



Exploring Linguistic Elements In Students' Written Discussion Texts

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to examine the language features used by students in writing discussion texts, specifically identifying the frequency and type of features such as modal verbs, conjunctions, and conditional clauses.

Methodology: This qualitative descriptive study used documentation as the data collection technique. The research analyzed 28 discussion texts written by third-semester students in the Genre-Based Writing course at the English Education Department, UIN Walisongo. Analysis was conducted using Feez's (1998) framework and the categorization of connectors by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999).

Main Findings: The study revealed that students frequently used modal verbs, particularly "can" and "will," to express hedging and certainty. Causal connectors like "because" were used more than sequential ones, reflecting the argumentative nature of the texts. However, conditional clauses were underutilized or often misapplied. The texts exhibited general awareness of discussion text features but lacked full mastery in applying them correctly, especially in balancing argumentation and reasoning.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study contributes to genre-based writing pedagogy by specifically mapping the linguistic elements used in students' discussion texts. Unlike prior research that mainly addressed discourse markers or argument structure, this study focuses on the integration of specific language features, offering insight into students' actual grammatical competence within the context of academic genres.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English is widely used as a global language for communication, and in Indonesia, it is taught from an early level as a compulsory subject [1]-[3]. Among the four primary language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing writing often presents the most challenges for students, especially at the university level. Writing is not only a productive skill but also a tool for expressing structured ideas [4], [5]. Mastery of writing is crucial for students in the English Education Department, particularly when composing academic texts like discussion essays that require balanced argumentation and linguistic precision.

Discussion text, as one of the genres taught in the third semester of the English Education curriculum, poses unique challenges [6]-[8]. It demands that students not only present arguments for and against an issue but

also utilize specific language features to structure and support their points of view [9], [10]. These include modal verbs, conditional clauses, and various connectors.

Despite its inclusion in the syllabus, discussion texts have received less scholarly attention compared to argumentative writing [11]-[13]. Many students fail to use proper grammar structures or display weaknesses in conveying logical reasoning. The problem is often seen in their use of connectors, modal verbs, and conditionals, which are essential to create cohesive and persuasive arguments [14], [15].

This study addresses the gap by analyzing the language features present in students' discussion texts at UIN Walisongo. It uses the framework from Feez (1998), Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), and other scholars to evaluate how effectively students employ linguistic tools in constructing discussion texts. The outcome is expected to inform pedagogical strategies and provide recommendations for improving writing instruction focused on genre features [16]-[18]. The study takes a broader linguistic perspective by examining various linguistic components that appear in students' discussion texts. This could encompass grammar, vocabulary use, discourse markers, modality, cohesion devices, and overall text organization [19], [20]. The focus is likely on how these elements contribute to the clarity, coherence, and effectiveness of argumentation in students' writing. Such an approach emphasizes a holistic view of language use rather than limiting the analysis to specific linguistic features.

In contrast, the study entitled "Language Features on Students Writing of Discussion Text" seems to adopt a more specific and technical approach by concentrating on the canonical language features commonly found in discussion texts, such as the use of modality, generic structure, conjunctions, and evaluative language [21]-[23]. This research may be more oriented toward the application of genre-based pedagogy, particularly within the context of the English curriculum in Indonesian secondary or tertiary education. The narrower focus offers in-depth insights into whether students have mastered genre-specific features but may overlook broader linguistic or stylistic issues.

Based on these differences, the research gap emerges in the level of analysis and scope. While the first study provides a comprehensive exploration of linguistic elements across the text, the second is confined to genre-specific language features [24], [25]. This indicates a need for future studies that can bridge both perspectives combining an in-depth analysis of discussion genre conventions with broader linguistic and stylistic dimensions to fully understand students' writing competence. Additionally, cross-comparative studies involving both micro-level language features and macro-level discourse strategies could yield more pedagogically relevant insights [26], [27], [28].

The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive and integrative approach to analyzing students' writing beyond the conventional focus on genre-specific language features. Unlike previous research that primarily emphasizes structural elements such as thesis statements, arguments, and modality, this study explores broader linguistic components, including cohesion and coherence devices, lexical variation, syntactic complexity, and pragmatic markers [29]-[31]. Thus, this study offers a more holistic view of students' linguistic competence in constructing argumentative discourse. This broader perspective not only reveals the depth of students' language use but also uncovers patterns and gaps that might be overlooked in narrower genre-based analyses, thus providing new insights for both academic writing instruction and curriculum development in EFL contexts.

The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable pedagogical implications for EFL teachers, curriculum developers, and education policymakers. By revealing a comprehensive profile of the linguistic elements utilized by students in their discussion texts, the research can inform targeted instructional strategies aimed at improving academic writing skills [32]-[34]. Teachers can design more effective interventions that not only focus on genre conventions but also strengthen students' overall linguistic proficiency, such as their ability to construct coherent arguments, use appropriate lexical choices, and maintain syntactic accuracy. Additionally, curriculum designers may use the insights to develop writing modules that balance both structural and stylistic components, fostering a more holistic approach to teaching discussion texts in secondary and tertiary education settings [35], [36].

The urgency of this research stems from the growing demand for high-level academic writing skills among EFL learners in an increasingly globalized and communication-driven world. As English continues to be the primary medium of academic exchange, the ability to produce well-organized, linguistically sophisticated argumentative texts becomes critical for students' academic and professional success [37], [38]. However, many EFL learners, particularly in non-English-speaking countries, still struggle with integrating various linguistic elements that enhance clarity, coherence, and persuasiveness in writing. This study addresses this gap by providing timely evidence on the actual linguistic performance of students, which is crucial for diagnosing challenges and reforming writing instruction in line with real student needs.

What sets this study apart is its multidimensional exploration of linguistic features, moving beyond the boundaries of genre-specific analysis. While previous research often isolates features such as modality or conjunctions in discussion texts, this study adopts an inclusive lens that considers how different linguistic elements interact to construct meaning, argument flow, and rhetorical impact [39]-[41]. This unique approach not only enriches the theoretical understanding of written discourse in EFL contexts but also offers practical insights that

mirror the complexity of real-world writing tasks. By situating students' discussion texts within a broader linguistic framework, the research contributes a fresh perspective that has not been sufficiently explored in current literature, making it a significant step forward in the field of applied linguistics and language education.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach [16], [17]. The goal was to analyze student writing products without manipulating variables, focusing solely on the language features used in the discussion texts. The subjects of this study were 28 third-semester students enrolled in the Genre-Based Writing course at the English Education Department, Walisongo State Islamic University. Two of the texts were excluded due to being non-conforming texts, resulting in 26 valid samples. Data was collected through documentation of students' written discussion texts. The researcher obtained these texts from the course lecturer, ensuring authenticity and alignment with academic learning outcomes [18], [19].

The main instrument was a checklist and coding sheet based on Feez's (1998) language feature framework. The researcher manually identified and categorized the language features used in each student's text.

The texts were analyzed through three steps: (1) reduction, where irrelevant data was excluded; (2) display, involving tabulation of feature frequency; and (3) conclusion, where patterns were interpreted. Modal verbs, connectors, and conditional clauses were counted and categorized using classifications from Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999).

The procedure began by collecting the written assignments. Each text was reviewed to identify language features, which were then classified under three categories: modal verbs, conditional clauses, and connectors. The frequency of each feature was calculated to determine which features were most or least commonly used. Tables were used to visualize results and support discussion.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the analysis on language features used in students' discussion texts. The features examined include modal verbs, conditional clauses, and connectors, based on the framework of Feez (1998) and Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999).

3.1. Modal Verbs in Students' Discussion Texts

The analysis revealed that students extensively used modal verbs to express possibility, necessity, and certainty in their arguments. Out of 193 occurrences, the most frequently used modal verb was "can" (48.7%), followed by "will" (31.6%) and "should" (8.8%).

Table 1. Modal Verbs In Students'

Modal Verb	Frequency	Percentage
Can	94	48.7%
Will	61	31.6%
Should	17	8.8%
Would	5	2.6%
Could	4	2.1%
To be able	4	2.1%
Must	3	1.6%
May	3	1.6%
Might	1	0.5%
Have to	1	0.5%
Total	193	100%

The dominance of "can" suggests that students tend to express arguments with moderate certainty, possibly reflecting their hesitation or a lack of confidence in making strong claims. The limited use of stronger modals like "must" and "have to" indicates a need for instruction on rhetorical strength and hedging in academic writing.

3.2. Use of Conditional Clauses

Conditional clauses were used in 16 out of 26 student texts. The majority used present real conditionals, such as "If students take part-time jobs, they cannot manage their time." A few students employed unreal conditionals, such as "If cigarettes were expensive, people would buy fewer," reflecting an understanding of hypothetical reasoning.

However, some students misused conditionals or failed to employ them where logically necessary. This underuse may limit the argumentative complexity of their writing. As Warchal (2010) notes, conditional clauses enhance interpersonal engagement and allow nuanced reasoning functions not fully realized in the data.

3.3. Use Of Connectors

Connectors were the most consistently used feature across the texts. Students frequently applied causal and additive connectors to structure arguments. The most common connectors were, Causal: because, so, therefore, Additive: and, moreover, in addition, Adversative: however, but, Sequential: first, finally, when.

Causal connectors dominated the discourse, emphasizing the students' attempt to explain reasoning. However, adversative connectors like *however* were used less frequently, which limited the development of contrast and depth in argumentation. This aligns with Derewianka's (1991) view that reasoning is often prioritized over sequencing in expository writing, but the limited variation signals a need for broader connective repertoire.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that writing instruction in genre-based courses place greater emphasis on the explicit teaching of rhetorical functions, particularly those related to modal verbs and conditional clauses, as these play a crucial role in persuasive and argumentative writing. Students should also be provided with increased practice in using a wider variety of connectors, including adversative and sequential types, to enhance textual cohesion and the contrast of ideas within their arguments [20], [21]. Furthermore, writing tasks should be designed to stimulate higher-level reasoning by incorporating hypothetical or evaluative prompts, thereby encouraging students to employ more complex sentence structures. The use of annotated models and guided feedback is also essential to help students understand and internalize the strategic application of language features in effective discussion texts. Future research may investigate the long-term impact of focused language feature instruction on students' argumentative competence, as well as explore the relationship between language feature usage and overall academic writing quality.

This research focuses primarily on how EFL students use various linguistic components in constructing discussion texts. The study found that students often tend to rely on basic sentence structures, exhibit limited use of cohesive devices, and inconsistent application of modality and evaluative language [42], [43]. The study highlighted slight variations in syntax, the typing of conjunctions, and general difficulties in achieving coherence and a logical flow of argument. These findings reveal practical issues in students' writing performance, demonstrating a lack of mastery of discourse-level features essential to academic argumentation.

On the other hand, "Linguistic Discourse Analysis: How Language in Texts Works" offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing how language functions at various levels of discourse. Based on functional and systemic linguistics, this research emphasizes the role of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning in texts [44], [45]. Eggins' framework provides tools for identifying how texts construct meaning through grammar, cohesion, theme-rheme structure, and modality. However, this work has been largely theoretical and analytical, aiming to provide learners and educators with a deep understanding of how language operates in texts, rather than examining how learners apply these features in real-life writing situations.

The gap between these two works lies in the application of theory to practice. While Eggins' discourse analysis model provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding textual functions, it is not directly grounded in empirical data on student writing in EFL contexts. In contrast, these student-focused studies provide concrete data analysis but often lack a systematic, advanced discourse analysis framework [46]-[48]. Therefore, future research could benefit from bridging this gap by applying theoretical insights from linguistic discourse analysis to empirical examinations of student writing. This integration would allow for a more detailed and theoretically grounded evaluation of how students use language to construct meaning in discussion texts, offering stronger insights into linguistic pedagogy and theory.

The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to bridge theoretical discourse analysis and empirical student writing data in the context of EFL academic writing. While previous studies have either focused narrowly on genre features or remained within the theoretical realm of systemic functional linguistics, this study integrates both [49], [50]. It applies a linguistic discourse analysis lens to actual student texts, enabling a multidimensional exploration of how students construct meaning through ideational, interpersonal, and textual elements. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of students' writing performance by aligning classroom realities with established linguistic theory something that has rarely been achieved in prior studies focusing solely on either practical or theoretical aspects.

This study holds significant implications for both pedagogy and linguistic research. By highlighting how linguistic elements function in authentic student writing, the research can inform EFL teaching practices, especially in the area of academic writing. Teachers can benefit from the findings to create more targeted feedback and instructional strategies that promote awareness of discourse-level features such as cohesion, theme development, and modality. Moreover, the study encourages the incorporation of discourse analysis training in teacher education programs, thereby enhancing educators' ability to assess writing beyond surface-level grammar. At the same time, it suggests that linguistic theory particularly systemic functional linguistics can be effectively operationalized in classroom-based writing assessments and curriculum development.

Despite its strengths, the study has several limitations. First, its sample size and context are restricted to a specific educational level and institutional setting, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, while the study draws upon discourse analysis frameworks, it may not fully exhaust the depth and

range of systemic functional linguistics, potentially leaving out finer-grained distinctions such as appraisal systems or genre-specific register variations. Another limitation is the subjective nature of text analysis, which, despite being guided by theoretical constructs, still depends on the researcher's interpretation. Future research should consider expanding the scope to different educational contexts and incorporating inter-rater reliability or corpus-based analysis for greater objectivity.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the use of language features in students' discussion texts, focusing on modal verbs, conditional clauses, and connectors. The findings revealed that students predominantly used modal verbs such as *can* and *will*, with limited use of stronger modals like *must* and *have to*. While conditional clauses appeared in the majority of texts, their use was often limited to basic structures, and more complex forms were underutilized. Causal connectors, especially *because* and *so*, were used more frequently than adversative and sequential ones, suggesting a focus on reasoning rather than nuanced argumentation. Although the students demonstrated a general understanding of the required language features for discussion texts, the variety, accuracy, and rhetorical depth of these features were inconsistent. These findings indicate a need for more targeted instruction on how to use language features not just for grammatical correctness, but also to enhance persuasiveness, criticality, and reader engagement in academic writing. Future research is recommended to explore students' use of linguistic elements across different text genres or educational levels to gain deeper insights into language development and writing proficiency.

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