

# Essays by ESL Learners: Interactional Metadiscourse (MD) Analysis

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## Abstract

This study highlights how critical MD should be used in ESL writing. Based on Hyland's metadiscourse (MD) table (2005), this study examined interactional MD markers in 40 expository essays written by ESL students taking different courses. The study sought to determine whether learners in separate course groups differed in their choice of MD and whether both groups used the exact amount and type. The quantity and variety of materials employed by the two groups varied to some extent. While hard science students were quite aggressive in their writing, soft science students created more MD traits and were more interpretative.

**Keywords:** Interactional Metadiscourse; Expository Writing; ESL Learners

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## 1.0 Introduction

One linguistic element that aids writers in keeping their writing consistent and reader-friendly is metadiscourse (MD). All writers write for their readers, and they can connect with them successfully by developing their MD abilities. Usually, the writers use two levels of writing. The propositional content delivery is the initial stage. It is the logical substance or assertion, to put it another way. Metadiscursal is the second level. Here is where different writer types diverge from one another. The engaging section, where writers attempt to relate their readers to the propositional content, is essential. Some writers are better at determining the readers' interest and attention span.

Because writing an essay involves only one-way interaction between the writer and audience, so English Second Learners (ESL) learners find writing effectively and coherently challenging. MD is an exciting area of research that is believed to be essential to arranging and producing writing and speaking. MD is considered a social act because it involves interaction between all participants. For example, there is a dialogue between the author and the reader in writing and composing. ESL learners usually face complexity. It is not just one-sided idealism. Hyland (2004) sees MD as "introspective verbal expressions relating to the developing text, the author, and the imaginary readership of that text". It is understanding writing and speaking as social and open togetherness. For ESL students, this issue is compounded by linguistic limitations (Abdul Rahman et al., 2022; Dillah et al., 2019; Isa et al., 2021).

Meta-discourse in writing and speech helps readers and writers recognise its importance and ensures that both parties understand the content. It is engaging to look at these and see how ESL learners developed MD features in their writing. Hyland (2005) acknowledges that teaching learners MD markers has three main advantages. First, learners can discern the thinking expectations the scriptures require and how they can assist them in writing. Second, teaching MDs gives them enough intention to stick with their ideas. Thirdly, the writer can confirm the rest to the reader. In summary, it helps a lot in the learning process.

In her teaching context, the researcher observed that ESL students now struggle with using MD markers. Asghar (2015), Mu et al. (2015), Lu (2011), Dafouz-Milne (2008), and Hyland (1999) all found that students have a limited grasp of MD markers and choose to use particular MD indicators, like transition markers and self-mentions, only in their writing (Zali et al., 2020). This study aimed to learn how ESL students used MD markers. Kashiha (2018) and Alharbi (2021) contend that in order to emphasise the significance of MD markers for writers of second languages, it is necessary to take a closer look at how they are used in other types of writing that are relevant to ESL students, such as expository writing. Additionally, using a more extensive corpus that focuses on Malaysia may produce.

The focus of current research on MD and writing is on teaching English writing, particularly ESL writing, to the English teaching community. In light of that, this study was done to analyse the usage of MD traits in two groups of ESL learners and investigate the frequency of their usage (based on a table from Hyland, 2005). Considering prior studies on academic writing, which is uncommon in this field, we plan to investigate and analyse

one type of MD, namely interactional MD, in expository essays written by Malaysian ESL students. Aziz et al. (2016) explored gender identities in argumentative essays, Mohamad Noor and Mohamed Alam (2017) concentrated on academic projects, Lo et al. (2014) detected metadiscourse usage in persuasive writing, Tan and Eng (2014) recognised metadiscourse use in persuasive writing, Aziz et al. (2016) studied on gender identities in argumentative essays, Mohamad Noor, and Mohamed Alam (2017) focussed on the academic projects, Lo et al. (2020) and Lo et al. (2021) explored the patterns of boosters in drafts of doctoral research proposals, Zali et al. (2020) looked on evaluative writing by comparing two different courses, hard and soft science, Rahmat et al. (2020) studied on gender differences, and Mohamed et al. (2021) stressed on good persuasive essays.

### 1.1 Objectives of Study

The study was conducted to seek the answers for:

- 1) The frequency of features of interactional MD produced by learners in their writing.
- 2) The differences in interactional MD features produced by two different groups of learners.

### 1.2 Conceptual Framework

As shown in figure 1, two variables are used in the study, independent variable (IV) and dependent variable (DV); specifically, IV is expository essays produced by ESL learners from two groups: hard science and soft science course. Meanwhile dependent variable is the interactional MD based on Hyland's 2005, which are *Attitude Markers*, *Self-mentions*, *Engagement Markers*, *Hedges* and *Boosters*. This study was conducted to determine whether both groups used the exact amount and type and whether learners in different course groups differed in their selection of MD features.

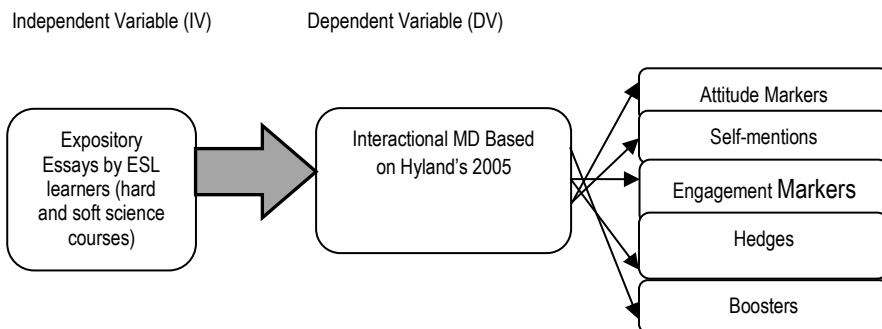


Fig.1: Conceptual Framework of Study

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Interactional Metadiscourse (MD)

Hylands (2005) proposed a model involving two kinds of MD; interactional and interactive. This current study has focused on interactional MD only. Interactional MD allows authors to comment on their messages. Hyland refers to this author's current behaviour as a printed "voice" (Hyland, 2005, p37). An interactional MD engages the reader and presents the author's perspective on the propositional content (Hyland, 2004). This feature can be recognised by the first individual pronouns and the possessive descriptive words "*I, I, mine, ours, mine, and us*" Different highlights that can be used for *self-mentions* are "writer, essayist, novelist, novelist". Kuo (1999) states that using *self-mention* in writing gives authors space to claim authorship by highlighting their contributions to the field and seeking recognition for their efforts.

*Hedges* are used to "recognise alternative voices and perspectives and keep the promise of proposals" (Hyland, 2005). The support presents the writer's data as emotions or possible thoughts rather than reality. For example, "from my point of view, as I would like to think, possibly." Different highlights are *boosters*. Unlike *hedges*, *boosters* help ensure that writers get what they have to say. The model is "actually safe and defiant". *Authors use engagement markers* to target readers and engage them in discussions. This marker is made possible through the extensive use of "we, us, us", reader pronouns "you and you", and question marks. Hyland (2005) highlights that "the most obvious manifestations of an essayist's dialogue consciousness occur when the subject clearly alludes, asks questions, makes suggestions, and legitimately cares about the reader". A final interactive highlight is the *Attitude Marker*. They "show the emotional as opposed to the essayist's epistemological and suggestive". Previous research has shown that good essays contain more MD than weak ones (Jalilifar & Alipour, 2007). Nevertheless, the utilisation of interactional MD relies upon the writer's writing ability. Most are not fully experts if their papers are to be contrasted with expert authors or local speakers (Amaal & Radzuwan, 2017).

## 2.2 Previous Studies

In the Malaysian context, the study on L2 writers by Heng and Tan (2010) revealed that Malaysian undergraduate learners produced more interactional MD markers than interactive MD markers in their argumentative essays. Interestingly, Mahmood et al. (2017) also found that Pakistani undergraduate learners were more inclined to use interactional MD markers instead of interactive ones in their corpus of argumentative writings.

Comparative studies between ethnicity, nations and societies are increasing as the world further develops. For instance, a study by Ariannejad *et al.* (2019) researched the utilisation of MD in English and Persian structural exploration articles. Like others in general, they made their examination based on Hyland's (2005) model of MD. Their examination explores the work of *Hedges*, *Boosters*, and *Attitude Markers* in a corpus made from the post-technique areas of 100 exploration articles (50 English and 50 Persian) in engineering. Overall, it was found that there are measurably marked contrasts between the frequencies of *Hedges*, *Boosters*, and *Attitude Markers* utilised in the English and Persian sub-corpora.

Mat Zali et al. (2019) analysed the corpus of 200 evaluation essays from Malaysian ESL students enrolled in hard and soft science courses using Hyland's Interactional MD Table (2005). The study aimed to determine whether students in both groups utilised the same amount of meta-discourse, whether students in various course groups chose MD differently, and whether the MD feature was used the most or the least in both courses. Compared to students in hard science courses, students in soft science courses applied more MD traits, according to the analysis. Also, it was observed that students frequently employed self-mentions and had little attribution markers in their work.

The use of interactive and interactional MD research on how L2 learners constructed MD functions were then compared by MM Zali et al. (2020). Based on Hyland's framework (2005), 200 evaluative essays written by undergraduate computer science and business students at UiTM were analysed. The goal is to find out how frequently and what kinds of meta-discourses are employed, as well as if students in various course groups differ in their decision-making. Research showed that students used interactive learning more frequently than interactive MD in both courses. The same distinguishing feature in both courses is the transition markers. Self-mentions are the most prominent characteristics, whereas attitude markers are the least prominent. The transition markers are the same distinctive characteristic in both courses. Unlike computer science frame markers, business administration courses are the least specific regarding evidence.

A corpus analysis of the MD markers employed in argumentative essays by Pakistani undergraduates was done by Shafqat et al. in 2020. The study aimed to determine the kinds of MD markers used in argumentative essays as well as their highest and lowest frequency. The results showed that interactive MD markers were used more frequently than interactional markers. Transition markers are the MD elements most frequently utilised, while endophoric markers are the least frequently used. This study makes a case for using MD tools in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), both for teaching and learning how to write well and for understanding discourse norms.

An MD study of 195 persuasive solid essays written by Malaysian student authors was conducted by Mohamed et al. in 2021. According to Tan et al. (2012)'s simplified MD framework for ESL lay writers, the study examined the frequency of MD markers used in both organisational and interpersonal discourse markers in the essays of good undergraduate writers, as well as how these MD markers are identified and classified into main categories and subcategories. The results indicated that undergraduate students employ more organisational discourse markers. As a result of the writer's employment of these conventions to engage readers in the text's debate, interpersonal discourse markers are less frequently used in the corpus. These inexperienced college students would employ fewer hedges in this situation.

### **3.0 Methodology**

For the study, 40 diploma students from Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Terengganu who were enrolled in the third semester of the English course ELC231 were

chosen. Twenty expository essays from the Soft Science (Hotel Management) and Hard Science (Electrical Engineering) courses were chosen for this quantitative study using the purposive sample method.

### 3.1 Data Collection

The expository essays are a component of the corpus used in this study which are 40 essays with 12,000 words. These essays were prepared for one of the ongoing assessments of Integrated Language Skills III (ELC231), representing 20 per cent of the course. The students were instructed to prepare the essay using one unified theme as the emphasis (Ways to Address Bullying Issues Among Teens) as an in-class assessment, in 250-300 words, within 1 hour and 30 minutes.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

Using the interactional MD model developed by Hyland (2005), which is described as a "more theoretically robust and analytically reliable model of metadiscourse" (Hyland, 2005a, p. 37). So far, it has been widely adopted by numerous studies and applied by Kashiba (2018) and Alharbi (2021), Ariannejad et al. (2019), Mat Zali et al. (2019), and Zali et al. (2020), Zahro et al., 2021; Lo et al., 2021; Ekawati & Rosyidah, 2022; Goltaji & Hooshmand, 2022) like *Attitude Markers*, *Self-mentions*, *Engagement Markers*, *Hedges* and *Boosters* were examined as to its usage frequency, and the frequency of interactional MD was carefully assessed. Data obtained after being analysed manually was charted. The list of search items compiled was based on Hyland's (2005, pp. 218–224) list of MD items, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Interactional MD Model based on Hyland, 2005

No.	Interactional MD	Examples
1.	Attitude Markers- indicate the writer's opinion or assessment of a proposition.	<i>I agree; I am amazed, appropriate, correct, dramatic, hopeful, and unfortunate.</i>
2.	Self-mention refers to the explicit authorial presence in the text and gives information about his/ her character and stance.	<i>I, we, the author</i>
3.	Engagement markers- explicitly address readers to draw them into the discourse.	<i>We, our (inclusive), imperative mood.</i>
4.	Hedges- indicate the writer's decision to recognise other voices, viewpoints or possibilities and be (ostensibly) open to negotiation with the reader,	<i>Assume, doubt, and estimate, from my perspective, in most cases, in my opinion, probably, suggests</i>
5.	Boosters- allow the writer to anticipate and preclude alternative, conflicting arguments by expressing certainty instead of doubt.	<i>Beyond doubt, we found, we proved, it is a fact.</i>

## 4.0 Results

The results of the study are explained according to the objectives of the study:

### 4.1 The frequency of features of interactional MD produced (the most prominent and the lowest occurrence MD features)

Table 2 shows the frequency of MD features produced by Soft Science (Hotel Management) and Hard Science (Electrical Engineering) learners. Based on the table, Hedges were the highest MD feature Hotel Management (HM) used, with 53.05 per cent. While Self-mention appeared to be the highest MD feature by Electrical Engineering (EE), with 57.81 per cent.

Table 2: The Frequency and Percentage of MD Features Produced by Learners from Soft and Hard Science Courses

INTERACTIONAL METADISOURSE	HM		EE	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Hedges	139	53.05	104	40.63
Boosters	1	0.38	0	0.00
Attitude markers	3	1.15	4	1.56
Engagement markers	3	1.15	0	0.00
Self-mention	116	44.27	148	57.81
Total	262	100.00	256	100.00

Table 2 also reveals the least frequent MD features for Soft Science learners, which are *Boosters*; meanwhile, the minor occurrence of MD for Hard Science learners are *Boosters* and *Engagement Markers*. The results showed no *Booster* in Hard Science and very little in Soft Science.

#### Hedges (H)

The hedging device is the first mostly used interactional MD marker in ESL students' essays. Hedges are employed in a text to understand the writer's commitment to the text. Salichah et al. (2015) noted that there are five different types of hedges. Modal verbs make up the first group (example 1). These modal gadgets serve as an expression of the readers' capacity and potential.

On the other hand, epistemic adjectives or adverbs fall under the second type of hedges. Epistemic adjective and adverb terms convey the ambiguity or likelihood of a specific claim, much like modal verbs do. (examples 2 and 3).

*Example 1: If I mention the story, what would be the most significant change related to it? I am sure children will be the surest certainty answer.*

*Example 2: ..., but in that time, their children likely have to complete their homework or rest to prepare for tomorrow's learning process.*

*Example 3: ..., with the young age of teenagers, it is possible for them to get bullied easily.*

Epistemic lexical verbs are a different group discovered in this study (example 4). They demonstrate the author's speculation through terms like suggest, conclude, infer Etc., or the author's commitment through phrases like claimed, showed, Etc. They also contain narrative components like attempt, tend, seek, and verbs of perception like seem, presumably, Etc. (Salichah et al., 2015). Remarkably, some sub-types separate the epistemic lexical verbs. Since the data used here were expository essays where students were expected to mention or clarify their intentions as a writer is expected to do with their journal articles, we could not locate any directly related examples.

*Example 4: For further action, I suggest parents consider the idea and make it as straightforward as possible before taking action.*

*Example 5: It seems like those kinds of stuff are just as essential as their role as parents.*

### Self-mentions

Self-mentions are the most prominent MD features produced by EE students. A writer/speaker uses these devices to highlight their presence in the text and represent their self-representations (Hyland, 2005 p,53). Self-mentions often use first-person pronouns (I, we) and possessive adjectives (mine, me, our, ourselves).

*Example 6: I think it is better to concern more about what their children do at school.*

*Example 7: ..., we may assume that one of the possible reasons for the increase in bullying is caused by them.*

### Attitude Markers

The tools used to display the writer's emotions are called attitude markers. Hence, these tools may demonstrate acceptance, duty, frustration, significance, Etc. (Hyland, 2005). To emphasise, neither in spoken nor written conversation are the attitude indicators frequently utilised. There are three basic ways it could manifest. It initially presents as an attitude verb like "agree," "support," or "prefer" (Example 8). Second, it could take the shape of sentence adverbs like, fortunately, hopefully, Etc. (example 9). Last but not least, several adverbs like absurd, fitting, and outstanding are also categorised as attitude indicators (example 10).

*Example 8: I cannot entirely agree with the parent's blame on teachers or schools for bullying issues.*

*Example 9: Unfortunately, all those authorities need to take fast action.*

*Example 10: It is appropriate to call "the authority" one of the most suitable people to do the action.*

### Engagement Markers



Engagement markers are used when writers write directly to the target audience. The purpose of using these techniques is to immediately engage the audience in the discussion and draw attention to their presence in the text. Second-person pronouns and possessive adjectives, such as you, yours, and yourselves, mainly indicate this group (example 11). Moreover, interjections like likewise, hello, by the way, Etc. may be used to present engagement markers. Moreover, Hyland (2009) offers an additional method of audience involvement by placing the audience and drawing them into the discussion using verb tenses directed towards the readers, such as should, must, have to, Etc. (example 12).

*Example 11: You will no longer be able to regret yourself.*

*Example 12: Take a look at the example of bullying. The first example is "some friends who see her". So, 'who' here is a relative clause that modifies "some friends". Second example*

### Boosters

Generally, boosters are used to persuade the reader by writing or speaking with confidence about them. It allows the author or speaker to make their points and preclude the opposing viewpoints from shaping their thoughts (Hyland, 2017). The students included their arguments and tried to persuade the readers of their position on the written data. Amplifiers, forceful words, universal and negative pronouns, and other words fall under the category of boosters. Every, no, all, and other universal pronouns are employed to exaggeratedly narrate a proposition that could elicit exaggerated reactions from the audience (example 13). A claim's impact is inflated, and the lexical intensity of its is increased, all while using amplifiers. Most of the adverbs used to describe the amplifiers are. The amplifiers are represented mainly by adverbs such as very, indeed, extremely, Etc. Finally, the emphatic markers, such as indeed, for sure, Etc., refer to the elements which emphasise the claim of a writer/speaker in the text.

*Example 13: Nobody could save Millennials but themselves*

### 4.2 The differences in interactional MD features produced by both groups.

Table 3 and Figure 2 compare the MD features of the two groups (HM and EE). HM learners used most Hedges (139), followed by Self-mention (116). On the contrary, the EE learners used most Self-mention (148), followed by Hedges (104).

Table 1: The Comparison of MD Features Produced by Both Groups

INTERACTIONAL METADISOURSE	HM	EE	Total
Hedges	139	104	243
Boosters	1	0	1
Attitude markers	3	4	7
Engagement markers	3	0	3
Self-mention	116	148	264
Total	262	256	518

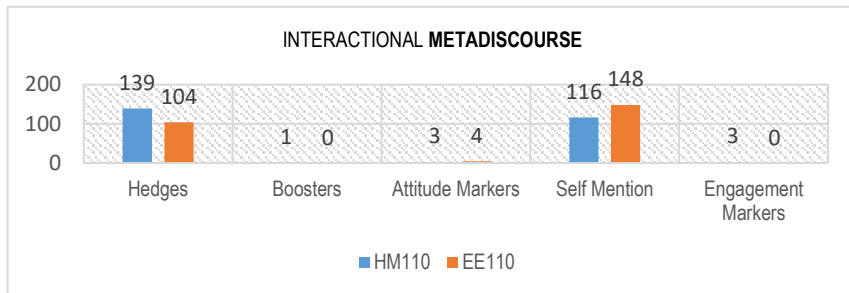


Fig.2: The comparison of MD features produced by both groups

If compared with both groups, *Self-mention* was the preferable feature produced by Soft Science and Hard Science, as the total for this feature was 264 if compared with other features. However, the least preferable feature was *Boosters*, as the total for this feature was one only.

## 5.0 Discussion

The discussion of the study is explained according to the objectives of the study:

### 5.1 The frequency of features of interactional MD produced (the most prominent and the minor occurrence of MD features)

Hard Science learners were more confident in constructing their writing than Soft Science learners. They applied Self-mention frequently with the use of *the author, I, we and our*. This study is in line with the study by Mat Zali et al. (2020) and (2022) and MM Zali et al. (2021). The strategic application of Self-mention in writing allows authors to assert their authorial persona by stating their strong beliefs and ideas, emphasising their contribution to the field, and seeking recognition for their endeavour (Kuo, 1999). However, the Soft Science learners preferred to imply when developing the content in their writings. According to Hyland (2005), entities in soft sciences are utterly more specific but less precisely evaluative and less clear-cut.

There was almost no booster in soft science and none in hard science because, at the diploma level, the students still needed to be exposed to evaluating and criticising. According to the syllabus, they were only obliged to produce expository essays, and the writing was descriptive. Moreover, *Boosters* are frequently used in analytical and persuasive writing. In addition, because they prefer to explain explicitly, Soft Science students were more likely to utilise *Attitude Markers* and *Engagement Markers* in their writing than Hard Science students, who tended to employ *Engagement Markers*.

### 5.2 The differences in interactional MD features produced by both groups.

Self-mention was the most favoured feature generated by Soft Science and Hard Science compared to other features in both groups. The outcome is similar to the research done by MM Zali et al. (2020) and Mat Zali et al. (2021). Hence, if we compare Hard Science students to Soft Science students, Hard Science students were highly assertive in their writing.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

MD plays a significant role in producing written materials. They help writers to produce well-organised and constructed writing. They try to express their experience, interact with their audience, and organise their expressions into cohesive discourses so that their addressees can make coherent sense.

Commonly, in analysing the interactional MD features in writing, the Soft Science (HM) learners used most Hedges followed by Self-mention, contrary to the Hard Science (EE) learners, who preferred using most Self-mention followed by Hedges. This trend showed that Hard Science learners demonstrated assertion in their writing compared to Soft Science learners.

For learners to compose a well-written discourse, they need to be aware of and employ appropriate MD devices within the written discourse. MD is a vital linguistic means that helps writers to direct the undertaking of their written ideas. Thus, universities should be made aware of learners' writing and emphasise the MD concept. MD is a construct that plays a vital role in writing and reading research. This MD works well for university-level learners. Because many novice writers focus only on the written text itself, the product, and need to pay more attention to the primary purpose of writing - communicating with the audience.

Limitations encountered in this study should be investigated in future studies. First, there needs to be more corpus material for this study. These resulting forces are likely to be more accurate with larger samples. Second, there needed to be more information about the authors or participants. Access to relevant information from participants helps researchers to conduct a more thorough comparative analysis of results.

For future research, it is proposed to conduct a comparative study on MD writing between secondary schools and colleges to comprehensively compare learner levels and the use of MD traits in writing. For this reason, it may be helpful to see whether secondary school learners use MD in their writing and whether this influences their writing assessment when studying at the university level. Next, having a broader scope, more significant number and different genres of corpora might be more exciting and produce a different angle of MD study among ESL learners. They may yield the importance of teaching MD in ESL classrooms.

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## Article Contribution to Related Field of Study

The use of interactional MD in expository essays needs to be studied more in the literature. This research fills that gap by thoroughly analysing the MD produced by ESL students in the Malaysian environment.

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