

EVALUATIVE STANCES IN DISCURSIVE ESSAYS BY EFL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AND THEIR REFLECTION

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Abstract. This research examines the use of evaluative language in academic writing essays about living in dormitories by 15 EFL undergraduate students at a university in Hanoi. Using Martin & White's Appraisal Framework (2005) and the UAM Corpus Tool, we analysed 15 essays (5725 words). Findings show that students predominantly use Appreciation within the Attitude system and frequently employ quantifiers and intensifiers in Graduation, with only one instance of a Focus item. We also interviewed 7 of the 15 Vietnamese EFL undergraduate students to assess their awareness of the importance of evaluation in writing and to improve their writing capacity.

Keywords: evaluative language, evaluative writing, Appraisal framework, UAM Corpus Tool.

1. Introduction

Academic writing requires individuals to demonstrate understanding and mastery of skills such as critical thinking, analysis, and communication within a specific academic domain (Irvin, 2010) [1]. The primary goal of an essay is to persuade readers to change their perspective or take action, using evaluative language to express attitudes and assessments. Appraisal Theory, which includes the dimensions of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation, is key in this context (Martin & White, 2005) [2]. Studies by Thomas et al. (2015) [3] on high-achieving Year 3 pupils, Liu & Thompson (2009) [4] on Chinese and English argumentative writing, and Liu (2013) [5] on Chinese University EFL students highlight the use of evaluative language in writing. Vietnamese researchers, including Nguyen (2021) [6] and Tran (2019) [7], have also explored this topic.

Nowadays, evaluative language permeates every aspect of English communication. Its importance is undeniable and EFL students are urged to be competent in applying evaluative items to their written text if they are inclined to master the foreign language. However, only a few English learners can smoothly and effectively incorporate evaluation into their writing. Therefore, this study aims to study EFL undergraduate students' ability to apply evaluative language in advantage and disadvantage essays by addressing the two research questions:

(1) How did EFL undergraduate students show their attitude toward the entity in their English writing for the topic?

(2) What are students' reflections on using evaluation in their writing?

2. Content

2.1. Theoretical background

2.1.1. The Appraisal Framework

Martin & White developed the Appraisal Framework based on the theoretical model of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Martin and other SFL scholars regionalised appraisal resources as categorizations, grouping them into three evaluation subsystems: attitude, engagement, and graduation (Martin & White, 2005) [2] (see *Figure 1*).

Attitude

The *Attitude* resource is responsible for our feelings towards things, our evaluation of human behaviours, and our assessment of phenomena. *Affect* is used in expressing our emotional expressions. *Judgement* deals with resources for evaluating human behaviours or personalities. *Appreciation*, resources for construing the value of entities, can be either positive or negative and conveyed either invoked or inscribed.

Graduation

Up-scaling or down-scaling is what the *Graduation* resource does to grade the other two sub-categories within the Appraisal System: *Attitude* and *Engagement*. The scaling function operates on two categories: *Force* and *Focus*.

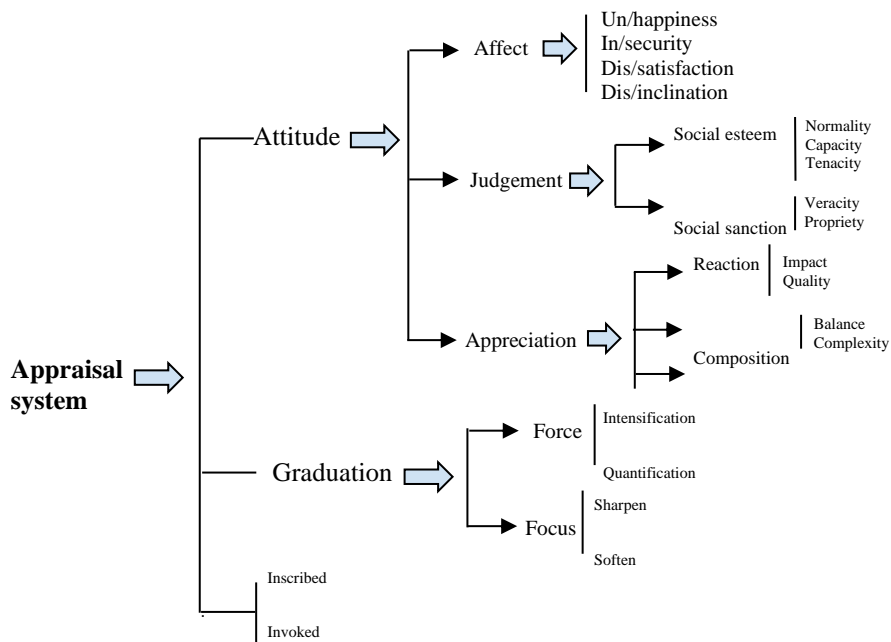


Figure 1. An overview of the Appraisal system (Adapted from Martin and White 2005)

Graduation within the scope of Attitude

Working with *Attitude* resources, *Graduation* is a general property of values that they construe as greater or lesser degrees of positivity or negativity (Martin & White, 2005) [2]. Graduation can manifest within attitudinal words (e.g., *better*, *primary*) or be embedded separately within attitudinal meanings (e.g., *more beautiful*, *many difficulties*). These mechanisms of graduation enhance its value in both positive and negative contexts.

2.1.2. Evaluative writing

Evaluative writing involves assessing subjects like people, objects, and phenomena based on specific standards or criteria. It crosses many fields, such as psychology, music, art, literature,

and film, and is frequently used in situations like product reviews and assessments. By employing evaluative language, authors make their commitment and position clear, which improves reader understanding.

2.1.3. Discursive essay

Discursive essays frequently pose the question, “Do advantages outweigh disadvantages?”. This type of essay requires the writer to explore both sides of an issue before reaching a conclusion. To do this effectively, they must structure their arguments and use evaluative language to advocate for one certain side or both sides. Our research examines how students evaluate the pros and cons of living in university dormitories, aiming to encourage their use of evaluative language. We examine how students incorporate this language into discussions about dormitory living.

2.2. Research methodology

2.2.1. Research design

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. The researchers employed Martin & White's (2005) [2] Appraisal framework to evaluate the attitude resources expressed in the written work of EFL undergraduate students.

2.2.2. Data collection method

2.2.2.1. Participants

Fifteen third-year EFL students in class A1 at the Faculty of English were involved in the research through two stages: (i) writing a discursive essay and (2) reflecting on how they use evaluative resources through a questionnaire.

2.2.2.2. Instruments

(1) **Writing test:** Students were asked to write a discursive essay in 40 minutes about the following topic: “What are the advantages and disadvantages of living in a dormitory on a university campus? Do the advantages outweigh its disadvantages?”

(2) **Questionnaire:** A questionnaire for students consists of four items:

Item 1. In your opinion, what is evaluative writing?

Item 2. As a student, is it necessary to use evaluation in writing?

Item 3. How difficult do you think it is to present an evaluation in writing?

Item 4. What are the difficulties you find in presenting evaluation in writing? Why?

2.2.3. Data collection procedure

Step 1: Collecting discursive essays and identifying evaluative resources

We gathered a total of 15 discursive writings from class A1 at the Faculty of English. In order to facilitate data analysis, attitudinal means were emphasised using three distinct colours: pink for affect, blue for judgement, and green for appreciation. For graduation means, we use yellow for intensification, brown for quantification, and red for sharpening .

Step 2: Answering the questionnaires

Students answered the questions, and the researcher collected the questionnaires filled out by the EFL undergraduate students for analysis.

2.2.4. Data analysis methods

The study aims to assess the writing skills of fifteen third-year EFL students at a university in Hanoi using both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The CORPUS TOOL facilitates the recording of statistical data, enhancing the research approach with strong empirical proof. The research examines the students' attitudes and lexico-grammatical expressions in their English compositions using questionnaire feedback and interviews. The EFL undergraduate students' perspectives on their writing methods are clarified by a thorough qualitative evaluation, which is

complemented by illustrative quantitative analyses. The study seeks to address important research inquiries regarding the expression of attitude in writing, students' thoughts on the use of attitudinal techniques, and suggestions for improving preparedness in evaluative writing.

2.3. Findings and Discussion

Question 1: How did EFL undergraduate students show their attitude to the entity in their English writing for the topic?

Table 1. Overview of Appraisal distribution

	No. of texts	Total word account	Appraisal expression frequency
Total	15	5752	465

2.3.1. Overview of Appraisal Distribution

Data collected from 15 advantages and disadvantages essays will be analysed in different aspects to figure out how EFL undergraduate students employ evaluative language in their writing. As shown in *Table 1*, 465 evaluative lexical items are used, accounting for approximately 8.1% of total words. This illustrates that EFL undergraduate students are aware of the use of evaluation in judging a particular subject.

2.3.1.1. Overview of each category

According to *Table 2*, EFL undergraduate students mainly use Appreciation resources when discussing living in dormitories. This aligns with Tran's (2019) [7] findings on EFL students' language choices in topics like the Internet and Movies, as well as Yang's (2016) [8] study on Chinese college students' essays. These similarities suggest that, when evaluating objects or social events, authors tend to employ more Appreciation language. Judgement and Affect language are less common, with 48 instances of Judgement and 29 instances of Affect. This trend contrasts with Nguyen's (2021) findings, but it also aligns with Nguyen & Nguyen's (2021) [9] research on Vietnamese secondary school students. This indicates that different education levels influence the use of evaluative language.

In terms of the Graduation system, Force is most prevalent in these essays while Focus is minimally used, echoing Liu's (2013) [5] findings on Chinese EFL students and Thomas et al.'s (2015) [3] study on eight-year-old students' essays. Similarly, Jalilifar & Hemmati (2013) [10] found that Kurdish-speaking learners employ more Force than Focus. These parallels emphasise that both college and elementary students tend to strengthen their arguments with Force language, regardless of the topic or genre, highlighting the effectiveness of quantifiers and intensifiers in essay writing.

Table 2. Overview of each category

Appraisal resources	Subsystems	Number	Total
Attitude	Affect	29	378
	Judgement	48	
	Appreciation	301	
Graduation	Force	86	87
	Focus	1	
Total			465

Table 2 provides an overview of the Attitude and Graduation system, with each subcategory slated for further analysis in subsequent sections.

2.3.2. Attitude analysis

2.3.2.1. Affect analysis

Table 3. Affect resources

Categories	Number	Total
Un/Happiness	5	29
Dis/Satisfaction	10	
In/security	7	
Dis/Inclination	7	
Explicitness	Number	Total
Inscribe	28	29
Invoke	1	
Polarity	Number	Total
Positive	13	29
Negative	16	

Table 3 details the subsystem that EFL undergraduate students use the least frequently. The last use of Affect resources is considered to be a characteristic of the argumentative genre (Lee, 2006 [11]; Liu & Thompson, 2009 [4]). Therefore, not only does this pattern appear in argumentative essays, but it also appears in other types of essays, including advantage and disadvantage essays.

EFL undergraduate students rarely repeated the same word multiple times. For instance, to describe the feeling of Dis/Satisfaction, EFL undergraduate students use numerous words such as *uncomfortable*, *disturbed*, *dissipate*, *convenient*, etc. However, the subcategory Dis/Inclination is against this, while the word *want* is commonly repeated.

Moreover, EFL undergraduate students exhibit slightly more negative feelings than positive ones, indicating a lack of affection for living on campus.

2.3.2.2. Judgement analysis

Table 4. Judgement resources

Categories	Number	Total
Normality	6	48
Capacity	34	
Tenacity	1	
Propriety	4	
Veracity	3	
Explicitness	Number	Total
Inscribe	48	48
Invoke	0	
Polarity	Number	Total
Positive	40	48
Negative	8	

Normality, Propriety, Veracity, and Tenacity are all applied in small quantities, as can be seen from **Table 4**. In response to that, the figure for Capacity outstands others with 34 instances. Nevertheless, the highest usage also means that reiteration is inevitable, as *can* is most commonly used to express the Capacity of the appraised, accounting for 29/34 Capacity expressions.

2.3.3.3. Appreciation analysis

Table 5. Appreciation resources

Categories	Subcategories	Number	Total
Reaction	Impact	19	67
	Quality	48	
Composition	Balance	18	30
	Complexity	12	
Valuation		204	204
Total			301
Explicitness	Inscribe	300	301
	Invoke	1	
Polarity	Positive	168	301
	Negative	133	

As can be seen in Table 5, EFL undergraduate students use Valuation as their main tool to assess the significance of things, with 204 encoded items, followed by Reaction and Composition, with 67 and 30, respectively.

Vietnamese EFL undergraduate students utilise various word classes to convey their Appreciation. Furthermore, authors frequently articulate explicit meanings; only one author implicitly highlights the favourable aspects of this type of accommodation, albeit only accounting for one instance (**Example 1**). Despite not explicitly using the term “cheap”, readers can infer this implication from the highlighted phrases in this example. This matches with the perception of Nunan (1993) [12], as he stated that in higher education settings, it has been observed that explicitness is crucial for understanding causal connections, and just like younger readers, adults also experience decreased comprehension when information is implicitly expressed rather than explicitly stated.

E.g.1. *To begin with, many people argued that living in a dormitory helps students save their money because it only **costs a half or little fee** [+appreciation: quality] compared to renting a house.*

(student’s paragraph 1/15)

Moreover, the data indicates a prevalence of positive language choices over negative ones (168 and 133, respectively), suggesting that EFL undergraduate students tend to present the positive aspects rather than the drawbacks of living in dormitories. It proves that living in dormitories has many benefits for college students at their university.

Another noteworthy observation is the widespread use of words to express appreciation. The most frequently used words in essays by EFL undergraduate students include terms such as *drawbacks, disadvantages, advantages, benefits, and merits*. This frequent usage may stem from the nature of the advantage and disadvantage genre, in which students are required to paraphrase the topic to avoid repetition.

2.3.4. Graduation analysis

Table 6. Graduation analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Number	Total
Force	Intensification	32	86
	Quantification	54	
Focus	Sharpen	1	1
	Soften	0	
Total			87

Table 6 demonstrates that EFL undergraduate students have nearly mastered the Graduation resources, which are “central to the appraisal system” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 136) [2]. These resources effectively grade Attitudinal neutral meanings, enabling readers to more clearly understand the author’s assessment of the appraised. Noticeably, Force worked much more efficiently with Attitudinal resources to create evaluative phrases than Focus did.

2.3.4.1. Force analysis

Undergraduate EFL students are proficient in quantification resources and prefer to use quantifiers to increase or decrease their ratings. Even though they are used less frequently, intensifiers show that students can still employ modifiers to make their points more powerful.

In addition, EFL undergraduate students primarily make use of common quantifiers such as *some, more, another, several, and many* in their writing to help convey information.

2.3.4.2. Focus analysis

There is only one word, *psychologically*, that falls under the category of Focus. It is possible that the use of emphasis is not often favoured in evaluative essays written by EFL undergraduate students.

Question 2: What are students’ reflections on using evaluation in their writing?

After interviewing seven random candidates, we will provide summaries of their responses to the four main questions below.

Item 1: In your opinion, what is evaluative writing?

7 students discuss their understanding of evaluative writing. 5 students define it as expressing the author’s perspective to assess subjects, suggesting a quite clear understanding. However, one views judgment as subjective, risking misinterpretations and a lack of coherence in academic discourse. Another believes evaluative writing should follow logical principles and convey meaningful information, thereby missing the essence of evaluative writing. These 2 students are unsure about the definition, highlighting the need for instruction on evaluative writing in college writing training courses.

Item 2: As a student, is it necessary to use evaluation in writing?

4 out of 7 respondents highlighted the importance of presenting evaluations in writing, with 2 considering it “very necessary” and 1 thinking it was “little necessary.” This indicates a general recognition of the significance of evaluative writing, again emphasizing the need for more focus on evaluation skills in college writing curricula.

Item 3: How difficult do you think it is to present an evaluation in writing?

7 individuals, 5 reported difficulties, while 2 found it moderately difficult. None found it easy. This suggests a significant challenge in using the evaluative language of these students, likely due to limited exposure or training in evaluative writing.

Item 4: What are the difficulties you find in presenting evaluation in writing? Why?

Responses from EFL undergraduate students at a university in Hanoi reveal common challenges in expressing evaluations in writing. Some students struggle with organizing thoughts and structuring their writing, while others face difficulties in gathering relevant material and balancing subjective and objective analysis. Additionally, a lack of prior information limits their ability to assess each element effectively. These issues, coupled with a limited understanding of evaluative language, hinder their ability to express evaluations clearly and persuasively towards readers/listeners.

3. Conclusions

Our research highlights the key vocabulary used by EFL undergraduate students at a university in Hanoi to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their writing. Based on the Appraisal Framework developed by Martin and White, we discovered that students analysed their college dorm experience mostly using Appraisal resources, with Judgement and Affect coming in second and third. Force was the primary graduation resource, suggesting a preference for quantifiers. To improve writing assessments, educational institutions should thoroughly teach evaluative language, equipping students with the skills to convey evaluations effectively. This will enhance their communication abilities, which are essential for academic and professional success.

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