

# Metadiscourse Markers in Saudi EFL Undergraduate Academic Writing: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Proficiency and Genre Variation

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## Abstract

The current study examines how the metadiscourse markers in Saudi EFL undergraduate academic writing may vary due to writing proficiency and essay genre. By utilizing a corpus of 206 final-exam essays (argumentative, cause-and-effect, and compare-and-contrast) from an English-medium college, we conducted a mixed-method analysis grounded in an established interpersonal model of metadiscourse. Quantitative results reveal a paradoxical trend where low-graded essays ( $\leq 65\%$ ) employed 26% more metadiscourse markers (approx. 140 per 1,000 words) than high-graded essays ( $\geq 90\%$ ). This finding suggests an overuse of basic transitions and engagement devices by low-graded writers. While the overall ratio distributions between interactive/interactional markers were similar across proficiency levels, qualitative differences were noticeable. High-graded texts displayed a diverse, contextually integrated marker use, whereas low-graded texts relied on repetitive, formulaic signals (e.g., excessive

“and” “also”). Essay-genre comparisons further demonstrated distinct patterns: argumentative essays by weaker writers showed engagement-marker saturation (direct reader address instead of strong argumentation), cause-and-effect essays showed authorial detachment (marked drop in self-mentions), and compare-and-contrast essays showed evaluative imbalance (excessive self-reference coupled with limited hedges or boosters). These findings confirm that proficiency improvements are associated with a shift from mechanical to strategic metadiscourse use. In terms of cultural impact, the results reflect a transfer from Arabic rhetorical norms (e.g., additive cohesion, collective ethos) and the influence of English-medium instructional practices. The study offers implications for pedagogy that go beyond formulaic cohesion, emphasizing functional marker use, balanced stance-taking, and genre-sensitive writing strategies to help learners develop a more effective academic voice.

**Keywords:** Metadiscourse Markers, Saudi EFL Undergraduate, Essay genre, Proficiency level, Corpus-based Analysis

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant expansion in research on metadiscourse markers, which Hyland (2004, p. 109) defines as “those aspects of the text which explicitly refer to the organization of the discourse or the writer’s stance towards either its content or the reader.” This expansion stems from the importance of using metadiscourse markers to assist writers in organizing the text in a coherent and convincing manner, expressing their viewpoints regarding the text content, and engaging the reader as a participant in dialogic interaction (Hyland, 2005).

It is evident that the English language has emerged as a global lingua franca, particularly for academia. It functions as the primary medium for scholarly communication, research publication, and international collaboration. Mastering English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for both native and non-native speakers is essential to engage effectively in the global academic context. Many second language (L2) learners encounter difficulties in adhering to the conventions of English academic discourse, which require coherence, argumentation, authorial stance, and reader engagement skills. Therefore, there remain a critical necessity for empirical investigation into the use of metadiscourse in L2 writing, as many studies indicate that L2 writers often struggle to employ metadiscourse markers effectively (e.g., Ament et al., 2020; Eghtesadi & Navidinia, 2009; Mauranen, 1993; Vassileva, 1997). These challenges and language requirements also apply to the Saudi EFL academic context. In the last two decades, the demand for mastery of the English language has increased significantly in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 proposes a national reform agenda focused on educational modernization, digital transformation, and enhancing global competitiveness to establish a knowledge-based economy (Saudi Vision 2030, 2017). Improving the universities’ competitiveness and international standing is one of this vision’s many objectives for educational development. The dominance of English has facilitated the emergence of English-Medium Instruction (EMI), described as “the most significant trend in educational internationalization” (Chapple, 2015, p. 1). EMI is recognized as a means to enhance students’ intercultural communication and to promote the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Coleman, 2006). In order to enhance global integration and employability, the majority of Saudi universities have implemented EMI, especially within science, engineering, and medical disciplines.

Research in metadiscourse has examined a variety of genres, including master’s and doctoral theses (Kawase, 2015; Mestre-Mestre, 2017; Alharbi, 2021), research articles (Cao & Hu, 2014; El-Dakhs, 2018b; Khedri et al., 2013), academic blogs (Hyland & Zou, 2020; Zou & Hyland, 2020), and book reviews (Jalilifar et al., 2018; Tse & Hyland, 2007). Many of these studies have highlighted variability in metadiscourse based on culture (Dahl, 2004; Shokouhi & Baghsiahi, 2009; Alqahtani, 2022), register/genre (El-Dakhs, 2018; Fu, 2012), discipline (Khedri et al., 2013; Yoon & Römer, 2020; Binmahboob, 2022), and diachronic differences (Hyland & Jiang, 2016, 2018). Several studies have examined metadiscourse in undergraduate EFL students’ argumentative writing (Mahmood et al., 2017; El-Dakhs, 2020; Shafqat et al., 2020; Rad, 2020). However, no published research has directly compared metadiscourse patterns between high- and low-graded argumentative and expository essay

genres produced in EFL contexts, particularly within Saudi Arabian higher education. Moreover, recent systematic reviews, such as those conducted by Pearson and Abdollahzadeh (2023), have underscored the prevalence of corpus-based quantitative studies and emphasized the growing relevance of metadiscourse research. These reviews also identified significant gaps in methodological rigor, cross-cultural analysis, and the study of underrepresented learner populations and contexts.

These gaps provide a foundation for examining metadiscourse use across diverse learner profiles, writing genres, and cultural settings. This study aims to address this gap by exploring metadiscourse through a corpus-based comparative analysis of argumentative and expository essays across proficiency levels at Yanbu Industrial College (YIC). It specifically aims to examine and compare the use of metadiscourse through three interconnected dimensions: (1) the distribution patterns of metadiscourse markers in Saudi EFL essays; (2) variations across proficiency levels as determined by standardized assessments; and (3) differences across academic genres of various essay types. For the current study, Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model is adopted as the primary theoretical framework for the data analysis.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Theoretical Evolution*

The concept of metadiscourse has undergone significant theoretical development over time. Zellig Harris introduced the term in 1959 to describe segments of a book that diverge from the fundamental material to convey propositional content. This content is conveyed by offering secondary information. This perspective argues that the main information conveys a text's essential meaning, whereas secondary information helps readers in understanding, organizing, and evaluating that meaning (Williams, 1981; Vande Kopple, 1985). Metadiscourse, as defined by Williams (1981) and Vande Kopple (1985), refers to "discourse about discourse." They delineated two levels of discourse: the primary level, which conveys propositional meaning, and the secondary level, which comprises linguistic expressions that articulate the writer's stance and guide the reader. The first to categorize metadiscourse into textual and interpersonal categories was Vande Kopple's (1985) model, which formed the basis for following frameworks such as Hyland (1998, 2005) and Crismore et al. (1993). Crismore enhanced the relationship between textual organization and social stance by incorporating interpretive indicators into Vande Kopple's taxonomy. These structuralist methodologies were ultimately criticized for neglecting the interpersonal aspect of metadiscourse in favor of primarily focusing on its textual function. Hyland (1998, 2005) addressed this weakness by placing metadiscourse inside a social and rhetorical framework that highlighted the relationship between writer and reader through his interpersonal model. Hyland (2005) claims that all metadiscourse is interpersonal as it considers the reader's knowledge, textual experiences, and processing needs.

The interpersonal model developed by Hyland (2005) is still the most prominent and widely employed taxonomy in metadiscourse research currently. Hyland's model reconceptualizes earlier textual–interpersonal categories into two broad categories: interactive and

interactional. Interactive resources guide the reader through the text and employ transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, code glosses, and evidentials, which facilitate content organization and support textual coherence. Interactional resources help writers interact with readers and take sides. These include engagement markers, hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions, which engage the reader into the discourse and reflect the writer's attitude. According to Hyland (2005, p. 49), the interactional dimension conveys assessment, solidarity, and dialogic alignment with the reader, whereas the interactive dimension "is concerned with the writer's awareness of a participating audience." This model is particularly suitable for Arabic EFL environments because it emphasizes the interpersonal and rhetorical aspects of writing, which are frequently neglected by Arabic learners who prioritize text organization. Hyland's interpersonal model (2005) is used as the analytical basis for this study due to its comprehensiveness and relevance to intercultural rhetoric and second language discourse.

Academic writing is greatly influenced by metadiscourse, which serves as both a means of rhetorical persuasion and an organizational tool. In contrast to earlier ideas that viewed academic writing as exclusively propositional, contemporary viewpoints stress that it is also a social act that involves communication between authors and readers (Hyland, 2005). Writers use metadiscourse to organize knowledge within disciplinary contexts, anticipate reader expectations, and express attitudes. While interactional markers like hedges and boosters establish engagement, stance, and credibility, interactive resources like transitions and frame markers help create textual coherence.

According to Hyland (2005), metadiscourse reflects the three rhetorical appeals that Aristotle identified as pathos, ethos, and logos. Pathos is associated with attitude markers that convey empathy and respect for the reader; ethos is similar to the use of self-mentions and evidentials to project authority; and logos is associated with connectives and transitions that organize arguments. Therefore, metadiscourse combines classical and modern rhetoric by converting monologic discourse into dialogic negotiation. Metadiscourse has been extensively investigated in the field of second language writing, where it serves as a measure of rhetorical and pragmatic competence. Hyland and Milton (1997), Crismore et al. (1993), and Ho and Li (2018) have shown that L2 students, when compared to native speakers, typically overuse cohesive devices such as transitions and underuse stance markers like hedges, boosters, and attitude markers. This overreliance on textual signals has been connected to limited familiarity with the interpersonal norms of academic discourse and to instruction that prioritizes grammatical accuracy over communicative effectiveness. As a result, beginner and intermediate EFL writers often produce texts that are structurally organized but rhetorically limited.

Later, L2 writing studies indicate the influence of linguistic and cultural background on the choice of metadiscursive features. For instance, Mauranen (1993) and Adel (2006) observed that when composing in English, non-native writers used rhetorical conventions of their first language, producing discourse that reflects rhetorical transfer rather than complete syntactic error. Hyland (2005) and Alshahrani (2015) also confirmed that L2 writers differ systematically in their use of interactive and interactional markers due to variations in

proficiency and exposure to academic conventions.

It is well established in the literature that language proficiency has a significant impact on metadiscourse use. Early work by Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1995) demonstrated that higher-proficiency ESL writers employ a greater variety of metadiscourse devices and use them more functionally than their less proficient peers. Recent corpus-based studies, such as that by Bax et al. (2019), have described the so-called “overuse paradox,” which states that lower-level EFL writers use metadiscourse more frequently but with less rhetorical control. As proficiency develops, writers move from quantitative overuse toward qualitative accuracy by using fewer markers overall but employing them in more context-specific ways. This developmental pattern shifts focus from explicit cohesion to balanced use of stance and engagement, which indicates the emergence of rhetorical awareness rather than just syntactic fluency.

Genre studies have consistently acknowledged that metadiscourse use varies significantly according to communicative purpose and readership (Hyland, 2005). In argumentative writing, interactive and interactional markers jointly construct persuasion and stance. Writers employ hedges, boosters, and attitude markers to make claims and counterclaims while engaging the reader directly. By contrast, expository genres, such as cause-and-effect or compare-and-contrast essays, prioritize clarity and textual coherence, relying largely on transitions and frame markers to guide readers through information (Burneikaite, 2008). In addition to rhetorical style, the distribution of metadiscourse also differs across academic sub-genres. Research articles, dissertations, and essays all rely on transitions and hedges but vary in their use of interactional features, as research articles favor minimal self-mention and high evidential density (Hyland, 2005), while student essays display repetitive transitions and limited stance expression (Alshahrani, 2015; Zakaria & Malik, 2018). Dissertations, which are considered the longest and most rigorous academic texts, combine frequent interactive markers with moderate stance devices to balance coherence and authorial identity (Burneikaite, 2008; Hyland, 2005).

Numerous studies demonstrate that Arabic rhetorical traditions influence Arabic EFL students’ use of metadiscourse. Classical Arabic rhetoric values repetition, elaboration, and coordination, traits that promote additive cohesion but reduce linear clarity. While English writing requires writer-responsibility for textual coherence, writing in Arabic is typically reader-responsible, expecting readers to infer logical relations (Sultan, 2011).

Consequently, Arab EFL writers tend to overuse transitions and underuse stance features such as hedges, self-mentions, and attitude markers (Alotaibi, 2016; Alshahrani, 2015). Several empirical studies confirm these tendencies. For instance, Sultan (2011) observed that students employ more transition markers but fewer evidentials in Arabic than in their English, suggesting that Arabic texts have a preference for explicit textual progression over dialogic engagement. Alshahrani (2015) found that Arab EFL doctoral writers used significantly fewer evidentials and frame markers than native speakers, but more code glosses and endophoric references. Alkhatlan (2019) further reported that Saudi students relied heavily on interactive elements (mostly transitions) while showing limited use of attitude and

self-mention markers. All of these studies reveal that Arabic EFL writers emphasize organizational clarity at the expense of interaction and evaluation, reflecting both L1 rhetorical transfer and limited awareness of English academic norms.

In metadiscourse research, corpus linguistics has become a dominant methodology since the late 1990s. It offers empirical insights into patterns of variation among genres, disciplines, and cultures. Corpus-based approaches evaluate marker frequency, calculate normalized counts, and facilitate contextual analysis through the use of concordance and collocation tools such as AntConc and WordSmith Tools. Researchers also employ mixed methods automated extraction followed by manual analysis to verify that each lexical item functions metadiscursively within its context (Hyland, 2005; Benraiss et al., 2025). Due to restricted access to big institutional datasets, corpus-based work in the Middle East, especially in Saudi EFL studies, has often taken a DIY (researcher-compiled) approach. While practical, such corpora require careful annotation and documentation to ensure validity and replicability. Normalization and reliability procedures remain critical; without them, comparisons across proficiency levels or genres risk distortion. Recent reviews (Benraiss et al., 2025) recommend combining corpus-based analysis with rhetorical interpretation to capture both frequency patterns and communicative intent, forming the basis of this research.

Despite the extensive cross-linguistic metadiscourse research, only a few studies have examined undergraduate Saudi EFL essays across multiple genres and proficiency levels. The majority of the current literature focuses mainly on published research articles or postgraduate writing, leaving early academic writing development understudied. Due to limited corpus coverage and inconsistent normalization, how proficiency and genre interact in shaping rhetorical competence is somewhat obscured. Addressing this gap is crucial for modeling metadiscourse as both a diagnostic and pedagogical tool, providing insights to strengthen writing curricula in Saudi EMI contexts and contributing original evidence to global EFL research. The current study aims to address the following research questions:

- 1) What are the overall distributional patterns of metadiscourse markers in Saudi EFL undergraduate academic writing?
- 2) How does writing proficiency influence the frequency and functional deployment of metadiscourse markers in Saudi EFL undergraduate essays?
- 3) How do metadiscourse patterns differ across argumentative, cause-and-effect, and compare-and-contrast essays written by Saudi EFL undergraduates?

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Research Design*

This study adopts a mixed-methods, corpus-based design integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine metadiscourse use in Saudi EFL undergraduate writing. Quantitative analysis involves frequency counts, normalization per 1,000 words, and z-tests for proportions, while the qualitative dimension employs contextual functional analysis to interpret rhetorical purpose and deployment strategies. This dual methodology allows for the

identification of distributional patterns as well as the evaluation of context-specific functional use.

### *3.2 Corpus Description*

The research corpus comprises 206 undergraduate essays totaling 53,727 words, collected from Yanbu Industrial College (YIC), an English-medium institution in Saudi Arabia. The data include 97 argumentative, 33 cause-and-effect, and 76 compare-and-contrast essays, representing three core genres in the institutional writing curriculum. Essays were stratified by proficiency, with 130 high-graded essays (scores  $\geq 90\%$ ) and 76 low-graded essays (scores  $\leq 65\%$ ), yielding six sub-corpora. The essays were written under controlled final-exam conditions, ensuring authentic, individual student production free from external assistance.

### *3.3 Theoretical Framework*

The analysis is grounded in Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse, which distinguishes between interactive (organizational) and interactional (evaluative) resources. For applicability to the Saudi EFL context, the model was adapted and validated through preliminary corpus analysis. Contextual modifications included the addition of connectives: while, since, even though; frame marker: all in all; and the code glosses: for instance and i.e., all confirmed as functionally consistent with Hyland's definitions. These adaptations broadened the analytical coverage while preserving theoretical alignment.

### *3.4 Analytical Strategy*

The quantitative component measured normalized marker frequencies per 1,000 words, computed interactive/interactional ratios, and compared genre- and proficiency-specific distributions using z-tests for proportions. The qualitative component analyzed rhetorical function and contextual appropriateness through manual coding and concordance-based verification. Analysis utilized the KWIC (Key Words in Context) and File View tools in AntConc 4.2.2, which enabled the examination of markers within their immediate and extended textual contexts to confirm functional classification.

### *3.5 Reliability and Validity*

The coding scheme underwent iterative refinement and independent testing by two trained coders. Inter-coder reliability reached  $\kappa = 0.91$  for all categories, denoting almost perfect agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Analytical transparency was maintained through explicit documentation of decision criteria, normalization formulas, and coding revisions. Internal validity was reinforced by using standardized assessment rubrics and validated statistical tests, while construct validity was derived from adherence to Hyland's extensively tested theoretical framework.

### *3.6 Ethical Approval*

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at King Saud University (KSU-HE-22-186) and the Research Committee at Yanbu Industrial College. The examined

essays constitute institutional property, and all data were anonymized during transcription. No personal identifiers or participant-specific information appear in the corpus, ensuring full compliance with confidentiality protocols.

### 3.7 Limitations

The study's scope is limited to a single institution and three short academic genres, restricting broader generalization across disciplines or writing contexts. Moreover, its cross-sectional nature captures one stage of learner performance without tracing longitudinal progression in metadiscourse development. Despite these constraints, the methodology offers a replicable model of corpus compilation, annotation, and triangulated quantitative-qualitative analysis consistent with current applied linguistics research standards.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Overall Distribution of Metadiscourse Markers (RQ1)

The total number of metadiscourse markers in the corpus came to be 6,422, over 206 essays (53,727 words). The quantitative comparison of high-graded and low-graded writing (Table 1) showed that there was an inverse significant correlation between the frequency of the marker and the quality of writing. High graded essays had a mean density of 111.3 markers per 1,000 words, and low graded essays had an average density of 140.5 per 1,000 words ( $p < 0.001$ ). This 26 percent overuse often results in lower-quality texts, where the lack of conceptual development is compensated for by the high frequency of cohesive and interactive marks, a finding empirically validated by Bax et al. (2019).

Table 1. Overall distribution of metadiscourse markers by grade level

Marker Category	High-Graded Essays		Low-Graded Essays		Proportional Difference
	Raw Count	Per 1,000 words	Raw Count	Per 1,000 words	
<b>Interactive Markers</b>					
Transitions	1,491	38.7	787	51.8	+34%
Frame Markers	412	10.7	214	14.1	+32%
Endophoric Markers	5	0.1	1	0.1	0%
Evidentials	5	0.1	1	0.1	0%
Code Glosses	166	4.3	52	3.4	-21%
Subtotal	2,079	53.9	1,055	69.5	+29%
<b>Interactional Markers</b>					
Hedges	583	15.1	265	17.4	+15%
Boosters	178	4.6	54	3.6	-22%
Attitude Markers	218	5.7	59	3.9	-32%
Engagement Markers	762	19.8	451	29.7	+50%
Self-mentions	469	12.2	249	16.4	+34%
Subtotal	2,210	57.4	1,078	71.0	+24%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,289</b>	<b>111.3</b>	<b>2,133</b>	<b>140.5</b>	<b>+26%</b>

Note. Statistical significance:  $p < 0.001$  for total difference.

The results support the negative relationship between metadiscourse frequency and the quality of writing, which is aligned with the international trends in L2 corpus research (e.g., Hyland, 2005; Farahani & Sabetifard, 2017).

#### 4.2 Frequency and Range of Metadiscourse Markers Across Levels (RQ2)

Although total density varied significantly, the ratio between interactive and interactional resources showed no significant change, with an average of 49 percent and 51 percent, respectively, in the proficiency groups (Table 2). This near-symmetrical distribution implies that there is a widespread understanding among student writers that they must balance textual organization with reader engagement, recognizing that effective academic writing involves both guiding the reader through the argument and establishing an interpersonal connection with them.

Table 2. Proportional distribution of interactive and interactional markers

Essay Grade	Interactive Markers		Interactional Markers		Ratio	Balance Index
	Per 1,000	Percentage of Total	Per 1,000	Percentage of Total		
<b>High-Graded</b>	53.9	48.4	57.4	51.6	0.94:1	3.2
<b>Low-Graded</b>	69.5	49.5	71.0	50.5	0.98:1	1.0
<b>Difference</b>	+15.6	+1.1	+13.6	-1.1		

*Note.* The Balance Index represents the absolute difference from a 50:50 distribution.

Although numerical balance was maintained, qualitative variation was evident. High-graded essays utilized a greater variety of markers (particularly hedges, boosters, and code glosses), whereas low-graded texts displayed mechanical repetition dominated by additive transitions and reader addresses (e.g., you can see, you must know).

#### 4.3 Distribution of Metadiscourse Markers Across Essay Genres (RQ3)

The statistical comparison of the three essay types showed that there were unique rhetorical patterns mediated by genre and level of proficiency (Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of metadiscourse markers across essay genres

Marker Type	Argumentative (%)	Cause–Effect (%)	Compare–Contrast (%)	Key Pattern
Engagement Markers	+61% ( $p < .001$ )	+54% ( $p = .028$ )	+45% ( $p < .001$ )	Reader address saturation
Self-mentions	+14% (n.s.)	-60% ( $p < .001$ )	+233% ( $p < .001$ )	Authorial instability
Frame Markers	+43% ( $p = .011$ )	+99% ( $p = .002$ )	+19% (n.s.)	Over-structuring
Transitions	+45% ( $p < .001$ )	+38% ( $p = .002$ )	+15% ( $p = .025$ )	Mechanical connectivity

*Note.* Positive values indicate higher frequency in low-graded essays.

The engagement marker saturation was most evident in argumentative essays, where we encountered saturation at +61%, indicating that the authors attempt to replace logical development with direct appeal to the reader (you can see/you should agree, etc.). Cause-and-effect essays had authorial withdrawal in that the number of self-mentions fell by 60%, indicating less author presence and less confidence in their cause-and-effect reasoning.

Extreme author intrusion was observed in compare-and-contrast essays, with the self-mention exhibiting a marked increase of 233% and evaluative markers (boosters -55%, attitude -53%) falling concurrently to create evaluative imbalance and uncertain reflexivity in stance management.

#### *4.4 Statistical Findings*

Z-tests for proportional differences confirmed that genre and grade effects were statistically significant at the 0.05 level or lower for all principal categories. The most salient differences included the following:

Transitions:  $z = 4.87, p < .001$ ;

Engagement markers:  $z = 5.12, p < .001$ ;

Self-mentions:  $z = 5.42, p < .001$ .

Normalized ratios further revealed that high-graded essays maintained an optimal metadiscourse density of approximately 111 markers per 1,000 words, whereas the over-marking tendency observed in lower-graded essays frequently exceeded 150 per 1,000 words.

#### *4.5 Universal and Divergent Trends*

Across all genres, four recurrent patterns emerged:

- 1) Transitions and engagement markers were universally overused (+33 % average increase), representing attempts at formal continuity and reader control.
- 2) Frame markers rose predominantly in structured genres (argumentative +43 %, cause-and-effect +99 %).
- 3) Evidentials and endophorics remained nearly absent (< 0.4 per 1,000 words), confirming source-independent exam conditions.
- 4) Genre-specific divergence showed self-mentions polarizing massively (-60% in cause-and-effect, + 233 % in compare-and-contrast essays) and hedges, boosters, and attitude markers shifting irregularly by genre demands

#### *4.6 Qualitative Illustrations: Strategic vs. Mechanical Deployment*

Close textual analysis delineates a functional distinction between strategic metadiscourse use in high-graded texts and mechanical use in low-graded essays.

#### **Strategic deployment (high-graded):**

“Certainly, some people would not like the idea of having a fresh graduate person to get a job, a perfect one so easily.... however, other people often think that fresh graduated students should work at easy places.”

→ Balanced interaction between boosters (certainly) and hedges (often) within complex syntax demonstrates pragmatic control and reader alignment.

#### **Mechanical deployment (low-graded):**

“First, I think online classes can make your life easier. Also, online classes can save your time and money. Moreover, it will keep you away from traffic.”

→ Excessive transitions (also, furthermore) and imperative reader appeals reflect formulaic cohesion without logical hierarchy.

High-graded essays displayed greater marker variety within paragraphs, whereas low-graded essays recycled 2–3 surface connectors, which confirms that rhetorical sophistication involves marker distribution and syntactic embedding rather than frequency alone.

#### *4.7 Interpretation of Proficiency and Genre Effects*

The combined quantitative and qualitative patterns indicate that Saudi EFL undergraduate writers display inverse proportionality between metadiscourse frequency and writing quality. High-graded essays are characterized by lower total use, higher variety, and strategically balanced functional deployment; low-graded essays exhibit overuse, repetition, and mechanical structure. Genre analysis further demonstrates that rhetorical context shapes marker behavior. For instance, studies show that argumentative writing typically highlights interactive control (how the text is organized) over interpersonal control (the writer’s involvement with the reader). Conversely, cause-and-effect writing depends on explicit structuring of ideas while maintaining a minimal authorial voice. In contrast, compare-and-contrast writing presents a unique challenge, often merging the expression of a personal stance with an underlying analytic weakness.

These tendencies confirm that metadiscourse development in Saudi EFL academic writing is a multidimensional process influenced by both proficiency level and genre awareness. Functional competence improves not by increasing frequency, but by refining distribution and contextual integration within the discourse.

### **5. Discussion**

This section deciphers and contextualizes the quantitative and qualitative findings relative to past research and theoretical frameworks of metadiscourse research. This is to elucidate how Saudi EFL undergraduate writers use metadiscursive features and cross-genre and cross-level factors, and how this informs us about their emerging rhetorical competences in writing in English in academic writing. This discussion brings together findings of the statistical results and discourse-level analysis of their outcomes based on the conceptualization of writing as informational and social interaction through the interpersonal model of metadiscourse proposed by Hyland (2005).

### *5.1 RQ1: What Are the Overall Distributional Patterns of Metadiscourse Markers in Saudi EFL Undergraduate Academic Writing?*

This section addresses the general prevalence and types of metadiscourse markers observed across the entire corpus, establishing the baseline for the analysis.

#### 5.1.1 Contextualizing the Findings Within International Literature

The Saudi corpus upholds international L2 trends on metadiscourse development and introduces culturally peculiar adjustments to the existing theory. Similar research in East Asian and Iranian settings (Yoon, 2017; Farahani & Sbetifard, 2017) indicates the same negative dependency relationship between frequency and quality, yet Saudi students are more dependent on engagement markers which are indicators of the dialogic and collectivist orientations of Arabic rhetoric. This relative balance between interactional and interactive marks ( $\approx 49:51$ ) reinforces the interpersonal model of Hyland (2005) and supports the idea that rhetorical competence is developed due to the organized management of discourse organization and stance.

Nonetheless, the Saudi data present two new observations. First, high frequency and low lexical variety of low-graded writers is a distinctive pattern of compensatory inflation and not functional expansion. Second, the genre-conditioned varying stance changes, including exaggerated mention of self in comparison essays and nonexistence in causal essays, reflect sensitivity to cultural constructs of power and modesty. These characteristics justify the importance of putting theories of metadiscourse into cultural and contextual perspectives, in particular, educational ecosystems and sociolinguistic heritages.

### *5.2 RQ2: How Does Writing Proficiency Influence the Frequency and Functional Deployment of Metadiscourse Markers in Saudi EFL Undergraduate Essays?*

This section focuses on the distinction between high- and low-graded essays, analyzing how proficiency affects both the volume and strategic use of markers.

#### 5.2.1 Interpretation of Frequency Patterns and the Over-Marking Paradox

The first major result of this research concerns the negative correlation between the frequency of metadiscourse markers and the quality of the overall writing. Essays graded low had 26 percent more markers (140.5 vs 111.3 per 1,000 words) than high-graded essays, which confirms both the over-marking paradox described and found in further corpus-based L2 studies (Bax et al., 2019; Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995). Novice writers are seen to employ metadiscourse so that they can balance out poor content and inadequate rhetorical control, whereas high-graded writers have fewer and more functionally varied markers. Low-graded writers in the study were very dependent on explicit connectors like “and,” “also,” and “because,” and on explicit appeals to readers like “you can see” and “you must know” in order to develop surface cohesion. This confirms the observations of Carlsen (2010) and Hasselgren (1994), who claim that these connective teddy bears act as linguistic scaffolds that provide a superficial sense of cohesion without profound thinking.

High-grade texts, on the contrary, were viewed as a controlled linguistic economy in terms of

syntactic embedding of transitions and purposeful stance construction. Their hedges (may, perhaps, might) and boosters (indeed, certainly) gave just enough confidence yet still scholarly caution, which fits with the argument put across by Hyland (2005) that effective academic writing is writing that is the result of interpersonal negotiation to calmness instead of textual abundance. The optimum of approximately 111 markers to every 1,000 words was conducive to both coherence and rhetorical clarity; beyond 150, which is more typical of low-grade papers, generated repetitiveness and lack of reflectivity. These results validate metadiscourse density as a valid predictor of rhetorical sophistication and show that frequency balance, rather than volume, codifies how strategic competence is differentiated into mechanical cohesion.

### 5.2.2 Strategic Versus Mechanical Deployment

Qualitative evidence distinguishes the strategic and mechanical application of metadiscourse. The contextual sensitivity, syntactic embedding, and balanced diversity of interactive and interactional resources characterize the strategy of deployment, which is inherent to highly graded writing. In clauses, writers embed transitions and markers of stance, but using five to seven markers per 300 words does not account for contextual variability. This embedded usage connects metadiscourse and propositional development and generates a coherent argumentative rhythm, which was determined by Hyland (2005) and Adel (2006) as the mark of high-level discourse maturity.

Mechanical deployment, in low-grade writing, is found in repetitive initial sentence transitions (Also, Moreover, Furthermore), sequential templates (First... Second... Lastly...), and overmanagement expressions (you should, you must). In such essays, there is an illusory cohesion, that is, an organized surface structure but a lack of conceptual development. The writer's incoherent combination of hedges and boosters also indicates poor stance control and awareness of pragmatics (It definitely might cause problems). These types disclose the influence of formulaic teaching on additive logic instead of critical thinking, which is promoted by teaching that focuses on visible structure.

The current evidence confirms the claim by Hyland (2023) and Hasan and Alsout (2023) that the process of academic literacy follows steps, such as mechanical imitation to communicative coordination. When writers become rhetorically mature, they no longer count markers but choose them strategically, showing a pragmatic affinity between the linguistic form and the rhetorical work.

### *5.3 RQ3: How Do Metadiscourse Patterns Differ Across Argumentative, Cause-and-Effect, and Compare-and-Contrast Essays Written by Saudi EFL Undergraduates?*

This section highlights the variations in marker use when writers shift between different rhetorical tasks (genres).

#### 5.3.1 Genre-Mediated Deployment of Metadiscourse

Genre has a great influence on the way EFL Saudi writers choose and allocate metadiscourse markers. The results indicate that there are unique genre-specific tendencies that support the

assertion by Hyland that metadiscourse is a rhetorical constraint but also a competence measure. The markers of engagement were the highest in argumentative essays, the saturation of which was +61% and included the consistent usage of directives and second person pronouns to create persuasion (you can see, you should agree). This trend reflects persuasive insecurity when authors try to replace a weak logic in arguments with the address form. This problem is also noted in East Asian and Arab ESL environments. Cause-and-effect essays displayed great authorial withdrawal with the reduction of 60% self-mentions. This reflects writers' misconception that objectivity requires self-erasure, aligning with Hyland's (2002) concept of the invisibility of authors in L2 academic writing. Comparison-and-contrast essays generated evaluative imbalances with an extreme increase in self-mentions (233) and a concomitant decrease in boosters and attitude markers. Personal preference, rather than critical assessment, had typified this genre, reflecting the results of Sultan (2011) and Alkhatlan (2019) of cultural transfer in Arabic rhetoric.

Framing signs and markers of transitions were universal and abundant; evidentials and endophorics were nearly non-existent ( $\leq 0.1$  per 1000 words). It is this lack of references that portrays dependence on intratextual logic as opposed to disciplinary citation, in part because exam conditions inhibit external referencing. In general, the findings indicate that rhetorical control is greatly moderated by genre expectations: competent writers modify write-back and stance resources to the communicative aim of this or that essay, whereas less competent writers use markers in a homogeneous manner irrespective of genre-specific conventions.

#### *5.4 Broader Implications (Cultural and Pedagogical)*

##### *5.4.1 Cultural and Pedagogical Implications*

The results emphasize the role of Arabic rhetorical transfer and EMI settings together in the development of Saudi EFL writing. The Arabic style of speaking prefers additive coordination, explicit repetition, and introduction reasoning, which promotes excess use of transition and direct address to readers (Sultan, 2011; Al Qahtani, 2022). At the same time, EMI programs in Saudi universities (which are frequently structured around exams with time limits and standardized rubrics) promote mechanical cohesion by incentivizing obvious structure in favor of less obvious rhetorical domination. The resulting hybrid model of discourse combines Arabic elaboration and English linear structuring. High-graded essays showed signs of intercultural accommodation, in substituting forms of directive engagement with forms of invitational academic expression (consider, let us examine) and in the combination of cohesive economy and evaluative stance. This movement is an illustration of the linguistic and rhetorical acculturation in the bilingual school environment.

Pedagogically, these lessons support curriculum changes based on functional awareness rather than formal count. Instruction in writing ought to incorporate the use of corpus-based exemplars in order to explain the contextual use of hedges, boosters, and markers of engagement in all genres. Explicit threshold consciousness, having a full density of approximately 111 and 135 markers per 1000 words, is one of the diagnostic measurements that can identify proficient and developing writers. In conclusion, metadiscourse must not only be taught as a luxurious sentence-connecting vocabulary but rather as an adaptive tool of

rhetoric that generates indicators of audience attention, the believability of the author, and professional argument.

To sum up, Saudi EFL undergraduate writers portray the developing rhetorical competence that is determined by genre, proficiency, and cultural norms. They demonstrate that their awareness of metadiscourse as an organizational and interactive resource is relatively high, but with little economic and strategic application. The high-grade essays have evidence of rhetorical balance, syntactic integration, and control of stance; low-grade essays consist of mechanical over-marking and rhetorical insecurity. These results redefine the Hyland (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse as an overlap of linguistic, cognitive, and social aspects and add some region-specific evidence to the global debates on L2 academic literacy acquisition. This study places metadiscourse as a pedagogical in-between language of linguistic form and rhetorical cognizance in English academic writing by focusing on the construct of proportion, purpose, and context.

## 6. Conclusion

The study explored the differences in metadiscourse among three common essay writing genres—Argumentative, Cause and Effect, and Compare and Contrast—and the role of writer proficiency in rhetorical performance. Based on the interpersonal model provided by Hyland (2005) as its basis of analysis, the paper has examined the nature of the differences in frequency, distribution, and functional integration of metadiscursive features of high- and low-graded essays. Quantitative findings revealed a significant negative correlation between marker frequency and writing quality, supporting the “over-marking paradox.” Low-graded essays contained substantially more markers than high-graded ones, evidencing compensatory overuse of transitions and engagement devices. High-graded essays, by contrast, displayed moderate density, greater diversity, and enhanced contextual integration.

Proficiency differences demonstrated that high-graded writers controlled marker density within an optimal range, balancing interactive and interactional resources effectively. Low-graded writers relied heavily on repetitive sentence-initial transitions and formulaic expressions, confirming that rhetorical maturity stems from strategic modulation rather than numerical symmetry. Genre comparison revealed distinct rhetorical behaviors: argumentative essays showed a saturation of engagement markers, cause-and-effect essays reduced authorial presence, and compare-and-contrast essays displayed evaluative imbalance. These genre-conditioned patterns highlight that effective metadiscourse is inherently genre-mediated and context-responsive.

Theoretically, the findings advance metadiscourse and L2 writing theory by presenting a genre-focused performance model that is useful for Arabic-medium EFL contexts. Pedagogically, the results show that the explicit teaching of functional metadiscourse can transform Saudi EFL writing from mechanical cohesion to rhetorical sophistication. To promote strategic, genre-conscious writing in academic settings, suggestions are offered in three areas: curriculum planning, classroom training, and assessment practices. To more accurately track developmental tendencies, future research may use cross-disciplinary or longitudinal approaches, increase the size of the corpus, and utilize computational tools.

Overall, metadiscourse competence in Saudi EFL academic writing links linguistic form with communicative aim, making it a reliable diagnostic measure of rhetorical maturity.

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