

Hedging in College Research Papers: Implications for Language Instruction

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Bio Data

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Abstract

Commitment and detachment in one's claims are linguistically manifested in the use of hedging and boosting devices. How novice writers show their confidence in or detachment to their proposed ideas has been the focus of analysis in this study that used Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric theory to examine 144 pages of introduction and conclusion sections in the randomly selected research articles of five different courses from both the arts and sciences disciplines investigated. Using Mojica's (2005) and Hyland's (2004) categorization, it was found out that hedges and boosters were almost equally used in the introduction and conclusion sections of the research articles sampled. Writers across all disciplines investigated exhibit preference for type 3 hedging device. Differences in showing commitment and detachment were apparent between the two disciplines: Psychology writers appear to be more detached while mass communication writers seem more committed. The topics of RAs apparently influenced the commitment and detachment of these writers. These findings suggest the need for awareness raising on the usefulness of hedging and boosting devices in mitigating claims despite the seeming sensitivity of the research article topics or its affect on the writers. In the end, these research articles are academic papers that must adhere strictly to

writing conventions of impersonality and formality.

Introduction

Research articles are avenues for researchers to publicly propose new ideas which are likely to support or contradict findings of other scholars; hence, writers employ cautious language as the acceptance of their research contributions depend largely on how these are presented to the academic community. Using cautious language means mitigating the strength of a proposal by increasing or decreasing its illocutionary force through hedging and boosting devices (Vassileva 2001 in Mojica, 2005) which, according to Salager-Meyer (1997, p. 106), serve three main rhetorical functions: (1) threat minimizing strategies ... to signal distance and to avoid absolute statements; (2) strategies to accurately reflect the certainty of knowledge; and (3) politeness strategies... between writers and editors.

The growing interest on hedges is apparent in various research investigations spanning hedging in speaking (Lakoff, 1972; Scarcella, R. & Brunak, R., 1981; Stubbs, 1986; Coates, 1987) to hedging in writing (Hyland, 1994; Cabanes, 2007). Scholars have explored frequency and functions of hedging according to genre and different rhetorical sections of scientific papers (Myers, 1989; Hyland, 1995, 1996; Meyer, 1997; Salager-Meyer, 1997). In the Philippines, Mojica (2005) extended the study on hedging in research articles to examine how Filipino authors use this academic discourse feature in introduction, discussion, and conclusion sections. She found out that there was significant difference in the two groups of authors' ways of showing commitment and detachment to their proposed ideas: Engineers boost more while linguists hedge more. She attributed this difference to the highly technical discussions in engineering as well as to its writing conventions which may not be as rigid as that of the linguists'. Mojica further suggested that the engineers' use of hedging despite the probable absence of academic writing training could be influenced by the Filipino culture, known for its politeness. Despite this interest however, there has been little attention to what hedging and boosting devices are and how these are used in research articles (RAs) of Filipino college writers. This present study extends Mojica's 2005 study to investigate how undergraduate ESL writers show their commitment and detachment to their ideas as revealed in RAs. Furthermore,

it aims to examine the differences in the use of hedging and boosting in five courses from the arts and sciences. Skelton (1988 in Swales & Feak, 2004, p. 125) wittily remarked that student-writers must learn the importance of being “confidently uncertain” in making claims. It is hoped that an analysis of how undergraduate writers confidently or detachedly present their ideas could be beneficial to English subject curriculum developers, research textbook writers, as well as to teachers of college academic writing.

Framework

Kaplan’s contrastive rhetoric (1997) informed the discussion on how novice writers from five different disciplines show commitment and detachment to their proposed ideas as revealed in their use of hedging and boosting devices. Sciences and the arts have always been seen as opposite poles in its academic orientation. The latter is characterized by subjectivity, while the former is known for its rigid adherence to objectivity. While the sciences tend to be exact in its analysis, those in the arts tend to be relative. This difference could be inferred in the way a certain phenomenon is discussed in each discipline. For example, scientists might use observable, quantifiable data to explain the changing patterns of climate whereas most of the arts would tend to rely on perception and value judgment. Still, each discipline within the arts might vary in its approach and method of analysis given the same topic. Analysis from the point of view of philosophy and literature for example would differ in various ways from communication and linguistics. Given this nature, the writing of research articles which imposes strict adherence to its conventions, on top of field-specific conventions, may pose as potential challenge to undergraduate writers who may not be as exposed to as many articles and consequently to the conventions of writing in their academic community as their professional counterpart in the same field. Hyland (2005) acknowledges the importance of context familiarity and repeated use of conventionalized forms to the choice of language and adherence to expectations from academic writing.

Language proficiency may yet be another significant factor in the students’ choice of linguistic features. Hyland’s study (2005) has revealed that

academically advanced students use more hedging devices while ‘weaker’ students employ more boosting devices. Still, another factor to consider in the analysis of student writing is the culture that may dictate how students express commitment and detachment to ideas they propose. Skelton and Allison (in Hyland, 2005) observed that EFL writers are more inclined to using direct and unqualified writing. Furthermore, they tend use more direct and authoritative tone, simple sentence constructions yet stronger modals that convey stronger commitments to statements.

Hedges and boosters

Categorization of hedges and boosters in the present study was adapted mainly from Mojica’s 2005 study as well as Hyland’s 2004 study on dialogic features. Mojica’s type 1 modals/probabilities and type 2 semi-auxiliaries/epistemic verbs were combined in this study as a cover term for tentative verbs and modals (type 1). This includes modal and lexical verbs like *may, might, could*, introductory verbs like *seem, suggest, appear*, and phrases that use any or a combination of these like *it may seem to appear, it might be suggested*. *Should* is taken as a booster as in Mojica (2005). Type 2 includes tentative adjectives and adverbs like *possibly, likely, probably*. Adjective as well as adverbs like *certainly, definitely* are treated as boosters as they are used to show confidence in the claim/s. Also under type 2 are nominalized verbs like *The treatment of homosexuals in the films...* (Instead of the stronger verb forms like *The society treats homosexuals... in the films as...*). Type 3 includes distancing phrases which may vary from citing authority to using impersonal third person and unnamed agents. Rhetorical questions, imperatives (which in Mojica was labeled grammatical/stylistic means) as well as solidarity features like *it is known, it is a fact, as we all know* are grouped as type 4 engagement markers (Hyland 2004) together with second person pronoun *you*, and any explicit reference or direct address to readers. Type 5 self-mention includes any reference to the researcher/s which includes pronouns *I, we*, or nouns *researchers, writers* even when a verb follows it like *this researcher believes, we argue*. In this last category that makes use of a combination of tentative verbs and modals together with self-mention, the device is considered a hedge when the claim seems to have been mitigated: it is a booster when the claim is

strengthened like in the example, *the researcher strongly believes* which made use of a tentative verb but was made certain by the use of the adverb *strongly*.

Method of Research

This study examined thirty undergraduate theses in English or 144 pages of selected RA sections written by randomly selected students of the Institute of Arts and Sciences of Far Eastern University. These students are arts majors in English Language, Political Science, Mass Communication, and Science majors in Biology and Psychology. These participants were chosen as they are cross sections of disciplines which are said to exhibit variation in writing conventions. Selection of theses was limited to those written and submitted in school year 2007-2008, totaling six theses per course, i.e., six introduction and six conclusion sections per college course. Only those which have more than 2 pages of introduction and 1 page of conclusion sections were selected.

Only the introduction and conclusion sections of these undergraduate theses in English were examined as prior studies by most researchers have shown that these are the sections where writers usually use hedging and boosting devices. These devices were analyzed and coded using an adaptation of Mojica’s (2005) categorization as well as Hyland’s (2004) as discussed earlier.

This study is descriptive in nature. A simple frequency count was used, making this study a qualitative research. Determining differences in hedging and boosting devices use in the two rhetorical sections of research articles of writers from five courses was accomplished employing Kaplan’s theory on contrastive rhetoric.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the different means by which college writers show their commitment/ detachment to their claims.

Table 1 Total number of hedges/boosters per course

Course	Type 1 Tentative Verbs & Modals		Type 2 Adjectives Adverbs & Nouns		Type 3 Distancing Phrases		Type 4 Engageme nt markers		Type 5 Self- mention		Total	
	H	B	H	B	H	B	H	B	H	B	H	B

Biology	7	6	2	5	9	0	0	3	0	3	18	17
English	6	29	0	5	42	0	6	1	0	9	54	44
Mass												
Communication	13	31	0	1	20	0	5	5	0	17	38	55
Political Science	13	11	1	9	20	0	3	5	0	16	37	41
Psychology	34	15	8	11	21	0	0	2	0	21	65	48

As can be seen, psychology writers hedged close to four times as much as biology writers who used hedging least among all writers from five different courses. Although psychology and biology are both sciences, the former may be said to belong to the “soft” sciences as interpretation of the human mental processes and behavior might not be presented precisely as it heavily relies on perception or personal judgment. It appears that type 3 distancing phrases are preferred across all courses, having been employed almost 53% of hedges in totality. One possible reason for this choice can be gleaned from directions in research textbooks that pound on students to cite authorities and remain as impersonal as possible by using passive voice of the verb (e.g. Plata, et.al., 2006). Not surprisingly, type 1 hedges ranked second among the top choices of hedging devices. Citing Vassileva, Mojica (2005) suggested that modals and probabilities *may* in particular, is a favored form of hedging. Although the samples in this study are not comparable to Vassileva’s nor to Mojica’s studies for a number of reasons, it is interesting nonetheless to note that modals and probabilities are favored among the five types of devices by the sampled RA writers in the similar way the writers in the mentioned authors’ study favored the said devices. On the contrary, none of the writers showed detachment using type 5 device. Perhaps, when students mention themselves, it is when they are certain about their statements or when their statements contain ideas that they personally believe to be true; hence, they seem to be more committed to their claim as can be seen from the sample *the researchers argue that even though it is the mandate of this commission to...*

Type 2 and type 4 appear to be the least preferred hedging devices as each accounts for less than 1% of the total hedges used. The somewhat limited use of type 4 device in the sampled RAs may be attributed to the students’ desire to comply with the writing conventions that caution writers to use these

devices sparingly whereas type 2 devices were probably unexhausted as they may not be commonly employed or it may be due to students' "unsophisticated knowledge of rhetorical... features" (Hyland 2002 in Mojica 2005, p. 512). Type 3 hedges used by most writers reached almost thrice as much as type 3 hedges employed by psychology writers. The latter seems to favor type 1 using more than 50% more of this device than any of the remaining four types of hedges. Not surprisingly, the writers showed commitment as much as they showed detachment: the number of boosters employed almost equaled hedges. Hedges exceeded boosters only by a marginal difference of seven hedges or 0.6%. The top three choices are type 1, type 5 and type 2 boosters. Type 1 is used 92 times, almost 3 times as much as type 2 while type 5 is almost 16% less than type 1. Consistent with previous studies (Skelton, 1988; Bloor & Bloor, 1991, in Hyland, 2005), this study suggests that novice Filipino writers, like their counterparts in other countries, show tendency to be more direct and committed to statements. Hyland (2005) attributed these tendencies to the writer's limited range of devices and unsophisticated communication skills; in this study however, the topics could have influenced the use of more boosters. Mass communication RAs were on gay stereotyping, abuse on women, gay rights/discrimination- these topics border on controversial yet these being chosen suggests that these could be issues that in some way directly or indirectly affect the writers. Perhaps, the research articles on gay stereotyping or gay rights were written by gay men or women; hence, the inclination towards using stronger language resulting in stronger claims. As the analysis of the corpus further reveals, mass communication writers tend to boost the most, having employed as much as 26% boosters in a total of 205 boosters or 16% more boosters than hedges, showing mass communication writers may be more confident about their claims for reasons mentioned earlier. On the other hand, biology writers used only one hedge more than its boosters. All throughout, biology writers tend to be more reserved in their use of hedges and boosters. This may be partly due to the relatively fewer number of pages of the biology RAs or it could be because of the technical nature of their research articles, being experimental and reliant on observable data. These tendencies of science articles could have possibly influenced the writers to use the least hedges and boosters.

Table 2. Frequency of hedges/boosters in selected sections

	Introduction		Conclusion		Total	
	H	B	H	B	H	B
Biology	9	7	9	10	18	17
English	35	24	19	20	54	44
Mass Communication	30	22	8	33	38	55
Political Science	19	10	18	31	37	41
Psychology	57	46	8	2	65	48

Table 1 shows how many hedges and boosters are used in the introduction and conclusion parts of the RAs. As can be seen, writers across five courses tend to show both commitment and detachment in the introduction part of the RAs. Hedging in the introduction part is almost twice as many hedges in the conclusion part. On the other hand, conclusion has 13 boosters less than in the introduction.

It is possible that the use of hedging in novice writers' articles may not be just because of their want for acceptability but perhaps a genuine representation of tentativeness or uncertainty. In addition, the writers might not be thinking of positioning as much as they are thinking of complying with the requirements of the course. Perhaps, the writers may have never thought of their work being published or even read by others but the research subject teacher; hence, there were no thoughts given on other researchers refuting their claims.

The marginal difference of 0.6% of hedges from boosters suggests that writers are comfortable in showing commitment perhaps because the topics i.e., political issues like *crime prevention, analysis of government efficacy, performance of optical media board, performance of the anti-graft, and corruption commission* and the like are mostly sensitive issues on which they probably have held strong opinions on even before the writing of the RAs. Another factor that could account for almost the same number of boosters as hedges is the need for the writers' to persuade their readers to continue reading the RAs. Probably, their desire to persuade the readers of the importance of

their topics motivated them to use stronger affecting words which consequently showed stronger commitment.

It is also noticeable in the introduction part that type 5 self-assertion almost typically follows type 4 engagement markers. For example, *...we must be aware of, all of us must...* are likely to be followed by *..the researchers aim to..., the researcher conducted...* This style could probably be these writers' way of occupying the niche and urging the readers to see the importance of their study. It seems that appealing to the readers to see the need for this research is a strategy to assert their identity as well as the possible contribution that their study could make.

Another factor that may account for the occurrence of more hedges and boosters in the introduction section could be the relatively longer introduction part. In most RAs, conclusion section is no longer than one page.

Conclusion

The use of hedges and boosters in the RAs sampled despite the probable limited exposure of the writers to the genre and its conventions suggests that hedging – i.e. being polite -- may be culturally-inherent, the writers being Filipinos. The writers' tendency to use strong language to show commitment imply the need for the inclusion of lessons on hedging and boosting in the research writing subjects as well as the need for students to be more exposed to the conventions of research writing. It might be helpful to raise awareness among students of the usefulness of various devices, especially reader-friendly boosters, in mitigating claims no matter how controversial or how much their topics affect them. Hedging is an important discourse feature that students must learn if they want their ideas to be taken seriously in the academic community. Training students to be “confidently uncertain” (Skelton, 1988 in Swales & Feak, 2004, p. 125) could prepare them for communicative situations that mostly require politeness. It could be a good preparation for writing research articles intended for publishing should the writers later on embark on graduate studies.

This small-scale study sought to examine the means by which novice writers use hedging and boosting devices to show their commitment/detachment to their propositions. Although results were drawn

from the samples alone and could not be claimed to be conclusive, insights gained from this study can be used to enhance research paper module writing as well as the teaching of writing in general. Findings from comparing sciences and arts texts could sensitize research-writing teachers to the different writing styles of students and to their tendencies in writing. The latter would perhaps make teachers realize possible adjustments in pedagogy. Analysis of rhetorical sections of research papers might yield other interesting results if samples will be extended to include RAs from other universities. It might also be interesting to find if student writers from different Philippine universities would exhibit the same tendencies in showing commitment and detachment from their proposals.

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