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# EXPRESSING CLAIM: HEDGES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS' WRITING

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It is now widely accepted that metadiscourse is substantial element of pragmatically effective written communication. Growing literature in the field has already shown that the use of metadiscourse devices poses problems to non-native writers. Despite its importance and considerable interest it attracts, most of the previous studies have concentrated either on the published research articles or post-graduate academic writings. This article presents a quantitative corpus-based comparative study of hedges used in academic essays written in English by novice university students. The study employs learner corpus case approach. For the purpose of the study a Non-native English Learner Corpus was created by the researchers and an academic writing sub-corpus of the British National Corpus was used as a reference corpus. The results showed similarity in hedge categories in both corpora, but when hedges used in each category are considered certain differences are observed.

Keywords: Hedging, Learner corpus, Metadiscourse, Non-native english learner writers.

## Introduction

It is now widely accepted that metadiscourse is substantial element of pragmatically effective written communication. Since writing is a social communicative act, writers project themselves into their discourse through the use of certain self-reflective linguistic expressions called as metadiscourse (Hyland, 2004). Metadiscourse, which is used as an umbrella term rather than a concept with a single signified, includes a set of devices with two main functions: textual and interpersonal. While the textual devices help the writer to organize the text, the interpersonal devices provide information about the writer's attitude towards the content, and help the writer to engage in interaction with the reader (Hyland, 2000).

Metadiscourse has informed several studies that focus on "text features, cross-cultural variations and writing pedagogy" (Hyland, 2004, p. 134). Areas which have been examined are wideranging, with examples such as casual conversation (Schiffrin, 1980), undergraduate textbooks (Hyland, 2000), postgraduate dissertations (Bunton, 1998) and school textbooks (Crismore, 1989). Studies investigating rhetorical differences in the texts written by different first language groups have shown that it is a characteristic of a range of languages and genres (Crismore, Markkanen & Steffensen, 1993; Mauranen, 1993; Valero-Garces, 1996). Particularly persuasive and argumentative texts have been found to utilize metadiscourse as a prominent component (Crismore & Farnsworth, 1990; Hyland, 1998). Yet, studies have also shown that each culture has its own rules in presenting knowledge, and L2 learners often have

difficulties interpreting and adequately using metadiscoursal features such as hedges and experience pragmatic failure in L2 writing (e.g. Milton & Hyland, 1999).

Though corpus studies on metadiscourse have so far provided detailed descriptions of the linguistic features of academic discourse, there is still a need for comparative studies that would investigate cross-cultural issues and probe into the differences between native (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of English. Growing literature in the field has shown that use of metadiscourse devices pose problems to non-native writers (e. g. Adel, 2008; Hyland, 2005; Intraprawat & Steffensen, 1995). Despite its importance and considerable interest it attracts, most of the previous studies have concentrated either on the published research articles or post-graduate academic writings (e.g. Hyland & Tse, 2004; Martin, 2003; Pérez-Llantada, 2010). The present study focuses on the use of one type of metadiscoursal devices, that's hedges, in academic essays written in English by university students. Employing a quantitative corpus-based comparative methodology, the study aims to investigate the similarities and differences in the use of hedges between native and non-native novice writers in order to uncover some of the metadiscoursal problems which non-native learners experience when writing academic essays.

## Background

According to Hyland (2005) interaction in academic writing involves "'positioning' in relation to both the issues discussed and to others who hold points of view on those issues" (p.175). In order to be effective, writers employ certain communicative strategies while stating their claims and propositions. As Vasquez and Giner (2009) point out "propositional meaning can be formulated with different degrees of strength, ranging from very weak to very strong statements through the use of different devices such as modality, first person pronouns, hedges and booster" (p. 220).

Hedges and boosters are among interpersonal devices that are used by writers to modify their claims, to construe and attain persuasion (Hyland, 2000; Vázquez & Giner, 2009). Hedges such as *might*, *probably* and *seem*, and boosters such as *actually*, *certainly* and *clearly* provide information about the degree of doubt and certainty of the statements made by the writer. These expressions of doubt and certainty is central to academic writing where the writers are expected to distinguish opinion from fact, and evaluate their assertions in order to compete demands of persuasion and objectivity (Hyland & Milton, 1997; Hyland, 2005; Vazquez & Giner, 2009). A large body of literature in the field has already documented the role of hedges and boosters in academic writing as communicative strategies for conveying reliability and manipulating the strength of commitment to the claim (see for example, Crismore, Markkanen & Steffenson, 1993; Hyland, 2005; Salager-Meyer, 1994).

Hedges are one of the most studied features of this audience-oriented aspect of claim design. Myers (1989) has suggested that academic writers employ hedges to soften interpersonal imposition. Hedges have also been seen as a way of anticipating the possible negative consequences of overstatement and the eventual overthrow of a claim (Hyland, 1996 & 1998; Salager-Meyer, 1994). According to Hyland (1996) in academic circles hedges allow writers "to present statements with appropriate accuracy, caution and humility" (p. 434). All these arguments imply that hedges are used in statements which are based on plausible reasoning rather than certain knowledge, and allow readers the freedom to dispute it. Previous research with first language (L1) speakers has demonstrated that L1 learners have difficulties in constructing appropriate argument structures and thus have difficulties in qualifying relationships between their grounds and claims (Connor & Lauer, 1988). The ability to express doubt and certainty becomes an even more complex task for the second language (L2) writers and learners (Hyland, 1996). Research demonstrates that the writings of non-native speakers (NNSs) are often considered vague and insufficient in terms of expression of meaning unless they follow the conventions of writing as expected by native speakers (NSs) (Hinkel, 1997; Myers, 1989). The differences between L1 and L2 writers have been reported in various studies conducted in different contexts. For example, in an earlier study Hu, Brown and Brown (1982) found that Chinese L2 writers are more direct and authoritative in tone and make more use of strong modals than NSs. Later, Skelton (1988) observed that direct and unqualified

writing is more typical of EFL students than. Similarly, Hyland and Milton (1997) claimed that L2 writers find the manipulation of degrees of probability particularly problematic. In a more recent study comparing Spanish and English abstracts, Martin (2003) found that English writers use hedges while reporting the conclusion, whereas Spanish writers use less. Although how hedges are employed by post-graduate students and academicians from a variety of scientific fields have been well documented, how undergraduate level L2 learners use these devices is still underexplored. To our knowledge there are only a few studies with undergraduate students. This study explores how Turkish speaking university students modify assertions. The main goal of the present study is, therefore, to investigate the frequency of incidence of hedges used by Turkish speakers of English and to identify similarities and differences between non-native and native speakers.

**Method**

The study employs learner corpus case approach. Hence, it is a corpus-based study and quantitative in nature. In the study, Hyland's (1998) model of hedging was used as a starting point of analysis. Hedges were classified as in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Hedge categories.

| Type | Example |
|---|---|
| Epistemic adverbs | almost, fairly, largely, mainly, typically |
| Epistemic adjectives | broadly, likely, possible, usually |
| Epistemic modals and verbs | appear, claim, could, seem, should |
| Epistemic nouns, pronuns & phrases | certain extent, somewhat, in most cases |

Researchers worked with two corpora: non-native learner corpus and native learner corpus.

*Non-native learner corpus (NNLC)*

The NNLC was compiled by the researchers as a project funded by Yıldız Technical University Research Center (Project number: 2012-09-02-KAP01). The compilation was started in 2011-2012 academic year. The corpus design features are given in Table 2. All the writers were undergraduate students with intermediate level of English. The NNLC was analyzed using *Concordance 3.3* program in order to find the occurrence of hedges.

**Table 2.** Corpus design features.

| Design feature | | |
|---|---|---|
| Learner related features | L2 background | English as a foreign language |
| | L2 level | Intermediate |
| | Year level | Undergraduate (1st to 4th year) |
| Language related features | Mode | Written |
| | Genre | Essay |
| | Style | Argumentative, narrative, cause-effect, opinion, comparison-contrast |
| Task related features | Data collection | Longitudinal |
| | Elicitation | Prepared |

### The NNLC holdings:

1. 316 pieces of student writings (ranging in length from about 400 words to about 750 words)
2. Holdings are restricted to applied linguistics (undergraduate) (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** NNLC holdings.

| Style | Number of essays | Word count |
|---|---|---|
| Cause-effect | 65 | 53.664 |
| Comparison-contrast | 58 | 40.915 |
| Narrative | 55 | 35.132 |
| Argumentative | 54 | 51.362 |
| Opinion | 51 | 39.489 |
| Classification | 20 | 7.033 |
| Process | 13 | 4.26 |
| **Total** | **316** | **231.855** |

### Native learner corpus

Native learner corpus used as a reference corpus. The researchers used British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus which was created by the Universities of Warwick, Reading and Oxford Brookes as reference.

### The BAWE corpus holdings:

1. 2761 pieces of proficient assessed student writing (ranging in length from about 500 words to about 5000 words)
2. Holdings are distributed across four broad disciplinary areas (Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Life Sciences and Physical Sciences) and across four levels of study (undergraduate and taught masters level).

For the present study, we used the Sketchengine tool for native corpus query. This tool enables the researchers see a concordance for any word, phrase or grammatical construction, in one of the corpora provided. It also offers tools to limit the query. Since our NNLC consisted of essays written by ELT undergraduate students, we wanted the reference corpus to have similar features. For this reason, instead of using the whole BAWE corpus, we narrowed down the corpus query to a single disciplinary area; Arts and Humanities. The text grade, text level, student age and L1 background features were narrowed down as well. Table 4 displays the features of this BAWE sub-corpus.

**Table 4.** Corpus features.

| **Design feature** | | |
|---|---|---|
| Learner related features | Language background | English as L1 |
| | Language level | Proficient |
| | Year level | Undergraduate (1$^{st}$ to 4$^{th}$ year) |
| Language related features | Mode | Written |
| | Genre | Essay |
| Text related features | Disciplinary area | Arts and Humanities |
| | Text grade | Medium |
| | Text level | 1 to 4 |
| | Number of texts | 349 |
| | Word count | 806.628 |

**Findings**

The results of the L2 learner corpus analysis show that undergraduate Turkish writers formulate their ideas and thoughts in a certain mode. However, we found certain similarities and differences in the overall use of hedges between non-native and native speakers. As shown in Table 5, both corpora show similarity with respect to hedge categories. When the categories are ordered in a descending order by looking at the number of items used, we will see that both corpora display a similar picture; starting with epistemic adverbs and ending with epistemic nouns, pronouns and phrase category. However, in each category the number of items is different, with NNCL having fewer items in each category. This means that the basic difference between native and non-native speakers is observed in variety. When per 100.000 usage frequencies are considered, the results displayed dispersion between native and non-natives speaker writers. While, in NNLC the most frequent type of hedges is epistemic adverbs, in BAWE the most frequent type of hedges is epistemic modals and verbs. In both corpora the less frequent type of hedges is epistemic adjectives and the least frequent type of hedges is epistemic nouns, pronouns and phrases category. These two categories show similarity in the order of preference in both corpora.

**Table 5.** Hedges in NNLC and BAWE.

|  | NNLC | | | BAWE | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | **No. of items** | **Raw *f*** | **Per 100.000** | **No. of items** | **Raw *f*** | **Per 100.000** |
| Adverbs | 21 | 1537 | 663 | 24 | 4143 | 514 |
| Adjectives | 14 | 189 | 82 | 15 | 5677 | 190 |
| Modals & verbs | 19 | 1436 | 619 | 21 | 10113 | 1254 |
| N., Pron. & phrases | 5 | 38 | 16 | 11 | 318 | 39 |
| **Total** | **59** | **3200** | **1380** | **71** | **20251** | **1997** |

In order to document the differences in variety between the two corpora in more detail, and to see whether L2 learners favor certain hedges over others, we looked at the most frequently preferred five hedges in all the categories. As can be seen in Table 6, despite some similarities are observed with regard to the list of lexicon in each category, the per 100.000 frequencies show an uneven distribution in non-native learner corpora. For example, in the adverb category *about* is the most frequent hedge in both corpora, however, in NNLC the usage is nearly 3 times more frequent than that of BAWE. On the other hand, with the second lexicon in the list a sharp decrease is seen in NNLC. Unlike NNLC, in BAWE corpus this descrease is proportional. One of the most striking difference worth to mention appears in the category of modal verbs and verbs. In this category, whereas verbs that are used in academic propositions such as *suggest* and *argue* are used as frequently as the modal verbs in BAWE, they are not used as frequently as they do in NNLC.

**Table 6.** The most frequent hedges in all categories in NNLC and BAWE.

|  | NNLC | | BAWE | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Category** | **Hedge** | **Per 100.000** | **Hedge** | **Per 100.000** |
| | about | 337,3 | about | 116,8 |
| | sometimes | 58,2 | often | 83,1 |
| Adverb | around | 44,4 | perhaps | 62,6 |
| | almost | 43,1 | around | 33,5 |
| | generally | 40,5 | almost | 33,0 |
| | possible | 34,9 | possible | 69,5 |
| | unlike | 11,6 | quite | 20,5 |
| Adjective | typical | 1,3 | unlike | 15,7 |
| | unlikely | 0,9 | unlikely | 9,2 |
| | probable | 0,4 | somewhat | 8,9 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Modals & verbs | may | 141,9 | would | 302,4 |
| | would | 88,8 | could | 170,7 |
| | could | 78,5 | suggest | 108,7 |
| | couldn't | 52,2 | argue | 87,3 |
| | should | 33,2 | appear | 70,0 |
| N., Pron. & phrases | in my opinion | 14,2 | to my knowledge | 14,9 |
| | in my view | 0,9 | in my opinion | 3,0 |
| | from this perspective | 0,4 | on the whole | 2,7 |
| | in this view | 0,4 | in most cases | 1,5 |
| | on the whole | 0,4 | in my view | 1,4 |

The figures given above indicate that L2 learners try to communicate their meaning by repeating a set of lexicon, and that they fall behind L1 learners in variety which results in the overuse of some lexicon and underuse of some others. The gap between the two corpora becomes even wider with the hedges that are included in the Academic Vocabulary List (Coxhead, 2000). This might be attributed to three main reasons. First, this is most probably due to the limited vocabulary size of our L2 learners. Similar results were reported in the previous research. For example, Hinkel (2003) and Anwardeen and colleagues (2013) found that L2 learners use fewer hedges than native speakers, and as a result they use some hedges more frequently than native speakers. Second, the difference between the two corpora is likely to sign that L2 learners are fully aware of the stylistic peculiarities of academic texts, and thus they experience difficulties in formulating their claims. Third, as Adel (2006) pointed out this difference might be due to the writing conventions for each group of students with respect to writer visibility and interaction with an imagined reader.

## Conclusion

This research attempted to investigate hedges used in academic essays written in English by novice university students and to identify similarities and differences between non-native and native learners. The main findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

- Both NNLC and BAWE show similarity with respect to hedge categories;
- When hedges used in both corpora are compared, the variety of hedges used by L1 writers is richer;
- Unlike BAWE, the most frequently used hedges are overused by L2 writers;

Drawing on the findings obtained from this research, we can conclude that the differences between two corpora may be attributed to (i) learners' linguistic competences, (ii) learners' vocabulary size, and/or (iii) differences between L1 and L2 writing conventions and norms.

The pedagogical implications of the study that in order to avoid over/underuse problems academic writing materials for Turkish learners of English are needed. The learners should be supported through EAP courses and they need to be made aware of disciplinary preferences in their EAP writing.

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