Hedges and Boosters in Bilingual vs. Monolingual Language learners’ Academic Writings

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ABSTRACT

The expression of doubt and certainty is crucial in academic writing where the authors have to distinguish opinion from fact and evaluate their assertions in acceptable and persuasive ways. Hedges and boosters are two strategies used for this purpose. Despite their importance in academic writing, we know little about how multilingual foreign language learners present assertions in their writing and the extent to which these assertions are used across two genders. To shed some lights on these issues, the present study investigated the use of hedges and boosters in research articles written by bilingual and monolingual EFL learners. Based on the collected corpus from twelve academic research articles, the overall rhetorical and categorical distribution of hedges and boosters were identified across four sections of these articles (Abstract, Introduction, Discussion, and Conclusion). The results evinced that the overall distribution of hedges and boosters in research articles written by bilinguals was higher than that of monolinguals. Moreover, there were significant differences between male and female EFL learners in the use of hedges and boosters in their academic writings. These findings not only paved the way for further studies in the use of hedges and boosters but they also presented some beneficial implications for teaching of academic writing to EFL learners.

INTRODUCTION

From the late 1980s, there has been a continuing interest in genre-based approach to specialized language teaching and in the development of professional communication skills [19]. One of the important professional communication skills is the expression of doubt and certainty in academic writing [6]. This is because the expression of doubt and certainty is central to the rhetorical and interactive character of academic writing [11]. Farrokhi and Emami [6] believe that the importance of the expressions of doubt and certainty lies in the fact that academics gain acceptance for their research claims by balancing conviction with caution, either investing statements with the confidence of reliable knowledge or appropriate social interactions. These expressions of doubt and certainty are known in the literature as hedges and boosters.

Hedges and boosters are communicative strategies for increasing or reducing the force of statement. They convey both epistemic and affective meaning in academic discourse. In other words, they carry both the writers' degree of confidence in the truth of a proposition and the attitude of the audience. Although literature emphasizes the significance of hedging in academic contexts [17,18], different scholars in the area of second language learning and discourse analyses such as Crystal [4], Hyland [11] stressed that there is little information about its use, frequency, and distribution in different disciplines or genres. In a similar manner, Holmes [8] believes that boosters have also received little attention in academic writing.

There have not been many studies on hedging and boosting in research articles written by monolingual and bilingual EFL learners in one hand, and male and female EFL learners on the other hand. Additionally, there are little studies on hedging and boosting across different rhetorical sections of research articles. The limited number of studies in these areas has indicated that there are some variations in the use of hedges and boosters across disciplines [11,20,6] and rhetorical sections of research articles [17,22,6].
What are Hedges and Boosters?:

Hyland [11] describes boosters as lexical devices used to express strong conviction. He believes that boosters, such as clearly, obviously, and of course, allow writers to assert propositions with confidence. In addition, they mark involvement with an audience by stressing shared information, group membership, and direct engagement with readers affectively.

Vassileva [22] describes hedges as lexical devices which are used to signal the speaker's lack of confidence. Hyland [11], believes that hedges such as possible, might, and perhaps are used to assert something tentatively and show doubt and indirect that information is presented as opinion rather than fact, or it may be to carry humility, difference, and respect for colleagues' view.

Hedges and boosters have different functions. The first pair of these functions is modal meaning and affective meaning. The general view toward hedging/boosting treats it as modality, as attitudes toward knowledge or an item of language which is used by a speaker to qualify the lack of commitment to the truth of a proposition [2,6]. Holmes [7] declares that a speaker modify the strength or force of a particular speech act because of two reasons: firstly, to convey modal meaning, and secondly, to express the speaker's attitude to the addressee which is known as affective meaning. Epistemic modality, according to Holmes [7] is concerned with affective meaning because it involves the speaker's attitude to the content of the proposition. The degree of conviction or confidence with which a speaker makes an assertion, or the degree of illocutionary force with which it is asserted, is an aspect of affective meaning [6]. Hedges are lexical items which reduce the illocutionary force of an utterance. So, they may serve to mitigate the force of speech acts such as accusation, criticism or disagreement. In other words, they can be used to express the speaker's view unconfidently. On the other hand, hedges can be used to attenuate the strength of positively affective speech acts such as praising, complimenting and encouraging utterances of a speaker [22]. Such forms, according to Holmes [7], express the speaker's uncertainty of the validity of what is asserted. They also may be used to carry affective meaning in order to reflect the speaker's attitude to the listener.

Lexical items such as believe me, definitely, certainly, definitely, really, and without doubt, for example are used to express the speaker's certainty may also function to boost the illocutionary force of a variety speech acts. In other words, unlike the hedges, boosters may be used to strengthen utterances functioning to express agreement or disagreement, reassurance or denial, as illustrated in the following example:

**EX (1):**

They really are beautiful. Function: agreement with addressee.

In this example, the italicized lexical item increases or strengthens the illocutionary force of the utterance and used to express the speaker's opinion with strong conviction. As a result, hedges and boosters express degrees of certainty and degree of conviction and express both modal and affective meaning.

The second pair of the function of hedges and boosters proposed by Vold [23] who distinguished between two types of hedges: real hedges and strategic hedges. The former is used to convey real uncertainty, for example when the nature of the research findings does not allow the author to make strong claims. The latter serves as a politeness strategy, in order to cautiously criticize fellow researchers and may be used within a context that expresses feasible opinions, and thus the author perceives potential criticism. According to Lewin [14], real uncertainty or hedging is used as the main motivation for authors of scientific texts and it is used to precisely express the ideas. Mayer [16] suggests that academic writers employ hedges to minimize the potential threat which new claims may make on other researchers by challenging their own work and soliciting acceptance, as illustrated in the following example:

**EX (2):**

We can not totally exclude the possibility that differential loss of participants may affect our results.

In this example, the italicized lexical items associated with tentativeness. They also tone down statements and claims in order for the author to be less susceptible to criticism which may even be caused by political or ethical discussions [6].

Boosters function to express the speaker's intentions with confidence and strong conviction [8], even though they have received little attention in academic writing. Holmes [8] also believes that boosters can be considered as an important part of creating conversational solidarity between participants. Boosters can be seen as forms of expressing positive politeness [2]. Mayers [16] claims that, in science articles, boosters can be regarded as positive-politeness devices which enable writers stress common group membership. In similar manner, Hyland [11] clarifies that boosters allow writers to negotiate the information which helps them to establish its perceived truth by presenting as unanimously consented.

Empirical Studies on Hedges and Boosters:

Hedges and boosters are lexical devices which are used to evaluate material and engage with readers. The use of hedges and boosters as interpersonal aspects of language use, complex textual signals can be seen as the
discoursal choices of individual researchers deciding to represent themselves more or less explicitly in their writings [6]. In academic writing, the choices individuals make are socially shaped by the possibilities made available to them by the discourse conventions of their disciplines.

Salage-Meyer [17] investigated the distribution of hedges across different rhetorical sections of medical research articles and reported that the discussion sections are the most heavily hedged sections, whereas the method section is the least hedged rhetorical section. He concluded that the choice of expression of tentativeness and flexibility is dictated by the general structure of discourse, the level of claim the writers wish to make, communicative purpose, and by the authors’ pretension to generalization.

Hyland [9] investigated the use of hedges in biology research articles the results of his study revealed the significance of hedges and boosters in academic writing and their variability across disciplines. The results of his study also suggested that there was a general distinction between philosophy, marketing, linguistics, and sociology on one hand, and physics and engineering on the other hand. The distinction was dramatically illustrated by the fact that over 70 percent of all hedges occurred in the social science papers. However, the engineering and science research articles were heavily underrepresented in the number of boosters.

Varttala [21] compared the hedging strategies in three different disciplines: economics, medicine, and technology. The findings indicated that the relative frequency of using hedges in the field of economics was higher than that in the field of medicine and technology.

Falahati [5] investigated the use of hedges across two rhetorical sections (Introduction and Discussion) of research articles from three disciplines: Psychology, Chemistry, and medicine. The results showed that the frequency of the use of hedges in psychology research articles is higher than that in chemistry and medicine. In other words, the relative overall number of hedges in medicine and chemistry research articles was about 57% less than psychology.

Farrokhi and Emami [6] investigated hedges and boosters in native and non-native research articles in applied linguistics and engineering across different rhetorical sections. The analysis of the collected data indicated that the overall distribution of hedges and boosters in applied linguistics articles was higher than that in Electrical engineering articles. In addition, there were significant differences between native and non-native writers in the use of hedges and boosters.

**Hedging, Boosting, and L2 Writers:**

A major problem for second language students writing academic essays in English is to convey statements with an appropriate degree of doubt and certainty [13]. They further argue that students from different cultures may have preconceptions about the formal features of culturally and rhetorically appropriate writing which may differ from those which operate in English academic setting. In other words, these differences can produce a risk of violating communicative norms as the writings may be too direct, too tentative, or running the risk of being considered as either dogmatic and seen as equivocal. Modirkhameneh [15] suggests that these cultural differences seem to be more vivid in multilingual contexts. Moreover, textual and personal variables can be considered as the two super ordinate categories to which the studies in the use of hedges and boosters belong.

The probe into the related literature unveils that the majority of researches in this area has focused on textual variables and explored the emergence of hedges and boosters in different genres and disciplines [17,9,10,11,21,5,11] and little literature is available on the role of personal variables in the use of these communicative strategies. Dijkstra (2003, as cited in Moderkhameneh, 2008) postulates that writers’ language and gender are among the personal variables which are believed to be more influential in the choice of discourse component. Manifested in term of multilingualism, the former, language, deals with the cultural differences. According to Dijkstra (ibid), multilingual EFL learners have at their disposal a very dynamic system that provides a dynamic and flexible way of accessing linguistic knowledge. The latter, gender, treated in terms of either male or female, has been the preoccupation of most researchers in the area of foreign language teaching and learning. However, the difference between the monolingual and bilingual EFL learners’ use of hedges and boosters in academic writings as well as that of male and female EFL learners have not been unveiled. These gaps in the studies on hedges and boosters have been also highlighted by Hyland and Milton [13]. In order to shed some lights on these issues, the present study aims at the investigation of the use of hedges and boosters in monolingual and bilingual EFL learners’ academic writings in both genders.

To achieve this goal, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) what are the differences between monolingual and bilingual EFL learners’ use of hedges and boosters across the different rhetorical sections in academic research articles? (2) What are the differences between male and female monolingual EFL learners’ use of hedges and boosters across the rhetorical sections in academic research articles? (3) What are the differences between male and female bilingual EFL learners’ use of hedges and boosters across the rhetorical sections in academic research articles?

The findings of this study will help EFL learners improve their writing in general and academic writing in especial by understanding the importance of hedges and boosters in conveying effective meaning. Furthermore,
the findings of the present study are expected to pave the way to other researchers in embedding language and gender differences as the important factors in language researches especially in discourse analysis.

Method:

Materials:

The materials for this study consisted of twelve academic research articles: six articles belonging to monolingual EFL learners and six articles belonging to bilingual EFL Learners. These two categories were selected as representatives of monolingual and bilingual EFL learners’ academic research articles. Among six articles in each category, three articles belong to male EFL learners and three articles belong to female EFL learners. The articles were published in leading Iranian international and journals during the last decade (see Appendix), most of them during the recent five years. They were written by both monolingual authors from Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Karaj, and Bilingual authors from Tabriz, Urmia, and Salmans.

Data Selection Criteria:

First of all, an attempt was made to choose research articles with single authors although it was time consuming and hard to grasp. The second criterion was the author’s monolingual and bilingual status. That is, the author of each article was interviewed through e-mail, phone call, or in person. The articles whose authors were monolingual or bilingual EFL learners were included in the study. The third criterion was the gender of the authors. In order to explore gender differences in the use of hedges and boosters, the research articles included both genders. That is, both male and female writers were included in the study. The forth criterion was choosing research papers necessarily having experimental design in order to collect homogeneous data. The fifth criterion was choosing research papers necessarily having sections namely Abstract, Introduction, Discussion, and Conclusion. Finally, the selected research articles were all restricted to those published within the last ten five years.

Procedure of Data Analysis:

One of the main objectives of this study was to explore the use of hedges and boosters across the four sections of research articles written by monolingual and bilingual EFL learners: Abstract, Introduction, Discussion, and Conclusion. Another aim was to identify the differences between male and female EFL writers in the use of hedges and boosters across these two language status (monolingual and bilingual) and four rhetorical sections of research articles (Abstract, Introduction, Discussion, and Conclusion sections). To this end, a list of hedges and boosters was adopted from Farrokhi and Emami [6]. This list comprised of two sections: hedges and boosters each of which comprised of six grammatical classes: modal verbs, lexical verbs, adverbs, adjectives, nouns, and clausal elements. The articles were then examined to determine the frequency of hedges and boosters. Because the size of the selected research articles varied, the frequency of hedges and boosters was calculated per 1000 words. To find out the difference in monolingual and bilingual EFL learners use of hedges and boosters besides that of male and female EFL learners, the percentage of their frequency was calculated. Finally, in order to statistically test whether there is a significant difference between monolingual and bilingual EFL learners use of hedges and boosters as well as that between the male and female writers, the Chi-square test was utilized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The frequency of hedges and boosters was calculated per 1000 words in four rhetorical sections of monolingual and bilingual EFL learners’ articles: Abstract, Introduction, Discussion, and Conclusion. Table 1 represents the total number of words, the total frequency of hedges and boosters, and their frequency in four sections of monolingual and bilingual as well as monolingual and bilingual male and female EFL learners’ research articles.

It indicates that the highest incidence of hedges in monolingual research articles is in the Conclusion and discussion sections (24.1 and 22.1 per 1000 words) and boosters occur mostly in Discussion section (9.1 per 1000 words), the Discussion section followed by conclusion section (28.4 and 27.2 per 1000 words) in bilingual EFL learners’ articles are mostly hedged with the highest incidence of boosters in bilingual EFL learners articles is in the conclusion and discussion sections (13.4 and 12.6 per 1000 words). The highest incidence of hedges was in the Abstract and Discussion sections (29.3 and 27.1 per 1000 words) and the highest occurrence of boosters was mostly in the Discussion and Abstract (10.4 and 10 per 1000 words) of the monolingual male and female EFL research articles. The highest incidence of hedges was in the Discussion section (34.2 per 1000 words) and the highest occurrence of boosters was in the Conclusion section (19.8 per 1000 words) in the bilingual EFL students’ research articles. Finally, the Introduction section (29.2 per 1000 words) and Conclusion (26.8 per 1000 words) contain the most hedges and the highest incidence of boosters was in the Discussion section (12 per 1000 words). Regarding the four rhetorical sections of bilingual articles, the frequency was calculated.
The results of the analysis, as table 2 indicates, indicated that the total frequency of hedges and boosters across four rhetorical sections of bilingual articles (27.4% and 9.8 per 1000 words) was higher than that of monolingual EFL learners’ research articles (21.5% and 7.9 per 1000 words). This finding is consistent with the claims of Dijkstra (2003, as cited in Modirkhameneh, 2008) who maintains that multilingual language learners have at their disposal a very dynamic system that provides a dynamic and flexible way of accessing learning strategies. The total distribution of hedges and boosters in the articles of female EFL learners (30.1% and 11.56 per 1000 words) was higher than that of the articles written by male EFL learners (24.4% and 8.2 per 1000 words). Additionally, the overall occurrence of hedges and boosters across four sections of the articles written by monolingual female EFL learners (27.4% and 10.2 per 1000 words) was higher than that of the articles written by monolingual male EFL learners (17.4% and 5.3 per 1000 words).

Regarding the four rhetorical sections of monolingual articles, their frequency was calculated. Table 3 indicates the distribution of six categories of hedges and boosters in monolingual EFL learners’ research articles.

According to this table, modal verbs (27.29%) and adverbs (25.67%) were the mostly used categories of hedges, and lexical verbs (38.71%) and adverbs (20.85%) were the mostly used categories of boosters in monolingual EFL learners’ research articles. According to this table, adverbs (28.35) and modal verbs (26.57) in the articles written by female EFL learners and modal verbs (26.50) in the articles of male EFL learners were the most frequently used categories of hedges. Both female (39.79) and male (39.53) EFL learners mostly use lexical verbs as boosters. Lexical verbs (24.72) and adverbs (28.46) in the articles written by bilingual male EFL learners were the most frequently used categories of hedges. In the articles of both female (41.50) and male (59.99) bilingual EFL learners, boosters occurred mostly in the form of lexical verbs.

**Table 1:** the frequency of hedges and boosters within rhetorical sections of the articles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>Discussion</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>strategies</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>monolingual</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bilingual</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monolingual male</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monolingual female</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual male</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual female</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2:** overall distributions of hedges in monolingual and bilingual EFL students’ research articles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>language</th>
<th>monolingual</th>
<th>bilingual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>category</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modal-verbs</td>
<td>27.29</td>
<td>17.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical-verbs</td>
<td>18.91</td>
<td>38.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverbs</td>
<td>25.67</td>
<td>20.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjectives</td>
<td>17.29</td>
<td>16.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nouns</td>
<td>8.64</td>
<td>7.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clause-elements</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3:** the percent of hedges and boosters in monolingual and bilingual EFL students’ research articles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of occurrence</th>
<th>hedges</th>
<th>boosters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>M-Male</td>
<td>M-female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modal-verbs</td>
<td>26.50</td>
<td>26.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical-verbs</td>
<td>16.60</td>
<td>20.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjectives</td>
<td>19.26</td>
<td>16.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nouns</td>
<td>15.50</td>
<td>5.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clause-elements</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion:**

Hedges and boosters are complex devices which a variety of functions, and they are central to the negotiation of claims and effective arguments in academic writing [6]. Lack of familiarity with their use can be influential in EFL learners’ academic writing success. To this end, this study investigated their use in bilingual
and monolingual EFL learners’ academic research articles in both genders. The results of the data analysis revealed some similarities and differences in the overall, rhetorical, and categorical distribution of hedges and boosters between monolingual and bilingual male and female EFL learners’ academic research articles. The similarities and the differences have been outlined as follow:

1. There was a similarity between monolingual and bilingual EFL learners’ use of boosters in academic research articles.
2. In both monolingual and bilingual EFL learners’ research articles, the Discussion and Conclusion sections contained more hedges and boosters than the Introduction and Abstract sections.
3. There was a broad agreement in the use of lexical verbs, adverbs, and modal verbs as boosters in both monolingual and bilingual EFL learners’ research articles.
4. There was a similarity in the distribution of boosters between monolingual male and female EFL learners’ research articles.
5. There was a similarity in the use of hedges in bilingual male and female EFL learners.
6. The highest incidence of boosters in research articles of male and female EFL learners was in the Discussion and Conclusion sections and the lowest in the Abstract and Introduction sections.
7. There was a difference in the use of hedges between monolingual male and female EFL learners’ research articles.
8. In both monolingual and bilingual male and female EFL learners’ research articles, lexical verbs were used as boosters.
9. In monolingual male and female EFL learners’ research articles, lexical verbs, modal verbs, and adverbs were used as hedges.
10. The occurrence of hedges in bilingual EFL learners’ research articles was higher than that in monolingual EFL learners’ research articles.
11. In monolingual EFL learners’ research articles, hedging was presented mainly through modal verbs, but in bilingual EFL learners’ research articles, lexical verbs were used to express hedging.
12. There was a similarity in the distribution of boosters between monolingual male and female EFL learners’ research articles.
13. There was a difference between bilingual male and female EFL learners in the use of boosters in research articles.
14. Female EFL learners in both languages used more hedges in the Discussion and Abstract sections than male EFL learners in both languages.

The results of this study are expected to promote teaching of these devices to the foreign language learners of English in the research courses as well as writing courses. Additionally, the findings of this study are expected to attract second and foreign language researchers’ attention to monolingual and bilingual differences in English learning. The findings also have implications for other researchers to investigate different linguistic features of language use in monolingual and bilingual EFL learners’ academic writing.

REFERENCES


Appendix:
Sources of the selected articles
- Iranian EFL Journal (2 Article)
- The journal of Applied Linguistics (3 Article)
- The Modern Language Journal (1 Article)
- ROYAL (1 Article)
- Asian EFL Journal (2 Article)
- The Reading Matrix (1 Article)
- The International Journal of Research and Review (1 Article)
- Roshd Foreign Language Teaching Journal (1 Article).