

Hedges and Boosters in Undergraduate Students' Research Articles

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Abstract: This study aims at investigating the use of hedges and boosters which are important in academic writing discourse as a mean of communicative strategies for increasing or reducing the force of statements. The data of this study were taken from the undergraduate students' research articles of English Department at State University of Malang and analyzed based on the taxonomy of Hyland (1998a) and Hinkel (2005). The result showed that there were five types of hedges and three types of boosters. Moreover, the students used greater hedges than boosters in their research articles as a way of reducing the risk of opposition, as a mean of being polite and as a way to obscure their authorial identity while advancing their opinion. However, the writers also used boosters to show their research originality and when they were quite sure that their claims share some universal understanding. Furthermore, the misused hedging devices by the students showed that they lack of knowledge of English rhetoric.

Key Words: hedges, boosters, articles

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki penggunaan *hedges* dan *boosters* dalam menulis wacana akademik sebagai sarana strategi komunikatif untuk meningkatkan atau mengurangi kekuatan pernyataan. Data penelitian ini diambil dari artikel penelitian mahasiswa Jurusan Bahasa Inggris di Universitas Negeri Malang dan dianalisis berdasarkan taksonomi Hyland (1998a) dan Hinkel (2005). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ada lima jenis *hedges* dan tiga jenis *boosters*. Selain itu, siswa menggunakan *hedges* memiliki nilai lebih besar dari *boosters* dalam artikel penelitian sebagai cara untuk mengurangi risiko oposisi, untuk menunjukkan sikap sopan dan untuk mengaburkan identitas kepenulisan dan menguatkan pendapat. *Boosters* juga digunakan untuk menunjukkan orisinalitas penelitian. *Hedging* yang disalahgunakan oleh para siswa menunjukkan bahwa kurangnya pengetahuan tentang retorika bahasa Inggris.

Kata kunci: *hedges*, *boosters*, artikel

One of the problems faced by the students in writing of English as a Foreign Language is the use of hedges and boosters. Although students are using hedges and boosters in their essays, they are still confused about exactly how to use them (Macintyre, 2013). Hedges and boosters are communicative strategies conveying the writer's degree of confidence in the truth of a proposition and expressing an attitude to the audience (Hyland, 2004). The use of hedges enables the writers to express a perspective on their statements, to present unproven claims with caution and to enter to a dialogue with their audience, while the use of boosters helps him/her to close down alternatives and to show a high degree of certainty (Hyland, 2005).

Furthermore, Hyland (2005) defines hedges as devices that indicate the writer's decision to withhold complete commitment to a proposition, allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than accredited fact and boosters as writers are to express their certainty in what they say and to mark involvement with the topic and solidarity with the audience. Holmes (1982) and Meyer (1997) view the term 'boosters' as those lexical items by means of which the writer can show strong confidence for a claim. These definitions are supported by Hyland (1998a) who views boosters as a tool which serves to strengthen the claim to show the writer's commitment. He pointed out that boosters can be used as a means or

medium to create interpersonal solidarity with readers. Hyland (1998b) argues that boosters serve to strengthen propositions and show the writer's commitment to his or her statements. He points out that although such assertion of the writer's conviction can be seen as leaving little room for the reader's own interpretations, boosters also offer writers a medium to engage with their readers and create interpersonal solidarity.

Furthermore, the importance of hedges and boosters in academic discourse lies in their contribution to an appropriate rhetorical and interactive tenor, conveying both epistemic and affective meanings. That is, they do not only carry the writer's degree of confidence in the truth of a proposition, but also an attitude to the audience. More specifically, although hedges and boosters play an important role in academic writing, the students still find any difficulties when using them. The fact shows that there are still many L2 writers overused, underused, and misused hedges and boosters in their writing which shows that they lack of knowledge of English rhetoric which makes them irrelevant to the context and basic traits of hedges and boosters. Therefore, the present research was conducted to investigate hedges and boosters in the articles written by Indonesian students.

The present research provides a continuum of how corpus-based analysis on the text provides valuable information on the use of hedges and boosters by the undergraduate students. The frequency of hedges and boosters derived from the corpus then was analyzed based on the taxonomy of Hyland (1998a) and Hinkel (2005).

METHODS

The present research was based on the text or document analysis and investigated the use of hedges and boosters in undergraduate students' research articles at State University of Malang. This research used mixed method research design. The basic purpose is to collect, analyze, and mix both quantitative and qualitative method in a single study to understand the research problem. According to Johnson et al. (2007), mixed method research is the type of research in which a researcher combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches for the purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration.

The data sources of this research were hedges and boosters found in the articles written by undergraduate students at State University of Malang in

2012/2013. There were 57 articles from ELT students and 16 articles from ELL students. Therefore, the total of the data was 73 articles which consisted of 304.883 words used as the corpus in this research. Those articles are available in PDF that can be easily converted into plain text.

The data were produced by the subjects without any intervention from the researcher. The data were collected from e-library of English Department and Faculty of Letters, State University of Malang. The selected data were of year 2012 and 2013. The data were available in the form of PDF that can be easily downloaded. After downloading the articles, the researcher copied them onto the computer. Next, the researcher converted all the files (in PDF) into TXT file which was required for concordance analysis.

The data analysis included five major steps. First of all, the researcher selected the words which were classified into several types of hedges and boosters. Secondly, the researcher measured the word frequency of the text by using wordlist feature. This tool counts all the words in the corpus and presents them in an ordered list. This tool was used to find which words were the most frequent in a corpus. In the third step, the researcher found out the occurrence of hedges and boosters in paragraph by using KWIC concordance. This tool shows search results in a 'KWIC' (Key Word In Context) format. From the KWIC concordance, it was seen how the word and phrases were commonly used in a corpus of texts. Then the researcher 'clicked' the File View to help her investigated the data in more detailed. This tool shows the text of individual files. Finally, the researcher drew some conclusions from the findings related to hedges and boosters in the research articles.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Referring to the frequency of hedges and boosters found in the research articles, Table 1 presents the results of the calculation. Table 1 shows that hedges were (69.08 %) higher than boosters (30.92

Table 1. Overall Distribution of Hedges and Boosters in Undergraduate Students' Research Articles

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Hedges	3.369	69.08%
Boosters	1.507	30.92%
Total	4.876	100 %

Table 2. Categorical Distribution of Hedges and Boosters

Category	Types	Frequency	Percentage
Hedges	Modal Verbs	2.982	61.16%
	Epistemic Adjectives	135	2.77%
	Epistemic Lexical Verbs	129	2.64%
	Epistemic Adverbs	101	2.07%
Boosters	Epistemic Nouns	22	0.45%
	Universal pronoun	914	18.74%
	Amplifiers	428	8.78%
Emphatics		165	3.38%
Total		4.876	100%

%). It reflects the critical importance of both distinguishing fact from opinion in academic discourse and the need for claims to be presented provisionally rather than assertively. Categories for *hedges* and *boosters* in the corpus for the present research were identified (see Table 2).

From the 4.876 hedges and boosters, modal verbs comprised more than half of the total hedging and boosting devices. It is clearly shown in Table 2 above that the most highly frequent hedges occurred in modal verbs (frequency = 2.982; percentage = 61.16%). The second place is followed by epistemic adjectives but much lower than modal verbs in term of frequency (frequency = 135; percentage = 2.77%). Epistemic lexical verbs are almost equal in frequency to modal adjectives (frequency = 129; percentage = 2.64%). Then, epistemic adverbs are in the fourth place before the lowest frequency of hedges. The frequency of epistemic adverbs is 101 (2.07%) and epistemic noun is 22 (0.45%). Furthermore, the most frequently boosters occurred in the articles is universal pronoun (18.74%) which is followed by amplifiers (8.78%). The last frequent boosters are emphatics with 3.38%.

Hedges in the Research Articles

The types of hedges which were found in the corpus consisted of five categories; modal verbs, epistemic adjectives, epistemic verbs, epistemic adverbs, and epistemic nouns.

Modal Verbs

These modal verbs in the present research serve a huge percentage of hedges in undergraduate students' research articles. It comprised 88.51% of all hedges. Table 3 illustrates the modal verbs in rank order with their raw numbers and corresponding percentages.

Table 3. Frequency of Modal Verbs

Modal Verbs	Frequency	Percentage
Can (not)	1.096	36.75%
Should (not)	532	17.84%
Will (not)	450	15.09%
Could (not)	345	11.57%
May (not)	215	7.21%
Would (not)	168	5.63%
Must (not)	103	3.45%
Might (not)	73	2.45%
Total	2.982	100 %

From the Table 3 , it can be viewed that modal verb *can (not)* is the highest in frequency. Its percentage is far higher (36.75%) than the other modal verbs. Modal verb *can* carries the meanings of ability and possibility. The students were mostly successful in expressing ability and possibility that *can* conveys. The following is the example from the data in which *can* expresses ability.

In undergraduate students' research articles at State University of Malang, the students used a lot of modal verb *can* and it occurred as the top most frequent item marking ability and possibility. However, there still appeared incorrect use of modal verb *can* which marked the negative ability. Below is the example for incorrect use of *can* found in the data:

Computer-based reading materials highly rely on the use of computers or laptops. Without a computer or a laptop, the students *cannot* read and complete all the tasks in the materials.
(MKA, *Developing Supplementary Materials of Genre-Based Reading for the Eighth Graders at SMP Negeri 4 Malang*)

The example above shows that the student employed *can* incorrectly. He transferred the negative ability meanings of L1 and used the negative form of the ability/possibility marker *can* in English. The use of *can* in the negated form made the claim too strong. The assessment of the illocutionary force of the claim as an impossibility was pragmatically

inappropriate. Thus, the manipulation of the modal *can* was problematic as the truth of the statement was misinterpreted.

Epistemic Adjectives

Modal Adjectives constituted 2.77% of the total hedges and boosters in the overall data. They were the second most frequently employed hedges with a frequency of 135.

Table 4 shows that epistemic adjectives *possible* get the highest frequency among other. It occurred 68 or 2.47%. Adjectives expressing probability or marking the information as uncertain or tentative are closely connected to modal adverbs and some sentences with modal adverbs can be paraphrased with structures involving corresponding adjectives.

Epistemic Lexical Verbs

Epistemic lexical verbs formed the third largest category of hedges. Table 5 shows the incidence of lexical verbs identified as hedges. Lexical verbs with epistemic meaning encompass verbs express epistemic judgment. That is verbs of speculation (e.g., *suggest*) and deduction (e.g., *conclude*, *infer*), as well as verbs expressing evidentiary. That is quotative verbs used to report the findings of others and at the same time expressing the degree of the author's commitment to the finding (e.g., *showed*, *claimed*), verbs of perception (e.g., *seem*, *appear*), and narrators, (e.g., *seek*, *attempt*).

Table 4. Frequency of Epistemic Adjectives

Epistemic Adjectives	Frequency	Percentage
possible	68	2.47 %
Potential	37	1.34 %
Likely	23	0.84 %
apparent	7	0.25 %
Total	135	4.90 %

Table 5. Frequency of Epistemic Lexical Verbs

Epistemic Lexical Verbs	Frequency	Percentage
Appear	37	1.34 %
seem	26	0.95 %
suggest	21	0.76 %
conclude	20	0.73 %
attempt	19	0.69%
Infer	4	0.15 %
Seek	2	0.07 %
Total	129	4.69%

Epistemic Adverbs

Epistemic adverbs are another group often mentioned in connection with hedging devices. However, the frequency of epistemic adverbs was rather low in the data. Research articles written by undergraduate students of State University of Malang occurred 101 (2.07%) of the total hedges. Table 6 shows the shares of epistemic adverbs identified as hedges in the data.

In most cases, the adverbs appear in the function of content disjuncts, commenting on the certainty or stating the sense in which the speakers/writers judge what they say to be true or false.

Epistemic Nouns

The last group of hedges included in the analysis was epistemic nouns as the lowest type of hedging device with *possibility* and *probability*. They comprised only 0.45 % of the total hedges and boosters (see Table 2) with a frequency of 22. Table 7 illustrates the most frequent epistemic nouns in the data.

The most frequent epistemic noun in the data was *possibility*, which was followed by *probability* (see Table 7). *Possibility* ranked as the first frequent nouns with 0.69 %. While, *probability* comprised for only 0.11% of the total hedges. *Possibility* is a thing that may happen or be the case. It is also a thing that may be chosen or done out of several possible alternatives. It is an unspecified qualities of a promising nature; potential. It is the state or fact of being possible.

Table 6. Frequency of Epistemic Adverbs

Epistemic Adverbs	Frequency	Percentage
probably	11	0.40 %
possibly	6	0.22 %
potentially	5	0.18 %
apparently	4	0.15 %
quite	63	2.29 %
fairly	12	0.44 %
Total	101	3.68 %

Table 7. Frequency of Epistemic Nouns

Epistemic Nouns	Frequency	Percentage
Possibility	19	0.69%
Probability	3	0.11%
Total	22	0.80%

Boosters in Research Articles

The categorization of boosters in this research was classified into three categories; universal pronoun which refers to a general authorship/audience such as *no-* and *every-* words, (2) amplifiers which functions to increase the size or effect of statements such as *very*, *clearly*, *etc.*, (3) emphatics which has function to emphasize force or writers' certainty in message such as *sure*, *for sure*, *no way*, *etc.*

Universal Pronouns

Universal pronouns ranked as the first most frequent booster with the frequency 914 or 18.74% of all hedges and boosters. Table 8 shows the frequency of universal pronouns in order:

Table 8. Universal and Negative Pronouns

Universal Pronouns	Frequency	Percentage
All	436	47.65%
No	318	34.75%
Every	156	17.16%
None	4	0.44%
Total	914	100%

It is clearly shown in Table 8 that universal pronouns *all* appeared as the most frequent booster with 47.65%. The use of universal and negative pronoun can show project a hyperbolic and inflated impression when the text appears to overstate claims with the goal of enhancing its persuasive qualities. Exaggeration and overstatement of universal pronouns represent valid rhetorical means of conveying the power of the writer's conviction and obvious evidential truths. While, *every* as the third frequent universal pronoun occurred 17.16% also has the function to express exaggeration.

Amplifiers

The second most frequent booster was amplifiers which increase the size or effect of statements. They occurred relatively (8.78%) of all hedges and boosters. The table 9 shows the frequent amplifiers found in the data.

It is obviously seen in the Table 9 that amplifier *very* occurred more than a half of amplifiers with 58.88% and the lowest amplifier is *entirely* which only comprised 0.70%. Amplifier *completely* has the function to emphasize the statement that following the textbook is easy because of its clear direction

Table 9. Amplifiers

Amplifiers	Frequency	Percentage
Very	252	58.88%
Always	71	16.59%
Never	52	12.15%
Completely	20	4.67%
Fully	13	3.04%
Extremely	7	1.63%
Totally	5	1.17%
Absolutely	5	1.17%
Entirely	3	0.70%
Total	428	100%

and guidance. Similar to *completely*, amplifier *entirely* was used by the students to emphasize the statement.

The students mostly used the degree adverb *very* either with the adjective or adverb. That is probably because of their limited lexicon in L2 and they could not use a variety of words.

The function of amplifiers is to increase the scalar of lexical intensity of gradable adjective or verb (Quirk et al., 1985) and they have the textual functions of intensifiers, exaggerative, and overstatement. In academic text in English, amplifiers, as well as such extreme markers of the time continuum as *always* and *never*, usually mark exaggerations. Biber et al. (1999) found that in general, intensifiers such as *always*, *never*, and *really* are hardly encountered in the published academic genre.

Emphatics

Emphatics constituted 3.38% of the total hedges and boosters in the overall data (see Table 2). They were placed in the third rank employed boosters with a frequency of 165. Emphatics which appeared in the research articles were *clearly*, *indeed*, *sure*, *certainly*, *of course*, and *for sure*. Table 10 showed the percentage of emphatics found in the data.

From the Table 10, the most frequent emphatics was *clearly* with 33.94%. Emphatics *clearly* emphasized force or writers' certainty in message. The least frequent emphatics is *for sure* which comprised only 3.64%. Here is the example of emphatic *for sure*:

Table 10. Emphatics

Emphatics	Frequency	Percentage
Clearly	56	33.94%
Indeed	42	25.45%
Sure	26	15.76%
Certainly	20	12.12%
of course	15	9.09%
for sure	6	3.64%
Total	165	100%

Secondly, an aspect of developing paper-based supplementary reading materials is concerned with the practicality. The students do not need to get connected with the internet to access the materials in the product. They just simply read the materials at home and did all the tasks designed in each chapter. They, *for sure*, could bring the materials practically anytime and anywhere since the materials only consist of 55 pages and are not too thick (MKA, *Developing Supplementary Materials of Genre-Based Reading for The Eighth Graders at SMP Negeri 4 Malang*).

As well the function of emphatics are to emphasize force or writers' certainty in message, *for sure* in example above was also used by the students to make sure the readers that students could use the product easily.

In text, the function of emphatics is similar to that of amplifiers and has the effect of reinforcing the truth-value of a proposition or claim or the strength of the writer's conviction. The usage of emphatics does not necessarily imply that the sentence element that it modifies is necessarily gradable but it becomes gradable when used with emphatics (Quirk et al., 1985). In spoken or written discourse, emphatics mark an informal register and are more characteristics of speech and conversational genre than of formal writing (Chafe, 1985, 1994).

Hyland's (1998b) corpus analysis of published academic text shows that the usage of emphatics may be discipline-dependent. They are comparatively more frequent in published texts in philosophy, marketing, applied linguistics, physics, and mechanical engineering than in sociology, biology, and electrical engineering. In addition, many of the studies that include emphatics deal with persuasive texts, such as advertising (Fuentes et al., 2001), or newspaper editorials (Dafouz, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

There were five types of hedges used in the articles written by undergraduate students at State University of Malang, those were modal verbs, epistemic adjectives, epistemic lexical verbs, epistemic adverbs, and epistemic nouns. Furthermore, there were three types of boosters in the articles. Those are universal pronouns, amplifiers, and emphatics. Of the total hed-

ges and boosters, modals verbs comprised more than half of the total hedging and boosting devices. Epistemic adjectives, epistemic lexical verbs, epistemic adverbs, epistemic nouns and boosters comprised the remaining. It is interesting to note that combined employment of the remaining hedges and boosters was still lower than that of the modal verbs.

Modal verbs as the highest frequently occurred in the articles overused hedging devices of *can* (frequency = 1.096) or 36.75% of the total modal verbs (frequency = 2.982). The overused modal verb *can* explained that *can* is the most familiar hedge typically taught to and digested by Indonesian EFL learners. Furthermore, the researcher also found the misuse of hedging device of *can*. The misused hedging devices by the students showed that they lacks of knowledge of English rhetoric. Moreover, the highest rate of *universal pronoun* (frequency = 914) or 60.65% of the total boosters (frequency = 1.507) found in the articles written by undergraduate students indicated that the students overstated and exaggerated the statements which represented a valid rhetorical means of conveying the power of the writers' conviction and obvious evidential truths. The use of universal pronoun in the article can project a hyperbolic and inflated impression.

The students used more modal hedges as a way of reducing the risk of opposition, being precise in reporting results, and also as a means of being polite. Furthermore, hedging enables the writers to minimize their presence in their writing, highlighting the tentativeness of propositions advanced by authors. Therefore, it can be said that the writers prefer to obscure their authorial identity while advancing their opinion. However, at the same time, boosters were also found in large number even though they were not as many as hedges in the students' articles when they were sure that their claims share some universal understanding to win the approval of their readers.

Suggestions

Based on the results, this research suggests the EFL lecturers to pay attention to the significance of hedges and boosters to enrich the students' knowledge on the parts of discourse. This might become references for advisors to have many attentions on students under their guidance. Familiarizing students with the rule and norms of academic writing might help students, especially those who write their final assignments. Moreover, the present research can be

a stepping stone for the future researchers to investigate hedges and boosters in academic context, written or spoken for the comparison. There can be further studies on certain hedges and boosters typically employed by particular group of people. There can also be further research investigating the functions or motivations behind the use of hedges and boosters in academic writings by also interviewing the authors. Finally, the studies on hedges and boosters in academic spoken discourse, for instance in English debate, can be carried out for the sake of exploration of English linguistics in general.

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