EFL Students' Engagement with Readers in Expository Writing: Contribution of Gender and Proficiency Level

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Article info	Abstract
	The present mixed-methods conversion-design study applied the engagement framework of the appraisal theory to disclose whether EFL students' gender and proficiency level have any effect on their use of engagement resources in their expository texts. To this end, through a convenience sampling procedure, 60 expository essays written by both male (N=30) and female (N=30) students of a language institute across three different proficiency levels (basic, intermediate, and advanced) were gathered and analyzed. Results of the chi-square test revealed that although generally, all students preferred to use more heteroglossic statements than monoglossic ones, the distribution of heteroglossic resources was significantly different in the essays of the three levels. Disclaim resources were dominantly used in the essays of all levels; however, more proficient students tended to use more Expand resources to leave room for opposing viewpoints while Attribute and Proclaim resources were considerably neglected in their writings. Additionally, no meaningful association was noted between the students' gender and their use of engagement resources. However, all types of resources were more frequent in male students' essays except for Proclaim. Based on the findings, this study provided insights into the need for incorporating engagement resources in writing instruction in order to help students construct a well-argued text to be able to communicate their viewpoints more efficiently. ***Keywords*:** Appraisal Theory, Engagement Resources, Expository Writing, Gender, Interpersonal Meaning, Proficiency Level

1. Introduction

L2 (second/foreign language) writing is no longer viewed as merely a task of producing accurate grammatical sentences, but as a social act in which communication between the writer and the reader is considerably important (Abdi & Ahmadi, 2015; Khatibi & Esfandiari, 2021; Lau et al., 2021). There is a general consensus that writing provides an interactional platform through which the writer can communicate with the target audience (Thompson & Muntigl, 2008). This interactional and social aspect of the writing skill is reflected in the theory of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday (2004), which views language as functional rather than formal. In other words, Halliday believes that language is used to serve a function, fulfill particular purposes, and be a practical means rather than an abstract set of rules and relations. SFL, as Schleppegrell (2004) pointed out, provides a theoretical link between language and context helping teachers and students understand the functional value of linguistic devices while clarifying different kinds of meanings that these devices construe.

One of the major categories of SFL is interpersonal meaning which is concerned with the relationships between participants, not only in spoken but also in written discourse. It discusses "how writers/speakers approve and disapprove, enthuse and abhor, align and disalign, applaud and criticize" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 1) their audience. By analyzing interpersonal meaning in written texts, one can gain insights into how writers place themselves and construct their relationships with their readers through different word choices. In doing so, Martin and White (2005) further elaborated on the interpersonal meaning under the framework of appraisal theory, which widely explains the role of lexical words employed by the writer in making meaning (Oteíza, 2017). In other words, this theory explicitly describes the forms of language used in communicating opinion and emotion by focusing on evaluative resources that writers choose to negotiate their ideas, and reveal their judgment and stance on an issue (Stewart, 2015). It divides the interpersonal meanings into three semantic domains: attitude (writers' use of lexical resources to show their feelings, emotions, and judgments towards other people or phenomena), graduation (the intensity and strength of an utterance with which opinions and feelings are expressed), and engagement (how writers express their propositions, and the extent to which the writer acknowledges other existing voices or alternative viewpoints when presenting an argument).

Knowing the engagement resources, as Mitchell et al. (2016) stated, allows writers to strategically incorporate their own perspectives in relation to those of others, which is vital in developing and establishing a better argument in writing (Pankova, 2014). In a similar vein, Yuliana and Gandana (2018, p.

2) also believe that good writing requires the writer to "present a clear position and show engagement with a range of ideas to support it". Hence, it is highly important for writers to be able to express and communicate their viewpoints and engage their readers with their text, which can be achieved through careful use of engagement resources.

There is a wealth of studies focusing on the use of engagement resources in students' writings (e.g., Cunningham, 2019; Garrido, 2017; Lau et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2016), among which there are some researchers who have taken the effect of students' writing scores into consideration (e.g., Miller et al., 2014; Warsono, & Widhiyanto, 2019; Wu, 2007; Yuliana & Gandana, 2018). However, the effect of overall language proficiency on using these resources has remained almost untouched. Furthermore, research in this field has mainly been confined to academic writing in university contexts. Tellingly, university students could enjoy more writing experience because of their previous exposure to L2 writing at schools or institutes. Thus, studies at pre-university levels specifically among pre-intermediate students have received rather limited research attention. Notably, the relative paucity of investigative work on texts written by lower-level and less-experienced EFL learners does not diminish the importance of uncovering such students' interpersonal literacy and their familiarity with the engagement resources in their texts (Wu, 2007).

Besides, another unexplored area is the possible association between the students' gender and their use of engagement resources in their writings. Although gender differences have been the focus of many studies related to students' writing (Alotaibi, 2016; Clarke, 2006; Lee, 2014; Martínez, 2018; Williams & Takaku, 2011), to the best of the present researchers' knowledge, no study has taken gender into account as a factor that might potentially affect students' use of engagement resources in their writings. Very few studies have examined the effect of gender on using Attitude and Graduation resources as major aspects of the Appraisal system (Bahmani et al., 2021) and minor subcategories of Engagement resources (Bacang et al., 2019; Serholt, 2012). However, the possible relationship between the writers' gender and using the resources of the Engagement system has not been investigated in the literature.

Moreover, former researchers paid a great deal of attention to argumentative essays to analyze students' use of engagement resources (e.g., Garrido, 2017; Lau et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2014; Warsano & Widhiyanto, 2019). This genre of writing requires the writer to present a specific point of view or claim supported by evidence. While considering opposing viewpoints, the writer needs to defend their point and convince the readers that the arguments mentioned are valid (Schleppegrell, 2004). Schleppegrell (2016) believes that it can be challenging for students to effectively and logically organize their information in argumentative essays especially at basic and

intermediate levels. The writers' unfamiliarity with the necessary patterns to develop the arguments adds to their challenge (Garrido, 2017), which makes argumentative writing unsuitable for basic or intermediate levels. An expository essay can contain elements of an argumentative essay, as they both deal with facts, information, explanations, and the writer's personal ideas. However, the main difference is that in an argumentative essay, the writer attempts to convince the reader to accept the writer's point of view while in an expository essay, the writer does not (Pankova, 2014).

Lastly, but importantly, given that in many EFL contexts, the focus of writing instruction is mostly on language forms through employing traditional pedagogical practices (Casanave, 2009; Lee & Coniam, 2013; Naghdipour, 2016), it is highly recommended that teachers provide their students with a good platform to focus on the meaning of words helping them boost their writing ability by providing various options for communicating their viewpoints. The results of this study, therefore, could provide profitable insights into students' differences and their strengths and weaknesses in employing engagement resources at different levels. In this vein, some studies in the literature (e.g., Bastola & Hu, 2021; Garrido, 2017; Lau et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2016; Yuliana & Gandana, 2018) have systematically examined the ways through which writers engage with the readers, particularly through the framework provided by Marin and White (2005). However, there is a lack of theoretically grounded analysis of the engagement resources with respect to different proficiency levels and gender of the writers although these two have been proven as influential factors in students' language performance, specifically in EFL writing (e.g., Ai & Lu, 2013; Martínez, 2018; Mazgutova & Kormos, 2015; Roquet et al., 2015). Hence, the present study attempted to address this neglected issue by drawing upon the appraisal system as the analytical framework to examine engagement resources used by EFL students of different genders across different proficiency levels. To this aim, it sought answers to the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant difference among Iranian EFL learners of different proficiency levels in terms of the engagement resources they use in their expository writings?

2. Is there any significant difference between male and female Iranian EFL learners in terms of the engagement resources they use in their expository writings?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Analytical Framework

Because of the complexities of language, any analysis of form and meaning requires an organizational and conceptual framework (Stewart, 2015). Given that appraisal theory is the most formalized and comprehensive

model that offers an ideal framework for analyzing evaluative meaning in a text (Xie, 2016), this study drew on the engagement system put forth by Martin and White (2005) to examine the students' expository writing. This system highlights the role of engagement resources which provide different options and strategies that the writer can employ to accept the proposition's negotiability, acknowledge other viewpoints, and regulate the dialogic space (Chu, 2014; Wu, 2007). In other words, using engagement resources announces the writer's position as being undecided, neutral, standing with or standing against an idea (Martin & White, 2005).

According to Martin and White (2005), each utterance can be divided into either heteroglossia or monoglossia. When writers use monoglossic utterances or bare assertions, they are leaving no room for alternative viewpoints and "projecting complete agreement on the part of the audience" (Miller et al., 2014, p. 5). The following sentence is an example of a monoglossic utterance:
"Language change stems from various phenomena" (Wu, 2007, p. 15).

Such utterances are characterized as monoglossic since they are stated in a neutral, objective, and absolute manner that ignores dialogical alternatives (Martin & White, 2005). In other words, they are taken for granted as being unquestionable utterances. On the other hand, if the writers employ heteroglossic resources, they consider other possible perspectives. These resources can be classified as either contractive or expansive. Contraction happens when the writer narrows the dialogical space by challenging, refuting, or restricting alternative viewpoints. The writer has two options for using contractive resources: Disclaim and Proclaim. Both of them seek to narrow down the dialogical space; however, the former does so by directly rejecting or replacing another view whereas the latter does it in a more positive way that serves the writer's purpose.

Expansion happens when the writer provides space for other possible perspectives. Expansive resources are further divided into Entertain and Attribute. By using Entertain resources, the writer "acknowledges a proposition as one possibility amongst others through modals" (Wu, 2007, p. 15); for example, *it seems that language change stems from various phenomena*. Attribute is when the writer refers to a third party or an external source for his/her statement. The difference between Attribute and Proclaim is that by using Proclaim resources, the writer invests in the proposition and contracts the dialogical space, while on the other hand, by using Attribute resources, the writer separates him/herself from the stated proposition, thus expanding the dialogical space (Garrido, 2017).

2.2. The Role of Language Proficiency in Using Engagement Resources

Interest in interpersonal meaning and the social aspect of language grew throughout the 1990s. Since appraisal theory provides a reliable tool for analyzing interpersonal meaning by offering "a typology of evaluative resources available in English" (Hyland, 2005, p. 23), the majority of the research has benefited from the theory as a tool to analyze texts in various genres such as theses and dissertations (Lau et al., 2021), students' narratives (Fitriati et al., 2018), teachers' feedback (Lin, 2017; Stewart, 2015), and argumentative writings (Warsano & Widhiyanto, 2019). Moreover, engagement resources, along with other systems of appraisal (attitude and graduation), have been the focus of many studies to tease out the patterns of students' writings in EFL contexts (e.g., Yuliana & Gandana, 2018), and nearly all researchers agree that the inclusion of engagement resources is vital for successful writing. In this regard, some researchers (Liu, 2013; Warsano & Widhiyanto, 2019) have benefited from the engagement framework to analyze and compare students' high- and low-graded writings. Although among a few studies, the results are contradictory, they mostly seem to reveal that L2 writing level tends to be a relevant influence on acknowledging other viewpoints. For instance, Liu (2013) divided Chinese EFL students into high- and low-graded writers according to their holistic ratings, and analyzed their argumentative writings using the appraisal framework. She found a higher frequency of monoglossic resources in the high-rated essays compared to the low-rated ones. On the contrary, Wu (2007) found that lower-graded scripts displayed a higher frequency of bare assertion clauses whereas the high-rated scriptwriters tended to engage more by using heteroglossic clauses. In a similar vein, Swain (2010) analyzed 26 discussion-type essays written under exam conditions by EFL first-year undergraduate students at the end of an academic writing skills program. The corpus of his study included 13 higher- and 13 lower-scoring essays. The results illustrated that higher-scored essays employed more heteroglossic resources compared to lower-scored ones.

In contrast to both groups of studies reported above, Warsano and Widhiyanto (2019) conducted a pretest among fourth-semester students who were majoring in English by giving them a topic to write an argumentative essay. They then classified the students' essays into high and low scores. After utilizing the appraisal framework, they concluded that the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant. Considering such studies, it could be argued that previous studies compared high- and low-graded texts which were subjectively scored by their teachers or the researcher, as a criterion for classifying them into different levels. However, the effect of students' overall language proficiency on their use of engagement resources has not yet been considered, notwithstanding that L2 global proficiency has been proven as a relevant influence on other fields; for example, syntactic

complexity (Martínez, 2018), critical thinking (Manalo et al., 2013), and using cohesive devices in EFL argumentative writing (Yang & Sun, 2012). Moreover, the mentioned studies predominantly focused on 'expert' texts in academic contexts (Garrido, 2017, p. 17) while the use of these resources in pre-academic levels specifically among pre-intermediate and intermediate levels has largely been overlooked despite the fact that the resources writers use for engagement are crucial for effective writing even at lower levels. Addressing these gaps, this study centered upon the patterns of engagement resources used by Iranian EFL students who were studying English at a private language institute at three different proficiency levels (i.e., basic, intermediate, and advanced).

2.3. The Role of Gender in Using Engagement Resources

Research into the extent to which men and women use language differently has sparked much scholarly attention (Newman et al., 2008). It seems undeniable that gender plays a significant role in foreign language performance (Kobayashi, 2002), using hedging devices (Namaziandost & Shafie, 2018), syntactic complexity (Martínez, 2018), metadiscourse analysis (Alotaibi, 2016), writing self-efficacy (Williams & Takaku, 2011), and classroom positioning (Clarke, 2006; Ritchie, 2002). In such studies, researchers mostly claim that female students are more inclined to learn second and foreign languages, and they usually outperform their male counterparts (Pavlenko & Piller, 2008). Similar findings were obtained in studies focusing on gender differences in EFL writing (e.g., Bahmani et al., 2021; Lee, 2014; Martínez, 2015; 2018; Roquet et al., 2015; Williams & Takaku, 2011).

In 2015, Martínez analyzed secondary education students' writings and found that females outscored males in both their overall quality of the compositions and the syntactic complexity of the sentences they used. In her more recent study (2018), she quantitatively measured the syntactic complexity of the writings with holistic ratings of learners' overall writing quality. The findings revealed that the difference in scores was statistically significant in that girls obtained higher scores in the general quality of the compositions in all measures. Based on such findings, it could be argued that gender differences can be a determining feature of EFL students' writing. However, although appraisal theory is approached by many researchers to analyze students' writings, few studies have utilized the theory to explore gender differences in students' writings. One such study was conducted by Bahmani et al. (2021) who examined attitude and graduation resources of appraisal theory in the writings of male and female students in an EFL academic context. The results showed no significant difference between the male and female groups.

Hence, a review of previous research raises the question of whether students' gender can influence their use of engagement resources while presenting an argument. Scholars have already examined gender roles in using boosters and lexical hedges (e.g., Bacang et al., 2019; Namaziandost & Shafiee, 2018) which are major subsets of Engagement belonging to Proclaim and Entertain categories, respectively. For instance, Namaziandost and Shafiee (2018) investigated gender differences in spoken language regarding the use of lexical hedges. The results demonstrated that females tended to use more lexical hedges compared to their male counterparts, which is also in line with the findings of Fahy (2002) who observed that females use more hedges than males in their academic conferences.

Another study by Bacang et al. (2019) on written discourse yielded similar results. They investigated the use of hedges, and boosters in the argumentative essays of male and female ESL learners and found that female learners managed to include more hedging and boosting devices in their essays despite the fact that males mostly wrote longer essays. However, in the case of hedging devices, the difference was not statistically significant. In another research by Serholt (2012), 100 advanced essays written by Swedish students of English were gathered to examine the frequency of hedges and boosters the students used, as well as the gender differences in using them. Results indicated that the female group employed fewer hedging devices, and used boosters less frequently than the male group, which contradicts Bacang et al.'s (2019) findings.

The contradictory results found in the literature certainly do not provide a clear vision for gender differences in using engagement resources. Moreover, although the two subsets of engagement resources have been examined in terms of gender-related differences, other major subsets of the engagement system and their relationship with gender have remained almost intact in the literature. Hence, addressing this gap served as the second impetus underlying this study.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a mixed-methods conversion design in which the data "collected in one form (e.g., numbers or text) is converted to a different form and then analyzed" (Ary et al., 2019, p. 523). In this study, qualitative data (i.e., expository texts) was quantified by first, coding the data and then, counting the frequency of a particular engagement resource used.

3.2. Context of the Study

The necessary data for this study was gathered from a private English language institute located in one of the large cities of Iran. In this institute,

classes are held for approximately four hours per week, and each class is composed of students who come from lower levels and those who have directly been placed in the levels based on their scores in an English placement test. The test consists of two parts: The first which is in written form is either designed by the institute experts or adopted from well-known reliable tests such as the Oxford placement test. The second part is an oral interview conducted by an experienced teacher. At the end of each course, in order to reach the next level, students are to pass a test that contains proportions of the four skills as well as grammar and vocabulary.

Private language institutes such as the setting of the current study "use imported commercial textbooks, which generally contain one or two writing tasks in the middle or end of each unit" (Naghdipour, 2016, p. 4). Therefore, students are exposed to writing features and are given different writing tasks during the program. Generally, no explicit instruction on engagement resources is given to students; however, the participants of the current study were all acquainted with the expository genre, as it was a part of the teaching curriculum of the institute under investigation. The data needed for this study was gathered by asking the students to write an expository paragraph as one of the routine tasks in their English learning program.

3.3. Participants

Sixty EFL learners (30 male and 30 female) of three different proficiency levels (20 basic, 20 intermediate, and 20 advanced) were recruited to partake in the study. While acknowledging that giving a proficiency test can definitely be more reliable while classifying participants into different proficiency groups, due to some practical issues, the study relied on the proficiency levels already determined by the institute to place students into different groups. All participants were Persian native speakers, with ages ranging from 15 to 22, and with a mean of 18. Because of practicality and accessibility issues, recruiting the students was done through convenience sampling.

3.4. Corpus of the Study

As stated earlier, the expository genre was considered appropriate for the purpose of the study. This genre requires the students to expound on an idea, explain a specific subject, and present an argument in a clear manner (Yuliana & Gandana, 2018). Since engagement plays a significant role in argumentation (De Oliveira, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2016), the argumentative nature of the expository genre makes it suitable for evaluating engagement resources. To gather the necessary data, the participants were asked to write an expository essay consisting of at least 250 words on the following topic, which

was chosen by consulting writing experts at the university where the study was conducted:

> Because of the COVID-19 outbreak, all educational institutions had to shift from real classes to online ones. In your opinion, what were the advantages and disadvantages of online classes? Support your ideas using examples and evidence.

For data collection, firstly, the researchers informed those who were in charge of the institute about the study and sought their consent and cooperation. Thereafter, the topic and the genre of the prompt were introduced to the teachers of each level. Subsequently, the teachers were to briefly explain the topic and ask the students to be ready to write a paragraph of at least 250 words on the given topic in the upcoming session. This task must have been done individually by the students in the classroom under the observation of their teachers. Furthermore, to encourage the students to write carefully, the teachers informed them about evaluating their task and considering a bonus mark in their overall score. Finally, the writings were gathered by the researchers and classified according to the levels and genders of the writers.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedures

Informed by the appraisal framework (Martin & White, 2005), this study used the UAM software, "a software tool for text annotation and analysis that allows for systematic manual tagging of text, storing, organizing, and recalling analyzed text segments" (Mitchell et al., 2016, p. 8). To make the numbers comparable and denote the frequency of engagement resources employed at each level, each essay was normalized to 10,000 words. Resources were coded manually according to the Engagement system. It is worth noting that coding the data was done to the level of Entertain-Attribute and Disclaim-Proclaim which are the subcategories of Expand and Contract resources, respectively. Once the coding was finished, the frequency of engagement resources in each essay was tallied. To ensure the reliability of the coding procedure, the researchers estimated both intra- and inter-coder reliability. The former was done by the second researcher examining the data at two distinct times, with an interval of two months, and the reliability was found to be .98. With respect to the latter, the first researcher coded a randomly selected subset of the data independently and the association between the two sets of codes was .97. Afterwards, chi-square was run to compare the performance of students in terms of their use of engagement resources across different proficiency levels and genders.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. The Use of Monoglossic and Heteroglossic Resources across Different Proficiency Levels

Potential differences among students of different proficiency levels in terms of monoglossic and heteroglossic resources were examined using a chi-square test.

Table 1

Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	10.805[a]	2	.005
N of Valid Cases	2324		
Cramer's V	.068		.005

The chi-square test for independence indicated a significant difference among different proficiency levels, $\chi2$ (2, *n* = 2324) = 10.8, *p* = .005, *V* = .06. Table 2 presents the results of the crosstabulation and frequency distribution of these resources.

Table 2

*Monoglossic and Heteroglossic Resources * Level Crosstabulation*

			Level			Total
			Basic	**Intermediate**	**Advanced**	
Code	**Monoglossic**	Count	222	315	308	845
		% within Code	26.3%	37.3%	36.4%	100.0%
		% of Total	9.6%	13.6%	13.3%	36.4%
	Heteroglossic	Count	485	501	493	1479
		% within Code	32.8%	33.9%	33.3%	100.0%
		% of Total	20.9%	21.6%	21.2%	63.6%
	Total	Count	707	816	801	2324

Generally, both Monoglossic and Heteroglossic resources were present in students' writing, and quantitative analysis showed a total frequency of 845 monoglossic statements versus a total of 1479 heteroglossic statements from among a total number of 2324 engagement codes. These frequencies correspond to a percentage of 36.4% Monogloss versus 63.6% Heterogloss. Overall, heteroglossic resources were much more preferred by the students at all levels. Table 3 below presents excerpts from the data.

Table 3

Monoglossic and Heteroglossic Resources

Engagement category	Example
Monogloss	1. COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted teaching in a variety of institutions.
Heterogloss	2. Moreover, they <u>can</u> decide the place and time of learning by themselves.

As can be noted, the first extract is stated categorically, while in the second one, the writer has acknowledged other viewpoints and regulated the dialogical space by using *can*. Data analysis revealed that generally at each level, the students invested more in heteroglossic resources in making their arguments, which implies that they preferred to Expand or Contract the dialogical space by allowing or challenging alternative voices rather than stating their arguments categorically.

4.1.2. Expand and Contract Resources

To examine any possible difference among different proficiency levels in terms of Expand and Contract resources, another chi-square test was conducted.

Table 4

Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.080ᵃ	2	.002
N of Valid Cases	1480		
Cramer's V	.090		.002

The chi-square test for independence showed that there was a statistically significant difference among different proficiency levels, $\chi2$ (2, *n* = 1480) = 12.08, *p* = .002, *V* = .09.

Table 5

Expand and Contract Resources* Level Crosstabulation

		Level			Total
		Basic	**Intermediate**	**Advanced**	
Expand	Count	162	193	218	573
	% within Code	28.3%	33.7%	38.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	10.9%	13.0%	14.7%	38.7%
Contract	Count	323	309	275	907
	% within Code	35.6%	34.1%	30.3%	100.0%
	% of Total	21.8%	20.9%	18.6%	61.3%
Total	Count	485	502	493	1480

Crosstabulation analysis revealed that contractive resources (907, 61.3%) outnumbered expansive ones (573, 38.7%). Overall, results show that there was a steady increase in the number of Expand resources employed by the students as their proficiency level increased. In other words, more proficient students used more Expand resources in their essays. However, regarding Contract resources, the reverse is true, meaning that more proficient students used fewer Contract resources. In the following table, examples extracted from the students' writings are presented.

Table 6

Expansive and Contractive Resources

Engagement category	Example
Expand	1. It <u>might</u> be more difficult for teachers to keep their classes engaging and interactive.
Contract	2. <u>Although</u> very promising, these classes came with their own cost.

In Extract 1, by using the modal *might,* the writer is opening up the dialogic space to differing opinions. However, in Extract 2, the writer acts to challenge, or restrict alternative opinions by using the contrastive connection *although*.

4.1.3. Subcategories of Expand and Contract Resources

Below is a breakdown of the subcategories of Expand and Contract resources employed by the students in their writing tasks.

Table 7

Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	38.697[a]	6	.000
N of Valid Cases	1480		
Cramer's V	.114		.000

Results of the chi-square test indicated that there was a statistically significant difference among different proficiency levels in terms of these resources in their writings, $\chi2$ (6, *n* = 1480) = 38.6, *p* = .00, *V* = .11.

Table 8

*Level * Subcategories of Expand and Contract Crosstabulation*

			Engagement				
			Entertain	Attribute	Disclaim	Proclaim	Total
Level	**Basic**	Count	162	0	283	40	485
		% within Code	30.1%	0.0%	35.9%	33.6%	32.8%
		% of Total	10.9%	0.0%	19.1%	2.7%	32.8%
	Intermediate	Count	185	8	270	39	502
		% within Code	34.3%	23.5%	34.3%	32.8%	33.9%
		% of Total	12.5%	0.5%	18.2%	2.6%	33.9%
	Advanced	Count	192	26	235	40	493
		% within Code	35.6%	76.5%	29.8%	33.6%	33.3%
		% of Total	13.0%	1.8%	15.9%	2.7%	33.3%
	Total	Count	539	34	788	119	1480

As can be noticed, among the three levels, there was an increase in the use of expansive resources and a steady decrease in using contractive ones. In other words, more proficient students used more Entertain and Attribute resources while they used fewer Disclaim resources. Proclaim resources were the second least frequent resources used almost equally at all levels. Some examples selected from students' writings are presented below.

Table 9

Examples of Sub-categories of Expand and Contract

Engagement category	Example
Entertain	1. <u>I think,</u> other classes like English classes are better to stay online.
Attribute	2. <u>Some people believe</u> COVID-19's changes were destructive.
Disclaim	3. <u>However,</u> on the other hand, online classes had some disadvantages.
Proclaim	4. We <u>certainly</u> have a more active participation than when we spend a course virtually.

In the first extract, the writer indicates that his/her position is but one of a number of possible positions and to a great degree, makes dialogic space for other possibilities by using *I think*. Among Entertain resources, the modal *can* and the phrases *I think* and *I believe* were more frequently found in the data set. For attribution, students mostly used phrases such as *X claimed,* and *X said*. In the Disclaim category, resources such as *However*, *but*, and negations and in the Proclaim category, *indeed, in fact,* and *certainly* were more frequently used by the students.

In summary, data analysis revealed that there was a statistically significant difference among learners of different proficiency levels in terms of the engagement resources they used in their expository writings. Therefore, the answer to the first research question is affirmative.

4.1.4. Monoglossic and Heteroglossic Resources across Genders

A chi-square test was run to denote possible differences between male and female students regarding monoglossic and heteroglossic resources.

Table 10

Chi-Square Test

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Continuity Correction[b]	.078	1	.781
N of Valid Cases	1547		
Phi	-.008		.740

Results indicated that there was no significant association between the gender of the students and using these resources, $\chi2$ (1, *n* = 1547) = .07, *p* = .781, *phi* = -.008. Therefore, the answer to the second research question is negative.

Table 11

Gender * Monoglossic and Heteroglossic Resources Crosstabulation

			Monoglossic	Heteroglossic	Total
Gender	**Male**	Count	306	533	839
		% within Code	53.7%	54.6%	54.2%
		% of Total	19.8%	34.5%	54.2%
	Female	Count	264	444	708
		% within Code	46.3%	45.4%	45.8%
		% of Total	17.1%	28.7%	45.8%
Total		Count	570	977	1547
		% of Total	36.8%	63.2%	100.0%

Further analysis revealed that there was a total frequency of 1547 engagement codes found in the writings of both groups, among which 570 (36.8%) were monoglossic and 977 (63.2%) were heteroglossic resources. To be more specific, results showed that male students employed 306 Monogloss and 533 Heterogloss, suggesting that male students preferred to use more heterglossic resources than monoglossic ones. Although female students have employed fewer engagement resources, similar to their male peers, they utilized more heteroglossic resources in their expository writing (444 vs. 264).

4.2. Discussion

As reported above, of the two main categories of the engagement system, students at all levels tended to use more Heterogloss in their writings, suggesting they privileged those linguistic resources that considered room for alternatives. Even though all the texts were generally heteroglossic, the distribution of these resources varied across the writings of each level. In fact, more proficient students were more likely to employ a diversity of heteroglossic resources, thus manipulating the arguability of their utterances. These findings confirm the findings of previous works by Swain (2010), Warsano and Widhiyanto (2019), and Wu (2007), which were carried out in academic contexts and showed that in higher-rated essays, more instances of heteroglossic resources were found. The mentioned studies also revealed that expansive resources (particularly Entertain) outnumbered other resources in their data set whereas this study revealed that generally, contractive resources (particularly disclaim) were dominantly used in the writings of the three levels.

Moreover, studies by Swain (2010) and Warsano and Widhiyanto (2019) showed that the number of both Contract and Expand resources increased in the higher-level essays. However, although the findings of the present study indicated that more expansive resources were found as the proficiency level increased, on the contrary, more proficient students preferred to use fewer contractive resources. This is in contrast with the findings of earlier works in academic contexts (e.g., Swain, 2010; Wu, 2007). This difference might be attributed to the context differences, the genre of the

writing tasks, or the small sample size of other studies. For instance, in Wu's study (2007), 25 students wrote academic essays for the specific subject of geography, and in Swain's study (2010), 26 discussion-type essays of varying lengths were analyzed.

More specifically, basic-level essays constructed authorial voice through disclaiming. In other words, students at this level tended to build their arguments as opposed to contrary points of view through negation and contrastive connections. This frequent use of Disclaim resources made their essays carry a negative tone with a strong voice that ignored possible refutations, which probably characterized poor writing (Liu, 2014).

Furthermore, the analysis illustrated that students rarely drew on Attribute and Proclaim resources to make their arguments, suggesting that they were not eager to either present supporting evidence or bring others' ideas to insist on the validity of their proposition. Such essays may convey a sense of unwarranted assertiveness if they are not well organized (Schleppegrell, 2016). This finding resonates with previous studies (Swain, 2010; Warsano & Widhiyanto, 2019; Wu, 2007), in which the researchers found a low frequency of Attribute and Proclaim, especially in lower-level writings. These studies also reported that there was an increase in the number of Attribute and Proclaim in higher-level essays. In this study, although more proficient students used more Attribute resources, a marked difference is that regarding Proclaim, no differences were observed across the three levels, which is not in line with the mentioned studies.

In regard to gender differences, despite not being statistically different, male students employed both Monogloss and Heterogloss more than their female counterparts. This finding contradicts that of Bacang et al. (2019) who found that EFL female students tended to use more boosting devices (a subset of Proclaim) in their writings than male students. Given that there are not enough studies in this regard, more studies are needed to either refute or confirm this finding.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The present study revealed that the proficiency level of students is an influential factor in their use of engagement resources. Despite their differences, students from the three groups of proficiency tended to express their viewpoints through both heteroglossic and monoglossic utterances. In doing so, similarly, students had a tendency to engage more with the readers through heteroglossic resources in their expository texts. This signifies that they often prefer to state their position while acknowledging the existence of alternative views. However, the dominance of contractive resources in students' writings resulted in a stronger authorial voice and claims that left

little room for disagreement. Moreover, excessive use of Disclaim resources indicated that students tended to position themselves as opposing and refuting contrary viewpoints. This resulted in employing a majority of negative verbs and contrasting connectives in their writings, particularly in basic-level writings where negations were extremely used. Nevertheless, the accumulation of such resources can weaken the arguments of writers and undermine the force of their claims (Schleppegrell, 2016). This feature was less observed as the proficiency level increased. In other words, the statements of higher-level students were more likely to be set in a dialogically expansive manner using the options of Entertain and Attribute. Therefore, it could safely be argued that as the students' proficiency level increased, they employed contractive and expansive categories in a more balanced manner. Finally, results showed that the students' gender was not influential in the use of engagement resources in their expository writings. However, more instances of both monoglossic and heteroglossic categories were found in male students' writings.

Overall, this study demonstrated the importance of acknowledging other viewpoints when presenting an argument in writing. Besides presenting information, students are expected to engage with their readers and comment on the knowledge they are delivering to them (Liu, 2014). In this regard, the engagement system on which this study was drawn can help writers comprehend and recognize the relationship that exists between them and the readers. It can help students move beyond a traditional focus on grammatical forms by offering a platform to the writers for investigating the impact of various word choices on establishing a convincing argument. Each of these choices places the writer in a different relationship with the reader; therefore, students need to be able to make effective lexical choices that truly reflect their intended meaning. This may present many difficulties to novice writers, especially in EFL contexts. The subtle understanding of various options available in the engagement system and how to use them to achieve a particular purpose cannot be automatically mastered by all students (Bastola & Hu, 2021). According to Mitchell et al. (2016), both experienced and inexperienced writers can benefit from the instruction of engagement resources, which can lead to the development of well-supported arguments in writing.

That being said, the present study suggests that the writing curriculum include instruction on engagement resources. English teachers can improve students' writing skills by emphasizing the importance of acknowledging different viewpoints and helping students entertain, counter, and attribute them in ways that support their own viewpoints. Once teachers become aware of the valuable linguistic resources that facilitate engagement, they can make them explicit to students in order to help them communicate their personal opinions in a more persuasive manner. Furthermore, the use of appropriate attributions

to substantiate one's argument is another area that needs attention, especially, at the basic level, since none of the participating students used attribution in their writings. Teachers can make transparent to the students the resources that they could utilize to attribute their proposition to a source arguing for their own position.

In addition, since the analysis revealed that the instances of Proclaim were very rare and there was no increase in using them as the proficiency level raised, the writing teacher can highlight the role of Proclaim resources. In this regard, for example, after incorporating a source text in the writing instruction, the student can use words and phrases of the Proclaim category to interpret the source and endorse their claim, such as *X shows, illustrates, or points out*. Learning Proclaim resources may help increase students' awareness of reinforcing accountability and a sense of assurance of their arguments and help them put forward claims that are properly warranted. They can also learn the importance of phrases such as *clearly, obviously, indeed, and certainly* in their writings.

Despite offering interesting findings, the results of this study need to be approached with caution given the sampling procedure employed and the small size of its sample. Moreover, for grouping the students into three different levels, the study relied on the levels determined by the institute while acknowledging that conducting a valid and reliable proficiency test could lead to more precise results. Furthermore, this study just focused on the main effects of the two independent variables under investigation. Obviously, examining the interaction effects could offer useful insights into possible ways through which male and female students of different proficiency levels might make interpersonal meaning, which can be traced in future research.

Other studies could focus on whether these resources are implemented differently in various parts of the students' essays, i.e., the thesis statement, body, and conclusion. Further studies could also be carried out on how counterarguments and arguments are stated with respect to the Engagement system and what resources are more commonly employed by students to engage with the reader.

In addition, future works could examine the extent to which engagement resources are valued by teachers in writing instruction and scoring the writing tasks. Conspicuously, more robust results can emerge from applying qualitative analysis. This includes, for instance, conducting interviews or reflection tasks to obtain data about students' perspectives and experiences regarding the teaching interventions and to find out whether they find this form of instruction supportive in the development of their skills in composing arguments in writing. Moreover, another area that is worth further investigation is comparing engagement resources in integrated writing tasks

and the possible effect of the authorial voice of the source text (written or spoken) on the students' use of these resources in their own texts.

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