

## The Use Of Engagement Resources In GCSE EFL And ESL Reading Exams: A Practical Application Of Appraisal Theory [In English]

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### ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates the value of Engagement as a subsystem of Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal framework in studies on IGCSE English reading assessments. The study focused on how IGCSE exam authors engage with their readers and how they construct and negotiate stances using evaluative language. The study used a mixed-method research design to examine engagement resources in four IGCSE EFL/ESL reading tests. Analysis of four IGCSE EFL and ESL reading tests using the Engagement system revealed that there are some different linguistic preferences among EFL and ESL exam makers. While both tests had a higher number of heteroglossic and 'contractive' resources, the manner in which these elements were distributed made a difference in serving each exam's purpose and type of evaluation, i.e. the engagement feature was used in EFL texts to present a more challenging text while ESL texts were considered clearer. A thorough understanding of the underlying features of engagement can help learners distinguish creative positioning, assess the impact of linguistic choices, identify the goal of writing, and comprehend underlying ideologies and values. The comparison between ESL and EFL texts indicates that closer attention to authorial presence and to problems of voice negotiation through the study of engagement resources can help in preparing EFL and ESL IGCSE exam takers to solve more effectively and can enhance their text understanding and sharpen their critical reading skills.

**Keywords:** Language Teaching, Appraisal Framework, Engagement System, IGCSE Exam, IGCSE EFL/ESL Reading Tests.

### Introduction

Reading comprehension is seen as a very complicated cognitive process in which the meaning is generated by the reader's engagement with the text

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(Zhang & Li, 2020). Decoding ability, linguistic materials, and (meta) cognitive processes are all necessary for effective reading comprehension (Firoozi, 2021). The ability to read competently in English is often characterized as a key factor in an individual's academic and professional success (Alderson, 2000). As a result, evaluating reading proficiency is crucial in many educational contexts and language programs. Reading comprehension tests, which demand that candidates understand a text, are widely used in the field of English language proficiency assessment. Globally, applicants who want to study or work in English-speaking settings must pass standardized English language tests (Firoozi, 2021). Some popular English tests such as English as a first language and English as a second language exams are under The International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE).

The IGCSE is an English language-based international high-stakes test. It was developed by Cambridge Assessment International Education based on the British curriculum (GCSE) but, adapted for a more internationally-focused framework. Typically, students start studying the curriculum at the start of Year 10 and take the exam by the completion of Year 11. One earns an "IGCSE" qualification for each subject taken since the qualifications are based on particular subjects of study. IGCSE applicants often take a First Language, a Second Language, Mathematics, and one or more Science topics as part of their "core" curriculum. The Cambridge IGCSE is the most widely accepted international certification for students between the ages of 14 and 16, by higher education institutions and employers. In the June 2022 series, more than 250,000 students took the Cambridge IGCSE examinations in 150 countries (Leadership, 2017).

Both EFL and ESL IGCSE tests include three modules: reading, writing and, speaking with listening. According to Cambridge Assessment International Education, English as a First Language (EFL) is intended for native English speakers, while English as a Second Language (ESL) is intended for students whose mother tongue is not English but who want to improve their communication skills in this language. However, many non-native students take the EFL test. The reading assessment, which is the focus of this study, is an essential component of the EFL and ESL tests. According to the IGCSE exam requirements, the EFL reading module evaluates a learner's capacity to: (1) exhibit an understanding of attitudes and implicit meanings (2) analyze, assess, and develop information, concepts, and viewpoints while utilizing suitable textual evidence, and (3) demonstrate knowledge of the employed writers' techniques to influence readers' opinions. Alternatively, an ESL reading test is designed to assess the

learner's understanding of what is implied but not directly stated in the texts (Cox, 2018).

The reading parts in EFL, as well as ESL tests, consist of three texts with slightly different lengths. Different types of questions are employed in each version of the test, while the EFL test uses comprehension tasks (identify ways in which..., explain how..., provide evidence...) and Short-answer questions ( meaning of words and phrases used ), the ESL one uses Wh-short answer questions tasks (what is..., how many..., which X is...), multiple matching, and note-making tasks. Candidates of both exams are supposed to answer the questions in 2 hours (Cox, 2018).

In the fields of applied linguistics and psychology, reading is viewed as an interactive process (Alyousef, 2006). The information communicated in a text may be predicted, tested, and confirmed or negated by the reader based on his own experience, knowledge, and beliefs. Literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative reading are the four tiers of reading identified by Adler and Van Doren (2014). High-level reading consists of critical reading and appreciative reading, as opposed to the other two. Recently, it has become necessary to have enhanced critical reading skills in a number of contexts, including academic, media, advertising, and educational settings. Moreover, Critical reading teaching is increasingly being incorporated into ESL/EFL curricula (Haromi, 2014).

Many recent attempts have been made to analyze different modules of high-stakes English language proficiency tests using different approaches including corpus analysis (Coffin, 2004; Ha et al., 2022; Kaneko, 2020) and revised Bloom's taxonomy (Baghaei et al., 2020). However, to our knowledge, no prior studies have examined, these types of tests (specifically the reading module) using Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal framework.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate evaluation, stance, and meaning construction in terms of the Appraisal-based Engagement subsystem in EFL and ESL reading exams. The study attempted to answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the engagement resources employed to enact interpersonal meanings in the IGCSE reading exams?
2. What linguistic resources pertaining to the realization of engagement resources are most frequently used in the IGCSE EFL and ESL texts?

### **Literature review**

In literature, the appraisal framework has been relatively used to investigate political discourses and academic writing to understand how engagement, positioning, and rhetorical functions are realized. However,

practical applications of this theory in the assessment and testing field are very rare and limited in scope.

Haromi (2014) analyzed how students' familiarity with Appraisal materials affected their critical reading ability. She examined the critical reading skills of 60 BA junior English majors before and after introducing them to the Appraisal theory. An in-depth analysis of the students' performance in reading comprehension tests showed that 70% of the students were able to recognize the biased nature of the text, and a larger percentage of participants were able to recognize the writers' side of the argument and support their responses with relevant passages.

In his attempt to get new perspectives on reading strategies, Liu (2010) examined the use of Appraisal theory in the teaching of college-level English reading. He inspected the impact of teaching "appraising" strategies to 100 Mandarin English Language and Literature sophomores over a period of 18 weeks (2 hours per week). In their post-tests, pupils in the experimental group in his study scored higher grades than those in the control group. In the same line, Ruo-mei (2016) applied the three sub-systems of appraisal theory to quantitatively assess the sample text "There's a lot more to life than a job" from Book 2 of New Horizon College English. He came to the conclusion that by using this sort of text analysis, students' integrated reading skills had considerably improved in critical consciousness through comprehending the discourse resources.

In the writing component testing, Shi and Liu (2016) analyzed 15 of the model essays written for IELTS test preparation in China. Drawing on Appraisal theory they examined the employment of engagement resources in constructing an English argumentative text. The findings suggested that the engagement resources valued in the model essays reflect the Chinese local rhetorical style in constructing an English argumentative text. They further argued that the texts do not provide enough access to the linguistic resources valued beyond the context of language testing (i.e., IELTS writing component) although they may be effective in helping students acquire higher scores on a language test. Also, in writing assessment, Hall and Sheyholislami (2013) conducted a study on the positive and negative written remarks of three raters scoring the same sixteen writing tests through "appraisal theory" and matched them to each test score. The examination of scoring criteria and rater variability through an analysis of the evaluative nature of rater comments determined the relative importance of a specific textual feature by the number of comments it receives and how strong the comments are. Essays using more appraisal terminology were awarded higher marks by the raters. The findings also revealed raters' perception of

the concept of "good writing" and presented how raters bring their interpretations to the grading task.

### **Analytical framework**

The Appraisal theory, derived from systemic Functional Linguistics and influenced by the works of Bakhtin (2010) and Vološinov (1986), was established in the 1990s, by a team of academics under the direction of Professor James Martin at Sydney University. The theory is defined as a method for evaluating language, taking positions, creating literary characters, and establishing interpersonal positioning (Martin & White, 2005). It examines how writers and speakers project their attitudes, ideas, or judgments onto readers and listeners in order to forge bonds with those who share their perspectives and experiences and to keep their distance from those who do not. Martin (2000) emphasized that Appraisal also looks at how speakers' and authors' opinions, judgments, and emotional responses are either directly conveyed or implied in texts. By expressing to listeners or readers how they feel about pertinent topics, Appraisal theory is used to assess discourse resources in order to negotiate social connections.

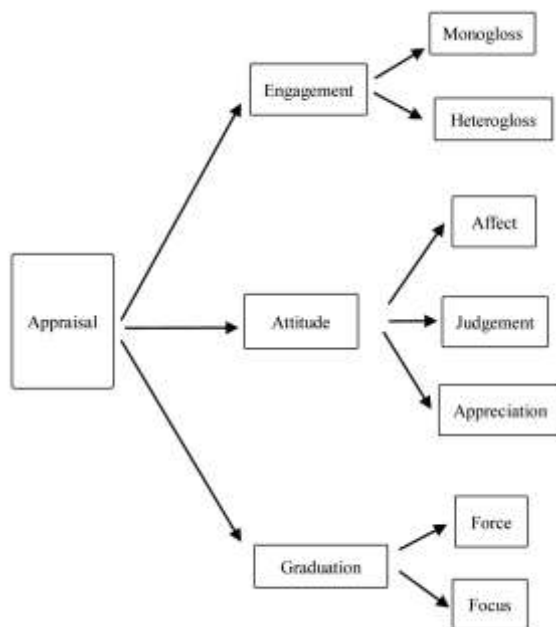
Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a comprehensive theory of language that offers a unique perspective on how language functions in context to make meaning. It was first developed by Michael Halliday in the early 1960s and has since become a widely recognized theory of language and an influential analysis model. The central tenet of SFL is that language is a social semiotic system, i.e. a system of signs and symbols used to convey meaning within a specific context. One of the key contributions of SFL is its distinction between different levels of meaning-making in language. It views language as having three interconnected levels: the ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual. The ideational level deals with the representation of experience and knowledge in language, and includes concepts such as theme, reference, and transitivity. The interpersonal level concerns the relationships between speaker and listener and includes concepts such as mood, modality, and politeness. Finally, the textual level is concerned with the organization of discourse and includes concepts such as cohesion and coherence (Eggins, 2004; Halliday, 2014). To our interest, SFL has been significantly applied in the field of education, where it has been used to develop pedagogical materials and curricula in several countries. SFL has been applied to the teaching of language, particularly in the areas of reading and writing, where it has been used to help students understand the ways in which language functions in context and how to use language effectively to convey meaning (Perales-Escudero, 2018).

As the focus of the current study is to investigate evaluation and stance expression in IGCSE English language exams, and since the texts are of an educational nature, the Appraisal theory as an SFL derivative is seen as a suitable framework to serve this aim. According to Hunston (2011), the Appraisal theory is regarded as the most theoretically based examination of the purposes and expressions of evaluative meaning in English as well as the most systematic analytical tool that provides a typology of evaluative resources.

Although it has many advantages, Appraisal theory has some limitations. The subjectivity of this theory is one of its notable criticisms since the texts may be perceived in several ways depending on the readers' subjective viewpoints (Martin & White, 2005). The inevitable exposure to this subjectivity has increased analysts' consciousness of the need to place oneself socially and consistently when studying evaluative language, along with taking context into consideration.

The Appraisal framework primarily consists of three sub-systems (Figure 1): *Attitude*, *Graduation*, and *Engagement*. Attitude deals with feelings and emotions, it is further subdivided into: Affect (responding to emotion), Judgment (assessing behavior), and Appreciation (appraising things).

**Figure 1. Appraisal framework**



*Graduation* provides the resources to operate the strength of semantic values. It is further classified into Focus (categorizing by sharpening and softening those values) and Force (assessing the degree of intensity and quantification). Engagement focuses on the position of the authorial voice with respect to other voices in the current communicative context.

The *Engagement* system refers to the “linguistic resources by which speakers/writers adopt a stance towards the value positions being referenced by the text and with respect to those they address” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 92). It is stated that engagement resources are crucial for the argumentation genre when it comes to developing strong arguments through operating writer-reader interaction (Ho, 2011; Swain, 2007), which is central to the purpose of our investigation.

In the *Engagement* system, a text has propositions, which are described as “something that may be debated, but argued in a certain way” (Eggins, 2004). Martin and White (2005) building on the dialogism research of (Bakhtin, 2010), distinguished between *monoglossic* and *heteroglossic* statements. A *Monoglossic* utterance is classified as being true and does not recognize the possibility of alternative views or opinions as in example (a), while a *heteroglossic* utterance suggests other alternatives, showing the assertion is merely one perspective among many potential ones, as in (b):

- a. Dancers are professional people who adapt to long hours of perfecting their art. (The writer makes no reference to external sources)
- b. Many people believe that dancers put a lot of effort to perfect their performances. (The writer refers to an external source “many people”)

The *heteroglossic* propositions are further divided into two main categories, “dialogic expansion” and “dialogic contraction” according to whether the statements actively allow for or suppress other voices (Martin & White, 2005). Each category additionally contains two options: *Disclaim*, *Proclaim*, and *Entertain*, *Attribute*.

In the *disclaim* element, authors cut down dialogic space with the readers by rejecting or opposing any substitute or contradictory ideas from the audience. Disclaim has two sub-types of its own: *deny* where the textual voice seems to reject an opposing viewpoint as in (a), and *counter* when it appears that the writer is aiming at substituting or replacing an alternative opinion as illustrated by (b):

- a. Dancing is **not** just for those of a certain age or ability.
- b. They can read German, **but** they can't speak it.

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Under the proclaim feature, the writers restrict the dialogic space with the readers by questioning any opposing opinions from them, since authors promote their ideas as extremely credible and acceptable by readers. There are four types of Proclaim, and their classification depends on whether the linguistic voice seems to restrict the range of dialogic options by: openly concurring with certain projected voices (*concur*) through either *affirming* or *conceding*, by perceiving those projected voices as accurate, indisputable, or strongly warrantable (*endorse*), by implied writer involvement (*pronounce*), or by indicating an utterance as controversial and requiring justification (*justify*). Martin and White (2005) did not explore the *justify* category, although it is a component of White's proposed model of *heteroglossic* engagement (2003). Examples of these subdivisions are represented below correspondingly:

- a. Affirm: Such cheap goods **obviously** rely on cheap labor.
- b. Concede: **Admittedly**, the ball was close to the line, but I'm sure it wasn't out.
- c. Endorse: These findings **illustrated** the complexity of early-life microbiome development and its sensitivity to perturbation.
- d. Pronounce: It is **in fact** a closed system
- e. Justify: They were angry **because** their plans had been discovered.

Within the *entertain* category, the writers accept and encourage various perspectives from the audience by providing ideas based on the authors' own subjectivity as one of several viable stances. In the *attribute* category, the writers provide the most room for various readers' perspectives by presenting assertions based on external subjectivity as one of several viable stances. They do so in a reasonably neutral manner ('acknowledge') or by expressly refusing to accept responsibility for the proposition ('distance') as shown here:

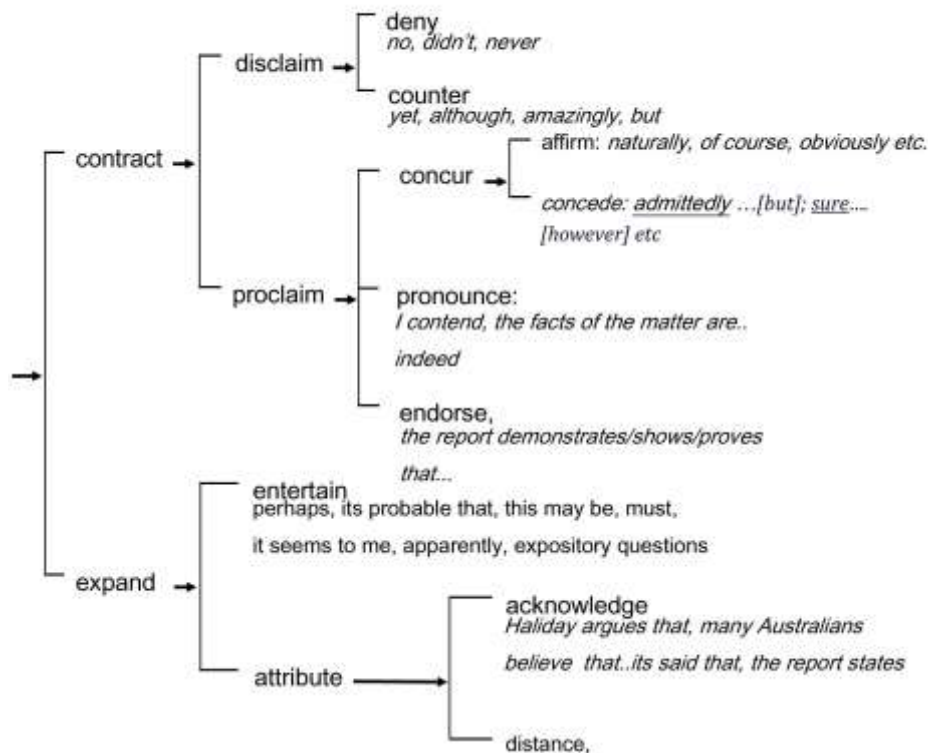
- a. Entertain: This **may possibly** be the cell sap in their interior, which must exercise a slightly different hydrostatic pressure on the basal and, the lateral walls of the cells.
- b. Acknowledge: She **argued that** the proposed law should be defeated.
- c. Distance: It is **claimed that** current levels of pesticide do not pose a threat to health.

All these *Engagement* subcategories can be realized through corresponding various resources as illustrated in



**Figure 2. A summary of the engagement Subsystem**

Figure 2. A summary of the engagement Subsystem



**Methodology**

*Research design*

Using a mixed-methods research approach, quantitative and qualitative analyses were used on the data in the present study. Martin and Rose (2008) noted that while generalizations derived from quantitative statistical studies are important, it is equally essential to give a qualitative analysis of particular, unique cases that contribute to a deeper comprehension of the text. From this perspective, the study utilized quantitative analysis to obtain system frequencies and percentages. furthermore, a qualitative analysis was undertaken on selected dataset extracts (Aljuraywi & Alyousef, 2022).

*Data collection*

The study is based on a comparative analysis of four IGCSE English as a First Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) reading

tests. The most two recent exams (November 2022– June 2022) were retrieved from the Cambridge International official website: <https://schoolsupporthub.cambridgeinternational.org>. The November exam issues contained one paper for ESL (paper 21) and two papers for EFL (paper 12 and paper 22), while the June issue contained two papers for both versions, with papers 22 and 21 for ESL and papers 12 and 11 for EFL. The Number of words in both data sets was relatively similar as shown in *Table 1*.

**Table 1. Data Distribution**

| Data set       | Total words  |
|----------------|--------------|
| IGCSE EFL exam | 5140         |
| IGCSE ESL exam | 5409         |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>10549</b> |

#### *Analytical procedure*

The study focused on evaluative language and engagement features in IGCSE English language reading exams. The exam texts were first converted from PDF to text format. Afterward, information like, institutes, figures, and footnotes were deleted and the resulting data were uploaded into the UAM Corpus Tool. The UAM Corpus Tool is a free and open-source program that provides several automated and manual approaches for multi-level linguistic annotation. It also gives descriptive and comparative data statistics (O'Donnell, 2011).

Since the software can not automatically identify stance and voice, the *monoglossic* and *heteroglossic* items in each dataset were manually identified and assigned features according to their respective sub-category. When an engagement item was spotted, co-text was read and evaluated to check for the accuracy of the pre-assigned sub-category, and then the item was feature-marked accordingly. Next, the texts were read and checked for any other possible engagement elements that were not annotated.

To increase reliability, annotations were first done in January 2023 and then repeated in February of the same year. Whenever there was uncertainty about how to annotate given items, fellow linguists were consulted. Finally, the UAM Corpus Tool was used to compile descriptive and comparative statistics, and the results from each dataset were compared and discussed.

#### **Results & discussion**

##### *Monoglossic and heteroglossic resources*

As discussed earlier, the engagement framework gives a systematic analysis of how writers linguistically express their points of view and stance,

and how they place their readers in relation to various voices and perspectives.

**Table 2** illustrates the frequency of *monoglossic* and *heteroglossic* propositions in the present study's data

**Table 2. Monoglossic Vs Heteroglossic resources in EFL and ESL texts**

| Data set  | Monoglossic |      |                | Heteroglossic |      |                |
|-----------|-------------|------|----------------|---------------|------|----------------|
|           | NO.         | %    | Frequency (/k) | No.           | %    | Frequency (/k) |
| IGSCE EFL | 61          | 25.1 | 11.7           | 182           | 74.9 | 34.8           |
| IGCSE ESL | 27          | 10.2 | 4.9            | 266           | 89.8 | 43.5           |

Note: /k = normalized frequency per 1000 words.

As presented in

**Table 2**, both IGCSE EFL and ESL reading texts used heteroglossia propositions more than *monoglossic* ones; however, the EFL texts had more *monoglossic* elements (25,1%, 11.7 per 1000 words) than the ESL ones with (10.2%, 4.9 per 1000 words). Alternatively, ESL texts utilized more *heteroglossic* propositions (89.8%, 43.5 per 1000 words) than the EFL texts did (74.9%, 34.8 per 1000 words).

In these corpora, *heteroglossic* statements are given in a way that indicates the presence of other alternative viewpoints, whereas *monoglossic* propositions are presented as facts since they solely comprise the writer's voice and make no reference to other opinions (Martin & White, 2005; Swain, 2007). The findings indicate that *monoglossic* proposition is seen as having an essential role in developing arguments in the texts, despite the fact that all the texts tend to utilize a higher amount of *heteroglossic* resources than *monoglossic* ones. Examples of the *monoglossic* resources employed in ESL and EFL reading tests are presented below:

- a. **EFL:** The synchrony involved in dancing to a beat along with other people is a powerful way for humans [**Monoglossic**] to bond socially.
- b. **ESL:** The museum is located on the site of their original factory [**Monoglossic**].

The findings suggest that there are more dialogic contractions than dialogic expansions in ESL as well as in EFL texts (**Table 3**). Remarkably, the contractive resources in ESL texts are way higher (70.7%, 34.2) than their EFL counterparts (47.7%, 22.2), while EFL texts displayed a higher frequency of expansive resources (27.2%, 12.6 vs 19.2%, 9.3). This suggests

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that ESL exam makers preferred to limit the scope of possible perspectives and reduce the dialogical space in their materials, instead of broadening it like EFL exam writers did.

**Table 3. Contractive Vs Expansive resources in EFL and ESL texts**

| Data set  | Contractive |       |                | Expansive |       |                |
|-----------|-------------|-------|----------------|-----------|-------|----------------|
|           | NO.         | %     | Frequency (/k) | No.       | %     | Frequency (/k) |
| IGSCE EFL | 116         | 47.7% | 22.2           | 66        | 27.2% | 12.6           |
| IGCSE ESL | 188         | 70.7% | 34.2           | 51        | 19.2% | 9.3            |

Note: /k = normalized frequency per 1000 words.

The frequency of resources of dialogic contraction employed in EFL and ESL reading texts is illustrated in **Table 4**. The table suggests that both EFL and ESL exam designers preferred using ‘disclaim’ over ‘proclaim;’ however, ESL texts had a larger frequency of both ‘contract’ subcategories where ‘disclaim’ accounted for 41.7% (20.2/k) and ‘proclaim’ for 28.9% (14/k), whereas EFL texts had 28% (13/k) ‘disclaim’ and 19.8% (9.2/k) proclaim. This may indicate the writers' rhetorical tendencies to explicitly eliminate or override opposing opinions instead of restricting the dialogic space of such views.

**Table 4. Contractive resources in EFL and ESL texts**

| Data set  | Contract |      |      |          |      |     |
|-----------|----------|------|------|----------|------|-----|
|           | Disclaim |      |      | Proclaim |      |     |
|           | NO.      | %    | /k   | NO       | %    | /k  |
| IGCSE EFL | 68       | 28   | 13   | 48       | 19.8 | 9.2 |
| IGCSE ESL | 111      | 41.7 | 20.2 | 77       | 28.9 | 14  |

Within the ‘disclaim’ category, as shown in Table 5, there are two sub-types: deny and counter. In this data, the EFL exam authors employed more resources of ‘Deny’ (15.2%, 7.1/k) than ‘Counter’ (12.8 %, 5.9/k). In contrast, the ESL texts had an opposite distribution with a higher frequency of ‘Counter’ (22.2%, 10.7/k) over ‘Deny’ (19.5%, 9.5/k). This contradictory distribution indicates that EFL texts are more likely to contradict assumptions that exam designers believe at least some exam candidates will

hold. Conversely, ESL texts are made more aligning rather than disaligning in showing the writers as sharing a certain axiological paradigm with the reader (Martin & White, 2005).

In terms of ‘Proclaim’ resources, all four sub-types were identified in both corpora (**Table 5**). On the one hand, ESL texts employed slightly more ‘Concur’ and ‘Pronounce’ items accounting for 6.8% (3.3/k) and 7.1% (3.5/k) respectively, while the same items accounted for 5.3% (2.5/k) and 4.9% (2.3/k) in EFL texts. On the other hand, EFL texts contained moderately higher ‘Endorse’ elements with 3.7% (1.7/k) compared to ESL texts which had 2.3% (1.1/k). The results of the ‘Justify’ items are remarkable since there was a large frequency in ESL texts with 12.8% (6.2/k); however, fewer elements were employed in EFL texts accounting only for 5.8% (2.7/k).

**Table 5. Proclaim Vs Disclaim resources in EFL and ESL texts**

| Data Set | Proclaim |     |    |           |     |     |         |    |    |         |     |    |
|----------|----------|-----|----|-----------|-----|-----|---------|----|----|---------|-----|----|
|          | Concur   |     |    | Pronounce |     |     | Endorse |    |    | Justify |     |    |
|          | NO       | %   | /k | NO        | %   | /K  | NO      | %  | /k | NO      | %   | /k |
| IGSC     | 13       | 5.3 | 2. | 12        | 4.9 | 2.3 | 9       | 3. | 1. | 14      | 5.8 | 2. |
| E EFL    |          |     | 5  |           |     |     |         | 7  | 7  |         |     | 7  |
| IGCS     | 18       | 6.8 | 3. | 19        | 7.1 | 3.5 | 6       | 2. | 1. | 34      | 12. | 6. |
| E ESL    |          |     | 3  |           |     |     |         | 3  | 1  |         | 8   | 2  |
|          | Disclaim |     |    |           |     |     |         |    |    |         |     |    |
|          | Deny     |     |    | Counter   |     |     |         |    |    |         |     |    |
|          | NO       | %   | /k | NO        | %   | /k  |         |    |    |         |     |    |
| IGSC     | 37       | 15. | 7. | 31        | 12. | 5.9 |         |    |    |         |     |    |
| E EFL    |          | 2   | 1  |           | 8   |     |         |    |    |         |     |    |
| IGCS     | 52       | 19. | 9. | 59        | 22. | 10. |         |    |    |         |     |    |
| E ESL    |          | 5   | 5  |           | 2   | 7   |         |    |    |         |     |    |

This pattern may suggest that external sources are typically utilized in IGCSE English exam reading texts whenever contracting the range of dialogic choices occurs. Many ‘Proclaim’ components were used in the texts to indicate a mixture of formal and informal language qualities. For instance, the usage of “clearly” is indicative of informal language, while “naturally” and “unsurprisingly indicate the author’s subjective participation in constructing the argument (Shi & Liu, 2016).

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- a. EFL: **Clearly**, he earns more than Ma at her bank job and Pa at his library. **Unsurprisingly**, this reform prompted controversy.
- b. ESL: zebras are **naturally** more aggressive. She can **clearly** remember the way that the novel came together.

The high frequency of ‘Justify’ items in ESL texts signals that some propositions (the immediately preceding ones) must be supported, as exam takers may find it debatable and want additional clarification. Textual voice, therefore, recognizes and restricts the scope of dialogic possibilities by presenting a specific rationale or argument for the significance of this particular topic (Fryer, 2013). Instances of ‘Contract’ resources from both data sets are provided below:

- a. Deny:
  - EFL: Parental competitiveness does not [Heteroglossic: contract: disclaim: deny] help children to thrive while learning to dance.
  - ESL: She had never [Heteroglossic: contract: disclaim: deny] written about her own family before.
- b. Counter:
  - **EFL**: Despite [Heteroglossic: contract: disclaim: counter] missing the deadline to enter this year’s Tough Mudder World Championship, ..., he repeatedly emailed the company responsible for the event, asking to be included in the endurance contest.
  - **ESL**: However, [Heteroglossic: contract: disclaim: counter] his real love in life was experimenting and inventing things,
- c. Affirm:
  - **EFL**: Unsurprisingly [**Heteroglossic**: contract: proclaim: concur: Affirm], this reform prompted controversy. Everyone needs to be able to write without computers
  - **ESL**: Most of them are completely separate from one another and are typically [Heteroglossic: contract: proclaim: concur: Affirm] very deep.
- c. Concede:
  - EFL: True or not, one thing is certain: [Heteroglossic: contract: proclaim: concur: Concede] faster technology means that handwriting is disappearing in the workplace
  - **ESL**: The sculptures were designed by a team of Mexican and British artists and the idea is certainly [Heteroglossic: contract: proclaim: concur: Concede] full of imagination.
- d. Pronounce:
  - **EFL**: Given that [Heteroglossic: contract: proclaim: pronounce] email and texting have replaced conventional ‘snail mail’

- **ESL:** Their nearest neighbour is in fact [Heteroglossic: contract: proclaim: pronounce] Scotland
- e. Endorse:
  - **EFL:** Experiments have proved [Heteroglossic: contract: proclaim: endorse] the cognitive benefits of dancing.
  - **ESL:** Records show [Heteroglossic: contract: proclaim: endorse] that a woman called Elena Cornaro Piscopia had earned a doctorate in philosophy 54 years earlier.
- f. Justify:
  - **EFL:** I'm a little hesitant to publish this because [Heteroglossic: contract: proclaim: justify] there's a risk that I'll just be moaning and I'll come across as whiny.
  - **ESL:** His real love in life was experimenting and inventing things, so [Heteroglossic: contract: proclaim: justify] he spent much of his free time doing this.

**Table 6** reveals that among the IGCSE texts, 'Entertain' resources were significantly more prevalent than 'Attribute' resources in EFL as well as in ESL texts with almost identical frequencies. Such a preference shows that the exam makers are more likely to develop arguments using their own intuitions or subjective perspectives rather than external sources, as the following examples show:

**Table 6. Distribution of expansive resources**

| Data Set  | Expand    |      |     |           |     |     |
|-----------|-----------|------|-----|-----------|-----|-----|
|           | Entertain |      |     | Attribute |     |     |
|           | NO.       | %    | /k  | NO.       | %   | /k  |
| IGCSE EFL | 44        | 18.1 | 8.4 | 22        | 9.1 | 4.2 |
| IGCSE ESL | 48        | 18   | 8.7 | 3         | 1.1 | 0.5 |

**Table 7. Distribution of Attribute resources**

| Data Set  | Attribute   |     |     |          |   |    |
|-----------|-------------|-----|-----|----------|---|----|
|           | Acknowledge |     |     | Distance |   |    |
|           | NO          | %   | /k  | NO       | % | /k |
| IGCSE EFL | 22          | 9.1 | 4.2 | 0        | 0 | 0  |
| IGCSE ESL | 3           | 1.1 | 0.5 | 0        | 0 | 0  |

In terms of ‘Attribute’ resources, only ‘Acknowledge’ formulations are found in both corpora. EFL texts contained significantly higher ‘Acknowledge’ elements representing 9.1% (4.2/k) in contrast with only 1.1% (0.5/k) in ESL texts. The predominance of ‘Acknowledge’ resources in both texts is predicted since exam writers’ position in regard to external voices is not explicitly stated for examination purposes, as shown in the examples below:

- a. **EFL: According to** one study by a printing company, one in three respondents hadn’t written anything by hand in the previous six months!
- b. **ESL: People sometimes** threw valuable items into the water as they **believed** it was a way of communicating with their ancestors.

Another noteworthy feature is that neither corpus makes use of the ‘Distance’ dialogic expanding technique as shown in **Table 1**. This serves to separate the authorial voice from those of the text’s external viewpoints (Geng & Wharton, 2016).

The results of this study indicate that there are linguistic preferences regarding the use of engagement resources in IGCSE EFL and ESL reading tests. There are far more *heteroglossic* resources than *monoglossic* ones in both data sets. These recurring patterns are associated with the texts’ respective argumentative goals. SFL theorists (e.g., Martin & Rose, 2008) contend that writings that are part of the same genre are more likely to have a similar stream of linguistic resources., and since the texts are both reading exams by the same institution, they, to some extent, employ the same pattern of engagement resources.

Krishnan (2011) stated that around 77% of the IELTS exam items assessed careful reading, compared to 23% that evaluated speed reading. This uneven mix of items shows that the IELTS reading examinations, which are very similar to IGCSE English Language exams, place a greater



emphasis on careful reading. Elements of critical reading as stated by Ruomei (2016) are:

1. "Consider discourse background." Every article is written in a cultural setting from a particular period, which is frequently distinct from the reader's. In this situation, it is important to acknowledge and take into consideration the disparities between the reader's beliefs and attitudes and the author's representations.

2. "Question assertions." Tone, depth, and breadth are checked on the documents in question. Before adopting and assimilating the information in them, be sure the author offers enough evidence to back up any claims. It is essential to search for supporting facts, instances, and data.

3. "Analyze assumptions." Many discourses make implicit rather than explicit use of the author's views. This implies that in order to find evidence, recognize assumptions, and judge their veracity, readers need to read attentively.

4. "Evaluate the sources." Verifying that the sources the author cites are reliable, accurate, and pertinent is crucial. In addition, the sources' accuracy and timeliness are crucial. Before deciding if some information is trustworthy or not, always verify the sources.

5. "Identify author's attitude and bias." Be careful that the sources an author utilizes could not accurately reflect all points of view if they are known to have an emotional or financial stake in the subject. Pay attention to the language tools and writing style that the author uses to convey mood, evaluation, and admiration.

We can notice that the IGCSE English language evaluation requirements mentioned at the beginning of the study are directly associated with these critical reading elements. Most of these elements can be spotted, realized, understood, and analyzed through the Appraisal theory subsystem of *Engagement* in which "every text is perceived to function in a dialogic context" (Haromi, 2014, p. 131).

There is a direct relationship between the engagement types employed in the reading texts and the distribution of the questions that the students have to answer. Since *monoglossic* resources make no reference to other voices and viewpoints, they are used more frequently in EFL texts to guide students on what to question and what to take for granted and orient them on what suitable chunks of the text are appropriate to extract answers for certain types of questions. These questions, as categorized by Cambridge Assessment, are considered broad and comprehensive like "Identify ways in which..., Explain how..., Provide evidence..., using your own words, Explain what the text means by....." Contrastively, the more precise the

question the more *heteroglossic* elements are used, as in ESL questions where matching, short Wh-questions (what is..., where...) and note-taking are the dominant types. This aligns with what Ivanova and Ivanov (2021) reported after analyzing three English proficiency tests (CAE (C1), TOEFL, and IELTS). They said that reading for particular information or scanning involves the execution of multiple-choice and multiple-matching activities. Skimming and reading for the gist place an emphasis on matching headers with sections of text and filling in the blanks. Reading for details includes activities such as sequencing, comprehending, and retrieving the text's semantic information. The use of these patterns exchangeably allows for students' critical thinking while providing a challenging yet clear context to explore.

The use of more expansive resources in EFL texts reveals why Cambridge Assessment categorizes IGCSE English EFL exams as "more challenging" and why some students consider EFL exams harder to solve since allowing subjective perspectives makes the evaluation process more difficult and provokes some ambiguity. Limiting the scope of possible perspectives helps ESL exam takers spot answers easily, which is more suitable for their level and proficiency. This is supported by Ivanova and Ivanov's (2021) results about a decrease in students' scores on the IELTS reading test in 2015, when exam makers opted for adding actual excerpts from scientific journals and other sources of enhanced difficulty to the reading part in order to complicate the task. They added that assessments of deep comprehension consistently provide lower average scores than exams of the other two categories of reading.

The high frequency of *Entertain* formulations in both EFL and ESL texts is more or less anticipated since the texts are taken from different academic journals, magazines, and websites using elements of modality, and postulation suggesting exam writers' different linguistic preferences in the manner of argument support.

### **Conclusion and implications**

Language is a multifunctional construction that is used to achieve a variety of social, political, and educational purposes. In this view, the present study attempted to take the initiative in introducing the promising contribution of Appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) to the field of international reading assessment. Analysis of four IGCSE EFL and ESL reading tests using the Engagement system revealed that there are some different linguistic preferences among EFL and ESL exam makers. While both tests had a higher number of *heteroglossic* and 'contractive' resources, the manner in which these elements were distributed made a difference in

serving each exam's purpose and type of evaluation, i.e. the engagement feature was used in EFL texts to present a more challenging text while ESL texts were considered clearer. A thorough understanding of the underlying features of engagement can help learners distinguish creative positioning, assess the impact of linguistic choices, identify the goal of writing, and comprehend underlying ideologies and values.

The study has, thus, pedagogical implications as to the understanding of Engagement in IGCSE reading tests. The examination of 'expansion' and 'contraction' resources unveils the different persuasive strategies that are employed by exam authors to negotiate a position within a specific topic. The comparison between ESL and EFL texts indicates that closer attention to authorial presence and to problems of voice negotiation through the study of engagement resources can help in preparing EFL and ESL IGCSE exam takers to solve more effectively and can enhance their text understanding and sharpen their critical reading skills. This was, indeed, the case in many studies conducted on different types of reading assessments where Jirasataporn and Hiranburana (2018) found that the students gained more confidence to approach written materials from various angles after being aware of Appraisal theory and it was possible to teach or improve the weak critical reading skills through this framework. We aspire to foreground the linguistic behavior that explains IGCSE English reading exam positioning by pointing out these tendencies. Finally, more IGCSE English Reading tests could have been analyzed, but due to time limits and manual annotation, only four tests were examined.

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