

Metadiscourse in IELTS Writing: Teaching Implications

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Reference Data:

Pham, T. A. (2026). Metadiscourse in IELTS writing: Teaching implications. In B. Lacy, M. Swanson, & H. Yoder (Eds.), *Language S: Learning, Teaching, Assessing – JALT 50 Years – Challenges and Perspectives*. JALT. <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTPCP2025-10>

This study investigates how metadiscourse is used across three IELTS Academic Writing proficiency levels and explores the pedagogical implications of these patterns for writing instruction. Using a dataset of 60 IELTS Task 2 scripts at Band 4, Band 6, and Band 8, the study combines quantitative and qualitative analyses based on Hyland's model of metadiscourse. Quantitative results show no substantial differences in the frequency or distribution of metadiscourse markers (MMs) across adjacent band levels. However, qualitative analysis reveals clear proficiency-related differences in accuracy, complexity, and rhetorical control. Higher-band writing is characterised by flexible, context-sensitive use of metadiscourse, particularly interactional markers, while lower-band writing shows more mechanical and formulaic patterns. Drawing on these findings, the paper proposes a set of pedagogical principles and classroom practices that emphasise rhetorical purpose, stance management, and reflective use of metadiscourse in IELTS academic writing instruction.

本研究は、IELTS Academic Writing における三つの習熟度レベル (Band 4, 6, 8) におけるメタディスコース使用の特徴を分析し、その教育的示唆を検討することを目的とする。60本の Writing Task 2 答案を対象に、Hyland のメタディスコース理論に基づき量的・質的分析を行った。量的分析では、隣接するバンド間においてメタディスコース標識の頻度や分布に大きな差は見られなかった。一方、質的分析からは、正確性、複雑性、修辭的統制に明確な習熟度差が確認された。高得点バンドでは、対人的メタディスコース資源が文脈に即して柔軟に用いられていたのに対し、低得点バンドでは機械的かつ定型的な使用が目立った。これらの結果を踏まえ、本研究は修辭的目的、スタンス調整、内省的なメタディスコース活用を重視した指導原則と教室実践を提案する。

Metadiscourse plays an important role in academic writing by supporting discourse organisation, stance expression, and reader engagement, and has been closely linked to coherence and argument development in second language writing research. However, instruction in IELTS writing contexts often prioritises surface features, such as linking words and formulaic templates, which may encourage mechanical use without sufficient attention to rhetorical purpose or reader engagement. Research suggests that proficiency-related differences in metadiscourse use are not always captured by frequency-based measures, as writers across levels may use similar categories of markers but differ in how effectively they are deployed. Guided by Hyland's interaction-oriented model of metadiscourse, this study analyses IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 scripts at Band 4, Band 6, and Band 8 using quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine how differences in metadiscourse use across proficiency levels can inform principled approaches to instruction.

Literature Review

Definition of Metadiscourse

Metadiscourse can be understood as part of the broader set of linguistic resources through which texts achieve cohesion and coherence, building on foundational work on cohesion in English (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) and systemic accounts of how meaning is organised in language (Halliday, 2004). Although metadiscourse has been extensively researched, scholars have proposed different definitions reflecting varying analytical emphases. A broad definition describes metadiscourse as “discourse about discourse or communication about communication” (Vande Kopple, 1985, p. 83). Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen (1993) define metadiscourse as linguistic material that does not add propositional content but helps readers organise, interpret, and evaluate information. A more interaction-oriented definition is offered by Hyland (2019), who conceptualises metadiscourse as self-reflective expressions through which writers

negotiate meaning, express stance, and engage readers, emphasising that communication involves not only information exchange but also writer identity and audience awareness. Hyland's definition is adopted in this study because it foregrounds the writer's role in mediating meaning and aligns closely with the rhetorical demands of academic writing.

Early Models of Metadiscourse

Early models of metadiscourse focused on distinguishing organisational and interpersonal functions. Vande Kopple's (1985) framework proposed a division between textual metadiscourse, which supports the organisation and interpretation of propositional content, and interpersonal metadiscourse, which reflects writer stance and reader engagement. Crismore et al. (1993) expanded this framework by proposing a more fine-grained taxonomy that included interpretive and evaluative categories, particularly in persuasive writing.

Although this taxonomy provides richer descriptive detail, later studies have noted difficulties in operationalising certain categories consistently, especially in corpus-based and pedagogical research (Bax et al., 2019; Hyland, 2019).

Hyland's Model

In response to these challenges, Hyland proposed a streamlined and functionally clear model that distinguishes between interactive and interactional metadiscourse. Interactive markers were analysed in terms of their role in organising discourse and guiding readers through the text, while interactional markers were examined for how writers expressed stance, commitment, and engagement with readers. This framework has become one of the most widely adopted in academic writing research due to its conceptual clarity and pedagogical relevance.

Table 1
Hyland's Model of Metadiscourse

Category	Function	Examples
<i>Interactive</i>	<i>Help to guide the reader through the text</i>	
Logical connectives (Transitions)	Express relations between main clauses	In addition; but; thus; and
Frame markers	Refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages	Finally; to conclude; my purpose is
Endophoric markers	Refer to information in other parts of the text	Noted above; see Fig; in section 2
Evidentials	Refer to information from other texts	According to X; Z states
Code glosses	Elaborate propositional meanings	Namely; e.g.; such as; in other words
<i>Interactional</i>	<i>Involve the reader in the text</i>	
Hedges	Withhold commitment and open dialogue	Might; perhaps; possible; about
Emphatics (Boosters)	Emphasise certainty or close dialogue	In fact; definitely; it is clear that
Attitude markers	Express writer's attitude to proposition	Unfortunately; I agree; surprisingly
Personal markers (Self-mentions)	Explicit reference to author(s)	I; we; my; me; our
Relational markers (Engagement markers)	Explicitly build relationship with reader	Consider; note; you can see that

Note. Adapted from Hyland (2019).

This model resolves many of the classification issues found in earlier frameworks by clearly separating organisational guidance from interpersonal engagement. Importantly,

it foregrounds interactional metadiscourse as a key component of effective academic writing, highlighting how writers manage stance, credibility, and reader alignment.

Metadiscourse Use in Academic Writing

Many studies on the quantity and variety of metadiscourse in academic written texts have been conducted, often with contradictory findings. Several appear to show that the more advanced writers are, the more metadiscourse is likely to be found in their works (Hyland, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995; Lee & Deakin, 2016; Noble, 2010; Sanford, 2012; Simin & Tavangar, 2009; Tavakoli et al., 2012). These studies, however, differ considerably in scale, genre, and proficiency measure, ranging from twelve university essays rated by TOEFL scores (Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995) to 240 postgraduate theses (Hyland, 2004) and 90 essays from an academic writing course (Simin & Tavangar, 2009), which complicates direct comparison.

Studies comparing good and poor ESL essays have shown that higher-quality writing tends to demonstrate more controlled and purposeful use of MMs (Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995). In contrast, lower-proficiency writing often exhibits overuse, underuse, or misuse of discourse markers, resulting in mechanical cohesion or unclear stance (Gholami et al., 2014; Simin & Tavangar, 2009).

Bax et al. (2019) have highlighted that metadiscourse was not used more but less by more advanced test takers when normalised per 100 words. Test takers appear to use a higher number of MMs only because they are able to write longer texts. Rather than contradicting the studies cited above, Bax et al.'s findings suggest that the apparent increase reflects text length: advanced writers produce more markers in total simply because they write longer texts, whereas normalised frequencies show equal or even lower use at higher levels. As their study examined Cambridge examinations (B2 First, C1 Advanced, and C2 Proficiency) rather than IELTS, the present study explores whether a similar pattern emerges in IELTS Academic Writing. Corpus-based research suggests that proficiency-related differences in metadiscourse use are largely qualitative. Learner writers may employ similar categories of markers as more proficient writers, but differ in how these markers are combined, positioned, and integrated into argumentation (Ädel, 2006; Noble, 2010). Studies of connectives and causal relations likewise indicate developmental patterns in complexity and appropriacy rather than simple increases in frequency (Mo, 2015; van Silfhout et al., 2015).

Instructional research suggests that metadiscourse use can be improved through explicit teaching, particularly when instruction focuses on awareness and rhetorical

function rather than memorisation (Farahani & Pahlevansadegh, 2019; Tavakoli et al., 2012).

Metadiscourse and IELTS Academic Writing

A growing body of research has examined metadiscourse in IELTS writing, though most studies treat it as part of broader analyses of linguistic performance or assessment criteria rather than as a primary focus. Banerjee et al. (2007) and Cotton and Wilson (2011), for example, analysed multiple linguistic features and examiner judgements of coherence and cohesion, reporting that higher-band writing attracts less attention to overt metadiscourse such as logical connectives. Other studies have considered metadiscourse indirectly when examining task performance or instructional effects, including Ahmadi et al. (2019), Barkaoui (2016), and Farahani and Pahlevansadegh (2019).

Corpus-based research further suggests that lower-band IELTS scripts rely more heavily on explicit linking devices, whereas higher-band writing demonstrates greater rhetorical control (Kennedy & Thorp, 2007; Weir, 2014). However, these studies focus primarily on general linguistic performance rather than on metadiscourse as a distinct analytical construct. With few exceptions, most notably Yao (2014), research has not examined qualitative differences in metadiscourse use across IELTS proficiency levels. Consequently, there remains a need for studies that analyse how metadiscourse functions across band scores and translate these insights into pedagogically meaningful guidance.

Research Question

In an attempt to inform more principled approaches to metadiscourse instruction in IELTS academic writing, this study aims to answer the question: *What teaching implications emerge from an analysis of metadiscourse use in IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 across different proficiency levels?*

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design. Quantitative frequency counts of MMs were employed to provide an overview of distributional patterns across proficiency levels, while qualitative analysis was prioritised to examine

how these markers functioned in context. This design reflects a mixed-methods approach in which quantitative and qualitative data serve complementary purposes rather than equal analytical weight (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

This methodological choice is particularly appropriate for discourse-level analysis, where frequency alone may fail to capture differences in accuracy, complexity, and rhetorical control. Previous corpus-informed research has similarly highlighted the limitations of relying solely on quantitative measures when analysing proficiency-related language use (Bax et al., 2019; Owen et al., 2021).

Data

The dataset comprises 60 IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 scripts granted by Cambridge Assessment (CA), representing three proficiency levels: Band 4, Band 6, and Band 8, with 20 scripts per band. Only the researcher (as the first rater/transcriber) and the second rater/transcriber were granted the authority to access the dataset. The dataset included only the overall band score for each script, without access to individual scores for the four assessment criteria. The scripts were released under a data-protection agreement that restricts disclosure of the task prompts, the content of the scripts, and further details of the dataset; accordingly, only limited descriptive information and illustrative excerpts can be reported in this paper.

All scripts were anonymised prior to analysis. The absence of criterion-level scores meant that the analysis did not attempt to attribute specific metadiscourse features to individual rating categories. Instead, the study focused on identifying overall patterns of metadiscourse use associated with proficiency level as reflected in the holistic band score. Writing Task 2 was selected because it requires extended argumentative writing, providing sufficient textual scope for examining discourse organisation and rhetorical signalling. The scripts were treated as a small, purpose-built corpus designed to support qualitative comparison across proficiency levels rather than large-scale statistical generalisation.

Analytical Tool

A range of automated tools has been used in previous research to analyse textual and discourse-level features, including Coh-Metrix (Graesser et al., 2011; Graesser et al., 2014), AntConc (Anthony, 2013), and Text Inspector (Bax, 2012). Such tools have increasingly been applied in language testing and writing assessment research, including

studies examining proficiency, discourse complexity, and textual comparability (Bax et al., 2019; Dunlea, 2015; Owen et al., 2021; Weir, 2014).

In the present study, Text Inspector was selected as the primary analytical tool. While AntConc is widely used in corpus-based research and Coh-Metrix offers a broad range of discourse indices, Text Inspector provides a more targeted set of metrics suitable for testing-related research. It supports automated identification of MMs and allows researchers to manually review and amend results, addressing limitations associated with context-insensitive detection. Given its transparency, efficiency, and relevance to metadiscourse analysis, Text Inspector was considered the most appropriate tool for the purposes of this study (Bax et al., 2019; Text Inspector, 2026).

Analytical Framework

The analysis was guided by Hyland's metadiscourse model, which was applied in both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study. In the quantitative stage, the model was used as a classificatory framework to identify and count instances of MMs across texts, providing an overview of their distribution across proficiency levels.

In the qualitative stage, the same set of identified markers was examined in context to evaluate how they were used within sentences and across texts. Attention was given to whether MMs were deployed appropriately, accurately, and effectively to organise ideas, manage stance, and guide the reader. Through close reading and cross-band comparison, the analysis focused on how writers used metadiscourse to achieve rhetorical control rather than on how often such markers occurred.

Rater Procedure and Inter-Rater Reliability

Text Inspector was used as the analytical tool for the quantitative identification of metadiscourse markers, following established procedures (e.g., Bax et al., 2019). The dataset was analysed in batches, and automated outputs were subsequently reviewed manually. This allowed raters to amend or exclude markers where contextual interpretation indicated misclassification.

The analysis involved two raters. The first rater, the researcher, is an L1 Vietnamese teacher of English with a background in academic writing. The second rater is an L1 English speaker who holds a Master's degree in a field outside linguistics and language education, as well as a teaching qualification, and has two years of teaching experience. Both completed two training sessions based on Hyland's (2019) model and his list of

metadiscourse items (pp. 265–272), which included guided coding of a nine-script practice sample (three per band) with discussion.

Inter-rater reliability was then assessed on a pilot sample of 21 scripts (seven per band, one third of the dataset), excluding the training scripts. Raters coded independently, and the Pearson correlation between their total counts was high ($r = .941$), rising to .948 after comparison and discussion of coding decisions. Remaining disagreements, mostly involving interactional markers with fuzzy category boundaries, were resolved through consensus. For example, *I think* could be read as a hedge, an emphatic, or an attitude marker, and was coded according to the meaning the writer appeared to intend in context.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in three stages. First, individual scripts were quantitatively analysed by Text Inspector to identify the number of markers within texts. Raw counts were then normalised to frequencies per 100 words to remove the effect of text length, as higher-band candidates tend to produce longer essays (Bax et al., 2019). Second, scripts within each proficiency level were analysed to identify recurring qualitative features characteristic of each band. Finally, cross-band comparisons were conducted to examine how metadiscourse use differed across proficiency levels.

As the focus of this paper is teaching implications, quantitative frequency counts were used descriptively to contextualise qualitative findings, and greater analytical weight was placed on qualitative evidence. This approach aligns with previous research suggesting that qualitative interpretation is essential for understanding developmental differences in discourse-level language use (Owen et al., 2021).

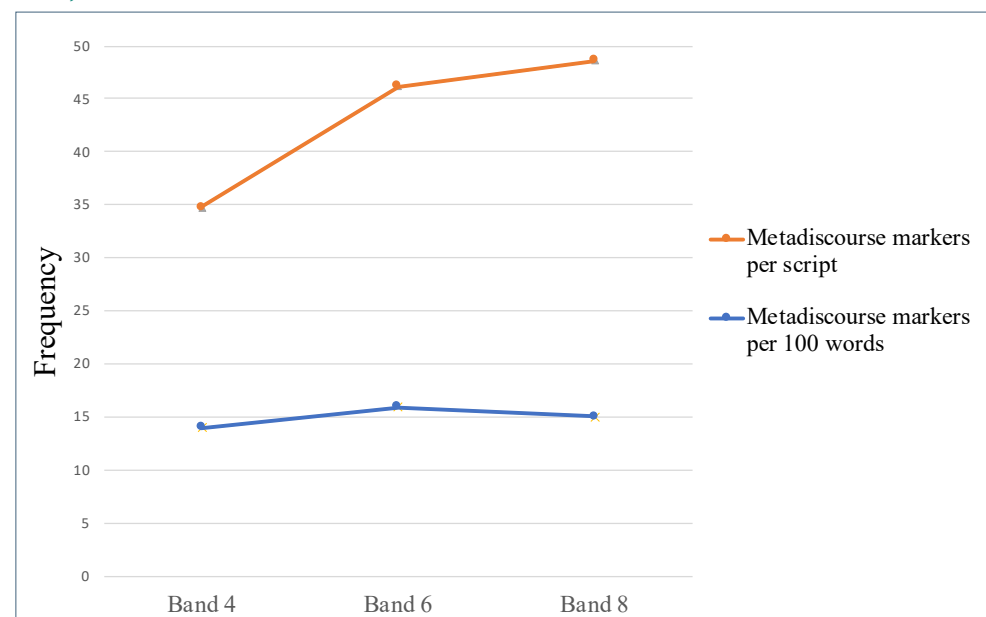
Results and Discussion

As this study's contribution lies in its teaching implications rather than in metadiscourse theory, the following section treats convergences with prior research as evidence relevant to pedagogical application rather than as a basis for theoretical argument; these applications are presented in the Teaching Implications section.

Frequency-Based Results

Figure 1

Use of MMs across the three band scores ($n = 60$)



Although the total number of markers increases with proficiency level, normalised counts per 100 words show that writers across Bands 4, 6, and 8 employ broadly comparable amounts of metadiscourse. No clear linear increase in frequency is observed across adjacent bands. Similar patterns have been reported in previous studies of assessed academic writing where higher proficiency is not consistently associated with increased use of discourse features (Burneikaitė, 2008; Owen et al., 2021). The pattern observed here is nevertheless not identical to that of Bax et al. (2019), who reported a decline in normalised frequency at higher levels. One possible explanation is the small dataset; a larger sample might reveal a different pattern.

Previous research suggests that frequency-based analyses are effective in capturing early developmental change but tend to lose sensitivity at higher proficiency levels where improvement is reflected less in quantity than in the nature of language use (Dunlea,

2015). In light of this limitation, the present findings highlight the need for further qualitative analysis.

Qualitative Results

At Band 4, metadiscourse use is characterised by heavy overuse of overt markers and frequent repetition. Writers rely extensively on a small set of highly visible connectives and formulaic expressions, often inserting them without clear rhetorical purpose. This pattern appears to be linked to limited lexical resources and instructional practices common in some educational contexts where learners are taught fixed sentence templates and encouraged to imitate model answers. As a result, students may assume that using more “advanced” linking expressions leads to higher scores, despite not fully understanding their functions. This often produces texts containing multiple high-level phrases that are semantically weak, repetitive, or poorly connected to adjacent ideas, leading to confusion rather than coherence.

At Band 6, greater control over overt MMs becomes evident, particularly with interactive markers used to organise ideas. MMs are generally used more selectively, with less repetition and fewer errors than at Band 4. However, metadiscourse use at this level remains partly mechanical. Many writers continue to rely on familiar patterns and prefabricated structures, suggesting surface-level understanding rather than fully developed rhetorical control. Interactional markers for expressing stance are limited, and attempts to use them are sometimes unsuccessful, indicating emerging but unstable control over writer positioning.

Band 8 scripts exhibit a qualitatively distinct profile. Metadiscourse is used selectively and strategically, often embedded within more complex syntactic structures rather than realised through explicit linking devices. Evaluation and stance are managed subtly, and reader engagement is achieved without heavy reliance on personal markers.

Overall qualitative findings indicate that progress from Band 4 to Band 6 involves resolving basic misuse and gaining functional control over discourse-marking strategies, whereas progression from Band 6 to Band 8 is characterised by refinement, selectivity, and increased rhetorical sophistication. These findings lend further support to pedagogical arguments that instruction should move beyond encouraging increased use of discourse markers and instead focus on developing learners’ awareness of rhetorical purpose, contextual appropriacy, and discourse-level organisation (Bax et al., 2019; Farahani & Pahlevansadegh, 2019). The implications of these findings for teaching are discussed in the following section.

Teaching Implications

Emphasising Purpose Over Frequency

One key implication is that higher-band writers do not necessarily use more metadiscourse markers but rather use them more effectively to support coherence and logical progression. Lower-band scripts frequently rely on repetitive use of simple connectives (e.g., because, and, but), often resulting in redundancy and mechanical cohesion.

Classroom Example: Editing for Purposeful Use

Students are provided with an over-linked paragraph extracted from a lower-band IELTS script, such as:

On the other hand must eat few food for keep to body because when eat too much we can’t get a sport also driving some people when eat a lot of food they can’t driving, also they can’t go to work, they can’t doing anything because they felling tried and it will become huge. (Extracted from the dataset)

Learners are asked to underline all linking words, identify inappropriate or repetitive use, and rewrite the paragraph to improve clarity and coherence. During revision, students replace redundant connectives with more purposeful markers and correct grammatical inaccuracies. This task encourages learners to evaluate the function of each marker and reinforces the principle that effective metadiscourse use involves choice and restraint rather than accumulation.

Introducing Metadiscourse Models for Classroom Use

The results also highlight the importance of explicit instruction in different types of metadiscourse. While interactive markers are often taught as linking devices, interactional markers, such as hedges, boosters, and engagement markers, are less systematically addressed despite their association with higher-band writing. Making these categories visible to learners supports a more nuanced understanding of how writers manage both textual organisation and interpersonal meaning.

Classroom Example: Metadiscourse Classification Task

Students are introduced to interactive and interactional categories through a simplified handout. Short excerpts from IELTS essays are provided, and learners work in

groups to identify and classify MMs according to their function. For example, students decide whether expressions such as “in addition,” “it could be argued,” or “you can see that” primarily guide the reader through the text or involve the reader in the argument.

As a follow-up activity, learners begin building a personal “metadiscourse bank,” recording useful expressions alongside notes on when and why they might be used. This activity encourages learners to think beyond form and to consider contextual appropriacy, supporting the qualitative finding that higher proficiency is associated with strategic rather than formulaic use.

Developing Stance and Reader Engagement

A further pedagogical implication concerns the development of stance control. Higher-band writers demonstrate greater sensitivity to degrees of certainty, selectively using hedges and boosters to position claims appropriately. In contrast, lower-band scripts often contain absolute or overly personal statements that reduce credibility and academic tone. Explicit instruction in stance helps learners align their writing more closely with expectations of academic argumentation.

Classroom Example: Hedging and Boosting Awareness

Students compare paired sentences expressing the same idea with different levels of certainty, such as:

- It seems that globalisation has both benefits and drawbacks.
- It is obvious that globalisation has both benefits and drawbacks.

Learners discuss which sentence sounds more cautious, which sounds more confident, and which is more suitable for IELTS Academic Writing Task 2. Subsequent rewrite tasks require students to soften overly strong claims (e.g., I believe globalisation is good) or strengthen excessively tentative statements. Through guided discussion, students analyse how stance choices affect tone, persuasiveness, and reader perception.

Encouraging Reflection and Self-Regulation

The findings suggest that metadiscourse instruction is most effective when learners are encouraged to reflect on their choices and engage in self-regulation. Rather than memorising fixed expressions, students benefit from developing awareness of how metadiscourse operates at the discourse level and how it contributes to reader comprehension.

Classroom Example: Metadiscourse Reflection Tasks

After revising a draft, students respond to reflection prompts such as:

- What is this metadiscourse marker doing in this paragraph?
- How does it help my reader understand my argument?

For more advanced learners, a “metadiscourse diary” can be introduced. Students record higher-level markers encountered in reading or used in their own writing and briefly reflect on their effectiveness. These activities promote metacognitive awareness while remaining manageable within typical classroom constraints.

Sequencing Instruction for Progressive Mastery

Finally, the qualitative progression observed across proficiency levels highlights the importance of sequenced instruction. Development in metadiscourse use appears to move from surface-level cohesion towards discourse-level organisation and reader engagement. Instruction should therefore be aligned with learners’ proficiency and communicative needs.

Classroom Example: Staged Metadiscourse Instruction

- **Stage 1 (A1–A2):** Combine sentences using appropriate transitions.
- **Stage 2 (A2–B1):** Insert frame markers (e.g., “to begin with,” “in conclusion”) to organise paragraphs.
- **Stage 3 (B1–B2):** Identify and revise hedges, boosters, and attitude markers in argumentative writing.
- **Stage 4 (B2–C1):** Revise drafts with explicit attention to audience awareness and reader engagement.

This progression supports learners in moving beyond mechanical cohesion towards rhetorical awareness, mirroring the developmental patterns observed in the study and addressing the qualitative differences associated with higher IELTS band performance.

Limitations

Three limitations should be noted. First, the corpus is small, consisting of the 60 scripts released by Cambridge Assessment. This restricts the strength of the frequency comparisons since a small sample is sensitive to individual variation between writers and it means that the qualitative patterns reported here should be read as indicative of

tendencies at each band rather than as representative of IELTS candidates in general. Second, the dataset included only holistic band scores. As criterion-level scores were unavailable, the analysis was conducted on the assumption that each band score, as a holistic measure, reflects the metadiscourse characteristics described in the analysis. It was therefore not possible to establish whether the patterns observed are driven specifically by the Coherence and Cohesion criterion or are also shaped by Lexical Resource and Grammatical Range and Accuracy, which limits how directly the findings can be mapped onto individual rating criteria. Third, the study examined a single task type, IELTS Writing Task 2 argumentative essays, so the findings may not generalise to other academic writing tasks or contexts. Future research could address these issues by drawing on larger and more varied script samples, by using data accompanied by criterion-level scores, and by extending the analysis to other task types and genres.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that overall frequency of MMs does not reliably distinguish higher-band IELTS writing, particularly at upper proficiency levels. Instead, qualitative differences in accuracy, selectivity, and rhetorical control provide a more meaningful account of writing development. These findings support earlier concerns about relying on surface linguistic measures alone to interpret writing quality in assessment contexts.

The pedagogical contribution of this study is to show how classroom instruction can respond directly to assessment expectations by shifting attention from the presence of discourse markers to their rhetorical effectiveness in supporting coherence and argument development. In this way, the paper bridges research on metadiscourse with classroom practice, offering an approach that aligns more closely with the qualitative features associated with higher-band IELTS writing.

Bio Data

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the British Council and Cambridge Assessment for their support during the conduct of this study and for providing access to the IELTS Writing Task 2 dataset used in the research.

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