

The Analysis of Schematic Structure in Students' Argumentative Essays

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ABSTRACT

Argumentative essay is an important component in English writing for students in China. The present study investigated the schematic structure of a higher vocational college students' argumentative writings and its pedagogical implementation in teaching and learning English writing in China context. This study utilized a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze fifteen English argumentative essays of students from a higher vocational college in Anhui, China. The schematic structure was analyzed based on Lee's (2006) model under Systemic Functional Linguistics. The findings showed that when writing argumentative essays, higher vocational college students in China centered on giving 'Thesis', 'Arguments' and 'Reinforcement' stages. Some essays including high-graded essays did not present the 'Identification' stage and many essays ignored the 'Recommendation' stage. For the 'Arguments' stage, middle-graded and low-graded essays did not exhibit the 'Point' and 'Elaboration' steps clearly. As many students failed to write reasonable and persuasive argumentative essays, the pedagogical implication is that teachers should help students be conscious of the schematic structure of different writing genres, and give students more opportunities to practice writing.

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Contribution/Originality: This study analyzed and compared the schematic structure of higher vocational college students' argumentative essays in China. The findings revealed some differences among different levels of essays, which can provide practical pedagogical implications for language learners and teachers.

1. Introduction

The importance of learning English in China has been emphasized in the education system since 2001 beginning from Grade Three in primary school. Whether in basic or higher education, English courses are scheduled at school to enhance students' proficiency in English skills. Among all the language learning skills, writing is the most significant and challenging (Liao & Liao, 2022; Pham & Bui, 2021). Besides, students have to cope with different genres of writing tasks, in which argumentative essay writing is common and important (Cao, 2018). English tests in China such as CET (College English Test), TEM (Test for English Majors) and international tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, all involve argumentative writing tasks. Zhang (2018) supports that argumentative essay writing is essential for students to enhance their academic skills. Hirvela (2017) asserts that effective argumentative writing ability is also a crucial indicator for second language learners to prove their writing proficiency level. However, argumentative writing is more demanding as it is tied to a variety of skills, problem-solving, critical thinking and knowledge construction (Liao & Liao, 2022). Besides language problems, ESL or EFL students often face greater language and cultural hurdles while writing argumentative essays than L1 students do (Zhang, 2018).

For higher vocational college (henceforth HVC) students in China, learning English is very important for further education and better career prospect. Thus, many HVC students choose to take English tests like CET(College English Test) to determine their English language proficiency. However, most HVC students with low English learning foundations have severe language problems in writing English texts (Tian, 2019; Wu, 2022) due to their diversified backgrounds (Ma, 2022). Some HVC students are from senior middle schools who are incapable of entering universities; some come from secondary vocational schools. Hence, it has been consistently difficult for HVC students to write essays in English, especially argumentative texts that require a high level of logical thinking and language expression ability (Lei, 2017).

In view of the importance and difficulty of learning English writing, more studies need to be conducted in this area, particularly concerning HVC students in China. Various studies have been conducted on the analysis of argumentative essays' structure (Imtiaz & Mahmood, 2014; Kanestion & Singh, 2019; Cao, 2018; Li, 2014; Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020; Zheng, 2013). However, most studies centered on university students' writings and there is a lack of studies on investigating the schematic structure of HVC students' argumentative writings based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach in China. Therefore, the present study utilized Lee's (2006) model under SFL to investigate the schematic structure of HVC students' argumentative writings.

2. Literature Review

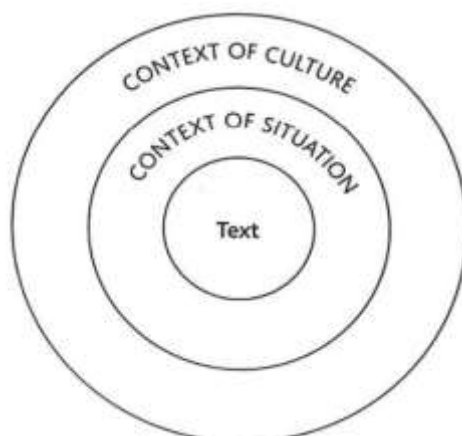
In argumentative writing, various studies have been conducted to investigate the schematic structure or move-step structure based on different models. In this part, text in SFL and the schematic structure, as well as some previous studies on this area are introduced briefly.

2.1. Text in SFL

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is an applicable theory founded by Halliday (1978), which studies the relationship between language and its functions in social

settings (Wang & Ma, 2022). In SFL, the term “text” refers to a spoken or written semantic unit of any length (Halliday, 1978). A text is a well-organized collection of meaning that makes sense in its context. It always occurs in two contexts, one within the other, as Figure 1 demonstrates graphically. The similarities and differences between one piece of language and another are caused by the combination of context of culture and context of situation results (Butt et al., 2012).

Figure 1: Text in context



Source: Butt et al. (2012)

2.2. Schematic Structure

Based on SFL, a text’s generic identity is similar to other texts of its genre, lies in the co-occurrence of a particular context, or its register configuration, the texts staged or schematic structure and the realization patterns in the text (Eggins, 2004). Martin (2009) states that genre is a process which can be characterized as staged, goal-oriented and social, which involves several phases and interaction with others to achieve specific purposes. Eggins (2004) also asserts that people set up a series of steps or stages due to the habit of joint negotiation of communicative tasks. These functional stages occurring in a particular sequence, are called the schematic structure of a genre. In short, schematic structure refers to the staged, step-by-step organization, which helps to develop linguistic expression within a genre.

In the current study, the texts studied are students’ argumentative writings, which is one of the common genres in English learning in China. One of the uniqueness of investigating the essays is the schematic structure proposed in the “Write it Right” project (Coffin, 1996), which is identification, thesis, series of arguments, reinforcement and recommendation. Lee (2006) explained more about the stages as Table 1 shows, which is appropriate for the researcher to utilize in the current study.

Table 1: The Stage and Functions of the Schematic Structure

Stage	Function
Identification (background/situation)	Provide a context for the issue.
Thesis	Introduce the issue in question and state the writer’s position.

Series of Arguments	Arguing case: Point Elaboration	Several arguments or micro-arguments are brought together to prove the overall macro-argument or thesis.
Reinforcement		Reaffirms the point of view.
Recommendation		Recommends a course of action, taking the form of a suggestion or a demand.

Source: [Lee \(2006\)](#)

2.3. Previous Studies on the Argumentative Essay Structure in EFL Contexts

In light of the available literature relevant to the present study in recent years, in China, most studies were based on the ESP genre school, such as speech, thesis, letter and webpage ([Ding & Qin, 2023](#); [Lei & Yang, 2019](#); [Liang, 2022](#); [Wang, 2016](#); [Yang & Xiao, 2023](#); [Zhang et al., 2019](#); [Zhao, 2020](#)). Moreover, previous studies on the structure of argumentative essays centered more on university students' writing ([Cao, 2018](#); [Imtiaz & Mahmood, 2014](#); [Kanestion & Singh, 2019](#); [Li, 2014](#); [Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020](#); [Zheng, 2013](#)).

[Imtiaz and Mahmood \(2014\)](#) used the model of [Hyland \(1990\)](#) to analyze the move-step structure of the argumentative essays written by Pakistani college and university students. Results showed that most of the argumentative essays followed the three stages given in the model. The study also revealed that there were some new moves in the essays that did not exist in the model. The researchers claimed that the findings could provide better guidelines for the teachers in Pakistan with better information that can help to improve their teaching approach and materials for academic writing.

In addition, [Kanestion and Singh \(2019\)](#) analyzed the introductory paragraphs of 14 argumentative writings produced by the pre-university students in Malaysia using the model of [Swales \(1990\)](#) and the analytical framework of [Hyland \(1990\)](#) as the guidelines. The study used a compiled representative corpus of argumentative essays to examine the moves. The researchers claim that the pre-university students need to be aware of the argumentative essay's rhetorical structure, as the findings of their study revealed that majority of students had difficulty in constructing and developing ideas in introductory paragraphs of argumentative essays. Consequently, the pedagogical implication of the study was that the familiarization of rhetorical structure could ease the students' writing process in producing effective introductory paragraphs.

Another study by [Ozfidan and Mitchell \(2020\)](#) aimed to detect students' difficulties in argumentative writing. The students were from a Saudi university. After statistically describing, the study revealed some common difficulties including structure, thesis statement, integrating academic sources, finding evidence, writing counterclaims, etc. In terms of structure, nearly half of the students' writings met or above expectations, while the rest accounted for more than half, among which 22.46% of the essays did not meet expectations. Besides, more detailed statistics were presented to show students' difficulties. The study identified Saudi undergraduate students' weaknesses in structure by statistics as well as other problems, which can provide insights for improving instruction and students' writing performance.

Additionally, [Zheng \(2013\)](#) employed the classification of the organizational patterns of argumentative essay structure by [Kamimura and Oi \(1996\)](#) to compare English argumentative writings of Chinese, Korean university EFL learners and English native

speakers, from seven aspects with the help of NVivo. Moreover, based on the cultural thought model of Kaplan (1966), the findings revealed that the Chinese and Korean learners probably shared more similarities than differences. One finding concluded was that the Chinese university EFL learners might be more indirect when stating their opinions because they wrote background information more frequently than Korean university EFL learners. The results indicated that Chinese and Korean EFL writers, especially most of the university students could handle the structure of English argumentative writings with enough writing practice and teachers' instruction.

Li (2014) investigated the current situation of move-step structure of the essays written by English majors in an EFL context. A selected analytic framework of Hyland (1990) was used to analyze the move-step structure of the essays. Results revealed that the majority of the argumentative essays were found to follow the three stages set in the model and showed the occurrence of two new moves namely "non-supporting move" and "Suggestion move" that did not exist in Hyland's (1990) model, which highlighted the unique move-step structure of the argumentative essays for English majors at this stage.

Cao (2018) investigated the textual organization of university students' argumentative essays based on an adapted model of Hyland (1990) and the model of Swales (1990). The results indicated that these students utilized a direct way more than indirect to compose their writing but with Chinese thinking patterns. Besides, they used fewer moves, unpersuasive arguments and simple endings. The research suggested that students had great problems in English argumentative writing and they should gain systematic guidance for their English writing.

In short, as shown in the above literature, students' challenges or difficulties in writing argumentative essays can be overcome by knowing the structure well. However, there is a lack of research on investigating the schematic structure of HVC students' English argumentative essays based on SFL approach in China. Thus, the present study investigated the schematic structure of the HVC students' argumentative essays as it is valuable and essential. The schematic structure of three different levels—high-graded, middle-graded and low-graded essays were analyzed. On the basis of that, the research questions in this study are the following:

- i. What is the schematic structure of high-graded, middle-graded and low-graded essays?
- ii. What are the differences among the schematic structure of high-graded, middle-graded and low-graded essays?

3. Research Methodology

The main purpose of conducting this study was to investigate the schematic structure of HVC students' argumentative essays in China. To achieve this goal, the study adopted a descriptive qualitative methodology.

The target population for this study is Year One students in a public HVC in China. Students were given a topic of a CET-4 test about "Whether technology will make people lazy". They were allowed 30 minutes to write an essay between 120 and 180 words based on the requirement of the CET-4 test. Fifteen argumentative essays were collected, and they were divided into three levels, i.e. high-graded essays (HGEs), middle-graded essays (MGEs) and low-graded essays (LGEs). The analysis was

conducted manually to examine the schematic structure based on Lee's (2006) model as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Outline of Analysis of Schematic Structure

Stages	Steps of Arguments
Identification	
Thesis	
Series of Arguments	Arguing case 1: Point Elaboration
	Arguing case 2: Point Elaboration
Reinforcement	
Recommendation	

4. Results

The fifteen essays collected were sorted into three levels, i.e. HGEs, MGEs and LGEs. The following are the results of the schematic structure analysis and the comparison of the differences.

4.1. The Schematic Structure of HGEs, MGEs and LGEs

4.1.1. HGEs

This section presents in detail the results of the schematic structure analysis of HGEs.

a) The 'Identification' and 'Thesis' Stages of HGEs

Table 3 presents the 'Identification' and 'Thesis' Stages of HGEs. Among the HGE group, two essays contained the 'Identification' stage and all the essays included the 'Thesis' stage.

Table 3: The 'Identification' and 'Thesis' Stages of HGEs

Essay No.	1	2	3	4	5
Identification	√	√	/	/	√
Thesis	√	√	√	√	√

Table 4 shows the sample of Essay 2 which presents the 'Identification' and 'Thesis' stages. The writer wrote the background information before showing the opinion.

Table 4: The 'Identification' and 'Thesis' Stages of Essay 2

Stage	Content
Identification	With the continuous development of technology, our life has become more and more convenient. Many people began to think about a question: Will technology make people lazy?

Thesis	In my opinion, technology will not make people lazy.
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Unlike the other HGEs, Essay 5 presents the ‘Thesis’ stage first followed by the ‘Identification’ stage. To illustrate, Table 5 shows the sample of Essay 5.

Table 5: The ‘Identification’ and ‘Thesis’ Stages of Essay 5

Stage	Content
Thesis	In my opinion, I think technology will make people lazy.
Identification	As we all know “Labor creates wealth”. With the development of technology, more and more intelligent products enter people’s life. However, it must be pointed out that many people have become increasingly lazy due to the technology appearance of these products.

b) The ‘Argument’ Stage of HGEs

In terms of the ‘Argument’ stage, all HGEs included the Arguing cases with Point and Elaboration. As can be seen in Table 6, two essays included three Arguing cases, two essays contained two Arguing cases and one essay had one Arguing case.

Table 6: The ‘Argument’ Stage of HGEs

Essay No.		1	2	3	4	5
Arguing case 1	Point	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Elaboration	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Arguing case 2	Point	✓	✓	✓	/	✓
	Elaboration	✓	✓	✓	/	✓
Arguing case 3	Point	✓	✓	/	/	/
	Elaboration	/	✓	/	/	/

For the delicate steps of the ‘Argument’ stage, Essay 1 included three Points and two Elaborations. Essay 2 had three Points and three Elaborations. Essay 3 and Essay 5 included two arguing cases and are clearly presented in two paragraphs. Essay 4 had only arguing case 1 with Point and detailed Elaboration in one paragraph. The content of the Arguing stage can be identified easily as most HGEs involved transitional marker words, such as ‘First and foremost, in addition’. Table 7 shows the detailed steps of the ‘Argument’ stage of Essay 2 clearly with “First of all, Secondly, Finally”. The essay comprised three Points and three Elaborations.

Table 7: The ‘Argument’ Stage of Essay 2

Steps of Arguments	Content
Arguing case 1	Point First of all, the continuous progress of technology comes from the continuous effort and exploration of human beings.
	Elaboration If human beings become lazy, then technology will not continue to develop.
Arguing case 2	Point Secondly, technology make us avoid a lot of unnecessary labor.
	Elaboration This has nothing to do with human beings’ laziness.
Arguing case 3	Point Finally technology is just a tool to help us,(should be .)
	Elaboration it can’t help us think and it can’t help us if ourselves don’t make the effort.

c) The 'Reinforcement' and 'Recommendation' Stages of HGEs

Table 8 introduces the 'Reinforcement' and 'Recommendation' stages of HGEs. The five essays all comprised the 'Reinforcement' stage in the last paragraph. Only one essay had a very short 'Recommendation' stage after the 'Reinforcement'. Based on the findings, it is evident that these students are not used to writing the 'Recommendation' stage in their essays.

Table 8: The 'Reinforcement' and 'Recommendation' Stages of HGEs

Essay No.	1	2	3	4	5
Reinforcement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Recommendation	/	/	✓	/	/

Table 9 is the sample of Essay 3 which presents the 'Reinforcement' and 'Recommendation' stages in the ending.

Table 9: The 'Reinforcement' and 'Recommendation' Stages of Essay 3

Stage	Content
Reinforcement	Above all, I think technology will make people lazy,
Recommendation	so we need use it rightly.

Table 10 is the sample of the 'Reinforcement' stage in Essay 4. The 'Recommendation' stage did not exist in this essay.

Table 10: The Reinforcement Stage of Essay 4

Stage	Content
Reinforcement	Some people may be lazy after using technology because they don't want to work hard. I think whether technology can make people lazy should depend on oneself, but not technology. So technology can't make people lazy.
Recommendation	/

4.1.2. MGEs

This section presents in detail the results of schematic structure analysis of MGEs.

a) The 'Identification' and 'Thesis' Stages of MGEs

In terms of the 'Identification' stage, two MGEs included the relevant background information. Meanwhile, three MGEs included the 'Thesis' stage. Table 11 presents the 'Identification' and 'Thesis' Stages of MGEs.

Table 11: The 'Identification' and 'Thesis' Stages of MGEs

Essay No.	6	7	8	9	10
Identification	/	✓	/	✓	/
Thesis	✓	/	/	✓	✓

Among MGEs, Essay 7 failed in providing a 'Thesis' in the beginning paragraph after the 'Identification' stage. Table 12 is the sample of Essay 7 which presents the 'Identification' stage with grammatical errors.

Table 12: The 'Identification' Stage of Essay 7

Stage	Content
Identification	Today, world technology quickly development, every time can have some change. We don't can happen what change.
Thesis	/

Table 13 is the sample of Essay 9 which presents the 'Identification' and 'Thesis' stages with grammatical and spelling errors.

Table 13: The 'Identification' and 'Thesis' Stages of Essay 9

Stage	Content
Identification	With the rapid development of science and technology, It has brought a lot of convience and quickly to ours life. But some think that will make people lazy.
Thesis	On my opion, technology does not make people lazy.

b) The 'Argument' Stage of MGEs

In terms of the 'Argument' stage, all MGEs consisted of Point and Elaboration. Three MGEs included one Arguing case and two MGEs included two Arguing cases. The result can be seen clearly in Table 14.

Table 14: The 'Argument' Stage of MGEs

Essay No.		6	7	8	9	10
Arguing case 1	Point	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Elaboration	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Arguing case 2	Point	/	/	✓	/	✓
	Elaboration	/	/	✓	/	✓

Specifically, Essay 6 contained one Arguing case in this stage, but it would be clearer to divide them into two Arguing cases. Essay 7 had only one Arguing case with language problems. Essay 8 comprised two Arguing cases and they were not clearly presented. In Essay 9, there are marker words such as "First and foremost, on the other hand", but the essay comprised only one Arguing case. Essay 10 included 2 Arguments using marker words such as "Firstly; Finally", but the content was not well elaborated. Table 15 is the sample of Essay 8 which presents the 'Argument' stage with language problems.

Table 15: The 'Argument' Stage of Essay 8

Steps of Arguments	Content
Arguing case 1	Point With the development technology. People rely on it more.
	Elaboration For example, people used to go gut with cash, but now they only carry mobile phones and pay with phones.
Arguing case 2	Point Technology bring us convenience, but also allows more. And the man became lazy.

Elaboration	With the development of technology, more and more people don't eating out instead of ordering food online. The technology does bring a lot of convenience, but is also caused many people to depend on it, which caused the body for bad and be lazy.
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c) The 'Reinforcement' and 'Recommendation' Stages of MGEs

As displayed in Table 16, all the MGEs included the 'Reinforcement' stage. Most MGEs stated "So (,) I think..." to give a concise conclusion to reclaim their opinion as 'Reinforcement'. What is worth mentioning is that two MGEs included the 'Recommendation' stage although they had language problems.

Table 16: The 'Reinforcement' and 'Recommendation' Stages of MGEs

Essay No.	6	7	8	9	10
Reinforcement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Recommendation	/	/	/	✓	✓

Table 17 introduces the sample of the 'Reinforcement' stage in Essay 7 with grammatical and spelling errors. The reason that the writer used '*world can quick develement*' might due to Chinese thinking patterns.

Table 17: The 'Reinforcement' Stage of Essay 7

Stage	Content
Reinforcement	So, I think, technology can will people lazy. But, I also think, this is good things, world can quick develement. People life will better.
Recommendation	/

Table 18 introduces the sample of Essay 10 which presents the 'Reinforcement' and 'Recommendation' stages with language problems.

Table 18: The 'Reinforcement' and 'Recommendation' Stages of Essay 10

Stage	Content
Reinforcement	To sum up, technology will make people lazy.
Recommendation	People need improve ourself abilities that they will be able to live.

4.1.3. LGEs

This section presents in detail the results of schematic structure analysis of LGEs.

a) The Stages of 'Identification' and 'Thesis' of LGEs

As seen in Table 19, not a single LGE essay included the 'Identification' stage. All the LGEs included the 'Thesis' stage without doubt although the clause is quite short and straightforward by using "I think..." or even a simple "Yes". Only one essay begins with a different way to introduce the 'Thesis'.

Table 19: The Stages of 'Identification' and 'Thesis' of LGEs

Essay No.	11	12	13	14	15
Identification	/	/	/	/	/
Thesis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 20 is the sample of Essay 12 which presents the 'Thesis' stage with language problems.

Table 20: The 'Thesis' Stage of Essay 12

Stage	Content
Identification	/
Thesis	I think technology not make people lazy.

Among LGEs, only Essay 15 presents the 'Thesis' stage different from other essays. However, it has serious grammatical and spelling errors. Table 21 shows the sample of Essay 15.

Table 21: The 'Thesis' Stage of Essay 15

Stage	Content
Identification	/
Thesis	Modem technology produce can not make people more lazy.

b) The 'Argument' Stage of LGEs

Table 22 shows that all LGEs included the 'Argument' stage consisting of Point and Elaboration. However, due to many serious grammar errors and limited content, the Point and Elaboration steps of these essays cannot be clearly understood and they are quite unpersuasive. The 'Argument' stage of LGEs is hard to be identified through the fragmented language as many clauses are incomplete.

Table 22: The 'Argument' Stage of LGEs

Essay No.		11	12	13	14	15
Arguing case 1	Point	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Elaboration	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Arguing case 2	Point	✓	/	✓	✓	/
	Elaboration	✓	/	/	/	/
Arguing case 3	Point	/	/	/	✓	/
	Elaboration	/	/	/	/	/

For the 'Argument' stage of LGEs, many serious problems existed. Table 23 introduces the sample of the 'Argument' stage in Essay 11. The content shows great grammatical problems. While writing, the writer can't avoid the influence of Chinese.

Table 23: The 'Argument' Stage of Essay 11

Steps of Arguments	Content
Arguing case 1 Point	Technology should in life. Technology help people make

Arguing case 2	Elaboration	something.
	Point	For example, study, food, taix and life. Have technology in they thing, we can't think and don't work.
	Elaboration	For example phone, have "apple" "Huawei" "oppo"... They brand have many technology can we people facilitate.

c) The 'Reinforcement' and 'Recommendation' Stages of LGEs

As displayed in Table 24, the LGEs have quite a big problem in exhibiting the 'Reinforcement' and 'Recommendation' stages. Only two essays comprised the 'Reinforcement' stage. The rest three LGEs did not give a conclusion or summary or any form of 'Reinforcement' stage in the end. Moreover, the 'Recommendation' stage did not exist in any of the LGEs.

Table 24: The 'Reinforcement' and 'Recommendation' Stages of LGEs

Essay No.	11	12	13	14	15
Reinforcement	✓	✓	/	/	/
Recommendation	/	/	/	/	/

Table 25 and Table 26 are the samples of Essay 11 and Essay 12 which presents the 'Reinforcement' stage in a similar and simple way.

Table 25: The 'Reinforcement' Stage of Essay 11

Stage	Content
Reinforcement	So, I think technology will make people lazy!
Recommendation	/

Table 26: The 'Reinforcement' Stage of Essay 12

Stage	Content
Reinforcement	So, I think technology is good of people.
Recommendation	/

4.2. Differences of Schematic Structure Among HGEs, MGEs and LGEs

This section introduces the differences in schematic structure among HGEs, MGEs and LGEs. Table 27 clearly demonstrates the results of the comparison.

Table 27: Differences of Schematic Structure Among HGEs, MGEs and LGEs

Essay	HGEs	MGEs	LGEs
Stage			
Identification	3	2	0
Thesis	5	3	5

Arguments	5 Relatively clearly arranged with Point and Elaboration, a few language problems	5 Unclear and obscure to some extent with many language problems	5 Simple, unpersuasive and unclear with quite limited words and serious language problems
Reinforcement	5	5	2
Recommendation	1	2	0

Based on the findings, HVC students' HGEs exactly conformed their essays to the core schematic structure of argumentative essays, i.e. 'Thesis ^ Argument ^ Reinforcement' stages. Three HGEs had the 'Identification' stage, and the 'Argument' stage was clearly arranged in HGEs. Only one HGE included the 'Recommendation' stage. MGEs generally had clear 'Thesis ^ Argument ^ Reinforcement' stages. Two MGEs had the 'Identification' stage and two included the 'Recommendation' stage. However, an important weakness observed is lacking clarity and obscure to some extent in the 'Argument' stage. The LGEs' main stages were the 'Thesis ^ Argument' stages. All the LGEs did not have the 'Identification' stage; They all had a very brief 'Thesis'. In the Argument stage, the Arguing point and Elaboration content were simple, unpersuasive, or unclear as they had limited words; Three LGEs had no 'Reinforcement' stage and all of them did not include the 'Recommendation' stage. These LGEs had a common feature in that they were between 50 words and 70 as these students did not know how to arrange their clauses and enrich their content. They had incomplete sentences, and their 'Arguments' lacked proper evidence or examples. In distinct contrast from HGEs, many MGEs and LGEs written by HVC students have difficulty in the 'Argument' stage with unclear Point and Elaboration step especially LGEs as they included very limited and incomplete clauses with serious language problems. Thus, in general, the HGE writers are stronger in grasping the schematic structure and have better language ability based on [Lee's \(2006\)](#) model.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the analysis, it can be concluded that the schematic structure of these argumentative essays by different levels of HVC students has distinct characteristics. Most of the HVC students' argumentative essays have fulfilled the core schematic structure based on [Lee's \(2006\)](#) model, i.e. 'Thesis ^ Arguments ^ Reinforcement'. The HGE writers, in general, have the strongest grasp of the schematic structure and better language ability, which has helped them to obtain higher scores than those of MGEs and LGEs. Conversely, many MGEs and LGEs written by HVC students have difficulty in the Arguments stage with unclear Point and Elaboration steps especially LGEs as they often include very limited and incomplete clauses with many errors. Moreover, the writers may be influenced by Chinese thinking patterns to some extent.

The present study revealed that many HVC students have difficulties in following the schematic structure while writing the argumentative essays. Different problems existed in different levels of essays. HGEs and MGEs conformed the schematic structure better than LGEs based on [Lee's \(2006\)](#) model. Meanwhile, all the essays involved varying degrees of linguistic problems. However, the previous studies ([Zheng, 2013](#); [Li, 2014](#); [Cao, 2018](#)) found in China mainly focused on university students and they did not conduct a detailed structure comparison between successful essays and weak ones.

Additionally, those weak essays showed unpersuasive arguments might be influenced by Chinese thinking patterns in composing argumentative essays which were also the problems described by [Cao \(2018\)](#). Furthermore, only one third of the essays presented the 'Identification' stage in the present study. This result differs from the conclusion of [Zheng \(2013\)](#), which demonstrated that Chinese university EFL learners wrote background information frequently.

Hence, based on the findings of this study, it clearly highlights that HVC students especially LGE writers need effective guidance about the schematic structure of English writing, which is in accordance with the pedagogical implications of the previous studies ([Pham & Bui, 2021](#); [Cao, 2018](#)) that EFL or SFL students should be provided with systematic guidance in learning writing. English teachers should be aware of teaching different genres of writing using the concept of schematic structure. Instructors at HVCs in China can assess students' English writing skills more accurately and provide targeted feedback according to students' writing levels. [Imtiaz and Mahmood \(2014\)](#) claim that teachers can know better about their work and intervene effectively in students' writing weaknesses if they know how to analyze the essays' structure instead of getting vague ideas and impressions. Meanwhile, teaching process should be well designed to enhance students' mastery of English writing by employing genre-based approach or utilizing practical methods. This implication has also been suggested by [Zein et al. \(2021\)](#). Teachers can help EFL students become conscious of schematic structure so that the students can convey the communicative purpose effectively within a specific context. Finally, more research can be conducted in this field. In order to draw more reliable conclusions as to the problems in China context, future research can cover more samples from different places, the findings could give more insights into the research area. Besides, since SFL includes ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions, while the current research is only related to textual metafunctions, further research can explore more areas of students' academic writings under SFL.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). All procedures involving human participants in this study were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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