



Argumentative Strategies in Discussion Sections of EFL Research Articles: A Genre-Based Analysis of SINTA 2 Journals in Indonesia

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Abstract

Discussion sections are central to the interpretation, justification, and disciplinary positioning of research findings. This study investigated argumentative strategies in 61 English-language EFL and applied-linguistics research articles published in three SINTA 2 journals affiliated with Muhammadiyah and Aisyiyah universities during 2024–2025. The corpus comprised 19 JFLT, 26 JEES, and 16 ELTEJ/UAD articles. Only discussion discourse was analysed: in articles with combined Results and Discussion sections, descriptive result statements, tables, statistics, and uninterpreted participant quotations were excluded. A qualitative corpus-assisted content analysis integrated Swalesian rhetorical moves, Toulmin's argument components, and Hyland's stance and engagement framework. Evaluating significance and presenting implications/recommendations each occurred in 58 articles (95.1%), while comparison with previous literature occurred in 55 (90.2%). Claims, grounds, warrants, and qualifiers were widespread, but explicit limitations appeared in only nine articles (14.8%). Concordance-audited stance counts showed 1,151 hedges and 390 boosters (2.95:1), confirming a strong preference for cautious qualification. Supportive citation functions were substantially more common than explicit contrast, and only 26 articles contained a clearly identifiable counterargument or alternative explanation. The findings show that these Discussion sections were generally interpretive and evaluative rather than merely descriptive; their principal weakness was uneven critical reflexivity, especially in acknowledging limitations, testing preferred claims against alternatives, and engaging discrepant evidence. The study offers an empirically grounded basis for academic-writing instruction and editorial guidance in Indonesian EFL publishing.

Keywords: *academic argumentation; Discussion section; genre analysis; stance and engagement; SINTA 2 journals; Toulmin model*

INTRODUCTION

Argumentation is a defining practice of academic writing because knowledge claims must be made contestable, supported with evidence, and positioned in relation to disciplinary alternatives. In research articles, the Discussion section is the principal site where writers move from reporting what was found to explaining why the findings matter, how they relate to prior research, and under what conditions the proposed interpretation is defensible (Swales & Feak, 2012; Yasuda, 2023). Effective Discussion

writing therefore involves more than summary: it requires a coordinated rhetorical sequence of interpretation, explanation, comparison, evaluation, qualification, and implication.

Three complementary perspectives clarify this process. A Swalesian genre perspective treats the Discussion as a patterned sequence of communicative moves through which writers restate salient findings, interpret them, compare them with previous research, acknowledge limitations, and establish implications. Toulmin's (2003) model identifies the internal architecture of an argument—claims, grounds, warrants, backing, qualifiers, and rebuttals—thereby distinguishing a supported interpretation from an assertion. Hyland's (2005) interactional model explains how writers calibrate commitment through hedges and boosters, express attitudes, project authorial presence, and engage readers. Taken together, the frameworks show that argumentative quality depends on both structural completeness and interpersonal negotiation.

Recent studies of EFL academic writing have reported persistent difficulties in connecting evidence to claims, developing warrants, and engaging critically with prior research. Indonesian studies have identified recognizable move structures in research-article Discussions, but also uneven elaboration of interpretations, limitations, and rhetorical justification (Arsyad, Purwo, & Adnan, 2020; Arsyad, Zaim, Ramadhan, & Lubis, 2020; Kurniawan, Lubis, & Suherdi, 2020). Cross-linguistic research similarly indicates that stance resources and citation practices vary according to linguistic background, disciplinary expectations, and publication context (Hyland, 2005; Zhang, Lee, & Chan, 2023). However, much of the available work examines a single journal, a single rhetorical framework, or student writing, and few studies integrate move analysis, argument structure, citation function, and stance within a multi-journal Indonesian corpus.

This gap is consequential in the SINTA system, where nationally accredited journals function as important venues for research dissemination and professional evaluation. A multi-journal analysis can establish whether recurring strengths and weaknesses reflect isolated editorial practices or broader patterns in Indonesian EFL publishing. Accordingly, this study analyzed Discussion sections from 61 articles in the three SINTA 2 journals published by English-related study programs within Muhammadiyah and Aisiyiah higher education institutions at the time of corpus compilation. It addressed five questions: (1) What rhetorical moves organize the Discussion sections? (2) How are Toulminian argument components realized? (3) How is previous research integrated into the argument? (4) How are stance and engagement resources used? and (5) To what extent do writers acknowledge limitations, counterarguments, and alternative interpretations?

The institutional boundary of the corpus is analytically important. The study does not claim that the three journals represent every SINTA 2 outlet publishing research on English language teaching in Indonesia. Rather, the corpus was constructed to examine a specific scholarly network: SINTA 2 journals managed by English-related study programs within Muhammadiyah and Aisiyiah higher education institutions. At the time of corpus construction, the journal-mapping process identified JFLTL, JEES, and ELTEJ/UAD as the three outlets meeting these institutional and accreditation criteria. Treating them as a bounded publication ecology makes it possible to examine whether writers working within related institutional traditions display recurring ways of interpreting evidence, positioning claims, and negotiating previous research. This delimitation also prevents an unwarranted national generalization and locates the

contribution at the intersection of genre practice, national accreditation, and an institutionally connected journal community.

A focus on Discussion sections is necessary because argumentative quality cannot be inferred simply from the presence of citations or from the reporting of statistically significant findings. Writers must transform results into disciplinary knowledge by selecting what deserves emphasis, explaining why a pattern occurred, connecting the finding to theory or earlier studies, qualifying the strength of an inference, and acknowledging conditions under which the claim may not hold. These functions are related but not identical. A Discussion may be rhetorically complete in the Swalesian sense yet contain only a weak warrant between evidence and claim; conversely, it may present a plausible Toulminian argument while offering little interpersonal calibration through stance and engagement resources. Integrating the three frameworks therefore enables the present study to distinguish structural coverage, inferential support, and writer-reader negotiation instead of reducing argumentative effectiveness to a single linguistic feature.

METHODS

This study used qualitative descriptive content analysis supported by corpus-based frequency and concordance procedures. The final corpus comprised 61 English-language research articles published during 2024–2025 in three SINTA 2 journals: Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning (JFLTL, $n = 19$), Journal of English Educators Society (JEES, $n = 26$), and English Language Teaching Educational Journal (ELTEJ/UAD, $n = 16$). Articles were purposively selected because they addressed EFL or applied-linguistics topics and contained an identifiable Discussion function.

Journal selection was institutionally delimited rather than intended to represent all Indonesian SINTA 2 EFL journals. At the time of corpus compilation, JFLTL, JEES, and ELTEJ/UAD were the three SINTA 2 journals published by English-related study programs within Muhammadiyah and Aisyiyah higher education institutions. This boundary provided a coherent basis for examining argumentative practices within the Muhammadiyah–Aisyiyah higher-education network. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as representing this delimited journal group rather than all SINTA 2 EFL journals in Indonesia.

The original 500-word threshold was used as an initial screening guide rather than an absolute exclusion rule. Two articles contained complete and analytically relevant Discussion sections shorter than 500 words; both were retained to preserve the complete publication corpus and avoid length-based bias. This decision was documented in the coding log and is reported transparently here.

The unit of analysis was discussion discourse only. When Discussion appeared as a separate section, the complete section was extracted. When Results and Discussion were combined, extraction proceeded at paragraph and, where necessary, sentence level. Included material interpreted, explained, compared, evaluated, qualified, limited, or extended findings. Pure result reporting—including numerical outcomes, table or figure descriptions, category lists, and participant quotations without authorial interpretation—was excluded. The resulting discussion-only corpus contained 152,861 words.

The coding scheme integrated three frameworks. Swalesian move coding identified restatement, interpretation, explanation, literature comparison, significance evaluation, limitations, and implications/recommendations. Toulmin coding identified claims, grounds, warrants, backing, qualifiers, and rebuttals/counterclaims. Hyland's

(2005) model was used for hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, reader mentions, directives, rhetorical questions, and shared knowledge. Citations were additionally coded by function: support, agreement, contrast, explanation, and gap/extension.

Coding proceeded in three passes. First, each extracted text was segmented and coded for rhetorical and argumentative functions. Second, frequencies and article-level presence were calculated, with cross-journal frequencies normalized per 1,000 discussion words. Third, concordance auditing was applied to categories susceptible to lexical false positives. Contrastive connectors such as *however* were not coded as rebuttals unless they introduced explicit disagreement, exception, discrepant evidence, or a competing claim. First-person forms inside participant quotations were removed from self-mention counts, and obligation modals were coded as directives only when they performed an explicit recommendation or instruction. The same conservative concordance procedure was applied to hedge and booster lexicons. Representative excerpts were checked against the discussion-only corpus and labeled using anonymized article codes (JFLTL01–19, JEES01–26, and ELTEJ01–16).

The extraction procedure was especially important for articles in which Results and Discussion were combined. Each paragraph was first screened for its dominant discourse function. Sentences that merely reported scores, percentages, significance values, table contents, thematic labels, or participant quotations without authorial interpretation were excluded. Sentences were retained when they interpreted the meaning of a finding, proposed an explanation, compared evidence with previous research, evaluated significance, delimited a claim, acknowledged a limitation, or formulated an implication. Mixed paragraphs were segmented at sentence level so that descriptive result reporting did not inflate the frequency of argumentative categories. This discussion-only rule was applied consistently across the three journals and recorded in the extraction log, including the retained word count, excluded result material, page range, and validation note for every article.

Operational coding combined occurrence and prevalence measures. For rhetorical moves, Toulmin components, and citation functions, the analysis recorded both the number of coded instances and the number of articles in which each category occurred. For stance and engagement, lexical candidates were first retrieved through concordance searches and were then checked in context. A modal such as *may* was counted as a hedge only when it reduced commitment to a proposition; first-person forms were counted as self-mentions only when they referred to the article's authors rather than participants; and *should* or *must* was counted as a directive only when it recommended or required action from a research, educational, or policy actor. Similarly, *however* and *in contrast* were not automatically treated as rebuttals. Rebuttal required an explicit competing claim, exception, inconsistency, or alternative account that constrained the main argument. These rules substantially reduced false positives and produced a conservative dataset suitable for interpretation.

Because Discussion sections varied considerably in length, raw frequencies alone could have exaggerated the contribution of journals containing longer texts. The analysis therefore reports three complementary indicators: total instances, article prevalence, and normalized frequency per 1,000 Discussion words. Article prevalence indicates how widely a strategy was distributed across the corpus, whereas normalized frequency indicates its textual density. The two indicators are not interchangeable. A move may occur in many articles but only once in each, while another may occur in fewer articles yet recur intensively within them. The final corpus retained all 61 articles. The initial 500-word threshold functioned as a screening guide, but two concise,

complete Discussions were retained because excluding them would have reduced journal coverage and because their published argumentative content remained relevant to the research questions. Their short length is reported transparently rather than concealed through post hoc exclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Corpus profile

Journal	Articles	Discussion words	Mean words/article
JFLTL	19	34,579	1,819.9
JEES	26	65,617	2,523.7
ELTEJ/UAD	16	52,665	3,291.6

The discussion-only corpus contained 152,861 words. Retaining all 61 articles enabled full journal coverage while the normalization procedure controlled for differences in article and journal length.

Rhetorical organization of the Discussion sections

Table 1. Distribution of rhetorical moves

Category	JFLTL	JEES	ELTEJ/UAD	Total	Articles, %	per 1,000 words
Restating/summarizing results	9	24	15	48	47.5	0.31
Interpreting results	52	114	80	246	82.0	1.61
Explaining results	71	138	112	321	91.8	2.10
Comparing with literature	38	90	49	177	90.2	1.16
Evaluating significance	127	287	176	590	95.1	3.86
Limitations	1	22	3	26	14.8	0.17
Implications/recommendations	115	98	117	330	95.1	2.16

Evaluation and implication were the most pervasive rhetorical functions: each appeared in 58 of the 61 articles (95.1%). Explanation appeared in 56 articles (91.8%), comparison with literature in 55 (90.2%), and interpretation in 50 (82.0%). Explicit limitations occurred in only nine articles (14.8%). Thus, the corpus was not dominated by simple restatement; writers generally interpreted and evaluated findings, but critical qualification through limitation statements was uncommon.

“This data indicates differences in the strength of identity at various sociocultural levels, with a tendency to be stronger at the personal and relational levels.” (JFLTL01).

“The significant variation in this data suggests a large difference in vocabulary acquisition ability among students.” (JFLTL01).

These excerpts illustrate the move from an observed result to a propositional interpretation. Linguistic realizations such as *suggests* and *indicates* function as both interpretive predicates and calibrated commitment. The pattern is consistent with genre accounts that treat the Discussion as a site for establishing the meaning and significance of findings rather than merely repeating them (Swales & Feak, 2012; Kurniawan et al., 2020).

The distribution across move categories also reveals that rhetorical completeness was uneven. Explanation occurred in 56 articles (91.8%), comparison with literature in 55 (90.2%), and interpretation in 50 (82.0%), whereas explicit restatement appeared in only 29 articles (47.5%). This pattern suggests that writers frequently moved directly from local evidence to explanation or evaluation without formally restating the result.

Such economy is not inherently problematic, especially in combined sections where the result has just been presented, but it places greater pressure on cohesion: the reader must be able to recover which result a subsequent explanation evaluates. The very low prevalence of limitations, by contrast, cannot be explained solely by section structure. Only nine articles acknowledged limitations explicitly, indicating that boundary-setting was not yet a routine move even when writers were otherwise willing to offer implications and recommendations.

Toulminian argument structure

Table 2. Toulmin components

Category	JFLTL	JEES	ELTEJ/UAD	Total	Articles, %	per 1,000 words
Claim	133	273	173	579	96.7	3.79
Data/grounds	146	302	276	724	93.4	4.74
Warrant	102	215	156	473	95.1	3.09
Backing	46	77	86	209	83.6	1.37
Qualifier	129	245	185	559	93.4	3.66
Rebuttal/counterclaim (audited)	4	16	6	26	26.2	0.17

Claims were present in 59 articles (96.7%), grounds in 57 (93.4%), warrants in 58 (95.1%), backing in 51 (83.6%), and qualifiers in 57 (93.4%). After concordance auditing, only 26 explicit rebuttal/counterclaim episodes remained, distributed across 16 articles. The sharp reduction from the pre-audit count confirms that ordinary contrastive connectors cannot be treated as Toulminian rebuttals without functional evidence.

“It differs from the feedback provided by students in the most recent study.” (JEES03).

“In contrast to the first formant (F1), which failed to show significant differences across categories, the second formant (F2) displayed a notable disparity.” (JEES10).

The audited excerpts qualify as rebuttal because they explicitly position a finding against earlier evidence or introduce a competing interpretation. By contrast, however used merely to shift topic or contrast two descriptive results was excluded. This distinction reveals that basic claim–ground–warrant structures were widespread, whereas genuinely contestable argument sequences remained comparatively rare.

The Toulmin profile shows a strong evidential core but a comparatively weak dialogic edge. Claims, grounds, warrants, qualifiers, and backing appeared in 83.6%–96.7% of the articles, demonstrating that most writers did more than announce findings. They connected evidence to propositions and frequently moderated the scope of those propositions. However, audited rebuttals occurred only 26 times in 16 articles (26.2%). This difference matters because qualification and rebuttal perform different argumentative work. A qualifier reduces the certainty or scope of a claim, whereas a rebuttal anticipates a condition, contradictory finding, or competing explanation that may challenge it. The prevalence of qualifiers therefore demonstrates caution, but not necessarily critical engagement with alternatives. The corpus was strongest at constructing a plausible supported claim and weaker at testing that claim against rival possibilities.

Integration of previous research**Table 3. Citation functions**

Category	JFLTL	JEES	ELTEJ/UAD	Total	Articles, %	per 1,000 words
Support	68	155	102	325	86.9	2.13
Agreement	36	80	45	161	88.5	1.05
Contrast	2	9	4	15	21.3	0.10
Explanation	49	121	90	260	83.6	1.70
Gap/extension	19	58	40	117	68.9	0.77

Support, agreement, and explanation dominated citation use. Supportive citation occurred in 53 articles (86.9%), agreement in 54 (88.5%), and explanatory citation in 51 (83.6%), whereas explicit contrast appeared in only 13 articles (21.3%). Citations therefore tended to consolidate the preferred interpretation rather than test it against discrepant evidence.

“This finding is actually in line with Mohammadi and Izadpanah (2019), who state that sociocultural is a demotivative variable towards language learning.” (JFLTL01).

“This finding is also in line with the broader study of ER implementation, which recommends more flexibility and adaptation to more successful outcomes across diverse learning contexts (Waring & Mclean, 2015).” (JFLTL03).

Phrases such as consistent with and in line with overtly align the current finding with an established knowledge claim. This strengthens backing, but the low frequency of contrastive citation limits the dialogic range of the Discussion. The finding extends previous Indonesian genre research by showing that literature integration is frequent, yet functionally skewed toward convergence (Arsyad et al., 2020).

The citation results reinforce this interpretation. Agreement appeared in 54 articles and support in 53, while explanatory citation appeared in 51. By contrast, explicit contrast occurred in only 13 articles and at a density of 0.10 instances per 1,000 words. Gap or extension functions were more common, appearing in 42 articles, but these often positioned the present finding as an addition rather than interrogating an established account. Thus, previous research was primarily used to stabilize the authors' interpretation. Such alignment is valuable because it locates a finding within disciplinary knowledge, yet an accumulation of confirmatory citations can make a Discussion appear consensual even where the evidence might permit debate. More developed Discussions would combine alignment with selective differentiation by clarifying why a finding diverges, which contextual variable may explain the divergence, and how the difference modifies rather than merely contradicts previous knowledge.

Stance and engagement**Table 4. Concordance-audited stance and engagement markers**

Category	JFLTL	JEES	ELTEJ/UAD	Total	Articles, %	per 1,000 words
Hedges (audited)	230	554	367	1151	98.4	7.53

Boosters (audited)	98	173	119	390	96.7	2.55
Attitude markers	98	173	103	374	93.4	2.45
Self-mentions (audited)	38	60	75	173	52.5	1.13
Reader mentions	36	46	21	103	37.7	0.67
Directives (audited)	36	32	23	91	65.6	0.60
Rhetorical questions	8	25	19	52	24.6	0.34
Shared knowledge	10	15	17	42	36.1	0.27

Concordance auditing identified 1,151 hedges and 390 boosters, equivalent to 7.53 and 2.55 occurrences per 1,000 words. The hedge-to-booster ratio was 2.95:1. This resolves the contradiction in the original manuscript: cautious qualification was clearly more frequent than emphatic certainty. Hedges occurred in 60 articles and boosters in 59.

“Students with lower lexical richness scores may have difficulty in selecting and using appropriate words to describe their ideas.” (JFLTL01).

“Huntington (2000) emphasized that, indeed, there is a clash of civilizations between the West and the East, which is caused by, among others, economic and cultural entities and ideology.” (JFLTL02).

Modal verbs and epistemic predicates such as *may*, *could*, *suggests*, and *appears* reduce categorical commitment and preserve space for alternative readings. Boosters such as *clearly*, *demonstrates*, and *significantly* intensify selected claims, but were used more selectively. The distribution accords with Hyland’s (2005) view that academic persuasion depends on a managed balance between commitment and caution. The audited self-mention and directive totals are lower than the initial automated counts because participant voice and non-functional modal occurrences were removed.

The journal-level counts show that hedging was not confined to one outlet: JFLTL contained 230 audited hedges, JEES 554, and ELTEJ/UAD 367. Boosters were lower in each journal, with 98, 173, and 119 instances respectively. The consistent direction of the difference supports a corpus-wide interpretation rather than an effect produced by a single journal. Nevertheless, hedging should not automatically be equated with argumentative sophistication. Some hedges appropriately calibrated inference from limited samples or context-dependent evidence, while repeated use without a clear warrant could also obscure the strength of a contribution. Similarly, boosters were effective when they marked a conclusion already supported by evidence, but potentially overstated when they preceded a broad pedagogical recommendation. The relevant issue is therefore functional fit: whether the level of commitment matches the design, data, and inferential reach of the study.

Critical reflexivity, limitations, and alternative interpretations

Only nine articles (14.8%) explicitly acknowledged limitations, and only 26 articles contained a clearly identifiable counterargument or alternative explanation

after auditing. These are the most consequential weaknesses in the corpus. Authors regularly evaluated significance and proposed implications, yet seldom specified conditions that constrained their claims or seriously considered explanations that could compete with the preferred account.

“This study is still limited to analyzing the images of the textbook.” (JFLTL02).

“This research is limited to describing how Arloopa is used in learning descriptive texts in a class where students are not equipped with cell phones.” (JFLTL04).

Limitation statements narrow the scope of inference and make the argument more accountable. Their rarity suggests that the central issue is not an absence of argumentation, but limited critical reflexivity. The Discussion sections were generally interpretive, evaluative, and coherent; however, they were less consistently dialogic when confronting discrepant evidence, methodological constraints, or plausible alternatives. This interpretation is more precise than the original manuscript’s broad characterization of the corpus as primarily descriptive.

This imbalance has practical implications for research-writing pedagogy and journal mentoring. Instruction often emphasizes formulaic comparison expressions such as *in line with* or *consistent with*, but less frequently teaches writers how to construct an alternative explanation, distinguish a methodological limitation from a general recommendation, or specify the conditions under which a claim may fail. A pedagogically useful sequence would ask writers to identify the principal claim, state the evidence supporting it, articulate the warrant, test at least one competing explanation, and then calibrate the claim through an appropriate hedge or boundary statement. For editors and reviewers, feedback can likewise move beyond requests for ‘more discussion’ by identifying the missing argumentative function: insufficient warrant, confirmatory citation without contrast, recommendation unsupported by the data, or absence of limitations. The corpus therefore provides not only a descriptive profile but also a diagnostic framework for strengthening Discussion sections in comparable EFL publication contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed discussion-only discourse from 61 EFL and applied-linguistics articles published in three Indonesian SINTA 2 journals during 2024–2025. The results show a stable argumentative profile: writers commonly interpreted and explained findings, compared them with previous research, evaluated significance, and presented implications. Toulminian claims, grounds, warrants, and qualifiers were widely present, and hedges substantially outnumbered boosters. The corpus was therefore generally interpretive and evaluative, not merely descriptive. Its principal limitation lay in restricted critical reflexivity: explicit study limitations, contrastive citation, rebuttals, counterarguments, and alternative interpretations occurred much less frequently than supportive and convergent strategies.

The study is deliberately limited to the three SINTA 2 journals published by English-related study programs within Muhammadiyah and Aisyiyah higher education institutions, together with a two-year publication window. This institutional delimitation supports a coherent network-level comparison but does not warrant generalization to all Indonesian SINTA 2 EFL journals. Functional coding inevitably involves interpretive judgment, even though discussion-only extraction, normalization, and concordance auditing were used to reduce error. Future research should test the coding scheme with independent coders, calculate intercoder agreement, extend the corpus to other SINTA levels and international journals, and examine disciplinary or

methodological variation. For pedagogy and editorial practice, explicit instruction should connect rhetorical moves with claim–evidence–warrant structures and require writers to articulate limitations, discrepant evidence, and plausible alternative explanations.

Within that bounded context, the findings support three conclusions. First, the dominant Discussion pattern was evaluative and implication-oriented rather than merely descriptive. Second, the arguments generally contained claims, grounds, warrants, backing, and qualification, but rarely developed explicit rebuttals or competing interpretations. Third, writers relied more heavily on epistemic caution and confirmatory citation than on overt disagreement. These tendencies suggest that the next stage of development is not simply to add more citations or stronger language, but to improve the relationship among evidence, warrant, scope, and alternative explanation. Future research should test whether the same pattern appears in other SINTA levels, institutional networks, disciplines, and publication periods, and should combine corpus evidence with interviews or stimulated-recall data to examine why authors choose particular rhetorical strategies.

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