

PATTERNS OF GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES OF STANCE IN ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS BY L2 MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

At tertiary institutions, undergraduate students are required to possess academic language features to express their stance in argumentative writing. However, the L2 undergraduate students lack competency in employing various grammatical structures to construct stance. They tend to use repetitive and similar structures in their writing. With the aim to gain more insights into patterns of use of grammatical structures in L2 academic writing, this study analysed the distributional patterns of use of grammatical structures in 100 argumentative essays by the L2 first-year undergraduate students in a private university in Malaysia. An adapted framework of grammatical patterns by Işık-Taş (2018) that comprised three main categories namely noun complement structures, deictic expression and other structures, was used to analyse the data. The results generally revealed that noun complement structures, deictic expressions and other structures can be used by the undergraduate students to express stance in L2 argumentative essays. The results showed that the L2 first-year undergraduate students tend to use noun complement structures such as *N-to* and deictic expressions such as *this-N* in their argumentative essays. However, the students rarely used other structures such as *N-wh*, *N-be-to* and *N-be-that*. Understanding the students' patterns of use of prevalent grammatical structures is fundamental for L2 language instructors and can be used as insights for material development and design of classroom activities in the teaching and learning of specific language features used in L2 academic writing.

Keywords: Grammatical structures; academic writing; stance expression; L2 writing; language use

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 22 August 2024

Accepted: 17 January 2025

Published: 28 March 2025

Volume 12, Issue 1, March 2025

INTRODUCTION

In higher education, academic writing is an essential skill to meet the course requirements and the faculty's expectations (Hyland, 2018; Zhu, 2004). One type of academic writing, that is argumentative essay is commonly used as a point of reference to determine the academic writing level in universities. In argumentative essays, students are expected to state their claim or stance, explicitly or implicitly, and provide reasons that support the stance while considering all aspects of the issue or problem in the body paragraphs. Often, elaboration and evidence are provided to support and justify the stance made by the writer (Toulmin, 2003). The students are also expected to restate the thesis to conclude the body of arguments to address the topic or issue. In short, the students need to develop arguments and persuade the readers to accept that the writer's stance is valid. As Ramage et al. (2012) state that the persuasion component in an argument refers to a claim made on an issue which is justified convincingly to move the reader to accept the claim.

In order to provide arguments convincingly, students are required to use specific academic language features (Yasuda, 2023). The use of specific grammatical structures and stance nouns is crucial in academic writing (Charles, 2007; Hong, 2023; Jiang, 2015). Hyland (2008) also argues that writers should use linguistic features that are accepted in the discipline or the academic context so that the writers' stance and argument in their writing can be more convincing. Past studies have illustrated the importance of the use of grammatical structures used in the stance noun constructions that can guide the readers to the content in the text and persuade them to agree with the writer's stance (Işık-Taş, 2018; Lee et al. 2021; Jiang, 2015). They further state that the grammatical structures are used with head nouns predominantly as stance expression in which the head nouns in these constructions are referred as the stance nouns. The use of such form of nouns in academic written texts allows writers to minimise verbosity and create objectivity in writing (Charles, 2007; Shen et al., 2023), particularly favourable in argumentative writing.

Furthermore, the study of deictic expressions which consists of demonstratives such as *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*, *another*, *same* and *such* in academic writing is also gaining more attention due to its growing importance in development of persuasive argument and textual cohesiveness in academic texts (Lee et al., 2021; Jin, 2019). The combination of stance noun with the deictic word can be used to denote the writer's stance or refer to previous argument. Prior research has also identified additional grammatical features related to stance nouns, including Noun-*wh* clauses, Noun-*be-wh* clauses, Noun-*be-infinitive to* clauses, and Noun-*be-that* clauses, which were also found in academic writing to express stance (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015; Işık-Taş, 2018).

It is important to note that many studies on linguistic analysis in academic written texts adopted the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach which explores the connection between language, social context and meaning (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). SFL approach in linguistic analysis emphasises language use and its close relation to meaning in texts. The different choices of words and grammatical structures form the meanings and rhetoric in the text for a specific purpose. For instance, the prevalent grammatical structures found in previous studies illustrate how these grammatical structures can create stance and arguments in the written academic texts. Thus, SFL approach will form the theoretical assumption in this study in that writing is formed by individuals making word choices to achieve writing purposes in academic context (Hyland, 2007).

Although research indicates the importance of the use of specific language features in academic writing, L2 students face various issues in academic writing such as inability to use various linguistic resources in their writing that affect the construction of arguments (Bartley & Hidalgo-Tenorio, 2016; Kecskes & Kirner-Ludwig, 2017). The lack of variety of grammatical structures suggests that students are unable to utilise diverse grammatical structures that convey and assert their stance in their writing (Biber, 1999; Biber, 2006; Wingate, 2012). They only used a few similar structures such as *infinitive-to* clause and *this-noun* as expression of stance in their writing (Işık-Taş, 2018). They struggled with writing in the argumentative genre in the main areas of academic writing (Lee, 2006) as English is not the students' native language, and they must grasp different ways of writing in universities. Therefore, there is a further need to examine the use of grammatical structures to express stance, particularly in L2 writing. A literature review of important studies on analysis of grammatical structures use in academic writing is provided next.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In L1 academic writing, many studies have provided profound insights on the use of prevalent grammatical structures and stance nouns as expression of stance. In particular, Biber (2006) found that *that*-complement clause structure served a functional role to add emphasis and further elaborated the stance nouns in the arguments to convince the readers that the writer's stance has valid viewpoints. Biber (2006) investigated the expression of stance and evaluation in university registers using the theoretical framework of 'stance' developed in the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (LGSWE) (Biber et al., 1999). The data was from a sub-component of the TOEFL 2000 Spoken and Written Academic Language (T2K-SWAL) corpus that focused on four registers such as classroom teaching, class management talk, textbooks and written course management language. He found that *that*-clauses controlled by nouns were restricted primarily to academic registers (classroom teaching and textbook). However, he did not conduct a comprehensive analysis on how students employed the grammatical structures such as noun complement structure in argumentative essays or other written texts that were assessed at higher education. Hence, the results of his study may be too generalised and not clearly represent the academic written texts that have high-stake values.

In another study on the use of N-*that* in L1 academic writing to express stance, Charles (2007) analysed how 'nouns + *that* complement clause' structure was used in L1 theses written for two disciplines: politics/international relations and materials science. She found that the politics corpus has more Noun-*that* instances than the materials corpus. The higher frequency indicates that the L1 writers in Politics tend to use Noun-*that* structure to create a more objective stance as the writers can avoid using a person marker with the head noun, encapsulating essential propositions. *That*-complement clause can function to express stance concisely by providing crucial information to complete the semantic meaning of the head noun preceding it.

In addition, using corpus-based analysis, Shen et al. (2023) examined the differences in the syntactic complexity of academic written texts produced by L1 English and L1 Chinese students across disciplines that were obtained from the British Academic Written English Corpus (BAWE). The results showed that the prominent syntactic features found in the written texts in social sciences were clausal structures, especially complement clauses while noun phrases were more ubiquitous in physical sciences texts. Complement clauses function to express the authors' or others' viewpoints. They provide important details to support stance and

offer a way for writers to present their arguments. Their results indicate the crucial role of complement clauses as part of the language features in expressing and supporting stance.

Previous studies on deictic expressions in L1 writing revealed that demonstratives such as *this* and *these* were commonly used with nouns in academic writing and considered as prominent language features (Biber et al., 1999; Charles, 2003; Crompton, 2017; Jin, 2019). Charles (2003) employed a corpus-based approach to investigate the way *this*-Noun in initial sentence position was used to construct stance in theses written by L1 writers at the University of Oxford in the field of politics and international relations, and the materials science. The noun is known as retrospective labels by Francis (1994) which refer to nominal groups that denote to earlier propositions. This is similar to the demonstrative determiners *this* or *these* analysed in some studies (Crompton, 2017; Lee et al., 2021; Jin, 2019). Charles (2003) argues that writers incorporate their opinions and evaluations in the text through the selection of noun, and thus contributing to appropriately marked stance. She provided ample examples to illustrate how successful encapsulation of information can lead to a clear and objective expression of stance, for example, “*This theory* is supported by the wider scratch track observed in this coating.” (Charles, 2003, p. 321).

Studies investigating grammatical structures as stance expression and other stance-related features in L2 writing had also increased which further attest to the importance of such language features in L2 writing. In a comparative analysis of argumentative essays between 366 Chinese students (L2) and 82 American students (L1), Jiang (2015) explored how the L2 students used the noun complement structures to express stance and develop arguments. He found that although the L1 and L2 students frequently used *infinitive-to* and *preposition-of* structures, the L2 students significantly used less of *that*-clause and preposition with *wh*-clause structures. This seems to indicate that the L2 students did not favour using these structures since they may require higher proficiency level to apply such complex structures (Biber, 2006).

In a study of the use of noun complement structures in research articles, Jiang and Hyland (2015) analysed 160 research articles from eight disciplines (applied linguistics, marketing, sociology, philosophy, electronic engineering, medicine, cell biology & physics) to investigate whether the noun complement construction (stance noun with noun complements) offers a range of choices for writers to express a clear stance. The findings illustrate that stance functions of noun complement clauses are important in academic writing, and there could be a wider scope and role for head nouns to perform other stance functions. Based on their findings, Jiang and Hyland (2015) proposed a model that described the functions of the stance nouns that writers can use as expressions of stance to persuade the readers on the validity of their opinions or viewpoints through evidence and relationship between evidence. The model was called the classification of stance nouns and, there were three types of stance nouns: *entity*, *attribute* and *relation*. Each type performs different functions (subtypes) to express and support the writer's stance, that is, to refer to object, event, discourse, cognition, quality, manner, status and, relationship of ideas. The classification of stance nouns illustrates how the different nouns express the writer's stance in the argumentative essay where the stance nouns were used to refer to a particular entity and the quality of the entity, to express differences of viewpoints or to discuss an event or circumstance.

Further, Işık-Taş (2018) developed an analytical framework known as ‘grammatical pattern of stance noun uses’ to investigate how IELTS test-takers used the grammatical structures in the essays in expressing stance. The sample essays were drawn from the Cambridge Learner Corpus (CLC) which is part of the Cambridge English corpus (CEC). She

found that stance noun with *that*- complement clause was one of the prominent linguistic features in expression of stance in an analysis of 300 IELTS texts written by L2 students which was followed by nouns with *infinitive-to* complement clauses and *preposition-of* complement clauses. She also found that lower-level students frequently used *this*-N because it is less complex compared to noun complement structures. Işık-Taş (2018) also found that the L2 students rarely used structures like *wh*-clauses, *be-that* clause and *be-infinitive-to* clauses in her analysis of 300 IELTS texts. Biber and Gray (2011) highlighted that these structures were not predominantly used in academic writing as the construction of such structures is complex and requires high proficiency level.

In terms of deictic expressions in L2 writing, Jin (2019) analysed the L2 learners' use of demonstrative *this/these* in 735 essays across levels that were required in an English Placement Test for the undergraduates and graduates. These essays were obtained from the English Placement Test Corpus compiled at one of the universities in the United States. One of the significant findings is that students with higher scores often used *this/these* followed by shell nouns such as *problem* and *concern* paired with extended antecedents that concisely expressed the writer's stance. The deictic expressions conveyed a certain level of stance and indicated to the readers on how to interpret the writer's stance and propositions. Moreover, Lee et al. (2021) investigated how '(un)attended *this/these*' was used at the initial, medial and final position in a sentence in 174 source-based ESL undergraduates' argumentative essay to understand the relation of the usage to the levels of writing. The essays were produced for a writing course in a US-based university. They explained that '(un)attended *this/these*' refers to the use of *this/these* as a demonstrative pronoun while 'attended *this/these*' refers to the use of *this/these* with shell nouns or stance nouns to express stance in writing. They found that high-rated writers had higher frequencies of attended *this/these* with more clausal or extended referents which was similar to Jin's (2019) findings. In other words, selection of nouns with *this* or *these* in the writing can be influenced by the writer's knowledge of the vocabulary and grammatical structures as well as the knowledge of the topic. The use of head noun with these demonstrative determiners also clearly refers to the writer's stance and helps in constructing persuasive arguments. However, both studies only focused on the use of demonstrative *this* and *these* in the writing and did not consider other types of demonstratives such as *that*, *those*, *another* and *such* to express stance and construct arguments.

In short, the review of past studies on dominant grammatical structures used in academic writing revealed that there are four types of the noun complement structures that follow the stance noun to express stance: Noun-*that*-clause, Noun-*to infinitive* clause, Noun-*of-preposition* clause, and Noun-*prep-wh*-clause. Deictic expressions that involved the use of demonstrative determiners like *this* and *these* are also found to be one of the important language features in academic writing. Although the literature review has raised awareness and revealed use of the specific language features in academic writing, most studies investigated language features in academic writing by focusing on one grammatical structure, for example, *that*-complement structure (Charles, 2007; Jiang, 2015) or *this*-N (Lee et al. 2021; Jin, 2019). Some studies focused on linguistic analysis of grammatical structure in L1 academic writing (Biber, 2006; Charles, 2007). Generally, there is a lack of comprehensive research examining how these grammatical structures can be used to express stance, particularly in L2 argumentative essays. Hence, more needs to be explored regarding how different grammatical structures are used to express the writer's stance given the growing importance of the argumentative essays in L2 academic writing. To the best knowledge of the authors, there is no study that has analysed the

use of different grammatical structures as expression of stance in argumentative writing in Malaysia. Thus, this study aims to fill in this gap by examining the distributional patterns of grammatical structures used by L2 undergraduates in Malaysia in expressing stance in L2 argumentative essays.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study aims to examine the distributional patterns of grammatical structures in the L2 argumentative essays. Thus, it followed a qualitative research design where interpretations of data were done qualitatively to seek answers to the research aim (Dane, 2018). In this study, the data was collected and analysed with an analytical framework that provided the coding of the grammatical structures found in the argumentative essays. The results of the coding were then analysed qualitatively to expand the breadth and range of the inquiry (Ary et al., 2010) about the distributional patterns of the grammatical structures used as stance expressions in the argumentative essays by the first year L2 Malaysian undergraduates.

Sample

A sample of 100 argumentative essays from a private university in Malaysia was used in this study. The total word count was 66496 with an average of 665 words per essay. The essays were written by L2 first-year undergraduate students aged between 19 to 21 years old who were enrolled in the business degree program, specifically in Finance and Accounting, and the Actuarial Study. The students obtained at least a band 4 (competent user) in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). The term ‘competent user’ means that the students “can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options” (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2024) in writing. Thus, it can be assumed that the undergraduate students had a satisfactory understanding of the English language in writing and able to function adequately well in the academic writing tasks.

Additionally, these students were required to pass the compulsory English academic course where they need to write an argumentative essay of 650 words in the final examination. The essays on the topic ‘Digital Marketing’ were produced in an examination setting which provides authentic data for analysis of the linguistic features (Işık-Taş, 2018). This offers a more accurate representation of the students’ writing since they could not refer to sources and use grammar tools to check their writing.

Data Collection Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the private tertiary education institution where the essays were obtained from. Convenience sampling method was employed as the essays were available to the researcher and appropriate for the research purpose (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). A total of 100 sample essays were selected from intact groups in one semester that consisted of six tutorial groups with approximately between 18 and 25 students in each group. There was a total of 23 tutorial groups for the English academic course in that semester. However, only six groups were selected for data analysis since they were accessible to the researchers at the start of data collection. The intact group was selected based on the criteria that they represented the larger

population of the L2 students who were required to pass the compulsory language English academic course as mentioned earlier. The students shared a similar characteristic of the intact groups where all of them were enrolled in the Business programmes at the private tertiary institution where the sample essays were obtained. The handwritten argumentative essays were digitalised and numbered to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the writers.

Data Analysis Procedure

To analyse the data, the Antconc 3.5.9. concordance software (Anthony, 2020) was used to identify the grammatical structures in the argumentative essays. A manual reading of the concordance lines was further done to improve the accuracy in the identification of the grammatical structures. Then, the total token for each grammatical structure was tabulated. These structures were categorised according to the analytical framework in Table 1. The grammatical structures were included in the findings when the head noun preceding the structure was an abstract noun that denotes an idea, quality, or state, and not referring to concrete objects or persons. For identification of the grammatical structures in the essays, the nouns used with the grammatical structures are identified as stance nouns which refer to head nouns preceding the grammatical structures that function to express the writer's stance or claim and evaluation towards the topic in the argumentative essay (Jiang & Hyland, 2015).

The Grammatical Pattern of Stance Noun Uses framework developed by Işık-Taş (2018) was adapted to analyse the distribution patterns of use of the grammatical structures in the argumentative essay. For ease of data analysis and discussion, the ten grammatical patterns in her framework were categorised into three main structures: the noun complement structures, deictic expressions and other structures as shown in Table 1. The total token and percentage for each structure were calculated to determine the distributional patterns of the grammatical structures.

Table 1. Adapted analytical framework: The grammatical pattern of stance noun uses (Işık-Taş, 2018)

(1) Noun complement structures	
(1.1) stance noun + that clause (N-that)	I am of the opinion <u>that</u> people in a group should work together to achieve a common goal.
(1.2) stance noun + to- infinitive clause (N-to)	Firstly, people in the group must try their best to achieve the success <u>to</u> be the best worker.
(1.3) stance noun + of prepositional clause (N-of prep)	People in Western countries enjoy this opportunity <u>of eating</u> new foods and at the same time learning something about relevant country.
(1.4) stance noun þ preposition + wh-clause (N prep-wh)	As for an organisation, they should do their best to produce an ideal atmosphere <u>in which</u> people have the freedom and rights to shown themselves.
(2) Deictic expressions	
(2.1) this/that/these/those/another/same/such + stance noun (this-N)	I will show some reasons why I agree with <u>this</u> view .
(2.2) this/that/these/those/another/same/such + be + stance noun (this-be-N)	<u>This</u> is a very simple talk about the culture and behaviour.
(3) Other structures	

(3.1) stance noun + wh- clause (N- <i>wh</i>)	This leads to a competition <u>where</u> the people will always look forward for the change in job for the better money. (No use of stance nouns in this pattern was identified in the corpus; the example was obtained from the results of current study.)
(3.2) stance noun + be + wh-clause (N- <i>be-wh</i>)	Digital marketing <u>is where</u> the businesses advertise their products online to attract more potential customers.
(3.3) stance noun + be + to +infinitive-clause (N- <i>be-to</i>)	My approach <u>is to</u> grab the lonely planet guide and read up on Wikipedia about local history and traditions.
(3.4) stance noun + be + that (N- <i>be-that</i>)	Another strong argument <u>is that</u> all-day TV programming has allowed people to keep in touch with what is happening around them, not only locally, but globally as well, with news, both local and international, being delivered as events unfold.

To assure the reliability and credibility of the data analysis, the results were verified by two raters who have 15 years of experience in teaching and research endeavours in academic writing. During the process of coding that involved the identification of grammatical structures based on the analytical framework in Table 1, the raters included all occurrences of grammatical structures that were used correctly in the sentences without grammatical errors that might jeopardise the meanings. An example of a correct use of the grammatical structure is shown in the following sentence below. The stance noun ‘opinion’ reflected the writer’s attitude towards the topic or information in *that*-complement clause. This example is counted as one token for the grammatical structure *that*-complement clause.

“I am of the **opinion** that people in a group should work together to achieve a common goal.”

An inter-coder reliability analysis was performed between the two raters using Cohen’s Kappa which is a measure of the agreement between two dependent categorical samples to establish reliability of results (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Lee et al., 2021; Jin, 2019). Cohen’s Kappa analysis showed there was a substantial agreement ($k=0.759$) between the two raters who analysed the results of this study.

RESULTS

This section discusses the results of the overall distribution of three categories of grammatical structures: noun complement structures, deictic expressions, and other structures. The examples are elaborated to highlight the patterns of use of the grammatical structures to express stance in the argumentative essays written by first-year L2 undergraduates.

Overall Frequency of Grammatical Structures

Table 2 shows the total token and percentage of the grammatical structures analysed in this study. Overall, there were 428 grammatical structures found in the argumentative essays to express stance. The most frequently used structure was the noun complement structures (66.3%), followed by deictic expressions (28.3%) and lastly, other structures (5.4%).

Table 2. Total Token and Percentage of the Grammatical Structures in the Argumentative Essay

Categories	Structures	Token	Percentage (%)
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Noun complement structures	N- <i>to</i>	216	50.5
	N- <i>that</i>	34	7.9
	N- <i>of prep</i>	33	7.7
	N- <i>prep-wh</i>	1	0.2
Total		284	66.3
Deictic expressions	<i>This-N</i>	114	26.7
	<i>this-be-N</i>	7	1.6
Total		121	28.3
Other structures	N- <i>wh</i>	13	3
	N- <i>be-to</i>	5	1.2
	N- <i>be-that</i>	5	1.2
	N- <i>be-wh</i>	0	0
Total		23	5.4
Overall Total		428	100

In the noun complement structure category, N-*to* had the highest occurrences (50.5%), followed by N-*that* (7.9%), N-*of-prep* (7.7%) and N-*prep-wh* (0.2%). For deictic expressions, *this-N* occurred 114 times (26.7%) whereas *this-be-N* only occurred seven times (1.6%). For other structures, N-*wh* structure had relatively low number of tokens with a total of 13 occurrences (3%), followed by both N-*be-to* and N-*be-that* (with 1.2%) respectively. N-*be-wh* was not used at all. The findings suggest that the L2 undergraduate students used more N-*to*, *this-N*, N-*that* and N-*of-prep* compared to other structures to express stance.

The Distributional Patterns of Noun Complement Structures (N-*to*, N-*that*, N-*of prep* and N-*prep-wh*)

The findings revealed that N-*to* had the highest token (50.5%) out of the four noun complement structures to express the writer's stance. In academic writing, *infinitive-to* complement clauses are commonly used to express human intention, future-oriented agency, and human control over action (Biber et al., 1999; Quirk & Crystal, 1985). The *infinitive-to* complement clauses are used to denote actions and intentions by the L2 undergraduates in this study to explain specific events and actions related to the topic of essay, 'digital marketing'. In example 1, the *infinitive-to* clause provides explanation to a specific event. The proposition in the *infinitive to* clause elaborates the writer's stance that digital marketing would be the future trends. The content in the infinitive to clause provides essential elaboration to the stance noun 'advertising' that elaborates how digital marketing provides marketing segmentation.

Example 1

"Firstly, digital marketing provides marketing segmentation to business. It can be used in advertising to track target consumers." [E15]

Next, N-*that* structure was ranked the second highest under this category, which was 7.9% with a token of 34, almost similar to N-*of-prep* structure with 33 (7.7%). In example (2), *that*-complement clause conveys the writer's evaluation and epistemic value of the information in

the proposition, following the stance noun ‘fact’. The proposition in *that*-complement clause with the stance noun support the writer’s stance with factual reasoning to convince the readers that digital marketing is important for the marketing of a product. This highlights the writer’s knowledge about digital marketing which is crucial in providing support to the argument.

Example 2

“In conclusion, digital marketing is believed to be the future of marketing trends. This is due to the **fact** that marketers are able to continually feed their target audiences with the business products or services wherever they go. This would then in turn reinforce the consumers’ perception and memory of a brand, triggering a higher chance for consumers to purchase the brand’s products.” [E39]

The third structure, *N-of prep* was ranked the third highest with 7.7% or a total of 33 frequency. Example (3) illustrates how *of-preposition* complement clause not only provides semantic meaning to the stance noun but also marks the support for the writer’s stance in this study (Shen et al., 2023). The proposition in *of-preposition* complement clause explains what the stance noun ‘way’ is and how it relates to the writer’s claim on the benefit of digital marketing (‘Furthermore, digital marketing also provides ...’). This example illustrates that *N-of prep* structure can be used to explain the writer’s stance and construct arguments in the writing.

Example 3

“Furthermore, digital marketing also provides a new **way** of attracting new customers and enhancing the business-to-customer relationship. Virtual reality, touch screen interaction and gamification become the new methods to promoting goods and services.” [E33]

Lastly, under the noun complement structures category, there was only one occurrence of *N-prep-wh* structure. In example (4), *wh*-complement clause contains crucial information to describe the effectiveness of digital marketing to express the writer’s claim. This expression was stated as a concluding remark to reinforce the writer’s stance in the essay’s conclusion.

Example 4

“To summarize, digital marketing can help businesses maximise the advancements in technology to further improve their marketing strategies and garner sales. It is definite that digital marketing will be the future of marketing trends. Although there is the concern of consumers’ privacy, businesses can overcome this by ensuring that all the data collected and stored is done so with the knowledge and permission of the consumer. Digital marketing can be an effective **way** in which businesses develop a successful company.” [E74]

The Distributional Patterns of Deictic Expressions (*this*-N and *this-be*-N)

As for deictic expressions, *this*-N structure was found to be used more frequently (26.7%) than *this-be*-N (1.6%). In example (5), *this* was used with the stance noun ‘issue’ to refer to an opposing view (‘Study have shown that people do not like to be surveyed and wish brand to inform the data they use’) in the refutation paragraph. The deictic expression connects the issue

and solution to clearly mark the writer's point of view. According to Lee et al. (2021), this also demonstrates the writer's knowledge about the subject matter.

Example 5

"Some group of people are concerned about their privacy when company uses digital marketing. Study have shown that people do not like to be surveyed and wish brand to inform the data they use. Regarding this issue, companies have come up with a new digital marketing method called 'gated offers' whereby promotions are advertised to people from certain age group." [E14]

On the other hand, *this-be-N* structure had very low token compared to *this-N*. *This-be-N* had only seven occurrences in the overall 100 essays which was 1.6% of the total tokens of the grammatical structures. The low token of *this-be-N* (1.6%) found in this study is similar to the results of Işık-Taş's (2018) study which also found that the L2 students seldom used *this-be-N* structure (2.1%) in their argumentative writing task. However, the students who used *this-be-N* in this study managed to connect the claim and grounds clearly to present a convincing argument to the readers. This suggests that the use of appropriate grammatical structure with the stance noun is essential in the construction of writer's stance (Charles, 2003; Jin, 2019). As illustrated in example (6) below, the expression '*This is the reason*' connects the explanation in the subsequent *wh*-clause with the statistical evidence mentioned in the preceding sentence ('statistics have also shown that social media users take up to 45% of the world population').

Example 6

"According to 'We are re Social', 2019 has seen 3.4 billion social media users. Not only that, but statistics have also shown that social media users take up to 45% of the world population. This is the reason why digital marketing can be so attractive to business owners in order to grow their businesses." [E67]

In another example (Example 7), the structure *this-be-N* links the stance noun 'situation' with the elaboration in the preceding two sentences to support the writer's argument. The writer argues that gated offer is a digital marketing strategy that is beneficial for both businesses and consumers. The elaboration after *this-be-N* structure reinforces the argument that digital marketing is becoming increasingly important for businesses. The structure can be employed to clearly connect the stance and evidence as a support to the writer's stance.

Example 7

"Gated offer is a type of promotional activity which attracts potential customer by giving out discounts. In return, customers must do a survey for the firm. ***This is a win-win situation*** as firms get feedback and information about customers, whereas customers get discounts from participating in the survey." [E66]

In summary, using a specific noun with demonstrative *this* (*this-Noun*) can provide a rhetorical option for writers to reduce ambiguity in writing (Swale, 2005). The use of such grammatical structure with appropriate head nouns in the argument can guide the readers with an interpretation of what was argued earlier to emphasise the writer's stance.

The Distributional Patterns of Other Grammatical Structures (N-*wh*, N-*be-wh*, N-*be-to* and N-*be-that*)

Other grammatical structures such as N-*wh*, N-*be-wh*, N-*be-to*, N-*be-that* and N-*be-wh* were analysed in terms of their distributional pattern to express stance in the argumentative essay. There was very low token for N-*wh*, N-*be-to* and N-*be-that* while N-*be-wh* structure was not used at all in the essays. In the following two examples, the students in this study used N-*be-to* and N-*be-that* structures to reinforce their stance. The information in the grammatical structures following the stance noun explicitly expressed the student's stance. In example (8), the structure N-*be-to* was used with stance noun 'method' to explicate how the products can be promoted differently using the digital marketing method. The example shows that this structure can be effectively and impeccably utilised with stance nouns to articulate the writer's perspective and bolster the argument.

Example 8

"Digital marketing is a new method of doing marketing compared to the traditional one. Marketing in general is used to boost businesses, particularly increasing sales. The **method** is to make their products available in front of the public." [E99]

In addition, stance nouns were accompanied by *wh*-clauses in the two structures: N-*wh* and N-*be-wh*. N-*wh* structure constituted a total token of 13 (3%) while there was none for N-*be-wh* structure. In example (9), the information in *wh*-clause provides explanation for the stance noun 'marketing' that refers to an important event or activity relating to the essay topic, 'digital marketing'. The stance noun and the grammatical structure were used appropriately and clearly to mark the writer's stance on the prevalence use of digital marketing in businesses.

Example 9

"Technology has shown that it is an integral part of business. As years go by, many individuals have taken their business online whether it is through an official website or even social media. Not just small businesses, even large businesses have taken part in this phenomenon. This gives rise to digital **marketing** where an entrepreneur advertises his or her products or services online. Various platforms are used for advertisements such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and even personal blogs." [E89]

In brief, this study affirms that certain grammatical patterns are commonly used in academic writing to express an author's stance (Biber et al, 1999; Biber, 2006) such as 'N-*to*' (e.g., opportunities *to develop successful businesses*) and '*this-N*' (e.g., *this* issue). This study also reveals that noun complement structures is one of the prevalent language features in academic writing to express stance as supported by Shen et al. (2023) and Jiang and Hyland (2015).

DISCUSSION

This study aims to analyse how the L2 students in a private tertiary education institution use the three main grammatical structures which are the noun complement structures (N-*to*, N-*that*, N-*of prep* and N-*prep-wh*), deictic expressions and other grammatical structures (N-*wh*, N-*be-wh*, N-*be-to* and N-*be-that*) to express stance. In terms of noun complement structures, the

results reveal that the distributional pattern of use of N-*to* was similar to patterns found in Jiang's (2015) comparative analysis on the use of noun complement structures between L1 and L2 students where both groups of students frequently used *infinitive-to* noun complement structures in their argumentative essay. Similarly, Işık-Taş's (2018) study revealed the students also used more *infinitive-to* clauses in the IELTS written test. In particular, the high number of tokens of *infinitive-to* complement clauses in many studies is due to its function in the argumentative essay which is to denote specific actions by certain entities (Biber et al., 1999). This pattern occurs due to the inherently argumentative style of writing, requiring the application of suitable grammatical structures to effectively convey the writer's epistemological perspective and critical assessment of the subject matter (Hyland & Tse, 2005; Jiang, 2015). The use of such linguistic features is pertinent to the expression of stance expressions and development of arguments in argumentative essay. Furthermore, *that*-clauses serve predominantly to succinctly summarise the proposition within the complement clause for the reader so that writers can thereby express their own stance towards the proposition (Charles, 2007; Flowerdew, 2006). Employing *that*-clauses alongside stance nouns is prevalent in academic writing and is recognised as an effective method for writers to signal their attitudes and evaluation of the presented information (Shen et al., 2023; Hyland & Tse, 2005). Such construction also helps students to signal their stance and support their stance with clear arguments in the argumentative essay. In addition, the pattern of use of N-*of prep* is also similar to findings obtained in Jiang and Hyland's (2015) study. They found that the low token of N-*of prep* found in their study is because the structure N-*of prep* has less compatibility with the nouns used in writing compared to other grammatical structures (Sinclair, 1998). In other words, N-*of prep* structure is more restrictive in nature and may not be paired easily with stance nouns to express stance. Their low number is also due to the limited function of *of-preposition* clause which generally only provides the semantic meaning or further explanation to the stance nouns or head nouns (Jiang & Hyland, 2015). Lastly, previous studies have similar findings of low token of N-*prep-wh* that seemed to be affected by students' inability in describing an event where the participant agent carries out an action (Işık-Taş's, 2018; Jiang, 2015).

For deictic expressions, the distributional pattern of N-*this* is similar to the distribution patterns in a previous study by Işık-Taş (2018) where the L2 students frequently used *this*-N in marking their stance and developing their argument. The high token of N-*this* structure in this study also supports previous findings by Biber et al. (1999) and Liu and Chen (2022) in which *this* appeared more frequently in the academic corpus. Surprisingly, the pattern of high use of *this*-N structure is also similar to those exhibited by the expert writers in Crompton's study (2017). This suggests that some students in this study were able to use *this*-N to express stance and guide the readers to the propositions they provided in their writing like the expert writers. The use of a head noun with the demonstrative determiner *this* can enhance textual clarity by functioning as references to preceding information or clauses (Gray & Cortes, 2011). Moreover, the use of such grammatical structure with appropriate head nouns in the argument can guide the readers with an interpretation of what was argued earlier to emphasise the writer's stance. However, caution should be exercised so that students do not overuse this structure (Liu & Chen, 2022) which may lead to repetitive structures in writing. Students should be encouraged to use a variety of different grammatical structures with appropriate stance nouns to express stance for a convincing argument in their argumentative essay.

Previous studies also found that the last category of structures analysed in this study, other structures such as 'N-*wh*', 'N-*be-wh*', 'N-*be-that*', and 'N-*be-to*' were seldom used in the

argumentative writing by the L2 students. For instance, Işık-Taş (2018) found that there were low occurrences for *N-be-to* (2.6%) and *N-be-that* (2.7%) structures compared to other structures in her study. These students rarely used the *wh*-clause as it is considered as an intermediate feature in academic writing that requires higher linguistic proficiency level and adequate knowledge of clausal structures for use in writing (Biber & Gray, 2011).

This study also highlights the lack of variety of grammatical structures for conveying and developing an author's stance which is also reported in previous studies (Biber, 2006; Işık-Taş, 2018; Wingate, 2012). Generally, there were many underused structures such as '*N-of prep*' (e.g., *methods of reaching consumers and driving sales*), '*N-that*' (e.g., *the fact that consumers can easily access information online*) as well as nouns with other structures such as '*N-wh*', '*N-be-wh*', '*N-be-that*', and '*N-be-to*'. These structures not only can clarify the meaning of stance nouns but also emphasise the writer's position, as elaborated in the results earlier.

Based on the discussion, the results of this study support the view that the use of multiple grammatical structures, particularly complex structures like the noun complement clauses, can convey the writer's stance and present the reasonings and evidence in an objective and sophisticated manner as well as demonstrate the writer's credibility and knowledge in the field of study (Biber, 2006; Işık-Taş, 2018; Jiang, 2015). This is particularly to avoid the use of repetitive and similar structures in writing. These grammatical constructions can condense sentences, a characteristic of academic writing, or expand on the development of ideas and relevant supporting details, particularly in argumentative writing (Shen et al., 2023). The results also indicate that the use of appropriate and varied grammatical structures is an important academic language feature that is related to linguistic sophistication which includes syntactic complexity and lexical diversity (Crossley et al., 2011; Maamujav et al., 2021; Staples et al. 2016; Yang et al. 2023).

In the context of academic writing, it is expected that academic writers should know how to use complex structures like *that*-complement clauses and *wh*-clauses to state their stance and develop their propositions to engage and convince the readers of the saliency of their arguments (Biber & Gray, 2011; Casal & Lee, 2019). Thus, the prevalent grammatical structures as well as the underused structures should be explicitly taught through the teaching and learning materials and classroom activities in L2 academic writing, particularly argumentative writing so that students are able to utilise a variety of grammatical structures appropriately in their writing (Charles, 2007; Dudley-Evans, 2002) to express stance clearly.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the grammatical structures used in argumentative essays by the L2 undergraduate students in a private university in Malaysia, particularly noun complement structures, deictic expressions and other structures. Overall, the findings show that the noun complement structures had the highest frequency compared to deictic expressions and other structures. The two most frequently used grammatical structures were *N-to* and *this-N*, followed by *N-that* and *N-of prep*. In contrast, *N-be-wh* was not found at all in the essays. The results suggest that appropriate and varied use of prevalent grammatical structures such as the noun complement structures, *this-N* and *wh*-clauses are crucial in the expression of stance and development of its supporting evidence in argumentative essay.

The results suggest pedagogical implications to research on linguistic analysis of L2 academic written texts. Firstly, the distributional patterns of grammatical structures found in

the L2 argumentative essays can provide insights into how the L2 undergraduate students can use these language features to express stance. A list of prevalent grammatical structures used in the argumentative essays can be drawn from the results of the study (refer to Appendix). The prominent patterns of usage that are identified through this study can be used in helping the students to improve their writing particularly stating the stance which in turn can lead to effective arguments (Charles, 2003; Hyland, 2009; Shen, et al. 2023; Swales, 1990, 2005). As for the less frequently used structures such as ‘N-*wh*’, ‘N-*be-wh*’, ‘N-*be-that*’, and ‘N-*be-to*’, these structures should be taught explicitly in class with more examples to illustrate how these structures can be used to express stance. Secondly, the results can provide indicators on how to develop a more refined pedagogical content to develop student’s argumentative skill at tertiary level (Hong, 2023; Jiang, 2015). The examples derived from this study can inform the researchers and course instructors on how to use a variety of grammatical structures in expressing stance clearly in argumentative writing.

Furthermore, analysing and scrutinising the way undergraduate writers express their stance using these linguistic features can help the instructors to comprehend how stance is expressed in an argumentative essay (Hyland, 2018) as argumentative writing seems to be the prevalent form of academic assessment for writing proficiency at higher education as mentioned earlier. The results may have pedagogical implications to the teaching and learning of language features for L2 academic writing. The results can help writing instructors to enhance the writing instruction, plan better teaching materials and design classroom activities for argumentative essay writing in teaching writing courses for L2 undergraduate students (Al Fajri & Oktavianti, 2024; Yasuda, 2023). The grammatical structures from the list mentioned earlier (in Appendix) can be used as a guide in the teaching and learning for academic writing. The instructors can design writing activities that focus on academic language structures to demonstrate to the students how to compose their writing using a wide variety of grammatical structures from the examples shown in this study. Using an essay prompt, the instructors can begin by asking the students to construct their stance (thesis statement) and supporting arguments (topic sentences). Next, the students can try to construct more sentences and develop paragraphs using different grammatical structures. These activities should enable the students to be more aware of the grammatical structures and how to deploy and organise them in the argumentative essay which should be practical and useful for the teaching and learning of the L2 writing. Such activity should be carried out with the emphasis on stance expression and construction of a clear argument, accompanied by a clear model of argumentative writing.

In terms of contribution to body of knowledge in stance and linguistic features in academic writing, the investigation of grammatical structures show that they are essential to the clear articulation of stance and effective construction of argument in argumentative writing. Investigation of the linguistic features in written academic texts like an argumentative essay can also contribute to the body of research that focuses on SFL approaches in linguistic analysis in academic writing. The linguistic analysis highlights the functional language features in terms of the variations and sophistication of the grammatical structures used for specific communicative purpose in an educational setting (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Jiang & Hyland, 2015; Yang et al. 2023). The study also emphasises how these expressions can be used in the teaching of academic writing based on SFL framework as there would be more opportunities for students to reflect and examine the language choices in writing (Hyland, 2009; Swales, 2005; Shin & Won, 2024; Zhou et al., 2023).

Following the results and discussion, this study has two recommendations for future research on L2 academic writing. First, the patterns of use of grammatical structures investigated in this study focused on analysis on one discipline only. The L2 first-year undergraduate students who produced the argumentative essays in this study were students enrolled in the Business degree program. Future studies may conduct a thorough investigation of the use of the grammatical structures in other disciplines to determine the extent of the differences in the distribution patterns of use across different fields of study as students in different disciplines may use the language features in a different manner, depending on the writing tasks required in their respective discipline (Flowerdew, 2016). The research in stance and language features in other disciplines can further contribute to the literature in expression of stance in L2 academic writing, particularly argumentative writing. Secondly, this study focused on the use of grammatical structures by the L2 undergraduate students in argumentative essays. Future researchers could conduct an in-depth comparative analysis to determine the differences in the use of such constructions between argumentative essays and other types of academic writing such as research papers and dissertations since such analysis may yield different results for the use of grammatical structures across prevalent types of writing in higher education (Işık-Taş, 2018; Lee et al., 2021). The comparison can reveal important insights on the effective use of these grammatical structures for the teaching and learning of the language features for other types of writing in L2 academic writing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank those who were involved in completing the study: Universiti Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM) for the ethical approval, Sunway University for data collection and the two raters who helped in validating the results.

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APPENDIX

A list of grammatical structures used in argumentative essays for a business topic
'Digital Marketing'

Categories	Structures	Examples and functions
(1) stance noun + complementing clause (N-complement)		
(1.1) stance noun + that clause	(N-that)	Example 1 - to support the topic sentence; "This is due to the fact <u>that marketers are able to continually feed their target audiences with the business products or services wherever they go.</u>" Example 2 - to provide example for illustration of the topic sentence "For instance, the software is able to identify which families have infants and will send a prompt to marketers to slide in an advertisement or two on milk powder formula. There is a close to 100% possibility <u>that they will be able to make a sale</u> because their infant will definitely need to drink milk."
(1.2) stance noun + to- infinitive clause	(N-to)	Example 3 - to state the topic sentence; "Firstly, digital marketing provides marketing segmentation to business. It can be used in advertising <u>to track target consumers.</u>" Example 4 - to elaborate the topic sentence; "It helps a business to reduce a lot of complicated process <u>to develop a company.</u>"
(1.3) stance noun + of prepositional clause	(N-of prep)	Example 5 - to state a topic sentence at the beginning of the body paragraph; "Furthermore, digital marketing also provides a new way of <u>attracting new customers and enhancing the business-to-customer relationship.</u>" Example 6 - to explain a key concept related to the main argument; "Gated offers are personalised promotions designed for a certain group of consumers where the process <u>of redeeming a gated offer</u> is protected by a digital verification."

(1.4) stance noun þ preposition + wh-clause	(N prep-wh)	Example 7 - to conclude in the conclusion paragraph; “To summarize, digital marketing can help businesses maximise the advancements in technology to further improve their marketing strategies and garner sales. It is definite that digital marketing will be the future of marketing trends. Although there is the concern of consumers’ privacy, businesses can overcome this by ensuring that all the data collected and stored is done so with the knowledge and permission of the consumer. Digital marketing can be an effective way in which <u>businesses develop a successful company.</u>”
(2) Deictic expressions		
(2.1) this/that/these/those/ another/same/such + stance noun	(this-N)	Example 8 -to provide a solution to the issue mentioned earlier which supports the topic sentence; “A survey shows that only 17% of the customers like social tracking. Majority does not like company to learn about their background covertly but wants the company make[s] them feel unique. However, <u>this dilemma</u> can be solved by using promotions and give external control rights to audiences to disclose their personal information.” Example 9 - to refute opposing view in refutation paragraph; “Some group of people are concerned about their privacy when company uses digital marketing. Study have shown that people do not like to be surveyed and wish brand to inform the data they use. Regarding <u>this issue</u>, companies have come up with new digital marketing method called ‘gated offers’ whereby promotions are advertised to people from certain age group.”
(2.2) this/that/these/those/ another/ same/such + be + stance noun	(this-be-N)	Example 10 - to link the reason to the main argument; “According to ‘We are the Social’, 2019 has seen 3.4 billion social media users. Not only that, statistics have also shown that social media users take up to 45% of the world population. <u>This is the reason</u> why digital marketing can be so attractive to business owners in order to grow their businesses.”

		Example 11 - to reiterate the writer's proposition; "Gated offer is a type of promotional activity which attract potential customer by giving out discounts. In return, customers must do a survey for the firm. <u>This is a win-win situation as firms get feedbacks and information about customers, whereas customers get discounts from participating in the survey.</u>"
(3) Other structures		
(3.1) stance noun + wh- clause	(N-wh)	Example 12 - to state the writer's proposition; "Technology has shown that it is an integral part in business. As years go by, many individuals have taken their business online whether it is through an official website or even social medias. Not just small businesses, even large businesses have taken part in this phenomenon. This gives rise to digital marketing <u>where an entrepreneur advertises his or her products or services online.</u> Various platforms are used for advertisement such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and even personal blogs."
(3.2) stance noun + be + wh-clause	(N-be-wh)	Example 13 - to state the topic sentence; Digital marketing <u>is where</u> the businesses advertise their products online to attract more potential customers."
(3.3) stance noun + be + to +infinitive-clause	(N-be-to)	Example 14 - to provide explanation to support the proposition; "Digital marketing is a new method of doing marketing compared to the traditional one. Marketing in general is used to boost up businesses particularly increasing sales. The method <u>is to make available their products in front of the public.</u>"
(3.4) stance noun + be + that	(N-be-that)	Example 15 - to state the topic sentence; "One of the reasons <u>is that digital marketing is good for the low budget business companies to start with.</u>"