

A Study of Vague Language in Argumentative Essays by Thai EFL Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

This research investigated the use of vague language (VL) in argumentative essays written by Thai undergraduate students studying English as a foreign language (EFL). It aimed to explore the extent of VL usage, identify typical VL forms, and propose strategies to address its use in writing. The participants comprised 36 third-year English major students from a government university in Thailand enrolled in the Persuasive and Argumentative Writing course. The research instrument was the final exam paper from this writing course, which required students to compose an argumentative essay. The study revealed a significant prevalence of VL in the essays, with four typical forms identified: general nouns, indefinite pronouns, vague quantifiers, and general verbs. Additionally, the study proposed practical resolutions to address the use of VL in academic writing. These findings emphasise the significance of providing explicit instruction on using clear, precise, and specific language, alongside other linguistic elements, to enhance students' academic writing skills, clarity, and effectiveness in written expression.

Keywords: Vague Language; Argumentative Essays; Thai EFL Students; Academic Writing; Language Clarity

INTRODUCTION

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Vague language (VL) is prevalent in the English language. It is commonly observed in diverse communicative contexts, ranging from informal dialogues to formal discourses. It permeates various forms of interaction, including interpersonal conversations (Jones & Oakey, 2024; McGee, 2018), political speeches (Cusen, 2016; Parvaresh, 2017), news reports (Pan, 2012), and academic journal articles (Cusen, 2019; Cutting, 2012; Poole, 2022).

Previous research highlights multiple functions of VL in communication. In everyday interactions, VL promotes politeness and maintains social harmony through implicit expression (McGee, 2018). It also fosters intimacy within discourse community (Cutting, 2007). In persuasive contexts such as advertising or political discourse, VL subtly enhances persuasion by shaping interpretation without full transparency (Mannaioli et al., 2024). Additionally, politicians use VL to navigate complex topics, maintain positive public perceptions, and reach broader audiences (Cusen, 2016).

VL occurs when precise information is unavailable, uncertain, or considered irrelevant to the topic under discussion (Pan, 2012). Additionally, vagueness in a language is likely inevitable in situations where objective criteria for evaluation are absent, such as assessing intangible concepts like interest, fame, and popularity (Paris et al., 2021). Also, the use and interpretation of VL are influenced by contextual factors and shared assumptions among speakers (Cutting, 2007).

The use of VL varies depending on several factors. These include the age of speakers (Martínez, 2011), their preferred communication styles (Parvaresh, 2017), adherence to cultural norms, and linguistic backgrounds (Alkhatnai, 2017). In addition, the prevalence and forms of VL are subject to influence by communication modes, such as spoken and written language (Martínez, 2011), and linguistic registers, such as informal and formal language (Samigoullina, 2020).

While past studies have extensively explored the use of VL by native English speakers in various spoken contexts, there remains a notable gap in the existing literature regarding the use of VL by non-native English speakers in written contexts. Furthermore, there is no research specifically examining the use of VL in EFL contexts among Thai students. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating the occurrence and forms of VL in argumentative essays written by Thai EFL undergraduate students.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

VL plays a significant role in spoken communication; however, its judicious use is advised in written discourse, particularly in academic settings (Samigoullina, 2020). In the EFL context of Thailand, argumentative writing is essential for evaluating English language proficiency and critical thinking skills (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2014). It requires the clear presentation of a viewpoint, supported by compelling reasons and evidence (Oshima & Hogue, 2014), while also addressing and refuting opposing perspectives. The use of precise and specific language is crucial for conveying messages clearly and engagingly (Provost, 2019). In contrast, the inadvertent use of VL can undermine arguments and hinder reader comprehension and engagement, particularly in argumentative writing.

For example, non-native English speakers, including Thai students, may frequently use vague pronouns such as “you,” “we,” and “it,” as well as vague nouns like “people,” which lack specific referents (Dechvijankit & Puangsing, 2021). These vague expressions can result in unclear arguments, weakening the overall impact of the writing and leading to confusion for the reader. Research suggests that this use of VL may stem from challenges in expressing ideas due to varying levels of English proficiency.

Such difficulties have been highlighted in previous studies that identify common issues faced by Thai students in mastering English academic writing. These include challenges with vocabulary (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2014), grammar (Dechvijankit & Puangsing, 2021), mechanics (Pongsukvajchakull, 2022), content organization, coherence, and cohesion (Chuenchaichon, 2022). For instance, students may struggle with structuring their arguments coherently and ensuring that their writing is logically organised and precise.

Given these challenges, this study seeks to investigate the prevalence and forms of VL used in argumentative essays written by Thai students, with the aim of proposing practical solutions for improving clarity. By addressing these issues, this research can provide valuable insights into the English language proficiency and academic communication difficulties faced by Thai students. The findings may also inform educators in developing strategies to help Thai students enhance their academic writing skills, thus improving the clarity and effectiveness of their written work.

To meet these objectives, the following sections outline the research objectives and questions aimed at examining the use of VL in Thai EFL undergraduate students’ argumentative essays.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate the extent of VL usage in argumentative essays written by Thai EFL undergraduate students.
2. To identify the typical forms of VL employed in these essays.
3. To propose resolutions to address the use of VL in academic writing.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent is VL employed in argumentative essays written by Thai EFL undergraduate students?
2. What are the typical forms of VL employed in these essays?
3. What strategies can be proposed to address the use of VL in academic writing by Thai EFL students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

To comprehensively investigate the use of VL in argumentative essays written by Thai EFL undergraduate students, it is essential to explore the existing literature on VL, argumentative essay writing, and the proficiency of Thai students in English academic writing. Therefore, the Literature Review section has been organised accordingly to present these key thematic areas.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

DEFINITIONS OF VAGUE LANGUAGE

The term “vague language” (VL) has been defined by several scholars. For instance, Channell (1994) outlines the characteristics of VL as follows: “(a) it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition, (b) it is purposely or unabashedly vague, or (c) the meaning arises from intrinsic uncertainty.” According to Cutting (2012), VL consists of expressions deliberately lacking clarity, specificity, or precision, having minimal semantic content, and relying heavily on shared contextual understanding for interpretation. Similarly, Nordquist (2018) defines VL as the use of unclear, uncertain, and indefinite language in both spoken and written communication. In essence, VL refers to imprecise and uncertain expressions, which may lack clarity, specificity, and semantic content, relying significantly on shared contextual knowledge for interpretation.

FORMS OF VAGUE LANGUAGE

VL can take different forms, such as general nouns, general verbs, indefinite pronouns, general extenders, and vague quantifiers (Cutting, 2012). General nouns are broad or non-specific nouns that lack specificity regarding their referents, e.g., a particular individual, location, or object. They typically represent broader categories rather than specific entities, as seen in words like “people,” “thing,” and “stuff.”

General verbs refer to verbs that are broad or non-specific in meaning, lacking precision in indicating specific actions. Instead, they convey generalised meanings rather than specific indications of the intended action. Examples of such verbs include “do” and “get.” In some cases, the context surrounding these verbs allows for inference by speakers with shared knowledge. For instance, “You *do* Language Planning, don’t you?” might be understood as “You *take* the Language Planning course, don’t you?” when interpreted within a specific context (Cutting, 2007).

Indefinite pronouns refer to pronouns that do not refer to any specific individuals, locations, or objects. Examples of indefinite pronouns include “someone,” “something,” and “anything.” In some cases, pronouns like “it,” “you,” and “that,” can function as indefinite pronouns when they do not refer to any specific referents. However, using vague pronouns without clear referents can lead to vagueness in communication, requiring listeners or readers to infer the intended meaning.

General extenders refer to expressions used to extend or generalise the meaning of a statement, adding vagueness or imprecision. These include phrases, such as “and something,” “or something like that,” “and so on,” “or whatever,” and “et cetera.” They are used to convey a general sense of a category without specifying every item within it, making communication more convenient, particularly in spoken language (McCarthy, 2020).

Vague quantifiers are words or phrases that lack precision or specificity when quantifying objects or concepts. They are used to suggest an approximate amount or quantity without providing exact details. Instances of vague quantifiers include “some,” “several,” “many,” “a lot of,” and “a few,” allowing for interpretation depending on the context.

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON VAGUE LANGUAGE IN SPOKEN DISCOURSE

The use of VL varies depending on various factors, including the age of speakers, their preferred communication styles, adherence to cultural norms, and linguistic backgrounds. For instance, Martínez’s (2011) study provides insights into the difference in VL usage across different age groups in spoken language. The analysis revealed that British teenagers tended to use certain general extenders more frequently, such as “and stuff” and “and everything,” whereas British adults used a wider range of general extenders, including “and things,” “and so on,” and “or whatever.”

Parvaresh’s (2017) study further highlights the distinct usage of VL by Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton during the 2016 U.S. presidential debates. The analysis showed that Trump’s speech contained a significantly higher number of vague expressions. He tended to use more instances of VL in categories such as vague boosters (e.g., “very”), vague nouns (e.g., “things”), and vague extenders (e.g., “and other places”). In contrast, Clinton more frequently used vague subjectivisers (e.g., “I think”) and vague possibility indicators (e.g., “would”).

However, while advocating for the use of VL in informal contexts, Samigoullina (2020) cautions against its overgeneralisation and inappropriate usage, particularly in formal registers like academic writing, where precision is essential. She further suggests that VL may be suitable when precision is unnecessary or irrelevant to the argument’s purpose, or when the speaker or writer is uncertain about specific details.

While much research has explored VL in spoken discourse, it is equally important to examine its usage in written discourse, particularly in academic contexts, where precision and clarity are crucial. The following section will review studies focusing on VL in written communication, which is more directly related to the current study’s focus on academic writing by Thai EFL students.

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON VAGUE LANGUAGE IN WRITTEN DISCOURSE

Research into VL in written discourse has investigated various genres, including academic journals and news articles. For instance, Cutting (2012) analysed conference abstracts to examine the use of VL and its impact on informativeness. She found that conference abstracts, particularly those describing incomplete research, tend to use VL to compensate for and disguise the incompleteness of the research, resulting in low levels of informativeness. VL, including universal general nouns (e.g., “people”) and research general nouns (e.g., “results”), serves the functions of convenience and anticipation.

In a similar vein, Cusen (2019) examined the use of VL in the abstracts of academic journal articles, with an emphasis on its forms and functions. The findings revealed instances of VL, including general nouns (e.g., “issue”), vague quantifiers (e.g., “about 10 subjects”), and hedging devices (e.g., “might”), which authors used to convey meaning dependent on shared contextual knowledge. These expressions served various functions, including convenience, self-defence, courtesy, modesty, caution, and anticipation.

Furthermore, Poole (2022) investigated the use of the vague quantifier “a number of” in applied linguistics articles. The findings revealed significant variation in its usage among authors in the corpus. While some authors used the phrase only once or not at all, others used it frequently. To address the inherent vagueness of this phrase, authors used various strategies, such as exemplification, lists, or tables of information. Also, some authors strategically used this phrase to make their arguments less specific or to avoid commitment to precise quantities.

Turning to news reporting, Pan (2012) examined the use of VL in English news articles. Her analysis revealed that VL in news reporting serves to enhance reliability, veracity, and objectivity. For instance, the frequent use of vague quantifiers with referents like “at least 30” and “almost 2 million Arabs,” enables reporters to convey information when precise details are unavailable, uncertain, or unimportant.

In essence, while past studies have explored VL in both spoken and written discourses, none has specifically investigated its usage in academic compositions written by Thai EFL students. Understanding how Thai students use VL in academic contexts could shed light on their language proficiency and the challenges they face in academic communication.

ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING

This section synthesises the key concepts and findings from the existing literature review on argumentative essays, including their definition, structural complexities, common challenges for EFL students, and suggestions for improving the quality of students’ essays.

An argumentative essay is a genre in which a writer presents a viewpoint on a topic and supports it with compelling reasons and solid evidence (Oshima & Hogue, 2014). Importantly, such essays require the writer to not only support their viewpoint but also to address opposing perspectives and subsequently refute them. This underscores the writer’s comprehensive exploration of various facets of the topic.

The primary objective of argumentative essay writing is to persuade the reader of the validity of the writer’s arguments presented in the essay. While arguments may occasionally aim to alter ideas and actions, their more prevalent function is to strengthen or weaken an existing opinion or stance (Fahnestock & Secor, 2003). This persuasion is achieved by presenting a coherent argument supported by reasoning and evidence.

The structure of an argumentative essay follows a distinct pattern: it begins with an introductory paragraph containing a thesis statement, followed by body paragraphs where arguments, evidence, and counterarguments are presented, culminating in a concluding paragraph. Thresia (2013) outlines various organisational patterns for composing a five-paragraph argumentative essay, as illustrated in Figure 1.

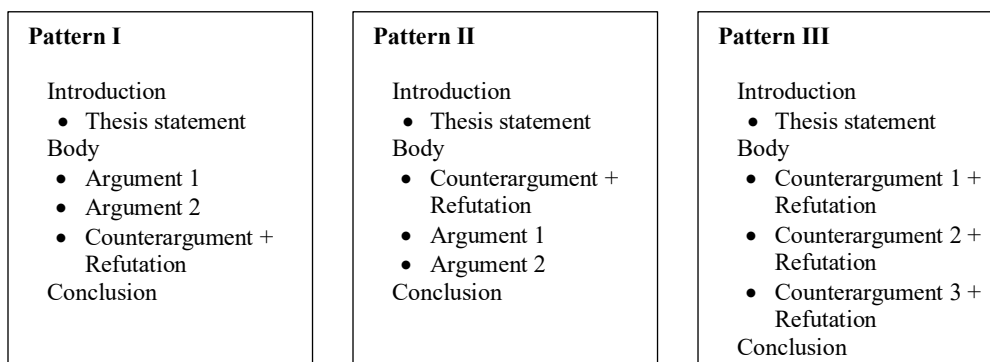


FIGURE 1. Argumentative essay organisational patterns

In EFL educational settings, argumentative essay writing serves as a valuable tool for enhancing students' critical thinking skills and writing proficiency. Supporting this notion, a study conducted by Sharadgah et al. (2019) demonstrates that students who engaged in writing argumentative essays exhibited significantly higher proficiency in critical thinking skills, including interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and explanation, compared to their peers.

However, writing argumentative essays poses various challenges for students, arising from several factors. These include language proficiency, including issues with vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures (Tanamai, 2015); adherence to genre-specific conventions, such as presenting a clear thesis statement and supporting it with reasoning and evidence (Abbas & Herdi, 2018); L1 interference, including issues with word order (Thresia, 2013) and translation as well as transfer of language structures (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2014).

In a study conducted by Ka-kan-dee and Kaur (2015), Thai EFL lecturers identified challenges in students' writing skills, including difficulties in creating a clear thesis statement, grammar weaknesses, and limited vocabulary. Their lack of familiarity with argumentative writing genres and insufficient training in written compositions further hindered their ability to construct coherent arguments and support them effectively.

To improve students' skills in writing argumentative essays and the instruction of this genre, Budiharso (2017) recommends a comprehensive essay prompt that integrates specific topics, defined purposes (e.g., persuasion, argumentation, or analysis), and clear structural guidance for introduction, body, and conclusion.

Additionally, Setyowati et al. (2017) propose that effective planning, including rough drafting, outlining, clustering, and mapping, can promote organisation, clarity, focus, argument development, and overall writing quality. By encouraging experimentation with different planning strategies, students can become more proficient and confident writers in academic settings.

Furthermore, Ka-kan-dee and Kaur (2014) emphasise the importance of teachers providing models for argumentative writing, writing practice, and instruction on academic vocabulary. Teachers can prioritise content and organisation initially and then focus on language variety and grammar in subsequent drafts (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015). In general, teachers should adjust their

teaching strategies to address student needs and learning styles to help them overcome challenges and improve their writing skills.

While these strategies are beneficial, Thai EFL students still face specific challenges in English academic writing that require further investigation. The following section will explore the unique obstacles encountered by Thai EFL students in mastering academic writing.

CHALLENGES THAI EFL STUDENTS FACE IN ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING

Exploring English academic writing proficiency among Thai EFL students reveals their perceptions and a variety of challenges. Thai students recognise the importance of mastering writing for both academic and professional purposes; nevertheless, they also perceive it as the most difficult skill among listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Sundrarajun, 2020).

Consequently, they commonly make writing errors across different linguistic levels. At the morphological level, students face challenges due to their incomplete knowledge of affixes, leading to their incorrect use and overuse (Waelatch et al., 2019). Similarly, at the lexical level, students encounter difficulties in selecting appropriate vocabulary for their writing (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2014).

Furthermore, at the syntactic level, students frequently make a range of errors, including articles, singular/plural usage, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, parallel structures, and verb tense inconsistencies (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013). Furthermore, they struggle with using different types of pronouns correctly, leading to errors related to pronoun-antecedent agreement and vague pronoun references (Dechvijankit & Puangsing, 2021).

Moreover, at the discourse level, students commonly face challenges in organising their ideas in writing, as seen in their errors in coherence and cohesion. Chuenchaichon (2022) identified issues with coherence, cohesive devices, and supporting sentences in English paragraphs written by Thai students. Mechanical errors such as punctuation, spelling, and capitalisation are also prevalent and impact the clarity and flow of written expression (Pongsukvajchakull, 2022).

Writing errors among Thai students stem from both interlingual and intralingual sources. Laikanokrat (2020) examined these errors in English essays by Thai students. He found six interlingual and eight intralingual types, such as possessive pronouns/adjectives, word forms, and conjunctions. These errors lead to grammatical inaccuracies and inconsistencies, impacting the overall clarity and readability of their writing.

Having outlined the key challenges Thai EFL students face in academic writing, it is now essential to discuss the research method employed in this study to examine their use of VL in argumentative essays.

RESEARCH METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Purposive sampling was employed to select 36 third-year English major students from a government university in Thailand enrolled in the Persuasive and Argumentative Writing course. This sample represented 53.73% of the total enrolment for the semester. All participants were Thai EFL learners with prior experience in English academic writing, having completed prerequisite courses, such as English Grammar, Basic Writing, Paragraph Writing, and Essay Writing.

INSTRUMENT

This study employed the final exam paper from the Persuasive and Argumentative Writing course as the research instrument. This exam paper was collaboratively developed by the course instructors, including the researcher and a colleague. It aimed to assess students' proficiency in composing a five-paragraph argumentative essay following Pattern I, as illustrated in Figure I and outlined by Thresia (2013).

In the examination, students were presented with four topic options, as outlined below:

1. Is it better to read fiction or nonfiction?
2. Do you agree with the ban on alcoholic drinks selling near educational institutions?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Only people who excel in school are successful.
4. Some people believe that university students should be required to attend class. Others believe that going to class should be optional for students. Which side are you on?

After selecting their topics, students were then instructed to outline and compose an argumentative essay within a three-hour timeframe under examination conditions. The essay's length was required to range between 400-450 words. Students were allowed to use a paper dictionary and provided with scratch paper for notetaking.

DATA COLLECTION

After the examination, students' papers were collected and preserved for further analysis as part of the research study. On the announcement of course grades on the university's e-registrar website, students were invited to participate in the research following established ethical guidelines for human research. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the research under the reference number P2-0393/2564. Participants' profiles were kept confidential, and research findings were used exclusively for academic purposes.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of the participants' essays employed Cutting's (2012) framework, focusing on frequency and percentage. VL forms identified included general nouns, general verbs, indefinite pronouns, general extenders, and vague quantifiers. Initially, the essays, excluding outlines, were manually tagged to identify and quantify instances of VL, addressing research question 1. Subsequently, each instance of VL was categorised to identify specific forms, addressing research question 2. Finally, practical recommendations were provided to address each identified form of VL, aiming to propose solutions to its use, as per research question 3. The following section presents the detailed results of this analysis, discussing the frequency, forms, and implications of VL usage in the students' essays.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion of this study are organised according to the three research questions (RQs) as follows.

RQ 1. TO WHAT EXTENT IS VAGUE LANGUAGE EMPLOYED IN ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS BY THAI EFL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS?

This section presents the findings and discussion of VL usage analysis in argumentative essays written by Thai EFL undergraduate students. The corpus comprised 36 essays, totaling 14,834 words and 792 sentences. On average, each essay contained 412.06 words ($SD = 58.13$) and 22 sentences ($SD = 3.96$). The examination of VL in these essays identified 865 instances of VL, averaging 24.03 instances per essay ($SD = 8.54$).

This frequency aligns with previous studies that highlight VL's common use in various contexts, such as interpersonal conversations (Jones & Oakey, 2024; McGee, 2018), political speeches (Cusen, 2016; Parvaresh, 2017), news reports (Pan, 2012), and academic papers (Cusen, 2019; Poole, 2022).

The high occurrence of VL in these essays suggests that Thai students may rely on vague expressions to manage the challenges of argumentative writing. This reliance may stem from limited vocabulary or difficulty in formulating precise arguments, aligning with previous research that identifies VL as a strategy used by authors when clarity is difficult to achieve (Cutting, 2012).

While VL can help students maintain the flow of writing, its overuse in academic essays can reduce clarity and weaken arguments. This suggests a need for targeted instruction in teaching students to use more precise language and to minimise the use of vague expressions, which is essential for effective academic writing.

RQ 2. WHAT ARE THE TYPICAL FORMS OF VAGUE LANGUAGE EMPLOYED IN THESE ESSAYS?

This section provides the findings on the various forms of VL identified in the essays. The analysis revealed four distinct forms of VL, as shown in Table 1. General nouns were the most frequently used (45.09%), followed by indefinite pronouns (23.47%), vague quantifiers (21.62%), and general verbs (9.83%). No instances of general extenders were found in the essays.

TABLE 1. Frequency and percentage of vague language forms in argumentative essays

Vague Language Forms	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
General Nouns	390	45.09	1
General Verbs	85	9.83	4
Indefinite Pronouns	203	23.47	2
General Extenders	0	0	5
Vague Quantifiers	187	21.62	3
Total	865	100	

The high occurrence of general nouns suggests that students frequently rely on broad, non-specific language to express their ideas, possibly due to limited vocabulary or difficulty finding more precise terms. This finding aligns with studies by Cutting (2012) and Cusen (2019), which also found general nouns to be prevalent in academic writing. The widespread use of general nouns

across various academic genres, such as Wikipedia entries (Paris et al., 2021) and news articles (Pan, 2012), further supports this finding.

Table 2 provides examples of vague expressions found in the essays, categorised by their forms, including general nouns, general verbs, indefinite pronouns, and vague quantifiers frequently used by the students.

TABLE 2. Examples of vague expressions by vague language forms

Vague Language Forms	Examples
General Nouns	people, place(s), thing(s), objects, stuff, student(s), children, lesson(s), institution(s), university(ies), college(s), academy, opponent(s), problem(s), information, content
General Verbs	have, get, do, be, make, use, interact with, achieve, reach
Indefinite Pronouns	everyone, someone, something, everything, somewhere, anything, they, them, it, you, yourself, we, us, some, most, no one, nobody, others, one
Vague Quantifiers	some, several, many, a lot of, plenty of, most, various, a large sum of, a number of

In contrast, the absence of general extenders may indicate students' adherence to guidelines for argumentative writing, which emphasise clarity and precision. This finding is consistent with Martínez's (2011) observation that general extenders are more common in spoken than written discourse. The use of specific examples, rather than vague generalisations, likely improves the clarity of students' arguments, an essential element of effective academic writing.

The frequent use of general nouns and other forms of VL suggests that students may be compensating for challenges in using more precise language, which is crucial in academic contexts. While the absence of general extenders shows an awareness of the need for clarity in argumentative writing, the reliance on indefinite pronouns and vague quantifiers highlights areas where students can improve their ability to construct more precise and focused arguments.

RQ 3. WHAT STRATEGIES CAN BE PROPOSED TO ADDRESS THE USE OF VAGUE LANGUAGE IN ACADEMIC WRITING BY THAI EFL STUDENTS?

This section categorises examples of VL identified in the argumentative essays by Thai students and proposes corresponding revisions to enhance clarity and effectiveness. It also discusses implications for academic writing instruction.

GENERAL NOUNS

General nouns, such as "stuff" and "thing," as exemplified in excerpts (1) and (2) respectively, exhibit vagueness as they lack specificity regarding their referents. To enhance the clarity of the writer's point in the essay, these vague nouns can be replaced with more precise nouns or noun phrases.

- (1) In other words, selling alcoholic drinks is like selling some *stuff*.
- (2) The ban on the sale of alcoholic beverages near educational institutions is a good *thing*.

In excerpt (1), the writer compares the sales of alcohol to selling “stuff,” a vague term that does not clarify what is being referenced. Replacing “stuff” with a more specific noun phrase like “consumer goods” would enhance the clarity by explicitly identifying the category of items being compared.

In excerpt (2), the writer supports the ban on alcohol sales near educational institutions, referring to it as a “good thing.” The term “thing” lacks precision, and replacing it with a more specific noun such as “policy” would make the statement clearer and more focused on the subject under discussion.

The general nouns used in these essays, as illustrated in the examples above, represent broad categories rather than specific entities, reducing the clarity of the writing. This finding supports Cutting’s (2012) assertion that general nouns typically convey limited information. The reliance on general nouns among Thai students may be linked to language proficiency issues, particularly a limited vocabulary range. This is consistent with challenges identified in previous research on Thai students’ writing (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2014; Laikanokrat, 2020; Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013).

To improve both vocabulary and writing clarity, students could benefit from explicit instruction on using superordinate and subordinate terms. For instance, instead of the broad term “people,” students could learn to use more specific alternatives such as “students,” “passengers,” or “teenagers,” depending on the context. Using specific language would allow for more precise communication, improving clarity and reader engagement (Provost, 2019). Expanding students’ vocabulary through these strategies would not only improve the specificity of their writing but also broaden their ability to convey ideas effectively.

GENERAL VERBS

General verbs, such as “get” and “do,” as illustrated in excerpts (3) and (4) respectively, are vague due to their broad meanings. The verb “get” could mean “acquire,” “buy,” or “consume,” while the verb “do” could mean “act,” “have,” or “participate in,” depending on the context. The use of these generalised verbs leads to ambiguity, making the intended action unclear. To enhance clarity, these vague verbs should be replaced with more precise alternatives.

(3) For instance, when students *get* some alcohol, it can make them feel dizzy.

(4) All the excellent students have to *do* a competition all the time such as a basketball, football competition ...

In excerpt (3), the writer discusses the effect of students “getting” alcohol, leading to dizziness. To improve clarity, “get” could be replaced with a more specific verb, such as “drink” or “consume.” This revision would make the action more explicit and align with the intended meaning.

In excerpt (4), the writer argues that high-achieving students regularly engage in competitions. However, the use of “do” is too vague in this context. Replacing “do” with more precise verbs like “participate in,” “enter,” or “take part in” would clarify the type of action the writer is describing, enhancing the overall precision of the sentence.

The general verbs identified in these essays lack specificity, often resulting in imprecise descriptions of actions. This issue may be linked to students’ limited vocabulary, which restricts their ability to express ideas clearly. These challenges are consistent with the findings of previous

research on Thai students' difficulties in choosing appropriate English words for writing (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2014).

To improve writing skills and writing clarity among Thai students, educators can focus on teaching the differences between general and specific verbs, formal and informal language (as seen with “get some alcohol”), and common verb collocations (as in “do a competition”). By expanding students' understanding of these language terms, they can be encouraged to use more precise verbs, thereby improving the effectiveness and clarity of their writing.

INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

Pronouns, such as “it” and “some,” can be vague when they lack specific references, as demonstrated in excerpts (5) and (6) respectively. To improve clarity, pronouns should have clear antecedents and agree in number with them. Alternatively, replacing vague pronouns with explicit nouns or noun phrases can enhance the precision of the writing.

- (5) In the past, finding a bookstore in a rural community was very difficult. In my hometown, there were only two bookstores, and *it* was very far from my school.
- (6) However, *some* say that selling alcoholic drinks tends to make a huge profit for the shop owners around the educational places.

In excerpt (5), the pronoun “it” lacks a clear antecedent, as it is unclear whether it refers to the bookstores or something else. To ensure coherence, “it” could be replaced with “they,” which directly refers to the “bookstores” mentioned earlier and agrees in number. This revision clarifies the intended meaning and improves sentence flow.

In excerpt (6), the pronoun “some” is vague, as it does not identify who is making the statement. To enhance specificity, “some” could be replaced with a more explicit noun phrase like “opponents of the proposed ban on alcohol sales.” This revision clearly identifies the group being discussed and strengthens the argument by removing ambiguity.

The use of vague pronouns by Thai students may stem from challenges with language proficiency, particularly in achieving pronoun-antecedent agreement. Previous research highlights these difficulties, noting frequent errors in pronoun usage and vague references (Dechvijankit & Puangsing, 2021). Additionally, the tendency to overgeneralise, such as using “everyone” in statements like “Education is very important for everyone,” further contributes to the lack of specificity and coherence in student writing.

To improve clarity and coherence in writing, educators should guide students on how to replace indefinite pronouns with specific nouns or noun phrases. Additionally, instruction should focus on ensuring consistency between pronouns and their antecedents to help students avoid overgeneralisation and vague references in their writing.

VAGUE QUANTIFIERS

Quantifiers, such as “many” and “several,” as shown in excerpts (7) and (8) respectively, can be vague when more specific numbers are required to provide clarity. In such cases, it is advisable to replace vague quantifiers with precise ones that give a clearer sense of quantity.

- (7) I have read *many* English novels since I was young.
- (8) In my opinion, there are *several* reasons why alcohol should not be allowed to sell near schools, namely that it is risky for students, and that it can make students lose focus while studying.

In excerpt (7), the statement “I have read many English novels” could be revised with a more specific quantifier to improve clarity. For example, it could be rewritten as, “I have read over twenty English novels since I was young” or “I have read an English novel a month since I was young.” These revisions provide a clearer sense of the quantity, making the statement more informative and reducing ambiguity.

In excerpt (8), the writer’s use of “several” to explain their reasons for banning alcohol sales near schools is too vague given the context. Replacing “several” with “two,” as the writer lists only two reasons, would enhance specificity and precision. The revised thesis could read, “In my opinion, there are two main reasons why alcohol sales near schools should be banned.” This adjustment eliminates vagueness and strengthens the clarity of the argument.

The frequent use of vague quantifiers by Thai students is consistent with findings in other contexts, such as academic journal article abstracts (Cusen, 2019), news articles (Pan, 2012), and political speeches (Cusen, 2016). In these cases, vague quantifiers are used when precise details are unavailable or unnecessary. They also serve various functions, including signaling uncertainty, maintaining flexibility, or offering convenience (Cusen, 2019; Pan, 2012).

In the context of Thai students, vague quantifiers may be used as a convenience when precise information is considered irrelevant or difficult to express. However, students should be encouraged to consider when precise language is necessary for clarity and when vague quantifiers are appropriate based on the context.

In conclusion, the findings highlight differences in how VL is used by Thai students compared to native English speakers, as seen in prior research (Cutting, 2007; Parvaresh, 2017). While native speakers often use VL deliberately, Thai students tend to use it unintentionally, likely due to language proficiency issues or a lack of awareness. Educators can address this by providing explicit instruction on using precise, specific language and offering guidance on when the use of VL is appropriate. This approach will improve the clarity and quality of Thai students’ academic writing and enhance their overall language proficiency.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This research investigated the use of VL in argumentative essays written by Thai EFL undergraduate students, specifically exploring the extent of VL usage, identifying typical VL forms, and proposing practical solutions to address its use in writing. The findings revealed a significant prevalence of VL across the analysed essays, with general nouns emerging as the most prevalent, followed by indefinite pronouns and vague quantifiers. General verbs were less frequently used, and general extenders were notably absent. These findings underscored the need for addressing VL in academic writing to enhance the clarity and precision of arguments.

Moreover, the implications of these findings for learners are significant. The overuse of VL can hinder effective communication, limit the clarity of students’ arguments, and negatively impact the overall quality of academic writing. For language learners, the prevalence of VL suggests a need for focused pedagogical strategies that not only expand students’ vocabulary but

also encourage them to be more intentional in their language choices. Addressing VL in the classroom can help learners develop the precision required for higher levels of academic and professional writing, ultimately improving their proficiency and ability to express complex ideas with clarity.

In addition to explicit instruction on using clear, precise, and specific language, guidance on various linguistic elements, including vocabulary, grammar, and coherence, could prove beneficial in alleviating vague expressions, thereby enhancing students' academic writing skills and composition quality. This emphasis on clarity and precision will equip students with necessary skills to effectively convey their ideas in a scholarly and coherent manner.

Further research endeavours could explore the presence of VL in other genres of English academic writing among Thai students, such as narrative, descriptive, and persuasive compositions. Such investigations would provide a broader understanding of the occurrence and forms of VL across various academic genres. Not only would this expand the existing literature on Thai students' proficiency in English academic writing, but it would also offer valuable insights into English language education in Thailand.

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