

# A Corpus-Based Contrastive Analysis of Metadiscourse in High School and University EFL Writing

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## Abstract

Existing research on metadiscourse in EFL writing has concentrated on the level of higher education, with relatively fewer studies investigating the comparative differences between high school and university stages. This study conducts a corpus-based contrastive analysis of metadiscourse in 440 argumentative essays written by Chinese high school and university learners. Adopting metadiscourse model, the results find a shift in writing patterns. Texts by high school students reflect a tendency of enumeration and subjective assumption; university students show a significantly higher use of evidentials and engagement markers, indicating a transformation toward academic objectivity and dialogic interaction. The findings suggest that the transition to university writing involves a shift from list-making to logical structuring and the building of writer-reader relationships. The study concludes with pedagogical implications for bridging the gap in EFL writing instruction.

**Keywords:** metadiscourse, EFL writing; corpus-based analysis, TECCL

## 1. Introduction

Defined as the linguistic resources writers employ to organize their texts and engage their audience, metadiscourse has long been recognized as a defining feature of successful writing (Hyland, 2005)[1]. It is increasingly acknowledged not merely as a stylistic embellishment, but an indicator of facilitating communication, supporting a writer's position and building a relationship with an audience (Hyland & Tse, 2004)[2]. In other words, whether writers in the field of second language have the ability to apply metadiscourse resources can be seen as a reflection of their academic literacy and communicative competence.

Over the past two decades, many studies have investigated metadiscourse use in L2 writing contexts. However, existing research in this field has primarily focused on academic writing at the undergraduate level and above. They tend to concentrate on university-level academic writing, such as postgraduate theses (e.g., Akoto, 2020[3]; Alharbi, 2021[4]), research articles (e.g., Qiu et al., 2024[5]), or undergraduate argumentative essays (e.g., Kostareva & Utkina, 2022[6]; Ho & Li, 2018[7]). In contrast, investigation on the secondary education level writing remains limited (e.g., Raymundo & Prudenciano, 2024[8]; De Castro, 2022[9]), leaving a critical gap in understanding the development of EFL writing strategies from high school to university. Considering that high school and university represent two different yet continuous stages of language learning, examining them in isolation may lead to a limited explanation and observation, which has created a knowledge gap regarding the developmental trajectory of L2 writing. Therefore, the research gap of a scarcity of comparative research that directly contrasts the metadiscourse features of high school students with those of university students within a unified framework should be noticed.

Hence, this study aims to conduct a corpus-based contrastive analysis of metadiscourse in high school and university EFL writing, thereby discussing and exploring both quantitatively and qualitatively the development of L2 writing capability and its pedagogical implications.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework: Metadiscourse

Metadiscourse is the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community (Hyland, 2005, p.37)[1]. This model consists of two dimensions: interactive and interactional. The interactive metadiscourse deals with the way how writers shape and constrain a text and how they set out arguments; meanwhile, "it reveals the extent to which the text is constructed with the readers' needs in mind"

(Hyland, 2005, p. 49)[1]. The interactional metadiscourse mainly presents how writers “conduct interaction by intruding and commenting on their message”, reflecting the writers’ community-recognized personality (p. 49). As for the complete model, see Table 1.

Table 1. Metadiscourse devices model (Hyland, 2005, pp.49)

Category	Function	Examples
<b>Interactive</b>	<b>Help to guide the reader through the text</b>	<b>Resources</b>
Transitions	Express relations between main clauses	In addition; but; thus; and
Frame markers	Refer to discourse acts, sequence or stages	Finally; to conclude; my purpose is
Endophoric markers	Refer to information in other parts of the text	Noted above; see Fig.; in Section 2
Evidentials	Refer to information from other texts	According to X
Code glosses	Elaborate propositional meanings	Namely; e.g.; such as
<b>Interactional</b>	<b>Involve the reader in the text</b>	<b>Resources</b>
Hedges	Withhold commitment and open dialogue	Might; perhaps; possible; about
Boosters	Emphasize certainty or close dialogue	In fact; definitely; it is clear that
Attitude markers	Express writer’s attitude to proposition	Unfortunately; I agree; surprisingly
Self-mentions	Explicit reference to author(s)	I; we; me; our
Engagement markers	Explicitly build relationship with reader	Consider; note; you can see that

The study adopts Hyland’s (2005)[1] metadiscourse model as the theoretical framework. Methodologically, the analysis was conducted using the wordlist provided by Hyland, combining AntConc and manual counting. The research process facilitates the automatic retrieval of metadiscourse markers based on a strict lexicon, calculation of normalized frequencies (per 1,000 words), and the extraction of n-grams and concordance lines for qualitative contextual analysis. In addition, the statistical significance of the observed differences between the two proficiency levels will be taken in to account.

### 2.2 Data Collection and Corpus Construction

The corpus for this study comes from the Ten-thousand English Composition Corpus for Learners (TECCL)[10], a large-scale corpus created by Beijing Foreign Studies University. To ensure the comparability of writing proficiency across different educational phases, a specialized sub-corpus was constructed, containing three argumentative topics shared by both groups: Online Shopping, Mobile Phone Usage, and Reading Habits. Also, since the original corpus exhibited a significant imbalance where university-level texts account for the vast majority, a Python-based random undersampling technique was employed. This proves randomly extracting an equal number of university texts to make the two groups take up the same proportion, thereby eliminating potential statistical bias caused by data imbalance.

The balanced sub-corpus comprises 440 essays in total, evenly distributed between the high school and university groups (220 texts each). The total volume of the corpus size reaches approximately 79,061 tokens, with 35,855 tokens in the high school sub-corpus and 43,206 tokens in the university sub-corpus. The balanced dataset increases the solidity of the comparison of metadiscourse use.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Overview

The overall frequencies and statistical comparisons of each metadiscourse items across the two sub-corpora is shown in Table 2. The quantitative results demonstrate a clear distinction between high school and university L2 writing.

Table 2. Overall distribution of metadiscourse markers in high school and university writing

Dimension	Category	School Freq.	School Norm (per 1k)	Uni Freq.	Uni Norm (per 1k)	Log-Likelihood (LL)	Sig.
<b>Interactive</b>	Frame markers	164	4.57	129	2.99	13.31	***
	Evidentials	6	0.17	22	0.51	6.98	*
	Transitions	1477	41.19	1713	39.65	1.21	ns
	Code glosses	69	1.92	98	2.27	1.11	ns
	Endophoric markers	54	1.51	59	1.37	0.27	ns
<b>Interactional</b>	Engagement markers	551	15.37	799	18.49	11.48	***
	Self-mentions	1482	41.33	1946	45.04	6.51	*
	Attitude markers	130	3.63	180	4.17	1.47	ns
	Boosters	60	1.67	82	1.90	0.55	ns
	Hedges	310	8.65	363	8.40	0.14	ns

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , ns = not significant

The most profound distinctions ( $p < 0.001$ ) were observed in the categories of frame markers and engagement markers, representing the interactive and interactional dimensions respectively. Frame markers were employed by high school students at a significantly higher frequency, compared to that by university students. This gap may imply that secondary English learners tend to organize their texts in a strictly structured way. Conversely, university students applied engagement markers more frequently, indicating a stronger awareness of potential readers.

Meanwhile, the usage of evidentials and self-mentions resources also shows crucial differences ( $p < 0.05$ ). Despite the small proportion of Evidentials in the whole model, their usage frequency in university writing (0.51) is three times that of high school writing (0.17). This sharp increase signals students' improvement of academic awareness, citation skills and the ability to ground arguments in external evidence. Similarly, the more frequent application of self-mentions in the university corpus ( $p < 0.05$ ) suggests that university students are more inclined to construct an authorial identity.

It should also be mentioned that even though some metadiscourse devices, such as hedges, boosters and attitude markers show no statistically significant differences in frequency, they are still worth discussing. The following detailed analysis will present the specific lexical choices and their rhetorical strategies, reflecting a progress in L2 writers' stance establishing.

### 3.2 Frame Markers

Among the all the interactive metadiscourse devices, frame markers demonstrate the most significant disparity between the two groups. See Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of high-frequency frame markers

Category	Marker Item	School Norm (per 1,000)	Uni Norm (per 1,000)	Ratio (School: Uni)	Trend
Sequencing (Start/List)	first	1.87	1.18	1.6: 1	School > Uni
	second	0.73	0.60	1.2: 1	School > Uni
	secondly	0.61	0.30	2.0: 1	School >> Uni
	firstly	0.42	0.16	2.6: 1	School >> Uni
Closing (End/Sum)	finally	0.33	0.42	0.8: 1	Uni > School
	In conclusion	0.31	0.12	2.6: 1	School >> Uni
	sum up	0.08	0.12	0.7: 1	Uni > School

Overall, high school students employed frame markers at a much higher frequency than that in the university cohort. A closer examination of specific claim development may reveal the underlying causes of this difference: high school students tend to use frame markers for mere enumeration, while university students employ them for argumentative progression.

In the high school sub-corpus, the average distance between each sequencing marker is comparatively shorter, hence leading to high density. This indicates that frame markers are often used to connect simple, less informative sentences. As shown in Example 1, the student listed each point in rapid succession. The markers here function merely as a tool to hold together a list of points, a strategy emphasizing listing rather than depth of argument.

**Example 1 (High School):** *Firstly*, use telephone to chat or send messages to others will waste a lot of time and money. *Secondly*, if a student who plays telephone in class, will influence the others students...

The average distance between each sequencing markers in the university corpus show a tendency of expansion, suggesting university students’ awareness of building their claims. As illustrated in Example 2, the writer’s first claim is elaborated upon with a reformulation (*that is...*) before the next sequencing marker appears. By applying frame markers to lead in substantial illustration rather than connecting single sentences, university students showcase the capacity for wider range of discourse management.

**Example 2 (University):** *Firstly*, with the development of economy, more and more people have the ability to purchase a cell phone. *That is*, they have extra money to afford other things... *Secondly*, the cell phone equipped with...

On the other hand, the different usage of closing markers also reveals a divergence in how learners at each phase conclude their discourse stages. When high school students show preference for the phrase *in conclusion*, university students apply *finally* and *to sum up* more frequently. This distinction suggests a shift in cognitive ability regarding discourse closure.

Through the concordance lines, it can be found that high school students typically use *in conclusion* as a terminal signal. As seen in Example 3, the phrase serves almost exclusively to signal the end of the writing task, often followed by a mere repetition of the thesis statement, with no actual conclusion being drawn.

**Example 3 (High School):** *In conclusion*, reading is very important. So we should read more books.

In contrast, university students tend to use “*to sum up*” to integrate the preceding arguments into a coherent whole rather than simply repeating them. As illustrated in Example 4, the closing marker “*finally*” functions to make a link between the argument of “tradition and modernity” and its following “*to sum up*” constructs a logical closed loop where the conclusion reinforces and deepens the preceding arguments.

**Example 4 (University):** *Finally*, it acts as a bridge between tradition and modernity... *To sum up*, while the medium of reading may change, the essence of acquiring knowledge remains constant.

### 3.3 Evidentials

Although they constitute a smaller proportion in the metadiscourse framework, they exhibit one of the most obvious progresses between the two educational stages. The results demonstrate that university students use evidentials significantly more frequently than high school students, whose difference is driven by the utilization of citation markers, specifically *according to*. In the high school sub-corpus, the use of this phrase is virtually non-existent, whereas it becomes a necessity in university writing, appearing nearly 12 times more frequently. This gap points to a fundamental shift in the learners’ stance awareness: high school writers tend to rely on personal assertion, while university writers begin to acknowledge the necessity of citing external evidences. See Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution of high-frequency evidentials

Category	Marker Item	School Norm (per 1,000)	Uni Norm (per 1,000)	Ratio (Uni: School)	Trend
Citation (External)	according to	0.03	0.35	11.7:1	Uni >> School
	states / argues	0.00	0.02	N/A	Uni only
Representation (Internal/Data)	Shows	0.14	0.14	1.0: 1	Equivalent
	Prove	0.14	0.12	0.9: 1	Similar

The function of evidentials also undergoes a transformation to objective verification. As shown in Table 4, although the frequency of the verb *shows* is identical in both groups, its context of usage differs. In high school essays (Example 5), *shows* is typically used in a subjective sense, where the evidence is the abstract concept itself or the example being used before, which reflects that the writer considers him/her own illustration as the sole source of validation.

**Example 5 (High School):** It (the story) tells us how explorers work, and it also **shows** a valuable friendship. It is still read and loved by many people today.

In contrast, university students’ use of *shows* and *according to* represent academic objectivity to some extents. As illustrated in Example 6, these markers are predominantly used to introduce external evidences including charts, statistics, or authoritative quotations. By connecting the information with evidences, the writers distance themselves from the claim, thereby enhancing the credibility of the argument. This usage highlights the academic socialization, where learners start to realize the importance of verifiable evidences rather than personal intuition.

**Example 6 (University):** **According to** the data, the amount of cellphone users had increased steadily...

### 3.4 Engagement markers and self-mentions

The disparity of interactional metadiscourse conveys a shift in how learners position themselves and their readers within the context. In this corpus, some significant divergence has been found in engagement markers and self-mentions. See Table 5.

Table 5. Distribution of high-frequency engagement markers and self-mentions

Category	Marker Item	School Norm (per 1,000)	Uni Norm (per 1,000)	Ratio (Uni: School)	Trend
Reader (second person)	You	8.37	9.28	1.1:1	Uni > School
	Your	1.59	2.45	1.5:1	Uni > School
	You can (pattern)	2.62	1.83	0.7:1	School > Uni
Writer (first person)	I	6.92	7.34	1.1:1	similar
	My	4.52	3.82	0.8:1	School > Uni
	We	13.75	16.60	1.2:1	Uni > School
Community (inclusive)	Our	8.90	9.00	1.0:1	Similar
	We should (pattern)	1.14	2.29	2.0:1	Uni >> School

Though both groups rely heavily on personal pronouns, the close examination of collocations and their pragmatic functions uncovers a transformation from an instructional style in high school writing to an inclusive persuasive style in university writing.

High school essays are characterized by the prevailing usage of the second-person pronoun *you*, often collocating with the modal verb *can* (*you can*). As shown in Example 7, the writer tends to use *you* to refer to a generalized person and adopts a directive stance, informing the reader of their choices or actions. This usage creates a distance between the writer and the reader with the writer acting as an external instructor rather than engaging the reader in a shared dialogue. Similarly, Self-mentions in this group often belong to personal narratives (*I read, my favorite*), restricting the discourse to the writer’s private experiences.

**Example 7 (High School):** If **you** want to buy a book, **you can** go to the bookstore. But if **you** use the internet, **you can** just sit at home and choose the color **you** like.

University students demonstrate a more alert awareness of audience by applying the inclusive first-person plural *we*, particularly with the modal verb *should* (*we should*). As seen in Example 8, the writer does not guide the reader to what they can do, but rather invites the reader to join a community. By framing the argument as *we should*, the writer avoids imposing an opinion and instead tries to reach an agreement, implying that the proposal is a collective and inclusive moral obligation. This rhetorical strategy transforms the text from mere information exchange to a persuasive social act, reflecting a higher level of academic writing capability where discussion can be taken.

**Example 8 (University):** Therefore, for no reason **should we** rely too much on it. **We** are supposed to take good advantage of it and let it serve **us** better.

### 3.5 Hedges and Boosters

As mentioned in the overall quantitative overview (Table 1), hedges and boosters did not show statistically significant differences between the two groups ( $p > 0.05$ ); however, a significant disparity of the actual use of lexical resources can be found. As shown in Table 6, high school students rely heavily on the verb *think* to modify their claims and tone, while university students distribute their hedging across a wider range of modal verbs such as *may*, *could*, and *believe*. This suggests that while both groups feel the need to modify their commitment to truth, the specific lexical strategies they employ reflect different stages of academic writing ability.

Table 6. Distribution of high-frequency Hedges & Boosters

Category	Marker Item	School Norm (per 1,000)	Uni Norm (per 1,000)	Trend
Hedges	Think	4.52	3.38	School >> Uni
	May	1.51	1.69	Uni > School
	Could	0.25	0.53	Uni > School
	Believe	0.75	1.16	Uni > School
	Always	0.89	1.00	Similar
Boosters	Obviously	0.06	0.19	Uni >> School
	Fact	0.25	0.32	Uni > School

For high school students, hedging is mainly a marker of subjective opinion. The dominant usage of *think* suggests that learners relate uncertainty with personal opinion. In Example 9, the use of *I think* serves to retreat into a safe zone of subjectivity by implying "this is just my thought", to avoid providing further evidences and amplification. This writing pattern can be accompanied by the booster *always* (Example 10), the combination of which characterizes a writing style that is personally opinionated yet logically absolutist.

**Example 9 (High School; Hedge):** **I think** that mobile phone is good for us. Some people **think** it is bad.

**Example 10 (High School; Booster):** **I think** reading books is **always** good for us. It **surely** makes us smart.

Quite the contrary, university students significantly reduce their reliance on subjective opinion words like *think* and increase the use of modal verbs like *could* and *may*. As demonstrated in Example 11, these markers are used to qualify the objectivity between cause and effect, rather than the writer's assertion. Also, when university students employ boosters, they show higher preference to evidential markers like *obviously* or *fact* (Example 12). This suggests that their certainty stems from external evidences or logical deduction, rather than assumption. Thus, the transition from high school to university writing in this dimension can be described as a move from "I believe" to "It may" and "The fact is".

**Example 11 (University; Hedge):** The overuse of phones **may** lead to a lack of face-to-face communication. This **could** be the reason why people feel isolated.

**Example 12 (University; Booster):** It is an **obvious fact** that technology has changed our lives. This **clearly** demonstrates the power of science.

### 3.6 Attitude Markers

Similar to hedges and boosters, attitude markers show a statistical pattern where the overall differences between high school and university students are not significant ( $p > 0.05$ ) (Table 1), but the actual lexical choices show a transformation in students' capability to make evaluation. See Table 7.

Table 7. Distribution of High-Frequency Attitude Markers

Category	Marker Item	School Norm (per 1,000)	Uni Norm (per 1,000)	Trend
Affective (subjective)	Prefer	0.64	0.44	School > Uni
	Interesting	0.42	0.28	School > Uni
	Important	2.29	2.75	Uni > School
Normative (objective)	Agree	0.14	0.42	Uni >> School
	Appropriate	0.06	0.12	Uni > School
	Correctly	0.08	0.05	School > Uni

High school students demonstrate a preference for affective expressions such as *prefer* and *interesting*. In Example 13, their evaluations are often grounded in personal pleasure or individual taste. The writer makes a choice based on what is more interesting or exciting, reflecting an evaluation style that focuses on the intrinsic gratification derived from an object or activity.

**Example 13 (High School):** I prefer watching movies because it is more **interesting** and **exciting** than reading boring books.

University students show a shift from personal feelings towards evaluation or assessment, which is supported by the notable increase in the use of *agree* and *appropriate*. As shown in Example 14, university writers use these markers not to express personal joy, but to align themselves with or against a viewpoint or to judge the suitability of an action. The extensive use of *agree* particularly highlights that university students regard writing as a process of conducting dialogue where they must engage with existing opinions, building their stance based on social values or logic rather than private preference. Thus, in this dimension, the disparity between the two groups can be described as a shift from personal affect to academic judgment.

**Example 14 (University):** While e-books are convenient, it is not **appropriate** to replace all traditional books. Weighing the pros and cons, I am inclined to **agree** with the latter point of view.

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the transformation from high school to university L2 writing is featured by a significant shift in how learners organize their arguments, establish objectivity, and engage with their readers.

The disparity in interactive metadiscourse application suggests that high school students and university students operate under different levels of awareness of academic writing. High school students rely heavily on sequencing frame markers, such as first and second, to organize their texts. This high frequency implies a tendency to view argumentative writing as a linear task of point listing, contributing to a structure where ideas are randomly added rather than logically connected and properly developed. This observation aligns with Gilquin and Paquot’s (2008)[11] findings that learner writing often exhibits spoken-like features, relying on the mere presentation or listing of information rather than the hierarchical structuring as in academic discourse; but university students show a different tendency by reducing similar metadiscourse devices while increasing concluding markers like finally, indicating a developing capability for logical synthesis, where the writer attempts to guide the reader through a reasoning progression that has a clear beginning, development, and conclusion, rather than a listing of isolated points.

Apart from structural organization, the study discovers a significant development of academic awareness and objectivity in university writing. University students have a deeper understanding that academic writing requires validation, whereas high school students depend largely on personal assertion. This contrast is evident in their use of Evidentials. High school students rarely cite evidences, turning to I think or personal narratives to support their views. Conversely, university students show a tendency to apply citation markers such as according to and like to clarify definitions and ground their arguments. This evolution corroborates Hyland’s (2005)[1] argument that successful academic writing involves establishing an authorial stance that respects the norms of the disciplinary community. It suggests that university students are moving away from a subjective expression of personal opinion toward a more objective, evidence-based style of argumentation.

In addition, the analysis conveys a transformation in the reader-writer relationship. High school students tend to use the second-person pronoun you to instruct readers, while university students show a preference for the inclusive

we combined with modal verbs like should. This indicates that they are beginning to view the reader not as a passive recipient of information, but as a peer in a shared community. By trying to construct a community of agreement, university students use those rhetorical strategies to persuade the reader by appealing to shared values. This finding supports Hyland and Tse's (2004)[2] view that advanced metadiscourse use is essentially about building social solidarity with the audience.

To sum up, this study confirms that the development of Chinese EFL learners is represented by the gradual acquisition of academic writing awareness. Specifically, students move from mechanical listing to logical structuring, from subjective assertion to objective verification, and from detached instruction to engaged persuasion. These findings imply that current English secondary education may concentrate too much on writing templates without fostering logical depth, argument exemplification and language cohesion. To bridge the gap between secondary and higher education, pedagogical practices may introduce concepts of academic objectivity and audience awareness earlier in the curriculum. Teachers are encouraged to move beyond teaching fundamental transitional expressions and focus on citing evidences and creating a dialogue between writers and readers.

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