# EFL Learners' Development Of Voice In Academic Writing: Lexical bundles, Boosters/Hedges and Stance-taking Strategies[1]

Desarrollo de la Voz en la Escritura Académica en Aprendices de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera: Estrategias de Paquetes Léxicos, de Refuerzo/ Cobertura y de Toma de Posición

Christian Fallas Escobar and Lindsay Chaves Fernández[2]*
Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica, Costa Rica

## Abstract

In EFL composition courses, teaching and learning normally orbit around norms of unity, coherence, support, and sentence skills that L2 learners are expected to comply with, at the expense of opportunities to develop voice. Against this backdrop, we resolved to examine the extent to which students' exposure to and practice with lexical bundles, boosters/hedges and stance-taking strategies allows them to build a stronger discoursal and authorial voice as future academic writers. Evaluation of the students' works revealed their level of success in this endeavor and analysis of student surveys unveiled the tensions and struggles they faced along the way. At the end of this paper, we advocate for academic writing courses to be transformed into spaces where students not only come to terms with the basic norms they have to conform to, but also build a discoursal and authorial voice as L2 writers.

*Keywords:* Academic writing, lexical bundles, boosters/hedges, stance-taking strategies, learners' voice, discoursal and authorial voice.

## Resumen

Los cursos de escritura en lengua extranjera normalmente se enfocan en las normas de unidad, coherencia, sustento, y estructuras gramaticales, a costas de múltiples oportunidades que los estudiantes podrían tener para desarrollar su 'yo' discursivo y autoral. Por esta razón, nos dimos a la tarea de investigar hasta que punto exponer a los discentes a fraseología académica, intensificadores lingüísticos/evasivas académicas, y estrategias para el posicionamiento crítico les permite escribir con mayor destreza y confianza. La evaluación de los textos escritos por los estudiantes revelan el impacto positivo que la exposición a y práctica de los elementos retóricos y lingüísticos antes mencionados tuvo en sus trabajos escritos. Por otra parte, los cuestionarios aplicados a los estudiantes al final del curso revelan las tensiones y dificultades que ellos enfrentaron a lo largo del proceso. Concluimos este artículo con un llamado a que los cursos de escritura en lengua extranjera sean transformados en espacios en los que los discentes puedan no solo cumplir con las normas básicas de la escritura académica, sino también construir un 'yo' discursivo y autoral más fuerte y sólido.

*Palabras clave:* Escritura académica, fraseología académica, intensificadores y evasivas académicas, posicionamiento crítico, el concepto de voz, 'yo' discursivo, y 'yo' autoral.

## Resumo

Os cursos de escritura em língua estrangeira de um modo geral se enfocam nas normas de unidade, coerência, sustentação, e estruturas gramaticais, decorrente de múltiplas oportunidades que os estudantes poderiam ter para desenvolver o seu 'eu' discursivo e autoral. Esse é o motivo pelo qual decidimos pesquisar até que ponto expor aos discentes à fraseologia académica, intensificadores linguísticos/evasivas académicas, e estratégias para o posicionamento crítico permite-lhes escrever com maior destreza e confiança. A avaliação dos textos escritos pelos estudantes revela o impacto positivo que a exposição e a prática dos elementos retóricos e linguísticos antes mencionados tiveram em seus trabalhos escritos. Por outro lado, os questionários aplicados aos estudantes no final do curso revelam as tensões e dificuldades que eles enfrentaram ao longo do processo. Concluímos este artigo chamando a atenção a que os cursos de escritura em língua estrangeira sejam transformados em espaços nos quais os discentes possam não somente cumprir com as normas básicas da escritura académica, como também construir um 'eu' discursivo e autoral mais forte e sólido.

Palavras chave: Escritura académica, fraseologia académica, intensificadores e evasivas académicas, posicionamento crítico, ou conceito de voz, 'eu' discursivo, e 'eu' autoral.

97

## Introduction

In EFL composition courses, students are often construed as 'not-knowing' novices in need of expert guidance if they are to gain membership into the academic writing discourse community. In these courses, teaching and learning generally orbit around norms regarding unity, coherence, support, and sentence skills that L2 learners are expected to comply with. Puzzled and discouraged, these students find themselves forced to draft and submit writing pieces that feel dry, dispassionate and alien to them. Sadly, regardless of the learners' evident confusion and frustration, composition courses continue to revolve around these norms at the expense of opportunities for them to develop discoursal voice and authorial voice (Ivanič, 1998). In the spirit of problematizing this practice, we created spaces in two composition courses so that the learners could experience using diverse rhetorical devices. The central inquiry in this study was the extent to which students' exposure to and practice with *lexical bundles, boosters/ hedges and stance-taking strategies* would allow them to build a stronger discoursal/authorial voice as future academic writers. Evaluation of student essays and surveys unveiled the tensions and struggles they faced as they tried using the different rhetorical devices to construct their own voice. At the end of this paper, we give specific recommendations regarding the inclusion of the aforementioned linguistic and rhetorical devices so that L2 student writers develop their discoursal/authorial voice.

## Literature Review

As academic writers and teachers of composition, we are familiar with the pressures that abound within the academic writing discourse community. Our own trajectory from apprentice to active writers has brought its rewards, but also left us with questions regarding the hardships we faced and the compromises we made along the way. Although we acknowledge that the pressures exercised within academic writing circles are intended to safeguard the highly-valued features of scholarly writing, we also concede that overemphasis on these features jeopardizes the possibility of developing one's discoursal/authorial voice (Ivanič, 1998). Thus, herein we address the features of traditional academic writing and the notion of voice in academic writing.

**Traditional Academic Writing: A Focus on Compliance to Norms**

The academic writing discourse community claims that 'good' writing ought to be impersonal, objective and informational (Rahimivand & Kuhi, 2014) and grounded in the specific highly-valued features of literacy, relevance and politeness (Farrell, 1997). 'Literate' texts are expected to be objective, analytical and sequential, and thus organized in ways that showcase symmetry, order and logical thinking. Similarly, in scholarly writing, relevance is central to establishing meaning, as the expectation is for all the ideas to refer back to the main thesis at the onset of the text. Additionally, the notion of politeness in argumentative writing is central, given that writing 'too directly' is taken to be arrogant, aggressive and rude. These norms of academic writing exercise pressures on composition instructors, who frequently feel compelled to center on conventions such as unity, coherence, support and sentence skills, at the expense of students' possibilities to build and reflect a sense of voice in their writing.

Academic writing, however, is not only about the communication of ideas in an impersonal, detached, and objective manner, but also about the representation of voice (Ivanič, 1998), since the act of writing itself is inevitably influenced by the author's life histories and the "multiple who's" of their identity (Gee, 2008)[3]. Opposite to common belief, research suggests that, "...academic prose is not completely impersonal, and that writers gain credibility by projecting identity invested with individual authority, displaying confidence in their evaluations and commitment to their ideas" (Hyland, 2002, p. 1091). More and more composition scholars agree that one crucial pragmatic competence of writers is to know how to construct a credible representation of themselves in their work, at the same time that they comply with the norms of the academic writing community (Hyland, 2002, p.1091). Thus, it follows that writing is not a neutral activity (Ivanič, 1998), but an exercise in balancing out one's own voice with the many norms one has to abide by (Trepczyńska, 2016).

Unfortunately, more often than not, the pragmatism that characterizes traditional academic writing, where the focus is on compliance with the pre-set institutional requirements (Benesch, 2001, p. 3), robs instructors of the possibility to problematize their practice, and thus they become accomplices in the trend of training students to comply with institutionally identified needs. Contrary to common wisdom, the emphasis in composition courses should be more on how

99

---

[3] This view coincides with the cultural and rhetorical approaches to discourse analysis proposed by Tracy & Robles (2013).

topics are studied *dialogically* rather than *didactically* (Benesch, 2001, p. 67), with teachers taking a critical writing rather than process writing approach to composition, in which the search for voice is combined with the search for collectiveness (norms of academic writing). Yet, this require that instructors provide learners with intellectually engaging experiences that allow for the development of discoursal/authorial voice; also known as authoritativeness/presence (Hyland, 2008).

## L2 Learners' Voice in Academic Writing: Rhetorical and Cultural Perspectives

In exploring the interconnectedness of writing to identity and voice, Le (2009) argues that writing "...involves processes of negotiation, adaptation, appropriation and resistance that can occur during the acts of conceptualisation, drafting and writing" (p. 136) and insists that students' prior experiences as writers and individuals should find validation in composition courses. That is because neglecting to nurture a sense of voice, "... place[s] students at a rhetorical and interpersonal disadvantage, preventing them from communicating appropriate integrity and commitments, and undermining their relationships to readers" (Hyland, 2002, p. 1092). Le (2009), nonetheless, also rightfully asserts that finding one's voice is not a linear path with a clear finish line, but rather filled with negotiation and contestation between the many norms and expectations of the academy and one's own desires about how to represent one's voice in writing.

Despite the aforementioned difficulty in addressing voice, scholars agree that voice plays in fundamental role in both L1 and L2 academic writing (Konnor & Kaplan, 1987; Shen, 1989; Li, 1996; Ivanič, 1998). It is for that reason that L2 learners must be explicitly taught about the linguistic and rhetorical features (devices) that enhance a writer's voice (Matsuda, 2001), as projecting individual voice is a part of acceptable English writing (Stapleton, 2002). Although "Voice has been viewed as fuzzy, slippery, hard to define, and nearly impossible to teach" (Sperling and Appleman, 2011), we agree (1) with Ivanič and Camps (2001) that L2 learners should be guided to develop authoritativeness and presence in their writing since the beginning in composition courses and (2) with Matsuda (2001) and Stapleton (2002) that voice is an indispensable tool that should be brought to the forefront, especially when dealing with persuasive writing (Javdan, 2014).

Sperling and Appleman (2011) explain that voice can be understood from two perspectives that need not be mutually exclusive. As an individual accomplishment, voice is viewed from a linguistic

100

and rhetorical lens that implies a particular threshold of linguistic and identity achievement, assumes the *self* to be stable, coherent, unitary and autonomous, and constructs voice as a possession. Given the linguistic and rhetorical slant of this perspective, voice is not taken to be a window into the writer's true self but into who the writer claims to be at a particular point in time and for a particular purpose. That is, writers write in different voices at different times.

As a social/cultural accomplishment, voice is assumed to be "…essentially the result of a social and cultural mediation with the individual" (Sperling & Appleman, 73). From this perspective, voice consists of the writers' representation of their social/cultural worlds and its emergence is said to be shaped by the contexts in which they live and inevitably overshadowed by other voices. Discussions of voice as social and cultural accomplishment are largely based on Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) thesis that "…voices and utterances exist in response to previous utterances and in anticipation of future utterances," which in turn suggests that "Voice reflects one's assimilation, reworking, and reaccentuating of other voices" (Sperling & Appleman, 74).

In sum, we concur with Sperling and Appleman (2011) that "…voice is a language performance – always social, mediated by experience, and culturally embedded" (p. 71). That is to say, we view voice as identity performance and as a series of rhetorical movements situated within historical, material and social settings. As such, we believe that part of the students' socialization into academic writing implies learning about how selecting from lexical, linguistic and rhetorical resources available allows them to build a stronger discoursal and authorial voice that is valued within the academic writing community. There lies the amalgamation of voice as individual and social/cultural accomplishments that we espouse. Therefore, we will be looking at how including instruction about particular linguistic and rhetorical devices can potentially guide the students to develop discoursal and authorial voice in their academic writing.

## Lexical Bundles, Boosters/Hedges and Stance-taking Strategies

101

According to Ivanič (1998), there are three interrelated strands of voice: *autobiographical voice, discoursal voice, and authorial voice.* The first one refers to the life histories student writers bring with them; that sense of voice shaped by previous life experiences and literacy practices. The second alludes to the self-representation that emerges from the text, is constructed by means of selected discourse features, and reflects the values, beliefs and worldviews the student writers hold;

the persona they consciously or unconsciously take on when writing and the voice they want readers to hear. The last one encircles an accomplished sense of worth that allows student writers to compose with authority. These three interrelated strands are seldom explored in traditional academic writing courses despite the fact these are likely to allow student writers to build a stronger sense of worth in the work that they produce.

In this paper, we focus on Ivanič's concepts of discoursal and authorial voice (1998), with an emphasis on student writers' use of lexical bundles, boosters/hedges, and stance-taking strategies. Lexical bundles refer to sequences of words that are frequently used in academic writing, serving to perform definable discourse functions: stance expressions, discourse organizers, and referential expressions (Biber & Barbieri, 2007). Discourse organizers, which is the focus in this paper, are multi-word phrases that help signal introduction of new material, elaboration/clarification, contrast/comparison, cause/effect relationships, and argumentation. See Table 1. for some examples of the phrases students were taught about and requested to utilize.[4]

*Table 1.* Lexical Bundles

- Many scholars/experts claim/sustain that...
- ... is a hotly-debated topic that often divides opinions.
- ... is often discussed yet rarely understood.
- First of all, it is worth considering....
- Another point worth noting is....
- Another factor to consider is...
- With respect to....
- There are those who argue that...
- Research has found that...
- According to experts, ...
- Weighing up both sides of the argument...
- Taking everything into consideration, …
- On the whole,... / By and large,...

---

[4] For this study, we chose the lexical bundles that were related to the types of essays they had to write, especially their final argumentative essay.

As regards boosters and hedges, we center on the student writers' use of these rhetorical devices to express degree of directness: the subtleness or bluntness with which they express their ideas. Although levels of directness may include diverse devices (See Tables 2 and 3 below for some examples)ʷ, we focus on boosters, which increase authorial commitment at the same time that rhetorical space for alternative views is closed, and on hedges, which signal weaker authorial commitment and openness to alternative views (Lancaster, 2014). By using these rhetorical devices, students can express certainty, skepticism, (dis)belief, and authority (Tracy & Robles, 2013).

*Table 2.  Boosters/Hedges*

| Boosters | Hedges |
|---|---|
| Quite | Probably |
| Really | Hardly |
| Very | Slightly |
| Extremely | Somewhat |
| Completely | Barely |
| Exceptionally | Mildly |
| Totally | Moderately |
| Absolutely | Partly |
| Utterly | Practically |
| Particularly | Reasonably |
| Certainly | Possibly |
| Rather | Apparently |
| Strongly | Presumably |
| Highly | Supposedly |
| Strikingly | Allegedly |
| Excessively | Nearly/Almost |
| Remarkably | |

103

---

5   For this study, we chose boosters/hedges and stance-taking strategies related to the types of essays they had to write.

*Table 3.* Deductive, Inductive and Inferential point-making

| Claim - Reasons | Reasons - Claim | Telling a Story |
|---|---|---|
| (Deductive point-making) | (Inductive point-making) | (Inferential point-making) |
| **Claim** | Reason 1 | Story/anecdote of |
| Reason 1 | Reason 2 | reasonable  length that |
| Reason 2 | Reason 3 | indirectly makes a point |
| Reason 3 | **Claim** | without stating it. |

Finally, stance, a writer- and reader-oriented concept (Lancaster, 2014), refers to the student writers' use of linguistic and rhetorical devices to overtly or covertly indicate their position and attitudes towards the topic under discussion and their confidence (or lack thereof) in the truth of the propositions expressed (Phang, 2010; Hyland & Guinda, 2012). In other words, the focus is on student writers' evaluation of the topic under discussion (Tracy & Robles, 2013). Although student writers can express contrastive and agreement stances in multiple ways, we wish to concentrate on the ways they use self mentions, disclose their attitudes, mildly/strongly commit to their ideas, and introduce/comment on citations (Lancaster, 2014). See Table 4. below for examples.

*Table 4.  Stance Taking Strategies*

| Self-mentions | Disclosure of Attitudes |
|---|---|
| I strongly believe that.... | Surprisingly, ... / It is surprising that... |
| In my opinion, ... | Alarmingly, ... / It is alarming to note that... |
| I am utterly convinced that... | Interestingly, ... |
| From my point of view, ... | Fortunately/Unfortunately, ... |
| I have no doubt that... | Most importantly, … |
| As far as I am concerned, ... | Ideally, ... |
| It seems to me that... | Paradoxically/Ironically, ... |
| I am certain that... | Oddly enough, ... / Most strikingly, |
| I am absolutely convinced that... | It is difficult to believe that... |
| In this essay, I argue/sustain that.... | It comes as no surprise that... |

104

| Strong/Mild commitment | Introduction/Commentary of Citations |
|---|---|
| The fact is that.... | Brown rightfully asserts that... |
| It is a fact that/ It is a well-established fact that... | Brown is quite right when he claims that... |
| It has been scientifically proven that... | I strongly agree with Brown's claim that... |
| It goes without saying that... | In the words of noted scholar, Dr. Brown, ... |
| This proves/shows/demonstrates that... | Brown convincingly argues that... |
| It is obvious/clear that... | Brown provides clear/convincing evidence that.... |
| There is no doubt that.... | Dr. Brown, authority in the field of education, asserts… |
| This seems to suggest that... | Brown's assertion demonstrates that.... |
| Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that... | Considering Brown's claim, it follows that... |
| Considering the above, it would seem that... | Considering Brown's claim, we can reasonably |
| Thus, it appears that... | |

Our contention is that the student writers' mastery of the basic norms of academic writing —unity, coherence, support and sentence skills—does not suffice to develop a strong discoursal and authorial voice. They also need to gain skill in the use of lexical bundles, boosters/ hedges and stance-taking strategies, which has the potential to aid them in developing a stronger discoursal and authorial voice, which in turn can make them feel more confident about their own writing and help them write more academically. This, however, does not come without complications, as appropriate use of these devices "… requires making decisions (usually tacitly) about such matters as when to tune up or down one's level of commitment to assertions, whether and how to comment on the significance of evidence, whether and how to engage with alternative perspectives; how to construct a text that engages with the imagined reader…" (Hyland 2004, 2005; qtd in Lancaster, 2014).

Not addressing these much-needed skills in composition classes may imply leaving the students on their own to guess what is taken to be good writing in academic spheres. And while some may argue that this is an impossible mission, students' awareness of these aspects may constitute fertile ground for them to better understand their professors' feedback and continue to work on their own to navigate unity, coherence, support, sentence skills, coupled with lexical bundles, boosters/hedges and stance-taking strategies, as they develop skill in making rhetorical moves that fit their purpose(s) and align with the highly regarded features of scholarly writing (rhetorical and cultural view).

105

## Methodology

As foreign language teachers and learners, we have gone through the tensions and struggles that writing an academic paper entails. When we were EFL students, however, there was nothing we could do to resolve the feelings of anxiety and alienation triggered by our writing tasks. Yet, now that we are seasoned EFL instructors, we resolved to change the customary composition class to help our pupils build a stronger discoursal/authorial voice in their academic writing pieces[6].

### The Participants and the Context of the Study

We worked with two groups of students from two majors at Universidad Nacional in Costa Rica (UNA): (1) B.A. in TESOL and (2) B.A. in EFL. Both groups were in their second year and taking their second composition course. Group 1 was comprised of eight students whose ages ranged from 19 to 25 whereas group 2 had a total of 15 students whose ages ranked from 19 to 24. Throughout the semester, they had to write classification, comparison/contrast, cause/effect, and argumentative essays. For this study, however, we analyzed their last essay (argumentative) because they had had 5 months of exposure to sample essays and feedback about their use of the target devices. As part of this study, students were given three workshops along the second semester of 2016. In the first one, they were exposed to examples of lexical bundles and given a published paper to identify instances of how professional writers used them. For the second, they were part of a session on boosters/hedges and were given a handout with 'neutral' statements, which they had to re-write using boosters/hedges (an activity they thought was helpful because it allowed them to see how one can intensify or tone down one's ideas). Before writing their argumentative essay, they participated in a session on stance-taking strategies, followed by sample essays/papers to illustrate their use. For every essay up to the final one, we gave them feedback on the target devices.

106

---

[6] This is not a pre-test/post-test type of study. Thus, it is out of the scope of this paper to compare their present writing skill to their past one. We aimed to collect their perceptions regarding their struggles and tensions as they tried incorporating the target linguistic and rhetorical devices in their writing. As two of the composition professors in the department, we know for certain that this was the first time the participating students were introduced to these target devices, which they also acknowledged in the surveys.

**Data Collection and Interpretation**

Upon completion of the course, we requested the students' permission to use digital versions of their essays, which we examined by quantifying the number of instances of lexical bundles, boosters/hedges, and stance-taking strategies. This analysis allowed us to notice which of devices the students embraced more willingly or had the most difficulties with. In addition, we passed a survey to collect their opinions regarding the extent to which the devices helped them gain confidence in their writing and develop a stronger discoursal and authorial voice. We used the patterns that emerged from this analysis to shed light on their use of each of the devices in their argumentative essays. In sum, we approached data analysis and interpretation both qualitatively and quantitatively.

## Results of the Study

The analysis presented here is based on two sources of data: student surveys and the students' final essay (argumentative). First and foremost, the student surveys allowed us to collect their opinions regarding the impact of using lexical bundles, boosters/hedges and stance-taking strategies on their overall writing skill and their struggles with the implementation of these linguistic and rhetorical devices. Secondly, examination of their argumentative essays served to confirm the impressions gathered from the surveys and to track the devices that were more predominant in their writing. Our analysis is divided into three major themes: (1) usefulness of the target devices, (2) instances implementation, and (3) tensions and struggles.

**Usefulness of the target devices**

When asked about the impact the target devices had on their overall writing skill, students from both groups held diverse opinions. With regards to lexical bundles, while students from group 1 considered that these devices added coherence and unity to their writing (see Figure 1), those from group 2 thought that these had multiple applications: professionalism, formality, easiness, elegance, variety of lexicon, relevance, and coherence (see Figure 2). Both groups combined, the highest number of students reported that lexical bundles added coherence (group 1) and professionalism (group 2) to their essays.
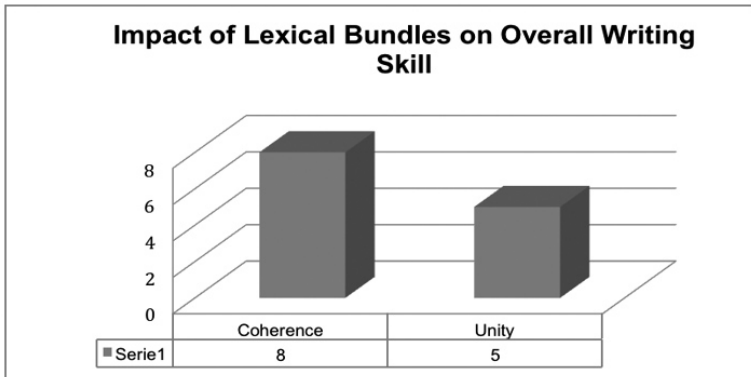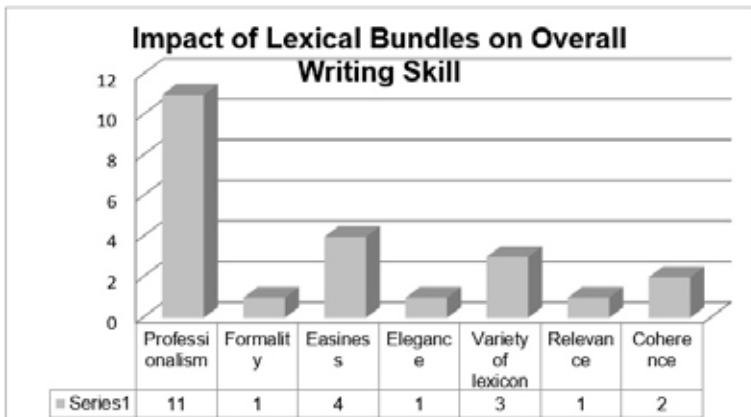
107

**Impact of Lexical Bundles on Overall Writing Skill**

| | Coherence | Unity |
|---|---|---|
| Serie1 | 8 | 5 |

*Figure 1.* Student Survey - Group 1

**Impact of Lexical Bundles on Overall Writing Skill**

| | Professionalism | Formality | Easiness | Elegance | Variety of lexicon | Relevance | Coherence |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Series1 | 11 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 2 |

*Figure 2.* Student Survey - Group 2

With respect to boosters and hedges, students' opinions were not that divergent. Learners from both groups coincided that boosters and hedges allowed them to state their opinions/positions more clearly and also to emphasize or de-emphasize (i.e. adjust the level of directness) certain ideas in their essays. As to their differences in opinions, subjects from group 1 stated that these devices boosted their overall writing skill whereas members of group 2 claimed that these also helped them to disclose their emotions and somehow connect to an imagined reader. This last aspect is worth noting, given that imagining a target reader and writing with the reader's is normally difficult for students in composition courses.
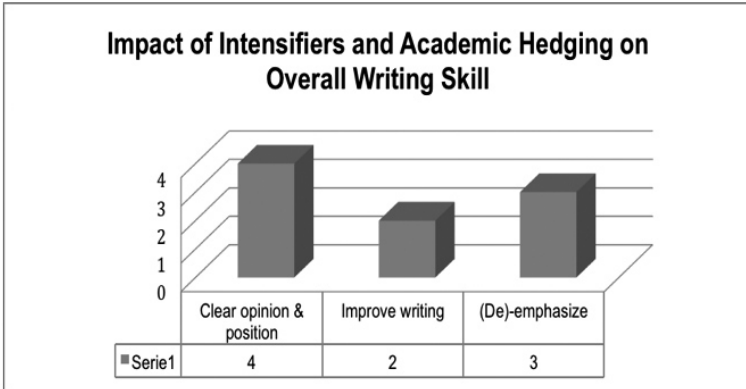
108

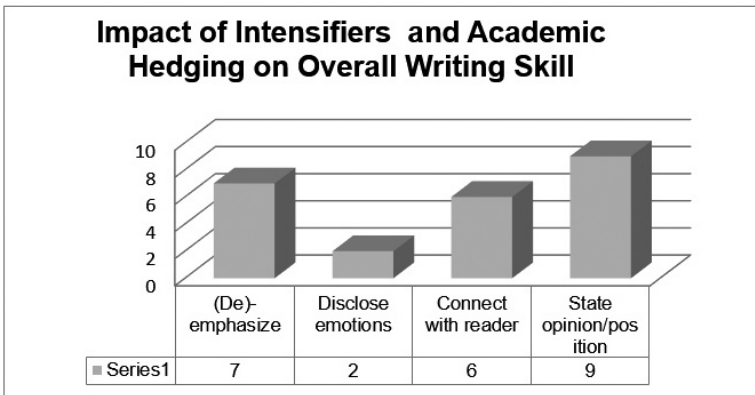*Figure 3.* Student Survey - Group 1



*Figure 4.* Student Survey - Group 2

Finally, pertaining to stance taking, pupils from both groups concurred that these strategies enabled them to be critical and develop a strong position/voice throughout their papers. Additionally, students from group 1 sustained that these strategies also added a sense of professionalism and naturalness to their writing, which they thought was one of the greatest gains in the course. Students from group 2, on the other hand, claimed that these allowed them to imprint their own voice in their essays, which they think is a skill they will be able to transfer to other courses. Overall, the highest number of students mentioned that stance-taking strategies had an impact on how they depicted their position/voice in their essays (authorial voice).
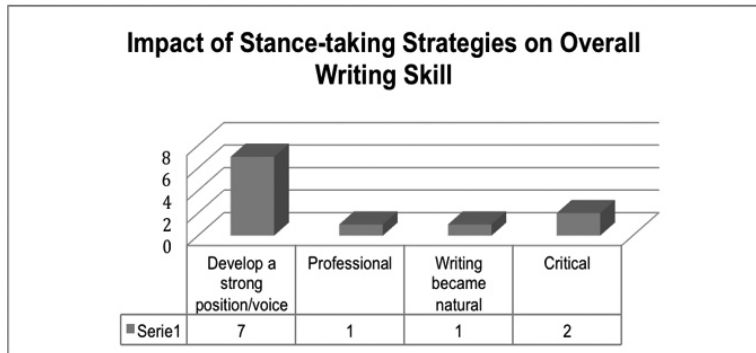
109

**Impact of Stance-taking Strategies on Overall Writing Skill**

| | Develop a strong position/voice | Professional | Writing became natural | Critical |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Serie1 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 2 |

*Figure 5.* Student Survey group 1

**Impact of Stance-taking Strategies on Overall Writing Skill**

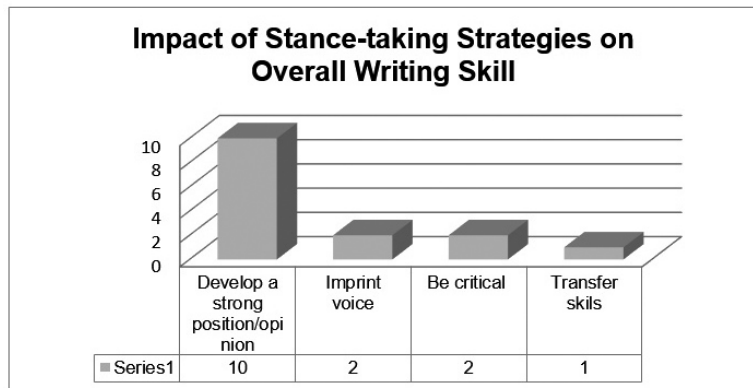| | Develop a strong position/opinion | Imprint voice | Be critical | Transfer skils |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Series1 | 10 | 2 | 2 | 1 |

*Figure 6.* Student Survey group 2

Despite the differences of opinions, it is worth highlighting that all the students regarded the use of lexical bundles, boosters/hedges and stance-taking strategies as having a positive effect: they all noticed that these different devices enable them to accomplish diverse purposes in their writing. Beyond that, they referred to being critical, connecting to the reader, professionalism, unity, and coherence; concerns that are normally the domain of composition teachers. We interpret this as students realizing that academic writing is based on specific values and that writing is not about satisfying the professor but about communicating ideas that they can shape and adjust to portray themselves in their essays and connect to the reader.

110

**Instances of Implementation**

As part of this study, we analyzed the students' argumentative essays and counted the number of times they used each of the linguistic and rhetorical devices to trace any possible preferences. As shown in Figure 7, the least employed device was lexical bundles (147 instances), which, as they explained, oftentimes weakened their own voice. Although they reported that stance-taking strategies (200 instances) allowed them to position themselves in the paper, they also sustained that boosters and hedges were most useful (228 instances), as these enabled them to better connect to the reader by appealing to reason, ethics and emotions in the way they treated the topic under discussion and developed the arguments they were putting forth.
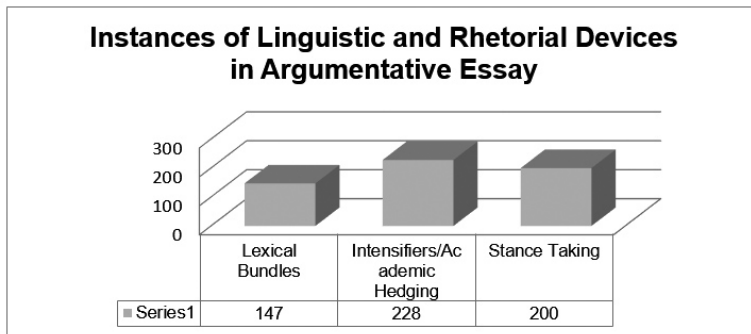


**Instances of Linguistic and Rhetorial Devices in Argumentative Essay**

| | Lexical Bundles | Intensifiers/Academic Hedging | Stance Taking |
|---|---|---|---|
| ■ Series1 | 147 | 228 | 200 |

*Figure 7.* Student Survey groups 1 and 2

Although not all uses of these three devices were accurate (as evident in their essays), we could notice they had started making rhetorical moves that enabled them to be cautious when suggesting or criticizing, to be passionate and firm about long-held values/beliefs, and to treat the topics with relative authority and confidence. Next, we showcase excerpts from the argumentative essays to illustrate the students' use of lexical bundles, boosters/hedges and stance-taking strategies. It is important to point out that by the time they wrote this essay, they had already employed lexical bundles and boosters/hedges in two previous written pieces (comparison and contrast / cause and effect), but it was their first time using stance-taking strategies. For the purpose of clarity, we designated excerpts of essays written by students from group 1, the letter A and from group 2, the letter B.

As notable in excerpt B, student 1 utilized three lexical bundles (discourse organizers), two boosters and four stance-taking strategies (disclosing emotions and providing criticism) in one of the body

111

paragraphs of her essay on dating and the role of women. Contrary to our finding of students' preference for boosters/hedges, this student clearly favored lexical bundles, which added coherence and flow to her piece. On the contrary, as evident in excerpt A, student 2's choices reflect students' overall inclination for boosters. In her paragraph, she used two lexical bundles, five boosters and two stance-taking strategies not only to show her commitment to the topic and claim, but also to validate her own experience as a mother.

---

**(B)** There has always been the common belief that, when it comes to dating, women must adopt a passive role and wait for men to make the first move. **By the contrary**, when a woman takes the initiative, all of society, including her female counterparts, disapproves of her behavior and alleges that she is doing wrong. Even women themselves think twice before attempting such an approach. A**s was pointed out in the previous paragraph**, this is due to the teachings given to girls in their childhood by their families and society. **Nevertheless, it is important to state that** those **backward** thoughts are **completely** wrong and **not properly** sustained. **Truth be told**, the fact that women make the first approach does not undervalue their integrity, either as women or as human beings. **One major drawback of this female mentality is** that women worry more about what other women think of their actions and do not take into account men's perspective, which is ironic seeing that men do not see this behavior as wrong. **On the contrary,** for some of them, being asked out by a woman is nice and admirable. **(Dating – Student 1)**

**(A) It has been scientifically proven that** breastfeeding is **utterly** important for both the mother and child. **I strongly believe that** there is nothing pointless in giving breast milk if there is a **high** chance to reduce cancer. **Moreover**, infant formula will **never** supply children with all the substances that breast milk does. The author **convincingly** argues that, "It is important to note that the antioxidant potential in breastmilk is more efficient than infant formula and bovine milk" (Kannan, 424). **Even though** infant formula was created to feed babies, it is not the best option if mothers can provide breastmilk. **(Public breastfeeding – Student 2)**

---

*Figure 8.* Excerpt from students' argumentative essay

Another pattern we noticed is that not all students, in either group, abundantly included rhetorical devices they were exposed to during the essay course. As exemplified in the following excerpts, some learners used Boosters (1A: 3; 1B: 2), lexical bundles (1A: 0; 1B: 0), and stance-taking strategies (1A: 1; 1B: 2) much less than their peers, who incorporated boosters (2A: 3; 2B: 6), lexical bundles (2A: 2; 2B: 4), and stance-taking strategies (2A: 3; 2B: 1) in a greater number of instances.

112

**(1A)** "More than half of LGBT workers hide their sexual orientation in their workplace" (catalyst.org). You can ask yourself, why do they do that? The answer is very simple; they hide their sexual preferences because they have been discriminated against or they are **extremely** afraid of being judged. Nowadays, homosexual people are still being criticized because of their sexual inclination. Even though a lot of people still think that being gay or lesbian is wrong or evil, **I am absolutely convinced that** it is something **very** natural, and homosexuals deserve our respect. **(The Wrong Idea – Student 3)**

**(2A)** Second, it is **unpleasant** that parents think they do not have any responsibility in their children's health. **It is a fact that** what kids see, especially from their parents, is something they will be imitating during their development, and that is why it is **extremely** common to see obese adults (parents) with obese kids. **It seems to me that** they think it is normal, and even though genetics have a lot to do in these situations, **I am absolutely convinced that** if parents are aware of their children's health, they will provide them a better adolescence and adulthood. **In fact**, if these kids' parents have unhealthy eating habits like eating junk food or lots of fats, or sedentary behaviors such as staying at home watching television and doing nothing, their children are possibly going to imitate those behaviors because those are seen as normal. **(Childhood Obesity – Student 4)**

**(1B)** How would you feel if you adopted a child and everyone started pointing at you to judge the decision you made? What would you do if you had to deal with the challenging legal processes and the people's opinion just to have the kid you were not able to have by yourself with your partner? These are not just questions for homosexual people. **Certainly**, the main reason for any couple to adopt is for they cannot have biological children by themselves, and this affects homosexual couples as much as heterosexual couples since the will of having a kid transcends sexual orientation. But what makes the difference between a heterosexual and a homosexual couple adopting? **It comes as no surprise** that it is the people and religious organizations that are against homosexuals adopting. It can eventually become a legal and social challenge for homosexual people since these others believe that homosexuality is a sin and the child should never be exposed to this kind of behavior. It is an evidently rough process that they have to deal with, and **I strongly believe that** it should not be that way since they are not doing wrong to anybody. **(Same Sex Marriages – Student 5)**

**(2B)** The idea of making decisions through logical and rational thinking has always been supported by numerous philosophers and stoic individuals. **It is believed** that emotions **should not be** involved when an important task or decision is at stake, **otherwise**, the results would be **highly** negative. **Due to this**, the significance of emotions regarding decision-making has been strikingly ignored. **Notwithstanding the above**, there have been several studies and analyses that have revealed

113

the importance of emotions when it comes to decision making and action taking. **Even though** rational thinking is one of the most effective tools in order to face life and its challenges, the role of emotions in decision making -and many other aspects with respect to life - is **imperative** and **unavoidable**. **(Emotions and Decision Making – Student 6)**

*Figure 9.* Excerpt from students' argumentative essay

Another relevant aspect that stood out was the absence, in some cases, or fewer instances, in others, of hedges throughout students' essays. In the following excerpts (A and B), the use of boosters is tangible since paragraph A contains five and paragraph B, seven. By contrast, zero hedges were utilized in passage A and B. In fact, we noticed that the use of Hedges was not a common practice among our learners. By way of further illustration, Figure 12 below shows pupils' preference for boosters over hedges. This figure demonstrates that from a sample of six argumentative essays from each group, students employed Boosters 3.5 times more often than they did hedges.

**(A)** As a conclusion, it is **really** important to say that the closure that the death penalty provides for victims, the cost of the death penalty versus life in prison, and the fear that the death penalty causes on would-be criminals are not the only reasons many people use as arguments to agree with this capital punishment. Even though those are not the only ones, I can **certainly** say that it does not matter which reason people bring, I will **totally** disagree with the death penalty. If the goal of any punishment, as stated above, is to teach us those things we should not do, then the justice system should more adequately teach the criminality of killing by refusing to partake in it. **(The Death Penalty – Student 7)**

**(B)** Further, recent evidence suggests that socio-affective bond is another area in which euthanasia **evidently** has a **huge** impact. Marc Groenhuijsen is quite right when he claims that many people have "vastly diverging opinions" and "strong feelings" while discussing about euthanasia (3). There is no doubt that when a person wants to undergo euthanasia his/her family will be utterly concerned about this decision, **particularly** because it is not **great** news to find out that a loved one is about to die. It is obvious that it is one of the reasons why people are against this practice, even if they or one of their relatives have to face **extreme** pain before dying. It is important to mention that even though it is hard for family members to accept euthanasia being applied to one of their relatives, the ultimate decision is that of the patient who is suffering from pain, which is the reason euthanasia is difficult to understand in terms of life choice. **(Euthanasia – Student 8)**

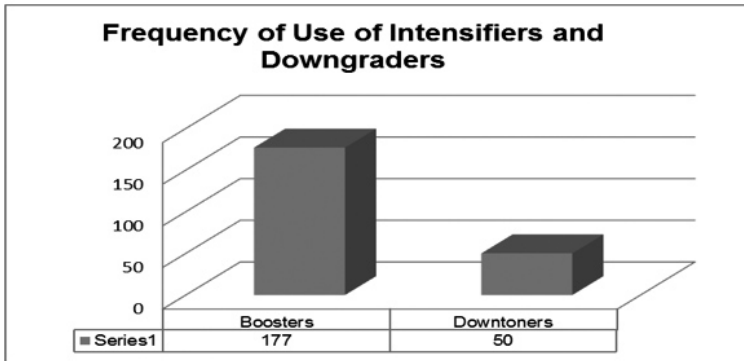*Figure 10.* Excerpt from students' argumentative essay

*Figure 11.* Students' argumentative essay samples

All in all, students' inclination for boosters/hedges and stance taking strategies may be attributed to the fact that lexical bundles are pre-fabricated phrases that they need to incorporate into their writing – something they have been asked to do in previous courses and towards which they show resistance- whereas the other two are devices they can more easily tailor into their writing. As reported by the students, the ready-made phrases oftentimes seemed alien, dry and void to them; reason why they relied more on boosters/hedges more often. They also claimed that these last two gave them the tools to accomplish something they had not been given a space for in previous composition courses: take a strong stance and reflect more of themselves in their work.

Likewise, while the trend was for students to rely more on boosters/hedges and stance-taking strategies, this was not always the case. A few students seemed to have no problems with lexical bundles and used them abundantly in their essays. Interestingly, these students also employed fewer instances of the other two devices. We could assume that these few students are comfortable with following structure and including prefabricated phrases (discourse organizers), but also feel less confident about or ready to develop a stronger authorial self. Additionally, the finding that whereas most students used the target devices rather copiously and that a few decided to use them scantily, we interpreted in two possible ways: (1) they may have been showing resistance to the inclusion of the devices or (2) they feel they still need more systematic practice with them. Similarly, the students' clear overreliance on Boosters over Hedges may point to a similar conclusion. These two points are further examined in the subsequent section.

115

## Tensions and Struggles

While all the students from group 1 asserted that the usage of lexical bundles, boosters/hedges and stance-taking strategies helped them position themselves in the essays and better portray their own voice as beginner writers, students from group 2 had diverse opinions (See figure 13 below). In this latter group, eight learners said that these devices enabled them to develop a sense of voice, five were hesitant as to the impact of the target devices on their voice, and two claimed that there was no direct impact. These last two students, however, reported that the devices gave them a sense of direction or that they were still in the process of developing this sense of voice (discoursal and authorial voice). These numbers show that throughout the course, they faced tensions and struggles, which they voiced in the student surveys.
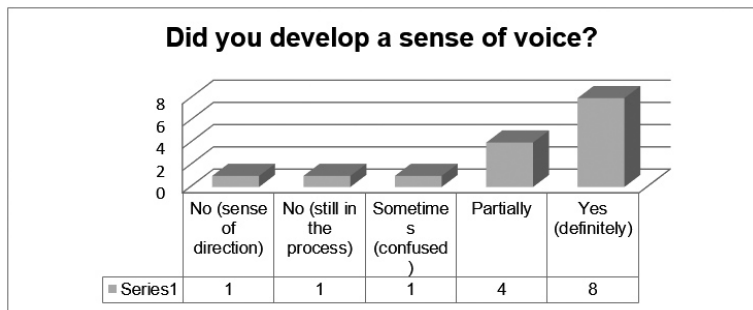


*Figure 12.* Student survey

As student 7 reported, "It was very strange because sometimes I felt that I had a voice, but in other essays I felt that I had lost it. At the end, what I found was that indeed all of them were part of my voice, but I don't know how to categorize it or describe it." Student 8 provided a similar opinion regarding the development of her sense of voice: "I am aware I have a style and a voice, but I truly don't know how to name it; however, it is there somewhere." By and large, both comments reflect the ambivalence implicit in developing one's discoursal and authorial voice. These two students have noticed that finding their voice is not an easy endeavor, but one filled with hesitation and uncertainty.

Other students gave different reasons for this lack of sense of voice despite exposure to lexical bundles, boosters/hedges and stance-taking strategies. While student 9 was grateful that he was given a space to develop his voice, he also pointed to the importance of time and more extended exposure: "Before this course, I was not aware of this voice that each writer should have. Along the course, I've been trying to

116

know more about myself in regards to writing; however, I think I have not found or discovered it, yet. Some people figure it out easier than others." Likewise, student 10 voiced a similar concern: "I think those are useful weapons that helped me to find or to be close to my own voice, but I think I need to keep using them from now on because I want to include them in my writing in a natural way, not thinking about where and how I should use them." As noted by these two students, natural use of the target devices takes time and practice. They rightfully assert that only by using them over and over, will they become able to employ them accurately in ways that actually reflect their own voice and help them develop a stronger sense of discoursal and authorial voice.

Another student (11) was more specific and direct as to what helped her develop her voice and what did not: "I think that lexical bundles are very useful for academic writing, but not for the voice. For example, in my case, my voice gets lost when I use them. Boosters and hedges have helped me to identify my voice. However, I cannot be only direct or indirect all the time, so that may affect my voice a little bit. When I take a stand, I totally find my voice since I have the opportunity to say what I think." She unabashedly expressed that not all strategies equally helped her, placing lexical bundles as the least advantageous and Boosters/hedges, coupled with stance-taking strategies, as the most useful. Her comment reveals the constant struggle students face in finding a balance between the expectations of academia and the diverse ways in which they can imprint their own style in their work. In fact, student 6, pointed to this when she wrote: "I think these strategies have helped us to find a balance between what academia expects from us and our voice when writing. All of us have different voices and styles and these can be noticed in the strategies, words, topics, and references we use."

Needless to say, all the students in both groups reported that lexical bundles, boosters/hedges and stance-taking strategies added coherence, unity, professionalism, elegance, formality, and variety of lexicon to their writing – clearly sought-after features in the academic writing discourse community. Even more importantly, they claimed that they could tone up or down the directness of their ideas, better state their position, and connect to the reader in ways they had not been able to, prior to this course. What they failed to see was a connection between these linguistic and rhetorical devices and their own voice as beginner writers, which comes as no surprise given the difficulty of finding middle ground between the highly valued features of academic writing and their own desire to write in ways that reflect their own voice.

117

## Conclusions

All in all, the study of lexical bundles, boosters/hedges, and stance-taking strategies in composition courses renders positive results that can be observed in the sample student essays included above. As the participating students reported: (1) lexical bundles added professionalism, coherence, formality, and elegance to their writing, and (2) boosters/hedges, together with stance-taking strategies, helped them develop a stronger voice or position in their essays and connect to an imagined reader. As the student surveys and essays seem to suggest, socializing students into academic writing, while at the same time introducing them to lexical, linguistic and rhetorical sources (voice as individual and social/cultural accomplishment), is advantageous. They all reported that, to varying degrees, these devices equipped them to improve their overall writing skill, and more specifically, allowed them to state their positions more strongly and in ways that were more critical than in the past; all of which serve to justify the inclusion of voice in composition courses.

Although the overall results of the surveys and essays pointed to the students' positive stance toward the inclusion of lexical bundles, boosters/hedges and stance-taking strategies, they showed a certain resistance to the inclusion of lexical bundles in their essays. This finding was illuminated by their opinions and perceptions that lexical bundles obscured their voice and felt alien to them. Equally important it is to consider that some still failed to see how these target linguistic and rhetorical devices could translate into the development of their own discoursal and authorial voice. In hindsight, however, this study did not expose them to the many multiple purposes for which these devices are used nor to sufficient practice. This may be why they did not clearly see how these tools can potentially strengthen their discoursal and authorial voice. As instructors of the courses, however, we had the obligation to cover the official course contents/objectives, which limited the time we had to deliver longer workshops and provide abundant practice.

Even further, while the participants in this study were found to use the target devices vastly (in most of the cases) and to make certain rhetorical moves to connect to the reader and more clearly state their position, the scarcity of usage of hedges was evident. Despite some exposure and practice with the target contents, these students did not seem to be aware of the importance of using hedges, which can be dangerous because: (1) the absence of these devices could be interpreted by the readers as arrogance and close-mindedness on the part of the writer, and (2) overuse of self-mentions, excessive disclosure

of feelings and unnecessary employment of boosters may undermine professionalism and seriousness in their written works.

Needless to say, we acknowledge that appropriate use of lexical bundles, adequate usage of boosters/hedges and conscientious stance taking are not easy to teach or learn, as it "… requires making decisions (usually tacitly) about such matters as when to tune up or down one's level of commitment to assertions; whether and how to comment on the significance of evidence; whether and how to engage with alternative perspectives; how to construct a text that engages with the imagined reader…" (Hyland 2004, 2005; qtd in Lancaster, 2014). This was true in our study because at times our students felt that they were skillful at implementing these devices, and at other times, they felt otherwise. This unsteadiness of their skills with the target linguistic and rhetorical devices can also be verifiable in their essays. Given that this study was conducted over the span of one course, it comes as no surprise that some (if not most) of the students did not feel fully confident using the target devices.

## Recommendations

In light of the findings discussed above, we now want to give the following recommendations, which we hope will guide future attempts at better understanding the benefits of including the concept of voice in composition courses:

1.  For future studies with a similar purpose, the learners should be more explicitly taught how hedges -of the evidentializing and conjecturing types- can be utilized to mitigate criticism, suggest courses of action, and problematize the ideas/works of others. They should be made aware that hedges allow them to make such subtle shifts in emphasis by means of which they can connect to the reader more and accomplish particular rhetorical purposes. Similarly, they should be shown abundant examples of how the strategic usage of lexical bundles helps them add to their work the features that the academic writing discourse community seeks for and highly values. Finally, students should be made aware that stance-taking strategies are used both to agree and disagree.

2.  The landscape described above calls for a systematic approach to the teaching of lexical bundles, boosters/hedges, and stance-taking strategies. As some students reported, the natural and accurate implementation of the target devices requires time and arduous practice. That is why we suggest that the English Department

119

that hosts the programs these students are completing modify the composition courses and officially include lexical bundles, boosters/hedges and stance-taking strategies. This would allow for more time to be devoted to direct and extensive teaching and analysis of examples of the target devices as found in published papers written by experienced and seasoned academic writers. If these students are to graduate with solid academic writing skills, their development of their discoursal and authorial voice cannot be overlooked.

3. Were lexical bundles, boosters/hedges, and stance-taking strategies to be officially included in the courses, composition instructors should be aware that attempts at helping students develop discoursal and authorial voice is an endeavor filled with ambivalence and uncertainty, as it "...involves processes of negotiation, adaptation, appropriation and resistance that can occur during the acts of conceptualisation, drafting and writing" (Ivanič, 1998, p. 136). Tensions and struggles, as was the case in this study, especially arise in composition courses where students are learning to write in their L2 at the same time that they are learning the contextually valued ways of academic writing. By and large, voice should then not be regarded as an easily teachable and measurable aspect of writing, but as a quality of writing that emerges over time. That been said, the assessment of voice should be approached with caution.

4. Future studies of voice in L2 writing would also profit from the perspective taken in literacy studies, in which voice is understood (1) as ideological, (2) as a dialogically shaped perspective and (3) as appropriation and revoicing. The first one acknowledges that "Individuals struggle with the tensions inherent in the voice that mediate their environment as they develop their own," which is pivotal given that it recognizes that all writing ideological and "… a process of appropriating and expropriating others' words" (Sperling & Appleman, 75). The second admits that the composition classroom, as a site where multiple ideas and perspectives about what constitutes *good writing* are shaped and negotiated, can potentially silence students' voice (Sperling & Appleman, 75), as their own competes with other stronger voices such as the instructor's and those of other seasoned writers. The last one recognizes that, as students compose, they engage in the process of shifting and amalgamating perspectives with their own as they develop their own voice; thereby appropriating and revoicing others' voices (Sperling & Appleman, 77). All of these

120

perspectives alert us to the fact that the composition class can become a space where attempts at nurturing students' voice can actually threaten, suffocate or suppress it.

## Final Remarks

To conclude, as previously stated, neglecting to nurture a sense of voice, "... place[s] students at a rhetorical and interpersonal disadvantage, preventing them from communicating appropriate integrity and commitments, and undermining their relationships to readers" (Hyland, 2002, 1092). Forming confident, skillful writers calls for an exploration of the norms of academic writing, not only at the unity, coherence, and sentence skill levels, but also at the discoursal and authorial levels. Students who find ways to put more of themselves in their essays are more likely to build a stronger sense of worth in the work that they produce. Not addressing these much-needed skills in composition classes may imply leaving the students on their own to guess what is taken to be good writing in academic spheres. And while some may argue that this is an impossible endeavor, students' awareness of these aspects may constitute fertile ground for them to better understand their professors' feedback and to continue to work on their own to navigate unity, coherence, support, sentence skills, coupled with lexical bundles, boosters/hedges, and stance, as they develop a stronger sense of authoritativeness and presence in their writing.

121

# References

Benesch, S. (2001). *Critical English for academic purposes: Theory, politics, and practice.* Mahwah, N.J: L. Erlbaum.

Connor, U., & Kaplan, R. (1987). Writing across languages: Analysis of L2 text. USA: Addison – Wesley.

Biber, D., & Barbieri, F. (January 01, 2007). Lexical Bundles in University Spoken and Written Registers. *English for Specific Purposes, 26*, 3, 263-286.

Farrell, L. (August 01, 1997). Making Grades. *Australian Journal of Education, 41*, 2, 134-149.

Gee, J. P. (2008). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses.* London: Routledge.

Hyland, K. (2002). *Authority and invisibility: Authorial identity in academic writing.* New York: Elsevier Science B. V.

Hyland, K. (2008). Disciplinary voices: Interactions in research writing. English Text Construction, 1 (1), 5–22.

Hyland, Ken & Guinda, Carmen. (2012). Stance and Voice in Written Academic Genres. 10.1057/9781137030825.

Ivanič, R. (1998). *Writing and identity: The discoursal construction of identity in academic writing.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Ivanič, R., & Camps, D. (2001). I am how I sound: Voice as self-representation in L2 writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 10*(1-2), 3-33.

Javdan, S. (January 01, 2014). Identity manifestation in second language writing through notion of voice: A review of literature. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 4*, 3, 631-635.

Lancaster, Z. "Making stance explicit for second language writers in the disciplines: What faculty need to know about the language of stance taking". In Zawacki, T. M., & Cox, M. (2014). *WAC and Second language writers: Research towards linguistically and culturally inclusive programs and practices.*

Le, H. P. (June 01, 2009). Strategic, passionate, but academic: Am I allowed in my writing? *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 8*, 2, 134-146.

Li, X. (1996). Good writing in cross cultural context. Albary: State University of New York Press.

122

Matsuda, P.K. (2001). Voice in Japanese writers discourse: Implications for second language writing. *Journal of Second language writing, 10*, 35- 53.

Pang, W. (October, 2010). Lexical Bundles and the Construction of an Academic Voice: A Pedagogical Perspective. *Asian EFL Journal. Professional Teaching Articles,* 47, 1-13.

Rahimivand, M., & Kuhi, D. (May 06, 2014). An Exploration of Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 98*, 1492-1501.

Shen, F. (1989). The classroom and the wider culture: Identity as a key to learning English composition. *College Composition and Communication*, 40 (4), 469- 466.

Sperling, Melanie & Appleman, Deborah. (2011). Voice in the Context of Literacy Studies. Reading Research Quarterly. 46.10.1598/ RRQ.46.1.4.

Stapleton, P. (2002). Critiquing voice as a viable pedagogical tool in writing: Returning the spotlight to ideas. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 11, 177-190.

Tracy, K., & Robles, J. S. (2013). *Everyday talk: Building and reflecting identities.*

Trepczyńska M. (2016) "In This Paper I Will Prove …": The Challenge Behind Authorial Self- Representation in L2 Undergraduate Research Paper Writing. In: Chodkiewicz H., Steinbrich P., Krzemińska- Adamek M. (eds) Working with Text and Around Text in Foreign Language Environments. Second Language Learning and Teaching. Springer, Cham