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Hedging in Academic Writing - A Pedagogically-Motivated Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The present study explores the use of hedges in academic writing based on Hyland's (1996) pragmatic framework of hedging orientations. It also elicits insight from specialist informants on the use of hedges in academic writing. The corpus comprises thirty randomly-selected research article discussions (published between 2010-2014) from the Journal of English for Academic Purposes. The analysis reveals that a repertoire of lexical signals and hedging strategies have been used to realize the different hedging orientations employed in the corpus. Informants stated that second language learners' inability to use hedges in their academic prose could be due to socio-cultural factor, classroom instruction, disciplinary culture and disciplinary appeals. The present study has pedagogical implications.

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1. Introduction

Hedges have been given different definitions by different researchers (Crompton, 1997; Hyland, 1996, 1998; Myers, 1989; Nash, 1990; Salager-Meyer, 1994) since Lakoff (1972) introduced the notion of hedges into linguistics by defining them as “words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy” (p.195). Hyland (1998) held that in academic writing, hedges “imply then, that a statement is based on plausible reasoning rather than certain

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knowledge, and allow readers the freedom to dispute it” (p.4). It is attested in the literature, academic writing is “pragmatically sophisticated” and is teemed with instances of hedges (Wishnoff, 2000, p. 122). Writers are attempting to present a paper with conviction and at the same time, to consider the role of the reader in confirming knowledge (Hyland, 1996). In so doing, hedges enable writers to appropriately modulate their claims as well as to give room for the reader to participate in a dialogue. In relation to this, Hyland (1996) made an interesting comment:

Hedges solicit collusion by addressing the reader as an intelligent colleague capable of participating in the discourse with an open mind. Good arguments are only 'good' from a particular perspective and hedges work to create this perspective. Once this is achieved, arguments can be based on other criteria. (p. 446)

Focusing on L2 (second language) writing, Hyland's (1994) held that the appropriate use of hedging devices poses considerable problems for second language speakers at Western Universities even for those L2 speakers who have good proficiencies in grammar and lexis of English (Skelton, 1988; Dudley-Evans, 1992; cited in Hyland, 1994, p.244). Mastering the skills of claim modulation becomes all the more difficult for L2 learners when the writing instructor often unwittingly gives these learners the impression that academic writing in English requires direct and linear arguments and arguments are weakened when one hedges his/her statements in writing (Wishnoff, 2000). Consequently, L2 learners become so direct in their English academic prose that is deemed to be inappropriate by native speakers. Wishnoff (2000) held that such ‘directness’ is also attributed to students’ failure in acquiring L2 pragmatic fluency to “convey and interpret meaning” (p. 120). Past researchers (e.g. Bouton, 1994; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Pearson, 1998; Tamana, 1998) held that this pragmatic fluency (interlanguage pragmatics) can be taught by direct classroom instruction. On the same note, Hyland (1994) held that the descriptive bases for materials on epistemic items in coursebooks are equally important to be used as teaching materials in academic writing classes. Motivated by such pedagogical concerns in the use of hedges as an important linguistic function in L2 learners’ English academic prose, some past studies have been carried out to examine issues related to the use of hedges in L2 student writing. These studies include Hinkel (2005), Hyland (1994) and Hyland and Milton (1997) among others. To complement their studies, this paper which is part of a larger study, attempts to explore the linguistic realizations of hedges in academic writing using Hyland's (1996) categorization of hedging devices and to elicit views of academics on the use of hedges in academic writing. The findings on hedging realizations will serve as linguistic knowledge [descriptive bases for materials in an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) classroom] and the informants’ views will provide additional insights to writing instructors and students on the pragmatic aspect of hedging. Based on the above research objectives, four research questions are formulated below:

- (i) What are the linguistic realizations of the four categories of hedging devices in the selected discussion sections of English research articles?
- (ii) How do informants perceive the use of hedges in academic writing?
- (iii) What are the possible reasons for L2 learners’ inability to modulate claims in their academic prose?
- (iv) What are the pedagogical implications of the present study?

2. Methodology

Thirty research article discussions restricted to empirical studies were randomly selected from the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*. The selected research articles were published between 2010 and 2014. The *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* is an international journal published by Elsevier.

2.1. Analysis Framework

The present analysis is based on Hyland 's (1996) pragmatic framework of hedging orientation which assists to provide a rationale for writers’ use of hedges in academic writing. Hyland (1996) elaborated that as far as non-factive statements are concerned, hedging functions can be divided into two main categories, namely content-oriented and reader-oriented. Content-oriented category includes both accuracy-oriented (inclusive of attribute-oriented and reliability-oriented) and writer-oriented hedges (see Figure 1 in Hyland 1996, p. 438). Content-oriented hedges help the writer to present claims with precision relating to “both the terms used to describe real-world phenomena and the degree of reliability the writer invests in the statement” as well as “signal reservations in the

truth of a claim to limit the professional damage which might result from bald propositions” while reader-oriented hedges “give deference and recognition to the reader and avoid unacceptable over-confidence” (Hyland 1996, p.449). The present study established the identification of the four types of hedges (writer-oriented, attribute-oriented, reliability-oriented and reader-oriented) according to their functions which are primarily realized by a repertoire of lexical markers and hedging strategies. The coding of hedging orientations is based on Hyland’s (1996, p. 450) taxonomy of hedging devices.

2.2. *Methods used to elicit information from informants*

As a measure for triangulation of data, the present study backs up the corpus-based analysis with additional insights from specialist informants. The selected informants are academics who have the experience of teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP)/Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)/linguistics/English language teaching. The correspondence involves a flexible use of open-ended discussion prompts (via LinkedIn Applied Linguistics group) closely related to the research objectives. Responses in relation to the following questions are included in the present study:

- (i) Do you think that considerable tentativeness (hedging) is essential for claims and propositions in academic writing? Why?
- (ii) What are your comments about the use of hedging devices in academic writing/L2 learners’ academic prose?
- (iii) What are the possible reasons of L2 students’ inability to use hedging devices in their academic prose?
- (iv) Can you share your teaching experience with regard to the use of hedges in L2 students’ academic prose?
- (v) How would you enhance L2 learners’ pragmatic competence in an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) classroom?

3. Findings and Discussion

The four categorizations of hedges as outlined by Hyland (1996) are found in the sampled English research article discussions of the present study. Their realizations (with emphasis added) are illustrated below with some examples from the corpus. Wherever applicable, the relevant informants’ views are presented with the accompanying examples:

3.1. *Writer-oriented hedges*

Writer-oriented hedges refer to the relationship between a claim and a writer and not a relationship between “propositional elements” (Hyland, 1998, p.14). In the corpus, writer-oriented hedges are linguistically realized by (i) impersonal subjects with epistemic speculative verbs (e.g. the following sections will discuss ... and suggest as in E1) and (ii) passive construction (e.g. can be discussed as in E13). This category of hedges is also realized by hedging strategies such as (i) reference to a wider bodies of knowledges through the use of non-integral citations (see E26) and (ii) reference to information presented earlier in the articles (e.g. as evidenced in Table 1 as in E4). The following examples display the above linguistic realizations and hedging strategies:

The following sections will discuss the findings in light of the precious research and suggest potential future revenues for language pedagogy and policy (E1)

This again can be discussed in relation to the threshold hypothesis ... (E13)

Clearly, vocabulary teaching itself is only one of the “four strands” language courses should include (Nation, 2008) and ... (E26)

As evidenced in Table 1, there is frequent use of the hesitation marker ‘uh’. (E4)

In the above examples, writers use attribution to other sources and impersonal expressions to withdraw personal commitment from propositional truth (Hyland, 1996). This hedging orientation to withhold personal commitment, can be deduced from Informant A’s views as in:

If I said the above deduction 'could be wrong', I'm opening the door to debate without making a personal commitment. (Informant A)

The use of these hedges can also be seen as a way for the writer to protect himself/herself from possible negative consequence of overstatements or poor judgment, a view reflected in Informant A’s comment below:

Hedging' has many functions, all of which relate to 'protecting' oneself in one way or another. A hedge is after all a type of fence. So, the point of 'hedging' is to be less definite about what you think may be the case. (Informant A)

3.2. Attribute-oriented hedge

Attribute-oriented hedges are used by writers to express claims with precision by keeping interpretations and deductions close to findings (Hyland, 1996). A range of realizations for attribute-oriented hedges is found in the sampled English research article discussions. Adverbs (degree of precision) and style disjuncts are two of the realizations. In E27 and E15 below, adverbs indicating the degree of precision such as partially and somewhat are used respectively to weaken the force of an attribute of a phenomenon described by the writer while in E11, style disjuncts such as generally is used to display a greater precision in providing explanation for a finding:

A larger point here is that cognitive energy normally used in a non-digital environment for lexical searches and formulating spelling and grammar was at least partially replaced by ... (E27)

They all used superscript numbers in their texts to indicate referencing, which, as Maria noted, was something they learned as generally required in the home work at the department at HU. (E11)

Attribute-oriented hedges are also realized through the use of sentence adverbs such as essentially to denote a deviation from an ideal research design and primarily to denote specificity about a particular cause of a phenomenon, in this case, it is concerning a limitation of the study. E15 illustrates the above two phenomena:

At the outset, some limitations must be acknowledged. First because of the design of the study - essentially, an intervention with no control group - we cannot be certain that ... Second, it could be argued that the data we draw on in this study (seven questionnaire items) are somewhat limited. This was primarily related to a result of students’ practical and considerations workload, ... (E15)

In addition, this group of hedges is also realized through the use of qualification (e.g. considering the content and structure of the course as in E15) to indicate the precise position/perspective from which to judge the truth of a claim (Hyland, 1996):

Considering the content and structure of the course, a number of factors are likely to have aided ... (E15)

In the above examples writers are using hedges neither to reduce their certainty nor withhold commitment (c.f. examples of writer-oriented hedges as presented above) to their claims but to present claims with precision. Informant G 's comments shed some light on this phenomenon:

I would give an example related to my personal research about gender and everyday talk; in this field, we talk all the time about masculinity and femininity, as well as about men and women; the research is typically full of hedges use in generalizations about women and men, to avoid reinforcing stereotypes, and to put all men and all women in the same "bag"; for instance: "some men do this", "women tend to say...", "topics of this kind use to be common in female talk", "this is a common phenomenon in male talk". Of course, hedges are also necessary to make claims more precise, to enrich the descriptions and to avoid too "simplistic" statements. For me, their functions are normally related to these ends, rather than to express tentativeness. (Informant G)

3.3 Reliability-oriented hedges

Reliability-oriented hedges are used by writers to indicate the writer's confidence in the truth of a proposition (Hyland, 1996). The present corpus displays a range of realizations for hedges in this category. The realizations are such as (i) modal verbs (e.g. *may* as in E8), (ii) adverbs of certainty which weaken the force of an attribute (e.g. *likely* as in E18) and (iii) evidential verbs (e.g. *seems* as in E18). The realizations are illustrated below with examples from the corpus:

One **may** criticize that the listing has undergone various stages of filtering and ... (E8)

Our study **seems** to support the notion that ... Undergraduate students are **likely** to pay more attention to tutor feedback on their own writing than to (E18)

In the above examples, writers use hedges to assess the status of a claim, attesting to the degree of reliability that it carries (Hyland, 1998). Informant D's views further reflect this phenomenon:

When you are discussing things that are based on speculation to some extent, you must hedge if you are honest. Otherwise you are claiming things not necessarily true. (Informant D)

3.4 Reader-oriented hedges

Reader-oriented hedges are employed to mark claims as provisional and give room for the readers to involve in a dialogue (Hyland, 1996). This category of hedges is commonly realized by (i) first-person pronouns (e.g. *we* as in E29), (ii) adverbs/sentence modifiers (e.g. *arguably* as in E29) and (iii) the hypothetical conditionals (e.g. *if* as in E21) and contrastive connectors (e.g. *however* as in E1). These examples are presented below:

This holds true even if **we** take into account the omitted interactionals (self-mentions and engagement markers) ... **Arguably**, the interactional markers are not equally distributed over the various IMRD sections. (E29)

English native speakers are also only an option **if** they hold a degree in the subject they need to teach, ... (E21)

A word of caution is, **however**, due here since the explicit teaching of rhetoric and composition is rather uncommon in many non-Anglophone contexts. (E1)

The above examples show *we* and *if* are used to connote an alternative view; adverbs (sentence modifiers) such as *arguably* is used to leave the claim open to the reader's judgment and discretion or in other words, the writer thinks that what he claims is true but is looking for a confirmation and *however* is used to consider other possibilities as it implies an expectancy or another position on the matter. (see Hyland, 1996). Such hedges are used for an interpersonal reason to make room for negotiation and discussions with peers, a view reflected in a comment by Informant B:

Its (hedging) presence indicates consideration for others whereas its absence suggests a lack of consideration for others. Its absence can discourage or stifle discussion. (Informant B)

As we can see above, firstly, a repertoire of lexical signals and hedging strategies has been used to realize the four categories of hedges in the discussion sections of the sampled English research articles and secondly, informants' views have shed some light on the use of hedges and its importance in academic writing. This generally suggests that hedging is a salient feature of academic discourse (Crompton, 1997; Hinkel, 1997; Hyland, 1996, 1998; Myers, 1989; Salager-Meyer, 1994) and its appropriate use is 'central to the process of weighing fact and evaluation, which is at the heart of academic writing' (Milton & Hyland 1999, p.147). According to Hyland (1996), L2 writers need to have control over this feature of academic discourse so that they are able to "use language with subtlety, to mean precisely and with discrimination" (Sketlton, 1988, p. 107, cited in Hyland, 1994, p.244). Other than acquiring a full understanding on the linguistic knowledge of hedging devices in academic writing, Hyland (1996) held that it is equally important to consider both social and institutional contexts. Focusing on the use of hedges in L2 learners' academic prose, informants' views provide further insight into the above two contextual aspects. Their views reveal that L2 learners' inability to use hedges in their academic prose possibly due to, namely socio-cultural issue, limitation in classroom instruction and lack of awareness on disciplinary culture and disciplinary appeals. The following presents informants' views that display this phenomenon. Informant E states that modulating claims in academic prose can be challenging for L2 learners as they need to engage with knowledge in new ways differing from those of their first language. This socio-cultural influence is reflected in his comments as follows:

The problem with L2 learners is that they are not learning a foreign or second language only, but its culture too. Now when they start using the language, even with a certain mastery, they find themselves torn between their own culture and the new patterns of the target language. So if hedging is a way throughout which they can pass on statements in L2, that's fair enough. But what about their culture, does it allow the use of hedges? If yes, that's great, if not, that's a big problem. In my own country, hedges are taught just as grammatical devices (modals verbs for instance), but not as communicative devices that can be used in academic writings. (Informant E)

Hinkel (2005) and Hyland (1994) however have differing opinions on the above. They held that L2 students face problem in using hedges in their academic prose (as reflected in the restricted frequency and range of hedges in their L2 academic writing samples) because the use of hedges is not completely addressed in instructional materials such as coursebooks. As a result of not being able to modulate claims, according to Informant F, L2 learners' writing sounds so direct as if they were extremely knowledgeable in a particular topic area and their assertiveness suggests no other alternatives or perspectives exist. This is consistent with Wishnoff's (2000, p.123) views that students struggle with the pragmatic competence to use hedges and as a result their writing may sound so "direct" and "offensive". The following presents Informant F's statements:

In fact, hedging is also explicitly being taught at the prep school/university where I recently worked in Istanbul, Turkey. (This, to show that I am not writing from a strictly Canadian perspective.) The use of hedging is to deter L2 learners from mistakenly sounding as though they are experts in any given topic area. It also shows L2 writers that using the simple present (to denote factual information) when presenting an argument or such in an essay could suggest that no other possibility exists ... eliminating hedges may give writers the false impression that further critical thinking is not needed when researching and writing about a topic in an essay. (Informant F)

The 'directness' in L2 learners' writing could be due to a misconception of "direct communication style" in English as a way to "counterbalance face-threatening acts" and consequently, students may not see the need to hedge their statements and on top of that, they deliberately use "boosting devices" to enhance their positioning in their writing, a view reflected in the following Informant C's statements:

... the misuse of some rhetorical devices in English Academic Writing is mainly due to: the misconception of

"direct communication style" in English as if it were designed to enhance one's positioning through boosting devices or to counterbalance face-threatening acts posed by the potential reader's critical stance... (Informant C)

Another possible cause of this 'directness' in writing as perceived by L2 learners is that they lack of awareness regarding disciplinary culture and disciplinary appeals, as pointed out by Informant C who shared her teaching experience in China:

... most Chinese guidebooks in English Academic Writing (the majority written by Chinese scholars) stress objectivity and certainty as basic requirements. Obviously, these requirements make sense in the hard sciences which are grounded in positivism and empiricism (basically, let the facts speak for themselves) while the soft sciences are more argumentative and, thus, require more hedging and persuasive strategies. (Informant C)

Informant C then stresses that it is important for writing instructors to "bring the language/culture interface to the forefront" when teaching L2 learners on the appropriate use of hedging devices in their academic prose. This can help L2 learners make conscious choices in presenting their statements/claims with complete caution, accuracy and humility in order to prevent "socio-pragmatic failure" as in:

As the misuse of these rhetorical devices results in socio-pragmatic failure by NNS (non-native speakers), I believe it is important to bring the language/culture interface to the forefront when talking about contrastive rhetoric in Academic Writing. I tend to draw attention to the misuse in my writing classes but I also try to explain why it happens so that my students can consciously avert it in their own academic writing. Naturally, this often leads to a series of drafts of one research paper which some may find a tiresome effort but others tend to learn a lot in the process. (Informant C)

The above comment is consistent with Algi's (2012) views. He held that sociocultural and pragmatic rules in employing hedging devices vary among languages as culture defines "what we may, and may not say, when and where we say it, to whom we say it, and why we say it" (Wishnoff, 2000, p.120). Algi (2012) further elaborated that L2 students should be explained and taught by comparing hedging meanings and functions both in their L1 and L2. This suggests that one needs more than an adequate linguistic knowledge to be able to appropriately modulate claims. The pragmatic competency in using modality as a discursual resource for negotiating knowledge claims and conveying a stance towards one's claims and readers, is equally important and this pragmatic competency can be enhanced through "metapragmatic awareness" (Wishnoff, 2000, p. 120). As communication in the L2 occurs within an intercultural context (Robert, 1998, cited in Wishnoff, 2000, p.120), without this "metapragmatic" knowledge that increases L2 learners' awareness to the differences of intercultural communicative styles, L2 learners with a set of their L1's (first language's) values and norms that might be very different from the L2's, may misuse the rhetorical devices and result in "socio-pragmatic failure" as pointed out by Informant C.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the realization of hedges in the sampled English research article discussions based on Hyland's (1996) pragmatic framework of hedging orientations and additional insight from informants on some contextual factors in the use of hedges. The findings suggest that generally, the use of hedges in L2 student academic writing is critical in order to display that claims have been appropriately managed for accuracy, mitigation and claim negotiation. Due to a relatively small research corpus which limited to only one journal, the present findings can be considered rather tentative. They primarily point to an important pedagogical implication in an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) classroom. The findings of the present study show that linguistic knowledge plays an important role in helping L2 learners to be able to modulate claims. Such a phenomenon is also reflected in Hyland's (1994) study which shows that there is a higher incidence of claim modification by NNS (non-native speakers) students in top three ability bands; averaging 2.0 1 devices per 100 words compared with 1.25 in the lowest band. Logically, NNS students who achieve a higher proficiency band (A levels) are better equipped with

linguistic knowledge on hedges among others. However, in order to convey statements with an appropriate degree of tentativeness, one also requires socio-pragmatic awareness in the L2. On this basis, the present study suggests that writing/ESL (English as Second Language) instructors to use the following teaching approach in an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) classroom.

L2 learners can first be introduced to the four categories of hedges namely, writer-oriented, attribute-oriented, reliability-oriented and reader-oriented hedges. Sentences that exemplify the notable features/lexical signals that realize the multifunctional hedges (We borrow this term from Hyland, 1996) can then be presented to the L2 learners. This attempt is in line with Schmidt's (1993) suggestion that learners be given relevant input at the initial stages of foreign language acquisition. In order to reinforce L2 learners' understanding on hedging realizations and strategies, they can be given tasks to identify the kind of realization available in a disciplinary appropriate material. In addition, L2 learners can engage in interactional role-play activities (c.f. Fukuya, 1998) which are contextualized with sufficient amount of authentic examples to help L2 learners exploit hedging devices appropriately. After the learners have gone through a sufficient amount of role-play practice, they can be asked to produce their own academic prose with a conscious attempt to appropriately modulate their views and claims. At a later stage (as suggested by Informant C), a peer-review workshop can be conducted for L2 learners to offer feedback on one another's work. After which, a teacher-student conferencing can be held to tackle the issue on an individual basis. Such activities ensure "acquisition of metapragmatic competence and clear explanation of the language/culture interface for L2 learners" (a view reflected in a comment by Informant C).

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