a stronger reliance on these sources, potentially reflecting their need for concrete examples to navigate academic conventions. The fact that supervisors or thesis guidelines were not seen as important sources for self-reference use from both questionnaire and interview data indicates that these sources should play a more active role in guiding such novice MA thesis writers. This also requires a general acceptance of self-reference use among thesis supervisors and examiners. With more explicit thesis guidelines that allow direct self-reference devices, students will find it more comfortable to use such devices in their thesis, without worrying or running the risk that their thesis will be rejected by examiners who are against explicit self-reference use.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that although Vietnamese students are generally aware of self-reference conventions in academic writing, uncertainty exists, particularly in using implicit and explicit self-reference markers. They generally accept third-person noun phrases, inanimate noun phrases, and passive structures, though some are still unsure or view appropriateness to be context-dependent. This indicates the need for more explicit instructions on self-reference strategies with consideration given to disciplinary appropriateness. To ensure effectiveness, writing instructions should introduce various forms and functions of self-reference and equip students with knowledge to make informed stylistic choices and boost their confidence in expressing more explicit authorial stance. Practice in using self-reference markers under supervisors' guidance is also recommended, as writing is a skill that can be improved through practice. Academic institutions can support this by organizing writing workshops with instructions on self-reference use as well as their rhetorical functions, and include clearer guidance on such use in thesis guidelines and instructions for thesis defense committees and examiners. Despite providing valuable insights into the use of self-reference in MA thesis, small sample size is a limitation in this study. The findings, therefore, may not be fully representative of self-reference use across different institutions. Future research should examine a larger sample across different institutions. It may also explore how self-reference use evolves with writers' experience and academic exposure to gain insights into its development over time.

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Appendix A

QUESTIONNAIRE

PART A: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Your M.A. Cohort:
   ☐ K2023 ☐ K2021 ☐ K2019
   ☐ K2022 ☐ K2020 ☐ K2018
2. Have you completed your thesis? ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. Are you in the process of writing your thesis? ☐ Yes ☐ No

PART B: SELF-REFERENCE EXPRESSIONS

1a. Have you ever heard the term "self-reference" somewhere before?
   ☐ Yes ☐ No

1b. Do you know any alternative terms that can be used to refer to "self-reference"? ☐ No ☐ Yes (Please specify: _____)

2. What do you think about the statements below. Please tick *Yes/No/It depends/Not sure* and explain.

With research reports in the field of applied linguistics and language teaching:

		Yes	No	It depends	Not sure
a.	The use of first person singular pronouns "*I, my, mine*" is appropriate. Please explain: ……..				
b.	The use of first person plural pronouns "*we, our, ours*" to refer to a single author is appropriate. Please explain: ……..				
c.	The use of first person plural pronouns "*we, our, ours*" to refer to multiple authors is appropriate. Please explain: ……..				
d.	The use of third person noun phrases such as "*the writer(s), the researcher(s), the author(s)*" is appropriate. Please explain: ……..				
e.	The use of inanimate noun phrases (e.g., *This study/research investigates/ believes/ argues …*) is appropriate. Please explain: ……..				
f.	The use of impersonal syntactic structures such as passive voice to avoid explicit reference to the author(s) (e.g., *It can be concluded that …*) is appropriate. Please explain: …….				

3. Which of the following rhetorical functions do you think self-reference expressions can be used to perform in English research reports? Tick *Yes/No*

	Functions	Yes	No
a.	to state a purpose (signaling the writer's intention and providing structure for the text) e.g., *In this section, I am going to describe the findings from my interviews …*		
b.	to explain a procedure (describing the research procedures used)		

	e.g., *I have collected the data of …*		
c.	to state results/ claims (presenting explicitly the writer's knowledge claim) e.g., *Likewise, I have offered evidence that some critical thinking practices may marginalise …*		
d.	to express self-benefits (expressing what the writers have personally gained) e.g., *To conclude, this interview is very useful both in completing our final year report and teaching me about how to do business …*		
e.	to elaborate an argument (describing the writer's line of reasoning) e.g., *I think that overall, the insight gained from …*		
f.	to define a term e.g., *I use the term pseudo-question to refer to …*		

4. Who/What affects your use of self-reference expressions? (Please tick all that apply)
   a. Your supervisor(s)
   b. Lecturers
   c. Ex-master's students
   d. Friends/colleagues
   e. Previous theses in your field
   f. Books
   g. Journal articles
   h. Websites
   i. MA thesis guidelines
   j. Ohters (Please specify): …….

Appendix B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you think the use of "*I, my, mine*" in English research reports is appropriate? Why (not)?
2. Do you think the use of "*we, our, ours*" in English research reports is appropriate? Why (not)?
3. Do you think the use of "*the writer, the researcher, the author*" in English research reports is appropriate? Why (not)?
4. Do you think the use of "*this study/research*" in English research reports is appropriate? Why (not)?
5. Do you think the use of passive constructions (e.g. "*It can be concluded that …*") in English research reports is appropriate? Why (not)?
6. Do you think there are differences between self-reference use in research reports in applied linguistics and language teaching and in other disciplines?
7. Do you use self-reference devices in your English research reports? Why (not)?
8. For what functions do you use self-reference devices in English research reports? Please explain.
9. Have you ever received any instructions/guidelines regarding self-reference use? Who/What influences your self-reference use? Please explain.