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Research Paper

Authorial Voice and Dialogic Features in Chinese College Students Argumentative Writing: The Interface between Culture and Argument Prompts

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Abstract

The current research attempts to explore distinctive characteristics of Chinese students' argumentative writing beyond the individualist vs. collectivist dichotomous stereotype (Shi-xu, 2019) through which Chinese discourse has generally been described. In doing so, after receiving ten sessions of instruction on argumentative writing, two groups of Chinese college students (N=104) were asked to write argumentative essays on two different prompts. The essays (N=208) were analyzed to investigate (a) the manifestations of stance-taking and audience engagement (Hyland, 2005, 2012) and (b) major discursive strategies for making an argument. The results of quantitative and qualitative analyses indicated that the use of discourse markers seems to be influenced by both the enculturated mindset as well as the nature of the argument prompt. Also, it was found that certain argumentative strategies, such as appealing to the majority, adopting an indeterminate and vague stance in the face of controversial issues, using uninformative truism, and adhering to reader-responsible discourse were favored by the participants. The findings are discussed with regard to the cultural context of the study and their implications for intercultural rhetoric inquiry.

***Keywords*:** Stance; Engagement; Argumentative Writing; Eastern Cultures; Intercultural Rhetoric; Writing Prompts.

1. Introduction

Rhetoric, with its interest "in the power and choices a rhetor – a speaker or writer – brings into a situation" (Eisenhart & Johnston, 2008, p. 6), remains an important player in the discursive analysis of argumentative writing. In this tradition, to effectively advance their arguments, writers are expected to reveal their stance on a given phenomenon, on the one hand, and attempt to persuade the readers to subscribe to the expressed opinion, on the other. As noted by van Rees (2007), every argument is "an attempt to convince the audience by rational means" (p. 1455). Therefore, the balance between writers' attempts to highlight their 'presence' in the text, i.e., authorial voice/stance (Tardy, 2012, p. 37), and the dialogic interaction with the reader seems to be the key constituent of a successful argument.

Within academia, argumentative writing, as a text type employed in different (academic) genres, such as essays, articles, reviews and theses, has received a lot of attention by researchers (Babaii, et al., 2015, 2016; Lee & Deakin, 2016; Xie, et al., 2024). Argumentative writing is taught to college students around the world as an important step in their socialization to academic life. Moreover, argumentation is regarded an important intellectual skill necessary for concept formation, critical thinking and knowledge construction (Larrain, et al., 2020). Students need to learn how to use evaluative language when they express an (intellectual) attitude toward something, and deal with possible counter-arguments and criticism. They are expected to understand the delicate interplay between "taking a stance" and "negotiating alignment or non-alignment" with the audience as a "crucial aspect of interaction between individuals" (Hunston, 2011, p. 3). In fact, as Hunston (2011, p. 23) discusses, evaluating something, which is inevitable in any argument,

> [...] necessarily indicates 'where you and I stand in relation to the object' and also necessarily indicates 'where you and I stand in relation to each other'. These two aspects relate to the ideological aspect of evaluation ('where you and I stand') and the interactional aspect ('how you and I relate to each other'). (Emphasis original)

Du Bois's (2007) 'stance triangle' provides further support for the interdependence and complementarity of authorial voice and audience engagement in proper argumentation. The triangle incorporates three acts of evaluation, positioning, and alignment in the process: "in taking a stance, the stance-taker (a) evaluates an object; (b) positions a subject (usually the self); and (c) aligns with other subjects" (p. 163).

While sound argumentation is primarily considered a cognitive ability and a "key indicator of an individual's reasoning competence" (Shi, 2024, p. 2), argumentative organization and strategies do not seem to be uniform across cultures. Intercultural rhetoric, as the post-modern heir of contrastive rhetoric tenets introduced in the late 1960s (Kaplan, 1966), considers the complex ways culture may influence different modes of writing, including argumentative writing. The extent and nature of culture-informed reasoning has been a matter of controversy for decades. Regarding the characteristics of Chinese rhetoric, there is an ongoing debate among scholars. Some researchers downplay the importance of cultural traditions in Chinese writing (Liu & Furneax, 2014; Xu, et al., 2016), particularly as posited in the early days of contrastive rhetoric (Kaplan, 1966, 1987) where 'indirection' was used to characterize the Oriental rhetoric. Nevertheless, several studies argue for the effect of culture on feeling, thought, and language use in the Chinese context (Li, 2014; Liao & Chen, 2009; Liu, 2009; Mann & Cheng, 2013).

Examining the perception of American students learning Chinese as a foreign language, Liu and Du (2018) find that the learners have a difficult time understanding and appreciating Chinese rhetorical preferences. Accordingly, the difficulty is mostly due to the different ways English and Chinese rhetoric characterize convincing 'evidence' in an argument. On the other hand, Guo and Huang (2018) report a high degree of overlap between L1 and L2 (English) writing strategies employed by Chinese students, except for the use of metaphor, personification, and quotations, appearing only in their L1 writing. Such controversial findings indicate that the case of culture-bound tendencies in argumentation is far from being concluded yet. Thus, re-examining the role of cultural mindset in formulating arguments seems warranted.

Another concern of the study is investigating the influence of writing prompts on the choice of argumentative strategies and resources which seems an under-researched area. Writing prompts have been studied with regard to the cognitive load they can exert during the planning stage of argument development (Li & Wang, 2024), and the contribution of students' topic familiarity to their writing quality (He & Shi, 2012). A new line of research reveals that linguistic features of argumentative essays can be modified in accordance with the position of the prompt along personal-public continuum. According to Li and Yu (2024, p. 3), personal topics (e.g., one's preference for online learning or traditional learning) as compared to public/social topics (e.g., the banning of death penalty) can encourage different choice of argumentative verbs and level of linguistic complexity, a conclusion supported by other researchers (Atak & Saricaoglu, 2021; Li & Yao, 2023). Considering the paucity of research in this domain, it seems worthwhile to examine the potential of cultural sensitivity/neutrality of writing prompts in triggering certain discursive and rhetorical strategies used in Chinese students' argumentative writing.

To address the research gaps discussed above, the following research questions were posed in the current study:

(1) Does the nature of an argument prompt affect the frequency of authorial stance resources employed in Chinese college students' argumentative writing?

(2) Does the nature of an argument prompt affect the frequency of reader-engagement resources employed in Chinese college students' argumentative writing?

(3) Is it possible to find traces of culture-informed preferences in argumentative strategies employed by Chinese college students?

2. Literature Review

The literature on argumentative writing is quite vast and diverse. As such, it would be almost impossible to provide a comprehensible account of the different theoretical approaches to the study of argumentation and all the relevant investigations subscribing to different models in their analyses. However, attempts are made here to provide a succinct

review of the studies with a clear reference or import to the notion of stance and engagement in arguments and the influence of contextual factors, including the context of culture on the linguistic realizations of these features.

In adopting this perspective, the study was mainly inspired by Englebretson (2007). Moving beyond the textual features of stance and linking this rhetorical notion with real-world phenomena, Englebretson (2007, pp. 6-7, emphasis added) recounts key conceptual principles of stance as follows:

> (1) stance-taking occurs on three levels – stance is physical action, stance is *personal attitude/belief/evaluation*, and stance is *social morality*;
>
> (2) stance is *public*, and is perceivable, interpretable, and *available for inspection* by others;
>
> (3) stance is *interactional* in nature – it is collaboratively constructed among participants, and with respect to other stances;
>
> (4) stance is *indexical*, evoking aspects of the *broader socio-cultural framework* or physical contexts in which it occurs;
>
> (5) stance is *consequential* –i.e., taking a stance leads to real consequences for the persons or institutions involved

These features help to explain why argumentative writing is not just a matter of writing proficiency. Setting forth an argument for or against a given issue would involve social morality, responsibility, and accountability. It follows that arguing for or against different topics would require different degrees of commitment and caution, depending on the social sensitivities surrounding those topics. Such extra-textual realities are expected to affect the discursive processes employed to render the text as a written product. The context of culture and the context of situation are among these extra-textual realities whose contribution to text production has been documented in the literature.

Liu (2009), for instance, believes that cultural values influence stance-taking. Using interviews and text analysis of the argumentative writings of American and Chinese college students, she concludes that individualistic values lead American students to clearly reveal their stance at the beginning of their essays, while Chinese students, influenced by collectivism, Confucianism, and Daoism, avoid direct arguments and relegate their indirect stance to the ending of their essays. Besides, modesty and humbleness prevent Chinese students from declaring their position explicitly. In their study of Chinese students' use of argument elements, Qin and Karabacak (2010) observe that the students succeed in presenting a basic argument structure including *claim* and *evidence* but fail to incorporate *counter-arguments* and *rebuttals* in their writing. Of course, the researchers blame inadequate writing instruction for this practice and avoid linking the observed results to rhetorical preferences in the Chinese culture.

Hyland (2012) analyzes a corpus of 64 final-year undergraduate reports in a Hong Kong university, supplementing the results with focus group interviews. He compares this corpus of unprofessional writing with a corpus of published articles. He finds that students employ more instances of boosters, and lower frequencies of hedges and reader reference; a practice which tends to make the students' reports appear less interactive as compared to more professional writing. Through interviews, he concludes that students through education in a non-Anglo milieu have some conceptions about academic writing quite different from their Western teachers and counterparts. Hyland's (2012) findings are generally supported in Zeng et al. (2024) who compare the elements of authorial voice used by Chinese English-major undergraduates in timed vs. untimed argumentative writing. They find that time constraint has little effect on the frequency of voice indicators. They observe that the more secure the students feel about their stance, the less they use hedges, and display strong feelings toward the topic of argumentation.

Similarly, Lee and Deakin (2016) compare two sets of successful (A-grade) and less successful (B-grade) writing samples written by US-based Chinese ESL students with those written by advanced English native students. They report more inclusion of stance-taking markers, especially hedges, in more successful ESL and native samples; a valued feature in Anglophone academic settings. However, both ESL groups showed resistance to signaling authorial presence in their writing. It seems that more successful writers learned how to follow the norms of English academic prose better than their less successful peers but they could not yet come to terms with the concept of authorial voice. The researchers observe the trace of culture in this practice: "This reluctance may indicate Chinese ESL students' discomfort with taking on a stronger writer identity, and instead preferring to maintain an impersonal and detached writing style that may be considered safe and familiar" (Lee & Deakin, 2016, p. 32). In a way, recent research seems to provide further support for the culture-bound nature of academic non-expert argumentation.

However, Wang et al.'s (2020) study provides a new aspect to the issue by qualifying the impact of culture. Analyzing Chinese students' prepared speeches and argumentative essays, they find that each mode of presentation lends itself to different rhetorical strategies. While essays tend to employ a direct structure with the central units at the start, speeches, as written-to-be-read texts, favor an indirect organization with the main themes appearing near the end. This finding highlights the significance of Contextual Configuration in creating textual/rhetorical variations. Contextual Configuration (CC) as discussed in Systemic Functional Linguistics is conceived to be made of three elements (cf. Thompson, 2014): *Field* (what is being talked about, the topic/subject of communication), *Tenor* (the participants in the interaction, real or putative), and *Mode* (the role and the form of language used in the interaction). Wang et al (2020), in effect, demonstrated that *Mode* can produce meaningful textual variation which may modify the impact of cultural mindset.

In another study by Hong and Cao (2014), essay type (descriptive vs. argumentative) as well as L1 background (Chinese, Spanish, and Polish) were found to produce significant variations in the use of meta-discourse markers in a corpus of young learners' writing. Thus, it seems that the categorical claims about the effect of linguistic/cultural background on text production need to be modified to accommodate other effective factors. In line with this concern and informed by the researchers' experience in writing instruction, it was intended to examine the contribution of an enculturated mindset (as the context of culture), and different topics/prompts (as the *Field* feature of Contextual Configuration) to the way Chinese college students deal with stance-taking and reader-engagement in their argumentative essays.

Hyland (2005, 2012) presents a typology of resources for investigating how writers reveal their position and attempt to connect to their audience at the same time. Hyland's model has been employed in quite a number of studies on academic writing, especially on research articles (Abdi & Ahmadi, 2015; Babaii, et al., 2015, 2016; Banari, et al., 2017; Khedri & Kritsis, 2018; Mozayan, et al., 2018; and Validi, et al., 2016, to name a few). The majority of available research on stance and engagement are purely quantitative and focus on disciplinary variations. As it will be explained in the next section, Hyland's model of stance and engagement (2005, 2012) was also adopted in the current research, nonetheless, the analysis was not confined to a quantitative treatment of the data. In line with Englebretson (2007), it is believed here that a qualitative understanding of these concepts is needed to explore their inter-relatedness and their interactions with the context, especially when the writers have to take a stance about a phenomenon that challenges communal values. In a word, it was attempted to explore the peculiarities of these inter-subjective positioning devices with reference to the cultural proclivities in the context of the study. As such, this investigation was basically different from quantitative studies on interactional meta-discourse markers such as the ones by Hong and Cao (2014) or Lee and Deakin (2016) where the markers frequencies and their implications for improving ESL/EFL writing instruction were of the main concern. Besides, the present study attempted to investigate how the nature of an argument prompt (as *Field* or the subject of communication in the SFL Contextual Configuration) can modify the use of stance and engagement markers as well as the macro-strategies used in the students' argumentative writing.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants and Data

After ten sessions of instruction on writing argumentative essays, supplemented by both in-class and take-home writing tasks, a total number of 208 argumentative essays written about two prompts (104 essays on each prompt) were collected from two groups of undergraduate students at a major southeastern Chinese university. Both types of essays analyzed in the study were written in the classroom to make sure no online writing assistance was utilized during the writing process, from drafting to revision. No student reported any problem or reservation regarding fulfilling the tasks. These essays were part of the assignment for the course of academic English which is a requirement for all non-major university students in China.

The participants were second-year students studying in two different fields of humanities: education and the Chinese language. Their level of English proficiency had been checked through College Entrance Examination of China held by the Chinese Ministry of Education in which the passing grade is 90 out of 150. The students' scores ranged from 106 to 145 with the average of 124 which indicates that their proficiency level may be considered intermediate to upper-intermediate. Prior to taking the current course, these students had studied English for ten years (three years in elementary

school, six years in high school, and one year at the university). Through their previous courses, they were quite familiar with the essentials of writing as well as different written text types.

The students were asked to write about two argument prompts taken from their writing course textbook. The first prompt was chosen for its controversial nature: attitude toward DINK (Double-Income-No-Kids) families (coded as D). This topic was meant to explore how writers talk about a phenomenon that challenges the traditional collective values of the Chinese society (cf. Liu, 2005). As such, it can be considered a 'public/social' theme, as described in Li and Yu (2024). The selection was inspired by the students' diverse reactions to the subject once it was introduced in the class. In fact, the DINK life style is considered highly provocative in China as one of the students, writing about DINK, clearly states:

> (D86) DINK families have been called 'personal hedonists' by many people as their family choice *conflicts with the traditional Chinese concept of childbearing* for thousands of years.

The second prompt (Your praised Company, coded as C), however, was not so culturally challenging as no strong reaction was expressed toward this subject. The students were asked to talk about their praised corporation and discuss why they were impressed by that particular organization/company. In line with Li and Yu (2024), the topic can be considered a 'personal' opinion. Although the students were expected to set forth a convincing argument about why they admire that company, the topic was deemed relevant to one's personal taste, and potentially neutral in terms of cultural values. The students were free to choose a domestic or an international company. It is noteworthy to mention that only 21% chose to write about an international organization (22 out of 104) and the majority praised the local icons with a lot of enthusiasm. The average word count calculated for the first essay (attitude toward DINK family) was 218 and for the second essay (one's praised company) was 198. The essays were coded and numbered according to the prompt, i.e., D1 to D104 for the essays on DINK, and C1 to C104 for the essay on praised company.

3.2. Analytical Procedure

For the quantitative phase of the study, Hyland's model (2005, 2009, 2012) of *stance* and *engagement,* an oft-cited model of meta-discourse markers was adopted. The model captures both the writer-oriented and reader-oriented sides of argumentative writing. Hyland (2012) defines stance as an "essentially author-oriented" mechanism which involves "the writer's expression of personal attitudes and assessments of the status of knowledge in a text" (p. 134). Hyland (2009) defines engagement as "a writer's choice to introduce readers as real players in the discourse, rather than merely as implied observers of the discussion" (p. 112). Accordingly, stance is realized through the following discursive devices (Hyland, 2005, pp. 178-181):

> 1. Hedges are "devices like *possible, might* and *perhaps*, that indicate the writer's decision to withhold complete commitment to a proposition, allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than accredited fact. Hedges also allow writers to open a discursive space where readers can dispute their interpretations".
>
> 2. Boosters are words like "*clearly, obviously* and *demonstrate*, which allow writers to express their certainty in what they say. They function to stress shared information, group membership, and engagement".
>
> 3. Attitude markers indicate "the writer's affective, rather than epistemic, attitude to propositions, conveying surprise, agreement, importance, frustration, and so on, rather than commitment. [Attitude] is explicitly signaled by attitude verbs (e.g. *agree, prefer*), adverbs (*unfortunately, hopefully*), and adjectives (*appropriate, logical, remarkable*)".
>
> 4. Self-mentions refer to "the use of first person pronouns and possessive adjectives to present propositional, affective and interpersonal information. Personal reference is a clear indication of the perspective from which a statement should be interpreted".

Engagement, as the other side of the coin of interpersonal dimension of discourse, (Hyland, 2005, pp. 182-185) is instantiated through the following:

> (1) Interrogatives, especially rhetorical questions "encourage the reader to explore an unresolved issue with the writer as an equal, a conversational partner, sharing his or her curiosity and following where the argument leads".
>
> (2) Second person pronouns and items referring to readers are "the most explicit way that readers are brought into a discourse" and inclusive first person pronouns which are used for "binding the writer and the reader together".

(3) Directives, including imperatives, and similar devices such as obligation modals referring to actions of the reader (*must, ought, should, have to, need to*), etc. "instruct the reader to perform an action or to see things in a way determined by the writer".

(4) References to shared knowledge help the writers "[construct] readers by presupposing that they hold such beliefs, assigning to them a role in creating the argument, acknowledging their contribution [...]"

(5) Personal asides "allow writers to address readers directly by briefly interrupting the argument to offer a comment on what has been said"

The model was studied carefully by both of the researchers and several samples were jointly analyzed. Then, all the essays were read independently to detect instances of stance and engagement devices. To ensure the reliability of analysis, the results were cross-checked for cases of different coding, missed features, and disagreements over some observations. Areas of controversy were discussed to reach complete agreement.

The qualitative phase involved reading and re-reading the essays in search of some recurrent patterns of argumentation. The researchers followed the inductive, open-ended procedure proposed in the grounded theory tradition of research, "to remain open to what is actually happening" (Glaser 1978, p. 3) and to "avoid developing a confirmation bias based on either [one's] own ideas or from the perspective of earlier studies (Hadley, 2017, p. 32). This approach seems justifiable considering the sweeping generalizations about Eastern rhetorical organization and thought-pattern existing in the literature which could potentially cloud the researchers' interpretation. Consistent with the tenets of grounded theory, the analysis started with open/initial coding and resumed with focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). According to Hadley (2017) "open coding [...] means studying the data word by word and line by line, and constantly asking the question, 'What is this about?' (p. 41)". This stage resulted in a host of strategies, some of which were discarded because of very low frequency and/or idiosyncrasy. The secondary coding stage (focused coding) was needed to subsume similar codes under more encompassing labels. The procedure was helpful for achieving a more coherent understanding of the data.

4. Results and Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative findings of the study are presented and discussed in two separate sections. The excerpts marked with (D) are related to the first prompt (DINK family) and the ones with (C) belong to the second topic (praised company). The companies' brand names are replaced with XXX to avoid any promotional impact.

4.1. Quantitative Analysis: Stance and Engagement Devices

The quantitative phase involved calculating the frequency of stance and engagement markers in the essays. To make a comparison between the prompts, the obtained raw frequency of each feature was normalized by dividing its raw value by the total word count, multiplied by 1000. Table 1 provides a summary of stance-taking devices for both essays. Figure 1 depicts the differences graphically.

Table 1. *Raw and Normalized Frequency of Stance-Taking Resources*

Essay prompt	Word count	Self-mentions	Boosters	Hedges	Attitude markers
Your attitude toward DINK Family	22722	288 (12.67)	154 (6.78)	144 (6.34)	892 (39.26)
Your praised Company	20648	328 (15.88)	250 (12.11)	72 (3.49)	1172 (56.76)

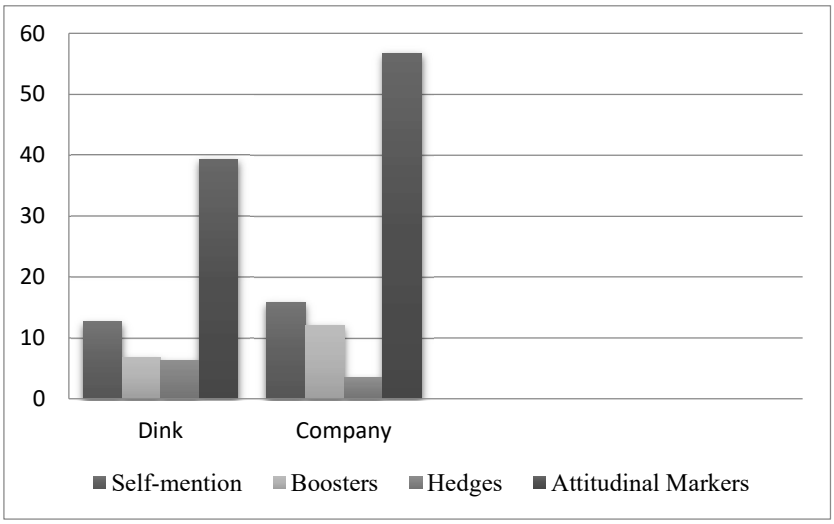


Figure 1. Frequency of Stance Resources by the Argument Prompt

As can be observed, there are notable differences both among the devices and across the essays. The result of chi-square statistical test for examining the differences among the frequencies of stance resources for each prompt is also significant (Chi-square=39.53, df=3, p<.000). Therefore, the first research question inquiring whether the nature of an argument prompt affects the frequency of authorial stance can be responded with affirmative.

Similar to previous studies on Chinese students' writing (Hyland, 2012; Lee & Deakin, 2016, Xie, et al., 2024; Zeng et al. 2024), the frequency of hedging seems low. Combined with high incidence of boosters, this makes the essays appear assertive and mono-glossic, leaving no room for uncertainty or alternative voices. In excerpts (C10), (D4), and (D18), as exemplars, the writers express their attitude as facts. Note the absence of modal verbs and other opinion-signaling devices to modify the claims. The italicized verbs make the sentences quite assertive:

(C10) XXX's success *is due* to its spirit of continuous innovation and self-improvement, as well as strong technical strength and excellent management team.

(D4) They (DINK families) *don't want* to spend time, energy and money for children, and even *don't like* children.

(D18) [...] *it is actually* a more responsible manifestation and should not be labeled as negative.

There are few cases where the claims are toned down and/or others' presence is acknowledged in the text:

(D68) *Studies show* DINK couples *tend to* be happier [...]

(C21) *In my opinion*, it is reasonable for some company to place money-making on the top of their list to survive in competitive world, but [...]

It is also noteworthy to mention that the (C) texts were even more mono-glossic due to the lower use of hedging and higher use of boosters, somehow indicating more confidence on the part of the writers in the validity of their claims. At times, the abundant use of positive adjectival and adverbial attitude markers with no hedging gives an advocative or promotional tone to the text:

(C93) XXX has created *groundbreaking* products. XXX's *commitment* to being *candid* and *clear* is *commendable*. Furthermore, XXX aims for the *highest* in *everything* they do.

On the whole, if self-mention, boosters, and attitude markers are taken as indicators of direct personal involvement with the topic and confidence in the adopted position, noticeable differences between the two prompts can be observed: 15.88 (C) vs. 12.67 (D) for self-mention; 12.11 (C) vs. 6.78 (D) for boosters; and 56.76 (C) vs. 39.26 (D) for attitude markers. It can be observed that the normalized frequencies of all these devices are remarkably higher for essay (C). These features along with low incidence of hedging [3.49 (C) vs. 6.34 (D)] imply that students felt more comfortable in expressing their attitudes, quite strongly about (C), but less so for (D). It may be argued that the reason for such drastic differences lies in the differential ways the Chinese culture looks at these topics. In (D) essays, students were

required to take position toward the DINK phenomenon that challenges traditional Chinese morality. As it will be discussed in the next section, many students could not adopt a clear stance regarding this topic and resorted to different strategies to make the text look as impersonal and factual as possible. For the essay (C), however, there was no such a predicament to deal with. The topic could even gain cultural support if a national organization and its success were mentioned. In all, the writing prompt as *Field* seems to play an influential role in choosing stance-taking discourse markers.

As can be observed in Table 2, engagement devices were used quite infrequently, with some categories, e.g., shared knowledge, and personal aside, almost negligible (cf. Zeng et al. 2024, for similar results). Figure 2 provides a graphical presentation of the use of engagement resources. Reader pronouns as the most frequent devices were used only about 10 percent. This, in toto, highly reduces the interactivity and persuasiveness of the essays. As mentioned in the interviews done by Hyland (2012), many Chinese students consider these devices too personal and informal to be employed for an academic task.

Table 2. *Raw and Normalized Frequency of Engagement Resources*

Essay prompt	Word count	Reader pronouns	Directives	Interrogatives	Shared knowledge	Personal aside
Your attitude toward DINK Family	22722	228 (10.03)	102 (4.49)	66 (2.90)	20 (0.88)	8 (0.35)
Your praised Company	20648	194 (9.39)	62 (3.01)	30 (1.45)	4 (0.19)	2 (0.09)

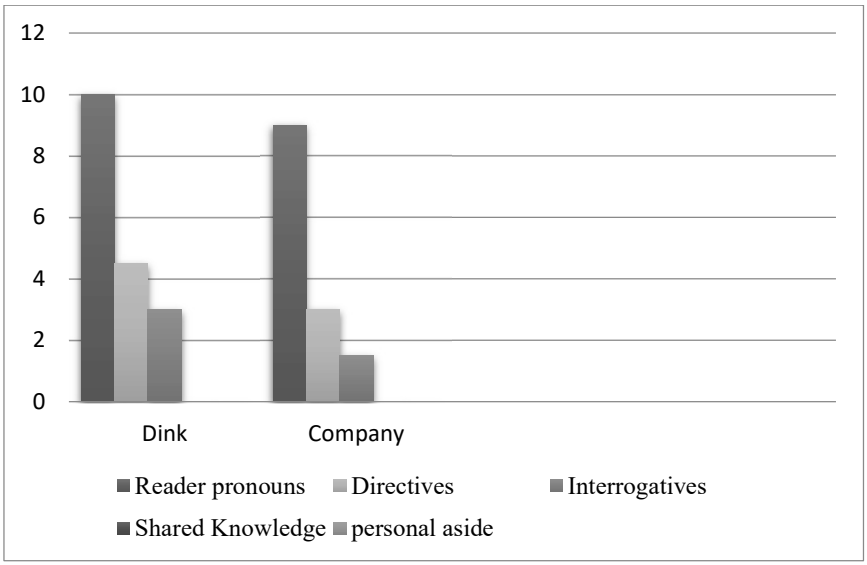


Figure 2. Frequency of Engagement Resources by the Argument Prompt

Similar to Wang et al. (2020), reader pronouns in combination with directives were mostly found in the ending sentences of the essays where a didactic tone was adopted and the writer invited the readers to think or act in a particular manner. It seems that, in this context, these devices mostly helped conclude the essay, rather than open a space to interact with the readers. In (D47) and (C101), for example, the inclusive *we* combined with *should* and *shouldn't* resemble advice provided by an authority trying to educate the reader—an observation also reported in previous research (Liu & Stapleton, 2014; You, 2010).

(D47) So *we should* respect DINK, but *we should not* support it.

(C101) As the youth of the new age, we *should be clear* about the direction of life, *keep on being good* [...]

Overall, the quantitative analysis of stance and engagement markers demonstrates the students' reluctance in toning down their claims in arguments and establishing a dialogue with their audience. Influenced by the nature of the essay prompts, the more confident the writers felt, the less they employed persuasive devices. Application of Chi-square reveals a significant difference in the frequency of using engagement devices due to the prompt characteristics (Chi-square=16.49, df=4, p<.002) leading to the DINK essays to be more interactive. The results also provide a positive response to the second research question inquiring if nature of an argument prompt affects the frequency of reader-engagement in students' writing. Moreover, it can be argued that most essays in the sample fulfill only the first act of Du Bois's (2007) stance triangle, that is, 'evaluating an object' and somehow fall short of the other two acts: 'positioning the self' and 'aligning with other subjects'. Hopefully, qualitative analysis of the data can shed some light over the deeper layers of the first act and how it is affected by the interaction between cultural background and prompt characteristics.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis

The findings of this phase are presented and discussed with respect to two features, namely, distinctive strategies used by the students for making their arguments, and the contribution of cultural values to their line of reasoning.

4.2. 1. Argumentation Strategies

4.2.1.1. Appealing to the Majority or Common Practice (Ad Populum).

Reference to a dominant trend or popularity of a practice was frequently observed in the essays. This was usually done by citing some (mostly undocumented) statistics. More often than not, the writers simply report the statistics and rarely discuss their relevance. (C13), for instance, starts by citing the number of gamers playing XXX game:

> (C13) According to the *latest figures*, the number of registered users of XXX (an online game series) has *surpassed 600 millions*.
> And he concludes that:
>
> (C13) [The company's] corporate culture shows that happiness can be simple.

But for the reader, who has not played this game, it is not clear how the game's popularity shows that simplicity is the core of the producer's success. For (C42) and (C35), the number of stores, company's valuation, and the number of users imply popularity and success:

> (C42) At present, XXX has *opened over 20000 stores* with a *corporate valuation of up to 65 billion Yuan*. (C35) [...] the monthly active users of A in the first quarter of 2023 were *1.319 billion*, and monthly active users of B were *597 million* (A and B are the products of XXX internet company).
> Or in (D50), the writer predicts that DINK will not become popular in China, implying that the majority are right:
> (D50) In china, although the scale of DINK is expanding, the average proportion of each age group is *15% to 33% lower compared to the world*. Combined with excellent culture and spiritual heritage of the Chinese nation, DINK *will not occupy a dominant position.*

In excerpt (D5), though, the writer reveals the point of argument (*This is enough to show ...*):

> (D5) The proportion of DINK families in Nordic countries has *exceeded 40%* [...]. *This is enough to show* that the DINK family is *the trend of the times.*

In short, implicitly or explicitly, appeal to the majority is a frequently-used argumentative strategy in both types of the essay. Through this strategy, the students attempted to provide fail-safe, indisputable support for their position.

4.2.1.2. Adopting Indeterminate and Vague Stance

This is a frequent strategy by which a writer avoids taking a clear stance. As an example, in this excerpt, the writer says he is just reporting some Chinese college students' attitude:

> (D42) *Chinese college students who choose DINK believe* that raising offspring is not an important part of self-development.

He quotes what others said while he himself refrains from directly taking position. Interestingly, earlier in the essay, by using the words *'bound by'*, he implicitly supports DINK:

> (D42) [...] most young people are not *bound by* the traditional concept of 'passing on the family line'.

As noted by Hyland (2005, p. 176) writers should offer and defend their stance "within a community whose members are likely to recognize only certain forms of argument as valid and effective". This means alignment with the communal values, sometimes at the expense of personal ideas and at the risk of self-censorship. Writers may pay lip service to the values advocated in their society without really supporting those values. Such a phenomenon is difficult to detect but there might be symptoms of conflict or ambivalence within the text, like (D42) mentioned above. The writers could also eschew adopting a position, leaving the reader in puzzlement as to their genuine attitude. In (D6), the writer, like an impartial mediator, talks about negative and positive aspects of DINK, and ends the essay with an indeterminate position:

(D6) [...] we believe that *people will think correctly*, make the right choices, and find a better way of life.

The (D) essays were replete with cases like this where the writers preferred to let the reader decide whether pros of DINK were more convincing or its cons. In fact, the students appeared reluctant to express their preferences regarding a topic belonging to the public domain. However, there were a few cases in the sample where clear, strong positions were taken. In (D65) and (D99), the writers explicitly adopted the opinion-holder position by using first-person pronoun:

(D65*) I do not recommend* DINK's approach.

(D99) *I believe* that being childless is an *acceptable* attitude towards life.

In (C) essays, as a topic belonging to the personal domain of preferences, the students rarely adopted a vague stance. Understandably, the writers did not worry about the readers' reaction when explaining why they were impressed by a particular enterprise.

4.2.1.3. Using Self-evident, Uninformative Truism

Using cliché and uninformative truism can be another effective strategy to conceal one's opinion. Interestingly, this strategy was only detected in (D) essays, with zero occurrences in (C) texts. In the following excerpts, it can be seen that this no-risk strategy does not make any meaningful contribution to the topic under discussion:

(D6) Everyone has the rights to pursue a happy life.

(D23) There is no doubt that a DINK family has both advantages and disadvantages.

(D31) Views on the issue varies [sic] from one person to person.

Such self-evident comments may seem open-minded and democratic but they can be signs of evasion where one is supposed to set forth an argument for or against something. That is, such statements do not help to advance and defend any particular stance simply because no stance is taken. In the sample, such statements were followed by listing pros and cons of DINK, with no clear position at the end. In effect, this strategy, similar to adopting a vague stance, helped students escape the consequences of expressing opinion about a controversial public issue.

4.2.1.4. Adhering to Reader-responsible Discourse

In the analysis, the researchers encountered a writing style that Hinds (1987) describes as 'reader-responsible'; what he believes to be the dominant rhetorical strategy in Eastern cultures. This style is said to be favored in 'High-Context' cultures (Hall, 1976; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005), where the writers present information with the tacit hope that the reader will understand its relevance to some previous propositions without signaling their link in the text. As Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005, p. 172) put it, in High-Context communication style, the listener/reader "is expected to 'read between the lines', to accurately infer the implicit intent of the verbal message, and to decode the nonverbal subtleties that accompany the verbal message" (Emphasis original). Numerous realizations of this strategy were found in the data. Quite frequently, the students simply offered some rankings of a given company without telling the reader what these ranks really meant or a lot of statistics were cited without any point of reference to help the reader understand how they could be interpreted.

As a case in point, in (C9), the writer praises a mining enterprise for its idea of 'sustainable development' and later somewhere else in the text mentions the company's attempt to 'reduce the carbon footprint' assuming that there is no need to remind the reader that the latter is in line of the former policy:

(C9) What XXX affects me most is its idea of *sustainable development*. [...] XXX will strive *to reduce the carbon footprint* of its product.

Or in an essay about a successful company, the hard life of the founder on the early days of his business is mentioned without elaborating what the reader is expected to deduce from this life story.

In the following excerpt, as another example, it seems that the writer over-presupposes the readers' shared knowledge and also their agreement with the claim she makes about a particular characteristic of her praised company:

(C69) Let's focus our attention on XXX's *logo* [...] XXX's core business spans from food delivery to ride-hailing, with which we can lead an *easy life*.

The writer does not explain how the logo is the indicator of an easy life and leaves the readers with their devices to figure it out.

The reader-responsible mindset can also explain the scarcity of connecting devices. In fact, it seems that the ubiquitous underuse of discourse markers and connectives is not because of the students' lack of familiarity with these devices as they have already received adequate relevant instructions. The reason appears to be rooted in the writers' assumptions/expectations regarding the readers' share. The logical connection among the pieces of information presented separately is presupposed. Using the discourse markers to connect the propositions probably appears superfluous according to this assumption.

4.2.2. Culture-bound Reasoning

Expressing one's 'personal' attitude may not be a completely 'personal' matter. In fact, as demonstrated by Mann and Cheng (2013), certain individual traits such as empathy and moral judgment which are deemed to operate at a personal level tend to be influenced by the communal norms. In this study, argumentative writing, at least for this sample of participants, turned out to be a good venue to present not only personal opinions and preferences but also advocate some cultural values.

One important sign of the community influence is the scarcity of diversified reasoning as subscribing to the common knowledge reduces the burden of personal search for information. For example, in essay (D), when talking about the positive points of DINK families, the majority of the students mentioned enjoying less responsibility as well as more freedom, time or money for self-development. Or, mentions were made of aging population, young labor force shortage, in addition to being lonely and not having (material) support and care in the old age as the downsides of going DINK. These pluses and minuses were repeated in more than ninety percent of the essays. There were very few cases who offered really different, personal, or counter-intuitive perspectives, like arguing that DINK could be a selfless decision not to impose life and its complications on the future children who may not want to be born, or talking about the disadvantage of not fulfilling the psychological needs of loving and taking care of another creature if you choose DINK.

As for essay (C), the researchers originally expected to encounter writings of a more personal nature; however, social orientation was also notable here. It was found that (a) most of the admired organizations were national, and (b) in addition to listing certain general yardsticks of success for an enterprise like financial success, innovation, ability to compete, and advancement, some social and moral values were emphasized, like disaster relief donation to the needy, patriotism, fighting poverty, helping at the time of national disasters, etc. Some of these points can be traced back to the Chinese moral values. Liu (2005, p. 19) speaks of five dominant communal values through which Chinese people are educated in schools: concentration and diligence, respect for authority (government leaders and elders), modesty and tolerance, collective spirit, and honesty. In line with this mentality, (C35) clearly highlights the importance of serving the society:

(C35) XXX is working hard to help *build a harmonious society*.

Of course, Liu (2005) believes that collective spirit in the Chinese culture goes beyond a common altruistic attitude that "happiness or satisfaction comes from helping or serving others in particular or society in general", and sometime it takes the form of "self-denial", and is "constructed against the 'self' and 'individuality' " (p. 24). In light of this interpretation of collective spirit, then, it is easier to appreciate the nature of reasoning in excerpts (C74) and (C43). In both of these cases, the writer is inviting the reader to define the concept of 'success', not only in terms of commercial achievement, but according to a different criterion, which is serving people:

(C74) Perhaps from a *commercial perspective*, XXX is not particularly successful, *but* [...]

(C43) XXX always pays attention to *product quality* and never puts too much effort into packaging and marketing. [...] its products have hardly changed in terms of *packaging and price*. [...] only *increased their price by 2 Yuan in 10 years*.

As noted by Huang (2000), and Hu et al. (2018), cultural changes in recent decades have created a dilemma in the minds of Chinese people and most people have tried to strike a balance between tradition and modernity. Huang (2000), while admiring the developments, voices a concern about the loss of traditions. She maintains: "regarding the 'four self(s)'--self-respect, self-confidence, self-improvement, and self-reliance-we should not focus on 'self' alone or we would become egocentric and ignore the nation, the collective, and other people" (p. 27). It is intriguing to find this concern reflected in this excerpt:

(C21) In my opinion, it is reasonable for some company to place money-making on the top of their list to survive in *competitive* world, but it is also necessary for them to have some *social responsibilities*. These are both indispensible factors for every successful company**.**

In essay (C78), the writer first narrates the story of patriotic action of a company during war time, and then explains how this selfless treatment is later rewarded by people. The use of positive evaluative language and the emphatic tone can be noted in the excerpt:

(C78) Since then, XXX has become the *patriotic enterprise*, and people in China are always *glad to pay for their products*. [...] pursuing financial interests can't be the only goal of a company. It's of great importance for the company to take *social responsibility.*

In a word, it seems that Chinese response to modernization has not been similar to Western communities (Hu et al., 2018; Yang, 1996). Attempts to reconcile the modernity-tradition tension to achieve the successful co-existence of modern life necessities and traditional values were reflected in the students' writings in our study; for DINK, they had to deal with the dilemma of respecting free choice of individuals and its long-term effect on the society, and for the company essay, they tried to find a balance between the personal right of making profits and serving the community.

Therefore, in response to the third question regarding the trace of culturally-informed preferences, it is fair to say that cultural values not only color the content but also influence the choice of argumentative strategies. However, the trace is not strong enough to support a deterministic role for cultural mindset in writing. Regarding the culture-informed content, in both essays, whether the prompt was of personal or public nature, the students made frequent references to the Chinese cultural values such as filial piety, care for the family, social harmony, and communal support. Regarding the effect of culture on argumentative strategies, the most notable case is the existence of 'reader-responsible' discourse. As discussed and exemplified in section 4.2.1.4., High-Context cultures presuppose a great deal of shared information among the interlocutors, and this assumption encourages the writers to skip explanations and leave a lot unsaid.

Other strategies used by the students in their writing, namely, appealing to the majority, adopting indeterminate and vague stance, and using self-evident truism, may be roughly taken as symptoms of belonging to what Lewis (2006) calls a 'reactive' culture with a preference for listening, tolerance and avoiding strong expression of disagreement and confrontation (cf. Liu, 2009). As mentioned before, the use of above strategies was more noticeable for the DINK essay which was related to an issue with social sensitivity. Although one needs to be very cautious in using this kind of stereotypical categorization of cultures, the observed argumentative strategies do help one to remain on the safe side and avoid direct backlash. The frequent use of these strategies indicates that the writers wished to shield themselves from negative consequences of open criticism. As such, it may be concluded that the cultural values may affect 'what' and 'how' of argumentation to a certain extent. The effect, nonetheless, is expected to be modified by myriad of factors, including personal traits of the writers and other contextual factors.

5. Conclusion

In light of the findings discussed above, it can be concluded that categorical statements about the influence of culture on the rhetorical organization of ESL/EFL writing fail to capture the variations instigated by contextual factors. That is, contextual configuration (*Field*, *Tenor*, *and Mode*) theorized in Systemic Functional Linguistics is too important to be neglected. In this investigation, it was found that variation in *Field* (what the discourse is about) alone led to

important variations in rendering an argument. It was documented that the use of stance and engagement resources differed significantly in the essays whose prompt encouraged expressing opinions toward a personal or a public topic. The nature of the prompt also triggered different types of macro-strategies in making an argument. This can have implications for a theory of intercultural rhetoric. The inflexible, one-dimensional categorization of cultures and languages should be modified to accommodate the myriad of factors affecting text production. Cultures and languages are indeed different in the way reality is perceived, analyzed, and discussed, but their differences cannot simply be explained away in terms of being direct, indirect, collectivist, or individualist. A complex and sophisticated model of intercultural rhetoric should search for more meaningful, context-informed descriptions of cultures and communication norms to capture the intricacies of intercultural communication with more theoretical adequacy.

The findings could also have implications for academic argumentative writing. As discussed before, the inadequate use of stance and engagement resources in the writing samples analyzed in this study made the essays appear less interactive and too authoritative at times. The absence of writer-reader interaction is considered undesirable when argumentative essays are to be evaluated (e.g., in IELTS writing modules, final-year reports and projects, etc.) (cf. Hyland, 2012; Zeng et al., 2024). The problem could be reasonably rectified through awareness-raising activities and challenging the mentality which considers these discourse markers as unessential and redundant.

The results of this study could be supplemented by including more writing prompts of a different nature but the analysis would not be manageable. It was also unfortunate that the researchers could not persuade the students to take part in interviews or a think-aloud procedure through which they could probably probe the writing process more closely. Hopefully, future research would shed light on the contribution of contextual configuration to the way different text types are construed in different languages.

Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest regarding the research reported in this manuscript.

Ethics Approval Statement

We hereby certify that during the course of this study no harm has been done to anyone as the participants of the investigation. Moreover, the samples written for this project were anonymized before the analysis.

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