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THE USE OF VAGUE LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

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Abstract:

Using precise words or expressions is one of the key factors in writing coherent and clear argumentative essays. English as a Second Language (ESL) students often use vague language in argumentative writing, which reduces the clarity of their written expression. The purpose of this study was to investigate the use and types of vague language in argumentative essays written by Malaysian ESL students. Data were collected from the argumentative essays of 35 ESL students at a public university in southern Malaysia. The essays were analysed using Termjai's (2025) framework, adapted from Cutting's (2012) classification of vague language. The findings indicated that across a 12,077-word corpus of 35 argumentative essays, students generated 328 instances of vague language, reflecting a mean frequency of 9.37 instances per essay. The results also revealed that students employed five categories of vague language in their argumentative essays, including general nouns, indefinite pronouns, vague quantifiers, general verbs, and general extenders. Indefinite pronouns emerged as the most frequently utilised category, while general extenders were the least frequently used by students in their argumentative essays. By acquiring deeper understanding of the vague language in argumentative essays, English educators and curriculum developers can reform the academic writing syllabus and design activities that teach students how to replace vague terms with precise expressions and strengthen their arguments.

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Academic Writing, Argumentative Essays, Language Clarity, Malaysian ESL Students, Vague Language



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Introduction

Argumentative writing is one of the most common genres assigned in tertiary education. Fraidan (2025) described an argumentative essay as a structured written task in which students formulate a central claim, support it with empirical or logical evidence, and address counterarguments to construct a coherent and precise argumentative essay. Academicians often teach students to be precise in expressing their ideas and provide solid evidence in their arguments by constructing a clear thesis statement, compelling evidence and logical reasoning (Ruzaita, 2007).

However, students commonly encounter various issues in writing a clear and coherent argumentative essay such as cognitive hurdles, inadequate linguistic and discourse competence, psychological issues, lack of familiarity with essay formats, and inefficient writing techniques (Fraidan, 2025; Mallahi, 2024). In addition, Termjai (2025) explained that non-native English speakers often use vague nouns such as “people”, “children”, and “student(s)” and vague verbs like “get”, “do”, and “have” which hinder effective communication, limit the clarity of students’ arguments, and negatively impact the overall quality of academic writing.

Cutting (2012) stated that vague language encompasses intentionally imprecise forms with minimal semantic content that derive their meaning primarily through shared contextual knowledge. This occurs when precise information is unavailable, uncertain, and irrelevant to the topic discussed (Pan, 2012). Samigoullina (2020) and Provost (2019) stressed that the use of specific language in written discourse, particularly in academic setting is essential to convey ideas clearly and engagingly.

Although extensive research has been carried out into the use of vague language in various corpus such as news report, academic journal articles, and argumentative essays (Termjai, 2025; Cutting, 2012; Pan, 2012), little is known about the use of vague language in argumentative essays written by Malaysian ESL students at a public university. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the use and types of vague language in argumentative essays written by Malaysian ESL students.

A deeper understanding of the specific forms of vague language used by Malaysian ESL students allows educators to provide targeted instruction. Furthermore, this study can help curriculum developers reform the academic writing syllabus and design suitable activities that teach students how to replace vague terms with precise words or expressions in their argumentative essays.

The following research questions guided the present study:

1. To what extent is vague language employed in argumentative essays written by Malaysian ESL students?
2. What are the typical forms of vague language employed in students’ essays?

Literature Review

The chapter begins with a review of vague language definition from various researchers. Since the research is focused on the use and types of vague language in argumentative essays, it is necessary to review the types and functions of vague language. The chapter also presents previous studies on vague language.

Definition of Vague Language

Empirical of studies shows a wide range of vague language definitions exists and vague language categories vary considerably between researchers. Cutting (2012) stated that vague language encompasses intentionally imprecise or general linguistic forms characterised by minimal semantic specificity and a primary reliance on shared contextual knowledge for interpretation. In the same light of thought, Cusen (2019) explained that vague language is used by language users, they purposely choose imprecise expressions and rely largely on shared contextual knowledge to convey their ideas to readers or listeners.

From the perspective of other researcher, Alkhatnai (2017) described vague language as words or phrases that are exact nor precise which are typically used when people are uncertain about something, save time during conversation, and intend to communicate in an informal and friendly manner. When it comes to examining vague language in academic English, vague language can be referred to knowledge that writers or speakers assume the readers or listeners already understood, and the shared knowledge helps educators or writers connect new information to the learners' existing knowledge (McCarthy,2020).

Types and Functions of Vague Language in Academic Writing

The present study focused on the use of vague language in ESL students' argumentative essays; thus, the discussion of the literature is only of those vague language forms and functions which relates to academic writing. Drawing on frameworks established by Cutting (2012) and adapted by Termjai (2025), there are five different types of vague language:

- **General Nouns:** In the work of Termjai (2025), general nouns are presented as broad, non-specific nouns whose referents such as particular people, places, or objects are not clearly identified, and they usually represent general categories rather than specific entities, for instance "people", "thing", and "stuff". The other examples of general nouns are "factors", "problems", "things", "effects", "people", and "issue" (Cutting, 2012). General nouns may have been used either for convenience or to create anticipation (Cutting, 2012).
- **General Verbs:** Termjai (2025) explained that general verbs are broad or non-specific verbs which express generalised meaning rather than specific indications of the intended actions such as "do" and "get". Termjai (2025) explained that the verb "get" is vague because it has broad meaning which could mean "acquire", "buy", or "consume". The use of general verbs can lead to imprecise descriptions of actions.
- **Indefinite Pronouns:** Indefinite pronouns refer to people, places, or objects without identifying them specifically such as "someone", "something", and "anything". They tend to be used as non-specific references (Cutting, 2012). In certain contexts, when the pronouns such as "it", "you", and "that" do not refer to any specific referents, they can

also function as indefinite pronouns. Using indefinite pronouns can cause vagueness in communication which require listeners or readers to make an inference on the intended meaning (Termjai, 2025). However, Cutting (2012) argued that specific pronouns can normally only be interpreted by those who share relevant background knowledge, such as “Everyone was interviewed” and “I did not find anything in the data”.

- **General Extenders:** General extenders are expressions that broaden or generalise the meaning of a statement, thus introducing vagueness or imprecision into the discourse (Termjai, 2025). The examples of general extenders including “and something”, “and so on”, or “something like that”, “or whatever”, and “et cetera”. The writers usually use “and so on” in their English academic writing (Biber, et.al, 1999). In oral communication, the utilisation of general extenders can make spoken language more convenient because they are used to convey a general sense of a category without specifying every item within it (McCarthy, 2020).
- **Vague Quantifiers:** Vague quantifiers can be referred to words or phrases that express an approximate quantity rather than an exact amount (Termjai, 2025). Ruzaitė (2004) claimed that vague quantifiers are used when writers feel that precision is “unnecessary” (Ruzaitė, 2004). The examples of vague quantifiers are “some”, “several”, “many”, “a lot of”, “plenty of”, “most”, “various”, “a large sum of”, and “a number of”.

Previous Studies on Vague Language

The same grammatical or lexical feature can have very different implied meaning in different contexts, in other words, the use of vague language can be exchanged in all types of discourse genres and context (McGee, 2018). There are numerous factors of using vague language including the age of speakers, their preferred communication styles, adherence to cultural norms, and linguistic backgrounds (Termjai, 2025).

For instance, Parvaresh and Ahmadian (2016) investigated whether and how task structures affected the number and types of vague expressions used by 50 Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students who are the native speakers of Persian with limited opportunity to interact with native English speakers and no experience in English-speaking countries. They discovered that there were more vague expressions such as ‘vague nouns’, ‘vague quantifiers’, ‘vague deintensifiers’ and ‘vague subjectivisers’ used in unstructured tasks because the nature of the unstructured task required the participants to both make sense of the story that they wanted to narrate and search for the right vocabularies to communicate their intended message effectively.

Furthermore, another study found that general extenders occurred more frequently in spoken than in written language because they facilitated interaction and the negotiation of meaning among speakers (Martínez, 2011). Besides, the researcher revealed that British adults commonly used general extenders as they used wider range of those items than teenagers. However, the British teenagers tended to use some general extenders such as “and stuff” and “and everything,” and “and that” due to situational and contextual factors.

Although extensive research has been conducted on vague language in spoken discourse, it is important to investigate its usage in written discourse, particularly academic writing. Therefore, the following section reviews previous studies on vague language in written

communication, which are directly relevant to the present study on vague language usage in Malaysian ESL students' argumentative essays.

Termjai (2025) conducted a study on 36 third-year English major students from a government university in Thailand enrolled in the Persuasive and Argumentative Writing course. He revealed a significant prevalence of vague language in the essays, with four typical forms identified including general nouns, indefinite pronouns, vague quantifiers, and general verbs.

In 2012, Cutting analysed abstracts for a British Association for Applied Linguistics conference and a Sociolinguistics Symposium to examine the genre of conference abstracts in terms of vague language, specifically universal general nouns such as "people" and research general nouns such as "results". The study revealed that all authors used vague language as part of the conference abstract genre which serves the functions of convenience and anticipation (Cutting, 2012).

Moreover, Pan (2012) investigated the use of vague language in some English newspapers. She found that the vague language helped and strengthened the artistic effects of the news reports, particularly when precise numerical data or detailed information could not be presented directly which improved reliability, veracity, and objectivity in news reports. The example given:

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin pledged to protect the 1,000,000 Jewish settlers living alongside almost 2 million Arabs in the occupied territories and said he intended to reduce as quickly as possible the number of Palestinians working in Israeli cities."
(From *The South China Morning Post*, Feb.8, 1993)

Based on the example above, the use of vague quantifiers "almost 2 million Arabs" enables reporters to convey information when precise details are unavailable, uncertain, and unimportant (Termjai, 2025).

Vagueness in language is often being said as something negative (McGee, 2018) especially in science, technology, and research which involve with scientific experiments where precision and clarity are necessary. On the other hand, the use of vague language in everyday life, arts, and literature is regarded as normal and acceptable (McGee, 2018).

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique. A total of 35 Diploma in Communication and Media students at a public university in southern Malaysia took part in the study. The participants, comprising 10 males and 25 females, were in their third semester of study at the university.

At the time of the study, the students had already passed two English courses during the first and second semesters including *English for Communicative Competence I* and *English for Communicative Competence II*. The courses required the students to learn basic grammar and write narrative writing, email writing, and expository essays. Generally, they had basic English writing ability and exposition writing knowledge.

Instruments

This study employed the final test paper from the *English for Communicative Competence III* as the research instrument. The researcher collected the argumentative essays from students after the final test. The final test paper was developed by the course instructors from various campuses which aimed to assess students' proficiency in composing a five-paragraph argumentative essay. The essays were written in response to the assigned situation:

Situation:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools are now widely used by university students to help with their assignments, both individual and group projects, such as writing, reading, and data analysis. Some argue that these tools save time and help students learn faster in a digital world. However, others believe that relying on AI prevents students from thinking critically and developing original ideas. Do you think using AI benefits students, or does it negatively affect their learning?

Instruction:

Write an argumentative essay of 300-350 words in response to the issue of using AI tools among university students.

Data Collection

The data for this study was collected during the 2025-2026 academic year. At the end of the course, the students were asked to write an argumentative essay as the final test. During the final test, students were advised to compose an argumentative essay within 75 minutes. The essay must be between 300 and 350 words long and the total mark of it is 25 points. Then, the researcher collected the essays for further analysis.

Data Analysis

This study utilised Termjai (2025) framework, which was based on Cutting's (2012) classification of vague language to analyse five specific categories of vague language:

- General nouns
- General verbs
- Indefinite pronouns
- General extenders
- Vague quantifiers

The researcher started the analysis by reading through 35 five-paragraph argumentative essays (totalling 12,077 words) written by students. Then, the researcher manually tagged the students' argumentative essays to identify and count every occurrence of vague language across the corpus.

Next, each identified instance was grouped into one of five categories according to Termjai's (2025) framework, adapted from Cutting (2012). The researcher also examined which type of vague language was most and least frequently employed by students.

Finally, the researcher identified examples of vague language used by students in their essays and categorised them according to five specific categories of vague language which are presented in Table 3.

Findings and Discussion

The data collected from argumentative essays are reported in this chapter.

To What Extent Is Vague Language Employed In Argumentative Essays Written By Malaysian ESL Students?

Total vague language instances and mean vague language instances are shown in Table 1. From Table 1, it can be seen that 35 argumentative essays contained a total of 12077 words and there were 328 instances of vague language with an average of 9.37 instances per essay.

The data shown on Table 1 suggest that vague language was a recurring feature of the Malaysian ESL students' argumentative essays. The results confirm the findings of Termjai (2025). Termjai (2025) found that Thai EFL undergraduates employed various vague expressions such as general nouns, general verbs, indefinite pronouns, and vague quantifiers in their argumentative essays.

There are several possible explanations for this outcome. There is a strong possibility that students employed vague language in argumentative writing because they expect their readers to understand the intended meaning from the context (Cusen, 2019). Furthermore, it is highly likely that using vague language can help students expressing generalisations and avoiding unnecessary details.

Additionally, vague expressions may be employed when language users are uncertain or unable to provide precise information (Alkhatnai, 2017). Another reason for the use of vague language in argumentative essays may be related to students' difficulty retrieving appropriate vocabularies or expressing complex arguments precisely. The students might be relied on vague expressions to manage the challenges of argumentative writing such as limited vocabulary or difficulty in formulating precise arguments (Termjai, 2025). This can be supported by Parvaresh and Ahmadian (2016), they explained that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners produced more vague expressions when they had to formulate ideas and search simultaneously for suitable vocabulary to communicate their intended meanings.

Nevertheless, the presence of vague language in students' argumentative essays should not be interpreted as evidence of weak writing because vague language appeared in academic conference abstracts that functions as convenience and anticipation (Cutting, 2012). This explains that vague language can be a legitimate rhetorical resource in academic discourse which depends on its function and context. In argumentative essays, vague language may become problematic when it produces unclear references, unsupported generalisations or imprecise claims. Therefore, the use of vague language in argumentative essays must be examined contextually before determining whether they represent purposeful vagueness or a lack of linguistic precision.

Table 1: Overall Frequency of Vague Language in Malaysian ESL Students' Argumentative Essays

Number of Essays	Total Words	Total Language Instances	Vague Language Instances	Mean VL instances per essay
35	12,077	328		9.37

What Are The Typical Forms Of Vague Language Employed In Students' Essays?

Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage of vague language forms in students' argumentative essays. As depicted in Table 2, indefinite pronouns were the most frequently used in students' argumentative essays (25.61%), followed by vague quantifiers (25%), general verbs (24.70%), and general nouns (24.39%). General extenders were found to be the least frequently used (0.30%). The analysis revealed that the frequencies of indefinite pronouns, vague quantifiers, general verbs and general nouns were notably similar although indefinite pronouns ranked first.

It is clear from Table 2 that the most frequently used of vague language was indefinite pronouns. One possible explanation is that students frequently used indefinite pronouns to make general references to people, objects and ideas without identifying them specifically. The following excerpt by one of the students clearly shows the way the student used the indefinite pronoun anything to make a broad generalisation:

*"Many people solve **anything** only by using their devices."* (Student 15)

In this excerpt, "anything" creates a broad and unspecified reference because the student did not specifically clarify the "problems" or "tasks" that people solve using their devices. Its interpretation depends on the reader's ability to infer the intended referent. Cutting (2012) explained that writers use indefinite pronouns as non-specific references, the meanings may depend on readers' ability to infer the intended referents.

In an argumentative writing, indefinite pronouns may facilitate generalisation, but they may also reduce clarity when the referents cannot be identified from the surrounding context. The frequency of indefinite pronouns in the present study was relatively close to that reported by Termjai (2025). One possible explanation is that non-specific references constitute a common feature of both Malaysian ESL and Thai EFL students' argumentative writing, even though the dominant vague-language category differed between the two studies.

The second most frequently used category of vague language was vague quantifiers. Based on the analysis, students used "many", "some", "a lot of", "several", and "a number of" in their argumentative essays. For example:

*"**Some** people believe that using Artificial Intelligence negatively affects students' learning."* (Student 16)

According to Ruzait (2004), writers employ vague quantifiers when they consider numerical precision as "unnecessary". This is in line with Pan (2012) who stated that that vague quantifiers in newspapers enabled writers to communicate information when precise numerical details were unavailable, uncertain, or unimportant. Thus, the use of vague quantifiers is not

inherently inappropriate because they may serve a valid communicative function in certain contexts.

However, vague quantifiers may weaken claims in argumentative essays when students make broad generalisations. For example, expressions such as “many” students or “a lot of” problems do not indicate the actual number, proportion, or extent involved. Their frequent use is possibly due to lack of access to precise evidence or considered exact quantities unnecessary. It may also reflect difficulty in expressing statistical or quantitative information accurately. Therefore, students need to understand when approximation is acceptable and when precise quantities or supporting evidence are necessary to strengthen their arguments in an argumentative writing. General extenders were the least frequently used in ESL argumentative essays. Only one student in the present study used “et cetera” in the argumentative essay. As written by a student in his argumentative essay:

*“Some students use AI to help them complete their assignments such as reading texts, writing essays **et cetera**.”* (Student 23)

The result in this study differs slightly from that of Termjai (2025), who discovered no instances of general extenders were found in the essays of Thai EFL undergraduate students. Hence, both studies demonstrate that general extenders are rarely used in ESL and EFL students’ argumentative writing.

Martínez (2011) stated that general extenders occur more frequently in spoken than in written language because they facilitate interaction and the negotiation of meaning between speakers. Since general extenders are commonly associated with conversational and informal language, their extremely low frequency in the present study may reflect the formal written nature of the argumentative writing task.

The low occurrence of general extenders in ESL students’ argumentative essays may also be associated with students’ understanding that conversational expressions such as and so on and or something like that are unsuitable for academic writing. However, this interpretation requires careful consideration because the present study did not directly examine students’ reasons for avoiding general extenders.

Their limited occurrence could also be influenced by the essay topics, task instructions, students’ language proficiency, or their limited familiarity with these expressions. Therefore, it cannot be concluded from the frequency data alone that the students deliberately avoided general extenders.

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Vague Language Forms in Argumentative Essays

Vague Category	Language	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Rank
Indefinite Pronouns		84	25.61	1
Vague Quantifiers		82	25.00	2
General Verbs		81	24.70	3
General Nouns		80	24.39	4
General Extenders		1	0.30	5
Total		328	100%	

Table 3: Examples of Vague Expressions by Vague Language Forms

Vague Language Forms	Examples
Indefinite Pronouns	something, someone, you, everyone, others, anything, everything, your, us, they, everywhere
Vague Quantifiers	many, some, a lot of, several, a number of
General Verbs	interact with, get, do, make
General Nouns	problems, thing, people, problems, conflicts, information, issue
General Extenders	et cetera.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the use of vague language in argumentative essays written by Malaysian ESL, specifically investigating the extent of vague language usage and identifying typical vague language forms. The present study has shown that Malaysian ESL students used vague language such as indefinite pronouns, vague quantifiers, general verbs, general nouns, and general extenders in their argumentative essays.

Findings of the present study can have several implications. Firstly, English educators can provide explicit instruction for students by teaching them about the use of vague language in academic writing, particularly argumentative writing. They can guide students to replace unclear pronouns with specific referents, support vague quantifiers with solid evidence, and choose precise verbs and nouns to be written in their essays to enhance clarity of the ideas. For example:

Indefinite Pronoun Resolution: Present students with authentic corpus examples, such as “Many people solve *anything* by using their devices” and guide students to replace broad terms like “anything” with precise ideas (e.g., “complex mathematical problems”).

Furthermore, this study offers a pedagogical contribution by providing syllabus developers with a structured instructional model for teaching vague language. By incorporating explicit instruction on vague language into academic writing modules, educators can help students distinguish between purposeful vague language and inappropriate lexical imprecision to construct stronger, more persuasive argumentative essays.

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