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Evaluative Stance in L1 and L2 Argumentative Essays: A Corpus-Based Comparison

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing is often perceived as objective and impersonal; however, writers strategically use language to convey evaluative stance and engage readers. While much research has focused on stance in expert academic genres, relatively less is known about how student writers—particularly those using English as a foreign language—employ stance markers in their academic texts. This study investigates the use of stance features, including hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions, in argumentative essays written by British university students (L1) and Korean EFL students (L2). Adopting a corpus-based approach, the analysis focuses on the frequency and distribution of stance markers across the two groups, with particular attention to L2 writers' proficiency levels. The results show that L2 writers, especially those at lower proficiency levels, tend to use more boosters and self-mentions but fewer hedges than their L1 counterparts. In contrast, higher-proficiency L2 students demonstrate increased use of hedging devices and a noticeable reduction in self-mention, patterns that more closely resemble native-speaker usage. These findings highlight the complex interplay between language proficiency and rhetorical choice in academic writing and reveal distinctive stance-taking conventions in L2 learner texts. The study underscores the importance of explicit instruction in stance and voice in EFL writing pedagogy to help learners develop a more nuanced and context-appropriate academic voice.

Keywords: Argumentative Writing; Corpus Analysis; Evaluative Language; L1 vs. L2 Writing; Stance

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1. Introduction

Academic writing is increasingly recognized as an interactive process where writers engage with readers through stance-taking. Writers do not simply report facts; they position themselves and guide interpretation through linguistic choices. It has been reported that academic texts have become more conversational over time, reflecting a growing emphasis on explicit authorial presence [1]. Stance markers—hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions—are central to this interaction, shaping how writers express evaluation, commitment, and alignment with readers.

While much research on stance has focused on expert genres like research articles [1, 2], less is known about how student writers, particularly second-language (L2) learners, develop these features. Recent studies show that L2 writers often use stance markers differently from native English (L1) writers. For instance, it appears that L2 writers rely more on overt certainty markers than L1 peers, suggesting a challenge in achieving a nuanced academic voice [3]. Similarly, it is also worth noting that Vietnamese EFL students used fewer hedges but expressed stance more explicitly than native speakers, reinforcing findings that L2 writers may prioritize directness over subtlety [4].

Another critical factor is proficiency. Previous studies have indicated that as L2 students advance, their stance-taking strategies become more complex [4, 5]. However, studies on L2 proficiency and stance remain limited, particularly in student academic essays, a key genre in higher education. Given the evolving role of English instruction and shifting norms in academic discourse, further investigation is needed into how L2 learners develop stance in writing.

This study addresses two gaps: (1) the need for updated research on stance in student academic essays and (2) the influence of L2 proficiency on stance-taking. Drawing on metadiscourse research [2, 6], this paper attempts to explore stance as an interpersonal domain in the context of academic writing. Specifically, this study asks:

RQ 1: How do student writers employ stance markers (hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions) in argumentative essays?

RQ 2: What differences exist between L1 and Korean EFL (L2) student writers?

RQ 3: How does proficiency affect L2 writers' stance-taking?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of writer–reader interaction in student writing and informs pedagogical approaches for developing advanced academic stance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Stance and Evaluation in Academic Writing

Stance in academic writing refers to the textual voice writers use to express attitude, certainty, and engagement with readers. It is central to making academic arguments persuasive yet dialogic. Various frameworks have been applied to study stance, including Hyland's interactional metadiscourse model [2, 6], which categorizes stance markers into hedges (uncertainty/caution), boosters (certainty/emphasis), attitude markers (evaluation/emotion), and self-mentions (authorial presence). These resources help writers navigate confidence and caution, aligning with disciplinary norms.

Another influential approach is the appraisal model, which classifies evaluative language into attitude (affect, judgment, valuation), engagement (acknowledging or rejecting alternative views), and graduation (intensifying or downtoning meaning) [7]. Many of Hyland's stance markers appear to correspond to these categories—for instance, hedges and boosters regulate graduation (e.g., might vs. undoubtedly), while attitude markers express attitude (unfortunately, important). Self-mentions and reader engagement devices fit within engagement, shaping the writer-reader relationship [2, 6].

Recent research advocates integrating these frameworks to capture both lexical choices and broader evaluative functions [1, 3, 4]. This combined perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of how writers establish stance and involve readers in academic discourse.

2.2. Applied Research on Stance in L1 and L2 Writing

In the field of applied linguistics, there has been a surge of interest in comparing how L1 and L2 writers employ stance and related metadiscourse, reflecting a broader concern with voice and identity in second language writ-

ing. Researchers have examined a variety of genres—from student essays[3–5, 8, 9] and theses[10, 11] to published articles[1, 2, 6, 12]—to identify cross-cultural or proficiency-based differences in evaluative language use. Overall, recent studies have reported that stance seems to be a crucial element of academic writing for both novice and expert writers, but they also reveal nuanced differences in usage patterns across different writer groups[13–16].

Several studies have focused on student academic writing. By examining British student essays, it has been noted that the quality of writing is associated with stance usage: higher-rated undergraduate essays exhibited a wider range of stance and engagement features (e.g., more varied hedging and reader engagement devices) than lower-rated essays[5]. This finding suggests that even for native speakers, mastering the nuance of stance is part of developing strong academic writing, and it underscores why L2 learners might struggle if they lack similar command of these features. Research has also extended to cross-linguistic comparisons in more specialized genres. Hyland and Jiang[1] traced diachronic changes in stance in research writing, observing a steady increase in explicit authorial presence over the years, which they interpret as a conversationalization of academic discourse.

Notably, appraisal linguistic features have been evaluated in L1–L2 stance comparisons. Lam and Crosthwaite[3] conducted a learner corpus study of evaluative appraisal resources in L1 versus L2 undergraduate argumentative essays. The study discovered that while both groups used a mix of attitude and graduation resources, L2 writers showed certain imbalances—for instance, relying less on subtle attitude markers and more on overt expressions of certainty/obligation—indicating L2-specific challenges in mirroring native-like evaluative patterns. A very recent study by Chung and Crosthwaite[4], focusing on Vietnamese EFL students, also incorporated appraisal analysis and found that L2 writers were more explicit in their stance expression than L1 peers (i.e., stating opinions more directly), even though overall they used fewer appraisal markers. This aligns with earlier observations that L2 academic writing can be more overtly assertive[9, 14].

In addition to genre and L1/L2 background, proficiency level has emerged as an important factor. In a comparative analysis of interactional metadiscursive resources, researchers found clear differences in stance marker use between L1 and L2 English academic writers, highlighting variations in how writers from different linguistic backgrounds construct authorial presence and engagement[15]. Similarly, studies have suggested that as student writers gain skill, they tend to employ more nuanced stance strategies such as increased hedging and modals to express caution[4, 14, 15]. This is, in particular, relevant for our study, which compares subgroups of Korean writers from lower-intermediate to advanced levels. It is expected to observe variation patterns that correspond with their language proficiency and academic writing experience, which can be a key element of the current study.

In summary, previous studies have observed that stance and evaluative language can be central to academic writing and are realized through a repertoire of linguistic features. L1 and L2 writers alike need to learn to control these features to meet the expectations of academic discourse communities[16]. However, L2 writers may differ quantitatively and qualitatively in stance usage due to factors like cultural rhetorical norms, transfer from L1, and developing language proficiency. This study builds on the above literature by focusing on a direct comparison of L1 and L2 student essays, a relatively under-examined sub-genre, and by incorporating insights from metadiscoursal perspectives to analyze stance. In doing so, it also attempts to respond to calls for more research on how learner proficiency mediates stance-taking behavior.

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus Data and Participants

This study examines stance in L1 and L2 student writing through a contrastive analysis of two corpora of argumentative essays. The L2 English corpus consists of 351 essays (79,207 words) written by first-year Korean university students at Yonsei University. These essays, produced under timed exam conditions for a placement test, cover six assigned social issues (e.g., public smoking, anonymity online, animal testing), requiring students to argue a position—an ideal context for stance expression. The writers' English proficiency levels range from lower-intermediate (CEFR A1+) to advanced (C1), allowing for a detailed examination of how stance-taking evolves with proficiency. Essays from A1

and C2 proficiency levels were excluded due to low representation in the highest level or excessive linguistic errors in the lowest level that hindered analysis.

The L1 English corpus is drawn from the British subcorpus of the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS), comprising 142 essays (79,201 words) written by British secondary and early university students. These essays, mostly A-Level exam responses, follow a similar argumentative format, addressing broad societal issues (e.g., government policies, ethical debates). Although the British students are slightly younger than the Korean university writers, their educational level is comparable, as A-Level writing serves as a benchmark for pre-university academic literacy [17].

The corpora were selected based on genre, context, and word count comparability. The L1 corpus was drawn from the British English subcorpus of the LOCNESS (Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays), which includes A-Level argumentative essays written by secondary and early university students. The L2 corpus consists of texts from the Yonsei English Learner Corpus (YELC), a large collection of English essays written by Korean students for the Yonsei English Placement Test (YEPT) upon entry to Yonsei University in Seoul, Korea. For the present study, a random sample from the most recent version of YELC was used, which includes essays written by 3,564 participants, representing a largely homogeneous group in terms of age and educational background. Both corpora contain approximately 79,200 words and consist exclusively of argumentative essays written under timed, unsourced conditions, allowing for direct and contextually matched comparison of stance marker use.

Both corpora are matched in genre (argumentative essays), writing conditions (timed, unsourced), and word count (around 79,200 words per corpus), ensuring comparability. However, a key contextual distinction is the linguistic environment: the British students write in their L1 English, whereas the Korean students operate in an EFL setting, where academic writing conventions may be influenced by explicit instruction or test preparation strategies. This difference is considered in the analysis of stance-taking patterns. **Table 1** below provides an overview of the two corpora.

The Korean L2 corpus further allows for an analysis of proficiency-based variation, as the writers span multiple CEFR levels. **Table 2** presents the distribution of L2 writers by proficiency level, based on an internal assessment aligned with CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). **Table 2** below presents an overview of the L2 corpus.

3.2. Identification of Stance Markers

This study examines four categories of stance markers as defined in Hyland's model of stance: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions [2, 6, 18]. To operationalize these features, a comprehensive list of lexical items typical of each category was compiled, drawing from Hyland's stance models [2] and other relevant studies [19–22]. For example:

- Hedges: modal verbs (e.g., *may*, *might*, *could*), epistemic adjectives/adverbs (e.g., *possible*, *perhaps*, *likely*), and tentative reporting verbs (e.g., *suggest*, *imply*).
- Boosters: amplifiers and certainty markers (e.g., *clearly*, *definitely*, *must*, *of course*).
- Attitude markers: lexical items conveying evaluation or stance (e.g., *unfortunately*, *important*).
- Self-mentions: first-person pronouns indicating authorial presence (e.g., *I*, *we*, *my*, *our*).

As one of the most distinctive stance resources, hedges (e.g., *perhaps*, *might*, *possible*, etc.) embody a weakening of a statement through modification and qualification [2, 6]. Hedges are evaluated as one of the frequently shown stance taking markers, and they also function as indicators displaying the writer's commitment or decision to accept the alternative tones and viewpoints [2, 6]. In doing so, writers succeed in withholding complete commitment to a proposition, and this is central to the rhetorical characteristic of successful academic writing [6, 18, 20]. The hedged expressions, in general, indicate that the information or knowledge is presented as opinion rather than approved fact [23].

In addition, these hedging expressions can also be found in clusters or chunks, reinforcing the uncertainty of the writer's knowledge or information in the process of writing [9, 24]. Equally, not only weakening the statements, hedges also play a role in opening a discursive space where readers may disagree with their arguments [20]. Since strong assertions may challenge existing literature in the community to which writers and readers belong, writers strategically open the space to accommodate readers' opinions in a discourse. In sum, hedges indicate that a writer's statement is built on the writer's conceivable reasoning rather than convinced

Table 1. Corpus composition.

Corpus	Number of Essays	Tokens	Types
YELC (Korean L2)	351	79,207	5,309
LOCNESS (British L1)	142	79,201	7,298

Table 2. Distribution of L2 writers by proficiency level.

Proficiency Level	Number of Essays	Tokens	Types
A1+ (Lower-intermediate)	91	11,292	1,543
A2	56	11,359	1,624
B1	50	11,253	1,635
B1+	40	11,290	1,731
B2	39	11,297	1,813
B2+	38	11,303	1,744
C1 (Advanced)	37	11,413	1,979
Total	351	79,027	5,309

information (Example 1):

Example 1: Whilst *to a certain extent* I *may* be guilty of having an island mentality, I *wouldn't* go as far as to say Britain is in danger of handing all control over to faceless bureaucrats in Brussels or Strasbourg. (LOCNESS)

Boosters, on the other hand, are devices such as *clearly*, *obviously*, and *indeed*, and they help writers to take a position in conveying their convictions and assertions of propositional information with confidence[2, 6, 20]. By employing boosting markers in the discourse, writers ultimately succeed in representing a stronger statement about a proposition. More importantly, the boosters allow writers to promote involvement and solidarity with the audiences, emphasizing commonly shared knowledge in the community, and finally engaging with readers[20, 25]. The proper use of boosting expressions may help writers to strengthen an argument by stressing the mutual or shared expressions or knowledge with their readers to share common ground[2]. Therefore, boosters play a role in helping writers to display their ideas with assurance while they also function to show interpersonal solidarity to the readers (Example 2):

Example 2: For these reasons, I *strongly argue* that all Korean men do not have to be forced to complete military service. (YELC)

Another discourse marker under the stance categorization, attitude markers, designate the writer's affective stance, rather than epistemic (i.e., hedges and boosters), helping writers to express surprise, agreement, importance, and frustration. It has been reported that attitude markers are usually realized by lexical verbs (e.g. *agree*, *prefer*), sentence adverbs (e.g., *unfortunately*, *hopefully*), and adjectives (e.g., *appropriate*, *logical*, *remarkable*) with regards to grammatical categorization[26]. By positioning an affective stance, writers successfully reveal his or their evaluation of the proposition in the written text, showing their surprise, agreement, or preference[25] (Example 3):

Example 3: They are able to generate *amazingly* accurate graphical representations and perform extremely difficult mathematical equations in just seconds. (LOCNESS)

In the last place, self-mention is mostly signaled by the use of first-person pronouns, and it can function as an indicator of an authorial self in the process of writing. This central signal in the written text may contribute a number of textual voices to the writers in projecting an identity of themselves[2, 6]. In other words, by employing this particular authorial identity, writers are able to take a particular stance from that identity

Example 4: But *I disagree with* the idea of completely restricting the use of cellular phones while driving.

To extract these markers, corpus analysis software (WordSmith Tools) was used to identify occurrences of candidate items in the two corpora. In order to search the stance

resources, this study made use of two major functions (Concord and WordList). The searching words were based on a list of the items from Hyland's classification of hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions, which can potentially function as stance markers [6]. Then, all cases shown in the concordance list were examined by the researcher to ensure that the selected items function as a metalinguistic resource in context, since the nature of expression of stance realized by stance markers is itself highly dependent on its context [6]. In other words, as stance markers can serve multiple functions depending on context, a manual filtering step was conducted to ensure accurate categorization [6, 19, 27].

This analysis focuses on explicit stance markers as lexical items, following standard corpus-based approaches. While stance can also be conveyed implicitly through syntactic structures and discourse patterns [19], such cases fall beyond the scope of this study. By focusing on lexically explicit stance markers, the study aligns with previous research on writer-reader interaction in academic discourse.

4. Results

4.1. Overall Use of Stance Markers in Student Essays

Before comparing L1 and L2 groups, it is useful to consider how common stance markers are in student academic essays as a genre. **Table 3** summarizes the overall frequency of stance features in the combined corpus (British and Korean essays together, 158,408 words). Stance markers are pervasive in these essays, occurring approximately 53.2 times per 1,000 words, which equates to roughly one stance marker in every 19 words of text.

It seems that the student writers do not just produce entirely impersonal prose in their writings; rather, they frequently inject their voice and evaluation using stance taking features. Overall, among the stance markers, self-mentions are the most frequent (18.3 per 1,000 words, 34% of all stance instances). This suggests that students commonly use first-person pronouns (e.g., *I*, *we*) to explicitly claim arguments and establish authorial presence.

Hedges are the second most frequent category (16.4 per 1,000 words, 31%), indicating that expressions of caution or possibility are a prominent rhetorical strategy among student writers. Boosters are also frequent (14.3 per 1,000 words, 27%), suggesting that students make emphatic claims relatively often. Attitude markers appear much less frequently (4.2 per 1,000 words, 8%), implying that direct expressions of emotion or explicit evaluation are used more sparingly in this context.

These results suggest that even at the student level, argumentative essays involve a substantial amount of interactional metadiscourse, stance, consistent with previous findings in professional academic writing. The overall stance marker frequency of 53.2 per 1,000 words aligns with other previous research on published academic texts, reinforcing the notion that stance-taking is a fundamental component of argumentation regardless of writer expertise [2, 6, 12, 21]. Moreover, the importance of stance markers (i.e., hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions) may be understood better when they are compared to other common linguistic resources (e.g., passive voice construction, reporting verbs, past tense verbs, etc.) of published academic writing. For instance, it has been reported that the important use of passive voice constructions, with 18.5 occurrences per 1,000 words and 20 per 1,000 words revealing for past tense verbs [27]. Naturally, these stance markers can be evaluated as an important constituent of academic essays.

It should be highlighted in this study that the high frequency of self-mention in student essays is particularly notable compared to expert academic writing norms. Previous studies have found that experienced academic writers tend to use self-mention less frequently, preferring more implicit authorial positioning [2, 6]. It has been observed that hedges were the most commonly used stance feature in journal articles, whereas self-mentions appeared much less often, reflecting a preference for impersonal presentation [2, 6]. In contrast, student essayists appear more comfortable using *I* and *we* to articulate their stance.

One possible explanation for the prevalence of self-mention in student essays is genre expectations. Academic essays, particularly those written in timed exam conditions, often prompt students to take a clear position and support it explicitly. In contrast, research articles tend to prioritize impersonal presentation, with self-mention used selectively to highlight key claims. This aligns with findings by Gillaerts and Van de Velde [12], who noted that stance patterns vary across academic sub-genres. In research article abstracts, for instance, boosters are used more frequently than hedges,

Table 3. Overall stance marker frequency in student essays.

Stance Category	Frequency (per 1,000 Words)	Percent of Stance Markers
Hedges	16.4	30.8%
Boosters	14.3	26.9%
Attitude markers	4.2	7.9%
Self-mentions	18.3	34.4%
Total	53.2	100%

reflecting the need for strong claims in a condensed space. Comparing with the previous studies, the result of the present study indicates the prominent authorial role of self-mentions in the academic essay genre. The examples below, from the academic essays corpus, illustrate how student writers express the authorial self in the texts:

Example 5: *My personal objections* to Camelot as the lottery organiser are that a large proportion of the consortium are American or foreign firms; for example, IBM has a sizeable stake in Camelot. The British national lottery run by non-British firms, since its introduction, has been more controversial over the national lottery. … In conclusion, *I think that* the lottery should be retained, but not in its present form. *I think that* jackpots should be capped at 2 million pounds, and the prize fund shared between more people: it is better to give fourteen people a fortune than to give fourteen fortunes to one person. *I would* also remove any American business interests and give the charity money to more deserving 'charity'. Now the lottery is in place, it *would* be very difficult to remove it from society. (LOCNESS)

As can be seen in Example 5 above, self-mention markers are prominent in the essays, presenting themselves explicitly while delivering their opinions, judgments, and commitments [19].The heavy use of self-mention markers in the academic essays may be caused by the rhetorical convention that academic essays require in the texts. Unlike professional academic writing such as research articles and dissertations, student writers are expected to set their authority more clearly to appeal to the readers in a more limited discursive space. As can be seen in the YELC sample 6 below, student writers attempt to present their opinions rather firmly in the boosting construction with the use of self-mention *I* or *we*. By constructing the authorial identity more strongly, writers attempt to persuade their readers more effectively in the rather limited space and possibly restricted time.

Example 6: *I strongly insist that* drivers of automobiles must not be allowed to use cell phones while driving. This act should be banned by law. There are three reasons. … In fact, he often goes the wrong way when he does both jobs, taking phone calls and driving. It makes my mom, brother, and me anxious. So drivers should consider their passengers. If drivers ignore this, they should feel guilty. Then, there are a lot of researches proving the danger of using cell phones while driving. *I* cannot explain all the details of the research, but the studies usually include this kind of text 'If you use a cell phone while driving, the possibility of car accidents and death raises several times higher.' … *We Koreans should* adapt that kind of law to prevent phone calls while driving. It must be treated the same as driving under the influence or many other driving crimes. (YELC)

Beyond frequency, the overall distribution suggests that student writers are learning to balance caution and certainty. The ratio of hedges to boosters in the combined data is approximately 1.15:1, indicating that hedging slightly outweighs boosting overall. While this aggregate measure does not capture potential differences between L1 and L2 groups, it suggests an emerging awareness of both cautious and assertive strategies in student writing.

The relatively low frequency of attitude markers may reflect an understanding that academic tone should be restrained in terms of emotional expression. Instead of relying on overtly evaluative language, students may prioritize evidential stance markers such as hedges and boosters. Interestingly, however, the expression of stance in the academic essays was used in different ways between native Korean writers and native English writers, which will be discussed in the next section.

4.2. L1 (British) vs. L2 (Korean) Writers: Differences in Stance Usage

The analysis in this section attempts to focus on whether native English-speaking (L1) student writers and Korean EFL (L2) student writers differ in their use of stance markers. **Table 4** below presents the normalized frequencies of each stance category in the British and Korean corpora, along with the percentage of each category relative to the total stance markers used by each group.

Several differences between L1 and L2 student writing are immediately evident. First, Korean L2 writers use stance markers at a higher overall rate than British L1 writers (59.8 vs. 46.6 per 1,000 words), indicating that L2 essays contain significantly more stance expressions. This suggests that Korean L2 writers explicitly assert their position in their essays, perhaps even more so than their native English-speaking counterparts. It should be noted here that the different uses of stance features may result from the heavy use of self-mention among Korean students' essays.

To be specific, the most striking divergence occurs in self-mention frequency. Korean students use first-person references three times as frequently as British students (27.9 vs. 8.8 per 1,000 words). In the L2 corpus, self-mentions account for nearly 47% of all stance markers, compared to just 19% in the L1 corpus. This indicates a fundamental difference in rhetorical style: Korean writers strongly foreground themselves in their arguments (Example 7), whereas British writers tend to adopt a more impersonal stance with comparatively less use of self-mention markers, showing 8.8 occurrences per 1,000 words.

Example 7: This is why *I* think you shouldn't just think of North Korea as another enemy. *I* think there's a way to make up with them, without any force. *I* watched an Indian documentary on TV last night, and *I* thought Gandhi's maxim has no exceptions. All men should complete military service by contemporary laws, but *I* think that is an overkilling decision. (YELC)

Conversely, British students use far more hedges than Korean students (21.8 vs. 11.0 per 1,000 words), indicating a stronger tendency to soften claims and express uncertainty (Example 8).

Example 8: This *would mean* that there *would probably* not be a large enough number of M.E.P.s of a particular persuasion for a single group, be it Socialist, Centre Right or Christian Democratic to hold a stable majority. This *would lead* to coalitions being formed, out of necessity, across ideological boundaries which, as we have seen recently with Italy and Belgium, *would lead* to unstable and ineffectual governments. (LOCNESS)

This aligns with established conventions in English academic writing, where hedging is often used to maintain objectivity and acknowledge alternative perspectives. According to Hyland [20], hedges are commonly known as "central to the rhetorical and interactive character of academic writing" (p. 349). By mitigating and softening one's textual voices [2], academic writers try to show that their statements or judgments are based on "plausible reasoning rather than certain knowledge, indicating the degree of confidence it is prudent to attribute to it" while opening a discursive space in which readers may agree or disagree with the writers' process of arguments (p. 179). Based on the data of the present study, it can be claimed that native English student writers seem to be aware of the conventional stance in the academic situation where strong assertion or claim-making might be unsafe.

In terms of boosters, both groups use these markers at comparable rates (13.2 vs. 15.4 per 1,000 words), indicating that strong assertions are a common strategy in both L1 and L2 student writing. However, the balance between hedges and boosters differs significantly. The hedge-to-booster ratio in L1 writing is approximately 1.65:1, meaning hedging is more frequent than boosting. In contrast, L2 writing exhibits a 0.7:1 ratio, meaning L2 students use more boosters than hedges. This suggests that L2 essays convey a more assertive stance overall. Interestingly, L2 writers tend to use the expression of stance through boosting and self-authority voice together in clusters, which leads them to make a firmer and more direct assertion in the texts.

Example 9: As a result, *I strongly believe* that everyone ought to use their real name on the Internet for the aforementioned reasons. (YELC)

Example 10: Though there can be many opinions about this, *I firmly believe* that not all Koreans have to complete military service. (YELC)

Table 4. Stance marker frequency in L1 vs. L2 student essays (per 1,000 words, with % of total stance markers).

Stance	British L1 (LOCNESS)		Korean L2 (YELC)	
	Frequency (per 1,000)	Percent (%)	Frequency (per 1,000)	Percent (%)
Hedges	21.8	46.8	11.0	18.4
Boosters	13.2	28.3	15.4	25.7
Attitude markers	2.8	6.0	5.5	9.2
Self-mentions	8.8	18.9	27.9	46.7
Total	46.6	100	59.8	100

Even though the existence of self-mention devices itself does not indicate inappropriate style in academic writing, the higher occurrences of self-mention markers (i.e., *I*, *we*, etc.) may imply Korean writers' more direct stance using boosters and self-mentions together in academic essays.

Attitude markers are the least frequent stance category in both groups but appear nearly twice as often in L2 writing (5.5 vs. 2.8 per 1,000 words). This implies that Korean students more frequently use explicit evaluative language (e.g., *important*, *unfortunately*), while British students adhere more strictly to an impersonal academic tone.

Overall, L1 student essays are characterized by caution and nuance, while L2 essays exhibit a more assertive and personal stance. These patterns align with previous research in contrastive rhetoric, suggesting that novice L2 writers may rely more on direct self-expression when constructing academic arguments [9, 15]. The way that L2 writers present their viewpoint in the essays, however, needs to be evaluated in accordance with the students' proficiency level in the English language. The present study also draws our attention to the different rhetorical stances within the L2 group to investigate whether the writing proficiency in the learners' target language (i.e., English) can be a distinguishing factor in delivering writers' stance in the academic essay texts. This issue will be dealt with in the next section.

4.3. Stance and L2 Proficiency Levels

The Korean EFL corpus was analyzed across proficiency sub-groups (A1+, A2, B1, B1+, B2, B2+, C1) to examine whether L2 writers' stance-taking patterns change with proficiency. **Table 5** below presents the normalized frequencies of stance markers in each proficiency band. It should be noted here that there seems to be a clear difference in the use of stance even among Korean writers from the lower writing level participants to higher writing level participants.

Table 5. Stance marker frequency by proficiency band (Korean L2 sub-corpus, per 1,000 words).

Proficiency Level	Hedges	Boosters	Attitude Markers	Self-Mentions	Total
A1+ (lowest)	8.2	20.5	7.0	38.9	74.6
A2	9.6	18.5	5.3	35.6	69.0
B1	9.0	16.4	5.7	34.2	65.3
B1+	12.8	15.2	5.0	25.2	58.2
B2	12.5	13.4	5.3	22.5	53.7
B2+	11.5	11.3	6.5	21.5	50.8
C1 (highest)	13.6	12.6	3.9	17.6	47.7

As shown in **Table 5** above, the lowest proficiency group (A1+) used a significantly high number of stance markers (74.6 per 1,000 words), exceeding even the combined L2 average. In their essays, nearly 7.5% of the words were stance devices, meaning almost every sentence contained multiple self-mentions or boosters. This pattern reflects a rudimentary argumentative style in which lower-level writers frequently assert their stance using markers such as *strongly*, *firmly* and strong modal verbs such as *must* or *should*, likely due to a lack of more nuanced argumentative strategies.

At the A1+ level, self-mentions alone occurred 38.9 times per 1,000 words, accounting for more than half of all stance markers in that band, while boosters appeared 20.5 times per 1,000 words. In contrast, hedges were used spar-

ingly (8.2 per 1,000 words), making up only 11% of stance markers. This distribution suggests that A1+ students heavily favor direct assertion and personal voice, with minimal hedging. This typicality of strong voice in the lower level can possibly be explained by the fact that Korean writers, especially lower language proficiency groups, have limited choice of discourse items to convey their statements in a more indirect way.

As proficiency increases (A2–B1), boosters and self-mentions gradually decline, though they remain prevalent, while hedges rise slightly (reaching 9–10 per 1,000 words). At B1, the general stance pattern remains similar to that of lower levels, albeit with a lower overall frequency. A notable shift occurs at B1+ (upper-intermediate), where total stance marker use declines to 58.2 per 1,000 words, and self-mentions drop significantly to 25.2 per 1,000 words, a sharp reduction from 34.2 at B1. Meanwhile, hedging increases to 12.8 per 1,000 words, surpassing boosters in frequency for the first time. This may suggest that students at the upper-intermediate level begin incorporating more cautious language using devices like hedges and reducing their reliance on constant self-referencing using devices such as self-mentions.

At C1 (advanced), the stance profile is markedly different from that of lower levels. Hedges (13.6 per 1,000 words) now exceed boosters (12.6 per 1,000 words), and self-mentions, while still more frequent than in L1 essays, decline significantly to 17.6 per 1,000 words. The total stance marker density at C1 (47.7 per 1,000 words) closely aligns with that of British student essays (46.6 per 1,000 words). This suggests that advanced L2 writers approximate native-like patterns, adopting a more balanced and academically conventional stance. At this level, hedges constitute 29% of all stance markers, boosters 26%, self-mentions 37%, and attitude markers 8%, compared to the A1+ level, where self-mentions accounted for 52% and hedges only 11%.

These results suggest that writing proficiency in English correlates with more nuanced stance deployment among L2 writers. Higher-proficiency students approximate the L1 writers' stance style more closely, hedging more and using self-mention less frequently. Lower-proficiency students tend to adopt a simpler, more assertive stance style, likely due to limited linguistic resources, leading them to rely on direct assertions and emphatic modals (*I believe*, *must*, *should*). As they gain proficiency and academic writing training, they moderate their tone and employ a broader range of stance devices, including modals for possibility, impersonal constructions, and hedging strategies.

This finding aligns with prior research that found less proficient L2 writers often rely on a narrow range of emphatic expressions, lacking the hedging repertoire of more advanced writers [9]. It has also been reported that stronger L2 student essays exhibit greater hedging and a more balanced stance, whereas weaker essays are marked by unmitigated assertions [14].

Interestingly, however, attitude markers did not show a clear linear trend with proficiency. Their frequency fluctuated between 5 and 7 per 1,000 words across levels, with a slight increase at B2+ followed by a decline at C1. This suggests that expressing affect or evaluation is not strictly tied to language proficiency but may be influenced by personal writing style, argumentative strategy, or task prompts. Some basic attitude markers (*important*, *good*, *bad*) are relatively easy to use, allowing lower-level students to employ them, while more subtle evaluative expressions may not be attempted at any level with great frequency.

It should be noted here that these results may suggest stance-taking evolves alongside language proficiency, reflecting both improved linguistic ability and increasing awareness of academic conventions. The fact that C1 writers still use self-mention more frequently than L1 students suggests that full convergence is unlikely, but the overall trend indicates progress toward a more conventional academic style as proficiency improves.

5. Discussion

The findings presented above offer significant insights into how interactional stance is realized in novice academic writing and how this varies according to linguistic background and proficiency level. This section interprets these results in light of existing research and discusses their theoretical and pedagogical implications.

5.1. Stance as a Pervasive Element of Student Writing

The analysis is likely to confirm to the idea that even at the undergraduate level, students actively employ stance

markers to engage with content and readers. The overall density of stance markers—approximately one in every 19 words—underscores that academic essays written by students, much like published academic genres, are inherently dialogic rather than purely objective reports. This supports the widely held view that academic writing involves an interaction between writer and reader, where the writer's voice plays a central role [25].

5.2. L1 vs. L2 Stance Styles

One of the most noticeable findings of this study is the contrast in stance-taking between British L1 and Korean L2 student writers. In line with prior research, L2 writers tended to be more explicit and forceful in their stance, while L1 writers exhibited a more nuanced and reserved style. Similar patterns have been shown in studies of L2 English academic writing, where non-native students have been found to underuse hedges and overuse first-person pronouns compared to native speakers.

The frequent use of self-mention among L2 writers reflects a complex rhetorical strategy that can enhance authorial presence but may also risk undermining academic objectivity. On one hand, it reflects a strong authorial presence, a feature that some studies have identified as a characteristic of L2 writing. On the other hand, it may lead to a style that appears less academically appropriate if overused. Previous studies argue that while first-person pronouns can signal confidence and identity, their overuse can make writing seem overly subjective or informal [18, 21, 22].

In contrast, the British L1 students' frequent use of hedging suggests an implicit or instructed understanding that strong claims should be qualified with appropriate use of hedges. Previous research on native English academic writing suggests that L1 writers develop an awareness of hedging as a rhetorical strategy to navigate uncertainty and avoid overstatement. The tendency to hedge more frequently aligns with broader academic writing norms in academic contexts, where writers are expected to acknowledge the complexity of arguments rather than making absolute claims [28].

The results also resonate with cross-cultural rhetorical differences in academic writing. Western academic discourse often emphasizes critical thinking and the careful presentation of claims, whereas some Eastern educational contexts have historically placed greater value on authoritative tone [16]. However, in this study, L2 students did not necessarily transfer Korean academic writing conventions into English; rather, their approach appears to be influenced by pedagogical factors and test preparation strategies, which often encourage explicit stance-taking. The observed patterns suggest that Korean L2 writers may be performing what they believe is expected in English argumentative writing rather than directly mirroring Korean academic conventions.

5.3. Proficiency Development in L2 Writers

The differences observed within the L2 group suggest a clear developmental trajectory in stance-taking strategies. As proficiency increases, students tend to hedge more frequently, reduce their use of self-mention, and develop a more balanced rhetorical style. By the time they reach the advanced C1 level, their stance profile approximates that of L1 writers, although some differences remain.

This progression aligns with previous studies on L2 academic writing, which have shown that lower-proficiency students rely on a limited repertoire of stance devices, often favoring direct assertions with strong modal verbs [9, 14, 15]. More proficient writers, in contrast, tend to use a broader range of hedging devices, impersonal constructions, and conditional structures, reflecting greater awareness of academic discourse conventions.

As can be seen in Example 11, comparatively lower-proficiency students frequently relied on self-mentions and boosters, producing statements such as:

Example 11: Considering my personal experience, *I strongly claim* that physical punishment should not be allowed in schools. (YELC B1)

By contrast, more advanced writers demonstrated a shift towards a more nuanced rhetorical approach, as seen in Example 12:

Example 12: If we eliminate the military service bound for men, the size of the army *would probably* shrink and there will be bigger chances that we might again fail to protect … (YELC C1)

Interestingly, attitude markers did not show a clear linear progression with proficiency. Their frequency remained relatively low across all levels, with some fluctuation. This

suggests that the use of evaluative language may be influenced more by individual style, task prompts, or argumentation strategies than by language proficiency alone.

5.4. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study highlight important implications for second language writing instruction. Given that L2 writers tend to overuse self-mentions and underuse hedging, explicit instruction on stance-taking strategies may be beneficial. Practitioners can introduce activities that encourage students to analyze academic texts, comparing direct assertions with hedged statements and discussing which style is more appropriate in different contexts [29].

A key instructional focus should be on expanding students' repertoire of stance expressions beyond basic structures such as "*I think*". Teaching alternative formulations such as "*It seems likely that*," "*There is a possibility that*," or conditionals like "*If X, then perhaps Y*" can help L2 writers adopt a more balanced academic stance.

However, it is also important not to discourage the use of self-mention entirely. While excessive reliance on "I" may weaken academic writing, appropriately placed self-mention can enhance clarity and authorial voice, particularly in argumentative essays. The goal should be to help students achieve a balanced stance—one that is confident yet appropriately qualified.

Additionally, genre awareness should be emphasized in writing instruction. Many L2 students may assume that all academic writing requires first-person assertions, but different genres impose different expectations. For example, while personal stance is often encouraged in essays, it may be less appropriate in research articles. Raising awareness of such genre-based conventions can help students become more flexible and strategic in their stance-taking [25].

6. Conclusions

This study examined how L1 and L2 student writers use stance markers in argumentative essays, highlighting differences in rhetorical strategies and developmental patterns. The results indicate that while L2 writers tend to use more explicit self-mentions and boosters, higher proficiency leads to greater hedging and a more balanced stance. These findings support previous research on academic writing development and suggest that stance-taking is a learnable skill.

The findings have pedagogical implications for second language writing instruction, especially in helping L2 learners develop a wider and more context-appropriate range of stance expressions. Raising students' awareness of the rhetorical functions of stance markers and encouraging strategic variation based on genre, audience, and purpose may support more nuanced authorial positioning in academic writing [25].

At the same time, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The analysis focused primarily on lexical stance markers, without examining the broader range of grammatical and syntactic features—such as modality, clause embedding, or nominalization—that also contribute to evaluative stance. Future research may explore how these grammatical elements interact with lexical stance markers, particularly across proficiency levels. In addition, this study was cross-sectional in design and based on exam-based essay corpora. Longitudinal or instructional studies could provide deeper insight into how stance competence develops over time and how explicit teaching of stance and engagement strategies may affect L2 academic writing. Broadening the scope to include more diverse L1 backgrounds and academic contexts would also strengthen the generalizability of the findings.

By addressing these aspects, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of interaction in academic discourse and provides practical insights for second language writing instruction.

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Data Availability Statement

The data analyzed in this study are not publicly available due to institutional restrictions and participant confi-

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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