

Who am I? A linguistic analysis of speech pathology students' professional identity formation as reflected in their ePortfolios

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Abstract

Language is a key tool in both shaping and reflecting professional identity, but few studies examine the language of professional identity formation and how this changes across a program. Understanding language differences could inform scaffolding to support deeper reflection on foster professional identity. This study aimed to explore differences between professional identity language in Year 1 (Y1) and Year 4 (Y4) speech pathology students in their portfolios to develop a guide or 'scaffold' to support reflection on and ultimately foster professional identity. Written reflective texts were purposively sampled from ten Y1 and ten Y4 students of a four-year undergraduate speech pathology program in Western Australia, matched on demographic characteristics. A systemic functional linguistics framework was used to analyse the language, exploring transitivity (process types), modality and attitude and the overall genre structure of the reflections. Basic descriptive statistics were collated with rich qualitative description to showcase differences. Results showed differences in how Y1 and Y4 students presented themselves and made meaning of their journey to becoming a speech pathologist. Y1 tended to be more self-focused, using more affective words compared to more cognitive processes in Y4. The genre structures indicated the different focus of their reflections. These findings informed the development of a scaffold for professional identity reflections. Analysing the linguistic features of written self-reflections may well assist health professional students to recognise and foster professional identity formation throughout their program.

Introduction

Professional identity (PI) is the pinnacle of health professional training, with a student ideally completing their program with a sense of belonging to the profession (Cornett et al., 2023; Reissner & Armitage-Chan, 2024). A strong PI helps students' self-confidence as professionals, supports resilience, reduces stress and gives protection against burnout (Ashby et al., 2016; Fitzgerald, 2020). PI contributes to a successful transition to graduate life (Ashby et al., 2016), increasing job satisfaction and retention (Fitzgerald, 2020). PI also increases students' motivation to persevere and has benefits for their clients, team and the wider community (Fitzgerald, 2020; Wilson et al., 2013).

Health professions education (HPE), therefore, is not only concerned with the transfer of knowledge and skills as competencies alone are not enough (Jarvis-Selinger et al., 2012). Programs need to also consider student 'being' (Jarvis-Selinger et al., 2012), fostering student 'becoming' (Barnett, 2009) or professional identity formation (PIF). PI internalises the profession's knowledge, skills and attributes (such as values and ethics) and gives the sense of belonging to the profession (Cornett et al., 2023). Students integrate their personal characteristics, traits and life experiences, and their world view into their PI (Belgraver et al., 2022). Students 'become' their profession through the actions of aligning, exploring and sometimes struggling with the process (Reissner & Armitage-Chan, 2024). Reflection is one strategy to foster PI and is an important skill for health professionals (Lim et al., 2023; Mann et al., 2009; Wald, 2015) as it can foster not only knowledge and clinical skills, but also changes in attitudes, beliefs, biases and values (Fragkos, 2016).

Reflection is key to the iterative process of PIF (James, 2013) as students align their own interests, values and behaviours to the profession's expectations and explore different aspects of the profession, who they want to be and the career path they wish to take (Reissner & Armitage-Chan, 2024). As well as participating in the profession's public discourses, students also reflect alone in their own thoughts, with peers in discussions, and in written reflections, all contributing to their PIF (Lewis et al., 2023; Wald et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2013). Written reflections can support PIF (Lim et al., 2023), as writing is not only performative but the process of writing can be formational as students use language to position and present themselves, making a claim about their identity (Barnett, 2009; James, 2013). Writing a reflection about their identity and future career supports students' narrative of who they are and can support their career success (Gómez, 2014). However, reflective practice is a complex skill and requires guidance, with scaffolding or prompts required for deeper levels of reflection (Dunne et al., 2024; Harvey et al., 2025; Moniz et al., 2024; Tight, 2024). Analysing written reflections to develop this scaffolding is helpful (e.g., Ryan, 2011), however there has been a limited focus on discourse analysis of written texts in HPE (Woodward-Kron, 2020). One study by Falgares and colleagues (2017) examined the differences between texts on 'becoming a psychologist' written before and after a group intervention to reflect on PI. Their analysis, using automated software, showed changes in how the students represented their profession, having a more realistic understanding of their role as a psychologist at the end of the intervention. Another study of graduating pharmacy students thematically analysed reflective essays written after a six-week placement and found PI followed a developmental process (Johnson & Chauvin, 2016). However, neither of these analyses enabled the development of a guide or scaffold to support deeper reflections on PI, leaving little guidance how to foster and systematically scaffold reflections to specifically enhance PI in health professional student training even though such scaffolding has been recommended (Ryan, 2011). We focus on analysing written reflections in speech pathology (SP) specifically for the purpose of scaffolding PI reflections.

Despite increasing research into PIF in medicine, nursing and other allied health professions (Belgraver et al., 2022; Reissner & Armitage-Chan, 2024), little is known about how PI forms in speech pathology (SP) (Cornett et al., 2023; Lewis et al., 2023). SP is a profession which focuses on language, yet there has been little reflection on how language shapes and defines the SP profession (Ferguson, 2007). Nor on how professional discourses affect the formation of PI in student SPs and the potential for shaping this formation through discourse. As already discussed, PI is shaped by the discourses of the students' professional community, as well as by the students' own reflections on their experiences (Mann, 2011). As students participate in the discipline's discourses they learn to talk and learn from talk (Mann, 2011). The discipline community discourse includes statements about the profession, considered to be the 'truth', that regulate disciplinary practice (Paton et al., 2023). This 'truth' is passed to students throughout their training both formally and informally, in the curriculum at university and on placements in a variety of other systems (such as healthcare, disability, education). Students are navigating these discourses through their program, and for some PIF may involve struggling, being unable to form their PI and find belonging or cohesion (Reissner & Armitage-Chan, 2024). The discourses of SP potentially influence the style of communication and interaction with clients. For example, if SP identifies as a profession that

'fixes' communication or swallowing problems then their language and practice will be impairment based. If SP identifies as a profession who 'advocates', then some of their time will focus on community and family level advocacy.

Theoretical framework

In examining potential discourse analyses that may assist in developing a guide or scaffold, a Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) framework (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) provides an opportunity to examine meanings conveyed in student discourses from both content and interpersonal/attitudinal perspectives. SFL is a framework based on a semiotic, meaning-making theoretical perspective, focusing on the linguistic features of discourse, exploring how these might contribute to the construction of certain meanings or reflect attitudes of the writers/speakers. It combines the benefits of a linguistic analysis that focuses on 'form' (wording, grammar) *and* meanings, by focusing on the 'function' of the language being used, linking the language closely with the context of the discourse, including its purpose. SFL has been used to analyse oral communication and interactions in healthcare (Schleppegrell & Oteíza, 2023), student SPs interacting with supervisors (Ferguson, 2010), and pathological discourse patterns in SP clients (Armstrong et al., 2011). One SFL study of multiple health disciplines examined on-line reflective journal entries about cross-discipline professional language use and communication skills (Ruitenberg & Towle, 2015). Analysis of modality revealed students were more tentative in early journal reflections compared to later, and use of modality of certainty when discussing group agreement indicated a developing interprofessional identity (Ruitenberg & Towle, 2015). An analysis of written reflections based on an SFL framework may be well positioned to offer insights into discourse features that reflect PIF and potentially offer a way to 'develop a shared language to explicitly teach and assess reflective writing' (Ryan, 2011, p. 99). SFL has been recommended for use in HPE (James, 2013), particularly for reflections, but has not yet been widely used to date for this purpose (Konopasky & Diaz, 2023).

Aim and research questions

Given the current lack of information on PIF in SP and the potential value of an SFL framework in assisting with exploration in this area, this study aimed to investigate how language use differed in PI reflections between Year 1 and Year 4 in a SP program, utilising an SFL framework, in order to better inform the teaching of reflection that specifically supports PIF. The research questions and sub-questions were:

1. What are the language choice and genre structure differences in PI reflections between Y1 and Y4 SP students?

- Are students' choices of doing, thinking, feeling verbs or processes different (transitivity)?
- Is students' use of probability, obligation, usuality and inclination different (modality)?
- Is students' use of affect, judgement and appreciation different (attitude)?

- Is the genre structure of students' reflections different?

2. If found, how can the differences inform the teaching of PI reflections to support PIF?

Methods

Study design and ethics

The study used an interpretivist paradigm with a sociocultural theory of learning, particularly useful for understanding PIF because context is so obviously influential (Wilson et al., 2013). As noted above, SFL examines language meaning in context so was relevant to explore the phenomena under focus in this study. Our larger study received approval from the human research ethics committees of both the university conducting the research and the university of the participants (approval numbers x). This study followed the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) guidelines (O'Brien et al., 2014).

SFL

SFL proposes three different components of the semiotic system: field, tenor and mode (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The field concerns the nature of the discourse occurring, in this study the written career reflection in an eportfolio used both in the university program and potentially for future employers. The field is 'realised' linguistically through choice of vocabulary that conveys the events, actions, people and phenomena involved in the experience(s) the writer is focused on and the semantic roles of the wording e.g. whether a person (realized by a noun) is the actor or the recipient of an action; whether a verb used involves 'doing' (material process) or 'thinking/feeling' (mental process). Such description is referred to as the transitivity system. The tenor of the discourse relates to the relationship between participants in the discourse, hence is concerned with more interpersonal aspects of the discourse such as levels of formality, persuasiveness, affect etc. The mode is focused on the medium of the text i.e., whether it is written or spoken, face to face vs telephone etc. and the patterns associated with either. As the focus of the current study was on the students' conveying of attitudes, systems realizing field (transitivity) and tenor (modality, appraisal) were central to the analysis (see further detail below). Genre was also analysed as it gives the holistic meaning of the text and is signalled by a staged or schematic structure (Eggins, 2004) as well as being characterised by the combination of field, tenor and mode.

Context

Xxx is a relatively young university and the student demographic has a high number of students being the first family member to attend university. It also has a high number of mature age students, with two thirds of students studying full time. The Bachelor of Speech Pathology is a four-year undergraduate program enrolling around 35 students each year. Students have placements each semester, building from short early observational and skills-based experiences to practicum units in the final two years. For

each placement students collect evidence, write structured reflections and set new goals in their eportfolio, completed in a Workbook template accessed in PebblePad software. Students commence their eportfolio in Y1, completing new pages each subsequent semester. Across Y4 students commence a new Workbook template as a capstone assignment. Students are building their reflective practice, understanding of competencies and ability to set relevant learning goals across the program, supporting their PIF across the program.

Recruitment

All students enrolled in the program at xxx were given written information about the larger study, an information video, and received email invitations. Presentations and additional invitations were given in the specific units where the eportfolio was embedded in both semesters of 2018. Students were aware that participation was voluntary and would not affect grades or relationships with the researchers. Students could participate by ticking a consent box within the eportfolio, giving permission for the eportfolio to be exported as a PDF document after grading was complete.

Participants

Overall, 47 eportfolios were submitted to the study in 2018, with participation rates of 84% for Y1 and 89% for Y4, giving an overall participation rate of 85%. We used purposive sampling (Moser & Korstjens, 2018) to select 10 eportfolios from Y1 and 10 from Y4 matched as closely as possible on their demographics as shown in Table 1. The participants were all female, English speaking, domestic students, with none identified as from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Table 1
Participant characteristics

Variable		Y1 (n = 10)		Y4 (n = 10)	
		Mean	Range	Mean	Range
Age in years		28	19–40	26	21–46
Variable	Subgroups	frequency	%	frequency	%
Disability	yes	0	0	1	10
	no	6	60	9	90
	unknown	4	40	0	0
First in family*	yes	6	60	6	60
	no	4	40	4	40
Study load	full-time	8	80	9	90
	part-time	2	20	1	10
SES	high	3	30	7	70
	medium	7	70	3	30
Regionality	urban	10	100	9	90
	regional	0	0	1	10
Born overseas [#]		2	20	2	20
*first in family means first to attend university in the family based on parent qualifications					
# one born in South Africa, one in Serbia and two in England					

Insert Table 1 here.

Data

Students develop a front page called ‘Who am I?’ to attach to their eportfolio Workbook. This page is an introduction to who they are as a person and their philosophy as a SP student, i.e., a career or PI reflection. Students are encouraged to be creative, by adding photos and other personalisation, and are given questions to guide their reflection:

- Why are you becoming a SP?
- What has led you to becoming a SP?
- Why is becoming a SP important to you?

- What kind of SP do you want to be and why?

This activity commences in a Y1 class in Semester 2, with students choosing from a selection of photographs, symbols and words to start their reflection. Throughout the unit students are given time in small groups to discuss with peers the competencies of SP and reflect on the knowledge and skills they have developed already in their lives that link to the competencies. They are also given time to discuss their two observation day experiences in class. Students also have feedback on an early submission of their ePortfolio, giving guidance about their reflections. These activities shape their ability to reflect before the activity to develop their '*Who am I?*' page. The ePortfolio is submitted at the end of semester and the depth of reflection is one of the rubric criteria. The '*Who am I?*' page activity is then repeated in Y3 when students are encouraged to redevelop the page. In Y4, students are again given the same instructions and renew their page to attach to their new Workbook (see supplementary file for detailed instructions).

This '*Who am I?*' page from Y1 and Y4 students formed the data for this study. After grading at the end of semester 2, the eportfolios with given consent were exported as PDF documents. The text for the '*Who am I?*' page was de-identified and copied into a Word document with each student given a code number to protect their identity. Demographic data had been collected with consent in the larger study and was also given the same code number.

Analysis

The texts were edited for spelling errors, then each text was added to an Excel workbook page. The text was divided into clauses (as indicated by the presence of a main verb) and each clause (and its associated embedded clause if present) was on a separate line. Clauses were chosen as the unit of analysis in line with SFL's theory of 'clause' as 'message' (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Columns were added for each analysis type described below. Texts were of a similar length in each cohort (see supplementary file for details).

Transitivity

Transitivity analysis relates to the field of the text as noted above. It explored the different types of processes depicted by verb usage and the role of participants in clauses. There are five main process types, shown in Table 2 (adapted from Armstrong et al., 2011), with mental processes subdivided into processes of sensing, feeling or thinking (Eggins, 2004). Different patterns of process usage can reflect the writer's reality and produce diverse types of genres. For example, the narrative genre typically consists of predominantly material processes reflecting actions and events, with a smaller number of relational processes used to describe participants or circumstances in which these took place. A small number of mental processes reflect either the speaker's or the narrative participants' attitudes/feelings towards the events in some way. An expository genre (i.e. explanation, provision of information on a particular topic), on the other hand, would consist predominantly of relational processes, where 'facts' are provided from a supposedly more objective stance (Eggins, 2004). The main verb was identified in

each clause and classified as a particular process type. The total number of different process types were then collated, with the average calculated across all Y1 texts and across Y4 texts. Rich textual description was used to give examples of patterns for each cohort.

Table 2
Process types

Verb process	Definition	Discourse function	Common examples from texts
Material	Processes of 'doing'	Recount actions, events	develop, do, give, go, help, make, study, work
Relational	Processes of 'having', 'being'	Categorizing or evaluating	I am/was...
		Describing	It is...
		Possessing	I have/had...
Mental	Processes of thinking	Reporting evaluation or opinion; experiences; or desires	I think/know/believe... I learned/realised... I want/hope/need...
	feeling	Reporting Feelings	I felt/like/love/enjoyed...
	sensing	Reporting experiences	I look/saw/heard...
Verbal	Processes of speaking	Reporting conversation	Speak, talk
Behavioural	Processes of physiology or psychology	Reporting physiological or psychological actions	Examples would be coughing, dreaming.

Insert Table 2 here.

Appraisal: Modality

The appraisal analysis relates to the tenor of the texts and examined two systems: modality and attitude. Analysis of modality can show the writer’s thoughts and attitudes towards their message. Modality can express the writer’s sense of obligation or inclination towards a task or issue and the probability or usuality of an event or feeling. Modality can be used to hedge, therefore making space for other perspectives (e.g. this *might* work) or may be definite (e.g. this *will* work) (Gebhard & Accurso, 2020). As explained for transitivity previously, modality (modal verbs, adverbs or nouns) was recorded for each clause in the texts and classified in terms of type (probability, usuality, obligation or inclination) and degree (high, medium, low) (Eggins, 2004) as shown in Table 3. The number of instances of each modality type and degree were then collated across all Y1 texts and compared to the totals from Y4 texts using descriptive statistics with examples and qualitative interpretations also provided.

Table 3
Type and degree of modality

Type	degree	Example
Probability	high (certainty)	I know I will do it.
	Medium (probability)	I believe I can do it.
	Low (possibility)	I hope I may do it.
Usuality	High (always)	I always do it.
	Medium (usually)	I usually do it.
	Low (sometimes)	I sometimes do it.
inclination	High (determined)	I need to do it.
	Medium (keen)	I'm keen to do it.
	Low (willing)	I'm willing to do it.
obligation	High (required)	I'm required to do it.
	Medium (supposed)	I'm supposed to do it
	Low (allowed)	I'm allowed to do it.

Insert Table 3 here.

Appraisal: Attitude

Attitude is categorised as 'affect' (related to personal feeling about something), 'appreciation' (related to more objective evaluations) and 'judgment' (related to more objective attitudes regarding ethics). Attitude can be positive or negative, see Table 4. As described for other analyses, the total number of instances of each type and polarity of attitude was collated, averaged across cohorts and described with examples and qualitative interpretation.

Table 4
Type and polarity of attitude

Attitude polarity	Examples
Positive affect	I loved it. I'm excited about it.
Affect Negative	I hated it. I'm sad about it.
Appreciation positive	I'm grateful for it. It is fascinating .
Appreciation Negative	It is difficult . I won't miss it.
Judgement positive	I'm competent . They were great supervisors.
Judgement Negative	I have so much to learn . They were unhelpful .

Insert Table 4 here.

Genre

A genre occurs in a particular context, has stages or a schematic structure indicated by patterns in the text (Eggins, 2004). Reflection is a type of 'social genre' with a social purpose, and has elements of different 'cognitive' genres that have a relatively fixed purpose: recount, description, explanation, and discussion (Ryan, 2011). In order to explore the genre of the texts and place the student's reflection within context, the procedure outlined by Woodward-Kron (2020), based on Eggins (2004) was used. The procedure involved:

- describing the overall purpose of the genre;
- identifying the main stages in the text based on topic and linguistic features;
- providing a rationale for these stages;
- identifying the order of the stages and whether stages are obligatory, optional or recursive;
- providing labels for the stages; and
- providing a description of the associated linguistic patterns (i.e., any relevant field, tenor and mode variables) for each stage (adapted from Woodward-Kron, 2020, p. 67).

Each text was analysed separately, with results for each cohort collated for comparison.

Researcher characteristics

The first author was known to the participants as the long-term clinical coordinator for the program. She prepared students for placements, taught clinical skills, lectured in different units and was responsible for the eportfolio. She has experience in qualitative research and this study was part of her doctoral study. The second author was also part of the SP academic team as a researcher, only having brief contact with students during the program. She has extensive research experience including as part of large multi-disciplinary teams.

Rigour

To enhance rigour and ensure trustworthiness, dependability, reliability and credibility (McAllister & Lyons, 2022) several processes were engaged. The first author kept a journal throughout the analysis process for ongoing reflexivity and to ensure a transparent audit trail across the research process. All decisions were discussed between authors to ensure trustworthiness and as part of the ongoing reflexivity process, to reduce the influence of biases on the analyses. Reliability checks were carried out for coding. The first author coded all texts for transitivity, modality and attitude, and the second author coded 20%. As the genre analysis involved extensive working back and forth across a number of texts to identify patterns and stages, the first author completed the analysis, and the second author checked the analysis and any differences were discussed. Finally, many student examples are given to support analyses and additional data can be found in the supplementary file.

Results

Transitivity

Generally, the type of processes between cohorts were similar. The majority were material processes, while relational and mental processes were about equal (see Table 5). This reflects the relatively factual nature of the students' statements, often relating to their journeys towards their choice of profession (Y1) or along their program (Y4).

Table 5
Processes in texts

Processes	Y1 frequency (<i>n</i> = 10)	% of all processes	Y4 frequency (<i>n</i> = 10)	% of all processes
Material	247	39	261	43
Relational	194	30	166	27
Mental	184	29	159	26
Verbal	15	2	25	4
Behavioural	0	0	0	0
Total	640	100	611	100

Insert Table 5 here.

Material processes

The most common material verbs used by both cohorts were: *do*, *help*, *take*, and *work*, reflecting relatively concrete actions reported in their portfolio as they both commenced and completed their program of study. Most students in both cohorts used *help* frequently, as expected for a helping profession (in 80% of Y1 texts and 70% of Y4 texts). Y1 students were general in denoting recipients of this 'helping', whereas Y4 students elaborated more on the recipients and the gains clients could achieve through the help, showing their increasing focus on outcomes of intervention by SP. Eighty percent of both Y1 and Y4 texts contained *work*, however Y1 students predominantly focused on their previous or current work outside of SP as well as their aspirations for SP work, whereas Y4 focused on their clinical placements, future job aspirations and about the work of an SP. Y4 reflected a broader perspective of the profession and the future.

The verbs *continue*, *develop* and *improve* were used more frequently by Y4 students (29 instances compared to 7 in Y1). Both cohorts wrote about wanting to improve or develop patients' *quality of life*, however, only Y4 (#6, #8, #99, #105, #108, #110, #111) reflected on how their own competencies and attributes developed through the program and will continue to develop in the workplace. This indicated their understanding of the importance of their own ongoing learning and development to then effectively assist others. Y4 students also used a greater variety of material processes related to doing things with clients or patients potentially demonstrating the wider range of activities they have undertaken with clients.

Mental processes

Although both cohorts used a similar number of mental processes, Y4 students used a higher percentage of thinking processes and Y1 more feeling and sensing processes (see Table 6, examples in

Fig. 1). Y4 may have associated being ‘professional’ with having less emotional content in their reflections. Y1 used feeling words to indicate their enthusiasm for the program and that they were a positive fit for SP, but reflected less explicitly on their beliefs, attitudes and learnings.

Table 6
Types of mental processes

Type of mental process	Y1 frequency	Y1% of all mental processes	Y4 frequency	Y4% of all mental processes
thinking	111	60	118	74
feeling	54	30	36	23
sensing	19	10	5	3
Total	184	100	159	100

Insert Table 6 and Fig. 1 here.

The most common lexical items for thinking mental processes, were *learn, decide, realise, understand* and *consider*. Y1 students presented the decisions that led to this career and a prospective view of learning goals whereas Y4 students reported retrospectively on their learning journey and saw learning as a lifelong activity. Y4 realised the full scope and role of an SP and saw the importance of understanding and considering all aspects of clients. Y1 were sensing the different careers available to them, including SP, as well as their future and Y4 students sensed the role of the SP, the importance of communication and what a difference SP makes. Y4 were less self-focused.

Verbal processes

While verbal processes were relatively rare across texts, there were some qualitative differences. Both cohorts used *communicate, say, speak* and *talk* but Y4 used a wider range of more specific communication vocabulary, for example *advocate, express*, and *pronounce* indicating a slightly more sophisticated understanding of SP practice (see supplementary file).

Appraisal: modality

While the number of occurrences of modality markers for obligation or inclination towards something and the probability or usuality of something was small for some categories, both cohorts used a range of modal words with similar overall frequency (20% of clauses in Y1; 24% in Y4, see supplementary file). However, as shown in Table 7, Y1 used slightly less probability and obligation, and more usuality than Y4; with inclination similar in both (see Fig. 2 for examples). In terms of degree (i.e. intensity of high, medium or low), Y1 used more high degree modality than Y4 (see Fig. 3). Both cohorts were positively definite about their career choice and the profession with Y4 being more moderated in their expression (i.e., medium degree) and more aware of their future obligations.

Table 7
Types of modality

Type of modality	Y1 frequency	Y1% of all modality	Y4 frequency	Y4% of all modality
Probability (certainty of doing something)	97	70	113	76
Inclination (desire to do something)	20	15	19	13
Usuality (the frequency of doing something)	18	13	9	5
Obligation (to do something)	3	2	7	6
Total	138	100	148	100

Insert Table 7, Figs. 2 & 3 here.

There was a similar spread of degree of probability across cohorts, with high probability most frequent, followed by medium then low. However, the cohorts were more/less certain about different things. Y1 were *certain* about their choice of SP as a career and of helping people; less certain they had the skills and attributes for SP; and least certain in future career goals they *hope* to achieve. Y4 expressed *certainty* about client-related facts or circumstances (e.g., impact of communication difficulties) and were much more emphatic about how much they had learnt, been challenged, and developed through the program. Y4 had less certainty they were ready and had the knowledge, competencies, and skills to be a SP and least certainty in their future, but hopeful of being the best SP and ready for anything that comes.

Inclination was similar but Y1 used only high degree. Y1 *needed* to become a SP, *needed* certain attributes to become one, and always *wanted* to help people and make a difference. Y4 used low as well as high obligation, they *wanted* to advocate and enable clients who *wanted* to have improved lives and *endeavoured* to continue learning.

Overall Y1 used slightly more usuality modals i.e. they were *always* interested in helping others, in communication and in SP as a career. Y4 also were also *always* interested in SP, will *always* remember to apply the skills they have learnt so they *always* focusing on clients' needs.

Finally, use of obligation was minimal and Y1 only used high levels, e.g., experiences *made* them realise their purpose in life. Y4 used high and low obligation, they *had* to do this job, *realise* the importance of communication, how *essential* functional communication approaches are and will be *allowed* to improve client lives.

Appraisal: attitude

Y1 used slightly less appraisal, in 33% of clauses, compared to 40% in Y4 (see supplementary file). Table 8 shows the different types. Y1 used more affect (emotions) and less judgement than Y4.

Appreciation usage was similar. In terms of positive/negative valence, Y1 texts were slightly more positive (90%) than Y4 (84%) and this was for both affect and appreciation; judgement was about the same (see Fig. 4 and supplementary file for text examples).

Table 8
Attitude expressed in Y1 and Y4 texts

Attitude type	Y1 (n = 10)	%	Y4 (n = 10)	%
Affect	98	47	74	30
Appreciation	29	14	37	15
Judgement	80	39	137	55
Total	207	100	248	100

Insert Table 8 and Fig. 4 here.

Both Y1 and Y4 showed enthusiasm and anticipation for SP (see Fig. 5), while Y4 had more comments about specific supervisors, practicum experiences. Y1 had negative affect about past careers, justifying or attempting to validate their feelings for either choosing SP or changing careers. Y4 were more focused on the future with positive affect towards SP. Y4 were also focused on the benefits they had gained from the program personally and expressed gratitude for this. They were often surprised by the journey through the program, with both negative and positive affect towards the challenges they faced as well as the challenges clients face.

Insert Fig. 5 here.

Y1 had appreciation for their own opportunities and for SP with negative appreciation towards their other potential careers/programs. Y4 had both positive and negative appreciation of the program, it being more than they expected but also challenging. They appreciated the *importance of communication*, *helping clients* improve their *quality of life* and the SP career.

Y1 judged themselves as a good fit for SP, having the *traits*, *interests* and *skills* required. They also judged their previous experiences, the skills of communication and the *special person* that has the *skills* and *traits* required to *make a difference* for clients, improving their *quality of life* and that SP would give them *purpose* and *meaning*. Y1 used negative judgement towards clients and other careers.

Over half of the attitude type for Y4 was judgment, directed at supervisors, the impact of SP on clients, and the skills, knowledge and attributes the profession shares. They judged their own growth through the program, with improved knowledge, competencies and attributes, while still having more to learn. Like affect and appreciation, Y4 had mixed judgement about the challenge of the program, *difficult* but *worth it*, and for clients, the impact of communication difficulties is negative, but SP can make a positive difference. Finally, Y4 used judgement to say how little is known about the importance of communication, the right to communicate, the value of SP, which led to a strong commitment to

advocating for clients and the profession in the future. This shows Y4 not only noticing issues but taking up the responsibility of their profession to make changes.

Genre

Across the texts nine stages were identified but not used by both cohorts as shown in Table 9 (full analysis in supplementary file). Y1 had a higher number and higher average of stages and more recursion perhaps indicating being unsure about what to write. Two stages were unique to Y1 (Other careers, SP is my purpose) and three unique to Y4 (My SP journey, Advocacy for SP, The future of SP), indicating a different reflection focus (examples in Fig. 6).

Table 9
Stages in texts

Stage	Total stages used (%)		stage order (optional)		Recursive	
	Y1 (n = 10)	Y4 (n = 10)	Y1	Y4	Y1	Y4
My identity	8 (80)	4 (40)	(i)	(i)	No	No
Other careers	7 (70)	0 (0)	(ii)	-	Yes	No
Finding SP	7 (70)	2 (20)	(iii)+	(ii)	Yes	No
SP is my purpose	5 (50)	0 (0)	(iv)+	-	No	-
I fit SP	10 (100)	3 (30)	any	(iii)	Yes	No
My SP future	10 (100)	10 (100)	ii+	ii+	Yes	Yes
My SP journey	0 (0)	10 (100)	-	(any)	-	Yes
Advocacy for SP	0 (0)	8 (80)	-	(any)	-	Yes
The future of SP	0 (0)	1 (10)	-	(iv)	-	No
Total stages (mean, range)	47 (4.7, 2–6)	38 (3.8, 3–5)	6	7	4	3
Total stages with recursive stages included (mean, range)	62 (6.2, 2–10)	46 (4.6, 3–7)	-	-	-	-

Insert Table 9 and Fig. 6 here.

My identity was used as the first stage by both groups, but more frequently by Y1. Younger Y1 students tended to list their name, age, previous school; mature Y1 students discussed other life roles. Y4 only

gave their name, year and current placement, with few referring to personal details or circumstances, showing their understanding of a professional presentation and their focus on their SP identity.

The four stages of *Other Careers*, *Finding SP*, *SP is my purpose*, and *I fit SP* were only/mostly used by Y1. Mature Y1 students presented previous careers/roles and younger students discussed previous studies. Y1 described experiences/research leading to SP, were definite SP was for them, giving them meaning or purpose; and gave multiple reasons why they fit SP. This shows Y1 focused on justifying their choice of SP and how they were suited for this profession which was less important for Y4.

My SP future was included by all students. Y1 presented how they saw themselves in the future, working with children or across the lifespan with some listing specific areas that interested them (e.g., disability). Y4 students were less specific about who they wanted to work with, being more open now they had experienced different placements. Y4 were excited and confident about entering their profession, knowing this was what they wanted to do, seeing how they would improve clients' lives, advocate, enable and provide the best care. Y4 were more specific about what they would do *for* clients, rather than the clients they would work *with*. This indicates their focus was not on themselves and how they fit SP but on the outcomes they will be achieving for clients.

The final three stages were only used by Y4, again indicating the shift of focus to their clients and their clients' needs. In *My SP journey* Y4 discussed all they had learnt and experienced and how they had been challenged and changed by the process. Some expressed appreciation for staff and supervisors who had shaped them and acknowledged the learning journey was just beginning. *Advocacy for SP* covered Y4 students' belief in the fundamental right of communication, the importance SP and of advocating for communication, their clients and their profession. Finally, only one Y4 discussed used new developments that will change SP in *The future of SP*.

Reliability

Inter-coder agreement was 81% for processes, 72% for modality and 83% for appraisal.

Discussion

As one of the few studies to examine PIF from a linguistic perspective, and the first to explore PIF in speech pathology students, this study found differences in the language of written reflective statements of Y1 and Y4 SP students that can inform improved teaching of reflection that specifically supports PIF. We will discuss the results in relation to each of the research questions.

What are the language choice and genre structure differences in PI reflections between Y1 and Y4 SP students?

Differences found in students' language choices and genre structure indicated that Y1 tended to be more focused on themselves, with a personal and enthusiastic reflection on their journey to SP, justifying their choice of SP rather than another career. They strongly presented themselves as fitting SP and saw

themselves working with specific client groups yet may not have had a strong self-awareness reflected in their frequent use of emotive/affective language rather than thinking language (differences in transitivity, attitude and genre). Y4 were more moderate and objective in their reflection, more focused on their journey through the program and their activities with their clients. They appreciated experiences that had developed their competencies and attributes, the difficult journey had been worth it to enter the career they now perceived to have a positive impact on clients (differences in attitude). They were committed to ongoing learning and to advocate for SP and their clients. They were excited to enter the profession and open to different career paths in SP, showing a broader understanding and deeper commitment to SP (differences in attitude and genre).

Are students' choices of doing, thinking, feeling verbs or processes different (transitivity)?

Reflection is the basis for PIF (Wald et al., 2015) and reflection involves thinking and questioning (using mental processes) along with self and contextual awareness, resulting in learning and improvement (Tovey & Skolits, 2022). Increasing self-awareness, therefore, is an important aspect of PIF (Belgraver et al., 2022; Gómez, 2014). The self is central to the construction of knowledge (Johnson & Chauvin, 2016) and also to delivering relationship-centred care (Shapovalova et al., 2020). Our worldview is formed from our core beliefs and values, shaped by personal norms, upbringing and sociocultural background, often informing the choice to become a health professional (Belgraver et al., 2022). The fact that Y1 used less 'thinking' and more 'feeling' mental processes in their portfolio texts could indicate a focus on their own instinctive feelings of 'liking, loving' something rather than more reflective-related processes of, for example, 'deciding, believing', with limited self-reflection or even awareness of the significance of their instinctive feelings at this stage in their professional formation journey.

Is students' use of probability, obligation, usuality and inclination different (modality)?

High degree modality was more frequent in Y1 and the types of modality differed. Y1 included more usuality, Y4 slightly more probability and obligation. For later students, prompts for students to consider their obligations to their clients and profession (obligation) and to see themselves more clearly in their future career (probability) would be useful (see supplementary file).

Is students' use of affect, judgement and appreciation different (attitude)?

Bearing in mind the previous discussion of reflection, it should also be noted that self-awareness does not only have cognitive components, but also emotional and behavioural components (Shapovalova et al., 2020). Emotions have an important role in the reflective process (Gómez, 2014), and are closely linked to self-regulated learning (Pekrun et al., 2002). Emotions are key to how we perceive and remember things, negative emotions can impact decision making, and unprocessed emotions can impact mental health (Lönn et al., 2023). Emotional intelligence is 'the competence to identify, express, understand and regulate emotions in the self and in others' (Shi & Du, 2020, p. 2). Reflective writing can foster emotional awareness and enable the processing of emotions, protecting against stress and burnout (Wald et al., 2015). The fact that Y4 used less feeling mental processes and affect (attitude)

than Y1 could be seen either negatively or positively. From the negative perspective, perhaps the 'professionalisation journey' may distance some students/clinicians from their emotions and may ultimately detract from the building of strong relationships required to engender trust. Seeing 'stoicism' as an aspect of being a health professional is harmful, contributing to burnout (Wu, 2025). On the other hand, students may have developed a degree of emotional regulation through the program. Students are often encouraged to distance themselves somewhat from their emotions as a) a self-protective measure in terms of emotional vulnerability, and b) a client-protective measure as the client should not necessarily be impacted by the clinician's emotional responses.

Is the genre structure of students' reflections different?

The cohorts were given four identical questions to support their reflections yet Y1 used different stages from Y4. Some stages were common to both cohorts, some unique to each cohort with some differences found in the reflections of mature-age students. Y1 focused on why they chose SP and how they were suited to the profession, being more self-focused and did not discuss their progress through the program. Y4 focused more on their profession and clients than Y1, showing a move from self to other awareness, including a commitment to advocacy. Y4 also reflected on their journey through the program, noting what they had learned and challenges they had overcome. Y4's possible emotional self-regulation, described previously, fosters resilience and is linked to wellbeing (Field, 2019), as is gratitude, (also expressed by Y4). In addition, Y4 reflected on the overcoming of challenges, another indicator of their resilience and confidence (Zegwaard & Adams-Hutcheson, 2025).

How can the differences inform the teaching of PI reflections to support PIF?

The SFL categories of wording used provided clear links to PI patterns and how PI was conveyed in Y1 and Y4. The analyses reflected insights into specific wording patterns related to self-awareness and emotions in particular, as well as differences in stages in the genre structure. These differences may assist in the development of a learning guide or scaffold for a PI reflection. An example of a PI reflection scaffold with prompts to facilitate a deeper PI reflection based on the analyses of language choices and genre structure can be found in the supplementary file, with a different scaffold for Y1 and Y2 than for Y3 and Y4.

Increasing self-awareness

Students and professionals are often not aware of their own worldview and yet this level of self-awareness is important for culturally safe practice in a cross-cultural context (Belgraver et al., 2022). Reflections are an ideal tool for developing self-awareness:

...students need to get insight in their beliefs, values and norms, identity and personality, and attach meaning to his/her experiences within those values: why do I do what I do? what are my motives? Who am I? what is my passion? What do I want to achieve in my life? (Gómez, 2014, p. 81 – 2)

Therefore, including prompts in the scaffold to trigger thinking processes could support Y1 students to become more self-aware (see supplementary file).

Fostering insight into emotions

The role of emotions and their regulation in PI could be discussed with students as part of their reflections, using the wording categories as described in the analysis to facilitate further reflection, including prompts to focus on emotions in the scaffolding. This could support students to consider the implications of their emotions and ensure they are developing emotional regulation, rather than 'stoicism' (see supplementary file).

Genre structure as a scaffold

The genre analysis demonstrated differences in genre structure, indicating the usefulness of the SFL analysis to potentially inform a PI reflection scaffold to facilitate students' learning. While a greater number of students would need to be sampled to establish an ultimate generic structure for such reflection, results suggest elements students may be encouraged to consider as they progress through their program. Having an explicit structure may well support more detailed and focused reflections (Gómez, 2014). The language choices and genre stages indicated differences in self-awareness, thinking and feeling language, and a different understanding of their role as a SP and these differences were used to identify prompts to add to the scaffold.

Strengths and limitations

This study was based in one university in an undergraduate program in Australia, examining texts of twenty students, which may impact the representativeness of the students, and the results may not be applicable to other health profession programs. Larger numbers of texts would enhance the generalisability of the results as would following students longitudinally. In written texts students can project an identity that they think is required for the assignment rather than being in line with their own identity (O'Donnell, 2014) so this may also impact findings. The original texts contained multi-modal features, such as page banners, headings and photos, which were not examined in this analysis.

Recommendations

Embedding career reflections (e.g., in an eportfolio) across a program may both facilitate and capture differences in PIF. As noted above regarding genre structure, annotated career reflections, highlighting stages and examples of linguistic features associated with each (e.g., modality, process type) could be developed (Ryan, 2011), tailored to the cohort with prompt questions for each stage (see example in supplementary file). These analyses could also be useful for reflections in other disciplines. In examining the language used to express the students' journeys, particularly investigating the explicit conveying of attitudes and the generic structuring of the written reflections, insights into student perceptions of their own status at their journey stage can be directly gained. Using the career reflections of final year students and gathering career reflections from early and experienced working SPs would provide strong

exemplars to extend the thinking of all SP students. Including prompts that encourage reflection on beliefs, values and identity to support increased self-awareness, as well as helping students see meaning in the full range of their experiences (Gómez, 2014) would be especially helpful for early in the program. In addition, students could be encouraged to reflect on those who have helped them on their journey so far along with the challenges they have faced and how they have overcome them to build their resilience and confidence before they face the increased pressure of full clinical placements.

Future research into the role of emotions in PIF could yield greater insights into how to scaffold the use of emotive language in PI reflections. Another aspect of transitivity analysis which was beyond the scope of this study, but may prove useful in future studies is agency, the participant roles within a clause. Agency could potentially reflect students' levels of perceived independence, autonomy or self-confidence and may also show differences in students' understanding of client agency.

Conclusion

An SFL analysis of PI reflections indicated differences between Y1 and Y4 students' language choices and genre structure that could be used to develop scaffolding to enhance PI reflections in the future. Using a specific scaffold to foster a PI reflection may not only support students' reflection but in addition may also foster PIF.

Declarations

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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Figures

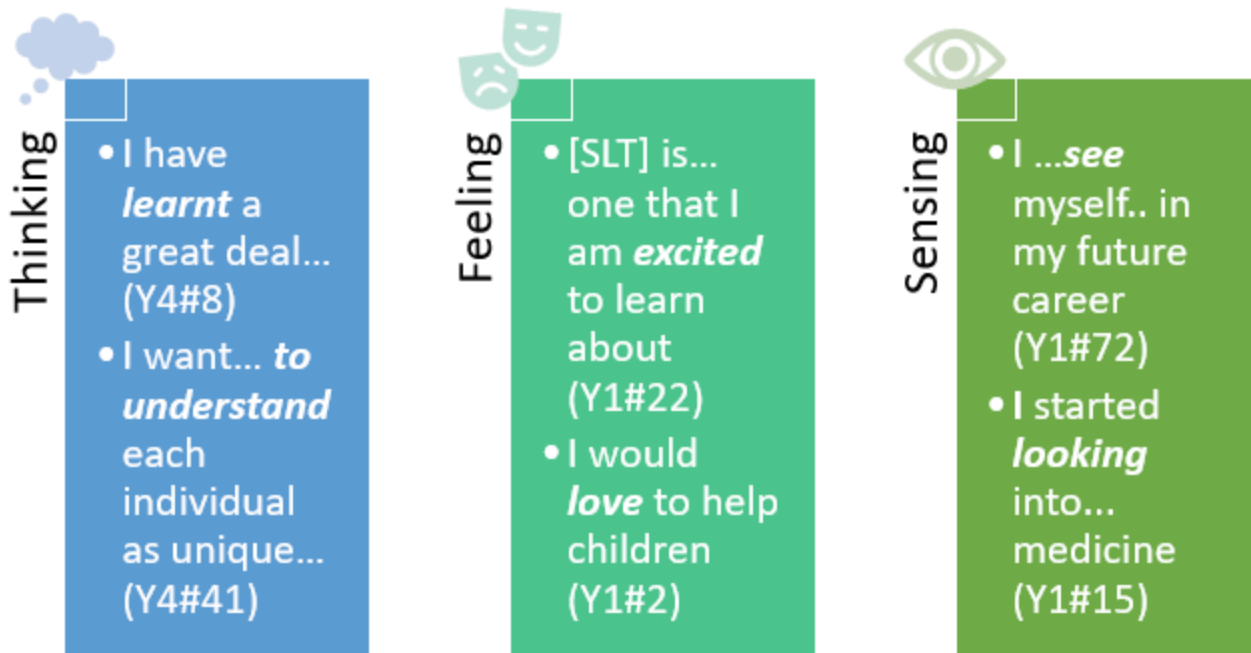


Figure 1

Mental processes examples

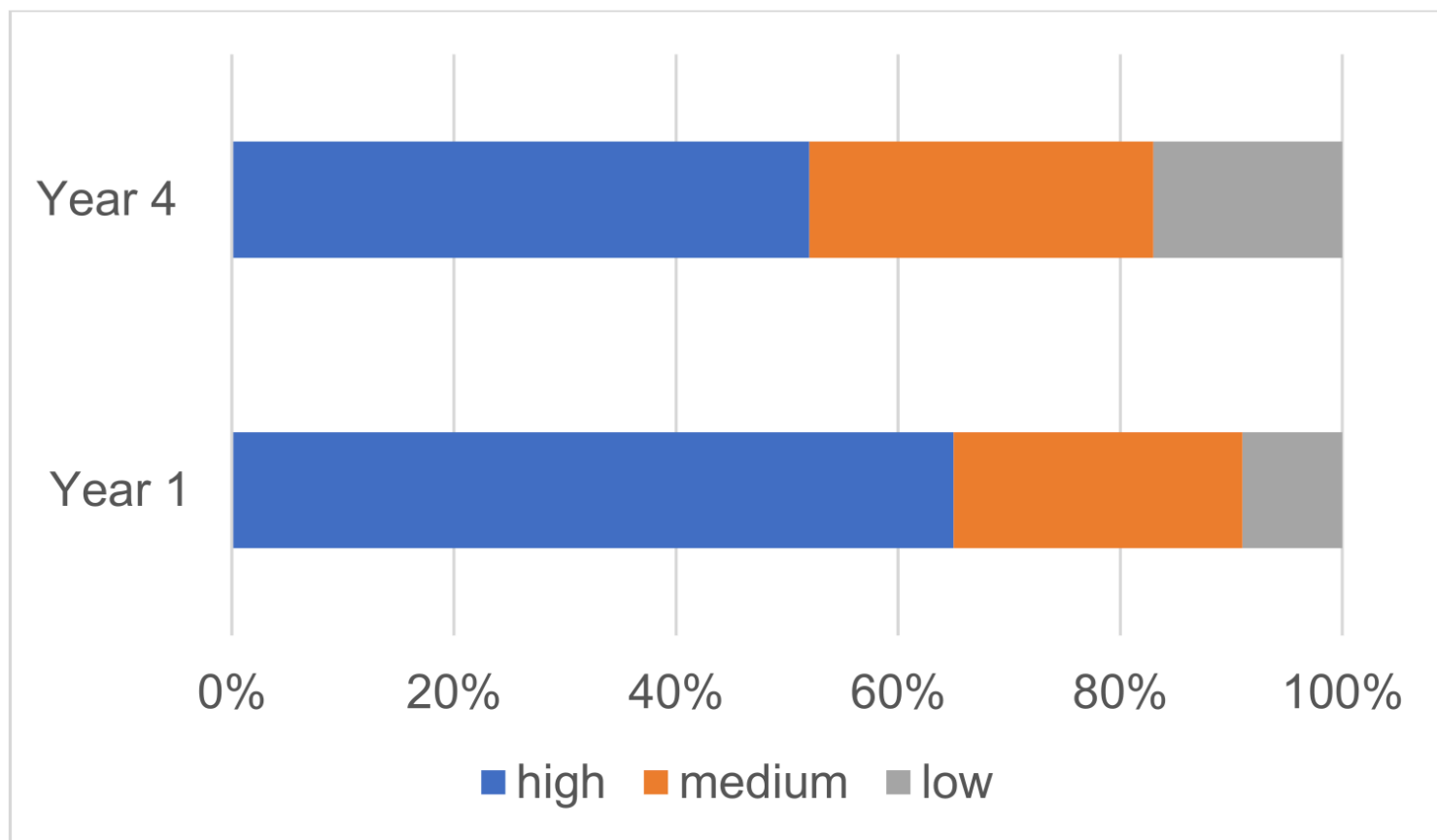


Figure 2

Degree of modality

Probability	Usuality	Inclination	Obligation
•I always knew I would pursue a career... (Y1#2) •I know I have a lot to learn, but I know... (Y4#110) •I will advocate for my clients... (Y4#110) •... I hope to bring to my future career. (Y4#110)	•I have always had an interest in... language (Y1#27) •...I have always struggled... (Y1#72) •Speech was always in the back of my head (Y1#2) •always maintain a holistic view of the client... (Y4#99)	•...what I needed to do to pursue it. (Y1#2) •I always wanted [to] help people... (Y1#75) •I want to be the very best person ... (Y4#108) •I wish to follow... (Y4#7)	•[SLT was] ...what I was meant to do in life. (Y1#15) •I had to do this job. (Y4#8) •...I realised just how vital communication is... (Y4#99) •Allowing people... the ability to do so. (Y4#41)

Figure 3

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Modality examples

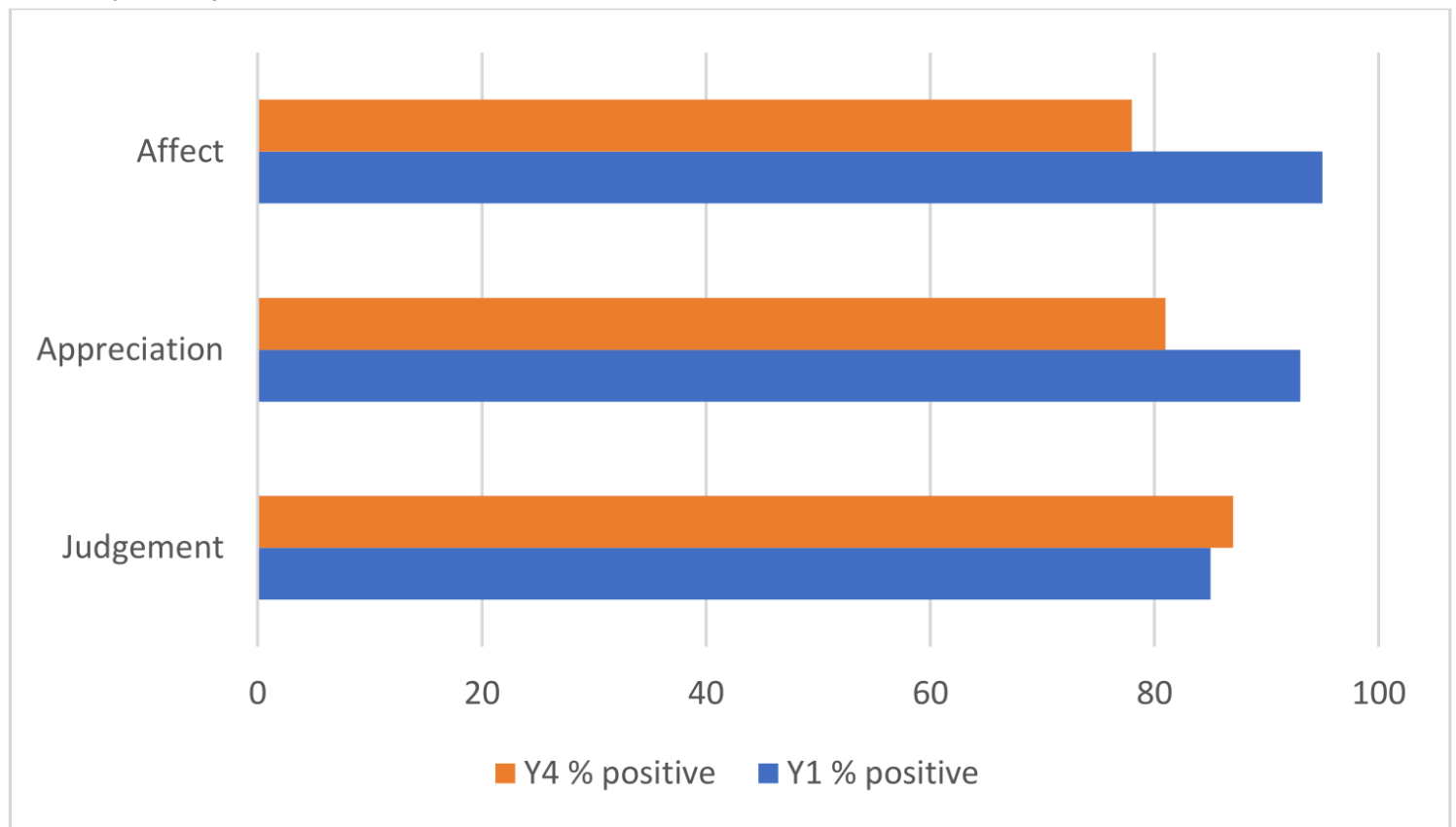


Figure 4

Percentage positive attitude for each type

Affect	Appreciation	Judgement
•...sure I enjoyed it. But I didn't LOVE [nursing] (Y1#2) •...I am excited to learn about... (Y1#22) •...I love to help people... (Y1#66) •I have such a passion for... (Y1#2) •as I weave my way through the emotional, challenging, rewarding and motivating path (Y4#108) •...[SLT] is about... being challenged to the brink but being ok with this... (Y4#6) •but our profession can turn situations that seem hopeless into challenges that can be overcome. (Y4#41)	•...the fascinating area of [SLT] (Y1#75) •...made me realise my purpose in life... (Y1#2) •I looked at Occupational therapy, but this still didn't seem like what I was after. (Y1#22) •Undoubtedly, the biggest bonus I have taken from this degree is the people I have met and the experiences I have had. I have met some lifelong friends and had some amazing opportunities that I will be forever grateful for... I will certainly not miss the many late nights' (Y4#8)	•I have a lot of personality traits that are needed... (Y1#15) •...you are not going to see results straight away... (Y1#15) •...a [SLT] can have a huge impact on an individual's quality of life (Y4#7) •I believe I have developed my competencies in every area... (Y4#6) •I know I have a lot to learn, but I know I have the ability to improve my clinical skills (Y4#110) •...developing these competencies has taken time and has been challenging, it has all been worth it to reflect on my growth (Y4#6)

Figure 5

Appraisal examples

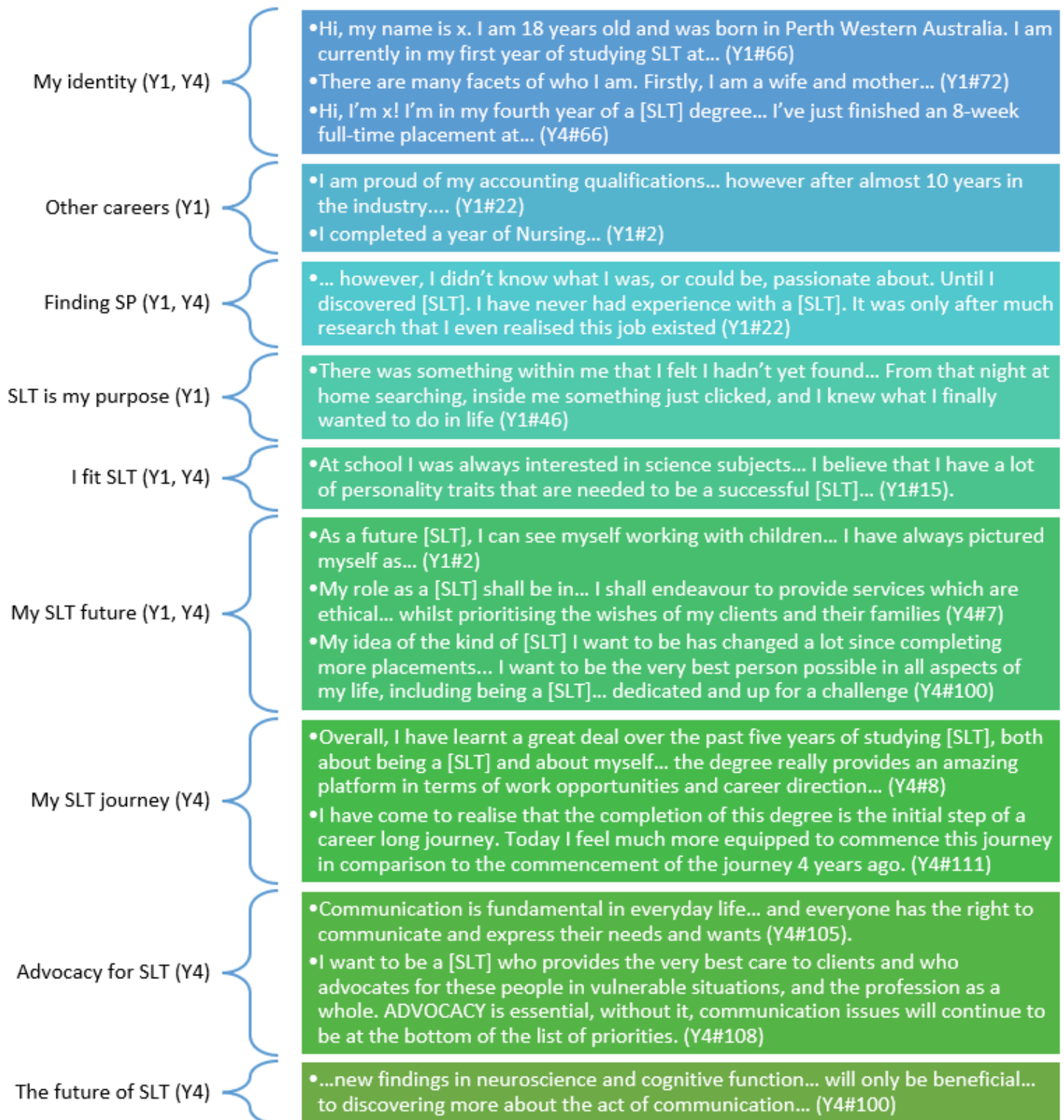


Figure 6

Examples of genre

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- [SupplementaryfileLinguisticanalysisofSPPIformation.docx](#)