

Undergraduate Argumentative Writing in English as a Foreign Language: a Gendered Perspective

Abbas Zare-ee^{*1}, Sheena Kaur²

¹ Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Kashan, Iran

² English Department, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract

Determining whether gender-related differences exist in the linguistic characteristics of writing in formal contexts is one of the concerns of recent research on gender in second language writing. This study aimed to explore gender differences in undergraduate argumentative writing in English as a foreign language (EFL) in terms of lexical and discursal features. Around 100 Persian-speaking male and female EFL learners with insignificant differences in English proficiency at the time of the study and with similar background literacy experiences performed an opinion-based writing task under exam conditions. Combined corpus analysis and discourse analysis techniques were used to describe and compare their texts in terms of writing quality, lexical properties, and rhetorical organization. Results showed that a) male learners received significantly higher mean scores in the content and organization of their argumentative writing ($t = 2.03$ and 2.08 respectively, $p \leq 0.04$); b) female EFL learners wrote less assertively and expressed positions more obscurely as shown in the analysis of their topic sentences; and c) While male learners used both inductive and deductive overall organizations for their texts, most female learners (74.4%) wrote more deductively. Results of concordance and keyword analyses through Wordsmith Tools also illustrated that learners' social and ideological contexts of gender contributes to their approach to academic writing in English.

Key words: Argumentative writing, academic writing, English as a foreign language, gender differences, learner corpus

* Corresponding Author's Tel.: +989133634757

E-mail address: zare-ee@KashanU.ac.ir

Background

Writing research has not so far shown whether gender-related differences should be expected in the lexico-grammatical and discoursal properties of texts written by second language (L2) learners in formal higher education contexts. Can some identifiable gender-related characteristics be found in the writing of male and female writers who write in their native language (L1) or in an L2 in particular social contexts? The limited research in response to such questions is equivocal. Some authors such as Francis, Read, and Melling (2003) have challenged the assumption of gender-related differences in written texts. These researchers found university professors unable to identify the gender of an author of a piece they were marking based on their expectations of what male and female writing should look like. Peterson and Kennedy (2006), on the other hand, found that teachers made more corrections and suggestions when they believed the authors were girls. Teachers might have actually rated female behavior or personality rather than female written work in these cases as well (see Whitelaw, Milosevic, & Daniels, 2000). Research needs to thoroughly examine the actual language written by male and female learners to determine possible differences.

The literature on L2 writing (e.g. Mulac & Lundell, 1994) suggests that writing researchers and teachers can expect male and female writers to write differently even in formal academic contexts and produce texts with different linguistic features. Female and male differences in experiences related to language learning and use are different and are not universal (Kubota, 2003). Determined by types of social contexts and writing tasks among other things, these differences might affect the way texts are written. L2 writing research has recently started examining gender in the cultural context of the student writer and has tried to broaden fixed notions of gender to include social constructionist understandings. This view in L2 writing considers gender as constructed within the social use of language and rejects gendered language as predictable or universal (Kubota, 2003). In other words, research on gender in the socio-cultural context of L2 learning in general and of L2 writing in particular has moved forward from the early stage of a fixed binary conceptualization of this variable to a more advanced stage of a dynamic and social constructivist view.

In its social constructionist conceptualization, gender is not something that we are and it is not something that we have. Instead, it is something that we do (West & Zimmerman, 1987). It is social rather than biological. Therefore, it finds its way into all social activities that we do including L2 academic writing (Eckert & McConnel-Ginet, 2003). Sex and sexual orientations are no longer viewed as dichotomous either. Blackburn (2005) draws on:

“...firsthand experiences with queer youth [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning] to illustrate the significance of understanding gender and sexual identities in complicated ways in order to meet the needs of queer students as well as all students

who are confined by dichotomous, heterosexist, and homophobic understandings of gender” (p. 398).

Major changes in research approaches and trends that have investigated gender in second language acquisition and in L2 writing have been summarized by Kubota’s (2003) in four approaches to gender and language. The male dominance framework stresses social domination and power of men over women in social interaction. The deficit approach emphasizes negative aspects of women’s language and regards male language as the norm. The dual culture model highlights the different communicative styles of boys and girls. And finally, the social constructionist view sees gender as constructed in the social use of language and reject gendered language as predictable or universal (see also Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004). Whereas the first three approaches view gender as dichotomous implying one-to-one relations between gender and language, the fourth sees gender as dynamic and socially constructed implying no universally applicable gender differences. This current view can have many implications for L2 writing research and instruction. One important implication is that people construct and convey their gendered identities through L2 writing differently in different contexts. In learning English as foreign language (EFL), the unexplored issues of the amounts and types of in-class gender-related interactions, the out-of-class gender-related limitations, different perceptions of gender, and different expressions of stance and identity might be viewed as significant factors in relation to the design and implementation of EFL academic writing instruction in different contexts (Bidlake, 2007).

Gender as a social factor is part of the dynamic identity of undergraduate EFL learners meaning that academic writing cannot be considered gender-free. With the present gap of serious research evidence, it would be premature to claim that there should be not gender-related linguistic differences in formal academic writing even when one acknowledges the standards governing academic writing activities. More research evidence from different social contexts is yet to be presented on the role of gender in EFL writing. EFL learner populations from various socio-cultural contexts need to be studied because, as Ehrlich (1997) stated, "the way that gender identities get constructed in particular communities may have very concrete consequences for the kinds of second language proficiency developed by men and women" (p. 435). In other words, to understand the changing identities of male and female language learners, language teachers, scholars, and teacher educators need to take into account the respective positioning of individual learners in particular socio-cultural contexts (Schmenk, 2004).

So far, not much is known about the differences underlying male and female writers’ performance in L2 and EFL writing classes. This is particularly the case in the context of English language education in Iranian higher education. That is to say, apart from the inclusion of gender as a moderating variable in EFL research, scholars have not reported much about how dynamic gender

identities of EFL learners in this context might influence their performance in and learning of academic writing in English and what implications they may have for EFL writing research and instruction. The present study aimed to gain insights into how male and female undergraduate learners differ in their argumentative writing in English and to contribute to the understanding of gender differences in L2 writing. The purpose was to compare the quality, rhetorical organization, and selected lexico-grammatical features of argumentative texts written by male and female learners using discourse and corpus analysis techniques. More specifically, three main research questions guided the study:

1. Do male and female undergraduate EFL learners write arguments of different qualities?
2. Are argumentative texts written by male and female undergraduate EFL learners lexically different?
3. Is overall rhetorical organization different in argumentative texts written by male and female undergraduate EFL learners?

The scope of the study was delimited to argumentative writing because much of what undergraduate EFL writers are expected to write at the university (e.g. term papers, exams, articles, reviews, etc.) involves writing arguments. Moreover, argumentation is the basis of much of their later academic writing activities and is usually more difficult for them than other types of writing (see Butler & Britt, 2011). Finally, the analyses were limited to the expression of positions and supports in an argumentative task to control for possible effects of generic variations on linguistic features of the text.

Studies of Gender in First and Second Language Writing

Noting that gender has been neglected for a long time in the field of second language acquisition (Willett, 1996), scholars have recently stated to examine gender in relation to numerous dependent variables. Language learning styles, learning strategies, language learning motivation, aptitude, amount of interaction, and various representations of language learning outcomes are among the variables studied across gender as a significant contextual variable (Sunderland, 2000). This body of research on male-female differences tends to define the gender variable in fixed biological terms. In L2 writing research, focus on gender is relatively new as well. Not very long ago, Belcher (2001) asserted that L2 writing research had begun to show signs of seeing gender as a factor worth noting as part of the cultural context of the writer. In this field, gender was not seen as dynamic for a long time either and scholars like Kubota (2003) regarded fixed notions of gender as a major limitation of past research. In short, much of the past research on gender in SLA and L2 writing has disregarded the dynamic and fluid nature of gender.

More recently, some valuable attempts have been made to overcome this limitation in L2 writing research. New developments offer more dynamic, context-dependent, socially constructed conceptualizations of gender and gendered identities. This recent shift in conceptualization is “from the positivistic conceptualization of gender as an individual variable to a constructivist view of gender as social relations operating within complex systems” (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004, p.381-382). A great deal of research on gender in relation to L1 and L2 learning has been motivated by the common belief that girls are more successful than boys in language-related activities. Much of this research has concentrated mainly on the study of oral L1 and L2 learning and use, therefore, not presenting a general picture. In the case of first language acquisition, a general belief, as pointed out by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), is that females enjoy a rate advantage, initially at least. In L1 literacy skills boys have been reported as less successful writers. As stated by Jones and Myhill (2007), “a concern that boys are less successful than girls in reading and writing is shared across the English-speaking Western world” (p.457).

Past research attributes the outperformance of girls in writing to different causes which make males and females differently literate but barely show how their writings are linguistically different. Some possible phonological and pragmatic differences between male and female language use in speech and informal writing have been reported (e.g. Argamon, Koppel, Fine, & Shimoni, 2003). However, other researchers have asserted that no difference at all between male and female writing styles should be expected in more formal contexts (e. g. Berryman-Fink & Wilcox 1983; Simkins-Bullock & Wildman 1991). In L1 writing, Jones and Myhill (2007) found limited gender-related differences in large-scale analyses of the linguistic characteristics of texts written by secondary-aged male and female learners. Kanaris (1999) also found that 8 to 10 year old Australian girls positioned themselves as the participants of the act of writing (using the pronoun *we*) and wrote more complex and longer texts containing more subordinate clauses whereas boys positioned themselves as the agents (using *I*) and wrote shorter texts. Female superiority in L1 orthographic skills have also been reported in the literature. In a study of the severity of reading and writing disabilities, boys and men were found to be more impaired than girls and women in handwriting, spelling, and composing (Berninger, Nielsen, Abbott, Wijsman, & Raskind, 2008).

In L2 learning research, the role of gender is controversial as well. In most review of research, gender has always been considered as a relevant variable in the list of individual differences that that determine differential success in language learning (e.g. Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Ellis, 1995). Like the research on gender in relation to L1 learning, gender research in L2 learning has focused mainly on oral aspects of language. In their work on gender differences in formal written texts in a subset of the National British Corpus, Argamon, et al. (2003) contended that “... nearly all of the work on

male/female linguistic difference has focused on speech and other high-interaction linguistic modalities such as correspondence” (p.322). Only a few research studies were located that focused on gender specific L2 written discourses or gender-related qualitative differences in writing.

Most studies focusing on writing quality have come up with the result that females write better. For example, Breland and Lee (2007) found that gender differences on free-response writing examinations favored females with varying degrees of gender differences across populations of examinees taking the computer-based Test of English as a Foreign Language. They stated that in populations for whom English was a second language, females scored around one-tenth of a standard deviation higher than males on writing tests. Substantial gender-related differences were also found in a study of lexical and syntactic features of formal written texts in English by Argamon, Koppel, Fine, and Shimoni (2003). In this study, female writing was shown to be more "involved" while male writing was identified as more "informational". Bermudez and Prater (1994) also found that persuasive essays written by female Hispanic L2 writers showed a greater degree of elaboration and a clearer attempt to express the writers' point of view than those written by male students. Male graduates have also been reported to write with a more assertive and argumentative academic voice whereas females have been shown to write with a more conciliatory voice (Clarke, 1994). Studies of qualitative differences should be interpreted with caution considering the fact that the rating of writing quality may be influenced by different same gender or different gender perceptions of learners by raters. Studies of gender-related differences in the linguistic characteristics of L2 writing cannot show female superiority either as the evidence is not conclusive and points to scattered differences.

Using corpus linguistics to study gender differences in writing

Corpus linguistics has been important to debates in linguistics since the 1980s with its divergence from the traditions of a Chomskian approach of intuition and assumed ideas about language to an empirical-based study of real language use following Firthian and Sinclairian approaches to language. There are reasons to believe that the application of computer technology defines corpus linguistics as a new research enterprise in the study of linguistics as contended by Leech (1992). The study of gender-related differences in written L2 and EFL corpora through corpus research tools can thus contribute more data-based evidence. Interest in corpus approaches has contributed towards the 'intuition' versus 'evidence-based' debate, the latter forming the basis of corpus linguistics. By analyzing texts systematically based on evidence of real language, researchers can gain insights into actual patterns of language use rather than theorizing about them. As Biber, Conrad, and Reppen (1998) point out, "rather than looking at what is theoretically possible in a language, we

study the actual language used in naturally occurring texts” (p. 1). In other words, corpus linguistics provides a means of quantifying linguistic features through statistical measures of significance via the application of computer technology in the analysis of learner corpora.

In this study linguistic features of a learner’s corpus were analyzed through the use of Wordsmith Tool 4.0 (Scott, 2004). The definition of a ‘corpus’ as used in this research follows that of McEnery and Wilson’s (2001) who described a corpus with four characteristics, namely sampling and representativeness, finite size, machine-readable form, and standard reference. The classification of a corpus encompasses a sizeable sample of a language variety that it represents-- that of Iranian EFL undergraduates’ argumentative writing in the case of this study.

Linguistics characteristics of L2 written texts can be studied through the examination of corpora that are collected in different sizes. The general consensus on the question of corpus size in corpus linguistics seems to be that there is no fixed size for a corpus. Leech (1991) contends that ‘to focus merely on size ... is naive’ (p. 10). De Haan (1992) also explains that ‘there is no such thing as the best, or optimum, sample size as such’ (p. 3). According to Gavioli (2005), ‘corpus size depends on the contents and research purposes of the corpus’ (p.7) and determining corpus sizes is a ‘very fuzzy’ business. Some researchers even argue that ‘the most common features of the language will be well represented even in relatively small quantities of text, and if these are the main subject of the work you may only need a relatively small corpus’ (Barnbrook, 1996, p. 25). For the purposes of this study, it is worth pointing out that though the corpus is relatively small (12100 words), it comprises a somewhat restricted genre of writing, i.e., argumentative texts on euthanasia by a group of Iranian undergraduate EFL learners, which helps to offset the corpus size.

Studies of learner language have long been the interest of corpus linguists with work developing from the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE, see Granger, 1998). The ICLE corpus consists of learner English including argumentative essays written by EFL learners from 14 different mother tongue backgrounds each forming a sub-corpus of 200,000 words. Examples of studies using learner corpora have focused on errors in the narrative writing of ESL Malaysian Learners (Sarimah Shamsudin & Nurul Ros Adira Mahady, 2010), lexical bundles in L2 academic writing (Jalali & Ghayoomi, 2010), and quantifiers and adjective intensification in argumentative writing (Lorenz, 1999). The examination of the relationship between language and gender has also been guided by some corpus linguistics research in recent years. An early study was carried out by Rayson, Leech, and Hodges (1997). In their study of the spoken conversational component of the British National Corpus consisting of 4.5 million words, they compared the vocabulary of speakers based on gender, age and social group. In terms of gender, they found 25 most significant words characteristic of male and female speakers. For example, males tended to use more swear words while females tended to use more

feminine pronouns and first-person pronouns as evidenced by this corpus. A study by Jiménez Catalán and Ojeda Alba (2008) examined the vocabulary of Spanish primary school girls and boys learning English as a foreign language (EFL) using the application of Wordsmith Tools. They analyzed 271 essays by ten-year-old children from four primary schools (152 boys and 119 girls) given a letter writing task. They found similarities and differences between the boys' and girls' use of vocabulary. Their research participants produced more nouns and verbs than adjectives or adverbs. These words generally referred to their daily lives and experiences, including sports, hobbies, animals, food and drinks, objects and appliances related to school and home, possessions and places. They also wrote about people familiar to them including their family members. Girls produced more words related to kinship terms and colors compared to boys. Even though these previous studies have been mainly concerned with the characteristics of gendered writing, none have explored the role gender differences in argumentative texts.

This study employs insights from studies of learner corpora to explore gender-related differences in argumentative writing in English by undergraduate EFL learners. It draws upon a learner corpus of 12, 100 words containing 98 handwritten argumentative texts on the topic of euthanasia written by undergraduate EFL Iranian learners. As discussed in this section and also suggested by Ghadessy, Henry, and Roseberry (2001), when the aim of the study is not a general description of language but the examination of a clearly defined portion of a form of language (in this case, the argumentative writing of undergraduate EFL learners) corpus analyses cannot be ruled out on the basis of small corpora size.

The study

To explore gender differences in the lexical and discursal characteristics of EFL argumentative writing, this study combined corpus analysis and discourse analysis techniques in a mixed method fashion involving both quantitative and qualitative comparisons. Written texts on an argumentative topic were collected from the participants under exam conditions. They were carefully examined and coded for organizational features (following the example of Hirose, 2003, and Kubota, 1998) by two independent male EFL experts. They were also scored independently by the experts on writing quality dimensions based the ESL Composition profile (Jabobs, Zinkgraf, Hartfiel & Hughey, 1981). The texts were also digitized and saved as .txt files for lexical analyses using Wordsmith Tool 4.0. (Scott, 2004) and online Vocabprofile (<http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/eng>) that show the lexical frequency, complexity, and sophistication of texts (see Laufer & Nation, 1995).

Participants

The study was carried out on argumentative written texts produced by 98 male and female third-year undergraduate EFL learners, aged 20-23. The participants were studying for a BA degree in English Language and Literature in 2010. All the learners consented to write a 100-200 word argumentative paragraph in English for analysis by the researchers. This sample was a convenient sample of 24 male and 74 female learners from three undergraduate content area classes. The participants were given 30 minutes to complete the task of writing a paragraph on their agreement or disagreement with euthanasia under classroom exam conditions. They were not allowed to use dictionaries but could write as many drafts as they wished during their time limit. Five of the participants completed more than one full draft and only their final version was collected for analysis. The background literacy experiences of the group included basic literacy education in the mother tongue, Persian, and EFL literacy education at the university. None had taken English language classes in private language schools. Their mother tongue literacy experiences included the learning, through the formal education system, of basic rules of correct writing in Persian without any systematic instruction addressing argumentative academic writing. Their formal EFL writing experiences included education in academic paragraph writing and essay writing in the first two years of their undergraduate studies. None had attended extra writing classes. Their mean level of English proficiency based on the Michigan English Language Assessment Battery was 64.8 out of 100 (range= 38-88, SD= 11.2) and there was no statistically significant difference between mean proficiency scores for male (68.42) and female (63.61) participants ($df=96$, $t= 1.84$, $p<0.5$). All participants had studied the same EFL writing textbooks with the same lecturers in their last two years of study and had been instructed on the principles of organizing and developing the introduction, body, and conclusion of formal academic paragraphs and longer essays with different rhetorical patterns such as cause-effect, comparison-contrast, description, definition, chronology, etc.

Scoring and Instruments

The 98 handwritten texts on agreement or disagreement with euthanasia were photocopied to provide two sets of the same documents for independent scoring by two male EFL experts. The raters assigned independent scores to the collected samples in the five dimensions of content (30 points), organization (20 points), vocabulary (20 points), language use (25 points), and mechanics (5 points) based on the ESL Composition profile (Jabobs, Zinkgraf, Hartfiel & Hughey, 1981). The mean score on each dimension was considered in the final analyses. The inter-rater reliability indices for the scores on the dimensions of writing quality were all significant at the 0.05 level and were above 0.75

(Content = 0.88, Organization = 0.84, Vocabulary = 0.78, Language use = 0.84, Mechanics = 0.75, Total writing score = 0.91). The two experts also coded the participants' texts for the presence and location of the position statements. They agreed on the coding of the location of position statements and supporting details in 90 percent of the cases and discussed ambiguities in a follow-up meeting for a final decision.

All handwritten documents were also typed and saved as .txt files. While digitizing the documents for computerized analyses, the researchers corrected the spelling errors because the aim of these analyses was not to look at spelling or grammar errors but to check lexical frequency and use. Wordsmith Tool 4.0 (Scott, 2004) and online Vocabprofile analyses (<http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/eng>) were used to calculate number of word tokens, number of word types, lexical complexity, lexical sophistication, and the number of lexical and function words. Lexical complexity was measured by the number of word types squared divided by the total number of words following Ong and Zhang (2010) to account for text length differences. Lexical sophistication was measured by the total number of tokens above the 2K level (2000+ most frequent word range in English) that the participants used in their writing (see Laufer & Nation, 1995).

All the lexical measures were taken from the computer analyses of digitized texts. Wordsmith Tool 4.0 is a powerful technique for examining wordlists, word frequencies, and concordances in learner corpora. Similarly, the online Vocabprofile program (<http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/eng>) generates and classifies the words in individual text file into four categories by frequency: 0-1000 (the most frequent 1000 words of English), 1001-2000 (2K or the second most frequent 1000 words), academic words and off-list words (not included in the other three categories). It can show the level of lexical sophistication usually measured by the number of words above the 2K level. This combination of discourse and corpus research methods has recently been shown to enable L2 writing researchers to efficiently examine both micro-level and macro-level textual features. It has been described in greater detail in Biber, Conrad, and Reppen (2008), and its use has been exemplified in Upton and Cohen (2009), and Don, Knowles, and Fatt (2010). The application of this combined technique can offer a good picture of gender differences in different types of student writing.

Analyses and results

Male-female differences in writing quality and lexical features of writing

The mean writing quality scores achieved by male EFL writers were higher than those by female learners on all of the dimensions of the ESL composition profile as summarized in Table 1. These differences were statistically significant only in the dimensions of content and organization. In other words,

male EFL learners wrote texts that were rated significantly higher in terms of content and organization than those written by female learners.

Table 1. Mean scores on texts by male and female EFL learners*

Dimension	Gender	Mean	SD	SEM	t- value	Sig
Content	Male	18.81	2.60	.53	2.035	.045
	Female	17.39	3.10	.36		
Organization	Male	15.33	1.91	.39	2.083	.043
	Female	13.90	2.49	.29		
Vocabulary	Male	13.02	1.78	.36	.559	.577
	Female	12.72	2.40	.28		
Language Use	Male	16.89	2.43	.49	1.608	.111
	Female	15.73	3.20	.37		
Mechanics	Male	3.25	.68	.14	.782	.436
	Female	3.14	.59	.06		
Total score	Male	66.29	8.20	1.67	1.456	.149
	Female	62.88	10.48	1.22		

*(Male=24, Female=74, df=96)

The second part of data analysis was the comparison of lexical properties of texts written by male and female learners. Except for the mean number of word tokens which was higher for women, male learners received higher mean scores on all lexical measures considered in this study (Table 2). These differences were not statistically significant except for the case of lexical sophistication ($t=4.41$, Sig 0.46). Therefore, the result of lexical analyses showed that men wrote with greater lexical sophistication. They wrote arguments using a significantly greater number of academic words from the 2000+ wordlist.

Table 2. Lexical features in arguments written by male and female EFL learners*

Lexical feature	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Number of word tokens	Male	121.67	49.25	-.107	.915
	Female	123.11	59.51		
Number of word types	Male	77.54	20.27	.130	.897
	Female	76.77	28.30		
Type-token ratio	Male	67.21	10.47	.743	.459
	Female	65.58	8.91		
Average word length	Male	4.29	.25	.461	.646
	Female	4.26	.33		
Number of sentence	Male	4.10	2.67	-.134	.893
	Female	4.00	3.09		
Lexical complexity	Male	50.62	7.92	.658	.512
	Female	48.65	13.87		
Lexical sophistication	Male	5.42	2.71	2.41	.0461
	Female	4.61	2.36		

*(Male=24, Female=74, df=96)

Male-female differences in text organization

The quantitative comparison of organizational aspects of the texts written by male and female learners summarized in Table 1 revealed significant differences in favor of men. For further insights, the presence and location of the position statements either for or against euthanasia as an indicator of argumentative text organization was qualitatively examined across texts produced by male and female learners. This main idea was coded as Initial (stated in the introduction), Medial (stated in the body), Final (stated in the conclusion), or Obscure (not clearly stated) following the guidelines offered by Hirose (2003) and Kubota (1998). Deductive overall organization where the position expressed in the text preceded supporting reasons and inductive overall organization where reasons preceded the main opinion were also identified and independently coded for each text following the example of the same two researchers. This data has been summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Organizational patterns in arguments written by male and female EFL learners*

Organizational variables	Options	Male Learners	Female Learners
Location of main idea	Text-initial position	11 (45.8%)	31(41.9%)
	Text-medial position	3(12.5%)	9(12.2%)
	Text-final position	10 (41.7%)	26 (35.2%)
	Obscure position	0	8(10.9%)
Overall organization	Deductive overall organization	13(54.2%)	55(74.4%)
	Inductive overall organization	11(45.8%)	19(25.6%)
Position	Agree with euthanasia	11(45.8%)	16 (21.5%)
	Disagree with euthanasia	13(54.2%)	50 (67.6%)
	No clear position	0	8 (10.9%)

*(Male=24, Female=74)

Few participants (12.5% of the men and 12.2% of the women) placed their position statements in the text-medial position. In other words, the position statement was very often placed either at the beginning or the end of the paragraph (Table 3). An interesting finding was that while all men clearly expressed for or against positions on euthanasia, eight women (almost 11%) did not write any clear position statements. As understood by the two independent expert coders, most female students (74.4%) used deductive overall organization in their texts based on the position of supporting statements in relation to the main claim. Females either placed a clear position statement before their supporting ideas or started with vague general statements and obscure positions and ended up with more specific supports. Male learners, on the other hand, used both kinds of deductive and inductive organizations with roughly the same frequency and always expressed for or against position statements to support (Table 3).

Qualitative differences in texts written by male and female learners

An examination of word frequencies in the wordlists generated for the sub-corpora written by male and female learners showed a frequent use of the pronoun “I” as the expresser of the main opinion for both male and females which collocated with opinion-expression verbs like *feel*, *believe*, *think*, *agree*, and *disagree*. The examination of the top 20 most frequent lexical words written by both male and female learners (Table 4) also showed that 13 words most frequently used to argue for or against euthanasia (65%) were associated with what the participants considered religious beliefs on *creator-created* relationships, *life-death* issues, and the *sufferings* of people (e.g. God, person, human, life, death, killing, suffering).

Table 4. Top 20 lexical words used by male and female EFL learners

N	Frequent words by females			Frequent words by males		
	Word	Frequency	%	Word	Frequency	%
1	person	101	1.11	God	31	1.06
2	life	95	1.04	killing	29	0.99
3	people	86	0.94	life	28	0.96
4	killing	63	0.69	people	25	0.86
5	God	61	0.67	person	23	0.79
6	kill	46	0.50	mercy	18	0.62
7	die	42	0.46	die	14	0.48
8	mercy	42	0.46	kill	14	0.48
9	death	40	0.44	think	14	0.48
10	human	38	0.42	right	12	0.41
11	suffering	36	0.40	ill	11	0.38
12	believe	35	0.38	better	10	0.34
13	ill	35	0.38	human	10	0.34
14	think	35	0.38	pain	9	0.31
15	patient	30	0.33	want	9	0.31
16	right	30	0.33	decide	8	0.27
17	situation	30	0.33	disease	7	0.24
18	pain	26	0.29	end	7	0.24
19	opinion	24	0.26	opinion	7	0.24
20	decide	21	0.23	situation	7	0.24

This corpus evidence suggests that in writing about euthanasia, both genders tended to show strong judgments and focused on issues pertaining to life, the living, and humanity as indicated by the occurrence of lexical words ‘*life*’, ‘*person*’, ‘*people*’, ‘*mercy*’, and ‘*human*’ as the domain of arguments. These were found to be opposing to the concepts of death, the act of killing and suffering through the occurrence of the words ‘*die*’, ‘*kill*’, ‘*killing*’ and ‘*pain*’ in both male and female writing, and ‘*death*’ and ‘*suffering*’ exclusively in the female texts. It is interesting to note how ‘*God*’ appears to be the most frequent lexical item used by the male students in their writing about euthanasia, compared to position 5 in the female students’ sub-corpus. Further scrutiny of the words showed that the argument put forth by the students against euthanasia was how it is against the will of God and the teachings of Islam. The example

concordance lines from both the male and female sub-corpora (Table 5) support this argument.

Table 5. Concordance lines of God in the male sub-corpus and the female sub-corpus

Concordance lines for male EFL writers (5 of 31 lines)		
1	think that this being not able to move is the will of	<i>god</i> but we must accept that god want no one to
2	kill themselves under any circumstances. They say that	<i>god</i> has created us and so he has the power to
3	is a wrong decision. We humans are the creatures of	<i>god</i> and he is the only one who can take our lives.
4	has its own advantages and disadvantages. As we know,	<i>god</i> has created us and only God can kill us, so
5	she lives her life. Why should we deprive her of life.	<i>God</i> has forbidden us to take someone’s life. You can
Concordance lines for female EFL writers (5 of 31 lines)		
1	All of us, as Muslims, believe in	<i>God’s</i> mercy. We also believe that we should never be
2	explosive situations they ask him to help them because	<i>god</i> in Quran says that he will help patients. He, him
3	Believe in God who is All-wise. All-informative.	<i>God</i> determines his servants’ destination. It’s He who
4	Moslms. the story is totally different. Moslms believe in	<i>god</i> and always in explosive situations they ask him
5	his birthtime. It is the same for his deathfime. It is	<i>God</i> who has the power to put his life to an end. So I

There was little difference in the way males and females related the ethics of euthanasia in their religion. Both related their belief in God’s ‘power’ and ‘mercy’ stating that God decided the end of life. They used the word ‘believe’ to express ideology rather than their own beliefs in euthanasia with words such as ‘a sin’ and ‘a non-human’ act. Word frequency analyses also indicated interestingly that the learners used pronouns such as ‘we’, ‘they’ and ‘us’ with high frequencies to show reference, solidarity and kindred spirit collectively with themselves, assuming their audience as Muslim readers.

The quantitative part of the analyses of lexical features of texts written by male and female learners (Table 2) did not show significant gender differences except for lexical sophistication. Neither did the analysis of most frequent lexical words in their texts show any major gender differences. However, a closer study of their position expression in the concordance lines for the frequent pronoun ‘I’ indicated that male learners tried to be more argumentative and expressive in their arguments. The patterns of the use of ‘I’ in subject position (Table 6) showed that opinion-stating verbs occurring after the subject included *believe, think, agree, disagree, feel, and am*. Male students wrote with stronger adherence to what they said as reflected in their use of pre-verb modifiers and intensifiers (e.g. the words *totally, strongly, personally* that were not observed in female position statements).

Table 6. Frequencies of the use of ‘I’+ verbs in position statements by male and female learners

Female texts	Freq	Male texts	Freq
If I were a patient/a doctor... I would...	11	I want to (argue, say, assert)	4
I will try to	6	I think (that)	7
I think (that)	19	I (strongly, heartfully, personally, completely, never ever) think	6
I (dis)agree	2	I strongly/personally/ feel (that)	4
I am opposed to	1	I believe that	2
I (don’t) (dis) agree	4		
I can/can’t believe, accept, agree	8	I am (personally, totally, highly) against/a supporter/opposed to	6
I believe (that)	11		
I am hardly (against, opposite, in favor of)	3		

In texts written by female learners ‘I’ was immediately followed by a verb, whereas in texts written by male learners it was followed by intensifiers before verbs. The concordance lines (Table 7) show several examples of the use of ‘I’ followed by an intensifier in the sub-corpus of male learners.

Table 7. Concordance lines of ‘I’ in the male sub-corpus (10 of 33 lines)

N	Concordance lines
1	and become free from this world which is full of pain. <i>I</i> believe people must accept mercy killing as part of
2	because they don’t believe in God and the other world. <i>I</i> never ever kill a man or woman in any condition
3	new subject in modernity and some countries accept it, <i>I</i> think that it is completely illegal and every human
4	euthanasia. Although euthanasia frees human extra pain <i>I</i> am highly against it since we are not God-like to
5	and our being omniscient we can’t prescribe Euthanasia <i>I</i> am personally against this action and believe that
6	sick people to get rid of this fucking life. Sometimes <i>I</i> strongly and heartfully wish for mercy killer to
7	of occurrence of miracles even though it is not much. <i>I</i> personally think that if someone is always having
8	you said above in some place mercy killing is legal but <i>I</i> think nobody could reserve the right of killing
9	I don’t know whether it is true religiously or not, but <i>I</i> myself completely disagree with euthanasia because
10	to religion and everybody should be under such rules. <i>I</i> feel that principles should be followed on every

We understand these examples to suggest that male learners were more assertive and argumentative in writing position statements with phrases like “*I strongly feel*” ; “*I want to argue*”; and “*I am personally a supporter*”. Such examples did not appear in female-authored texts. To demonstrate male assertiveness in argumentative writing, the reader’s attention is drawn to a sample text where the male student author expressed his strong sentiments and opinion for euthanasia through his argument and choice of words.

Mercy killing is a process in which you help a terminally ill person to die. I fell this process is not wrong because the very ill person doesn't have any hope to recover from disease and he/she just suffers from it. Helping him/or [sic] is not only right, but we have morally [sic] rights to put these hopeless people's lives to end. By killing them, we finish their suffers [sic], pains and help them to start a new painless life maybe in another life. At the end I want to conclude that it is not actually killing (with its negative connotation), but rather helping other sick people to get rid of this fucking life. Sometimes I strongly and heartfully wish for a mercy killer to finish my Goddam life. Therefore, we decide that mercy killing is one of the best things that is created to help other people. (Text 1, File euth043, male author, errors are original).

On the other hand, the female participants displayed less assertiveness. The quantitative study of position statements showed that eight of the women (10.9%) did not express any clear position in the texts. In their clear position statements, females did not use the modifiers and intensifiers described above for male learners. Only three out of 74 used the word “hardly” (as in ‘*I am hardly against euthanasia because of three reasons*’) which was of course wrongly used to mean that the student was serious in her position. The female writers tried to put themselves in the shoes of a decision-maker (If I were a doctor, a patient, in a situation like this ...) and used modals (*I will try, I can't accept, I can agree*) to try to express their voice less directly and less assertively. The concordance lines in Table 8 present examples of the use of ‘I’ in the female sub-corpus.

Table 8. Concordance lines of ‘I’ for the female sub-corpus (10 of 113 lines)

N	Concordance lines
1	sometimes I asked myself and then drew a conclusion, if <i>I</i> were one of these patients, I tried to accept it
2	are not in their shoes, but have you ever asked yourself if <i>I</i> were one of these patients, what would I do?
3	if I gave up and I'm under supervision of him because <i>I</i> know that if I gave up and didn't want to
4	What would you do? If you ask me I will say at first <i>I</i> can't accept it, but after sometimes that I
5	Euthanasia! Oh. No! <i>I</i> can't believe. Imagine one of your close relatives
6	their place, you can't understand their situation. Maybe if <i>I</i> were them, and if Euthanasia was allowed in Iran
7	pain is mental or physical. If I were in this situation <i>I</i> try to prepare a pleasure environment for him/her
8	the health and disease is just the work of God and <i>I</i> never kill a person, although he is sick. My grand
9	and I'm under supervision of him because I know that if <i>I</i> gave up and didn't want to continue living, maybe
10	first can't accept it but sometimes that I think a lot and <i>I</i> don't see anyway I will accept because everyone has

The female learners were shown to be emotional regarding decisions about euthanasia as indicated in the corpus evidence. They found it distressing as reflected in examples of their writing like the following text written by one of the female writers.

Have you ever seen a living creature that suffer [sic] from his life. If you see that what will you do? Life is a right of each person. He or she wants to continue his or her life but he or she can't. This is a very big problem. He or she wants to use his or her opportunity and schedule for his or her life but he or she can't. He or she wants to use of [sic] the God's gift but he can't. The problem is very important that emotional people can't think about it because it annoys them. He or she wants to breathe but can't. This problem is not solved by emotion. We should think with our mind and then decide. Every one wants to be [sic] exist in this world. I as an emotional person can't do this work and can't kill some one that is alive. (Text 2, File euth065, female author, errors are original).

Example texts like this one display a state of emotional despair in making judgments about life. Rather than stating sound arguments through the expression of a clear position about euthanasia and the provision of supporting ideas expected in academic writing, the female learner in this case appeals to personal feelings and emotions.

Discussion

The results of this study illustrate that there can be different interpretations of the quality of argumentative texts written by male and female undergraduate EFL learners. The quality of L2 written texts may be measured in terms of the holistic scores assigned to different dimensions of their texts based on some scoring criteria such as the ESL composition profile (Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Hartfiel & Hughey, 1981). It may be measured in terms of the quantity of the lexicogrammatical features of texts such as lexical complexity and lexical sophistication examined using different text-analytical tools. Text quality may even be examined through the study of the frequency and nature of lexical items employed to realize the discursive requirements of certain texts such as position statements in arguments. In each case, results of comparisons between male-authored and female-authored texts may be different. In this study, the quantitative comparison of writing scores showed that, contrary to common beliefs about female superiority, male learners outperformed their female peers in terms of organization and content. Further qualitative examination of frequently-used words and position statements also showed that male learners argued more assertively. These findings do not support perceptions of women as better performers in second language writing. For example, they are in sharp contrast with Breland and Lee's (2007) findings on females' outperformance in L2 writing exams in the computer-based Test of English as a Foreign Language.

The perception of female undergraduate EFL learners as better learners or better L2 writers may not be universally valid because of the unique characteristics of social and cultural settings for learning English. In the case of this study, the male and female undergraduate EFL learner population is dispersed in the country's institutions of higher education including public universities, Islamic Azad University branch campuses, distant learning Payame Noor centers, and private universities. All these institutions share the features of increased admission rates by female students (around 60%) in recent years, a tendency for male-female segregation, and a disregard of the significance of unequal gender combinations and gender identities. The Institute of Research and Planning in Higher Education has the statistics of 1,713,652 students in public universities including 668,588 (39%) male and 1,045,064 (61%) female students for 2010 (IRPHE, 2010). This composition in terms of gender is at least partly due to increased post-revolutionary social involvement of women. The second feature, i.e. male-female segregation is an ideological one. Institutions tend to encourage less and less contacts between male and female learners as well as a felt common expectation of more taciturnity on the part of female learners. As Farhady, Sajjadi Hezaveh, and Hedayati, 2010 rightly put it, post-revolutionary changes in foreign language education in Iran have mainly focused on the "Islamization of textbooks, segregation of males and females, and observation of Islamic laws in and outside the school environment" (p. 3). In their weaker performance on the academic writing tasks such the argumentative one in this study, female learners may be under the influence of the social and ideological forces that limit their contacts, discourage them from being assertive, and contain them in the more traditional social position. Some unwritten socio-cultural rules of inequity in the use of language may still ban women from assertive speaking in public domains or assertive writing in this context and these can explain how a gendered identity might find its way into variations in academic EFL writing.

Controversies over women's rights coupled with the above-mentioned social issues of gender have also led some scholars and probably some women learners themselves to silently and politely overlook failures in women's academic progress. They feel that the majority of Iranian female undergraduate learners are in their study programs for the wrong reasons. Most Iranian young men, on the other hand, come more determined seeing college as a channel that will lead to better jobs and better opportunities for their success as the breadwinner of future families. Shavrini's (2005) statements further clarify the point:

"Young Iranian Women do not consider college as an avenue through which they can acquire skill and knowledge. For them College is an experience of intangibles: of feeling uncontrolled; of increasing their 'worth' of marriage; of gaining respect; and of acquiring independence _ all of which are rarely available to women in this society" (p. 340).

Sharvini's observation should not be overgeneralized in spite of its reflection of some social realities of gender. The fact that some female undergraduate EFL writers find the university as just a starting point for assertion and self-expression may explain why they were found to be less argumentative in writing. It exemplifies the relationship between society, gender, and L2 writing.

The finding that female learners are weaker in content and organization scores and tend to be less assertive and less argumentative supports Lakoff's (1977) contention that there are gender-specific discourse techniques shaped from childhood. From childhood, many Iranian women learn that they are expected to be less talkative, less argumentative, and less assertive. Clarke (1994) used his findings on male graduates' assertiveness and argumentativeness (as opposed to females' conciliatory voice) to explain why fewer women had achieved first-class degrees from Oxford and Cambridge. The similar findings of this study can be used to partially explain why professions in Iran especially those involving greater degrees of argumentation and assertion (e.g. judges, MPs, professors, etc.) are strongly male-dominated.

The frequency of the lexical words, pronouns, collocates, concordance lines, and the coding of rhetorical patterns in both male and female sub-corpora of argumentative texts in our study indicated women writers tend to write with an 11% rate of obscurity in position-taking. We understand this to imply that examining the organization of undergraduate learners' arguments using corpus techniques can be more revealing about micro-level text organization than the holistic scoring of overall rhetorical organization.

One of the limitations of the use of corpus linguistics for the study of second language writing is that, in small sample sizes, frequency of occurrence of lexical items may reasonably be questioned (see Culpepper, 2007 & Biber, 1998). To account for this limitation, alternative methodologies including discourse analysis and inferential statistics of SPSS were used to complement corpus methods in this study. Future research in this area can consider multiple tasks written in multiple academic genres to construct larger male-authored and female-authored corpora of academic writing that can be used for further exploration of context dependent gender differences in academic writing in English or in other languages.

Concluding remarks

This article focused on gender differences in argumentative texts. Through this article, we hope to have shown how certain linguistic devices have been employed for writing arguments by a less represented population of male and female learners of English. We hope to have contributed research insights into the characteristics of male and female argumentation. We also hope to have highlighted some of the gender-related differences that EFL writing teachers may be aware of when teaching mixed classes. Combining insights from

discourse analysis with those from corpus linguistics for the analysis of language learners' argumentative texts has worked in more ways than one and has added to the values of traditional text scoring profiles. These two fields we envisage can be reconciled well for the in-depth exploration of EFL writing and have great potentials and scope for further developments in multidisciplinary research into second language writing.

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