Gender Based Linguistic Variation in Pakistani IELTS Argumentative Essays: A Multidimensional Analysis

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Abstract

The present study hopes to explore the linguistic dimensions (proposed by Biber, 1988) in argumentative essays written by IELTS test takers in Pakistan. Extensive research has been carried out on learner writing in Pakistan. In the previous studies, among other research methodologies (Toulmin, 1958; Swales, 1993; Hyland, 1990; Nini, 2009), Biber's multidimensional approach has also been used. However, the focus of most of these studies has been either world languages or contrastive rhetoric. This research is quantitative in nature. A corpus of IELTS writing component task 2 has been developed. This corpus is a specialized learner corpus. Data has been collected by conducting mock tests at IELTS preparation centers. Essay prompt was given and the candidates had to follow the time constraints of IELTS Task 2 (40 minutes). About 500 texts each of approximately 200-word have been collected from IELTS test preparatory centers in Lahore, Pakistan. This IELTS Argumentative Essays Corpus (IAEC) is comprising upon 0.1 million words. The compiled data has been analyzed using Biber's multidimensional tagger (1988). The gender-based difference has been studied in this paper. The mean values of dimension scores show that there is a slight difference in the nearest genre to Biber (1988) only on dimension 1. On all other dimensions the gender based linguistic difference is insignificant. While comparing the present corpus to Biber's dimension scores, the IAE corpus shows significant results on dimension 1, 2 and 3. Biber's closest genres to the present research are prepared speeches, broadcasts, official documents and press reportage respectively on dimensions 1 to D5. The corpus compiled for this study will be useful for further linguistic explorations of IELTS test takers data of the genre of argumentative essays particularly in Pakistani context.

Keywords: IELTS test takers, Argumentative writing, Multidimensional analysis, gender-based study

1. Introduction

Argumentative writing is considered an important component in anyone's development of academic competence, and it also works well as an indicator to measure learners' level of language proficiency in international exams such as IELTS, TOEFL, and GRE. who are more or less proficient learners; this is also measured by the ability of the learners to compose argumentative essays (Moore & Morton, 2005). This requirement is intensifying with each passing day. The learners are supposed to present their arguments and evidence in their writing. The pressure increases when the learners are non-native speakers (Cullen, 2017). As compared to L1 learners, the L2 learners face more challenges in both the arenas of language and culture (Pan, 2018). L2 learners have to learn and master the genre traditions and demands as well as the argument structure of the target language (Pan, 2018; Kim & Nam, 2019; Crosthwaite, 2016). Simultaneously, their cultural and ideological backgrounds also had an influence on their writing in the target language. Toulmin's model of argumentative writing has had a decades-long influence on the research on L2 argumentative writing. These and other previous studies have concluded that, in spite of all the importance attached to learners' argumentative writing, L2 learners have not yet achieved the required mastery of argumentative writing (Hirvela, 2017). All those studies that follow Toulmin's model of argumentation put too much emphasis on the organisational elements of argumentation. Swales (1993) and Hyland (1990) also give more importance to the organisational patterns of argumentation, and the rhetorical structures in learners' writings have been studied.

Various studies have been carried out in Pakistan to explore the linguistic, textual, and generic characteristics of Pakistani learner writing. The focus of previous studies has been either a comparison between or among different varieties of English in the realm of world Englishes or genre analysis between or among different registers and genres. Pakistani academic writing is the least explored area so far. The research work that represents Pakistani academic writing as a small part of the general-purpose corpora of Pakistani Written English (PWE) comes from Mahmood, A. (2009), and Mahmood, R. (2009). In PWE, Pakistani academic writing is represented by three sub-registers: text books, research articles, and theses, and forms a part of the general-purpose corpus. No distinct features of Pakistani academic writing have been studied in this research. Afterwards, Abbas et al. (2020) explored this corpus using Biber's multidimensional analysis as a methodology. Furthermore, a few studies appeared that paid attention to research journals of different disciplines, sections of research articles, theses and dissertations, and argumentative essays.

Argumentative writing is a genre of writing that establishes a position on an issue or topic and then explains and supports this position with reliable pieces of evidence.

Argumentative writing is an essential component of English language learning programmes since it is considered a critical mode of written discourse. According to Allen et al. (2019), argumentative writing is a complex cognitive process that is related to the authors' purpose, the prospects of audiences, the contextual position, and the predictable rhetorical patterns (Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020).

In Pakistan, Imtiaz and Mahmood (2014) and Shafqat et al. (2020) studied meta-discourse features in Pakistani learners' argumentative essays, while Tabassum et al. (2019) and Abdulaziz (2017) used essays from ICLE and ICNALE, respectively. They have applied multidimensional analysis for the identification of the co-occurrence of linguistic features in argumentative essays. These essays have been written by college and university learners in Pakistan. In Abdulaziz (2017), a comparison among different varieties of English, using the Kachruvian paradigm in world Englishes as the theoretical ground, has been drawn. Whereas, in Tabassum et al. (2019), 306 essays from ICLE have been used as the data for the research, and multidimensional analysis has been used for the identification of linguistic features and the factor analysis on the basis of dimensions in Biber's (1988) multidimensional analysis. MDA has gained much appreciation due to its objective and empirical nature. It not only systematically arranges common linguistic patterns but also elaborates on the functional associations of these patterns.

There are a few studies that have been carried out on the writing of L2 Pakistani learners using Biber's multidimensional analysis. In these studies, the features of writing in research papers, theses, abstracts, argumentative essays, and research journals for different disciplines and learners' linguistic backgrounds have been focused. Swale's, Hyland's, and Biber's approaches have been used as methodological backdrops in these studies. The present study is aimed at exploring the structural elements in the argumentative essays written by IELTS test takers in Pakistan using Biber's (1988) multidimensional analysis.

The main objective of this research is to demonstrate that an empirical corpus-driven approach to argumentation in learner writing has great theoretical and practical possibilities and can lead to a rich harvest of pedagogically relevant findings about argumentation, particularly in the context of IELTS test takers in Pakistan. One objective of this research is to develop a corpus of argumentative essays written by IELTS test takers in Pakistan. Another objective is to identify the co-occurrence of linguistic features (dimensions) in the argumentative essays by conducting the multidimensional analysis proposed by Biber (1988). One more objective of this research is to interpret the functions of dimensions (i.e., the communicative functions of the textual features, in the genre of argumentative essays written by Pakistani IELTS test takers). The research question that is trying to be answered in this paper is as follows: What are the frequently

co-occurring linguistic features of the IELTS Argumentative Essays Corpus (IAEC) according to the old MD?

2. Methodology

2.1 Data Collection Procedures

A corpus of argumentative essays written by Pakistani IELTS test takers has been compiled. The following steps were considered while building this corpus:

Corpus representativeness has been considered an important parameter. To make the corpus representative, data has been collected from different centres for the preparation of IELTS in Lahore, Pakistan. The centres were selected, and tests were conducted under controlled conditions. Which centres were to be selected and how much data was to be acquired were also decided before the acquisition of the corpus.

This corpus aims to be truly reliable for further research on argumentative writing by Pakistani IELTS test takers. Therefore, the researcher had controlled conditions related to task, length, and time. The essay prompt was selected before the acquisition. The essay prompt was selected considering the style and level equivalent to the IELTS test writing component Task 2. One essay prompt was used for the essays. The word limit for the essay was approximately 200 words. The essays were produced within the time constraints. The essay time constraints of IELTS tests were followed. Hence, the candidates had to complete the essay in 40 minutes.

It had been decided that a minimum of 500 essays would be included in the corpus. Keeping in view the screening procedure and other relevant factors, about 950 essays were collected from different centers. The data was collected from the IELTS preparatory test centers. The researcher visited the selected IELTS preparatory centres and herself administered tests to ensure the observance of controlled conditions (prompt, time, length of essay). The essay scripts had been compiled during the year 2022.

After the acquisition of the data, it had to be screened. All those scripts that were left incomplete or that had some missing author information were also excluded. All those copies that suffered any type of damage during collection, transportation, or conversion into electronic form were also excluded. Those scripts that were illegible due to handwriting or any other factors of damage were excluded.

The collected data were in the form of handwritten scripts. It was converted into machine-readable form. There are many options available, but for the present research, the data was typed into.doc files, which were further converted into.txt files.

Now machine-readable data was preserved in different folders. The data was further refined. The researcher proofreads the data. As the aim of the present research is not error analysis, the errors, spelling mistakes, etc. were corrected by the researcher. Keeping this in mind, the raw files of the corpus were already preserved, so that in any future research, this corpus would be used for error analysis, contrastive interlanguage analysis (CIA), or contrastive rhetoric.

2.2 Data Analysis Procedures

In this research, Biber's multidimensional analysis (1988) has been used to analyse argumentative essays. The old multidimensional analysis is based on Biber's (1988) factor solution. MD analysis has been developed as a quantitative approach to identify the variation in the use of linguistic dimensions in a language. Co-occurring features are central to this approach. In the old MD, Biber identified textual dimensions (1988), and the reliability of these dimensions has also been established. Old MD analysis has been carried out by using linguistic features relevant to textual dimensions of academic register.

The data was tagged using Biber's tagger for all linguistic features relevant to dimensions in the 88 MD analysis. The five dimensions of variation as given in Biber (1988) need to be detailed here for the purpose of cross-referencing while detailing the 1988 MD analysis and results obtained from the data. Each dimension consists of a positive and a negative end, and the function of the co-occurring linguistic features at both ends is determined by the tagging of a dimension.

When the data was tagged for linguistic features, the raw count of frequencies for each linguistic feature was calculated. The counts were normalised per 1,000 words (standard set by Biber, 1988). The procedure of normalisation of frequencies adjusts all the values to the same scale. These processes, too, were completed using Biber's tag count program. After that, the standard deviations of all the values were calculated.

In this paper, the focus is on gender-based linguistic variation; hence, the mean and standard deviation of the dimensions of essays written by male as well as female writers have also been calculated. These values have been presented in the next section in the form of tables.

3. Results

The purpose of this study is to investigate gender-based linguistic variation in essays written by Pakistani IELTS candidates using Biber's multidimensional analysis. The Biber tag count programme also calculated the dimensions that exist in the stated

data. These dimensions and their mean values, as well as their standard deviation, have been given as under:

Table 1

Gender wise dimension scores in Pakistani IELTS argumentative essays

Gender	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5
Male	0.28	-3.39	8.94	0.17	0.07
Female	1.33	-3.53	8.99	0.35	-0.03

Graph 1
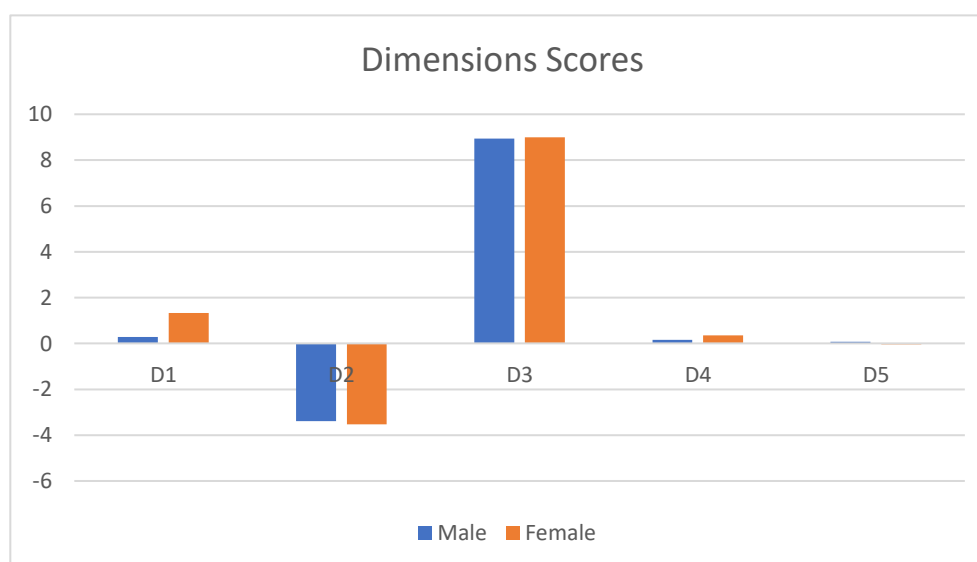
Dimensions Scores Across Genders

Table 2

Representation of the comparison of Biber's genres to Pakistani IELTS argumentative essays corpus

Dimensions	Dimension represented in the present research	Nearest genre (Biber, 1988)
Involved versus information production	Involved	Prepared speeches
Narrative versus non-narrative	Non-narrative	Broadcasts
Explicit versus situation dependent reference	Explicit	Official documents
Over expression of	Slightly persuasive	Prepared speeches

persuasion		
Abstract versus non-abstract	Abstract	Press reportage

Biber (1988) calculated dimension scores for different genres. Here, the comparison of Biber's genres with those of the present data has been given in Table 2. This table shows that we have striking results as compared to the dimensions proposed by Biber (1988) for different genres. The argumentative essays written by IELTS candidates have involved a focus on D1 rather than the informational focus in the equivalent genres in Biber. Here, it is similar to the genre of prepared speeches. On D2, learner essays exhibit a significant trend; they are non-narrative due to negative loadings on Dimension 2. Rather than being alike to academic prose, they are closer to broadcasts. On D3, due to the positive loadings of the features, the argumentative essays show that they fall in the explicit domain and are closer to the genre of official documents. The IELTS candidates' essays are shown to be argumentative and persuasive due to positive loadings on dimension 4. While comparing them to Biber's analysis (1988), they are closer to prepared speeches; it also shows that the structure of argumentation is established in these essays. On D5, the essays are more abstract in nature because they have higher positive loadings. They are closer to the genre of press reporting. Further discussion has been given in the following section.

4. Discussion

4.1 Interpretation of dimension 1

Dimension 1 (D1) represents informational versus involved production. It has two extremes. At its positive extreme, involvement is a non-informational focus. This is representative of a discourse that has the primary purpose of interaction and is constrained by the immediate circumstances of production, for example, a discourse of conversation. Features with positive loadings on factor 1 are, for example, private verbs (I think), present tense, first and second person pronouns, that-deletions (e.g., I think [that] children should), and contractions. These features can also express fragmented, reduced, and generalised kinds of content. On the contrary, the negative side of D1, which is informational focus, is described by features such as word length, nouns, prepositional phrases, attributive adjectives, and type/token ratio. All of these features can be interpreted as having a high informational focus. These also provide the opportunity to integrate and organise information and to make precise and accurate lexical choices, as might be the case in academic prose. This aspect also makes the results on this dimension significant. The discourse in the argumentative essays written by Pakistani IELTS test takers is involved rather than informational. The male and female writers both reflect the same pattern of having positive loadings, but somehow, they follow different patterns on Dimension 1. The female essays' discourse is closer to

prepared speeches; on the other hand, the male essays' discourse is closer to general fiction. This finding is also striking as the opposite hypothesis was formed on the basis of some previous research that used literary stylistics as its methodology.

Furthermore, this finding is significant on the basis of the comparison of past MD studies on learner essays (Abdulaziz et al., 2016; Tabassum et al., 2019). According to Abdulaziz et al. (2016), more packets of information are placed in learner essays through prepositional phrases, word length, and lexical density, and these and other linguistic structures make the discourse of learner essays highly informational and nearer to the genre of academic prose in Biber (1988). This research, on the one hand, confirms the results on Dimension 1 (Tabassum et al. 2019) as having involved focus rather than informational production, while, on the other hand, the present data is closer to prepared speeches on the whole. Prepared speeches have characteristic features of elaborated grammatical structure, noun phrases, and prepositional phrases. They are produced for an expected audience. The highly informative discourse is expected to have markedly low scores on this dimension.

4.2 Interpretation of dimension 2

Dimension 2 has its values placed on the continuum of narrative versus non-narrative discourses. Narrative discourse patterns lie on the positive end of the continuum, whereas non-narrative discourses are on the negative end of the continuum. Dimension 2 (D2) has features like past tense and perfect aspect verbs, public verbs (e.g., report, say), third-person personal pronouns, and present participial subordinate clauses, which can be interpreted as marking a narrative purpose. The salient negative loadings on dimension 2 are present tense and attributive adjectives. This list of features on positive and negative loadings indicates the visible trend of the nature of information presented on the narrative versus non-narrative continuum. On the narrative cline reside past tense and past participial verbs, and on the non-narrative cline reside present tense verbs. This indicates the clear opposition between reporting events that happened in the past with the past tense and the immediate events with the present tense. First is the narrative attitude as it happens in fiction, (i.e., novels, and the other is the non-narrative attitude as in broadcasts, interviews, official documents, etc). The present data has significant results in that it possesses all the linguistic features of non-narrative discourse. Its value on the cable line is closer to broadcasts. While comparing it to Biber's (1988) genres, it resides at the far end of the continuum. The communicative function that these linguistic features in these texts fulfil is the description of actions that are still in progress. It also classifies these texts as strictly non-narrative with a non-informational focus. This is again typical of non-narrative discourse. These texts are characterised by having fewer verbs, all verbs in the present tense, and more attributive adjectives. The high frequency of attributive

adjectives is used to report vivid descriptions of events. According to Biber (1988), broadcasts are grouped with official documents and procedural texts for their high concerns on the non-narrative continuum.

4.3 Interpretation of dimension 3

The distinction between two separate types of reference is made by dimension 3 (D3). Three relative constructs—WH relative clauses on object and subject position and pied-piping constructions—tend to appear frequently in texts with high D3 scores. (Biber, 1988). All of these constructs can create a clear and elaborate recognition of referents in a text, despite functional differences between them. They co-occur in D3 with nominalizations and phrasal coordination, both of which are compatible with an explicit reference and represent an integrated and informational type of communication (as is seen, for example, in academic prose).

On the other hand, texts with low D3 scores frequently have very low frequencies of the aforementioned features while showing a lot of adverbs, particularly time and place adverbs, and they are more frequently used for deixis than they are for internal text reference. Explicit vs. situation-dependent Reference was given to D3 because this type of reference (which can be found, for instance, in sports broadcasts) is non-specific and situation-dependent.

This dimension is also significant in a way that the values for the present data have the highest values and are placed at the highest point on the cline of explicit discourse with more positive loadings. The figure shows how distinct a pattern is exhibited in the Pakistani IELTS takers' argumentative corpus. There is a high frequency of nominalizations and wh-relative clauses in comparison to the low frequency of adverbs. The figure also shows that the argumentative essay corpus is placed closer to official documents, with the majority of positive loadings on the continuum of explicit reference. Both male and female groups also show similarity in the choice of linguistic features, and both are closer to official documents.

4.4 Interpretation of dimension 4

Overt Expression of Argumentation or Persuasion is listed as D4. Prediction modals, suasive verbs (such as insist and suggest), conditional subordination, necessity, and possibility modals are a few examples of features in Dimension 4 (D4) that only have salient positive loadings. Professional letters, prepared speeches, and editorials are the types of texts where this might happen. All these characteristics occurring together are thought to communicate an overtly persuasive and argumentative kind of discourse, where some point of view is made clear. On the other hand, if a text has a low D4 score,

it either lacks a persuasive focus or conveys persuasion in other, more subtle ways that were not taken into consideration in this MD Analysis study. The present data resides on the positive cline of this dimension. It is more akin to Biber's prepared speeches. No noticeable difference has been observed on the basis of gender. High positive loadings are in the opinionated discourses. These discourses attempt to convince the reader. Prepared speeches are slightly persuasive, according to the description given by Biber. The present data also shows the same trend. It is slightly persuasive in nature.

4.5 Interpretation of dimension 5

This dimension is labelled "abstract" versus "non-abstract" information. Adverbial subordinators, agentless passives, and by-passives are examples of D5's positive characteristics, which seem to indicate how abstract a text is. The counts of two additional positive features for D5—adverbial past participial clauses and past participial WHIZ deletions—are subtracted from the frequencies of these passive structures (or participial clauses functioning as reduced relatives, e.g., the solution produced by this process). Subordinators and other conjuncts appear to indicate the complex logical relations typical of an abstract, technical, or formal discourse, as might be academic prose. All of these passive constructions typically have abstract and/or technical content and a formal style. The feature with the most weight on negative loading (slightly smaller than the cut-off limit) on this dimension is type/token ratio, which might unexpectedly point to the relatively low lexical variety of highly abstract (and therefore probably technical or specialized) discourse, which repeatedly uses a small set of technical vocabulary for the sake of precision and to avoid ambiguity. As one might expect, fiction and face-to-face conversation have poor average D5 scores. Thus, this dimension has been designated as containing either abstract or non-abstract information. The present data has more weight on positive loadings; hence, it is abstract in nature. This corpus of argumentative essays is closer to Biber's genre of press reportage. The mean values given in the table also show this trend. There is a high frequency of conjuncts, agentless passives, and adverbial subordinations in the positive loadings of this dimension. This data is most similar to press reports, which have higher positive loadings. It also declares that the language used in these essays is formal and focused. According to Biber, the genre of press reportage has intermediate values on this dimension. It describes a phenomenon, and then through an abstract discussion of the implications, it lends a formal air to the overall use of language.

4.6 Gender based linguistic differences in argumentative essays written by Pakistani IELTS candidates

The mean and standard deviation values on the basis of gender have been given in the table.

Table 3

Mean and Standard Deviation of Dimensions Scores across Gender

Gender	Techniques	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5
Male	Mean	0.28	-3.39	8.94	0.17	0.07
	Stan.Dev	7.85	2.49	3.32	4.60	3.39
Female	Mean	1.33	-3.53	8.99	0.35	-0.03
	Stan.Dev	7.36	2.33	3.01	4.24	2.73

Based on the table, it appears to be a comparison of mean and standard deviation values for five different techniques (D1, D2, D3, D4, and D5) across two genders (male and female). In terms of the register of academic writing, this table can be used to examine the language use patterns and conventions of academic writing across different gender groups. Academic writing is typically characterised by a formal and precise style of language that is used to convey information and arguments clearly and accurately.

The mean values for each dimension in this table provide insight into the ways in which different genders tend to use language in academic writing. For example, the fact that the mean values for dimension 3 are consistently higher for both genders and the dimension scores for dimension 2 are lower for both genders suggests that members of both genders tend to use similar linguistic features in their academic writing. The standard deviation values, on the other hand, indicate the degree of variation in language use patterns across different individuals within each gender group. Higher standard deviation values suggest that there is more variation in language use within a particular gender group, which can potentially reflect different levels of proficiency or different language backgrounds among writers.

The standard deviation values are given for each technique separately for each gender and are expressed in standard deviation units. For example, for the male gender, the standard deviation values are 7.85 for D1, 2.48 for D2, 3.32 for D3, 4.60 for D4, and 3.39 for D5. The standard deviation values for the Female gender are 7.36 for D1, 2.33 for D2, 3.01 for D3, 4.24 for D4, and 2.73 for D5.

Overall, this table can be used for exploring the language use patterns and conventions of academic writing prevalent in Pakistani IELTS candidates and potentially providing insights into the ways in which both genders use language in this context.

Biber has also discussed (1988) that the difference between spoken and written genres can also be solidified through D1, D3, and D5. In our findings, these three dimensions have significant scores. The mean and standard deviation values also justify the claims. Hence, it is meaningful to discuss the dimensions' scores statistically as well as compare them to Biber's genres.

5. Conclusion

Motivated by previous studies, the present study utilised the MD approach proposed by Biber (1988) to uncover the linguistic patterns in a corpus of argumentative essays compiled from IELTS test takers in Pakistan. This is conducted through a specialised learner corpus. The representative corpus of IELTS test takers has been compiled from IELTS preparatory centers. In the previous studies, ICLE or ICNALE have been used as the data source for research. For the present research, data has been collected from IELTS test takers in Pakistan, and a corpus has consequently been compiled. This is a specialised corpus of Pakistani learners' (IELTS test takers') argumentative essays. An essay prompt has been provided to the candidates, and they are required to write an argumentative essay in 40 minutes.

This research is significant in two ways: first, it is another study on learners' writing in Pakistan, and second, it has narrowed down its focus to IELTS. Argumentative essays are an integral part of academic life in Pakistan, particularly for those who have to appear in IELTS exams. Argumentative essays are a compulsory component of the IELTS writing test. But students are not given detailed and clear instructions about writing argumentative essays in college. As a result, they are unaware of the genre's schematic structure and enroll in IELTS preparation centres for instruction and practise of argumentative writing under controlled conditions. The main purpose of the study is to investigate the linguistic features of argumentative essays written by Pakistani IELTS test takers. In this way, the organisational structure of their textual compositions can be located and different proposals for their improvement can be suggested. The information gained about language use can also be helpful for the teachers. In addition, this research will be particularly useful from an IELTS point of view. The preparatory centres will also be able to put more or less emphasis on the areas or linguistic structures that would be needed to be focused on based on the results of this research.

Currently, there are plenty of books and articles that address ESL learners' writing skills and the mechanics and preparation of the IELTS writing test. However, studies on

Pakistani learners' use and variation in the use of linguistic features in IELTS Writing Task 2 are few and limited in scope. With this research, Pakistani learners' use of linguistic features while writing an argumentative essay can be documented qualitatively and in detail, which is significant in the Pakistani context. Hence, this research is an effort to highlight textual properties in the argumentative essays written by Pakistani IELTS test takers. The findings of this research can pinpoint the dimensions that make up the structure of Task 2 and which of these dimensions might be responsible for the writing test score. The findings of this research will also be helpful for the IELTS trainers in Pakistan to apply in their classrooms so that learners' performance in Task 2 can significantly improve overall.

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