

An Analysis of Interactional Metadiscourse Markers in Expository Writing by Malaysian ESL Undergraduates

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Abstract

Research on metadiscourse has explored various genres, such as research articles and theses, often using Hyland's Interpersonal Metadiscourse model. However, findings vary due to differences in genre and educational level, such as undergraduate versus postgraduate. Expository writing, especially in Malaysia, has received less attention in recent years. This study examines interactional metadiscourse in expository essays by Malaysian ESL students, focusing on how markers enhance clarity and conciseness based on Hyland's Interpersonal Metadiscourse framework. Interactional metadiscourse markers are the main focus in this study because they assist readers in understanding the propositional contents clearly. A corpus of 206 essays, approximately 83,445 words, was analysed quantitatively using Text Inspector and qualitatively to ensure reliability. Results showed minor discrepancies among the five interactional metadiscourse types, as students used them unconsciously without strong preferences. Notably, self-mention markers like "we" and "our" were overused, suggesting a misunderstanding of academic tone and reliance on personal opinions over evidence. The second highest frequency of interactional metadiscourse markers is boosters, followed by engagement markers, hedges, and attitude markers. These findings highlight the need for explicit instruction on metadiscourse in academic writing courses. Teaching students the rhetorical functions of these markers can improve discourse awareness, audience engagement, and adherence to conventions. These findings suggest ESL curricula should prioritise explicit instruction on metadiscourse in Malaysian ESL writing curricula to enhance students' rhetorical awareness, audience engagement, and academic writing competence.

Keywords: applied linguistics, expository writing, genre analysis, interactional markers, metadiscourse

Introduction

In academic writing, particularly expository essays, clarity and reader engagement are essential. One of the tools writers use to achieve these goals is metadiscourse, a language tool that signals the writer's presence, guides the reader through the text, and helps shape how information is understood. Metadiscourse can be broadly categorised into two types which are interactive and interactional. While interactive metadiscourse helps organise content and structure ideas through the use of markers such as transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials and code glosses, interactional metadiscourse reflects the stance of a writer and engages the reader by expressing attitudes, judgments, and evaluations (Hyland, 2005). Interactional

markers include features such as hedges (e.g., *perhaps*), boosters (e.g., *clearly*), attitude markers (e.g., *unfortunately*), self-mentions (e.g., *I argue*), and engagement markers (e.g., *consider*).

For learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), mastering interactional metadiscourse is a critical yet often overlooked aspect of writing development. These markers enable writers not only to present information but also to interact with their readers, aligning themselves with academic discourse conventions (El-Dakhs et al., 2022). However, ESL learners may struggle with using such features effectively due to limited exposure to native writing models or instruction that prioritizes grammar and content over discourse-level strategies (Perez Penup, 2020).

In Malaysia, English plays a significant role as a second language in education, and many university students are required to produce academic writing in English. Yet, local researchers such as Che Mat (2020), Hamdan and Ahmad (2023), and Mat Zali et al. (2022) suggest that Malaysian ESL undergraduates often face challenges in engaging their readers and expressing authorial stance in writing. Given the importance of interactional metadiscourse for academic success, it is essential to examine how these students use such linguistic resources in their essays, particularly in a formal and structured genre like expository writing.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of interactional metadiscourse markers are used by Malaysian ESL undergraduates in the expository essays?
2. How frequently are these interactional metadiscourse markers used in the expository essays?
3. What do the patterns of use suggest about the students' ability to engage readers and express stance in writing?

Although previous studies have explored metadiscourse in ESL and EFL contexts, few have focused specifically on Malaysian learners' use of interactional metadiscourse markers, especially in the genre of expository writing. Most existing literature tends to concentrate on advanced learners or published academic texts, leaving a gap in our understanding of undergraduate-level writing in a Malaysian context. By understanding how Malaysian undergraduates utilise interactional metadiscourse, it can provide insights to language instructors and applied linguists into their rhetorical awareness and inform teaching practices in academic writing courses. Hence, this study aims to analyse the types and frequency of interactional metadiscourse markers in expository writing by Malaysian ESL undergraduates. It also aims to determine how much these students interact with their audience and present themselves as writers. The results will advance knowledge of academic writing in ESL classes and could influence instructional approaches to raise students' awareness of metadiscourse in the classroom. Therefore, to contextualise the present study and clarify its theoretical foundation, it is essential to examine prior research on interactional metadiscourse markers and their role in ESL academic writing.

Literature Review

Researchers have been looking This section reviews relevant literature on interactional metadiscourse markers, with a particular focus on ESL and EFL academic contexts, to highlight gaps and guide the current analysis. Metadiscourse refers to the linguistic resources writers use to organise their texts, engage readers, and express stance (Deng et al., 2025). It represents how writers project themselves into their writing and communicate directly with readers, beyond simply delivering information (Hyland, 2005). In academic writing, metadiscourse plays a key role in constructing a coherent, reader-friendly, and persuasive argument. It enables writers to guide readers through their arguments and to signal how ideas should be understood.

Hyland (2005) proposes a widely accepted model of metadiscourse that distinguishes between two main categories: interactive and interactional. Interactive metadiscourse helps organise the propositional content of the text, while interactional metadiscourse reflects the writer's awareness of the reader and helps to engage them in the argument. However, this study focuses specifically on the interactional dimension only.

Numerous studies have investigated the use of metadiscourse in second and foreign language writing (Chung et al., 2023). Chung et al. (2023) claimed that many students lacked the metadiscursive flexibility required to adapt their interactional strategies to genre and audience expectations. In relation to metadiscursive flexibility, other researchers such as Alqahtani (2024), Lee (2020), and Yoon and Kim (2022) generally show that ESL or EFL learners tend to underuse or misuse interactional markers compared to native English writers. Consequently, this may result in writing that appears overly factual, impersonal, or lacking in rhetorical engagement.

As demonstrated by Hyland and Jiang (2016), L2 academic writers use fewer hedges and boosters, leading to a less nuanced expression of stance. Similarly, Fu and Hyland (2014) reported that Chinese EFL learners struggled with using engagement markers, which affected their ability to connect with the reader. These findings suggest that interactional metadiscourse competence is closely linked to rhetorical awareness and pragmatic sensitivity, which may be underdeveloped in ESL learners due to differences in language proficiency, cultural expectations, and writing instruction.

In the Malaysian context, several studies have explored features of academic writing among ESL undergraduates. For example, Mat Zali et al. (2024) noted that Malaysian students, regardless of whether they are from the fields of hard science or soft science, often focus heavily on content and grammar, with limited attention to rhetorical features such as metadiscourse. Similarly, Rahmat et al. (2020) analysed argumentative essays and found that interactional markers were used inconsistently and often inaccurately by inbound students from Thailand.

Despite these efforts, there remains a lack of focused research on how Malaysian undergraduates use interactional metadiscourse in specific academic genres like the expository essay. Much of the existing work, such as El-Dakhs (2020), Mat Zali et al. (2024), and Zakaria and Abdul Malik (2018), either analyses general language proficiency or combines interactional and interactive markers without a deeper look into their individual functions. Across these three previous researchers, ESL and EFL learners have shown limited yet evolving awareness of interactional metadiscourse markers, though their usage often lacks rhetorical control and genre sensitivity. El-Dakhs (2020) found that Saudi university students overused engagement markers such as “you” and “should”, with minimal use of self-mentions and hedges, resulting in writing that was overly forceful and lacking nuance, partly due to L1 interference and insufficient instruction. Similarly, Zakaria and Abdul Malik (2018) observed Malaysian undergraduates employing interactional features inconsistently, often relying on formulaic expressions that compromised academic tone and persuasive strength. In both studies, the infrequent use of self-mentions suggested a reluctance or lack of training in projecting authorial voice. Meanwhile, Mat Zali et al. (2024) identified more strategic use of interactional markers among high-proficiency Malaysian ESL learners, especially in their application of hedges and self-mentions to convey stance and build reader rapport. However, even among proficient writers, challenges remained in maintaining rhetorical appropriateness and avoiding overuse of engagement markers. These findings have collectively highlighted a shared need for explicit, genre-based instruction on how to deploy interactional metadiscourse to enhance clarity, persuasion, and audience awareness in academic writing.

The literature reveals that while the importance of metadiscourse in academic writing is well established, there is limited research that specifically examines how Malaysian ESL undergraduates employ interactional metadiscourse markers in expository writing. Most prior studies have focused either on general writing skills (AbdelWahab, 2020; Akinseye, 2023; Liao, 2020; Yoon & Kim, 2022) or on argumentative writing (Kacimi & Messekher, 2024; Khamkhien, 2025; Umirzakova et al., 2023), leaving expository genres underexplored. Furthermore, there is a need for more corpus-based analyses of actual student texts to identify patterns and areas for pedagogical intervention. Therefore, this study seeks to close the gap by offering a systematic examination of interactional metadiscourse markers in Malaysian ESL learners' expository essays. The findings are expected to contribute to a better understanding of students' rhetorical competence and inform instructional strategies in academic writing programs.

Theoretical Framework

Interactional metadiscourse includes several subcategories, each serving a specific function in facilitating writer-reader interaction (refer to Diagram 1). These markers are crucial in shaping how readers interpret

and respond to an argument proposed by the writer for the consideration among readers. They contribute to building a credible and persuasive authorial voice, which is especially important in academic genres such as expository writing.

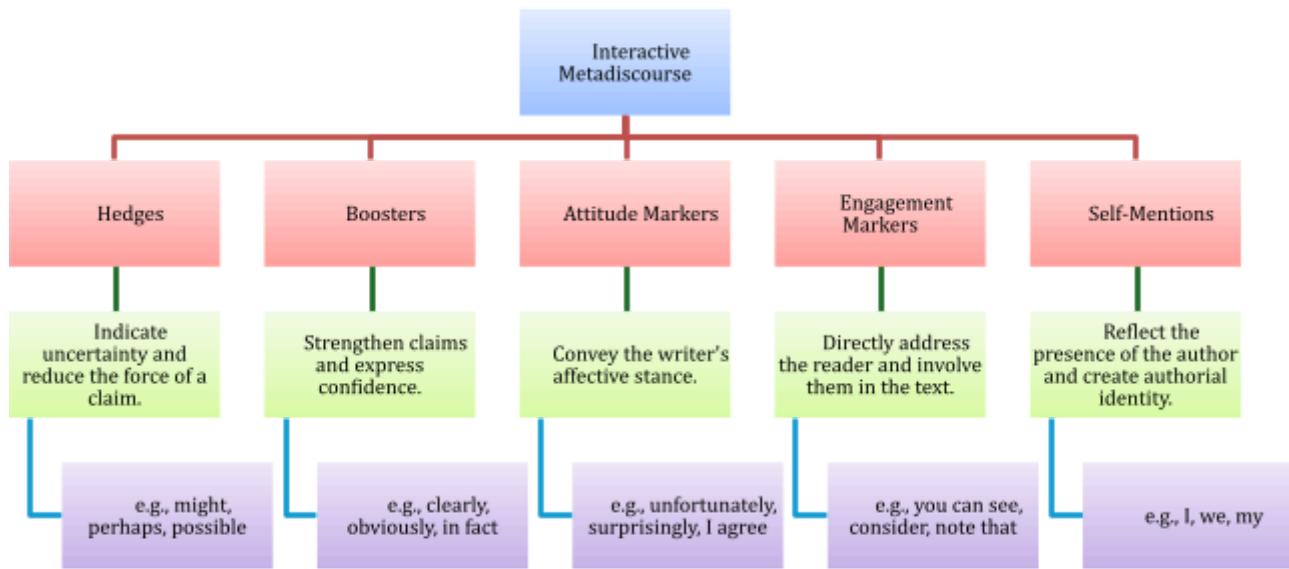


Diagram 1: The interactional metadiscourse markers adopted from Hyland's (2005) Interpersonal Model of Metadiscourse

Diagram 1 visually represents how interactional metadiscourse markers function in expository writing to enhance communication between writer and reader. Adapted from Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model, the diagram is structured around two core components, which are the writer's stance and reader engagement. The diagram branches into five categories of interactional metadiscourse markers that reflect how writers engage with readers in academic writing. Hedges signal the writer's caution or tentativeness, allowing space for alternative interpretations (e.g., "might", "perhaps"), while boosters convey certainty and confidence to reinforce arguments (e.g., "clearly", "indeed"). Attitude markers express the writer's affective stance or personal evaluation of the information presented (e.g., "unfortunately", "surprisingly"). Self-mentions such as "I argue" or "we suggest" reveal the writer's presence and identity within the text, asserting ownership of the claims. Lastly, engagement markers like "as you can see" or "note that" directly involve the reader, fostering a dialogic relationship between writer and audience. Each category is connected to rhetorical goals, either projecting authorial presence, showing commitment, or acknowledging the

audience. The diagram illustrates how these markers operate not just as surface-level expressions, but as tools that position the writer in relation to the reader and content.

Hence, when interactional metadiscourse markers are applied in expository writing, the essay can communicate effectively to the readers. This is because the primary aim of expository writing is to inform, explain, or clarify a topic. However, effective communication goes beyond presenting facts as it involves managing the writer-reader relationship. This is where interactional metadiscourse markers become crucial. By using hedges, writers show intellectual humility and openness to other interpretations, which enhances credibility. Boosters, in turn, signal confidence and help underscore key points, guiding the reader's perception of importance. Attitude markers inject evaluative tone, subtly influencing how readers interpret information. Self-mentions reinforce authorial control and argument ownership, especially in persuasive or analytical sections. Finally, engagement markers invite the reader into the discussion, making the text feel more interactive and accessible. Together, these markers transform expository writing from a one-sided expository writing into a reader-aware and rhetorically sophisticated discourse. They help writers balance authority with approachability, ensuring that ideas are not just presented, but also received and understood with clarity and relevance.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative textual analysis with descriptive statistics based on the previous study done by Zakaria and Abdul Malik (2018) to analyse the use of interactional metadiscourse markers in expository essays written by Malaysian ESL undergraduates. The design is exploratory in nature and aims to identify the types, frequency, and patterns of interactional metadiscourse usage based on Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model.

Participants

The participants consisted of 54 Malaysian undergraduate students enrolled in an English proficiency course at a public university in Malaysia. There were 14 male and 40 female participants involved in this study, aged between 20 to 23 years old. The students were selected through purposive sampling based on their availability and willingness to provide written essays for research purposes. The students are enrolled in two different faculties, namely the Faculty of Business Management and the Faculty of Plantation and Agrotechnology. Their language proficiency levels were determined from their previous Malaysian Certificate of Education, also known as Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM).

Prior to writing the four types of expository essays, they had completed academic writing instruction for the semester, during which the data was collected. Each student was asked to write four types of expository essays. Three types of essays were written in untimed conditions, while one type of essay was written in timed conditions. The three types of essays that were written more freely as part of coursework assignments are topical, cause-effect, and problem-solution essays. There was also one expository essay that was composed within a two-hour time frame during formal tests. This mix of writing conditions allowed the researchers to capture a more authentic range of student writing behaviours, both in more reflective, prepared settings and under exam pressure.

Data Collection

The data comprised 206 expository essays, each between 400 to 600 words. Three types of expository essays, which are topical, cause-effect, and problem-solution, were written in response to the various prompts, where the students select the writing topic based on their personal preference during a classroom-based writing assessment. There is also an expository essay that they have written as their writing assessment under the time constraint of two hours. These prompts required students to present their views on a contemporary social issue (e.g., the benefits of student engagement in creative activities like art and music), allowing for the natural use of stance and reader engagement. Essays were collected with consent from students and were anonymised for confidentiality.

Analytical Framework

The essays were first transcribed into digital format and processed using Text Inspector and Microsoft Word to prepare the text for analysis. Text Inspector is a well-known text evaluation tool for English and is designed to evaluate non-native speakers' writing (Rysova et al., 2019; Yoon & Kim, 2022). The tool provides a statistical analysis of the text by calculating the number of words, syllables, sentences, average text length, relative frequency, and metadiscourse markers. This tool complements the manual coding by assisting the Text Inspector users when they provide some input, a software called Analyst checks every example of coding in the context, and it can alter or exclude the coding if misclassification of an item has been made (Bax et al., 2019).

Each essay was then carefully read and manually coded for instances of five interactional metadiscourse categories. This coding was carried out by the researcher and verified by a second rater who had been trained in discourse analysis, ensuring the reliability of the data. After coding, the frequency of each type of marker was counted, and descriptive statistics, such as frequency and percentage, were calculated to identify usage trends. Finally, a qualitative analysis, specifically content analysis, was conducted by identifying and quantifying specific features within the text, such as the frequency of

engagement markers or the repeated use of expressions like “I believe”. This method is particularly effective because it is systematic, replicable, and capable of producing quantifiable data that can be used to identify patterns or trends (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012). It allows researchers to code textual elements into meaningful categories, making it especially useful for large datasets. Furthermore, content analysis is often employed as a preliminary step before conducting more interpretive analyses such as discourse or thematic analysis, as it provides a foundational overview of what appears in the text, how frequently it occurs, and how these elements are distributed across the dataset (Neuendorf, 2017; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Trustworthiness and Reliability

To ensure reliability, inter-rater agreement was calculated using a subset of 50 essays, achieving a Cohen’s kappa coefficient of 0.82, indicating strong agreement. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. Member checking and peer debriefing were also employed to enhance credibility.

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the university’s ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent, and their identities were protected by assigning anonymous codes to each essay.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal important insights into the use of interactional metadiscourse markers in expository writing by Malaysian ESL undergraduates. This section discusses the implications of the patterns identified in relation to each research question and connects the results to previous literature and theoretical frameworks.

Table 1: The usage of interactional metadiscourse markers in the corpus

Interactional	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Self-mentions	898	28.35
Boosters	650	20.52
Engagement markers	631	19.92
Hedges	572	18.06
Attitude markers	417	13.16
Total	3168	100

Table 1 indicates the interactional metadiscourse markers used by Malaysian ESL undergraduates in expository writing. The most frequently used metadiscourse marker category is self-mentions (28.35%), whereas students use attitude markers the least (13.16%). These five types of interactional metadiscourse

markers are not very different from interactive markers, which show a big difference between transitions and endophoric markers. It is evident from comparing the frequency of interactional metadiscourse markers with the interactive ones that students will utilise transition markers more frequently than the other four types of interactional metadiscourse markers when they are more accustomed to them. However, when it comes to interactional metadiscourse markers, students tend to use them unconsciously, which means they do not have a strong preference for any particular type. Pearson and Abdollahzadeh (2023) addressed this in their systematic literature review, highlighting the identification and retrieval of metadiscourse markers as a noteworthy area for future research design and reporting. Apart from focusing on audience awareness (Fang & Zhuang, 2022), identification and retrieval of metadiscourse markers can be understood as a writer's awareness in using metadiscourse (Chung et al., 2023). Interactional metadiscourse markers demonstrate the writer's awareness of their readers and the necessity to clarify, elaborate, interact with, and guide them through the use of language. Management of interactional metadiscourse markers enables the writer to convey their affective position towards the content and reader, build writer-reader rapport, and eventually construct a text that is considered persuasive or successful (Lee & Deakin, 2016; as cited in Chung et al., 2023).

Self-mentions

Table 2: The use of self-mentions in the corpus

Self-mentions	Frequency	Percentage (%)
We	900	55.01
Our	714	43.64
I	19	1.16
My	3	0.18
Total	1636	100

Among the four types of self-mention markers used in expository writing, as shown in Table 2, "we" (900 items) and "our" (714 items) are the most common self-mentions used by the students. The least common frame markers used by the students are "I" (19 items) and "my" (3 items). The findings from this study show that students have the intention to convey authorial identity and engage with readers at the same time, and it can be achieved by using self-mentions explicitly (Hyland & Paltridge, 2011; as cited in Abousaeed, 2020). The application of reader pronouns such as "you", "your", and "we" is the way for students to make explicit reference to readers to engage them by weaving potential points of view into discourse. There have been differing opinions among teacher-participants in Karakus's (2020) study, as some teachers said that students should not explicitly show their presence using "I" or "we" in their essays, while some teachers said it is

acceptable to use those pronouns as long as they do not overuse them when making themselves visible by giving personal examples. Yuksel and Kavanoz (2018) stated that novice non-native writers used more self-mentions to express their commitment to their propositional content, while expert writers refrained from making overstatements.

Apart from the intention of the authors in this study to overly use “we” and “our” for conveying authorial identity and engaging with readers, there is also a possibility that its overuse can be attributed to the misunderstanding of academic tone, which stems from collectivist norms in Malaysian society. Yoon’s (2020) study supported this possibility as she found that there is a significant variation in metadiscourse use across three different backgrounds, such as Chinese, Korean, and Japanese EFL students. These norms affect how writers project authority, engage the audience, and structure argumentation through the excessive use of self-mention. In other words, if metadiscourse is the author’s way of showing up on the page, then the author’s culture determines whether that presence is assertive, reserved, or collectively oriented.

“I” and “we” are also frequently used by the participants in Kapranov’s (2020) study. Kapranov explained that the author’s goal to project a formal and trustworthy authorial voice is one of the reasons for the extensive use of “we”. In this context, it should be emphasised that Hyland (2002; as cited in Kapranov, 2020) describes the self-mention “we” as an expression of the authorial presence that gives the writer a sense of authority and legitimacy by excluding the reader. The increased usage of “I” was further explained by Kapranov as a predisposition to use a more neutral and possibly more colloquial register of the English language. According to the teacher-participants in Karakus’s study, Kapranov seems to agree with them when they say that the self-mention “I” seems to be a component of a less rigorous narrative that is characterised by the participants’ reflections rather than a well-organised and cohesive argument. Kapranov concluded that rather than the participants’ major at university, the use of self-mentions in the current corpus depends on their level of EFL competence. However, because the third-person point of view can be more impartial and persuasive, students are frequently required to avoid using the first-person point of view in academic writing, such as expository articles. Students might say, “I think the author is very convincing,” for instance. Removing the “I” from the example strengthens the statement or claim, as demonstrated in this example: “The author is very convincing”. Despite the common belief in academic writing, the students in this study still frequently use the first-person point of view “I” and “my”. This suggests that they are more direct in their self-references and reasonably candid in sharing their opinions and participation in the essay (Nawawi & Ting, 2022).

Boosters

Table 3: The use of boosters in the corpus

Boosters	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Should	189	28.64
Know	149	22.58
Always	64	9.70
Essential	60	9.09
Show	33	5.00
Indeed	29	4.39
Sure	19	2.88
Actually	17	2.58
Never	17	2.58
Establish	11	1.67
True	11	1.67
Even if	9	1.36
Won't	9	1.36
Definitely	7	1.06
Clearly	5	0.76
The fact that	5	0.76
Demonstrate	4	0.61
Of course	4	0.61
Prove	4	0.61
I believe	3	0.45
Certainly	2	0.30
Undoubtedly	2	0.15
Well known	2	0.30
Obvious	2	0.30
Beyond doubt	1	0.15
Determine	1	0.15
No doubt	1	0.15
Obviously	1	0.15
Total	660	100

Table 3 illustrates the analysis of the expository essay corpus in which the students have employed 28 types of boosters. The most common boosters used by the students are “should” (189 items), “know” (149 items), “always” (64 items), “essential” (60 items), and “show” (33 items). The least common boosters used by the students are the items with recorded only a single usage from the corpus, which are “beyond doubt” (1 item), “determine” (1 item), “no doubt” (1 item), “obviously” (1 item), and “undoubtedly” (2 items).

According to Hyland’s (2005) six categories of metadiscoursal boosters, the most common boosters used, such as “should” can be categorised as boosting modal auxiliary; “know” can be categorised as boosting phrase; “always” can be categorised as boosting adverb; “essential” can be categorised as boosting adjective; and “show” can be categorised as boosting verb. It is evident that the students utilised a variety of boosters, often without conscious awareness of their use. The highest frequency of “should” (28.64%) used

by the students in this study suggests that they are prone to include advice, recommendations, and expectations in their expository essays. As for the boosting phrase “know” with the second highest frequency (22.58%), when it is used with the pronoun “we” or “you”, it shows that the writer is having an attempt to communicate with the readers on the topic in which they assumed that the writer and reader shared a similar extent of schemata. The corpus contained 13 instances of the phrase “as we know” and only two instances of “as you know”. Despite their non-dominant use in expository writing, boosters showed that writers were more inclined to convey their confidence in their arguments to a close audience. Qin and Uccelli (2019) speculate that the short time frame of the essays may have prevented the writers from seeking external evidence to bolster their arguments. Consequently, in more formal academic writing, the absence of evidence may also lead to comparatively lower “confidence or commitment” to the stated beliefs (Deng et al., 2025).

For the least common boosters used, namely “beyond doubt”, can be categorised as a boosting adjective; “determine” can be categorised as a boosting verb, whereas “no doubt”, “obviously”, and “undoubtedly” can be categorised as boosting adverbs. The limited use of these boosters needs to be highlighted because the participants in this study might be uncomfortable boosting their propositional contents to a certain degree. Yoon (2020) discovered that the topic effect significantly impacts the metadiscourse category of boosters. This finding has practical implications, particularly when preparing writing test prompts. When stance markers are used in a prompt, test-takers may unconsciously be influenced to write their essays from a specific viewpoint, which could have a detrimental effect on their language and performance ratings (Yoon, 2020). Therefore, writing prompts to be used in high-stakes test settings should be constructed with few biased or emotional words, unless the elicitation of particular language features is intentionally planned, like facilitating the use of hedging expressions. In addition, Lo et al. (2021) presented several explanations for the variation in the boosters used by the participants in this study. People have different levels of knowledge about how boosters work in academic writing, different writing experiences, and a lack of understanding about how boosters and the writing context interact. Additionally, students lack confidence in their capacity to deliver propositional information in a second language, do not understand how to utilise boosters effectively in academic writing, and do not view boosters as a communication approach that can strengthen or weaken propositions.

Engagement markers

Table 4: The use of engagement markers in the corpus

Engagement markers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Us	294	38.38

You	258	33.68
Your	168	21.93
One's	12	1.57
Let	8	1.04
Imagine	4	0.52
Let us	4	0.52
Let's	4	0.52
Notice	4	0.52
Think about	4	0.52
Recall	3	0.39
Note (that)	2	0.26
Consider	1	0.13
Total	766	100

The Malaysian ESL undergraduates used 13 types of engagement markers in their expository writing, as shown in Table 4. The most common engagement markers used by the students are “us” (294 items), “you” (258 items), and “your” (168 items). The least common engagement markers used by the students are “let's”, “let us”, “notice”, and “think about”, which recorded four items, respectively, and a single use of “consider” based on the analysis. The findings in this study contradict Rahmat's (2011) assertion that the students in her study wrote without any consideration for their audience. The heavy use of pronouns such as “us”, “you”, and “your” indicates that the participants from the current study have made an attempt to communicate with their readers directly. In addition, the teacher-participants in Karakus's (2020) study reported that students often utilize “you” in their essays as a means of communication with the reader. However, initiating interactions with the reader requires skill, creativity, and smoothness, which depend on the language proficiency of the students. Furthermore, Ho and Li (2018) discovered that, in contrast to other kinds of interactional metadiscourse markers, the students in their study employed more engagement markers. The time constraint to engage with the reader and exposure to the argumentative essay model can influence a stronger preference for engagement markers, as demonstrated in their study. In line with the findings of Ho and Li, Pavlovic and Dordevic (2020) discovered that engagement markers were the most frequently used category in interactional metadiscourse, while Mohamed et al. (2021) discovered that engagement markers accounted for nearly half of all metadiscourse markers in the corpus. On top of that, ESL writers' higher usage of reader pronouns than that of native speakers (NS) can be explained by their cultural origins, which place a high importance on harmony with other community members and view overt self-projection as impolite or insulting (Yoon, 2020). Thus, it is important to note that although the use of reader pronouns by writers establishes a common ground with readers (Hyland, 2010), an overreliance on personal pronouns can still negatively impact the formality of academic writing. In addition, Erarslan (2021)

also observed that students primarily used interactional markers with engagement markers, suggesting a desire to establish a connection with their readers through their texts.

Hedges

Table 5: The use of hedges in the corpus

Hedges	Frequency	Percentage (%)
May	110	18.71
Could	91	15.48
Frequently	62	10.54
Would	57	9.69
Might	54	9.18
Often	41	6.97
Possible	25	4.25
Usually	25	4.25
Sometimes	23	3.91
Likely	18	3.06
Mostly	16	2.72
Maybe	13	2.21
Almost	10	1.70
Essentially	8	1.36
Little	8	1.36
Generally	5	0.85
Probably	5	0.85
Mainly	4	0.68
Possibly	3	0.51
In general	3	0.51
Seems	1	0.17
Apparently	1	0.17
Appear to be	1	0.17
Approximately	1	0.17
Assume	1	0.17
Doubt	1	0.17
Largely	1	0.17
Total	588	100

The Malaysian ESL undergraduates have produced 27 types of hedges in their expository essays, as demonstrated in Table 5. The most common hedges used by the students are “may” (110 items), “frequently” (62 items), “would” (57 items), “might” (54 items), “possible” (25 items), and “usually” (25 items). The least common hedges used by the students are “apparently”, “appear to be”, “approximately”, “assume”, “doubt”, “largely”, and “seems”, which were recorded one item, respectively, in the corpus. The usage of

diverse hedges can be demonstrated by combining and focusing on hedges of modal verbs; writers aim to alter their discussion of options and modify their attitudes towards the truth of claims (Ge, 2015). Carrio-Pastor (2021) validates this claim by asserting that hedges will be used more frequently the more varieties there are.

In contrast, the finding in this study produced a different outcome as compared to Pyykonen's (2023) study, as she found that "would" is preferred by students of all different proficiencies (CEFR B1, B2, C1, C2), and it is used more in opinion writing than letter writing. The writer uses "would" to highlight the extent to which they would benefit from the recipient's assistance. The highest frequency of "may" in this corpus showed that study participants were likely to express uncertainty about their expository essays. It is understandable that diploma-level authors employ "may" as a warning tactic, enabling them to "diplomatically" convey less than complete dedication to their work (Swales, 1990; as cited in Ge, 2015).

According to Bhartiya et al. (2023), postgraduate students use hedges more frequently than undergraduate students, but this study's findings show that undergraduate students also use a significant number of hedges. On a different note, Ho and Li (2018) made a connection between the use of hedges and the type of writing (timed versus untimed). They explained that the limited time students have to write their essays contributes to the increased use of hedges, as it reduces their opportunity to consider the most effective way to present propositional content in English. In order to enhance the persuasiveness of an essay, particularly an expository one, it is crucial for the writer to convey both uncertainty and confidence in their argument (Skelton, 1988; as cited in Ho & Li, 2018). Nonetheless, using hedges in academic writing, like those items found in research journals, may show that the author is aware of many perspectives and views, which encourages debate (Hyland, 2005; as cited in Qin & Uccelli, 2019).

Attitude markers

Table 6: The use of attitude markers in the corpus

Attitude markers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Important	152	34.62
Even	100	22.78
Must	99	22.55
Have to	45	10.25
Interest	20	4.56
Prefer	12	2.73
Correctly	3	0.68
Ought	2	0.46
Unfortunately	2	0.46
Hopefully	1	0.23

I agree	1	0.23
Pleased	1	0.23
Remarkably	1	0.23
Total	439	100

Table 6 specifies that there are 13 types of attitude markers in the document analysis. The most common attitude markers used by the students are “important” (152 items), “even” (100 items), “must” (99 items), and “have to” (45 items). Surprisingly, students managed to use the least common attitude markers, such as “hopefully”, “I agree”, “pleased”, and “remarkable”, which have been used at least once in these expository essays. Like earlier research by Hyland (2012) and Thomson (2021), “important” was the most common attitude marker in this corpus. Students may view attitude indicators as expressing “subjectivity rather than objectivity, which may conflict with their notion of academic writing” (Lee & Deakin, 2016, p. 29; as cited in Thomson, 2021).

The low use of attitude markers in writing discourse has also been reported in various genres such as research reports (Letsoela, 2013), persuasive essays (Tan & Wong, 2014), and various genres compiled in a corpus, like argumentative, cause-effect, opinion, and comparison-contrast (Yuksel & Kavanoz, 2018). According to Pavlovic and Dordevic (2020), students’ lack of awareness about the functions and importance of attitude markers, as well as their potential impact on readers, contributes to their low use. Additionally, they contended that students often lack confidence when discussing certain points in their arguments, leading them to choose not to express their attitude towards the topic. Moreover, Tan and Wong (2014) emphasised that Malaysian undergraduate students had a low awareness of attitude markers among the metadiscourse categories, with the lowest use, which echoes the decrease in metadiscourse awareness of these markers. The lack of use could be an indicator that it is a more challenging metadiscourse feature to use, and the students have a lack of exposure towards these metadiscourse features, which cannot be remedied in a short intervention.

Conclusion

This study investigated the use of interactional metadiscourse markers in expository writing by Malaysian ESL undergraduates, focusing on their types, frequency, and patterns of use. Using Hyland’s (2005) interpersonal model as the analytical framework, the research revealed that while students employed all five categories of interactional markers, hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers, their usage was often unbalanced and formulaic. The most frequently used category was self-mentions, followed by boosters and engagement markers. This indicates a tendency among students to assert a personal stance and manage certainty. However, the limited use of hedges and attitude markers

suggests underdeveloped rhetorical strategies for expressing evaluation and involving readers. These findings reflect a developing awareness of audience and stance but also point to a need for more nuanced control over such features in academic writing. Overall, the results suggest that Malaysian ESL undergraduates are at an intermediate stage of rhetorical competence. They recognise the need to position themselves in relation to their readers, but often lack the range, appropriateness, and strategic variation required for effective academic communication.

This study makes a significant contribution to ESL pedagogy in Malaysia by offering empirical insights into how Malaysian undergraduates use interactional metadiscourse markers in expository writing, a genre that has been underrepresented in prior research. By addressing the research questions, namely, the types and frequency of interactional metadiscourse markers used, and what these patterns reveal about students' rhetorical competence, the study highlights areas where ESL learners struggle to meet academic writing conventions. Notably, the overuse of self-mentions such as "we" and "our" and the relatively low use of hedges and attitude markers suggest limited awareness of authorial stance and audience engagement strategies. These findings reveal not only a reliance on L1 rhetorical habits but also a pedagogical gap in teaching the pragmatic and rhetorical functions of metadiscourse. As such, the study provides a clear directive for Malaysian ESL educators to incorporate explicit instruction on metadiscourse into writing curricula. Emphasising rhetorical awareness, appropriate tone, and genre sensitivity can help students develop more reader-oriented, persuasive, and academically appropriate writing. By contextualising the data within Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model, the study also strengthens the theoretical foundation for integrating metadiscourse instruction into syllabus design, thereby advancing the pedagogical treatment of stance and engagement in Malaysian ESL classrooms.

Despite offering valuable insights, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, the research was conducted using data from a single public university in Malaysia, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other ESL contexts or institutions with differing student demographics and proficiency levels. Secondly, while efforts were made to ensure a range of expository essay types, the writing prompts, particularly those involving social issues, may have inadvertently influenced students' stance-taking and use of interactional metadiscourse. As noted in Yoon (2020), topic familiarity and emotional framing can significantly affect the deployment of boosters and engagement markers. Thirdly, the study did not include a native-speaker comparator corpus, which restricts the ability to benchmark Malaysian students' metadiscourse use against established norms in L1 academic writing. Without such a reference point, it is difficult to determine whether the observed patterns reflect unique L2 features, instructional gaps, or broader genre conventions. Future studies may benefit from expanding the sample across multiple institutions, diversifying prompt topics to reduce bias, and incorporating native-speaker corpora for more robust comparative analysis.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several pedagogical and research-oriented recommendations are suggested to enhance students' academic writing. First, language instructors should provide explicit instruction on metadiscourse by teaching the definitions and functions of each type, using authentic examples from academic texts, and offering practice activities for identifying and applying markers effectively. Second, since rhetorical features vary by genre, genre-based writing practice should be emphasised. For expository writing, students need proper guidance to analyse model essays to see how metadiscourse supports clarity and argument, and they should be encouraged to use stance and engagement markers purposefully. Third, incorporating corpus-based tools, such as learner corpora and software like AntConc, can help students notice patterns in their own writing. Language instructors might create small corpora from student essays to support this. Fourth, reflective practice should be promoted through journaling, peer review, and revision, helping students become more aware of their rhetorical choices and audience needs. Finally, future research could expand the sample size, explore different academic disciplines, track metadiscourse development over time, examine proficiency-related differences, and assess the impact of targeted instruction. These approaches can bridge rhetorical gaps in ESL writing, helping learners become more persuasive and confident academic communicators.

Author Contributions

SFK and NK conceived the study and contributed to the data interpretation and literature review. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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