

# Rhetorical Move-Step Analysis of Argumentative Essays by Chinese EFL Undergraduate Students

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**Abstract**—Rhetorical move-step analysis, an analytical approach within discourse analysis, is commonly employed to scrutinize the rhetorical structures inherent in various community genre practices. This method has also been extensively applied in academic and professional writing, particularly in published research articles and doctoral dissertations. However, little research has investigated the rhetorical move-step structures evident in argumentative writing by Chinese undergraduate students. Therefore, this study explores the rhetorical move-step structure of argumentative essays in Chinese EFL contexts. A corpus comprising 30 argumentative essays authored by undergraduate students at a Chinese university was assembled for analysis. The move-step structure of the data was analyzed using Hyland's (1990) analytical framework. The results indicated that most students utilized Hyland's model in crafting their argumentative essays. Additionally, the findings revealed that the argumentative essays by Chinese undergraduates adhered to a structure consisting of five obligatory moves, three conventional moves, one optional move, and multiple obligatory, conventional, and optional steps beyond the established analytical framework. These findings' implications extend to pedagogical practices and further research in the domain of EFL students' academic writing.

**Index Terms**—rhetorical move-step analysis, argumentative writing, Chinese undergraduates

## I. INTRODUCTION

Argumentative writing is a crucial academic genre that demands adherence to standardized structures and appropriate linguistic features to achieve communicative objectives in educational contexts. Constructing persuasive arguments is considered pivotal for success in academic and professional settings (Wingate, 2012; Schmeer, 2014). The efficacy of an argumentative essay lies in its rhetorical structure. Rhetorical move-step analysis, an approach employed to examine rhetorical structures and the embedded steps of community-specific genre practices, is widely acknowledged to be closely linked to the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) school of genre-based approach (Swales, 1990, 2004). Generally, moves represent the components of a genre that serve a specific rhetorical function (Swales, 1990).

Additionally, moves are characterized as rhetorical or functional units operating coherent communicative functions within texts (Swales, 2004, pp. 228–229). As a functional unit, a move can be manifested in a phrase, a sentence, and a paragraph. On the other hand, steps are defined as functional text fragments aimed at realizing the rhetorical moves. Moreover, the steps associated with a move fulfill the purpose of the move to which they belong (Biber et al., 2007). The distinction between moves and steps lies in the specificity of the explanation provided at each level. The elucidation of a given text at the step level is more precise than at the move level, often involving identifying a gap and establishing a niche.

Under the influence of Swales's (1990) Create-a-Research-Space (CARS) model and Bhatia's (1993) Sales-Promotion-Letter model, many scholars have utilized the rhetorical move-step analysis framework to unveil the rhetorical structures of some academic genres, such as published research articles and theses or dissertations. Notably, attention has also been directed towards professional genres like promotional business English emails and spoken genres like three-minute thesis and spoken student presentations. Rhetorical move-step analysis is a versatile method for studying learner and expert texts (Kessler & Polio, 2023). Most previous research focused on the rhetorical organizations of disciplinary academic genre practices for expert L2 writers. However, there needs to be more literature concerning the rhetorical structure of texts produced by undergraduate L2 learners, particularly in Chinese settings. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to investigate the rhetorical move-step structure of argumentative essays written by Chinese EFL undergraduate students. The research questions of this study are as follows:

RQ1: What rhetorical moves do Chinese EFL undergraduate students employ within the argumentative writing genre?

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RQ2: How do Chinese EFL undergraduate students utilize rhetorical steps to construct each move in the argumentative writing genre?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. *Studies on Rhetorical Move Analysis*

Rhetorical move-step analysis is closely linked with the ESP school of genre theory. Genre, as defined by Swales (1990), refers to a category of communicative events utilized by discourse community members who share common communicative intentions. Similarly, Martin (1992) defines genre as staged, goal-driven, and purposeful communicative activities. Tardy (2023) highlights that genres are shaped by groups of people who share social practices and language use. In the context of argumentative essays by undergraduates, the communicative purpose is to persuade teachers that argumentative writing can be executed appropriately. Consequently, argumentative essays by undergraduate students qualify as authentic genres.

Academic discourses, including the argumentative writing genre, contain various rhetorical moves. Parkinson (2017) depicted them as essential elements for recognizing discourse as an instance of the genre. According to Swales (2004), discourses comprise numerous sections, with each section classified into moves and each move further divided into multiple steps. A move can be realized by one or more steps, with steps serving as the fundamental building blocks that form a move.

Rhetorical move analysis is a prime example of genre analysis, representing a prevalent approach to scrutinizing the rhetorical conventions inherent in community-specific genre texts. This analytical framework has spurred extensive research into the rhetorical structures of various academic and professional genres initially devised to examine the rhetorical structures within research articles (RAs) (Swales, 1990). Its application in academic writing extends across disciplines, encompassing sections such as RA Abstracts (Friginal & Mustafa, 2017; Alyousef, 2021), RA Introduction (Loi, 2010; Dong & Lu, 2020), RA Methods (Lim, 2006; Cotos et al., 2017), RA Results (Yang & Allison, 2003; Kanoksilapatham, 2007), and RA Discussions (Swales, 1990; Basturkmen, 2012). Examining academic genres such as theses or dissertations, Hyland (2004) formulated a generic structure of acknowledgments in dissertation writing and analyzed variations among theses from diverse disciplines. Neupane Bastola and Ho (2023) conducted an in-depth analysis of the rhetoric structures in 60 literature reviews from Ph.D. dissertations using Swales's revised CARS model. The results revealed limited disciplinary distinctions between Moves 1 and 2 strategies but highlighted significant differences in Move 3 strategies.

Additionally, professional genres have been subject to scrutiny through rhetorical move analysis, encompassing genres such as business emails (Park et al., 2021; Herck et al., 2022) and promotional genres (Kessler, 2020; Wang, 2023). In a comparative move analysis, Park et al. (2021) examined request emails written by L1 and L2 professionals, contributing to an intercultural understanding of request emails in a business English context with cross-cultural insights. Similarly, Herck et al. (2022) employed move analysis to examine rhetorical organizations and linguistic patterns of 150 English email responses to customer complaints. The author identified conventionalized moves and sub-moves within the texts. The research also emphasized the significance of emails in service recovery.

Addressing promotional genres, Kessler (2020) examined the rhetorical strategies of undergraduates applying for a Fullbright English Teaching grant using a move-step analysis model. The result showed that successful applicants employed four specific moves, offering implications for prospective grant applicants. Meanwhile, Wang (2023) investigated the rhetorical moves and steps within 100 teaching philosophy statements, identifying common and less common moves. The research also discussed pedagogical implications for future research.

Another facet of rhetorical move-step research has examined rhetorical structures in spoken genres, such as three-minute thesis presentations (Hu & Liu, 2018) and spoken student presentations (Ädel, 2023). In their cross-disciplinary study, Hu and Liu (2018) investigated the rhetorical structure of 142 Three Minute Thesis presentations, identifying six obligatory and two optional moves in the 3MT presentations. The results bear pedagogical implications for graduate students. Similarly, Ädel (2023) further explored the metadiscourse of 13 spoken student presentations through a move-based approach. The findings revealed the distribution of various sorts of metadiscourse and the significant discourse functions.

In summary, previous studies highlighted the efficacy of rhetorical move analysis as a potent tool for analyzing the rhetorical structures inherent in academic and professional genres. Moreover, rhetorical move analysis has been applied to investigate pedagogical genres within undergraduate university contexts, notably in analyzing genres such as argumentative essays (Kessler & Polio, 2023).

### B. *Studies on Rhetorical Move Analysis of Argumentative Essays Using Hyland's (1990) Model*

The growing interest in investigating rhetorical moves within the argumentative writing genre has prompted the development of various analytical frameworks, with notable contributions from Hyland (1990), Swales (1990, 2004), and Toulmin (2003). Within the current landscape of rhetorical move analysis, Hyland's (1990) model holds particular significance in analyzing the rhetorical moves of argumentative essays written by EFL undergraduate students.

For instance, Najlaa Alharbi (2023) applied Hyland's analytical framework to explore the rhetorical moves in the introductions of 49 argumentative essays written by Arabian undergraduate students. The findings revealed the utilization of Move 1, Move 2, and Move 3 in the introductions, while Move 4 was absent in some cases, and Move 5 was omitted from all the discourses. These outcomes carry pedagogical implications for enhancing the academic writing skills of EFL undergraduates.

In addition, Kanestion and Singh (2021) conducted a corpus analysis of rhetorical moves in the argument stage of 60 argumentative essays by Malaysian university students. The results revealed three moves and five steps within the argument stage of these essays. Accordingly, the study's findings provided insights into rhetorical moves, steps, and pedagogical implications for novice writers in argumentative writing.

While previous researchers focused on the introduction and argument stages of argumentative essays using Hyland's model, Liu's (2015) analysis stands out for its comparative rhetorical move analysis of conclusions in 184 argumentative essays by Chinese students, employing Hyland's model. The results showed the rhetorical structures of conclusion sections written in Chinese compared to those composed in English.

Based on previous studies, a noticeable gap exists in the literature concerning a comprehensive examination of the moves across all stages of argumentative writing by Chinese EFL undergraduate students. Furthermore, the existing body of work is yet to explore the rhetorical steps employed by Chinese EFL undergraduates in crafting each move within the argumentative essay. Given these identified gaps, the current study investigates the rhetorical moves and steps Chinese EFL undergraduate students employ in constructing argumentative essays.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The study involved addressing the two primary research questions. This section focuses on the methodological procedures employed in the study. First, the research context and the sampling considerations were examined, followed by introducing an analytical framework. Argumentative essays were evaluated by an L2 expert and the researcher, with subsequent identification and analysis of the underlying moves and steps.

#### A. *Study Context and Sampling*

The study was conducted at a private university in China during the spring semester of 2023. Data were gathered from sophomores majoring in English who enrolled in an academic writing course for the first time. This course occurred twice a week, with each session lasting 45 minutes. Students were required to compose argumentative, narrative, and descriptive writing across the semester. For this study, argumentative writing was explicitly chosen, aligning with the analytical frameworks proposed by Hyland (1990) and Swales (1990, 2004). Ethical considerations were prioritized, with students providing informed consent and having the option to withdraw from the study at any point. Participants who had studied overseas were excluded from the study.

During the data collection stage, 32 undergraduate students were tasked with composing argumentative essays within 40 minutes. However, only 30 essays were successfully obtained and included in the study. The exclusion of the remaining two argumentative essays was attributed to one student withdrawing from the course while the other student still needed to sign the consent form. The chosen topic for the argumentative essay was "University education is very important. Do you agree or disagree?" The students' manuscripts were stored and labeled as AE (argumentative essay), with numbers ranging from 1 to 30. For instance, AE-1 refers to an argumentative essay authored by student number.

#### B. *Analytical Framework*

Hyland's (1990) analytical framework was the basis for examining the rhetorical structures of 30 argumentative essays written by Chinese EFL undergraduate students. Hyland's (1990) analytical framework comprises three essential stages, namely Thesis, Argument, and Conclusion, which are embodiments of the overall structure of an argumentative essay. Each stage is further classified into distinct moves, delineating a series of steps. All stages of Hyland's model were utilized as an analytical lens to investigate the rhetorical structures within the 30 argumentative essays written by Chinese EFL undergraduates to fulfill the study objectives. Table 1 below outlines the fundamental components of Hyland's model. The selection of Hyland's analytical framework was deliberate, chosen for its ability to offer a systematic and comprehensive approach to analyzing argumentative essays. Moreover, the reliability of the model was affirmed by Hyland through the analysis of 65 argumentative essays composed by EFL students.

TABLE 1  
HYLLANDS' (1990) MODEL

Stage	Move
1. Thesis Introduces the proposition to be argued.	(Gambit) Attention Grabber-controversial statement or dramatic illustration.
	(Information) Presents background material for topic contextualization.
	Proposition Furnishes a specific statement of position.
	(Evaluation) Positive loss-brief support of proposition.
	(Marker) Introduces or identifies a list.
2. Argument Discusses grounds for thesis. (Four-move argument sequence can be repeated indefinitely)	Marker Signals the introduction of a claim and relates it to the text.
	(Restatement) Rephrasing or repetition of the proposition.
	Claim States the reason for acceptance of the proposition.
	Support States the grounds which underpin the claim.
3. Conclusion Synthesized discussions to affirm the validity of the thesis.	(Marker) Signals conclusion boundary.
	Consolidation Presents the significance of the argument stage to the proposition.
	(Affirmation) Restates proposition.
	(Close) Widens the context or perspective of the proposition.

### C. Rhetorical Move-Step Annotation of the 30 Argumentative Essays

The study adhered to Hyland's (1990) framework for rhetorical move-step analysis. The students' manuscripts were compiled into a distinct Word file. Subsequently, the moves were identified, employing Hyland's move classification across all three stages (see Table 1). The definite rhetorical steps constituting each move in the argumentative essay were then identified. Next, the researcher meticulously annotated all 30 argumentative essays through the following three stages to ensure the credibility and consistency of the coding process.

During the initial stage, the researcher consulted an expert on rhetorical move analysis. Subsequently, the researcher independently annotated 20 AEs from the corpus using a top-down approach. This process involved a meticulous and close reading of all texts in the data, resulting in the development of an initial framework. This framework included a definition and explanation for each move or step identified. The researcher then presented this framework to the expert for verification and revised it based on the expert's feedback.

In the second stage, a university lecturer with expertise in move analysis participated in inter-coder reliability testing. A training session was conducted to introduce the argumentative writing genre and Hyland's analytical framework. A pilot coding was conducted to ensure mutual agreement on identifying moves and steps within the texts. The coder was provided sufficient time to annotate 20 AEs, mirroring the work previously done by the researcher. According to Rau and Shih (2021), the inter-coder reliability was 83%, and any disparities in coding were diligently addressed and resolved to secure a consensus.

The frequency of moves and steps was manually calculated in the third stage. Employing a combination of Kanoksilapatham's (2015) and Wang's (2023) criteria, the status of moves and steps was categorized as "obligatory" (occurring in 80-100% of the texts), "conventional" (60%-79%), or "optional" (below 60%) within the argumentative essays corpus. Adopting this criterion is based on clarity, making the distinctions among categories more readily understandable.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are discussed from two perspectives. The first offers an analysis of the overall rhetorical moves of argumentative essays based on occurrence frequency. The second focuses on the distribution of rhetorical steps within argumentative essays.

### A. Overall Occurrence Frequency, Percentage, and Status of Rhetorical Moves in Argumentative Essays

In general, the results indicated that not all moves from Hyland's (1990) model were utilized in the argumentative essays of undergraduates. Moreover, none of the 30 argumentative essays introduced new moves beyond the scope of Hyland's analytical model. A noteworthy finding is that all 30 argumentative essays adhered to most of the rhetorical moves in Hyland's model. Although the Thesis, Argument, and Conclusion stages comprised fewer moves than Hyland's rhetorical moves model, the standard rhetorical moves were consistently sequenced as Gambit, Information,

Proposition in the Thesis stage, Marker, Claim, Support in the Argument stage, and Marker, Consolidation, Affirmation in the Conclusion stage, respectively.

TABLE 2  
OCCURRENCE FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF MOVES IN ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS

Stage	Move	Frequency	Percentage	Status
Thesis	Move 1: Gambit	21	70%	Conventional
	Move 2: Information	28	93%	Obligatory
	Move 3: Proposition	27	90%	Obligatory
Argument	Move 4: Marker	17	57%	Optional
	Move 5: Claim	29	97%	Obligatory
	Move 6: Support	28	93%	Obligatory
Conclusion	Move 7: Marker	23	77%	Conventional
	Move 8: Consolidation	27	90%	Obligatory
	Move 9: Affirmation	20	67%	Conventional

Table 2 presents the results of move analysis in argumentative essays. In the Thesis stage, Move 2 (Information) dominated, accounting for 93% of the argumentative essays. This finding aligns with Najlaa Alharbi's (2023) discovery, where Move 2 occurred at a high frequency of 95% in students' theses. The prevalent use of Move 2, involving background information, implies that Chinese EFL undergraduates proficiently incorporated background information in their introductions.

The second most popular move in the Thesis stage is Move 3 (Proposition), comprising 83% of the argumentative essays. This result closely mirrors Najlaa Alharbi's (2023) research. The gradual increase in the use of this move may be attributed to the fact that most students directly stated their thesis in the introduction while composing argumentative essays (Chang, 2023). In addition, 21 students (70%) utilized Move 1 (Gambit) to capture the reader's attention. Hyland (1990) stated that the gambit was frequently utilized in texts and required a specific skill to engage readers. The frequency and percentage of Move were closely parallel to a previous study (Najlaa Alharbi, 2023).

Moves 4 (Evaluation) and 5 (Marker) did not appear in undergraduates' argumentative essays. This absence may be attributed to English writing textbooks in China emphasizing the rhetorical moves of Gambit, Information, and Proposition while neglecting Evaluation and Marker. For instance, consider the following example from the Thesis stage.

(1) **[Information]** Since the "great leap" of college education in 1999, a bachelor's degree is not able to secure a job as easily as it did 20 years ago. **[Gambit]** In this context, many people question the necessity of university education, saying that the input is falling short of output. **[Proposition]** Despite this, I think university education is very important. (AE-7)

Among the three moves in the Argument stage, Move 5 (Claim) and Move 6 (Support) are deemed obligatory, indicating their crucial roles in organizing this stage. One states why the thesis is accepted, while the other provides evidence supporting the claim (Hyland, 1990). The former relies on shared assumptions, evidence, and the force of conviction, while the latter seeks examples or evidence to reinforce these claims. Move 1 (Mark) occasionally marks the sequence and connects the move to the steps and thesis in the argument. It is considered an optional move in students' argumentative essays.

The Conclusion stage, although brief with three moves, Move 7 (Marker), Move 8 (Consolidation), and Move 9 (Affirmation), exhibits nearly identical frequencies and percentages as observed in the conclusions of argumentative essays by Chinese students (Liu, 2015). This finding indicates a consistent approach among Chinese EFL undergraduates in organizing the concluding sections of their argumentative essays. An example of identified moves in argumentative essays is provided in Appendix.

As presented in Table 2, Chinese EFL undergraduate students demonstrate distinct patterns in using moves across the three stages of argumentative essays. For instance, in the Thesis stage, Move 1 and 2, classified as optional in Hyland's analytical framework, emerge as conventional and obligatory moves in students' argumentative essays, appearing in 70% and 93% of the Thesis stage, respectively. Additionally, specific moves in Hyland's model, such as Evaluation, Restatement, and Close, do not occur in the argumentative essays of Chinese undergraduates.

#### B. Identification of Rhetorical Steps in Each Move of Argumentative Essays

This section explores the rhetorical steps Chinese EFL undergraduates employ to construct the moves within their argumentative essays. The results are presented through the frequency of moves observed in students' argumentative essays. It is essential to note that the instances of these steps are quoted directly from students' authentic writing without any modifications. Table 3 outlines the nine moves that constitute argumentative essays, each encompassing multiple steps (refer to Appendix A for an example of identified moves or steps in argumentative texts). This part addresses research question 2 by identifying and explaining the steps associated with each move in argumentative essays.

##### (a). Rhetorical Steps in the Thesis Stage

The thesis stage comprises three moves, each consisting of two or three steps. These steps are described and exemplified in the following sections. In Move 1, the author strategically aims to capture the reader's attention through three steps: raising a question related to the topic (Step 1), providing an overall statement about the topic (Step 2), and offering quotations related to the topic (Step 3). As shown in Table 3, 21 students utilizing Move 1 tended to raise questions to engage readers. Another prevalent step, accounting for 29% of the thesis, involves presenting an overall statement about the topic. The third step is less frequently utilized in Move 1, comprising 19% of its usage. Examples of these steps are shown in (2), (3), and (4).

(2) (M1S1) "Is university education very important? Why can this question be put up?" (AE-2)

(3) (M1S2) "Many people question the necessity of a university education, saying that the input falls short of the output". (AE-7)

(4) (M1S3) Winston Churchill once said, "The privilege of a university education is a great one; the more widely it is extended, the better for any country." (AE-13)

The analysis shows that students utilize various steps in composing Move 2. As shown in Table 3, describing the background to the topic (Step 1) emerges as the most popular step, occurring in 89% of the argument stage. Moreover, 29% of students explained issues relevant to the topic (Step 2), particularly emphasizing historical backgrounds. Additionally, 21% of students introduced opposing ideas related to the topic (Step 3) to provide additional information. Examples of these three steps are illustrated in (5), (6), and (7).

(5) (M2S1) "With the development of society, people's living conditions are getting better and better, and an increasing number of people are aware of the importance of university education". (AE-12)

(6) (M2S2) "Since the "great leap" in college education in 1999, a bachelor's degree is not able to secure a job as easily as it did 20 years ago". (AE-7)

(7) (M2S3) "There are two different viewpoints on university education. Some people think that university education can help them have a successful life, while others argue that university education is not so important". (AE-19)

In Move 3, stating a position (Step 1) is a conventional step, indicating that Chinese undergraduate students can explicitly articulate their viewpoints on the given topic. Stating the thesis statement (Step 2) is the sole obligatory step, consistent with its status in Hyland's analytical framework (1990). This move indicates that Chinese undergraduates possess the flexibility to express their thesis statements. Examples illustrating these steps are presented below:

(8) (M3S1) "From my point of view, I think university education is vital for a successful life". (AE-23)

(9) (M3S2) "I am firmly convinced that people with a university education can have a successful life". (AE-14)

#### (b). *Rhetorical Steps in the Argument Stage*

The argument stage plays a vital role in the structure of an argumentative essay. A standard argumentative essay requires the author to assert a position on a contentious issue and support that claim with evidence to persuade the reader (Wood, 2001). Based on Table 3, the argument stage encompasses three moves, namely, Marker (Move 4), Claim (Move 5), and Support (Move 6). In Move 4, the sequence is framed, connecting it to the steps in the argument and the thesis statement (Hyland, 1990). Move 4 comprises two steps: signaling a list (Step 1) and signaling a transition (Step 2). The two steps of M4 are demonstrated in Example (10).

(10) (M4S1) There are a number of reasons. First and foremost, university education is undeniably important. If people received a university education, they would get a proper salary in their careers (M4S2). In addition, our knowledge and experience can be enriched. (M4S1) Last but not least, university education helps people better shape their outlook on life and values. (AE-21)

Following M4 is the Claim (M5), which entails providing reasons for the argument (M5S1), making comparisons (M5S2), or offering examples or anecdotes (M5S3). In M5, brief stories or personal experiences are highlighted (M5S4). Examples (11)-(12) illustrate the four steps of M5.

(11) (M5S1) University education can influence a person's future development and run through their entire life, and its importance is self-evident. (M5S2) Compared with high school education, university education puts more emphasis on the development of morality, intelligence, and physical fitness. (AE-20)

(12) (M5S3) For one thing, as Cai Yuanpei, an influential Chinese educator, puts it "Five Domains" ... (M5S4) For another thing, education improves people's learning ability that makes them know more about the world. When they encounter problems in work or life, they can consult others humbly and make progress. (AE-15)

Following the claim in M5 is the support for the argument in M6, which involves four steps: presenting reasons for the idea (M6S1) and showing the comparisons (M6S2), as displayed in Example (13), providing examples or evidence (M6S3) and presenting facts to support the idea (M6S4), as illustrated in Example (14).

(13) (M6S1) The advantage of university education not only benefits students but also affects our society. (M6S2) When more and more people receive university education, cultural literacy and professional knowledge are also higher, the society is more harmonious. (AE-11)

(14) (M6S3) "University education places more emphasis on practical activities. (M6S4) There are many clubs where you can meet many like-minded people". (AE-2)

The four steps in Move 6 share similarities with several aspects of steps in Move 5, where authors present reasons (M6S1), make comparisons (M6S2), provide examples (M6S3), and present facts (M6S4). This relationship exists because the Support move is directly related to the Claim move, intending to demonstrate the relevance of the claim to

the thesis statement. The Claim represents the central assertion in the argumentative essay, where the writer argues for a position, and the Support comprises arguments that help readers accept the claim (Hyland, 1990). In summary, the rhetorical steps in Move 5 and Move 6 are optional, providing additional space for authors to assert, support, and enhance multiple layers of students' argumentative writing competence.

(c). *Rhetorical Steps in the Conclusion Stage*

The conclusion is the final stage of an argumentative essay. Following an analysis of Chinese undergraduate students' argumentative writing corpus, the author identifies that students construct the Conclusion stage by utilizing Move 7 (Marker), Move 8 (Consolidation), and Move 9 (Affirmation). Table 3 indicates that Move 7 (Marker) manifests in two steps: summarizing ideas (Step 1) and inferring results (Step 2). Summarizing ideas (Step 1) can be accomplished through various discourse markers, such as "in a word," "in summary," "all in all," and "to sum up." Inferring results (Step 2) primarily involves discourse markers like "in conclusion," "therefore," and "to draw a conclusion." Examples of these two steps are shown in (15) and (16).

(15) (M7S1) "To sum up, university education plays a vital role in people's lives". (AE-17)

(16) (M7S2) "In conclusion, individuals, societies, or countries need a university education to provide strong support for their future development". (AE-19)

Move 8 (Consolidation) is deemed an obligatory move in this study, with 90% of argumentative essays including such a move, aligning with Hyland's findings in 1990. Move 8 comprises restating the main arguments (Step 1) and establishing connections among the thesis, argument, and conclusion (Step 2). M8S1 is the sole obligatory step of the Conclusion stage, occurring in 81% of students' argumentative essays. M8S2 is an optional move with an occurrence rate of 33%. The two steps are exemplified in (17) and (18).

(17) (M8S1) "In one word, university education can not only make people intelligent but also teach people how to deal with interpersonal communication". (AE-9)

(18) (M8S2) "Therefore, we should attach importance to university education, ensure its development, and train more outstanding talents for the future world". (AE-19)

The above analysis suggests that students are conscious of the significance of Consolation (Move 8) and adept at employing this move as a strategic approach in argumentative writing. While some students focus on summarizing claims supporting the thesis statement through Move 8, others restate their thesis statements through Move 9: Affirmation. This move comprises two steps: echoing the introduction (Step 1) and restating the thesis statement (Step 2). These two steps are optional and appeared in 45% and 55% of students' argumentative essays. It may occur before and after the Consolidation move. For example:

(19) (M9S1) "Therefore, it can be concluded that it is very important to have a university education, which will bring us many benefits and make us live better". (AE-5)

(20) (M9S2) "In conclusion, university education is indeed indispensable and important. It provides students with skills and knowledge for their future careers and has a positive impact on society". (AE-10)

In summary, the frequency of steps in the Conclusion stage varies significantly, indicating that Chinese EFL undergraduate students tend to select their steps flexibly to achieve their communicative purposes.

TABLE 3  
DISTRIBUTION OF STEPS IN ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS

Stage	Move	Step	Frequency	Percentage	Status
Thesis	M1 Gambit	S1 Raising a question related to a topic	11	52%	Optional
		S2 Giving an overall statement to the topic	6	29%	Optional
		S3 Offering quotation to the topic	4	19%	Optional
	M2 Information	S1 Describing the background to the topic	25	89%	Obligatory
		S2 Explaining the issues related to the topic	8	29%	Optional
		S3 Presenting opponents' ideas on the topic	6	21%	Optional
	M3 Proposition	S1 Stating a position	20	74%	Conventional
		S2 Stating the thesis statement	23	85%	Obligatory
	Argument	M4 Marker	S1 Signaling a list	13	76%
S2 Signaling a transition			4	24%	Optional
M5 Claim		S1 Providing the reasons for the argument	14	48%	Optional
		S2 Making comparisons	12	43%	Optional
		S3 Offering examples or anecdotes	15	54%	Optional
		S4 Presenting facts or evidence	5	18%	Optional
M6 Support		S1 Presenting reasons for the idea	14	48%	Optional
		S2 Showing comparisons	15	54%	Optional
		S3 Providing examples or evidence	13	46%	Optional
		S4 Presenting facts for supporting the idea	7	25%	Optional
Conclusion	M7 Marker	S1 Summarizing ideas	15	65%	Conventional
		S2 Inferring results	8	35%	Optional
	M8 Consolidation	S1 Restating the main arguments	22	81%	Obligatory
		S2 Connecting thesis, argument, and conclusion	5	19%	Optional
	M9 Affirmation	S1 Echoing the introduction	9	45%	Optional
		S2 Restating the thesis statement	11	55%	Optional

## V. CONCLUSION

The study investigated the rhetorical move-step structure of argumentative essays written by Chinese EFL undergraduate students. Hyland's (1990) model was the analytical framework for analyzing the data from 30 argumentative essays. Five out of the nine moves were deemed obligatory at the rhetorical move level, and their occurrences generally aligned with Hyland's model. Nevertheless, the study excluded specific moves, such as Evaluation, Restatement, and Close, from the three stages of Chinese undergraduate students' argumentative essays. Most students adhered to a nine-move rhetorical pattern outlined in Table 2 throughout the three stages (i.e., Thesis, Argument, and Conclusion) of their argumentative writing. The motivation behind students adopting the nine-move rhetorical pattern in Hyland's (1990) model stems from Chinese English writing instructions, which rely on writing textbooks and emphasize these move patterns as the rhetorical structures of argumentative essays.

Meanwhile, the study revealed significant disparities in frequencies and percentages at the rhetorical step level. Classifying the steps into stable and flexible became feasible (Ye, 2019). The obligatory or conventional steps, considered stable, were presumably identified in M2, M3, M4, M7, and M8. On the other hand, the optional steps were likely found in M1, M5, M6, and M9. Most students employed a single step to construct each move. The frequent use of optional steps in argumentative essays indicates that Chinese undergraduate students use steps flexibly to accomplish their communicative objectives.

Based on the study's findings, there are significant pedagogical implications for genre-based second language writing. The study enhances the awareness of second language writing teachers regarding the correlation between rhetorical move-step analysis and argumentative essays, enabling them to develop a profound understanding of Hyland's (1990) model in argumentative writing. Consequently, teachers can prioritize teaching the rhetorical structures of argumentative essays based on Hyland's (1990) model. For example, teachers can familiarize students with the rhetorical structures using Hyland's model and guide them in analyzing the rhetorical moves and steps in argumentative genre exemplars. This approach helps students identify the similarities and differences between their writing and the model through explicit discussion and activities in the classroom.

Simultaneously, teachers can ask students questions, such as, "What rhetorical moves does the author utilize to achieve their communicative purposes in the Thesis stage?" and "What rhetorical steps does the author use to construct each move in the argumentative essay?" This interactive approach encourages critical thinking and a deeper understanding of rhetorical strategies. Furthermore, teachers can illustrate the various moves, steps, and variations in argumentative essays to enhance students' sensitivity to genre knowledge. This approach bridges the gap between standardization and variation (Cheng, 2015), better-preparing students to write well-organized argumentative essays. Integrating these pedagogical strategies into second language writing instruction can contribute significantly to students' knowledge of argumentative essay writing.

Despite the findings and pedagogical implications, this study has some limitations. One constraint is the small number of argumentative essays utilized, which may have influenced the obtained results. Future research could address this limitation by investigating many argumentative essays written by Chinese EFL undergraduate students, enabling a more robust examination of the proposed model's effectiveness across a wider population.

Another constraint lies in the study's exclusive focus on analyzing the rhetorical move-step structures of argumentative essay genres without exploring the linguistic features of argumentative genres and their relevance to the identified moves and steps. Future research should examine how the moves and steps identified in this study manifest through various linguistic features of the argumentative genre, encompassing lexical (Khany & Malmir, 2020) and syntactic elements (Zhang & Cui, 2023). This examination would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how linguistic choices contribute to constructing the moves and steps within argumentative essay genres.

### APPENDIX. AN EXAMPLE OF IDENTIFIED MOVES AND STEPS IN ARGUMENTATIVE TEXTS

[M2S2] Since the "great leap" of college education in 1999, a bachelor's degree is not able to secure a job as easily as it did 20 years ago. [M1S2] In this context, many people question the necessity of a university education, saying that the input falls short of the output. [M3S2] Despite this, I think university education is very important.

[M4S1] First of all, [M5S1] college education makes us specialized in a certain field. [M5S2] Upon high school graduation, we know something about everything. But, in university, we are supposed to know everything about something. [M6S2] For instance, I had to learn about chemistry, physics, biology, history, geography, English, Chinese and math in senior high school. In university, I majored in English. [M4S2] Therefore, I turned into a specialist in English after college education. [M6S3] Instead of wasting time and energy in every possible field, I could devote my heart and soul to one major and excel in it. [M4S1] Secondly, [M5S1] university education makes us a well-rounded person. [M5S3] Through presentations, interest groups, research groups and other activities, we not only gain valuable knowledge but also sharpen our skills, such as communication skills, research skills and teamwork. [M6S4] All these will benefit us for our entire life.

[M7S1] In conclusion, [M8S1] university education is very important in that it improves us into experts with multiple capabilities. [M9S1] In general, university education is a must.

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