

A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF STANCE FEATURES IN
ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS OF ESL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN
MALAYSIA

*Roslina Abdul Aziz

Khairul Firhan Yusob

Evanna Devi Seyapalan

Siti Noor Aisyah Hasnan

Norzie Diana Baharum

Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pahang

*leenaziz@uitm.edu.my

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Abstract: Argumentative writing requires students to present a clear position and develop persuasive arguments through the effective use of stance features, which, according to past studies, has been proven to be challenging for ESL learners. This study aimed to investigate the use of stance features among ESL learners in Malaysia by analysing the stance features used and how they were used. Using a corpus-based approach, 145 argumentative essays were compiled and analysed using LancsBox X. Hyland's Interactional Metadiscourse Framework was adopted to guide the analysis of stance features; hedges, boosters, self-mentions, and attitude markers. The findings revealed that hedges and boosters were used most frequently, while self-mention was the least used. Concordance analysis revealed that even though learners are aware of the need to express stance, the use was still limited and lacked the rhetorical sophistication expected in academic writing. The study stresses the crucial need for explicit instruction of stance features in ESL academic writing classrooms.

Keywords: Argumentative writing, corpus-based, ESL, stance features.

INTRODUCTION

At tertiary levels, producing argumentative essays that go beyond merely reporting information is often expected of students (Wingate, 2012). Argumentative essays often represent a crucial area of tertiary education, one that is a distinctively different form of writing from the descriptive or narrative writing often emphasised in secondary school. While dissecting the gist of an argumentative essay, it can be seen that the fundamental purpose of an argumentative essay is to investigate a topic, collect and evaluate evidence, and establish a concise position on that topic. With such a shift, the core mission of higher education can be reflected in its aim to cultivate critical thinkers who can engage in academic discourse (Davies, 2011). In argumentative essays, the idea is never to seek a single correct answer, but the challenge lies in demonstrating a deep understanding of a topic's complexities and dilemmas, in which the writer/author would need to convince the reader of the validity of one's perspective through reasoned and logical persuasion.

There is a need for a sophisticated structure and the integration of specific rhetorical elements when writing an argumentative essay. Though there are pedagogical models that introduce a simple five-paragraph structure, some university-level tasks may demand a more nuanced framework from the students. Key elements of an argumentative essay, like a clear and concise thesis statement commonly written in one sentence, serve as the foundation for the entire piece. It is imperative that the body of the essay then develop this thesis by presenting claims supported by credible evidence, which can be factual, logical, statistical, or anecdotal (Toulmin, 2003). How this evidence is interpreted and framed within the scholarly conversation is illustrated through the writer's stance.

In academic writing, it is crucial for writers to establish their personal and professional perspectives or opinions on certain matters or significant issues to create a writer-reader relationship or engagement (Hyland, 2005a). This proposed the need to form opinions, judgements, and beliefs, as different individuals have different perspectives and ideas. Hyland emphasised stance, where writers present their cognitive capacity to use their authorial voice and linguistic features to establish their professional positions with regard to certain topics or arguments. He described three significant components of stance: *evidentiality* (certainty and impact, how authors justify their claims or positions), *affect* (authors' subjective lens: their personal attitudes, judgements, emotions), and *presence* (authors' visibility, self-representation). In the structure of stance, he illustrated four major linguistics devices: *hedges*; the use of words such as 'perhaps' and 'might' when writers present their claim, *boosters*; the use of words like 'clearly', 'obviously', 'apparently', 'certainly', 'undoubtedly' to present their perspectives, *attitude markers*; the use of "...attitude verbs (e.g., *agree*, *prefer*), sentence adverbs (*unfortunately*, *hopefully*), and adjectives (*appropriate*, *logical*, *remarkable*) and *self-mention*; the use of first-person point of view to establish authorial voice (Hyland, 2005a, p.9). These linguistic features assisted writers in presenting their prevailing arguments and justifications in order to persuade, convince, or attract readers to believe their perspectives on certain discourses.

Empirical evidence from past studies has shown that ESL learners generally face considerable challenges in producing effective argumentative essays (Bahari et al., 2021; Barrot & Gabinete, 2021; Dang et al., 2021; Fareed et al., 2016; Horverak, 2016; Zainuddin and Rafik-Galea, 2016). Among the challenges are syntactic complexity and accuracy (Barrot & Gabinete, 2021; Fareed et al., 2016), which were often the result of using unfamiliar vocabulary and lengthy sentence constructions in an attempt to appear more academic and convincing (Dang et al., 2021). ESL learners were also reported to struggle in mastering the argumentative genre conventions, causing their essays to resemble narrative or expository essays that lack logical argumentation (Bahari et al., 2021; Horverak, 2016; Zainuddin & Rafik-Galea, 2016). In addition, studies have also highlighted learners' difficulties in presenting a clear stance and limited use of appropriate stance and engagement features (Khairuddin et al., 2021; Peloghitis, 2016; Yang, 2022) that are crucial in developing effective argumentative essays.

Despite the extensive volume of research on argumentative essay writing, attention to the use of stance in argumentative essays of ESL learners in Malaysia, especially among L1-Malay, remains underexplored. Much attention has been vested in grammatical accuracy, lexical complexity, genre conventions, and general writing performance, with less attention to interpersonal and rhetorical resources learners use to construct arguments and position themselves in the writer-reader relationship, in particular the use of stance features, namely hedges, boosters, self-mention, and attitude markers. Examining these linguistic resources can provide valuable insights into ESL learners' rhetorical competency and contribute to the development of effective pedagogical approaches for teaching argumentative writing. To this end, the current research is guided by the following research questions:

1. What stance features do ESL university students use in their argumentative essays?
2. How are stance features used in the students' argumentative essays?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interactional Metadiscourse

Interactional metadiscourse, commonly seen as a key dimension of Hyland's (2005a) interpersonal model, refers to the linguistic devices writers and speakers use to express a stance and engage with their audience. It is also seen as a tool to manage communication. Hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers, and self-mentions, which are classified as devices, allow communicators to explicitly acknowledge and interact with their readers (Hyland, 2005a). Many theoretical discussions have moved beyond simple frequency counts, calling for more nuanced, context-sensitive analyses that include the exploration of functional and intrageneric variation of these markers, such as how their use differs across sections of a research article and between spoken and written registers (Xu & Nimehchisalem, 2024).

Over the years, interactional metadiscourse has expanded and is seen to move from its traditional stronghold in academic writing to diverse professional and digital settings. It has gained prominence in both pedagogical and oratorical contexts. A study by Wu (2025) on EAP classrooms demonstrated that native and non-native teachers employ interactional metadiscourse differently. Native teachers are seen to use more hedges to foster student autonomy, while non-native teachers relied on boosters for authoritative knowledge transmission. Similarly, L2

student speakers are seen to be underutilising the range of interactional metadiscourse features compared to expert TED talkers, resulting in a less persuasive and emotionally resonant speaking style (Huang, 2025).

In specialised academic and instructional settings, the growth of interactional metadiscourse application has also deepened and expanded. Research is increasingly focused on disciplinary variation and the challenges faced by L2 writers. For instance, a study by Xu and Nimehchisalem (2024) discovered that L2 students overused boosters and attitude markers in ways that were rhetorically and disciplinarily inappropriate, highlighting a need for more explicit instruction in disciplinary norms. Furthermore, the scope has broadened to include spoken academic discourse, such as English-medium instruction (EMI) lectures. Additionally, Lasagabaster and Bier (2025) found that engagement markers were the most frequent category in EMI lectures across disciplines, suggesting that disciplinary culture profoundly shapes how teachers use language to interact with students. Today, the impact of technologies on metadiscourse use is consistently explored and studied in tertiary writing classrooms. (Esfandiari & Allaf-Akbary, 2024) and the specific challenges faced by undergraduate L2 writers are also studied (Kamaruddin & Kaur, 2026). Overall, the literature suggests that interactional metadiscourse is a dynamic and flexible linguistic resource rather than a fixed set of writing conventions.

Stance in Argumentative Writing

Following Hyland's (2005a) framework of stance and engagement, past and current academic scholars examined stance in academic writing (Black, 2022; Zhang & Zhang, 2021), mainly focusing on argumentative writing (Fatima & Arshad, 2023; Khammee & Rhee, 2024; Min et al., 2019; Papangkorn & Phoocharoensil, 2021; Teh et al., 2025). Focusing on 28 Korean EFL learners, Min et al. (2019) examined the relationship between the landscapes of metadiscourse and the quality of academic writing. Their findings revealed that, generally, stance devices enhanced the formal structure of an essay, and the use of hedges primarily drove students to score higher with regard to the quality of the content. While Teh et al. (2025) emphasised students' use of nouns in their argumentative essays and Aull and Lancaster (2014) examined different academic levels' use of stance markers, Jiang (2015) clarified *nominal constructions* that refer to the way writers alter emotions and feelings through the use of nouns, portraying academic objectivity. For instance, instead of saying 'I believe', they have written 'There is a possibility that...' or 'It is possible...'. Jiang compared English essays written by native speakers and Chinese EFL students and found that Chinese EFL students found it hard to shift from the use of feelings to more objective writing.

Interestingly, Fatima and Arshad (2023) highlighted gender differences when examining the use of stance in Pakistani students' argumentative essays. Their findings indicated that more female students used linguistic features related to stance compared to male students. Focusing on different genres, Aull (2019) identified stance and engagement markers used by higher-level undergraduate students in their argumentative writing. She suggested that different levels of study presented different cognitive capacities to use linguistic markers and to engage in writer-reader discussions. On the other hand, focusing on a specific genre, which is scientific, Khammee and Rhee (2024) did not assert different study levels among the undergraduates, but they compared scientific writings by published writers and Thai undergraduate students. Their findings proposed that Thai students used varied boosters (*clearly, obviously, certainly*) because they believed that to be scientific and to make their arguments credible and plausible to readers, they had to sound convincing.

The literature acknowledged that varied factors like the level of study or academic level, gender, genre, and certain writing tasks and goals influence the placement of stance and engagement markers in argumentative writing.

Challenges in Argumentative Writing for ESL Learners

ESL learners face difficulties producing a good-quality argumentative essay. Thus, there is still a need to observe the challenges faced by ESL learners when writing and presenting their arguments in order to enhance pedagogical approaches and classroom instruction. Even advanced ESL learners showed that they have difficulties in terms of the accuracy and precision of lexical and syntactic use (Barrot & Gabinete, 2021 & Fareed et al., 2016). Barrot and Gabinete emphasised Complexity, Accuracy and Fluency (CAF) as they evaluated ESL and EFL students' 1870 argumentative essays. Generally, ESL learners produced more syntactically complex and accurate writing. However, students still faced challenges in terms of linguistic features because some of them used simple and complex sentences to avoid forming grammatically inaccurate sentences. When those students used complex sentences in their argumentation, their writing became less inaccurate. Barrot and Gabinete (2021) and Fareed et

al. (2016) highlighted that students selected certain words or vocabulary that they might not understand in order to sound 'academic' and convincing. Similarly, Dang et al. (2021) suggested that students struggled with inaccuracies in the words used when they wrote long sentences, leading to what Horverak (2016) called a "breakdown in genre expectations."

Horverak (2016) described students' failure to comprehend genre, thus leading them to write argumentative essays that may sound like a narrative or personal essay. In addition, Peloghitis (2016) noticed that students simply included all the information or input regarding the topic rather than analysing, synthesising and summarising them to produce a logical argumentation. Instead of writing an argument, they have been reporting all the data. As students found it difficult to understand the genre of argumentative writing, this has led to challenges in writing a proper structure or format. Bahari et al. (2021), Horverak (2016), and Zainuddin and Rafik-Galea (2016) observed that many ESL learners could not generate counterarguments in argumentative essays. Bahari et al. (2021) and Zainuddin and Rafik-Galea (2016) revealed that the reason was that they were not equipped with enough stance and engagement markers to justify their claim. Similarly, in the introduction, some students did not write a clear stance, but then they indicated their perspectives in the conclusion; hence, the lack of coherence and cohesiveness in their writing (Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020).

Apart from that, Khairuddin et al. (2021), Peloghitis (2016) and Yang (2022) reported that students were unable to provide linguistic features of stance and engagement due to the inability to think (writer's block) especially during the initial stage of writing argumentative essays. This is because they did not understand the genre and structure of argumentative essays. Sometimes, students developed writing anxiety, and they did not have enough confidence (Dang et al., 2021), to write grammatically correct sentences (Barrot & Gabinete, 2021). On the other hand, Fajaryani et al. (2021) perceived students to be inadequate in their cultural capital, thus, they described all the data instead of writing their arguments, with evidence and justification. Students' cultural background also influenced the way they wrote an objective argument as they feared using strong stance markers. Likewise, Ozfidan and Mitchell (2020) discussed cultural translation where Arabic learners thought that writing layers of indirect arguments was associated with sophistication yet, native English speakers preferred a clear and direct linear argument. This resulted in their inability to use stance and engagement markers to engage readers with logical arguments. Khairuddin et al. (2020), argued that, in terms of engagement parts where most Malaysian ESL learners were not involved in reader-writer dialogue as when writing, they did not focus on the target audience. Instead, in their argumentative writing, they wrote all available information without trying to persuade readers to believe in their arguments.

The literature proposed that, when writing argumentative essays, ESL students regardless of the context, found it difficult to implement stance and engagement markers because they focused on lexical precision and grammatical accuracy without a strong foundation in the genre and structure of argumentative essays. Hence, their argumentative essays were similar to expository or narrative essays because their arguments did not sound objective and credible.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopts a corpus-based approach to investigate the use of stance features in argumentative essays written by ESL university students in Malaysia, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Using a purposive data collection technique, 145 participants contributed their argumentative essays. The essays were compiled into a digital corpus for analysis.

Quantitatively, the corpus was examined using LancsBox X (Brezina & Platt, 2025), a corpus analysis software, to identify the frequency and distribution of stance features based on Hyland's (2005a) framework. The framework categorises stance into four types: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions. This analysis aims to uncover usage patterns in stance across the essays. As for the qualitative component, concordance analysis was conducted to explore how stance features were used in context, revealing their rhetorical functions, the expression of authorial voice, argument construction, and reader engagement.

Corpus Data

The corpus for this study was compiled from argumentative essays written by 145 third-semester students enrolled in a compulsory English course across various programmes under the Faculty of Applied Sciences at UiTM Pahang Branch, Malaysia. The essays were produced as part of a timed (1-hour) writing task during the students' final assessment in August 2024. Each student was required to write an essay of approximately 300–350 words in response to the following prompt:

“Nowadays, many social media influencers involve their children in social media when promoting products and services from sponsors. They believe that this could help their children become popular and earn big money for their personal savings and education. However, some people believe that involving children in social media can be dangerous to their privacy and restrain them from getting a normal childhood.”

The collected essays were transcribed and compiled into a digital corpus for subsequent quantitative and qualitative analysis of stance features. The composition of the corpus is summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Composition of Corpus Data

No. of essays	145
No of words	55699

Corpus Tool

For the analysis of the corpus, LancsBox X, a free and widely used corpus analysis toolkit developed by Brezina and Platt (2025), was employed. The software is available for download at <https://lancsbox.lancs.ac.uk/>. LancsBox X was chosen due to its accessibility, user-friendly interface, and robust functionality, which make it especially suitable for the purpose of analysing stance features in the current study.

Within LancsBox X, two key tools were used for the analysis: the Word tool and the KWIC (Key Word in Context). The Word tool was used to generate frequency lists of stance features across the entire corpus, while the KWIC tool was employed to examine how these stance features functioned within actual sentence structures through concordance analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using Hyland's (2005a) framework of stance, which categorises stance features into four main types: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions. Hedges (e.g., *might*, *possibly*) are used to express uncertainty or to soften claims, allowing writers to acknowledge alternative views. Boosters (e.g., *clearly*, *definitely*) convey certainty and emphasise the writer's confidence in their arguments. Attitude markers (e.g., *unfortunately*, *surprisingly*) indicate the writer's affective or evaluative stance toward the content. The last feature, self-mentions (e.g., *I*, *we*) demonstrates the writer's presence in the text, showing personal involvement or ownership of the argument. Table 2 below summarises the framework.

Table 2

Division of Stance Features based on Hyland's Interactional Metadiscourse Model 2005

Category	Function	Examples
Hedges	Withhold writer's full commitment to proposition	<i>might/ perhaps/ possible/ about</i>
Boosters	Emphasis force or writer's certainty in proposition	<i>in fact/ definitely/ it is clear that</i>
Attitude Markers	Express writer's attitude to proposition	<i>unfortunately/ I agree/ surprisingly</i>
Self-mention	Explicit reference to author(s)	<i>I/ we/ my/ our</i>

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Distribution of Stance Features

Table 3 presents the frequency and distribution of stance features used by the students in the corpus. The analysis includes raw frequency counts, normalised frequencies per 1,000 words, and percentage distributions to provide a clearer overview of the patterns of stance feature use in the students' writing.

Table 3

Rank, Frequency and Percentage of Stance Features in the Corpus Data

Category	Rank	Raw Freq.	Normalised Freq. (1000)	Percentage
Hedges	1	606	10.88	54.45
Boosters	2	245	4.40	22.01
Self-mention	3	149	2.68	13.39
Attitude Markers	4	113	2.03	10.15
Total		1113	19.98	100.00

As can be seen in Table 3, the most dominantly used feature was hedges (e.g., *could*, *often*, *really*), which recorded 606 occurrences (54.45%). Boosters were ranked second in the list, accounting for 22.01% use throughout the corpus data, followed by self-mentions (13.39%), while the least-used stance feature was attitude markers (10.15%).

The findings partly reiterate the study conducted by Papangkorn and Phoocharoensil (2021), with Malaysian students showing some similarities with their Thai counterparts in their employment of hedges as the most dominantly used resource and attitude markers as the least used. They assert that the use of hedges indicates the students' lack of "confidence in their argumentative essays" (p. 877). Nevertheless, Loi and Lim (2019) argue that hedges in the form of epistemic modals such as 'would' or 'could' are common, especially in academic writing, as is also observed in the present study. The researchers reported a substantial use of modal verb hedges in the discussion sections of Malaysian research articles they examined. Similarly, Ting and Chai (2013) also reported that advanced ESL writers frequently employed hedges in their academic writing, indicating that hedges are a common feature of academic writing among ESL writers.

The present study's findings on the predominant use of hedges and boosters however show a stark contrast to a Pakistani study by Ghulam and Arshad (2023) in which self-mentions and attitude markers were found to be dominant in the 100 argumentative IELTS essays analysed, thus, suggesting a possible role of culture in shaping ESL/EFL learners' use of stance features in their writing. Ozfidan and Mitchell (2020) observed that Arabic learners' inability to effectively use stance and engagement resources in argumentative writing is due to cultural influence.

Realisation of Stance Features in Student Writings

Table 4 presents the five most frequently used devices for each stance feature identified in the corpus of argumentative essays written by L1 Malay learners. The table highlights the dominant linguistic resources employed by the students to express their stance in their writing.

Table 4
Five Most Frequently Used Stance Markers

Feature	Device	Frequency	Range (%)
Hedges	could	156	41.38
	might	104	30.34
	may	126	35.86
	would	44	14.48
	often	36	24.83
Boosters	always	77	36.00
	must	44	30.34
	really	22	15.17
	know	18	12.41
	actually	17	11.72
Self-mention	I	122	51.03
	me	9	5.52
	my	18	12.41
Attitude Markers	agree	37	32
	important	34	28
	disagree	11	11
	inappropriate	10	5
	essential	4	4

Epistemic modal verbs (e.g., *could*, *might*, *may* and *would*) were found to lead the hedging feature. Epistemic modality (Coates, 1983) is commonly used in academic writing to soften or modify claims (Hyland, 1996; 2005a). As exemplified by Extract 1, ‘could’ was used to soften the assertion that influencers exposing their children on social media “could lead to endorsement deals and collaboration for the child”. Similarly, ‘might’ and ‘may’ were also commonly employed to reduce the strength of claims made as illustrated by Extracts 2 and 3. The finding is in line with a study by Loi and Lim (2019) who highlighted a major use of modal verb hedges in many discussion parts of Malaysian research articles, written either in English or Malay. Modal verbs in particular ‘can’ and ‘will,’ were also found to be dominant in Malaysian tertiary students’ discussion essays (Ting & Chai, 2013).

The use of hedges allows learners to present their claims more cautiously to avoid generalising or making sweeping statements. Their use also reflects learners' efforts to minimise personal stance, hence appearing more objective (Khamkhien, 2025). This is shaped by the instructional practices in academic writing contexts where objectivity is highly regarded and writers are expected to avoid making overly direct claims (Hyland, 2005a).

1. Influencers can earn a substantial income from sponsored posts, and by involving their children's education or future endeavors, which *could* lead to endorsement deals and collaborations for the child. ID_111
2. Some parents *might* force their children to be involved in their social media and the parents will force them with threats and these kids have to obey. ID_114
3. In conclusion, while many influencers *may* argue that sharing their children's lives helps to create a greater image, the risks outweigh the benefits. ID_12

Boosters which signal certainty and reinforce a writer's stance are also well represented in the corpus data. According to Hyland (2005a), the use of these boosters aims to persuade readers of the writers' assertion. Among the five most frequently used boosters are 'always', 'must', 'really', 'know,' and 'actually', all of which are epistemic adverbs. Notably, 'always' recorded the highest percentage of usage (36%). As exemplified by Extracts 4 and 5, learner writers commonly used 'always' to express a strong certainty. Both extracts suggest influencers and the media regularly expose or use children for content in order to gain more views, making the statements sound definite, but, at the same time overgeneralised since they imply that the claims are absolute.

4. Since now many influencers are *always* exposing their children, it gives trendy content for all people.... ID-97
5. The media or reporters will *always* try to involve the children so that it can be viral and more people see their news.
6. So, parents *really* play an important role in their screen time. ID_114
7. This can *actually* disrupt your little family to have a family time together. ID_109

Similarly, 'really' and 'actually' were also used to strengthen the writer's claim. In Extract 6, 'really' was used to stress the importance of parental involvement in controlling or monitoring children's screen time. 'Actually' was used to assert the validity of the claim, suggesting that the effects of using children in social media content are real. Lo et al. (2021) also found higher usage of boosting adverbs such as 'really' and 'always' among first year doctoral students and noted that students generally used them to foreground certainty of statements. Even though this practice helps students to express commitment to their claims, overuse of such adverbs may suggest a lack of objectivity, hence appearing too personal. The tendency is also evident in the current study.

This finding indicates that learners in this study are equipped with the knowledge and skills in applying boosters in academic writing, but the repetitive manner of the application (i.e., epistemic adverbs) suggests issues rooted in a lack of proficiency (Mcintyre, 2013). McIntyre (2013) citing Hinkel (2003) and Gilquin et al. (2007), stressed that this may also be the result of L1 transfer and exposure to the spoken register of the target language. Hinkel's (2003) study reported that non-native speaker (NNS) writers tend to overuse amplifiers and emphatics in comparison to their native speaker counterparts. NNS writers were also inclined to use boosters that are more characteristic of speech. This is attributed to their exposure to spoken English that has resulted in the transfer of speech-like features to their academic writing (Gilquin et al., 2007; Hinkel, 2003).

As for self-mentions, only 3 devices were recorded in the corpus data, they include 'I', 'me' and 'my', with 'I' recording a noticeably higher percentage of occurrences (51%). Self-mentions refer to how writers project themselves into the text (Hyland, 2008) and in academic writing they are commonly used together with hedges, boosters and attitude markers in expressing purpose, stating claims and developing arguments (Hyland, 2005b). As exemplified by Extracts 8, 9 and 10, the personal pronoun 'I' was used predominantly in expressing personal stance often with stance verbs 'agree', 'believe' and 'disagree' and boosters like 'strongly'. A similar usage pattern was also reported by Alwad (2019) and Kapkranov (2020) where the personal pronoun 'I' co-occurred with subjective verbs like 'believe' and 'think' in explicit foregrounding of the writer's stance or opinion in argumentative essays.

8. *I strongly believe* that in this case, risks outweigh the benefits. ID_135
9. In *my* opinion, *I* too *believe* that involving children in social media is dangerous because their privacy is invaded, they won't have a normal childhood growing up and their grades might be dropping. ID_136
10. As for *me*, *I disagree* about the behaviour of posting your child on social media platform are disturbing the children's privacy, exploiting children's images and it will open for potential risks. ID_11

Writers use attitude markers to communicate their stance towards a proposition (Hyland, 2005b) and their use aids in guiding readers in understanding the writer's stance. In the current study, attitude markers are mainly manifested through the use of attitude verbs like 'agree', 'disagree' that are paired with the personal pronoun 'I' to directly signal the writer's personal stance as exemplified by Extracts 11 and 12. Intensifiers such as 'totally' (Extract 13) were also employed to increase the intensity of the stance. In addition, evaluative adjectives like 'inappropriate' and 'important' were also commonly used in expressing the writer's personal judgment on an issue or in stressing the significance of the issue being discussed as exemplified by Extracts 12 and 13.

11. First, *I agree* that social media can lead children to privacy violation. ID_141
12. To conclude, *I totally disagree* about making children worse because it's a distraction to education, can get expose to *inappropriate* content, and develop mental health issues. ID_14
13. Normal childhood to is *important* for child's growth. ID_143

A similar pattern was also observed in the argumentative essays written by L1 Korean (Kim, 2025), who also had the tendency to rely heavily on attitude verbs (e.g., *agree* or *disagree*) and evaluative adjectives (e.g., *important*) in conveying affective stance. The findings suggest that both L1-Malay writers of this study and Korean learners in Kim's (2025) study tend to favour direct attitude expressions (e.g., *I agree* that social media can lead children to privacy violation), rather than employing more epistemic expressions like 'may violate' to exhibit their stance (e.g., *social media may violate children's privacy*). The use of epistemic markers would allow writers to realise their stance in a cautious, balanced and objective way (Kim, 2025), resulting in less direct and personal attitude manifestation. This approach is preferred by the native speaker writers in this study, revealing that NS writers tend to express attitude through epistemic strategies that result in more objective personal claims. The approach is generally considered more aligned with the academic writing convention (Kim, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The study investigated the deployment of stance features among 145 third-semester university students based on two central research questions. The findings indicate that students possess awareness of using stance or claim in their argumentative essays, however, their usage of stance features reflects an emerging rather than fully developed academic writing competence. The heavy reliance on hedges, especially epistemic modal verbs such as 'could', 'might', and 'may' indicates that even though students are aware of the need to moderate claims, they possess a limited range of hedging devices. The findings also reveal an overuse of conversational-like boosters such as 'always', 'really' and 'actually' that seems to stem from exposure to conversational English. The conversational-like expression of stance is further heightened with the direct use of self-mentions (i.e., *I*) and evaluative adjectives (e.g., *important*). This usage pattern renders the students' stance expression overtly personal, therefore, lacking objectivity and balance. Overall, the findings suggest that even though students possess a basic understanding of stance-taking, their use of stance features is still limited and does not fully reflect the conventions of academic arguments.

The findings have important pedagogical implications. Firstly, insights from the findings can be used to design and develop argumentative writing lessons that incorporate explicit instructions on the rhetorical functions of stance features. Argumentative writing instructions in ESL settings tend to focus heavily on content development and language accuracy, with less attention given to the rhetorical awareness of argument development. This could stem from time constraints; curriculum demands and the tendency to prioritise language accuracy. To ensure greater awareness of the conventional uses of stance features, teachers should explicitly teach a wider range of hedges, boosters and attitude markers and more effective usage of self-mentions in their writing lessons. This would enable students to express claims with more objectivity and caution, therefore, avoiding overly direct and personalised claims.

Secondly, teachers could use the findings to develop lessons incorporating corpus-based activities using existing corpora such as the International Corpus of Learner English developed by Granger et al. (2009), which consisted of argumentative essays written by NS and ESL university students or a teacher-developed corpus consisting of argumentative essays written by ESL learners in Malaysia scoring CEFR Bands C1 and C2. Teachers could source the corpora for authentic examples of stance features as they are used in real student essays. By examining the selected samples, students can observe the actual usage patterns that are more closely aligned with the conventions of argumentative writing. In addition, teachers can use these samples to develop activities that involve students comparing different ways of expressing stance and revising their own stance expressions to replicate forms that are more appropriate and acceptable to the standard of argumentative writing.

Despite the valuable empirical data that it offers to researchers and teachers, the present study does have its limitations. The main limitation concerns its sample size and composition. The size can be considered small as it only involves 145 essays written by ESL learners with the same L1 background and from only one higher learning institution in Malaysia. Therefore, the findings could not be generalised to represent all ESL learners in Malaysia. Future studies should include a bigger sample size preferably from different L1 backgrounds and institutions to give better representation to ESL learners in Malaysia.

Another limitation concerns the restricted range of topics included in the corpus. The essays compiled were on a single argumentative topic, which may shape the frequency and distribution of stance features. The topics may influence the degree of personal involvement or evoke a different range of emotional reactions that may affect the way students express their stance and arguments. This can result in a possible variation in the employment of stance features. Therefore, the patterns of use of the stance features in the present study may be topic-dependent, which means a different pattern of usage may be revealed if students were to write on a different topic altogether. To address this limitation, future studies could compile corpus data consisting of a broader range of argumentative topics. This would enable researchers to determine with greater certainty whether the stance features are either topic-dependent or otherwise.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Roslina Abdul Aziz contributed to the conceptualisation, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, software development, and writing of the original draft. Khairul Firhan Yusob was involved in the conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, visualization, and writing of the original draft. Evanna Devi Seyapalan contributed to data curation, writing of the original draft, and critical review and editing of the manuscript. Siti Noor Aisyah Hasnan contributed to the methodology, investigation, and review and editing of the draft. Norzie Diana Baharum contributed to validation, provision of resources, and review and editing of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author.

ETHICS DECLARATIONS

Formal ethical approval was not sought for this study, as it did not involve human participants or animals. Therefore, ethical approval was not required for the conduct of this research.

GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DECLARATIONS

The authors used generative AI tools solely to assist with language editing, grammar checking, and improving readability. The AI tools did not contribute to the study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of

findings, or the generation of scientific content. All outputs generated by AI were carefully reviewed, verified, and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the manuscript.

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