

# **Writing in English as a second language: A study of the development of structure and modality in the argumentative genre**

Irene Pascual Peña  
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

## **Abstract**

This paper deals with the writing skill and, specifically, writing in English as a foreign language. Some argumentative texts written by foreign learners of English (Spaniards) will be analysed in terms of structure and modality. The argumentative genre is one of the most difficult ones; hence, we will see whether foreign learners of English are able to deal with it and its characteristics in a satisfactory way. The main objective of this paper is to analyse and compare two groups of students with regard to the features mentioned above: firstly, all the compositions were graded; after that, they were analysed (in terms of structure and modality), so that comparisons between groups could be established and so that it could be observed a relationship between quality and the features of structure and modality. The first group of students is students in their last year of high school; the second one, postgraduate students. The results show us that we can find differences between both groups and that postgraduate students' writing seems to be at a more advanced level, at the same time that they got better marks.

## Introduction

This paper will deal with the development, in foreign learners of English, of structure and modality in the genre of argumentative texts. Firstly, a theoretical background will be explained in order to contextualise this research. Secondly, it will be described how the data was collected. Thirdly, the results found will be explained and discussed. Finally, some conclusions and interpretations will be highlighted in order to make clear what the results show.

The main objective of this paper is to compare the compositions of 2º Bachillerato students (students who are in their last year of high school) and postgraduate students in order to see whether there is some kind of development. Although the subjects are not the same studied at two different points of their learning, the results and the comparison could hint at a probable future development of high school learners' writing. Likewise, differences among students in the same group (postgraduate students or 2º Bachillerato students), if any, will be pointed out and explained. Thus, the research questions are the following: is there any development regarding the features under study (modality and structure) if we compare students from 2º Bachillerato and postgraduate students? And, if so, what does this development consist of? Is there any relationship between the quality of the compositions and the two features under analysis?

The reason to study the structure of an argumentative text (the different parts it is made of) is that these types of texts have certain structure that they have to fulfil in order to be effective. In the next section, it will be explained what this structure consists of. In the same way, I decided to analyse hedges and modality as markers of the interpersonal function of language (this function establishes the relationships among participants involved in the act of communication). Modality is one of the features which are more complex to acquire for foreign learners of English. That is why I had a special interest in seeing whether there was a development in the use the two different groups of students make of modality (a better and more diverse use).

## Theoretical framework

This research works within the systemic functional linguistics framework, a theory whose father is Michael Halliday (1978, 2004). This theory stresses the fact that language is communication and has a social purpose (Martin and Rothery, 1993). Genres, specifically, also have social purposes and are seen as a staged and goal-oriented social process (Hyland, 2002). The different structures of the different kind of genres serve specific and different social purposes (Hyland, 2002). Language is linked to context and grammatical, lexical and cohesive devices are said to construct the functions of the different stages of the different genres (Hyland, 2002). The context in which we are communicating is very important in systemic-functional theory. The teaching of these genre structures and functions provide non-native learners of English with a tool to be on a similar level as native speakers of English. Genres are fundamental to understanding how we see reality, how we act and construct social situations (Hyland, 2002). Genre and grammar are inseparably tied, since meaning in a

text is constructed through the lexico-grammatical choices the writer makes (Gerot and Wignell, 1994).

The main written genres are recounts, argumentations and expositions ((Martin, 2001, Gerot and Wignell, 1994). The genre of arguing is very important in effective social participation and in school as well because it involves reasoning, evaluation and persuasion (Knapp and Watkins, 2005). Some lexico-grammatical features of this genre are the following: mental verbs expressing opinion (“I think”, “I believe”...), logical connectors to link different points in the argumentation (“furthermore”, “on the contrary”, “for example”...), causal connectors (“because”, “since”, “as a consequence”...) modality (“can”, “must”, “should”...) and nominalisations (“clarification” instead of “to clarify”, “development” instead of “to develop”...). Knapp and Watkins (2005) differentiate between exposition, a kind of argumentation in which the writer offers his/her point of view and argues in favour of it in order to persuade the reader, and discussions, an argumentation where the writer considers an issue from a number of perspectives. The kind of argumentative texts we are dealing with in this paper is, then, exposition: the writers defend their viewpoint about an issue by elaborating arguments that support that viewpoint.

The structure of an argumentative text has different stages or parts:

1. Introduction: first part of an argumentative text that, ideally, should include the following subparts:
  - 1.1 Thesis (Gerot and Wignell,1994, Knapp and Watkins,2005 and Martin,2001): statement of the issue under discussion.
  - 1.2 Position: (Gerot and Wignell, 1994) the writer indicates his or her position about the topic that will be discussed about.
  - 1.3 Preview: (Gerot and Wignell, 1994): the writer outlines the main arguments that will be presented.
2. Body paragraphs: the main part of the text, in which the arguments are developed.
  - 2.1 Argument: (Gerot and Wignell, 1994, Knapp and Watkins, 2005 and Martin, 2001) reason that supports the position the writer is defending. It should have a topic sentence (Martin, 2001), where the main idea of the argument is expressed.
  - 2.2 Elaboration of the argument (Gerot and Wignell, 1994, Knapp and Watkins, 2005 and Martin, 2001): development of the main idea expressed in the topic sentence, in order to reinforce the argument (writer’s viewpoint) and to persuade the reader.
  - 2.3 Counterargument (Knapp and Watkins, 2005): an argument to refute the writer’s argument. In this way, the reader realises that the writer takes into account other points of view and other arguments which are contrary to his or her thinking. This counterargument, then, should be refuted by a counter-counterargument, in order to persuade the reader and reinforce the whole argumentation. This may be a very effective (if well used) and mature technique, especially in high school. It seems that it would be a necessary prerequisite for postgraduate students.
3. Conclusion: final paragraph that should include different parts, which are the following:

- 3.1 Reiteration (Gerot and Wignell, 1994 and Martin, 2001): the writer repeats his or her position about the issue of discussion.
- 3.2 Summing up (Martin, 2001 and Knapp and Watkins, 2005): a summary of what has been presented and discussed in the body of the text.
- 3.3 Recommendation or suggestion (Knapp and Watkins, 2005): the writer ends the text by giving some recommendation or suggestion to improve the state of affairs (the topic under discussion).

This structure has been taken and adapted from different authors (Gerot and Wignell 1994, Martin 2001, Knapp and Watkins 2005), yet it must be recognised that there is not just one way of structuring arguments. It may depend on the topic and the length, but also on the writer: postgraduate students may have not used the same model as high school students. However, a model structure had to be chosen in order to analyse compositions according to it and be able to compare them.

Let us now turn to modality, the different types of modal verbs that exist and their meanings (what they express). For this purpose, I have used Downing and Locke's (1992) classification:

1. Epistemic modality (has to do with the expression of the speakers' thoughts, beliefs, predictions...)
  - 1.1 Certainty: from high certainty ("must", "can't") to low certainty (may, might, could...).
  - 1.2 Prediction: from high confidence in the prediction ("will") to low degree of confidence (should, may, might, could...).
  - 1.3 Possibility or probability: from high ("may", "might", "would") to low ("could").
2. Non epistemic or deontic modality (that which has to do with ability, permission and obligation).
  - 2.1. Ability: in the present ("can") or in the past ("could").
  - 2.2. Permission: from less polite ("can") to medium ("may") to more polite and formal ("could", "might").
  - 2.3. Obligation: from strong obligation ("must", "have to") to middle obligation ("should", "ought to") to lack of obligation ("don't have to", "needn't") to prohibition ("mustn't"-equivalent to strong obligation not to do something-).

I have considered as hedges mental verbs (such as "I think", "I believe", "I agree" ...), expressions showing the writer's opinion ("in my opinion", "from my viewpoint" ...), adverbs and expressions denoting the writer's attitude ("obviously", "fortunately", "it is very important", "it is better" ...) and verbs of liking ("I like", "I hate" ...). All these features are indicators of the writer's opinions, thoughts, evaluations, attitudes etc. That is why all of them are features of the interpersonal metafunction of language, and that is why all of them have been considered here as hedges in general.

There have been previous studies which have analysed the development of different features (such as topic development, development of genre structures and development of register features) in different text types. For example, Martín Úriz, Whittaker and Hidalgo Downing (2005), studied the topic development in 185 compositions (written in English by Spanish learners of English) of their large corpus

(students from the last two years of high school). They found that the majority of the compositions had a principal idea (84.3%); 97.3% had a first argument; 68.8% had a second argument, and the percentages of compositions with three or four arguments was very low (27% and 7%, respectively). They found a correlation between the argument and its correspondent elaboration, as well as a significant correlation (though low) between argument one and argument two. A stronger correlation was found between argument two and argument three; and even a stronger one between argument three and four. By correlation, what is meant is that if there is correlation between two elements, the presence of one guarantees (at a high level of certainty) the presence of the other. Another finding was that only half of the compositions included a conclusion.

A study carried out in 2002 by Morán deals with argumentative texts in Spanish produced by native speakers of the language. The findings were that only half of the younger group of students (who were 13 years old) obtained a good expression of the thesis. Moreover, 70% of them obtained a low mark in the argumentation and 80% obtained a low mark in generalization and closing of an argument. This shows that the argumentative genre is quite difficult, at least for high school Chilean students, even in their mother tongue (in a foreign language, we have to take into account more complex cognitive processes).

Shaw and Ting-Kun Liu (1998) carried out a project which studied register features in the writing of overseas students before and after they enrolled full-time courses in English for Academic Purposes. They wanted to know if there was any development in register features. They found a general development from spoken to written style and an increasing awareness of the requirements of different genres. They also found stylistic shifts in the vocabulary but the total number of different words did not increase. Students abandoned the overuse of "I", increased their use of nominalisations, subordination, WH- relatives, modal verbs, non-standard discourse markers and logical connectors. Another finding was that a decrease of "I think" was noticed. These findings may suggest that development will also be discovered in the case of this study (although students in this research did not enrol in EAP courses and their only nationality is Spanish).

Finally, I will mention another study by Martín Úriz, Whittaker, Barrio, Murcia, Ordóñez and Vidal (in press). In this study, the researchers wanted to find out whether Spanish students of 2º Bachillerato (last year of high school) were able to respond appropriately to the context of the foreign language (English) in which they were communicating. This would be manifested in the structure of texts and lexicogrammatical features. That is, if students were able to build the appropriate genre asked. This study focuses on recounts. The conclusions reached were that students knew the different stages of the genre, but these did not fulfil the expected functions. This might be relevant for my study, since it may be the case that 17-year-old students are able to build the argumentative genre in the same way that they can do it with recounts. However, it could also happen the opposite, since the argumentative genre is more complex.

## Data

My data consists of nine compositions: four from students in 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato (the last year of high school) and five from postgraduate students who studied English Philology.

All of them belong to a corpus collected by Martín Úriz and Whittaker (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid), a corpus that has led to many studies (some of them have been mentioned in the “theoretical framework” section). The topic of the composition was, for all the students, “The drinking age should be 21”. Students had to agree or disagree with this claim and support their point of view. The students were allowed a time of just thirty minutes to write the compositions.

The four compositions belonging to 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato students were chosen at random (they are compositions number one, two, three and four). I have to say that five compositions were chosen. However, one of them was discarded because it was very difficult to analyse, given its incredibly short length and its very bad grammar: there were some parts difficult to understand. The discarded composition had 50 words, whereas the rest had, at least, 200. Besides, I (advised by my supervisor) considered that the other four were enough and that they could be a representative sample, at least for the purpose of this paper.

Regarding the compositions written by postgraduate students, all of them were chosen at random too (they are compositions number five, six, seven, eight and nine). None of the chosen ones had to be discarded because of lack of understanding, short length or very poor grammar.

The first thing to be done was grading all the different compositions, although no correlation between quality and structure or quality and modality will be established, since to make such an affirmation (that there is or there is not correlation between them) would require a very large corpus with hundreds of examples (as Martín Úriz, Whittaker and Hidalgo Downing did with 185 compositions). After that, the proper analysis of the structure and modality in all the compositions was carried out. Once done this, the results were tabulated so that they could be observed in a clearer way.

## Results

		Co mp 1	Co mp 2	Co mp 3	Co mp 4	Co mp 5	Com p6	Com p7	Co mp 8	Co mp 9
	<i>Thesis</i>	Yes	Yes * <sup>1</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes *	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>INTROD</b>	<i>Position</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

<sup>1</sup> The asterisks mean that either the parts are wrongly placed or there is some kind of problem with them

FUNCTION		*	*	*		*				
	<i>Preview</i>	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
	<i>Argument 1</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	<i>Elaboration</i>	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	<i>Counterargument</i>	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
	Counter-counterargument	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
	<i>Argument 2</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	<i>Elaboration</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>BODY</b>	<i>Counterargument</i>	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
	Counter-counterargument	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
<b>PARAGRAPHS</b>	<i>Argument 3</i>	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	<i>Elaboration</i>	Yes	No	No	Yes*	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	<i>Counterargument</i>	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
	Counter-counterargument	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
	<i>Argument 4</i>	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes*	No

	<i>Elaboration</i>	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No
	<i>Counterargument</i>	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
	Counter-counterargument	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
	<i>Summary</i>	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<i>Reiteration</i>	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes*	Yes*	Yes*	Yes
	<i>Sugg/Recommend</i>	Yes*	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 1 Genre structure of compositions

Two tables show the results obtained by the analysis of the nine compositions: table 1 and table 2. The first one shows the results regarding structure, whereas the second one presents the results about modality and hedges.

First of all, there are some clarifications to make regarding structure: this is the reason why some of them have an asterisk drawn in some of the parts of the structure. The asterisks mean that there are problems with some parts of the structure, mainly problems of position. In many compositions by both groups, we find parts of the structure where they should not be. Likewise, sometimes there are sections that are longer than they should. Let us see this in a detailed way:

- In composition number one, we find the writer's position towards the issue concerned right after the topic sentence of the first argument. In the same way, the suggestions are found after the position, where some elaboration of the first argument was supposed to be included ("For example, in the discos this workers should pedir the DNI when people will go to alcoholic drink"). It has to be said that all the three arguments have a topic sentence. However, there is a problem with the topic sentence in argument number three: it is too long ("On the other hand, if the age to drink is the twenty one years old, if will have a lot of problems for the young people, because the age to go to the discos also will be twenty-one").

- In composition number two, it can be seen that thesis and position of the writer are placed in the same clause ("But I think that drinking prohibitions won't solve anything: the young people has brains and intelligence. They are not fools just for being young people"). Topic sentences are present.

- In composition number three, topic sentences are also found. What I would like to stress here is that this composition has a very long introduction (and no conclusion), where there are many preliminary sentences and



generalizations. This would be acceptable if the length of the whole composition would have been longer.

- Composition number four has four arguments, something that surprised me, given that it is written by a 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato student. This fact is something unusual, since, as it can be seen in the rest of the compositions written by these students, the usual thing is that the compositions have two arguments (three at the most). However, the elaboration of argument number three is quite messy, and not all readers would be able to get the message ("I think that when a person is 18 should have enough mind to think what they can do if you are 18 you are an adult in our society while your article say you can not drink if you are not 18. It is a contradiction"). Elaboration of argument number two is not placed in the same paragraph as the topic sentence. On the contrary, it is placed one paragraph later. Again, as in the previous compositions, topic sentences are included.

- Now we enter in the domain of compositions written by postgraduate students. In composition number five, we find the position and the thesis in the same clause complex ("I fully agree with your opinion that the drinking age should be raised from 18 to 21"), as in the second composition. It has to be stressed that argument one has not all the elaboration expected for a postgraduate student. The topic sentence of argument one is that many foreign countries prohibit people under 21 to drink. Its elaboration is "For example, in the US the pubs ask for the identification card and if people are under 21, they cannot get into the pubs". This is not really an elaboration of the argument, but a measure that one country practices to keep youngsters away from drinking alcohol. Likewise, argument number two is a personal experience of the writer ("there was an occasion where my friends..."), which shows a lack of maturity in academic writing. Moreover, this makes the argument rather unpersuasive for the reader.

- In composition number six, the writer's reiteration is placed in the same sentence as the first suggestion (since the writer offers more than one suggestion or recommendation): "I would suggest putting all our efforts in education rather than in prohibitions".

- The same happens in composition seven as it happened in number six: reiteration is implicit in the recommendation: "raising the age limit could be one solution, but it has to be reinforced with other measure: education and heavier fines".

- In composition number eight, the fourth argument is found in the conclusion and after the reiteration. The writer should have put this argument after the third one, not in the conclusion part: "For all said, I am not in favour of restricting alcohol to young people, and if they are old enough to vote, they can also control themselves when they can drink or not".

- In composition number nine, it should be noted that the position of the writer is not properly stated in the introduction, but in the body paragraphs and the conclusion parts.

- All the compositions written by postgraduate students have topic sentences for each of the arguments elaborated in the essay. Some of these topic sentences are quite long ("I don't think we would be acting properly if we

expected them to be adults for some things, like to vote, or to drive, but forced them to wait until they are twenty one to be eligible for drinking”). In spite of this, after it, the writer has been able to create further elaboration.

- Finally, it should be noted that, in all the nine compositions, preliminary sentences and generalizations are found (“In the last years young people have been drinking more and more”, “the last weeks people have talked much of this”). This preliminary stage can be more or less long, but it is found in absolutely all the compositions.

		MODALITY				HEGDES
	Obligation	Possibility & Probability	Possibility & Probability	Ability	Prediction	
	Verb	Verb	Adverb	Verb	Verb	
<b>Compo 1</b>	-Should (in clauses 11,14,17) -Haven't got to (lack of obligation) in clause 28			-Can (in clause 25 and 26)	Will (in clauses 16,31,33)	I think (in clauses 6,13,19,24)
<b>Compo 2</b>	-Must (in clause 10) -We have the necessity (in clause 12) -we have the obligation (in clause 15)	-Can (in clause 14, 17)		-Can't (in clause 27)	Won't (in clause 5)	I think (in clauses 4,10)
<b>Compo 3</b>	-Have to (in clauses 9,20)			-Can (in clauses 12,25)	Will (in clause 15)	-My opinion (in clause 4) -In my opinion (in clause 6) -I think (in clauses 10,22)
	-Should (in			-Can		-From my point of view (in clause 7)

<b>Com po 4</b>	clauses 5,25,42,44,47,48)			(in clause 5, 13, 27, 37) -Can't (clause 31)		-From my experience (in clause 11) -I think (in clauses 23,39,43) -I am not agree (in clause 6) -I do not like (in clause15)
<b>Com po 5</b>	-Should (in clause 4)	-Cannot (in clause 9)				-I fully agree (in clause 3) -I think (in clause 20) -I hate (in clause 24)
<b>Com po 6</b>		-Will (in clauses 41,42) -Would (in clauses 10,26,38) -Can (in clause 20,17)				-Disagree (in clause 2) -Fortunately (in clause 5) -I think (in clause 6) -I thought (in clause 7) -I don't think (in clause 26)
<b>Com po 7</b>	-Should (in clauses 10,15,19,24) -Has to (in clause 39)	-Would (in clauses 5,23) -May (in clause 35) -Could (in clause 38)	Maybe (in clause 7)			-I believe (in clause 8) -Obviously (in clause 27)
<b>Com po 8</b>	-Should (in clause 4) -Shouldn't (in clause 12) -Must (in clauses 23,27,54,61)	-Can (in clauses 3,62)		-Can (in clause 48) -Cannot (in clause 52)		-I don't agree (in clause 5) -My opinion (in clause 7) -I don't know (in clause 35) -I am not in favour (clause 45) -It is better (clause 42) -It is very important (clause 55)
<b>Com po 9</b>	-Must (in clause 25)	-Would (in clauses				-My opinion (in clause 7)

	-Should (in clause 9)	37,17,60) -Could (in clauses 19,51,53) -Can (in clause 47) -Cannot (in clause 43)				-Don't you think?(in clause 61)
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Table 2 Types of modality and hedges

In table 2, all the different types of modal verbs used by students, as well as the hedges they deploy, can be clearly observed. In addition, it can also be seen how many times a modal or hedge appears and in what clause number.

## Discussion of results

### *Similarities and differences among 2º Bachillerato students*

As regards the introduction, the four compositions belonging to students from 2º Bachillerato have the thesis and position of the writer included. In the same way, none of them has a preview (outline of the main arguments to be presented).

All the compositions had two arguments at least. Only half of them have three arguments, and just one has four arguments. Regarding elaboration, it can be seen that, in the first argument, half of the compositions (one and four) do not have any elaboration of the argument. On the other hand, compositions number two and three do have elaboration. As regards the second argument, all of them have its correspondent elaboration (one example could be "I think that person can have a good night without to drink, you can dance with yours friends, speak with them and you haven't got to do the things that your friends do"). The same is true for argument three in compositions one and four (precisely the ones that did not have elaboration for argument one). Composition four, in the fourth argument, also includes an elaboration.

The fact of not having found any counterargument in the compositions written by the group of students of 2º Bachillerato was expected, since it is a mark of the writer's maturity, and so it may develop later. It is a technique that has much effect when persuading, since the reader sees that the writer takes into account other arguments that favour the opposite viewpoint to that s/he is defending. Then, the counterargument is refuted by the writer with a Counter-counterargument, and persuasion is more likely to be achieved. As it can be observed in the table, no Counter-counterarguments have been found.

Only one of the four compositions written by these students has a concluding paragraph. In the first composition, some suggestions are detected "the government should close the shop where his proprietaries sell drinks a young people". Nonetheless, they are not included in the appropriate place: they are placed after the topic sentence of the first argument. That is why, although there are suggestions, which is one of the parts forming the conclusions, we cannot say that there is a proper conclusion. It is in composition number two where a conclusion can be found: it consists of a suggestion,

and maybe a reiteration could be implicit (“Like we, young people of this new millennium has his own concepts and ways of living their lives, so ¿why can’t we show them the different options of what is good and what is bad, and let them make his own personal choice?”). However, it is not separated into another paragraph, as it could be expected (the conclusion should have its own paragraph). Neither composition three nor four have a conclusion: an imbalance is observed in composition number three, since it has a very long introduction and no conclusion at all. A possible explanation for the fact that the majority of the compositions of this group do not have conclusions could be the time constraint.

Now we turn to highlight the similarities and differences among the writers of this group regarding modality and hedges. None of the writers uses any adverbs which mark modality; their only device to express modality seems to be modal verbs.

Regarding modal verbs, students have a limited variety of them. The writers of compositions three and four only use one modal verb to express obligation (“have to”- “they have to have the possibility to choose”- and “should”-“the owner of the shop should ask for this document”-, respectively). Composition number one uses “should” to express obligation (“the drinking age should be 21”) and “haven’t got to” to express lack of obligation (“you haven’t got to do the things that your friends do”). It is student who wrote composition number two the one who has wider variety of forms to express obligation: “must” (“we must think about seriously in education programs”), “we have the necessity” (we have the necessity to teach young people”), “we have the obligation” (“we have the obligation to be a good example”). Compositions number one, two and three also make use of the modal verb “will” and its correspondent negative form to express the epistemic meaning of prediction “will have a lot of problems for the young people”). All the compositions express the meaning of ability by using “can” (“you can dance with yours friends”, “people can get easily all the drinks”). Only in composition number two the meaning of possibility is expressed (twice), and it is done through “can” (“how bad the alcohol can be”) In summary, we can say that students from 2º Bachillerato have a limited range of modal verbs to express different meanings: “will” for prediction, “can” for ability, and “should” and “have to” for obligation (although there are some exceptions, as explained above).

As far as hedges are concerned, it can be observed that “I think” is the most typical and frequent one: it is present in the four compositions several times. In half of the cases, it is almost the only hedge that can be found (compositions one and two). In composition one there is “I would want” (“I would want to give my opinion”), which can be counted as a hedge (it shows writer’s intentions), and in composition number two the same happens with “I was always agree” (it shows the writer’s thinking). Composition number three also includes expressions such as “in my opinion”. It also includes some expressions such as “I would want” (“I would want that you know my opinion”) or “is true” (“is true that in the last years young people have been drinking”), which could be considered as hedges as well, since they show the writer’s attitudes and thinking. Finally, composition number four is the one which has more variety of hedges: apart from the typical “I think”, the writer includes expressions such as “from my experience”, “from my point of view”, “I do not like”, “I am not agree”. However, some of these expressions (“from my experience” and “I do not like”) reveal a lack of maturity in the writing: the writer including himself too much in the text, the

expression of personal experiences and likes or dislikes are said to be a feature of immature writing (Shaw and Ting-Kun Liu, 1998).

*Similarities and differences among postgraduate students*

Concerning structure and, specifically, introduction, it can be observed that all the writers (regardless of the group) have stated the thesis (some examples are "...that the drinking age should be raised from 18 to 21", "there is a problem among young people and alcohol", "the age at which young people can start drinking should be raised from 18 to 21"). In the case of the writer's position, only one, composition number nine, has this part of the introduction stated throughout the whole composition, but not properly in the introduction section (in this part the writer only says "I would like to express my opinion"). The rest have clearly stated the position the writer is in favour of ("I don't agree with this", "please let me disagree with the intention of your article", "I fully agree with your opinion"). As to the preview, none of the compositions has included it, like the students from 2º Bachillerato.

Regarding the body paragraphs of the structure, the five compositions have two arguments, at least. Composition number five is the one that has fewer arguments: only two. The other four have a third argument as well, and only composition number eight has a fourth argument.

A great homogeneity can be found regarding elaboration of arguments: all the arguments in all the five compositions have their correspondent further elaboration: "First, not only young people drink. There are also many people, mainly men, who drink at home and then become violent and start to hit their family, shouldn't there be forbidden to sell alcohol to these people?"). In composition number nine, there is a counterargument for argument two ("However, I must admit that it is true (...) that a lot of traffic accidents (...) are due to (...) very young people driving under the effects of alcohol"), and also a refutation with a Counter-counterargument ("This would not be a solution (...) since there are a lot of people of that age who do not consume alcohol"). It is the only composition where counterarguments have been included. However, the writer does not include a counterargument for each of his/her arguments, but just for one of them.

As opposed to the group of students from 2º Bachillerato, in this group, conclusions are present in 100% of the compositions. As in the other group of students, none of them includes a summary of what has been said to guide the reader. All the conclusions include a reiteration of the position of the writer of the text: their stance is reinforced after the whole argumentation, and so it is good to reiterate the position ("For all said, I am not in favour of restricting alcohol to young people", "instead of raising the drinking age to 21, we could look for other solutions"). As to suggestions and recommendations, only composition number five lacks this feature. In the other four compositions we can find examples such as "give them guidance, "offer them a place where they can drink", "It is very important to teach young people to behave themselves and drink moderately", "I would suggest putting all out effort in education".

Now we turn to the aspects of modality and hedges. Surprisingly enough, composition number six does not make use of any modals of obligation in the whole composition. In the same way, composition number five only uses the modal "should" ("the drinking age should be raised"), and no more examples of different modals

expressing obligations can be found. Composition number seven uses “should” (“this mass media should be used appropriately”) and “has to” (“it has to be reinforced with other measures”). Composition number eight makes use of “should” (“the drinking age should be 21”), “shouldn’t” (“shouldn’t there be forbidden to sell alcohol to these people?”) and “must” (“this must be a task undertaken principally by parents”), and composition number nine, “must” (“I must admit”), “should” (“there are different points that should be taken into account”) and “have to” (“you only have to think about “Ley Antibotellón”). Thus, it can be noticed that “have to”, “should” and “must” are the most common modal verbs to express obligation.

In the use of modals expressing probability and possibility, a greater variety and a higher frequency (this meaning was only expressed twice in one of the compositions from the other group) can be appreciated than in the other group of students: now, it is not only “can” the verb used to express this meaning, but also “will” (“better cultural activities that will fill their mind”), “would” (“Fixed ages for certain activities (...) would make them violate the restriction”), “may” (“It may not be such a good idea”) and “could” (“raising the age limit could be one solution”). Nonetheless, I have to remark that compositions number five and eight only use the verb “can” to express possibility (“but also in schools teachers can help their parents”). An adverb, “maybe”, is found in just one of the compositions, number seven, expressing probability or possibility.

Only composition number eight makes use of the meaning of ability through “can” (“they can also control themselves”), which contrasts with the high frequency with which we can find this meaning in the compositions written by high school students.

As opposed to 2º Bachillerato students, the epistemic meaning of prediction is hardly used in this group of postgraduate students. None of the five compositions use any verb expressing this meaning of modality. However, composition number seven uses the adverb “obviously”, which I have considered to express prediction: the writer is predicting something, and s/he is absolutely sure about it, s/he is totally convinced that what s/he is saying will be the case. Specifically, s/he is predicting that, although the drinking age is raised to 21 years old, youngsters will manage to get alcoholic drinks anyhow.

The last section to be analysed is hedges. “I think” is found in some of the compositions, although not in all of them (as it occurred in the previous group of students). In composition number seven we find “I believe”. “I agree” or “I disagree” are found in three of the five compositions, in compositions number five, six and eight. In composition number five we find the following hedges: “I hate”, “I think”, “I fully agree” and “we didn’t know”. “I hate” (“I hate to hear any more stories like this”) and “we didn’t know” (“we didn’t know what to do”) are related to personal experiences, denoting a lack of maturity in the academic writing style. Composition number six, apart from “I think” and “disagree”, has “fortunately” (“who fortunately did not have this problem”), which denotes the writer’s evaluation of something, and “expected” (“if we expected them to be adults for some things”), which expresses the writer’s attitude and thinking. Composition number seven is very poor in hedges: it only has “I believe”, and “obviously”, if, instead of being considered as an adverb of prediction, it is considered as a hedge (it can also be an interpretation). Composition number eight is the richest. It has a lot of hedges which denote the writer’s thinking, attitudes,

knowledge etc: “my opinion” (“express my opinion about it”), “I don’t know” (“I don’t know why”), “it is better” (“it is better to leave free for everybody”), it is important (“it is very important to teach young people”), “It is more attractive” (“when something is forbidden (...) it is more attractive for young people”), “I don’t agree” (“I don’t agree with this”), “I am not in favour of” (“I am not in favour of restricting alcohol to young people”). Composition number nine has several and varied hedges as well: “I would like”, “my opinion” (“I would like to express my opinion”) “expect” (“many people react in the opposite way, and not how we expect”), “it is true” (“I must admit that it is true (...) that a lot of traffic accidents...”) etc.

*Similarities and differences among the two groups of students: a comparison. Is there any development?*

First of all, I will establish a comparison regarding structure (table 1). There seems to be little difference between the introductions of the compositions written by 2º Bachillerato students and the ones written by postgraduate students, since all of them include a thesis and the writer’s position, and none of them includes a preview of the arguments that will be developed later on. Nonetheless, there is development in this component: position sentences, in postgraduate students’ compositions are not placed wrongly. Even in composition number nine, where position is not included in the introduction, it is implicit and easily deduced from the whole argumentation. In composition number five, we find that position and thesis are in the same clause complex, as in composition number three. In compositions from postgraduate students, the error of too long introductions is not found, in the way it is in composition number three (written by a student from 2º Bachillerato). As a consequence, although not very visible differences can be identified, if we analyse and compare the two groups deeply, it can be seen that there is development.

There is a visible development in what concerns arguments and elaboration. Half of the students from 2º Bachillerato develop three arguments. In contrast, all the compositions written by postgraduate students (except composition number five) have three arguments. In each group, there is only one case (composition number four and composition number eight) where the writer elaborates four arguments. It is somewhat surprising to find four arguments in a composition written by a 2º Bachillerato student; however, it could be expectable (and desirable) in the case of a postgraduate student. The difference is that the writer of composition number four does not elaborate his or her first argument, whereas the writer of composition number eight elaborates all the arguments (I have to note, though, that the fourth argument in composition number nine is wrongly placed in the conclusion part, after the reiteration). Also, the level of sophistication between the arguments of the two writers is very different: a great development is visible in this aspect. The level of sophistication and reasoning in the elaboration of each of the arguments is much richer and higher in the compositions written by postgraduate students. As a consequence, the development can be said to be great. The perfect exemplification of this sophistication is the use of counterarguments and Counter-counterarguments, though they are present only in one of the five compositions written by postgraduate students. However, their presence is very telling.

A great development can be appreciated as regards conclusions, simply because in the group of 2º Bachillerato students, only one of the compositions has a conclusion.



In contrast, all the postgraduate students' compositions have a conclusion. None of them has the summary part, contrary to what was expected. All of them have a reiteration of the position, and almost all (except composition number five) include some suggestions or recommendations. Composition number two, which is the only one that includes a conclusion in the group of 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato students, only has the recommendation part. Composition number one, as it has been already said, has some suggestions, but wrongly placed. That is why we cannot say that it has a conclusion. Therefore, in this stage of the structure of the argumentative genre, a great development can be observed.

Next, it is the turn for a comparison of modals and hedges between the two groups of students analysed (table 2). In composition number five, it can be observed that, to express obligation, the writer only uses "should", as in composition number four. In composition number six, there is not any expression of obligation at all. The rest of the compositions make use of "must", "should" and "have to". Therefore, there is no difference in the modals used, but there is difference in the variety of modals used to express this meaning in the same composition: in that aspect, there is development. Except composition two, the rest of the 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato students' compositions use just one or two different verbs to express obligation. However, it can be seen that there are two compositions by the postgraduate students that show no development with respect to the other group. These are compositions number five and six, as has already been stated.

More or less the same phenomenon can be observed with respect to modals which express possibility and probability. In the group of students from 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato, the only modal used to express possibility is "can" (only used in one of the compositions from this group). The range of modal verbs used is very limited, thus. In contrast, a greater variety, as well as a higher frequency, is found in the group of postgraduate students: not only "can" is used, but also "may", "will"; "could", "would". Nonetheless, in two of the postgraduate students' compositions, no development can be appreciated: the writers of, again, composition number five and composition number eight, limit their expression of possibility to the use of "can". Another difference between the two groups in the expression of possibility is that an adverb is found in one of the compositions of the postgraduate students, "maybe".

Regarding the expression of ability, only one composition from the group of postgraduate students makes use of it. However, all the students from the high school group use the meaning of ability. "Can" or "can't" are the verbs used to express ability.

As to prediction, none of the postgraduate students expresses this meaning (as opposed to 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato students). Only, if we consider "obviously" as an adverb which expresses prediction, this meaning can be found once in composition number seven).

As a conclusion, it could be said that postgraduate students express obligation and possibility with a wider variety of modal verbs and adverbs than students from 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato. They also sacrifice the meanings of ability and prediction to enrich the expression of obligation and possibility meanings, which are more important in the argumentative text than the other ones (ability and prediction), at least in this concrete argumentative text.

As far as hedges are concerned, a great development can be appreciated from the 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato students to postgraduate ones: while students from 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato

mostly use “I think”, “I agree”, “in my opinion” and “I do not like”, postgraduate students’ hedges are more varied: apart from the expected “I think”, “I agree” etc, they use expressions such as “fortunately”, “it is very important”, “expect”, “I am not in favour”... Composition number four, among compositions from 2º Bachillerato students, is the one that shows more variety in the use of hedges: “from my point of view”, “from my experience”; “I do not like”... However, it lacks maturity, since the writer includes personal experiences and likes/dislikes. The same occurs with composition number five: one of its two arguments is the recounting of a personal experience, something which is not appropriate in argumentative texts and manifests immaturity. This characteristic was not expected to be found in a composition of a postgraduate student, though it is only found in one of the five compositions of this group. This lack of maturity is more expected to be found in less proficient and inexperienced writers (2º Bachillerato students).

#### *Quality: differences between groups*

Composition number five is the composition which has obtained the lowest mark within the postgraduate students group, 5.95. In fact, its mark is very close to composition number four, which has the highest mark in the 2º Bachillerato students group, 5.85. The rest of the marks within the group of postgraduate students are quite uniform: composition number six got a 7.5; composition number seven a 7.6; composition number eight is 7.1; and, finally, composition number nine has the highest mark, 8.65. The mean mark of the group is 7.36. The mark of composition number five is closer to 2º Bachillerato students’ compositions. This is something that could be expected, since it could be seen that it had more similarities with the compositions written by high school students: the personal hedges, more appropriate for recounts and a feature of immature argumentative writing (one of its two arguments consists in the recounting of a personal experience); the only use of “should” to express obligation; the only use of “can” to express possibility; the inclusion of only two arguments, and the lack of suggestions or recommendations.

In the group of 2º Bachillerato students, composition number three obtained the lowest mark: 3.9. Composition number four obtained the highest one (5.85), and compositions one and two obtained similar marks: 5.35 and 5.25. In this group, the marks are quite uniform as well (except composition number three). The mean mark in this group is 5.08, considerably lower than the mean of the group of postgraduate students.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper, I have analysed the development of 2º Bachillerato students and postgraduate students with respect to the structure of an argumentative text and the use of modality and hedges.

The first part of this paper dealt with the theoretical framework used in this study, which is the systemic-functional linguistics framework: language is considered as a social process, and genres are goal-oriented, staged activities that serve a purpose. Some of the previous studies have been taken into account and briefly outlined. Next,

the data has been explained: nine compositions, four from 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato students and five from postgraduate students. The topic about which students had to write was: "the drinking age should be twenty-one". They were supposed to have read an article of a newspaper suggesting this idea, and they had to send a letter to the editor agreeing or disagreeing. The time was limited: only thirty minutes.

The analysis of the results leads me to some conclusions that will be presented next. Regarding structure, in both groups thesis and position were present and the preview absent. However, 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato students have some problems that postgraduate students do not, such as very long introductions, the placement of the position in the first argument... In the body paragraphs, all postgraduate students (except the writer of composition number five) have developed three arguments, at least. Furthermore, composition number eight even developed four arguments. In contrast, half of the 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato students' compositions have developed just two arguments (like composition number five). There is another composition of this group that has three arguments, as the majority of postgraduate students' compositions do. The last composition has four arguments, something which was not expected in a composition from a student in 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato. However, it has to be noted that the inclusion of many arguments does not mean a better quality: sometimes, one argument correctly developed and reasoned is more effective than four arguments wrongly elaborated. Nonetheless, these students have some problems with the elaboration of the arguments. Whereas postgraduate students make an elaboration of all the arguments, half of the 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato students' compositions lack elaboration for the first argument. Therefore, some development has been achieved. In Martín Úriz and Whittaker's study (2005), they found a strong correlation between argument number three and argument four: that correlation indicated that the fact of elaborating three arguments, often involved the capacity of developing four arguments.

Finally, regarding the conclusion part of the structure, we have to say that a great development is observed: only one of the four 2<sup>o</sup> Bachillerato students' compositions has a conclusion. In contrast, all the postgraduate students' compositions have a conclusion. Therefore, there is an actual development: students learn to make conclusions and learn the importance of this part of an essay. Lastly, I would like to point out that there are not any compositions that include in their conclusion a summary of what has been said, not even in the postgraduate students' conclusions. The summary is important, since it positions the reader, making him/her remember what has been said and the main points argued. Contrary to my expectations, this part of the conclusion was not found in postgraduate students compositions. Maybe this could be explained by a lack of time: maybe they had time to write a conclusion, but not a complete one. Or maybe they did not remember or they did not know a summary should be included. Further research would be necessary in order to test these hypotheses.

Regarding the use of modality and hedges, there is also development. Although more or less the same modal verbs are used to express obligation by both groups of students (most frequently, "must", "have to" and "should"), a wider variety can be appreciated in postgraduate students' compositions. That is, instead of using only one or two verbs to express obligation, they use three or four. This is true for all postgraduate compositions except number five, which only uses "should", and composition number six, which does not use modals of obligation at all. With respect

to the expression of possibility, there is development, since postgraduate students, again, use more variety of verbs: whereas 2º Bachillerato students only use “can”, postgraduate students make use of verbs such as “will”, “would”, “could”, “may”... and adverbs such as “maybe” as well ( only in composition number seven). Two exceptions to this variety are compositions number five and eight, which only use “can”, as the 2º Bachillerato students. In the same way, it seems that high school students express ability with much frequency, and this is not the case in the compositions by postgraduate students. It may be the case that the meaning of ability gradually disappears to give way to the meaning of possibility. Regarding prediction, just the compositions written by 2º Bachillerato students (three out of the four) express this epistemic meaning, by using the modal verbs “will” or its negative form, “won’t”. On the other hand, compositions belonging to postgraduate students do not express prediction meaning: their focus is mainly on obligation and possibility (meaning that has certain similarities with that of prediction. What happens is that the meaning of prediction is many times expressed from a personal viewpoint, while the expression of possibility is likely to be expressed more objectively). Only the adverb, “obviously”, in composition number seven, can be interpreted as a prediction of which the writer is totally sure about.

As far as hedges are concerned, there is also development: postgraduate students, though still use the typical “I think”, they opt for more hedges, some of them that are not very obvious and can be considered as hedges or not: “it is true”, “it is better”, “fortunately”, “expect”, “I am not in favour”... These kinds of hedges are not found in the compositions from the other group of students. The most typical hedges found in the group of high school students are “I think”, “I agree” and “in my opinion”. It does not mean that postgraduate students do not use them, since, in fact, they also do. The difference is that they also use other ones. Composition number four is the one by the 2º Bachillerato students that includes a wider variety of hedges than the rest: “from my viewpoint”, “from my experience”, “I do not like”, “I think”... Nonetheless, “I do not like” is too personal to be included in an argumentative text. It lacks maturity, since it is an interpersonal device that immature writers use, and thus is unsuitable. Composition number five, again, also has these traits: “I hate”; “we didn’t know”. These hedges show personal experiences, which would be more appropriate in a recount than in an argumentative text.

To finish this paper, two final conclusions will be drawn: quality is considerably higher in the group of postgraduate students than in the group of 2º Bachillerato students. Likewise, some development can be appreciated in all the features analysed in this study: in some features there is a greater development than in others, but there is development in all of them. These conclusions fit the initial expectations and hypotheses that one could have about the results to be obtained. Though correlation between quality and the two features analysed has not been calculated (because a huge amount of data would be needed), it seems probable that some correlation exists between quality and modality. This is because, as it has been seen, postgraduate students’ quality of their composition was substantially better than high school students’. In the same way, postgraduate students used a more varied and more precise range of modal verbs. Therefore, there may be a relationship between the two features: quality may be affected by the use of modality; the varied and precise use of modal verbs may mean a higher mark. A stronger correlation seems to be present

between quality and structure, just at first sight and by looking at the data. A possible explanation for this is that structure is more visible than modality: a bad structure is immediately perceived, but a poor use of modal verbs may require a more detailed reading to be noticed. In the same way, structure is the means through which the message is organized and so it can determine whether the message reaches the reader properly or not. If the reader is unable to decipher or understand the message because of a bad structure, it will be detected immediately, and, therefore, the quality will be affected: the mark of that composition will be lower than if a correct structure would have been used.

I urge more analyses and studies dealing with writing in English as a foreign language in order to be able to strengthen and consolidate the results obtained in previous research studies, as well as in order to uncover new pedagogical implications. This would give us a deeper insight of what goes on in the academic writing development process of foreign learners of English. If new pedagogical implications are found, teaching writing can be improved and writing in an L2 may become a more effective process.

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