

The Use of Interactional Metadiscourse in the Construction of Gender Identities among Malaysian ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates how interactional metadiscourse resources are used to articulate and construct gender identity among ESL learners in Malaysia. The main purpose of the study is to provide language practitioners with empirical data of how gender is projected in the academic writings of ESL learners and to what extent learners' writings are affected by their gender. The data can then be utilised for the design and development of more effective academic writing courses in Malaysia. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were performed on the similarities and differences in the use of interactional metadiscourse resources, namely; hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers and self mentions between male and female ESL learners involved in the study. The findings of the quantitative analyses show no obvious differences in the writing style of female and male writers in the study, while the qualitative findings reveal slight differences in the way writers position themselves in the reader/writer interaction and in the expression of agreement statement.

Keywords: interactional metadiscourse; gender; identities; argumentative writing; ESL learners

INTRODUCTION

Gender and writing has been a subject of academic interest for some time. A large body of research that examines gender differences in writing was mainly conducted in the L1 context involving both child (Kanaris 1999, Franchis 2000) and adult participants (Meinhof 1997, Franchis et al. 2001). According to Kubota (2003), despite its status as one of the three essential elements (besides class and race) in a writer's agency and identity, gender has been rather neglected in the second language writing. Recently, however, there has been some interest shown in the relationship between writing and gender in the ESL context, particularly in relation to L2 learners' success in academic writing. Among these studies, one was conducted by Dana (2008) on gender differences in academic writing of ESL learners in the University of Melbourne, and another was by Abbas and Sheena (2012) on how male and female undergraduate learners differed in their argumentative writing in English. These studies are unfortunately too small in number to adequately address the issue of gender differences in L2 writing. Thus, there is the need for more investigation to be conducted in this area to contribute to the understanding of how gender constructs and shapes learners' writing preferences and behaviour, especially in the academic setting.

Writing is central in the academic setting as it is the key assessment tool used by tertiary institutions in awarding value to the extent of learners' understanding; likewise it is the means through which learners consolidate their understanding of a subject matter. Learners' ability to respond and engage in various writing tasks (essays, reports, proposals and theses) determines their success and failure in the higher learning institutions. Academic

writing constitutes some distinct features that distinguish it from any other forms of writing. It needs to contain a ‘reasoned argument’ based on a considered evaluation of various perspectives (Francis et al. 2001). The argument needs to be communicated to the reader in an assertive and confident style, which according to Clarke (1994) is a style less available to female students and academics.

METADISOURSE

Halliday’s (1978) macro-functions of language, which include ideational, interpersonal and textual, lay a very important theoretical foundation for the concept of metadiscourse. Metadiscourse, according to Vande Kopple (1985), fulfills Halliday’s interpersonal and textual functions of language. Vande Kopple (1985) defines metadiscourse as linguistic material, which does not add propositional information, but employed by the author to signal his/her presence in a text. The same definition is also echoed by Crismore, Markkanen and Steffensen (1993), who state that metadiscourse encompasses the linguistic material in written and spoken texts, which speakers and authors use to help the listener or reader organise, interpret and evaluate information given in a text (1993:40). Similarly, they also view the linguistic material as not having any contribution to the propositional content of a text.

Preferring the term resources over material, Hyland (2000) defines metadiscourse as the resources employed to organise a discourse or writer’s position towards a proposition or the reader (p.109) and later adds that the resources are also useful to communicate to the reader the author’s attitude towards a proposition (Hyland & Tse 2004). The notion of metadiscourse can be quite simply summarised as an important means to facilitate communication, support the writer’s position and build relationship with audience (Hyland & Tse 2004:159).

Vande Kopple (1985) suggests two main categories of metadiscourse; textual and interpersonal. Textual metadiscourse concerns textual connectives employed in organising a text and directing the reader, while interpersonal metadiscourse is engaged as a means to establish a writer-reader relationship and interaction and as a way to convey the writer’s personal stance as well as degree of commitment toward a proposition (Vande Kopple 1985). The former category is realised through *text connectives* and *code glosses*, while the latter through *illocutionary markers*, *validity markers*, *narrators*, *attitude markers* and *commentary*. Maintaining the same metadiscourse categorisation, Crismore et al. (1993) refine each category by further sub-dividing textual metadiscourse to textual markers and interpretive markers. *Logical connectives*, *sequencers*, *reminders* and *topicalisers* are added under textual markers. While the interpretive markers see the removal of *temporal connectives* and *narrators* and the creation of *code glosses*, *illocution markers* and *announcement*. More recently, Hyland and Tse (2004) have introduced an interactional metadiscourse model, which is founded on three key principles of metadiscourse, namely that:

1. metadiscourse is distinct from propositional aspect of discourse;
2. the term ‘metadiscourse’ refers to those aspects of the text that embody writer-reader interactions;
3. metadiscourse distinguishes relations which are external to the text from those that are internal.

(Hyland & Tse 2004, 159)

These key principles become the basis to a framework that conceptualises interpersonal relations in academic writing. The interpersonal relations are realised through two main domains; interactive and interpersonal resources. The researchers explain that interactive resources help organise the author's flow of propositions with the use of textual connectives that include *transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials* and *code glosses*. Interactional resources, on the other hand, concern the writer's involvement in the interpersonal relationship and interaction with the reader. They help the writer control the level of personality and intimacy in a text, establish the desired relationship with the data, arguments and readers, express his/her attitude and commitment and finally control the reader's involvement in the text (Hyland & Tse 2008, p.1237). They are realised as *hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers* and *self-mentioned*. Hyland and Tse's model not only provides an update on the categorisation made by Vande Kopple (1985) and Crismore et al. (1993), but also refines the categories. The specific and comprehensive examples given for the sub-categories enable distinction between and within sub-categories to be carried with ease, and for these reasons, the model is employed in this study as the framework to analyse interactional resources in the argumentative essays of the Malaysian learners involved in this study.

METADISCOURSE AND WRITING

Metadiscourse, according to Hyland (2004), is a pivotal rhetorical device for writers as it “represents writers’ attempts to present and negotiate propositional information in ways that are meaningful and appropriate to a particular disciplinary community” (p. 136). He adds that successful academic writing would be characterised by the writer's ability to control the level of personality in his or her texts, establish relation with the reader, evaluate his/her material and acknowledge alternative views. Academic writing, in other words, should go beyond mere representation of an “external reality”; instead, an avenue for writers to build “credible representation of themselves and their work” and establish social relations with their readers (Hyland 2004, pp. 133-134).

In the ESL context, the use of metadiscourse is most visible in persuasive writing, as it is one of the more common genres that students in tertiary education have to produce (Hyland 1998), but more importantly, it involves the writer interacting with the reader (Hyland 2004). In essence, argumentative essay writing is a social practice (Kuteeva 2011), which requires the writer to understand and anticipate the reader's expectations of how ideas should be communicated, at the same time possessing the mastery of the linguistic features that are used to convey meaning. The linguistic features here refer specifically to metadiscourse. It is for these reasons the investigation of interactional resources are employed by ESL learners in constructing their gender identities in this study which involves an analysis of argumentative essays.

GENDER IN ESL WRITING

There have been very few studies that focus specifically on gender differences in ESL writing. They include Morris (1998), Dana (2008) and Abbas and Sheena (2012). Interestingly, two of the studies (Morris 1998, Dana 2008) came to an almost similar conclusion with regard to female learners' writings i.e. they are more superior in comparison to male learners' writings. Morris (1998) stressed that even though female and male learners' texts generally had comparable quality in terms of accuracy and readability, female learners who exhibited higher level of conformity to essay guidelines performed more superior than

their male peers. Adherence to guidelines proved to be advantageous to female learners as they were richly rewarded in return (Morris 1998, Dana 2008).

Female learners were also found to outshine their male peers in the study conducted by Dana (2008). The texts written by female learners were found to contain more complex structures. In comparison to the male learners, female learners recorded higher frequencies in paraphrasing when integrating sources (instead of direct quotation) and using hedges in thesis statements to soften arguments. In addition, the arguments presented by female learners were also more developed and organised.

On the contrary, Abbas and Sheena (2012), in their investigation on the differences in the quality, rhetorical organisation, and selected lexico-grammatical features of argumentative texts written by male and female learners from a university in Iran, found that male learners performed better than female learners. Male learners obtained higher mean scores for all the dimensions of ESL composition, which include content, organisation, vocabulary, language use and mechanics. In addition, they were also reported to be more assertive and argumentative in voicing their stance in comparison to the female learners, who were reported to be less assertive and argumentative. The researchers related the female learners' lack of assertiveness and argumentativeness to the Persian culture, in which a woman is expected from childhood to be less talkative, argumentative and assertive (Abbas & Sheena 2012, p. 5790).

Learners' success in academic writing, as evidential from the findings of the studies by Morris (1998) and Dana (2008), relies heavily on their ability to meet the expectation of academic writing convention. Their understanding of the academic writing convention and ability to fulfill its requirement would then place them as more superior and successful writers (Morris 1998, Dana 2008). The findings of these studies reject the notion of gender dichotomy, which stereotypes female writers as having lack of confidence and assertiveness in their writing and thus less superior than their male counterparts. Writers' success, especially in the academic setting, is determined by how well they adapt to the conventionalised nature of the genre and may less likely be constrained by gender identities.

Nevertheless, strong cultural influence could also be an important factor in shaping how learners write, as attested by Abbas and Sheena (2012). The researchers highlighted how Persian culture has, to an extent, shaped and even limited female learners' voices in their own writing, hence supporting the existence of gender-specific discourse that is shaped from childhood (Lakoff 1977). The findings of this study provide important empirical evidence on how significant gender is in shaping and influencing learners' discourse. More importantly, these findings highlight that gendering may be so deeply rooted that without adequate training in the academic writing convention, learners could find themselves disadvantaged or even marginalised.

The understanding of how profoundly academic writing can be positively as well as negatively affected by gender, ignites the interest to investigate this relationship further among ESL learners in Malaysia. The main purpose of the study is provide language practitioners in Malaysia with empirical data of how gender is projected in the academic writing of ESL learners in Malaysia and examine the gender differences in the employment of interactional metadiscourse resources (Hyland & Tse 2004, Hyland 2005) in learners' articulation and construction of their gender identities, which can then be utilised in the design and development of more effective academic writing courses. More specifically, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences between male and female ESL learners in the use of interactional metadiscourse resources, namely hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers and self-mentions?

2. What are the key interactional metadiscourse devices used by male and female ESL learners in this study?
3. To what extent does the use of interactional metadiscourse resources reflect the articulation and construction of gender identity among ESL learners in this study?

METHODOLOGY

CORPUS DATA

The learner corpus for this study consists of 269 argumentative essays written by 166 female and 103 male students from two higher learning institutions in Malaysia; Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and Multimedia University (MMU). The corpus stands at approximately 149154 word tokens, with an average of 550 words per essay. The essays were compiled from third semester's students, who have completed two semesters of English language proficiency courses at their respective universities. At the time the essays were compiled, the students were finishing their third semester language proficiency course, in which they were required to write argumentative essays as part of the syllabus requirements. Table 1 below summarises the learners' profiles.

TABLE 1. Learner profile

	UiTM	MMU
Level of study	Diploma	Pre-degree
Semester of study	Semester 3	Semester 3
Years of formal instruction of English	11 to 13 years – during primary and secondary school years 2 semesters – at university level	11 to 13 years – during primary and secondary school years 2 semesters – at university level
No participants	155 undergraduates	114 undergraduates
No of word tokens	78832	70322

WRITING TASK

The writing task was treated as a class assignment, which the learners had to complete within class hours. Learners were given 2 hours to draft and produce a complete essay of not less than 500 words. Only the final draft of the essay was collected and analysed. Access to reference materials was not allowed during the actual writing process, but learners were allowed a brainstorming session with their respective lecturers prior to the two-hour intervention. A list of five topics was given to the learners. The topics were taken and adapted from the suggested topics listed by the Centre for English Corpus Linguistics, University Catholic Louvain in their corpus collection guidelines for contribution to International Corpus of Learner English-ICLE (Granger, 2002). The topic selection was made by considering the Malaysian learners' level of proficiency and culture, and the topics are as follows:

1. In the words of the old song "Money is the root of all evil".
2. Crime does not pay.

3. Most university degrees are theoretical, thus, do not prepare students for the real world. They are therefore of little value.
4. Some people say that in our world, dominated by science, technology and industrialisation, there is no longer a place for dreaming and imagination. What is your opinion?
5. Terrorism is wrong. There cannot be any justification for it.

DATA ANALYSIS

Using AntConc 3.2.1, a freeware concordance program developed by Laurence Anthony (2010), the concordances of possible interactional metadiscourse were obtained for each gender, and the items were manually analysed with their co-text to determine their function as metadiscourse. Only items or expressions with metadiscoursal value are classified as metadiscourse. For instance, *about* that is used as a preposition as in “a story about slavery”, thus, not as a hedging device, will not be counted in the analysis. Since there is a difference in the number of scripts by female and male students, which has resulted in the unequal size of female versus male sub-corpora, the total number of matches for the metadiscourse items found the data have to be normalised to 1,000 occurrences. Normalisation enables comparison to be made within and between sub-corpora.

This study utilised Hyland and Tse’s (2004) interactional metadiscourse as the operational model. Only the interactional metadiscourse resources are analysed in this study, and they include hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers and self-mention (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Interactional metadiscourse model

Category	Function	Example
Interactive		
Transitions	Express semantic relation between main clauses	in addition/ but/ thus/ and
Frame markers	Refer to discourse acts, sequences, or text stages	finally/ to conclude/ my purpose here is
Endophoric markers	Refer to information in other parts of the text	noted above/ see Fig./ in section 2/
Evidentials	Refer to source information from other texts	According to X (Y, 1990)/ Z states/
Code glosses	Help readers grasp functions of ideational materials	namely/ e.g./ such as/ in other words
Interactional		
Hedges	Withhold writer’s full commitment to proposition	might/ perhaps/ possible/ about
Boosters	Emphasise force or writer’s certainty in proposition	in fact/ definitely/ it is clear that
Attitude Markers	Express writer’s attitude to proposition	unfortunately/ I agree/ surprisingly
Engagement Markers	Explicitly refer to or build relationship with reader	Consider/ note that/ you can see that
Self-mention	Explicit reference to author(s)	I/ we/ my/ our

FINDINGS

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE EMPLOYMENT OF INTERACTIONAL METADISOURSE RESOURCES

Table 3 displays an almost similar density in the use of all the five interactional resources among female and male learners in this study. This finding suggests that writers of both

genders conduct interactions with readers in an almost similar way (Hyland & Tse 2008). Both female and male learners exhibit greater use of hedges, boosters and engagement markers, features that Holmes (1988) categorises under a more personalised and engaging style associated with female discourse.

Nevertheless, there are some gender differences recorded in the use of hedges and engagement markers. Both resources showed higher average use by female learners with the average of 38.7 and 15 for engagement markers and hedges respectively, in comparison to 36.9 and 11.4 average use of the same resources by the male learners. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies that reported higher employment of hedges by female writers (Morris 1998, Dana 2012). Despite these differences, both genders recorded frequent uses of both resources, which can be deduced by the similar percentages of the use of these resources. Female learners employed approximately 55% and 15% of engagement markers and hedges respectively, which was almost similar to the 54% and 16% employment of the same resources by male learners. According to Hyland and Tse (2008), it is common for academic writing to contain heavier use of these resources, as they are means for writers to create a shared context (p. 1238), in which reader-writer interaction can be established.

Franchis et al. (2001) in their investigation of gender differences in the writing style of L1 learners, reported that both genders had almost similar use of tentative language; consisting more cautious and tentative style of discourse which Lakoff (1973, 1975) characterised as ‘women language’. The finding suggests a lack of gender difference in academic writing and that female and male writers have the tendency to employ more cautious language in academic discourse. Franchis et al. (2001), citing Rubin and Green (1992), added that academic writing is less likely to elicit gender differences due to the formal and conventionalised nature of the writing (p.322). Even Lakoff (1973, 1975) acknowledged that academic discourse contains many of the traits characterised to belong to women language such as being tentative and cautious. The lack of gender differences in this study is consistent with the current contention that there is no one-to-one relation between gender and language (Hyland & Tse 2008), and in the academic writing context, men and women exhibits far more similarities than differences (Franchis et al. 2001).

TABLE 3. Interactional resources in learner corpus

IM Resources	Female			Male		
	Tokens	Frequency per 1000 words	%	Tokens	Frequency per 1000 words	%
Attention Marker	560	5.9	8.3	293	5.4	7.8
Booster	1178	12.5	17.3	694	12.7	18.5
Self-mention	296	3.1	4.4	167	3.1	4.4
Engagement Markers	3751	39.7	55.3	2017	36.9	53.6
Hedges	1421	15	14.7	625	11.4	15.7

ENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE EMPLOYMENT OF INDIVIDUAL INTERACTIONAL METADISOURSE RESOURCE

In addressing the second research question, the key markers or devices used by the learners were identified and examined. The quantitative data obtained from these analyses were supplemented with qualitative data from the contextual analysis of the resources.

KEY ENGAGEMENT MARKERS

TABLE 4. Key Engagement Markers

	Female		Male		+-Female/Male
	Tokens	Frequency per 1000 words	Tokens	Frequency per 1000 words	
we (inclusive)	990	10.5	475	8.7	+1.8
our (inclusive)	548	5.8	184	3.4	+2.4
us (inclusive)	226	2.4	140	2.6	+0.2
you	149	1.6	145	2.6	-1

Inclusive *we*, *us*, *our* and *you* were the key engagement markers employed by the learners as summarised in Table 4. These markers are normally employed to refer to shared knowledge, but they were mostly used by the learners to engage readers and enter personal relationship with them as shown by the following examples:

Female:

If *we* have money, *we* can build up a happiness and warm family. *We* can try to give *our* children having a good education outside the country. **F91 MMU**

Male:

In fact, if *we* have no money, *we* cannot buy goods, clothes and other necessary that *we* need. Without money, *we* can not do anything. **M87 MMU**

Both male and female learners used this strategy in their writing, and this made their writing more conversational as illustrated in the extracts above. The communicative style of writing is common among ESL learners, who often draw on the informal form to strengthen their arguments (Hinkel 2002).

There were, however, slight gender differences in the use of three of the key markers; *we*, *our* and *you*. The number of female learners was found to exceed that of male learners in the use of *we* and *our*, while male learners appeared to use more of pronoun *you* than the female learners. Generally, both female and male writers used these markers as a means to engage readers, but female learners were found to have more tendency to include themselves in their arguments with the use of *we* and *our*. While the male learners' preference for the pronoun *you* suggests the tendency for some of them to exclude themselves from their arguments as exemplified below:

Male:

If *you* are criminal and also drugs supplier, then *you* got caught by policeman and have a serious change of your action and as a result *you* got death punishment. At that time *you* will felt so stupid ... **BB005M UiTM**

Male:

This is happen because during *you* have money, *you* will fool around with the money but if *you* don't, *you* started to cheated everyone around *you* including your family, your friend and even ownself. **DIA005M UiTM**

It is interesting to observe that female and male learners differ in the way they position themselves in an argument. The former has the tendency to transmit a sense of togetherness and cooperation by equating themselves in their arguments (Mason 1994), while the latter

seems to project an aura of dominance and authority by separating themselves from the reader (Leaper 1991, Mulac, Bradac & Gibbons 2001).

KEY HEDGES

TABLE 5. Key hedges

	Female		Male		+/-Female/Male
	Tokens	Frequency per 1000 words	Tokens	Frequency per 1000 words	
should	176	1.9	122	2.2	-0.3
most	153	1.6	88	1.6	0
would	133	1.4	92	1.7	-0.3
may	121	1.3	38	0.7	+0.6

As summarised in Table 5, only four key hedges were most often employed by learners, and they include *should*, *would*, *may* and *most*. Asian learners in general are very cautious and indirect in expressing their opinions (Ahmad 1995); thus, modals such as *should*, *would* and *may* would be common occurrences in their writing. The use of hedges to soften arguments, as attested by Morris (1998) and Dana (2008) is welcome and can be advantageous in academic writing.

Even though the overall findings show higher use of hedges by female learners (Table 3), the figures in Table 5 above show that male learners recorded slightly higher average use of two of the key hedges; *could* and *should*, whereas female learners showed higher average use of *may*. The male learners were found to use *would* and *could* mostly in stance making and in the expression of probability as exemplified in the following extracts. The use of these hedging devices tones down the writers' argument or proposition (Hyland 2005) creating a 'softer' style of writing.

Male:

Therefore, ***I would*** like to make a stand a say that Money is not the root of all evil. There are several factors on why ***I would*** say so. M2 MMU

So, to oppose the point of practicing theory in life, ***I would*** have to say, "Do one even go to a university just to repair little minute things like a mere plug?" M114 MMU

Money ***could*** distribute the levels between poor and wealth, money ***could*** control the power dominantly and money ***could*** easily get you involved in criminal activities. M5 MMU

The employment of *may* by female learners, in comparison to the use of *could* and *would* by male learners, created a relatively more cautious and overly tentative tone, and this was further heightened by repetition of the word as shown below.

Female:

The babies ***may*** also become their earning method in order to *traffick* the drugs. But, it ***may*** also leads to the deceased of babies. And, they ***may*** not feel guilty about the dead of the people that had been used by them. F23 MMU

These findings reveal that although female and male learners have similar choice and range of hedging devices, they differ slightly in the pattern of use of these devices. Female learners' preference for *may* coupled with its repetitive use makes them sound slightly more

tentative than their male counterparts, whose inclination for *could* and *would* transmits a relatively more assertive tone.

KEY BOOSTERS

TABLE 6. Key boosters

	Female		Male		+Female/Male
	Tokens	Frequency per 1000 words	Tokens	Frequency per 1000 words	
always	160	1.7	88	1.6	+0.1
must	158	1.7	70	1.3	+0.4

Hyland and Tse (2008) in their investigation of gender difference in book reviews found that female and male writers differ in their use of boosters. Female boosting was often associated with positive comments, while male writers often used them to underpin their confidence in a judgement (Hyland & Tse 2008: 1239). Franchis et al. (2001) also observed that men writers used boosters more frequently and adopted a bolder style of writing than women writers. This study also observed a slight gender difference in the frequency of use of the key booster (*always*, *must*) as shown in Table 6. Female learners appeared to use these boosters slightly more frequently than the male learners, which is contrary to the findings of Franchis et al. (2001).

Despite the differences in the figures, there existed a consistency in the pattern of use of these boosters across gender, and they were mainly employed by writers of both genders for the purpose of exaggerating and emphasising their commitment to arguments. However, the narrow range of the boosters used resulted in a lot of repetitions, which were apparent in the essays written by both male and female learners. While exaggeration and overstatement are an appropriate and effective means of persuasion in conveying the writer's commitment (Hinkel, 2002), repetition of the same boosters as exemplified below could result in a writing sounding very casual and conversational and further cause a writer to fail in delivering a strong conviction as intended.

Female :

The first *obvious* reason that why crime does not pay is that crime is *always* unacceptable by a society. The happening of crimes has *always* put the society in a state of heebie-jeebies. Crimes *always* make people around to feel anxious but not joyful as crimes like murders are not accepted by them. **F52 MMU**

Male:

Social problem is *always* the problem that linked to money. One of the problems are robbery. Robbery is one of the bad activities that evil people *always* planning to do and had already done it. It is because doing the robbery is *always* give a good income if we succeed of it. Bad people *always* targeted a bank ... **BM007M UiTM**

KEY ATTITUDE MARKERS

TABLE 7. Key attitude markers

	Female		Male		+-Female/Male
	Tokens	Frequency per 1000 words	Tokens	Frequency per 1000 words	
even	139	1.5	100	1.8	-0.3
agree	92	1.0	43	0.8	+0.2
usually	51	0.5	43	0.8	-0/3

Table 7 shows slight differences in the use of the key attitude markers. Female learners recorded slightly more frequent uses of one of the key attitude markers (*agree*), while more male learners used the other two markers (*even* and *usually*). Despite these differences, the analysis of the individual use of these markers does not reveal much difference in the purpose of such use. The employment of these markers helps the writers express their attitude towards their propositions (Hyland 2004). As shown in the following extracts, female and male learners used these markers for a similar intent i.e. to assert their presence to the readers.

Female:

As we can see that crimes in Malaysia increases from day to day or *even* month to month. The crimes is very related to money...The criminal will do anything to get money *even* to have to kill people. **OM017F UiTM**

Male:

As a result, the people live miserable lives, some with no shelter or even insufficient food as well. All this misery is cause by corruption ...Corruption does not only affect governments, even ordinary workers can be corrupted. **M37 MMU**

KEY SELF-MENTION

TABLE 8. Key self-mention

	Female		Male		+-Female/Male
	Tokens	Frequency per 1000 words	Tokens	Frequency per 1000 words	
I	225	2.4	135	2.5	-0.1
my	62	0.4	24	0.2	+0.2

The use of self-mention, especially the first person pronoun *I*, by male learners, as seen in Table 8, was slightly higher than that of female learners. Self-mention is used as a direct way of expressing involvement and views, and this is commonly achieved with the employment personal pronoun *I* or *we*. According to Ohta (1991) and Scollon (1994), Asian L2 learners favour the inclusive *we* over the first person pronoun *I* as they prefer the collectivist way of expressing identity or opinion (Ohta 1991, Scollon 1994). This was found to be the case in the use of *we* and *I* in this study, in which inclusive *we* recorded higher average use (between 9-11 average) in comparison to *I*.

In this study, self-mention appeared most often in the introduction to express learners' stance and/or in the conclusion for the restatement of the stance in *I + adv + agree/disagree* cluster. Female learners were found to prefer this structure, and the combination of self-mention with boosters such as *strongly*, *definitely* or *totally*, is used to assert a strong agreement statement, making them appear more assertive in voicing their agreement, in comparison to their male counterparts whose self-mention was often accompanied by

modality to create more subtle and toned-down statements. The following extracts illustrate the difference.

Female:

I strongly agree that money is roots of all evil and ***we*** should control our greed so that ***we*** will not go too far, beyond our humanity. **F73 MMU**

In my stand, ***I*** agree that most university degrees are theoretical and do not prepare us for the real world. ***My*** argument is based on three main points which are cost, space and the rehabilitative values. **F27 MMU**

Male:

Therefore, ***I would*** like to make a stand a say that Money is not the root of all evil. There are several factors on why ***I would*** say so. **M2 MMU**

So, to oppose the point of practicing theory in life, ***I would*** have to say, “Do one even go to a university just to repair little minute things like a mere plug?” **M114 MMU**

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main findings of this study suggest far more gender similarities than differences in the employment of interactional metadiscourse resources in the persuasive writing among the ESL learners involved. Consistent with recent contention that there is no one-to-one relation between gender and academic writing style (Franchis et al. 2001, Hyland & Tse 2008), female and male writers in this study exhibited a similar style of writing. Despite the suggestion from literature that women writers have the tendency to adopt a more cautious and tentative style of writing (Abbas & Sheena 2012), the findings of this study reveal that the same style also sits well with male learners, supporting the contention that learners’ writing especially in the academic setting is not only shaped by their gender identities, but also constructed by social practices drawn by a particular social setting and negotiated by the need to adhere to their disciplinary discourses (Hyland & Tse 2008). The convention of academic writing propagates cautious and considered tone (Franchis et al. 2001), whereas interactional metadiscourse resources such as hedges, boosters and engagement markers are normally used to achieve the required style and tone.

Nevertheless, there is evidence of slight gender differences in the use of key metadiscoursal devices, especially in the expression of agreement/disagreement. While the male learners prefer the more subtle and softer way of voicing their stance by cushioning their agreement statement with a choice of modality (e.g. ***I would*** like to make a stand..), the female learners seem to prefer the bolder and direct approach, and agreement statement was found to consist of the combination of self-mention and boosters, without the softening effect of any hedging device (e.g. ***I strongly agree***). The bolder approach to agreement statement by the female learners in this study further shows that in academic writing, the traditional stereotyping of women language as being overly anxious, cautious or nervous (Lakoff 1973, 1975) is perhaps no longer accurate, as writers’ language is “not determined by their gender but constructed, negotiated, and transformed through social practices informed by particular social settings, relations of power, and participation in disciplinary discourses” (Hyland & Tse 2008: 1246).

The present study also identifies a slight gender difference in the way writers position themselves in the reader/writer interaction, which is traceable through the employment of engagement markers *we* and *you*. Male learners’ preference for the pronoun *you*, seems to

position them higher than the reader; evoking a sense of authority and dominance. This is a communication style often associated with men, who, according to researchers, use language to enhance social dominance (Leaper 1991, Mulac, Bradac & Gibbons 2001). On the contrary, female writers' preference for the inclusive *we* builds a rapport with the reader and puts them at one with the reader. This is typical of women language, which according to Mason (1994), would consist of features that transmit a sense of cooperation and selflessness.

With regard to the range of metadiscoursal devices employed by the learners, it was found that learners generally used very restricted range of devices that made repetition of the same devices to be fairly common in the learners' writing. Regardless of their genders, learners were found to be using the same devices with almost similar density, suggesting that if not all, most of them share a somewhat similar range and choice of metadiscoursal devices in their language repertoire. Hinkel (2005) highlighted that L2 writers often employ "a severely limited range of hedging devices, largely associated with conversational discourse and casual spoken interactions (p. 47)", which were also employed in the writing of some learners in this study. This is expected, as the learners involved in the study had had very little exposure to persuasive writing prior to data collection and were still in the process of learning the convention of the genre when the data were collected. It is also indisputable that learners' restricted range and choice of metadiscoursal devices could have a direct relation to their proficiency in the L2. Learners' language proficiency could possibly constrain their expression of ideas and identities, resulting in overuse and repetition of generic structures and devices.

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