

The Use of Metadiscourse in Good Malaysian Undergraduate Persuasive Essays

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ABSTRACT

Metadiscourse is used by a writer to organise his text and textually interact with the potential readers. An effective use of metadiscourse reflects the writer's writing ability because it is one of the aspects in composing process of making a successful text. However, ESL writers especially undergraduates tend to face problems in using metadiscourse markers in their writing. Many of them do not use the metadiscourse markers appropriately in their essay writing. This preliminary study investigates the use of metadiscourse markers in good persuasive essays written by undergraduates from a public university in Malaysia. The corpus examined in the study was built from 195 persuasive essays written by the second year students at the university. The objective of this preliminary paper is to present the metadiscourse markers found in a corpus of good undergraduate writers' essays. The markers are classified in the main categories (organisational and interpersonal discourse markers) and sub-categories based on Tan et al.'s (2012) simplified metadiscourse framework for ESL lay writers. Using a computer-mediated concordance software, this study aims to reveal the frequency of the metadiscourse markers use in a total of 195 good persuasive essays produced by Malaysian undergraduate writers. The findings presented in this paper are anticipated to be beneficial for other researchers who are interested in finding an example of metadiscourse markers usage in good persuasive essays.

Keywords: good persuasive essays; metadiscourse; undergraduate writing; organisational discourse markers; interpersonal discourse markers.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian undergraduate students engage in many types of essay writing including argumentative, persuasive, comparative reflective and writing. They are essentially required to produce these types of essay writing in classrooms especially in English classes. This exercise is a preparation for the students to write a good English language writing in the workplace later

after graduation. Apart from language and content, organisation is also one of the significant elements which governs the quality of an essay especially the marks awarded. A clear and organised undergraduate essay tends to score high marks, awarded by the teachers. Yet, little is acknowledged as to how organisation is actually used by the undergraduates in their essay writing.

The use of metadiscourse can assist an essay to be more organised and readable to the readers. In writing, metadiscourse is defined as a way of interaction between writers to readers and even writers to themselves which is not related to any propositional content or idea mentioned in the text, while delivering and organising contents or messages effectively (Hyland, 2005; Heng and Tan 2010; Amiryousefi and Rasekh, 2010; Rustipa, 2014).

Since little is known about how metadiscourse is used among the undergraduates in Malaysia, it is the objective of this study to investigate how these undergraduates apply metadiscourse markers in organising their essays. This study is hoped to give a clear picture of how the use of metadiscourse affects the good quality of writing scored by Malaysian undergraduate writers in this study. The study also identifies the types of metadiscourse used by good undergraduates in their writing. So, the main objective of this study is to explore the use of metadiscourse markers in the good persuasive essays.

Therefore, this study is applicable to stretch some insights into the following research questions:

1. What are the frequencies of metadiscourse markers use in both organisational and interpersonal discourse markers in good undergraduate writers' essays based on Tan et al.'s (2012) simplified metadiscourse framework for ESL lay writers?
2. What are the metadiscourse markers identified in good undergraduate writers' essays and how are these metadiscourse markers classified into main categories and sub-categories based on Tan et al.'s (2012) simplified metadiscourse framework for ESL lay writers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Metadiscourse

Working as a channel, metadiscourse is used by writers to deliver and engage their content to readers while influencing readers to derive writer's intended interpretation through context and linguistic meaning (Hyland, 1998). Metadiscourse is also a central concept in pragmatics as it establishes and maintains contact between the reader and the writer and between the message and the writer (Hyland, 1998).

Furthermore, metadiscourse is seen as the style of language that a writer uses to refer to his own thinking and writing, the structure or identity of the paper, or to the audience's thinking, when he is writing (Hyland, 2005). It represents the writers' discourse about their discourse which involves their directions on how readers should read, respond to, and assess what they write about a particular subject (Crismore et al., 1993). In the same way, it directs the readers to understand the writer's meaning and strategies in writing (Crismore et al., 1993) and link them to one another (Olateju, 2006). In addition, Hyland (1998) suggests that metadiscourse markers work as a part of text which clearly arrange the discourse (content), engage the audience and give clues on the writer's attitude (on the content). It shows how writers develop themselves into the discussion to indicate their attitude toward the contents and the readers (Hyland & Tse, 2004).

Kumpf (2000, p. 401) proves that writers provide "cues and indicators" in their writing while arranging the contents to help readers comprehend and respond to the text. In fact, "cues

and indicators” here portrays what Hyland (1999, 2004, 2005) refers as metadiscourse markers. Likewise, the markers are common in academic genres, where the writers guide the readers through discourse, by making the content organization explicit (Adel, 2010). Similarly, Jalilifar and Alipour (2008) found that metadiscourse markers organise the content and ideas by using connectives and build an interaction between the readers and the writers to become reader-friendly text. They conducted a study about reading comprehension with the help of metadiscourse markers. The same idea has also been suggested by Vande Kopple (1985).

Although more than 498 markers (refer Table 2.5, p. 38 - 42) can be found in a list of metadiscourse items listed by Hyland (2005), there are no exact markers in identifying metadiscourse in a sentence. A possible marker can be a metadiscourse marker in a sentence, but might become a propositional content in another sentence. It depends on the semantics of the idea that a particular writer or speaker is trying to deliver.

Metadiscourse helps readers to understand the writer’s message in the text (Gillaerts & Van de Velde; Infatidou, 2009; 2010, Jalilifar & Alipour, 2008; Hyland, 2005; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Hyland, 2004). In a study conducted by Jalilifar and Alipour (2008), the use of metadiscourse markers were confirmed whether it can accommodate the readers’ understanding towards the texts and recognize the writers’ ways of writing with styles in their text. One of the purposes in this study was to see how the elimination of metadiscourse markers from a text affects its comprehensibility. They found that the use of metadiscourse markers can make a particular text become syntactically complete; and contribute to readers’ comprehension among the readers in recognizing a particular writer’s writing style.

In the area of persuasive writing, metadiscourse markers may assist writers to lead their readers or audience while displaying an appropriate persona (Hyland, 1998). This type of writing is intended to effectively persuade the readers. To some readers, a text which does not contain any of metadiscourse markers can be challenging to comprehend. In a study conducted by Jalilifar and Alipour (2007), students were found to be unable follow many of the main points in the texts which do not contain metadiscourse markers. The students could not successfully answer the given questions. This is because as all the metadiscourse markers were removed, reading comprehension was automatically affected (Jalilifar & Alipour, 2007). Thus, metadiscourse must primarily be used properly and correctly to produce a piece of effective writing. With this principle, a good writer usually writes a good piece of writing which may result in good comprehension of texts among the readers.

Metadiscourse Taxonomy

For the purpose of this study, a model of metadiscourse called ‘a simplified metadiscourse framework for ESL lay writers’ introduced by Tan et al. (2012) is used. It is a metadiscourse taxonomy which is designed for lay writers, especially the L2 undergraduate students. It is a reviewed taxonomy by altering the metadiscourse jargons into common terms based on Hyland’s (2015), Crismore’s (1993) and Vande Kopple’s (1985) taxonomies of metadiscourse.

TABLE 1: A simplified metadiscourse framework for ESL lay writers

Category	Function	Example
Organizational	Discourse markers	Help writer to manage the flow of ideas
Connectives:		
i) Inter-sentential linkers	Expressions that link one idea to the next (between two sentences)	Thus In addition Thus,
ii) Intra-sentential linkers	Expressions that link one idea to the next (within a sentence)	...and.... ...but....

Category	Function	Example
Sequencers	Contribute to the staging ideasyet..... Finally/to conclude/next
Topicalizers	Stating the purpose or intention of the writer	My purpose here is to....., in the essay, I am going to.....,
Pointers	linking current information with preceding or forthcoming information	Noted above/ see Fig/in section 2, that was mentioned earlier
Citations	Giving credit to writers of other texts	According to X/ (Y, 1990) Z states
Elaborators	Providing readers with extra information of the proposition	Namely/ e.g./ such as/ in other words, this includes.../ use of punctuation marks
Interpersonal Discourse Markers	Help writer connects with his readers	
Hedges	Withhold writer's full commitment to proposition	Might/perhaps/possible/about
Emphatics	Emphasize force or writer's certainty in proposition	In fact/definitely/it is clear that
Attitude markers	Express writer's attitude or stance to the proposition	Unfortunately/I agree/surprisingly, ...has been.../ ...were....
Engagement markers	Explicitly refer to or build relationship with reader	Consider/ note that/ you can see that, use of questions
Conditionals	Explicitly brings the reader into the argument	If you..../if I were you
Self-mentions	Explicit reference to author(s)	i/we/my/our

Based on the 'simplified metadiscourse framework for ESL lay writers' introduced by Tan et al. (2012), the metadiscourse are classified into two main categories (organizational and interpersonal metadiscourse markers) and six sub-categories each. The sub-categories in organizational discourse markers include connectives, sequencers, topicalizers, pointers, citations, elaborators. Meanwhile, the sub-categories in interpersonal discourse markers are hedges, emphatics, attitude markers, engagements markers, conditionals and self-mentions.

Persuasive VS Argumentative Essays

At early level of tertiary education, undergraduates are introduced to write persuasive or argumentative essays to prepare them to write good academic projects in their final semester. Generally, argumentative and persuasive essays are seen as one similar cluster of writing. These two types of writing, however, are slightly different in nature based on their conventionalism of styles and formality. The Bedford Writing Center (from the Academic Centers for Enrichment at Middlesex Community College, Massachusetts) has associated a guideline to assist their students to differentiate between persuasive and argumentative writing. The summary of persuasive and argumentative writing can be taken from Smekens Education Solutions (2011).

The goal of a persuasive writing is mainly to get readers to agree with a writer's opinion about a certain topic. The writer is using general facts based on his knowledge and includes emotions in writing to convince the readers to get on his side. For persuasive essays in tertiary education institutions, the possible audience are specified by the writers. They imaginatively know who their possible readers are and will write to persuade the readers to agree with his opinions. Therefore, persuasive essays are more personal and emotional in nature.

Meanwhile, the purpose of an argumentative writing is to let the potential readers to recognise that a writer's side is relevant to be considered as a point of view. This writing is

using supportive facts and sufficient proofs to support the writer's stand and show that it is worthy to be true. In this type of writing, the writer acknowledges the opposite views and counter them with facts to let the readers know that his opinion is more relevant.

Although argumentative and persuasive writing are significantly different in nature, both still fall under the same genre. Both types of writing use arguments to support an opinion and convince the readers that a given claim is valid. Generally, undergraduate students in Malaysia are asked to write persuasive essays which are more frequently questioned during final examination for many English courses. Argumentative writing is required to complete their final project or reports. Apart from that, general undergraduate writing itself is also argumentative and persuasive in nature. According to Tan (2011), undergraduate students have to write their arguments clearly in their assignments or any other types of undergraduate writing for the examiners to comprehend their opinions. Therefore, in regards to this current study, the use of metadiscourse is needed in these types of writing so that arguments can be presented in a good way which is understandable to the readers who are the language teachers.

METHOD

Research Approach

For the purpose of this study, descriptive analysis approach was used. This approach was necessary in this study to look at the frequency use of a language feature which is metadiscourse. It describes the application of mathematical processes to review a whole set of data. It also defines the procedure of collecting, classifying, summarising and presenting the data (Ian, 2001; Chiang, 2003). The data in this study are presented in table forms to show the research findings. These quantitative findings are important as an evidence to support how the metadiscourse items are used, or how common each item is relative to another in the analysis.

Samples

Samples of undergraduate essays were collected from a selected public university. The collection of essays consists of 295 persuasive essays from a selected public university in Malaysia yielding a total of 106, 568 words. For the purpose of this study, only good essays were collected to create a corpus of good persuasive essays. The corpus consists of 195 good persuasive essays yielding a total of 80, 512 words.

The essays were all graded by the teachers based on the content, language and organization, as shown in Table 2. Meaning, the essays had been graded by the lecturers even before the data collection began.

TABLE 2: Guide for Scoring Good Essay

Classification	Characteristics
Good Essay	<p>CONTENT: Effective hook to attract reader's interest in introduction. Has a theme that connects the story together Creates a mood quite well Clear picture given of setting and characters Plot builds to a climax Concludes well</p> <p>LANGUAGE: Effective, excellent/simple constructions Minor problem in complex constructions Several errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions but meaning seldom obscured Uses an sufficient/adequate range of vocabulary</p> <p>ORGANIZATION: Fluent expression Organised (inductory paragraph, body paragraph & concluding paragraph are indicated) Main ideas stand out Limited support Logical sequencing</p>

The essays were of the writing part of a final exam paper for English language course taken by second year students. The examination was conducted under controlled environment. The students had to write the essay of the same title and topic given as a question. They were also writing the same type of essay writing in the same condition including the duration time given (within 3 hours) which was in an examination environment. Their essays went through the same grading system of being moderated and vetted by Testing and Evaluation Committee (TEC).

Corpus

This collection of good persuasive essays were converted into an electronic corpus. The metadiscourse markers in this corpus were electronically searched with an assistance of a concordance computer programme, WordSmith. The list of 498 metadiscourse markers (Hyland, 2005) was used to match any hits in the corpus. Only sentences which seemed to reveal metadiscourse markers were carefully examined and categorised into the distinguished metadiscourse categories and sub-categories. There were two experienced readers from the field of English Language assisted this project in several sessions of metadiscourse identification. They were the second and third person to verify the metadiscourse markers found.

Tool

The samples were explored sentence by sentence and generated for identification of metadiscourse markers with the help of a concordance software, WordSmith Tools Version 4. Based on the results during the software analysis, occurrence per 1, 000 words of each metadiscourse marker found were calculated to find the most commonly used types of metadiscourse markers in the corpus.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Answering Research Question 1: What are the frequencies of metadiscourse markers use in both organisational and interpersonal discourse markers in good persuasive essays based on Tan et al.'s (2012) simplified metadiscourse framework for ESL lay writers?

There are 7, 215 metadiscourse markers identified in the good essays which consist of 80, 512 tokens. These metadiscourse markers are classified into two main categories which are organisational and interpersonal discourse markers.

Table 3: Frequency of Use of Organizational and Interpersonal Discourse markers

Metadiscourse Category	Total Markers	Occurrence per 1, 000 tokens	% of Total metadiscourse
Organizational discourse markers	3, 501	43.48	48.52
Interpersonal discourse markers	3, 714	46.13	51.48
Total	7, 215		100

Based on the findings, it can be seen that organizational discourse markers use is recorded as 48.52%, while interpersonal discourse markers use is 51.48% (only 2.96% lower than interpersonal discourse markers category of metadiscourse). The interpersonal discourse markers category of metadiscourse has a higher frequency of use with 46.13 occurrences per 1, 000 words as compared to organizational discourse markers with 43.48 occurrences per 1, 000 words.

Organizational Discourse Markers

The following table presents the sub-categories of organizational discourse markers found in the corpus.

Table 4: Sub-categories of Organizational discourse markers Found

Metadiscourse Category	Total Markers	Occurrence per 1, 000 tokens	% of Total metadiscourse
1. Organizational Discourse Markers			
Connectives	2, 521	31.31	72.01
Sequencers	538	6.68	15.37
Topicalizers	-	-	-
Pointers	-	-	-
Citations	-	-	-
Elaborators	442	5.49	12.62
Total	3, 501		100

Table 4 shows that connectives (e.g.: and, also, but) has the highest frequency count of its use with more than half of the total metadiscourse markers found with 72.01% of total metadiscourse. This corpus precisely scores 2, 521 tokens of connectives which is 31.31 occurrence per 1, 000 words. The second highest type of metadiscourse in organisational discourse markers category is sequencers with 538 tokens which is equivalent to 6.74 occurrence per 1, 000 words. It is leading by 96 tokens as compared to scores recorded by the other type of metadiscourse in this main category which is elaborators. Elaborators are used lower than sequencers with 5.49 occurrence per 1, 000 words and the percentage of 12.62. The

following Table 5 presents the number of types found in organizational discourse markers sub-categories.

Table 5: Number of Types Found in organizational discourse markers sub-categories

Category	Examples	Number of Types Based on 80, 512 tokens
Organizational Discourse markers		
Connectives - Inter/Intra-sentential linkers	Thus, In addition,...and.....,but...,yet...	32
Sequencers	Finally/to conclude/next	17
Topicalizers	My purpose here is to....., in the essay, I am going to.....,	-
Pointers	Noted above/ see Fig/in section 2, that was mentioned earlier	-
Citations	According to X/ (Y, 1990) Z states	-
Elaborators	Namely/ e.g./ such as/ in other words, this includes.../ use of punctuation marks	11
TOTAL		60

As we can see, connectives expectedly score the highest number with 32 types of metadiscourse in organizational discourse markers sub-category in this corpus. Meanwhile, sequencers and elaborators score 17 and 11 respectively. With that, the total types of organisational discourse markers found is 60.

Interpersonal Discourse markers

The next main category to discuss is the Interpersonal Discourse markers category which has six sub-categories: hedges, emphatics, attitude markers, engagement markers, conditionals and self-mentions. The following table presents the sub-categories of Interpersonal discourse markers found in the corpus.

Table 6: Sub-categories of Interpersonal Discourse markers

Metadiscourse Category	Total Markers	Occurrence per 1, 000 tokens	% of Total metadiscourse
2. Interpersonal Discourse markers			
Hedges	435	5.40	11.71
Emphatics	513	6.37	13.81
Attitude Markers	682	8.47	18.36
Engagement markers	1, 515	18.81	40.79
Conditionals	-	-	-
Self Mentions	569	7.07	15.32
Total	3, 714		100

Table 6 shows that engagement markers (e.g.: Consider/ note that/ you can see that, use of questions) has the highest frequency count of its use in the corpus with nearly half of the total metadiscourse markers found with 40.79% of total metadiscourse. This corpus precisely scores 1, 515 tokens of engagement markers which is 18.81 occurrence per 1, 000 words. The second highest type of metadiscourse in interpersonal discourse markers category is attitude markers with 682 tokens which is equivalent to 8.47 occurrence per 1, 000 words. This is equivalent to 18.36% of the total metadiscourse found in the corpus.

The next highest is scored by self-mentions with 569 tokens which is equivalent to 7.07 occurrences per 1, 000 words. In this corpus of good essays, emphatics score 513 tokens which is equivalent to 6.37 occurrences per 1, 000 words. Finally, the lowest type of metadiscourse used in this category is hedges which scores 435 tokens with 5.40 occurrences per 1, 000 words. While there is no sign of conditionals found in the corpus, it can be said that there are only five sub-categories in interpersonal discourse markers which are acknowledged by the undergraduate writers in this corpus.

Table 7: Number of Types Found

Category	Examples	Number of Types
Interpersonal Discourse markers		
Hedges	Might/perhaps/possible/about	25
Emphatics	In fact/definitely/it is clear that	18
Attitude Markers	Unfortunately/I agree/surprisingly, ...has been.../ ...were....	16
Engagement markers	Consider/ note that/ you can see that, use of questions	13
Conditionals	If you.../if I were you	-
Self Mentions	i/we/my/our	3
Total:		76

Based on Table 7, hedges scores the highest number with 25 types of metadiscourse in interpersonal discourse markers sub-category in this corpus. Meanwhile, emphatics, attitude markers and engagement markers score 18, 16 and 13 respectively. The lowest number of types in interpersonal discourse markers sub-category is scored by self-mentions with three types. The total types of organisational discourse markers found in the best essays is 76.

Answering Research Question 2: What are the metadiscourse markers identified in good undergraduate writers' essays and how are these metadiscourse markers classified into main categories and sub-categories based on Tan et al.'s (2012) simplified metadiscourse framework for ESL lay writers?

The following table presents the metadiscourse markers identified and classified into main categories, sub-categories and types.

Table 8: Metadiscourse Markers Identified and Classified into Main Categories, Sub-Categories and Types

Main Categories	Sub-categories	Good Persuasive Essays
Organizational discourse markers (help writer to manage the flow of ideas)	Connectives (expressions that link one idea to the next)	Because Also And But So Beside/s that While However Besides Still Furthermore Although Even though At the same time Moreover In addition Therefore Thus So that Since On the other hand Hence ...result Again Though Meanwhile Whereas In contrast Nevertheless Nonetheless Yet On the contrary
	Sequencers (contribute to the staging of ideas)	...conclusion Firstly Secondly First Then Lastly Second Next Thirdly Last Third Last but not least Finally To begin First of all First and foremost At last
	Elaborators (providing readers with extra information of the proposition)	Such as For example Or That is For instance '()' In fact Which means This means In other tokens Indeed

Interpersonal discourse markers (help writer connect with his readers)	Hedges (withhold writer's full commitment to proposition)	Should May Might would Could Maybe sometimes ...opinion rather x usually Mostly Almost tend to Argue suggest/ed/s Often Appear Mainly quite Feels In my view Generally wouldn't couldn't Around
	Emphatics (emphasize force or writer's certainty in proposition)	Always Think/s/thought Strongly Show/s/ed/shown Believe Really Actually Sure Clearly Never Of course True Surely Clear Obvious In fact Definitely Truly Realize/d/s
	Attitude markers (express writer's attitude or stance to the proposition)	Agree/s/d Important Disagree Even x Correctly Interesting Usually Unfortunately ! Appropriate Hopefully Unusually Dramatically Importantly Prefer Essential
	Engagement markers (explicitly refer to or build relationship with reader)	We (inclusive) Our (inclusive) You Your Us (inclusive) Must See Need to ? Have to Imagine By the way Do not
	Self-mentions (explicit reference to author/s)	I My me

Connectives (e.g.: and, also, but) shows the highest occurrence per 1,000 words of its use in this corpus with more than half of the total metadiscourse. The second highest is sequencers while elaborators sub-category becomes the last for the other three sub-categories (topicalizers, pointers and citations) are not found in the corpus. Connectives sub-category scores 2, 521 tokens. The first eight most common connectives include 'because', 'also', 'and', 'but', 'so', 'beside/s that' and 'however'. The corpus shows the highest usage of 'because' and 'also' based on the occurrence per 1, 000 words.

There are nine types of sequencers which are commonly used as the highest usage of sequencers. The markers are '...conclusion', 'firstly', 'secondly', 'first', 'then', 'lastly', 'second', 'next' and 'thirdly'. Meanwhile, the first highest three of sequencers are '...conclusion', 'firstly' and 'secondly'. The first five most common elaborators include 'such as', 'for example' and 'or x'. In this corpus, the type of elaborators 'such as' is used more than 'for example'. It can be said that good essays include elaborators to provide details in writing when giving examples.

To compare interpersonal discourse markers category in this corpus, engagement markers such as 'consider', 'note that' and 'you can see' show the highest occurrence per 1,000 words of its use with nearly half of the total metadiscourse. The second highest is attitude markers and emphatics becomes the third highest. The lowest usage of interpersonal discourse markers is hedges. There are only three self-mentions markers could be found.

CONCLUSION

This study discloses that the undergraduate students involved in this study use more organisational discourse markers. This is because it leads the readers to understand through the application of connectives (inter-sentential and intra-sentential linkers), sequencers, topicalizers, pointers, citations, and elaborators. The use of connective markers (but, because, also) and sequencers (first, then, finally) is the easiest way to organise sentences and ideas.

Meanwhile, the use of interpersonal discourse markers in the corpus is lower because it involves customs the writer interacts with the readers by attracting them into the discussion in the text. In this case, these inexperienced undergraduates student would use fewer hedges

(claim, could, tend to), emphatics (certain, believe, found), engagement markers (note that, refer), attitude markers (expected, important, usually) and self-mention (I, we, us) to attract the readers' participation while reading. The use of interpersonal discourse markers depends on the writers' writing skill which most undergraduates do not yet fully master.

A further study should be encouraged as a follow up to explore further into the inappropriate use of metadiscourse in the undergraduates' essays, both in good and weak essays. With sufficient knowledge of metadiscourse and its use, undergraduate writers will become more aware of the importance to assist readers in text, by articulating their ideas and messages clearly. Therefore, it is very significant to analyse the usage of metadiscourse markers in undergraduate writers' essays. Many improvements are yet to be accomplished for there are also limitations to this preliminary study. Therefore, it is really hoped that further related studies of the same kind in the field of metadiscourse will be done in the near future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is the extended version of the proceeding of the 2nd Borneo International Conference 2021 (BorNCE'21) organised by Politeknik & Kolej Komuniti Zon Borneo.

FUNDING

This study was funded by the Skim Geran Jangkamasa Pendek (SGJP). Reference No: R/SGJP/A0400/01061A/001/2019/00633 under Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. We would like to thank the Faculty of Language Studies and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan for supporting the process of publishing this humble work.

Citation of authors

Mohamed, A. F., Rashid, R. A., Lateh, N. H. M. & Kurniawan, Y. (2021) and (Mohamed et al., 2021)

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INSANIAH: Online Journal of Language, Communication, and Humanities
Special Issue, November 2021

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