

Rhetorical Strategies in L2 Writing: An Exploration of Hedging and Boosting in Applied Linguistics Research Articles

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Introduction

It has been generally attested that academic writing does not only involve propositional content but has also been established as interactional and persuasive (Ho & Li, 2018; Hyland, 2005; Lee & Deakin, 2016; Swales, 1990). Hedges and boosters are interactional metadiscourse (MD) strategies which are considered to play a significant interactional role in academic genre. While hedges are used to reduce epistemic authorial commitment, the use of boosters indicate the writer's full commitment about the propositional content put forth. Nevertheless, hedges and boosters are not simply used to comment on the truth value of propositions but they are also deployed to reflect the writer's relationship with members of discourse community (Hyland, 2005; Vassileva, 2001). They are conceived as epistemic expressions that help writers modulate claims by anticipating readers' responses to the writer's statements and so their manipulation is considered essential in academic writing (Hyland, 2017). Hedges are linguistically realized by expressions such as *might*, *perhaps*, *possible*, *generally*, *to a certain extent*, etc. whereas boosters include such expressions as *definitely*, *demonstrate*, *in fact*, *it is clear that*, etc.

Nevertheless, there exists some cultural rhetorical variation of hedging preferences across cultures since hedging and culture are interrelated (Bloor & Bloor, 1991). Hedging, for instance, is perceived as persuasive in Anglo-American context (Hinkel, 2003) and thereby its use may be considered essential in this context. However, it may or may not be viewed to have such a rhetorical impact in other cultural-rhetorical contexts. In classical Arabic, for instance, persuasion may not be generally pursued by hedging but rather by amplification (Hyland, 2005). Hinkel (2005) also suggests that exaggeration and assertion are characteristics of Arabic rhetoric. According to this view, Arab L2 writers generally attempt to persuade audience utilizing less hedges and more boosters (Connor, 1996), and this could lead to "cross-cultural misunderstanding" (Vassileva, 2001, p.84). This paper investigates this claim and examines the use of hedging and boosting in advanced Arab L2 writing.

Due to their importance, hedges and boosters have attracted a widely remarkable interest in the literature such as the use of hedges and boosters across cultures (Mu, Zhang, Ehrich, & Hong, 2015; Mur-Dueñas, 2011), academic disciplines (Ken Hyland, 1998), undergraduate students' essays (Ho & Li, 2018; Lee & Deakin, 2016), post-graduate writing (Hyland, 2004, 2010; Risda et al., 2018) non-native writing (Abdollahzadeh, 2011; Loi, Lim, & Wharton, 2016; Vassileva, 2001; Yagız & Demir, 2014). However, the study of hedging and boosting in Arab L2 advanced writing is relatively scarce and so research on these features in this context could yield fruitful pedagogical implications (Yagız & Demir, 2014). Therefore, it is anticipated that the findings of this study could be of usefulness to academic writing instruction especially in the Arabic context. The purpose of the study is to explore the extent to which Arab L2 writers modulate their claims through the use of hedges and boosters in academic writing. Accordingly, two questions are posed: 1) what are the hedging and boosting

strategies employed in RAs by Yemeni Arab L2 writers 2) What is the distribution pattern of hedging and boosting strategies across the major sections of RAs?

Methodology

In this paper, we take a corpus-based analysis approach to examine the use of hedges and boosters in a text of research articles. The corpus consists of 34 research articles written in English by Yemeni applied linguistics writers. The corpus analysis was conducted based on Hyland's (2005) model. What distinguishes Hyland's from the other models is that it is explicit and genre-based (Ho & Li, 2018). Moreover, Hyland's model includes a set some principles which generally draws a borderline between propositional and metadiscoursal features. Based on Hyland's (2005) list of potential hedging and boosting expressions, we used Antconc, a software analytical tool to search for the instances of hedges and boosters in the corpus. However, we do not totally depend on this list as it is by no means complete. We extracted all the features and examined all the occurrences in context.

Results

The overall findings indicate that Arab L2 writers tend to focus more on the subject matter than the interactional strategies in writing. Table 1 overviews the normalized frequencies of hedges and boosters. It is found that writers deploy fairly limited proportions of hedges and boosters.

Table 1: overall frequency of hedges and boosters

Categories	No of tokens	Freq per 1000 words	Percentage %
Hedges	738	5.64	76.96
Boosters	221	1.69	23.04
Total	959	7.33	100

Nevertheless, hedges are found to be slightly more frequent than boosters (See table 1) although there are no statistically significant differences (0.5416, $P > 0.05$). Having overviewed the overall frequency of both hedges and boosters, let us now consider their distribution across the introduction and conclusion sections of RAs.

The results indicate that L2 writers tend to show doubt than marking conviction as they introduce one's claims in the introduction. As table 2 shows, hedges were used about four times more than boosters in the introduction. Hedges are even more significantly used than boosters in the conclusion section. While the normalized frequency of hedges in the conclusion accounts for 8.65, they only amount to 1.75 per thousand words in the introduction (See table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of hedges and boosters across RAs sections

Interactional MD	Introduction		Conclusion	
	Freq.	Freq. per 1000 words	Freq.	Freq. per 1000 words
Hedges	360	5.04	104	8.65
Boosters	93	1.30	21	1.75

Comparing the two features across RAs sections, the conclusion has considerably higher frequency of hedges and slightly more boosters. While the frequency of hedges in the introduction accounts for 5.04, it has a considerably higher frequency (8.65 per thousand words). However, the normalized frequency of boosters is only slightly higher in the conclusion section. This could generally imply that L2 writers tend to prefer concluding their findings with caution attempting to detach themselves from expressing commitment as they conclude the argument.

Discussion

The findings indicate that Arab L2 writers tend to pay more attention to content than interaction in writing. Both hedges and boosters were employed in limited proportions though hedges were found slightly used more than boosters. The limited use of hedges and boosters might indicate lack of authorial voice and stance in discourse. According to Hyland (2019), scarce use of these feature in writing may diminish authorial stance to evaluate the content and appeal to audience. Even though hedges were found slightly more frequent than boosters, both hedges and boosters do not seem to be frequent compared to the use of these features in previous research carried out in research articles. Take the use of hedges as an example. While normalized frequency of hedges in the present study is 5.64 per thousand words, Hyland (1998), found that the frequency of hedges accounts for 15.1 per thousand words i.e. three times higher than the frequency of hedges in the present study. As another example, in their comparison of interactional MD in English by American and another two groups of Chinese ESL learners, Le and Deaken (1998) show that the frequency of hedges were (11.70, 10.63 and 8.37 per thousand words) respectively. Given the limited range of hedges and boosters, the present study provides an empirical evidence that even advanced Arab L2 writers tend to pay more attention to content than interaction in writing. Further, the use of booster was found infrequent in the present study compared to previous research. This relatively resonate with previous research on the use of hedges in native and non-native writing (Abdollahzadeh, 2011; Yagız & Demir, 2014). Nevertheless, it was also found that Arab L2 writers oftentimes tend to present argument like established fact using neither hedges nor boosters. This is also collaborative with the research by (Lee & Deakin, 2016) who reported that undergraduate students writers tend to use such an impersonal style presenting argument like facts. The findings also indicate that Arab L2 writers use hedges quite more frequently in the conclusion sections. Although the conclusion section involves higher frequency of hedges than the introduction, the differences are not significant. This quite concurs with (Yagız & Demir, 2014) who report that Turkish L2 writers used hedges slightly more frequently than American writers in the conclusion section.

Conclusion

This paper endeavoured to explore the extent to which Yemeni L2 writers mark one's authorial stance in the genre of research articles. Given the limited proportions of hedging and boosting strategies used, it seems pretty clear that there is a lack of authorial voice in Yemeni L2 academic writing. The study has some useful implications for the teaching of academic writing in EFL context. Given that Arab advanced L2 writers relatively lack the familiarity with hedges and boosters, this could be generalizable to most Arab L2 writers. Thus, syllabus designers and university writing instructors should work together to reconsider the goals and content of EFL academic writing syllabus and highlight the role of hedges and boosters as essential interactional MD strategies in writing.

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