



A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *ENHANCE* AND *IMPROVE* IN L1 AND L2 ACADEMIC WRITING

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Accepted :

27 June 2025

Published :

13 July 2025

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ABSTRACT

Lexical verbs like *enhance* and *improve* are crucial in academic writing, signaling change, development, and authorial stance. However, their use by native (L1) and non-native (L2) English writers remains underexplored. This comparative study investigates the frequency, grammatical patterns, and stance-related functions of these verbs in journal articles by L1 and L2 authors. Using AntConc and Partington et al.'s (2013) evaluative stance framework, the study analyzes syntactic and semantic usage. Results show that while both groups use the verbs correctly, L1 writers prefer abstract, passive, and nominalized structures that reflect disciplinary conventions and subtle evaluation. L2 writers, however, favor active constructions and concrete collocations, often linked to observable outcomes or instructional contexts. These differences reveal varied approaches to expressing stance and rhetorical positioning, suggesting that L1 writers demonstrate greater awareness of disciplinary norms. The study emphasizes the role of verb choice and syntactic form in academic identity construction and offers implications for academic writing instruction, particularly in supporting L2 writers' engagement with disciplinary discourse.

Keywords: Academic writing, Lexical verbs, Enhance and improve, L1 vs. L2 writers, Evaluative stance

1. INTRODUCTION

In academic discourse, lexical selection is fundamental to articulating meaning, shaping argument structure, and signaling authorial stance. Verbs such as *enhance* and *improve*, though often considered near-synonyms, are commonly employed to denote advancement, transformation, or beneficial outcomes. Despite their apparent semantic proximity, these verbs can diverge significantly in terms of syntactic behavior, pragmatic function, and rhetorical purpose (Afisi, 2020; Yusuf & Ali, 2025). Such

nuanced differences are particularly salient for second language (L2) writers who aim to align their writing with native-like academic norms. As English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pedagogy seeks to empower multilingual scholars in crafting effective and discipline-appropriate prose, examining the usage of these verbs across native (L1) and non-native academic writing provides critical insights into language use, stylistic variation, and instructional focus.

Recent corpus-based studies have provided critical insights into how L2 academic writers construct meaning and navigate discourse through lexical and syntactic choices. Su and Lu (2020), for example, examined the pragmatic performance of Chinese EFL learners in expressing exemplification and found that proficiency was closely tied to the strategic use of local grammar patterns. Similarly, Yunjung (2025) explored the use of prepositional phrase-lexical bundles among L2 writers from different language backgrounds, revealing that discourse function and L1 typology influenced bundle usage more than previously assumed. Li et al. (2023) focused on the role of negation in L1 and L2 PhD theses, demonstrating that L2 bundles, often writers employed fewer negative markers for both interactive and interactional purposes, thereby limiting their rhetorical engagement.

A growing body of research also emphasizes lexical sophistication and complexity as key indicators of L2 writing development. Nasser and Thompson (2021) showed that L2 dissertation abstracts had lower lexical diversity compared to L1 texts, while Zhang and Yang (2025) argued that verbal diversity within grammatical constructions predicted L2 proficiency more robustly than surface-level

frequency measures. Al-Harhi (2023) supported this by showing that L1 writers consistently outperformed L2 postgraduates in terms of lexical sophistication and variation, despite comparable lexical density. These findings highlight the need to go beyond surface accuracy in assessing L2 writing quality.

Further attention has been paid to the role of lexical bundles in academic writing across writer groups. Li and Lei (2025) found that L2 writers specifically Chinese master's students used more lexical bundles overall, but with less structural variety and a weaker awareness of academic register compared to their L1 counterparts. This aligns with Amirusefi (2019), who revealed that L2 academic professionals favored clause-based passive structures, while L1 professionals relied more on noun/prepositional phrase-based bundles, suggesting structural divergence even among experienced writers. Fajri et al. (2020) confirmed this trend in applied linguistics articles, noting that L2 writers overused verbal phrase-based bundles and underused common native-like expressions, which may hinder their integration into the expected discourse norms of their field.

While these studies have richly documented lexico-grammatical and

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discourse-level variations in L1 and L2 writing, from prepositions and bundles to negation and exemplification, very few have addressed how *near-synonymous academic verbs* are used across these writer groups. Specifically, the comparative use of *enhance* and *improve*, two verbs central to expressing positive academic claims, has not yet been investigated through the lens of syntactic construction, semantic nuance, and pragmatic function. Moreover, prior studies tend to focus either on student corpora or general writing samples; little is known about how such verbs are deployed in professionally published academic articles, such as those in *TESOL Quarterly*, where writers are expected to meet high disciplinary and stylistic expectations.

To bridge this research gap, the current study employs a corpus-informed methodology to investigate the deployment of *enhance* and *improve* in academic journal articles authored by both L1 and L2 English writers. Utilizing AntConc for frequency and collocational analysis, the study is further enriched by qualitative concordance examination grounded in evaluative stance framework (Sherine et al., 2020). This dual approach enables a nuanced exploration of how native and non-native writers operationalize these near-synonymous

verbs in terms of syntactic structuring, lexical co-selection, and stance-taking strategies. The overarching objective is to identify systematic variations in lexicogrammatical choices that reflect divergent rhetorical practices and disciplinary alignment. The findings are anticipated to contribute to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pedagogy by offering practical insights into fostering lexical precision and effective evaluative expression among multilingual academic writers. Specifically, the study seeks to answer three core research questions: (1) What are the frequency and distributional profiles of *enhance* and *improve* in L1 and L2-authored academic texts? (2) How do syntactic realizations and collocational tendencies differ across these writer groups? and (3) How do such lexical-grammatical patterns inform the construction of stance and meaning in L1 versus L2 academic discourse?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic writing functions not merely as a vehicle for conveying information, but also as a rhetorical arena where writers articulate stance, convey evaluation, and assert epistemic perspectives (Oshima, 2019; Zhang et al., 2025). Within this context, lexical verbs like *enhance* and *improve* assume a

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central role. Commonly used to signal advancement, development, or beneficial change, these verbs are integral to constructing scholarly arguments. Their grammatical flexibility and semantic depth render them powerful tools for reflecting a writer's engagement with disciplinary norms and underlying epistemological frameworks (Hyland, 2018; Curran, 2018).

The first variable of this study concerns frequency and distribution, which are often used in corpus linguistics to identify patterns of lexical preference between different writing populations. Prior research Gee and Gee (2020) has shown that L1 academic writers tend to use a wider variety of verbs and more abstract forms, while L2 writers may rely more heavily on high-frequency verbs with more concrete applications.

The second variable involves syntactic realizations, including active vs. passive constructions, nominalizations, and infinitival clauses. Studies such as Vandermeulen et al. (2024) and Revniuk and Bányi (2023) report that L1 writers often utilize more syntactically complex forms, such as passive voice or nominalizations, to convey detachment and objectivity hallmarks of academic discourse. In contrast, L2 writers are often found to favor more straightforward and agentive

structures (Lesiana et al., 2023; Jaya et al., 2025).

The third variable academic stance and evaluative meaning is central to how writers construct voice and authority. Stance refers to the linguistic resources used to express certainty, doubt, value, or engagement (Hunston & Thompson, 2020; Hyland, 2019). Verbs like *enhance* and *improve* carry evaluative meaning by indicating progress or positive movement, which implicitly positions the author's contribution as valuable or innovative (Jaya et al., 2025b).

To investigate how such stance is constructed through lexical verbs, this study adopts the analytical lens of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) as proposed by (Septianingti et al., 2024). CADS emphasizes that recurrent lexico-grammatical patterns in a corpus are not merely linguistic but also discursive they index social practices, ideological positions, and evaluative stances. Within this framework, verbs like *enhance* and *improve* are seen as carriers of appraisal, intersubjective alignment, and rhetorical positioning.

By drawing on this framework, the present study examines how L1 and L2 academic writers employ *enhance* and *improve* differently not only in terms of frequency and grammar, but also in how

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these choices reflect their epistemic commitment and discourse community alignment. This literature review thus sets the stage for a discourse-sensitive comparison of writer identity construction in global academic writing.

3. METHODS***Research Design***

This study employs a corpus-based comparative approach to examine how L1 and L2 English academic writers use the near-synonyms *enhance* and *improve* differently in terms of syntax and semantics. Using qualitative corpus methods such as frequency, collocation, and concordance analyses it explores both lexical patterns and contextual meaning (Neuman, 2019; Patton, 2020; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Grounded in Partington et al.'s (2013) corpus-assisted discourse analysis, the study combines surface-level data with discourse-level insights to reveal pragmatic and evaluative strategies underlying verb use across writer groups.

Research Subjects

This study examines academic texts authored by L1 and L2 English writers, drawn from TESOL Quarterly, a leading journal in English language education. Twenty research articles 10 by presumed L1 and 10 by L2 writers were

purposefully selected based on the authors' names, affiliations, biographical notes, and linguistic backgrounds. The articles, published between 2023 and 2025, ensure up-to-date stylistic and editorial consistency. TESOL Quarterly was chosen for its scholarly credibility and relevance to English for Academic Purposes (EAP), providing an appropriate corpus for analyzing linguistic variation in authentic academic discourse (Jenks & Lee, 2020; Khanh, 2021).

Data Collection

The study gathered data by converting full-text academic articles into plain text for analysis using AntConc 4.3.1. The corpus was divided into L1 and L2 writer subcorpora, focusing on the verbs *enhance*, *improve*, and their derivatives. Collocates were identified within a 3-word window, and metadata such as publication year and article section was recorded to support interpretation. The sampling was purposive and ensured balance in authorship and topics (Mauliddiyah, 2021; Daruhadi & Sopiati, 2024).

Data analysis involved two main steps: (1) a quantitative phase identifying frequency, distribution, and top collocates based on frequency and statistical scores, and (2) a qualitative

concordance reading using Partington et al.'s (2013) discourse framework to examine the evaluative and semantic roles of verb use. Special attention was given to abstract versus concrete meanings and how lexical choices reflect stance and academic identity across L1 and L2 writing (Susanto et al., 2023; Herdayati & Syahril, 2019).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Frequency and Distributional Patterns

The findings of this study reveal clear differences in how L1 (native) and L2 (non-native) English academic writers use the verbs *enhance* and *improve*. L2 writers used these verbs particularly *enhance* much more frequently than L1 writers. This supports Zhang and Yang (2025), who argue that L2 writers often rely on a limited set of high-frequency academic verbs to demonstrate competence, even if this results in repetitive or formulaic usage (Li & Lei, 2025).

In contrast, L1 writers showed more balanced usage across verb forms, demonstrating what Al-Harhi (2023) calls “lexical control.” They also used fewer nominalized forms such as *enhancement* or *improvement*, aligning with Nasser and Thompson's (2021) observation that L1 writing tends to avoid redundancy and excessive abstraction.

The overuse of nominalizations by L2 writers may reflect an attempt to adopt an academic tone what Fajri et al. (2020) refer to as “over-formalization” but often lacks the precision and clarity seen in L1 writing.

The repetitive use of *enhance* by L2 writers also suggests a reliance on memorized patterns or “lexical bundles,” possibly shaped by academic training that emphasizes formality over contextual appropriateness (Li & Lei, 2025). This limited syntactic and semantic range may point to a surface-level grasp of academic style, rather than a deeper rhetorical awareness (Zhang & Cui, 2023). L1 writers, on the other hand, were more likely to use verb-based constructions (e.g., *improve*, *improved*), which maintain clarity and directness in line with the empirical style of academic writing.

These patterns align with Sherine et al. (2020), who found that L2 professionals often prefer verb-based clause structures, while L1 writers use more varied and mature noun/prepositional phrase bundles. The heavy use of *enhance* by L2 writers might reflect their desire to express authority, but at the cost of structural and rhetorical variation (Nasser & Thompson, 2021).

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In sum, while both groups show grammatical competence, L1 writers exhibit greater lexical sophistication and rhetorical nuance (Appel et al., 2023). L2 writers, though ambitious in vocabulary choice, often display what Zhang and Yang (2025) term “surface-level proficiency” limited variation within familiar patterns. These findings highlight the need for instructional support that goes beyond academic word lists, encouraging L2 learners to explore a wider range of syntactic forms and context-sensitive usage in academic writing.

Syntactic Constructions of Enhance and Improve in L1 and L2 Academic Writing

The study highlights important differences between L1 (native) and L2 (non-native) academic writers in their use of verbs like enhance and improve. While both groups use these verbs accurately from a grammatical standpoint, they differ notably in how they incorporate them into academic discourse. L1 writers use these verbs in broader, often more critical or reflective contexts, whereas L2 writers typically use them in performance-based, outcome-driven expressions (e.g., improve academic performance, enhance learning). This supports the findings of Kim, Crawford, and McDonough (2025), who emphasize

that communicative purpose, not just structural accuracy, shapes grammatical choices.

L2 writers frequently rely on formulaic expressions, aligning with Kang and Lee’s (2025) research on Korean academic discourse. Like Korean writers, L2 English writers depend on common verb-noun collocations and familiar patterns. This pattern suggests that L2 writers focus more on clarity and correctness than on thematic or syntactic diversity, which may reflect the influence of their first language or educational background.

In line with Seo and Oh’s (2024) findings, the study also shows that while both L1 and L2 writers can use complex structures (like infinitives or passives), L1 writers demonstrate greater syntactic variety and semantic subtlety. For example, L1 writers use more elaborate clause constructions (e.g., enhance awareness of linguistic diversity), showing deeper grammatical and rhetorical control. In contrast, L2 writers often repeat similar expressions, which may indicate a developmental plateau in their writing skills due to limited exposure or instructional support.

These findings affirm Biber et al.’s (2020) argument that writing quality is not merely about complexity or correctness, but about how language

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serves rhetorical and ideological functions. L2 writers tend to use improve and enhance to describe measurable, technical outcomes, missing deeper discourse-level engagement. This shows that L2 academic writing often lacks the evaluative stance and rhetorical complexity seen in native writing.

Finally, the study echoes Khamkhien's (2025) observation that L2 writers often adopt a distant and impersonal tone, using fewer critical or authorial strategies. In this study, L2 writers focused on technical gains rather than epistemic engagement, while L1 writers used these verbs to express evaluative meaning and argumentation. This suggests that L2 writing instruction should move beyond teaching formulaic expressions and focus more on developing students' critical thinking, genre awareness, and rhetorical flexibility. In sum, the study underscores that true academic writing proficiency involves more than grammatical accuracy; it requires rhetorical purpose, genre sensitivity, and discursive agency.

Lexico-Grammatical Resources for Academic Stance Construction in L1 and L2 Discourse

This study shows that although both L1 (native) and L2 (non-native) academic writers use the verbs enhance

and improve with grammatical accuracy, they differ significantly in how they construct academic stance. L1 writers tend to pair these verbs with abstract and critical concepts (e.g., awareness, diversity) to engage reflectively with broader social or pedagogical issues. In contrast, L2 writers typically use them with concrete, measurable terms (e.g., skills, confidence), reflecting a focus on performance and institutional expectations.

Syntactically, L1 writers use more complex structures like passive voice and nominalizations to convey objectivity, while L2 writers rely more on active constructions that emphasize clarity but lack rhetorical subtlety. Lexically, L1 writers also show a greater range and nuance in evaluation, whereas L2 writers often use fixed and predictable phrases, indicating limited stance expression.

These differences suggest that stance construction is not just about vocabulary or grammar, but about rhetorical awareness and genre familiarity. Therefore, L2 writing instruction should go beyond formulaic correctness and explicitly teach stance as a rhetorical skill, using corpus-informed examples and critical genre approaches.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the frequency, syntactic patterns, and stance-related uses of the verbs *enhance* and *improve* in academic writing by L1 and L2 English users. Findings revealed notable differences: L1 writers favored complex, abstract, and evaluatively detached constructions aligned with disciplinary norms, while L2 writers preferred active, concrete, and performance-driven expressions. These patterns reflect not only linguistic proficiency but also differing levels of rhetorical and genre awareness. However, the study's scope was limited by a small, domain-specific corpus, focus on only two verbs, and reliance on written data and inferred author identities. Despite these limitations, the findings offer valuable pedagogical insights. EAP instruction should integrate corpus-based materials and explicit guidance on functional grammar, stance, and disciplinary discourse to help L2 writers develop more nuanced, credible, and rhetorically appropriate academic prose. Incorporating tools like AntConc into writing instruction can foster learner autonomy in identifying and adopting expert writing strategies. Future research should expand the lexical scope to include a broader range of evaluative verbs, analyze larger and more diverse corpora across disciplines, and consider

spoken or multimodal academic discourse. Including interviews with writers could also offer deeper insight into their linguistic choices, identities, and rhetorical intentions.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to the English Education Department (Prodi Tadris Bahasa Inggris) of STAIN Mandailing Natal for the academic support, institutional facilitation, and valuable encouragement throughout the research process. This study would not have been possible without the department's commitment to advancing scholarly research in language and education.

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