Developmental Patterns in Persuasive Writing: A Study of Upper Primary ESL Students.

[1]**Kriti Nigam,** [2]**Dr. Anil Sehrawat**

[1]Research Scholar Amity Institute of English Studies &Research, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Noida

Kriti.nigam@s.amity.edu Contact details: 98113306021

[2]Head & Deputy Director Amity Institute of Corporate Communication, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Noida

asehrawat@amity.edu

Abstract - The ability to write persuasively in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms necessitates the incorporation of rhetorical elements, including goal announcement, stage labelling, person markers, and sequencing (Hyland, 2004). This research investigates the persuasive writing techniques employed by upper primary ESL learners, utilizing a coding framework (Swales, 1990) to analyse 22 texts produced by students. This study examines the intricacies of ESL writing, focusing on persuasive writing and the application of rhetorical structures. Through discourse analysis, we explore the significance of goal announcement and sequencing in the context of upper primary education, highlighting their impact on writing development. The results demonstrate that sequencing emerges as the predominant rhetorical feature utilized, while goal announcement and stage labelling are observed to occur with irregularity. This research elucidates the developmental trajectories associated with persuasive writing, identifying specific domains in which students necessitate further assistance. The findings present significant pedagogical implications for the advancement of persuasive writing instruction within ESL contexts (Gibbons, 2015). The findings indicate that the deliberate instruction of rhetorical frameworks, combined with scaffolded teaching methods, can markedly enhance the capacity of ESL learners to formulate persuasive arguments with efficacy.

Keywords: ESL Writing, Persuasive Writing, Upper Primary Education, Writing Development

1. Introduction

Persuasive writing is a fundamental skill that allows students to structure arguments, express viewpoints, and engage with audiences effectively. In academic and real-world contexts, strong persuasive writing enables critical thinking and logical reasoning, essential for participation in civic, social, and professional domains (Flowerdew & Wan, 2010; Hyland, 2004). For English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, mastering persuasive writing is particularly crucial as it strengthens language proficiency and argumentation strategies simultaneously (Gibbons, 2009).

Despite its importance, ESL students frequently struggle with the conventions of persuasive discourse. Research indicates that these learners face challenges in constructing coherent arguments due to linguistic limitations, unfamiliarity with rhetorical structures, and cognitive processing difficulties in writing (Bacha, 2010; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Effective persuasive writing requires the ability to articulate clear goals, label argumentative stages, employ person markers for authorial presence, and ensure logical sequencing (Swales, 1990; Derewianka, 2011). However, the extent to which upper primary ESL students integrate these elements in their writing remains an area requiring further empirical exploration. By identifying these patterns, this study contributes to the understanding of how young ESL learners develop persuasive writing skills and informs pedagogical strategies that can enhance their rhetorical proficiency.
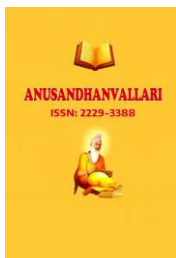
Persuasion in writing is rooted in classical rhetoric, particularly Aristotle's framework of ethos (credibility), pathos (emotional appeal), and logos (logical reasoning), which provides a foundation for argument construction (Kennedy, 2007). In modern academic contexts, persuasive writing is viewed through a genre-based lens, where rhetorical structures and audience awareness play a central role (Hyland, 2004).

Swales' (1990) genre analysis framework highlights the significance of discourse moves in shaping persuasive arguments, emphasizing the importance of goal announcements, stage labelling, and logical sequencing in text coherence. Additionally, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides insights into how language choices shape meaning in persuasive texts, underscoring the need for explicit instruction in argumentative structures (Martin & Rose, 2008).

Writing development among ESL learners is widely acknowledged as a complex process influenced by cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural factors (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Research suggests that novice ESL writers often struggle with structural and organizational aspects of writing, leading to linear argumentation with limited rhetorical depth (Flowerdew, 2015).

Graham and Perin (2007) highlight the role of metacognitive strategies in enhancing writing proficiency, arguing that explicit instruction in planning, drafting, and revising improves argumentative coherence. Similarly, Derewianka (2011) emphasizes the significance of scaffolding techniques, where students progress from guided practice to independent construction of persuasive texts. These instructional strategies are particularly crucial for ESL learners, who may require additional support in organizing arguments and employing rhetorical conventions effectively.

Effective persuasive writing relies on the strategic use of rhetorical devices, including goal announcements, stage labelling, person markers, and sequencing. Prior research indicates that ESL learners underutilize explicit goal announcements, leading to weaker argumentative clarity (Chen & Foley, 2016). Additionally, stage labelling, which helps structure arguments and guide readers through the text, is often inconsistently applied by ESL students (Swales, 1990).

Person markers, which establish authorial presence, are another key feature in persuasive writing. However, research suggests that ESL learners may be hesitant to assert personal viewpoints due to cultural differences in self-representation in academic discourse (Hyland, 2002). This reluctance can impact the effectiveness of their arguments, as a strong authorial voice is critical in persuasive writing.

Empirical studies on discourse analysis underscore the importance of specific structural features in argumentation. Goal announcements signal the writer's intent, enhancing clarity and focus in persuasive texts (Flowerdew & Wan, 2010). Stage labelling improves text cohesion by explicitly marking different sections of an argument, yet research suggests that ESL learners often omit these markers, resulting in fragmented discourse (Bacha, 2010).

Sequencing is another critical element, ensuring logical progression between ideas. While advanced ESL writers demonstrate proficiency in logical sequencing, they often lack explicit transitions between argument stages, leading to abrupt shifts in reasoning (Hyland, 2004). Additionally, person markers play a crucial role in positioning the writer within the argument, yet ESL learners frequently use them inconsistently, affecting the overall persuasiveness of their texts (Chen & Foley, 2016).

Instructional approaches to ESL persuasive writing emphasize the importance of genre-based teaching and metacognitive strategies. Genre-based pedagogies encourage students to analyse model texts, identify rhetorical structures, and apply them in their own writing (Derewianka, 2011). Research indicates that peer feedback and graphic organizers can significantly improve students' ability to structure arguments effectively (Gibbons, 2009).

Explicit instruction in rhetorical moves such as using sentence starters for goal announcements has been shown to enhance students' confidence in constructing persuasive texts (Graham & Perin, 2007). Additionally, the

integration of discourse-based feedback can help students refine their use of rhetorical features, fostering greater coherence and persuasiveness in their writing (Hyland, 2019).

2. Significance of the Study

Despite extensive research on ESL writing, several gaps remain in understanding how young learners develop rhetorical strategies in persuasive writing. Most studies focus on secondary or tertiary-level ESL students, leaving limited empirical evidence on upper primary students' writing patterns. Additionally, much of the existing research centres on grammatical accuracy and lexical development, often overlooking the role of discourse-level features such as goal announcements and stage labelling.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by providing empirical insights into the use of rhetorical structures in upper primary ESL students' persuasive writing. By analysing authentic student texts, this research extends existing genre-based frameworks and offers pedagogical implications for enhancing rhetorical awareness in ESL instruction. The findings will inform educators on targeted scaffolding strategies, supporting young ESL learners in developing more structured and persuasive arguments.

This study aims to analyse the developmental patterns in persuasive writing among upper primary ESL students by examining their use of four rhetorical structures: goal announcement, stage labelling, person markers, and sequencing. Through a discourse analysis of student texts, this research seeks to address the following questions:

- To what extent do upper primary ESL students utilize goal announcements in their persuasive writing?
- How effectively do they label argumentative stages within their texts?
- What role do person markers play in their persuasive discourse?
- How consistently do they use sequencing to organize their arguments logically?

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, employing discourse analysis to examine the rhetorical structures used in persuasive writing by upper primary ESL students. The methodology is structured as follows:

The 22 participants in this study consist of upper primary ESL students enrolled in a specific educational setting. To maintain ethical integrity and participant anonymity, all identifying details have been omitted. The selection criteria included students with diverse language proficiency levels to ensure a representative sample of ESL writing development.

Persuasive writing samples were collected as part of routine classroom activities, ensuring authenticity in the students' natural writing processes. The texts were sourced from formative assessments, with no external intervention in content creation to preserve the ecological validity of the data (Hyland, 2004).

3.1. Research Objectives

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of persuasive writing development among ESL learners. The objective is to analyse the extent to which upper primary ESL students incorporate goal announcements, stage labelling, person markers, and sequencing in their persuasive writing. Further, this study identifies recurring patterns, strengths, and gaps in students' rhetorical structuring. The research provides insights into the developmental trajectory of persuasive writing in ESL learners, informing pedagogical strategies for enhancing argumentation skills.

Through these objectives, the study seeks to bridge the gap between ESL writing instruction and students' actual writing practices, offering empirical evidence to support more effective curriculum design and instructional interventions.

3.2. Coding Scheme

The analysis focused on four key rhetorical features that contribute to effective persuasive writing (Derewianka, 2011; Swales, 1990):

- **Goal Announcement** – Explicit statements outlining the argument's purpose and intended direction.
- **Stage Labelling** – Transitional markers that signal different sections of the argument.
- **Person Markers** – The use of personal pronouns to establish authorial presence.
- **Sequencing** – The logical organization of ideas to maintain coherence and argument flow.

Each feature was coded systematically using an adapted framework based on genre analysis (Martin & Rose, 2008). The presence, frequency, and patterns of these rhetorical elements were recorded across all student texts.

3.3. Inter-Rater Reliability

To enhance the reliability of the coding process, an independent researcher cross-verified the analysis. The inter-rater agreement was calculated using Cohen's kappa, ensuring a statistically reliable measure of consistency (McHugh, 2012).

3.4. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research guidelines as outlined by the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2011). Parental consent and student assent were obtained prior to data collection. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and pseudonyms were assigned to all student work.

4. Data Analysis

This section presents the analysis of student-generated persuasive writing samples through coded discourse features. The findings provide insights into how upper primary ESL learners integrate rhetorical structures in persuasive texts, particularly in relation to goal announcements, stage labelling, person markers, and sequencing. The analysis employs descriptive statistics, visualization through tables and graphs, and an examination of patterns, trends, and anomalies, including an outlier case of 22.

The analysis of persuasive writing samples from 22 upper primary ESL students provides insights into the extent to which rhetorical structures are incorporated into their compositions. The data were coded according to four key features: goal announcement, stage labelling, person markers, and sequencing. This section presents a systematic examination of these features, their distribution across student texts, and their implications for writing development.

### 4.1. Frequency of Rhetorical Structures in Student Writing

A quantitative coding of the student texts revealed variations in the usage of rhetorical structures. Table 1 summarizes the frequency distribution of each feature across the dataset.

Table 1: *Frequency of Rhetorical Features in Persuasive Writing Samples*

Rhetorical Feature	Total Occurrences	Most Frequent User	Least Frequent Users
Goal Announcement	10	Student 16 (3 instances)	Multiple (0 instances)
Stage Labelling	1	Student 16 (1 instance)	Majority (0 instances)
Person Markers	5	Student 16 (2 instances)	Multiple (0 instances)
Sequencing	24	Student 16 (4 instances)	Multiple (0 instances)

A visual representation of the distribution is provided in Table 1, illustrating the dominance of sequencing and the limited use of other rhetorical features.

Graph 1: *Distribution of Rhetorical Features in Student Writing*
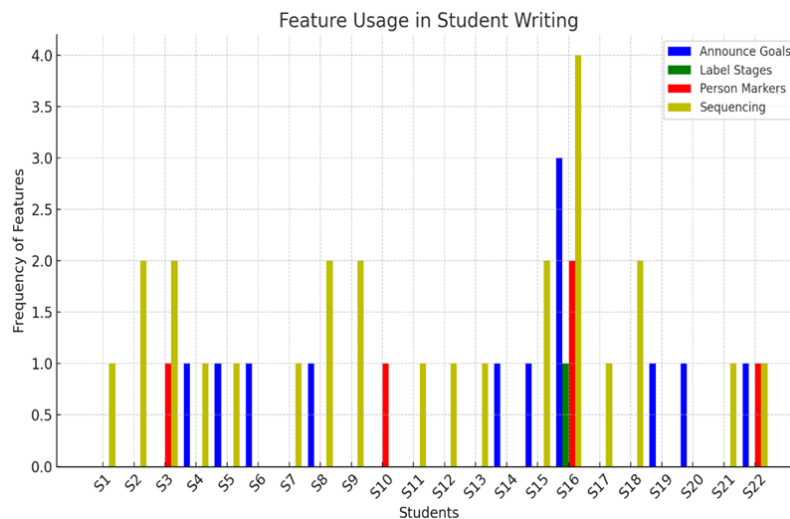
Findings

The bar chart above illustrates the frequency of various coded features used by individual students in their writing. Key observations include:

- Student 16 is a clear outlier, exhibiting significantly higher use of all coded features compared to peers.
- Announce Goals was used by several students, but Student 16 stands out with a much higher frequency.
- Sequencing was the most common feature used across students, with some variation in its application.
- Label Stages was the least used feature, appearing only once in the entire dataset.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics of Coded Data

A total of 22 student texts were analysed, focusing on four key coded features. Table 1 provides a summary of feature frequency across all texts.

Table 2: *Frequency of Coded Features in Student Writing*

Feature	Frequency (Total)	Percentage (%)
Announce Goals	10	45.45%
Label Stages	1	4.55%
Person Markers	4	18.18%
Sequencing (Sum)	24	N/A

Graph 2: *Distribution of Sequencing Scores*

Distribution of Sequencing Scores
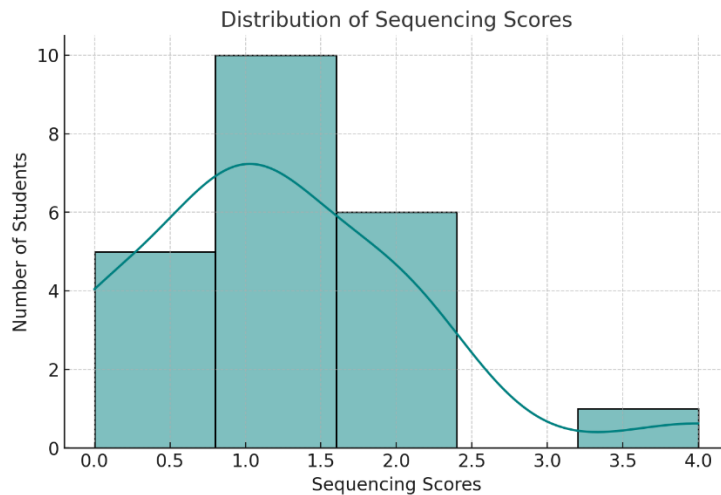
Findings

- **Goal announcements** appeared in nearly half (45.45%) of student texts, indicating an emerging awareness of persuasive structuring.

- **Stage labelling** was notably rare (4.55%), suggesting that students struggle with explicit textual organization.

- **Person markers** were present in only 18.18% of cases, reflecting a potential reluctance or unfamiliarity with establishing authorial presence.

- **Sequencing**, essential for logical flow, had the highest frequency (24 instances), highlighting a preference for linear structuring.

### 4.3. Presentation of Findings in Tables and Graphs

A student-wise breakdown of feature usage is presented in Table 2, highlighting individual variation in rhetorical structuring.

Table 3: *Individual Student Coding Data*

Student ID	Announce Goals	Label Stages	Person Markers	Sequencing
S1	0	0	0	1
S2	0	0	0	2
S3	0	0	1	2
S4	1	0	0	1
S5	1	0	0	1
S6	1	0	0	0
S7	0	0	0	1
S8	1	0	0	2
S9	0	0	0	2
S10	0	0	1	0
S11	0	0	0	1
S12	0	0	0	1

S13	0	0	0	1
S14	1	0	0	0
S15	1	0	0	2
S16	3	1	2	4
S17	0	0	0	1
S18	0	0	0	2
S19	1	0	0	0
S20	1	0	0	0
S21	0	0	0	1
S22	1	0	1	1

Graph 3: *Percentage of Students Using Each Coded Feature*
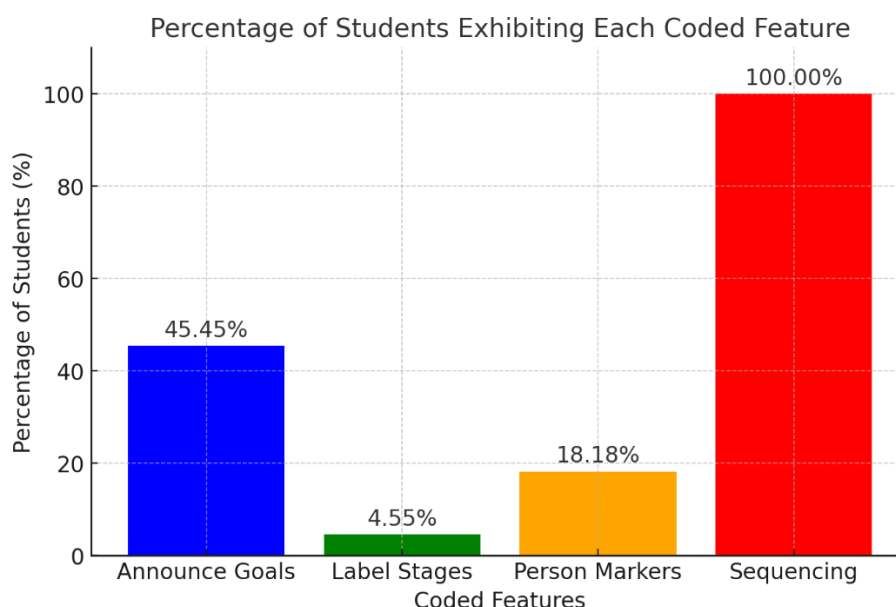
5. Discussion

The most notable finding in this study is the obvious preference for sequencing with 24 instances, while other rhetorical features were only used sparingly: goal announcements (10 instances), person markers (5 instances), and stage labelling (1 instance). This confirms Hyland's (2004) observation that ESL students tend to place high importance on linear organization while dismissing more advanced rhetorical intricacies. Sequencing appears to be crucial for students in relation to the basic understanding of how to organize their arguments logically, potentially in recognition of linear ordering being the dominant focus during their earlier education in writing (Graham & Perin, 2007).

However, while students appear competent in organizing their arguments in sequence, limited use of explicit transition markers between argument stages hampers text coherence. Flowerdew and Wan (2010) write that ESL students would be aware of basic criteria for ordering, but would struggle to create cohesive links from one paragraph to the next. This finding indicates the necessity for explicit teaching of transitional devices that will help build strong connections between sequenced ideas, from the simplest chronological markers to more complicated rhetorical transitions.

The moderate presence of goal announcements (45.45% of texts) suggests the nascent awareness being built around the need to clarify argumentative purpose. However, inconsistencies in its application reveal that for many students this element of persuasive writing has not yet become part of their core teaching. This finding is similar to that noted by Chen and Foley (2016), stating that ESL learners tend to underutilize explicit goal statements, which leads to a loss of argumentative clarity. The inconsistent use of goal announcements might also suggest a spectrum of metacognitive awareness amongst students, with some being conscious of the need to signal their argumentative intentions while others simply plunge into content without providing context.

With more than half of the samples showing the absence of goal announcements, it can be argued that students may not have received direct training in effectively introducing and framing their arguments. As raised by Derewianka (2011), goal announcing is a complex metacognitive skill that requires attention to audience needs and argument structure. This suggests the need for specific instruction in opening strategies that clarify the writer's purpose and direction. The rather troubling finding concerns the almost total absence of stage labelling, of which there is but one instance across the 22 texts available for study. Such a gross underutilization implies that students have probably not acquired the ability to signpost the various stages of their argumentation explicitly. Stage labelling is an important navigational mechanism for readers, rendering complex arguments much clearer and accessible (Swales, 1990). By not referring to stage dependency, these texts work against cohesion and hence the persuasiveness of an otherwise coherent argument.

This finding corresponds with Bacha's (2010) observation that ESL learners do not often state explicit discourse markers, which create a fragmented argumentative structure. The instance of stage labelling from Student 16, however, the outlier in overall rhetorical awareness, only encourages the conclusion that this skill might lie very much in the advanced range of persuasive writing development, one that most upper primary ESL students have not yet achieved without explicit instruction and scaffolding.

The limited prevalence of person markers (18.18% of texts) shows a reluctance or alienation from authorial presence in persuasive writing. This accords with Hyland's (2002) findings that, due to cultural differences in self-representation in academic discourse, ESL writers often avoid asserting their personal viewpoints. Little first-person pronoun and disguises to establish writer identity consumption let presume that students picture persuasive writing to be impersonal or doubtful on presenting their views authoritatively.

This trend reflects the wider struggle of acquiring a persuasive voice most probably for ESL writers who might be simultaneously traversing linguistic constraints and rhetorical conventions. The cultural dimensions of this finding deserve consideration as different educational traditions will differ in the emphasis on personal voice versus objective presentation (Flowerdew, 2015). Instructional practices need to be culturally informed while gradually allowing comfort with appropriate authorial presence in persuasive contexts.

Student 16 stands out as a significant outlier in the data set, exhibiting greater facilities than the others on all rhetorical features. This student included three goal announcements, the only occurrence of stage labelling, two person markers, and four sequencing elements. Such a remarkable performance opens up several avenues for understanding the developmental pathway in persuasive writing, namely, that some can achieve an integrated mastery of several rhetorical strategies even in the upper primary years.

On the one hand, the success of Student 16 raises several questions regarding individual patterns in rhetorical development; this outlier case may indicate an exceptionally high degree of language proficiency on the part of Student 16 or greater exposure to model texts or possibly a more developed metacognitive awareness regarding the application of rhetorical strategies. A plausible alternative is that this child has received explicit instruction in rhetorical strategies that the other students did not. In identifying those factors behind the success of this student, the hope is that it will provide some guidance in developing an intervention to assist others toward matching rhetorical sophistication.

The implications for ESL writing instruction are considerable. The fact that rhetorical features are developing unevenly hints that whatever is being taught now is not tackling all the frontiers of persuasive writing. The prominence of sequencing would imply that fairly basic skills to do with organization are receiving classroom attention, while more sophisticated rhetorical moves need direct instruction and scaffolding.

Genre-based teaching orientations proposed by Derewianka (2011) and Martin and Rose (2008) provide potential frameworks that would certainly help fill these gaps. Analysing model texts that make explicit use of goal announcements, stage labelling, and person markers would further heighten students' awareness of these rhetorical conventions. The incorporation of sentence starters, graphic organizers, and guided writing activities into scaffolded opportunities for practice would also support students in integrating these features into their persuasive texts.

Highlighting the consequence of differentiated teaching proceeds further in that students like Student 16 may indeed be prepared to handle further advanced rhetorical aspirations while others need more support with the basics. A gradual approach to the teaching of persuasive writing following the natural growth path indicated in these findings may range from the easier element of sequencing to the harder elements of goal announcements, followed by the more complex art of stage labelling and person markers.

6. Conclusion

As this study aimed to show, it threw much light on the rhetorical patterns upper primary ESL students use in persuasive writing. These findings have shown more preference for sequencing than the accompaniment of a variety of more sophisticated rhetorical features, as seen from the moderate use of goal announcements, minimal use of person markers, and a near-absence of stage labelling. Such patterns indicated that a basic trajectory emerged where lower levels of organization would precede higher levels of rhetorical awareness. Student 16 exceptionality in performance across all categories shows that by proper scaffolding, mastery can be attained at this level.

Thus, findings from this study can describe and intervene, with particular reference to goal announcement, stage labelling, and authorial presence needing specific instruction. Pedagogical approaches should include, for instance, genre analysis, model texts, and scaffolded writing exercises that will gradually enhance the students' rhetorical repertoire. Future research should address the development of the targeted interventions and the investigation of culture- and language-based differences along which explanations of rhetorical choices are made in ESL contexts. The best way that will help ESL learners in achievement regarding this important persuasive writing skill in academia and a wide array of discourse communities is by highlighting these missing elements.

References

[1] Bacha, N. N. (2010). Teaching the academic argument in a university EFL environment. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 9*(3), 229–241. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2010.05.001

[2] Chen, J., & Foley, J. A. (2016). The role of explicit teaching in developing rhetorical awareness in L2 writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 32*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2016.03.001

[3] Chen, Y., & Foley, J. A. (2016). Formative assessment and scaffolding in persuasive writing. *Language Teaching Research, 20*(5), 618-641.

[4] Chen, Y., & Foley, J. A. (2016). Investigating the structure of persuasive writing in ESL learners. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 32*, 25-38.

[5] Derewianka, B. (2011). *A new grammar companion for teachers.* PETAA.

[6] Flowerdew, J. (2015). Discourse in academic writing. *Applied Linguistics, 36*(2), 89-105.

[7] Flowerdew, J. (2015). Discourse in English language education. *Routledge.*

[8] Flowerdew, J., & Wan, A. (2010). Genre analysis of tax computation letters: How and why tax accountants write the way they do. *English for Specific Purposes, 29*(2), 68–82. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2009.12.001

[9] Flowerdew, J., & Wan, A. (2010). The linguistic and cognitive processes of professional legal writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 19*(3), 151-164.

[10] Gibbons, P. (2009). *English learners, academic literacy, and thinking: Learning in the challenge zone.* Heinemann.

[11] Grabe, W., & Kaplan, R. B. (1996). *Theory and practice of writing: An applied linguistic perspective*. Routledge.

[12] Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). A meta-analysis of writing instruction for adolescent students. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 99*(3), 445-476.

[13] Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). A meta-analysis of writing instruction for adolescent students. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 99*(3), 445–476. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.99.3.445

[14] Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing. *Carnegie Corporation of New York*.

[15] Hyland, K. (2002). Authority and invisibility: Authorial identity in academic writing. *Journal of Pragmatics, 34*(8), 1091–1112. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(02)00035-8

[16] Hyland, K. (2004). *Genre and second language writing.* University of Michigan Press.

[17] Hyland, K. (2018). Metadiscourse: Exploring interaction in writing. *Bloomsbury Academic.*

[18] Hyland, K. (2019). Second language writing. *Cambridge Applied Linguistics*.

[19] Kennedy, G. A. (2007). *Aristotle on rhetoric: A theory of civic discourse* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

[20] Martin, J. R., & Rose, D. (2008). *Genre relations: Mapping culture*. Equinox.

[21] Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings.* Cambridge University Press.

[22] Toulmin, S. (1958). *The uses of argument.* Cambridge University Press.