

The Use of Hedges and Boosters in Monolingual and Bilingual EFL Learners' Academic Writings: The Case of Iranian Male and Female Post-graduate MA Articles

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Abstract

Expressing doubt and certainty in academic writings requires a cautious use of hedges and boosters. Despite their importance in academic writing, little is known about how they are used in monolingual and bilingual male and female EFL learners' academic writings. To shed some lights on the issue, the present study investigated the use of hedges and boosters in research articles written by monolingual and bilingual male and female 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 research articles. 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.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Bilingual, Boosters, Monolingual, Hedges

Introduction

Academic writing becomes challenging when the text is to be written in a foreign language and it is of special importance in discourse studies (Thompson, 2001; Weigle, 2002). Different studies in this area have emphasized on textual components of writing and ignored the role of cultural as well as personal components in written patterns during academic writings (e.g., Verttala, 2001; Farrokhi & Emami, 2008, to name a few). In other words, there are some personal factors among which language experience in terms of monolingual-ism and bilingualism are claimed to be influential in EFL learners learning process (Moderkhameneh, 2008). In order to shed some lights on these issues, the present study aims at investigating the use of hedges and boosters by male and female monolingual and bilingual EFL learners' academic writings. 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.

A number of studies have emphasized the importance of hedges and boosters in expressing opinions and facts by learners of English as a foreign language (e.g. Holmes, 1982, 1988; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Hyland, 2000; Shengming, 2009). Hedges and boosters are communicative strategies through which writers' degree of confidence in the truth of a proposition are carried (Farrokhi & Emami, 2008). Hedges and boosters are among the most important interpersonal and textual aspects of language use by which writers personally intervene into the discourse to evaluate material and get engaged

with readers. The aforementioned nature of hedges and boosters underpins the premise that textual and personal variables can be used 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 (e.g. Salagar-Meyer, 1994; Hyland; 1996a, 1996b, 1998; Wishnoff, 2000; Verttala, 2001; Falahati, 2006; Farrokhi & Emami, 2008) 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. Multilingual EFL learners have at their disposal a very dynamic system that provides a dynamic and flexible way of accessing linguistic knowledge (Moderkhameneh, 2008; Simin & Tavangar, 2009). The latter, gender, which is 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 (1997). In order to shed some light 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.

Method

Materials

The materials for this study consisted of 12 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 and international journals during the last decade (see Appendix), most of them during the recent five years. They were written by both monolingual authors from Tahrān, Isfahān, Shirāz, and Karāj, and Bilingual authors from Tabriz, Urmia, and Salmas.

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

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 (2008). 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

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.

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

sections	Frequency								total	
	Abstract		Introduction		Discussion		Conclusion		H	B
strategies	Hedges	Boosters	Hedges	Boosters	Hedges	Boosters	Hedges	Boosters		
monolinguals	20.1	6.4	21.1	6.9	22.1	9.1	24.1	6.8	21.5	7.9
bilinguals	23.2	8.1	27.5	7.6	28.4	12.6	27.2	13.4	27.4	9.8
Monolingual male	5.9	4.8	14.4	2.5	15.2	7.2	23.6	5.2	14.7	5.3
Monolingual female	29.3	10	24.2	8.3	27.1	10.4	24.6	8.9	27.4	10.2
Bilingual male	17.6	6.6	29.2	5.8	22.2	12	26.8	7.2	24.4	8.2
Bilingual female	31.2	9.3	27.1	10.1	34.2	11.9	28.4	19.8	30.1	11.5

It indicates that the highest incidence of hedges in monolingual research articles was in the Conclusion and Discussion sections (24.1and 22.1per 1000 words) and boosters occurred mostly in Discussion section (9.1 per 1000 words). In bilingual EFL learners’ articles, the Discussion section followed by the Conclusion section (28.4 and 27.2 per 1000 words) were mostly hedged, and the boosters had the highest frequency in the Conclusion and Discussion sections (13.4 and 12.6per 1000 words). The highest incidence of hedges was in the Abstract and Discussion sections

(29.3and 27.1per 1000 words), and the highest occurrence of boosters was mostly in the Discussion and Abstract (10.4and 10 per 1000 words) of the monolingual male and female EFL research articles. The highest incidence of hedges was in the Discussion section (34.2per 1000 words) and the highest occurrence of boosters was in the Conclusion section (19.8per 1000 words) in the bilingual EFL students’ research articles. Finally, the Introduction section (29.2per 1000 words) and Conclusion (26.8per 1000 words) contained the most hedges, and the highest incidence of boosters was in the Discussion section (12per 1000 words).

Regarding the four rhetorical sections of bilingual articles, the frequency was calculated.

Table 2
overall distribution of hedges in monolingual and bilingual EFL students’ research articles

language	monolingual		bilingual	
category	hedges	boosters	hedges	boosters
Modal-verbs	27.29	17.02	25.97	8.15
Lexical-verbs	18.91	38.71	31.82	50.01
Adverbs	25.67	20.85	17.01	23.40
Adjectives	17.29	16.02	10.24	7.20
Nouns	8.64	7.38	5.30	8.16
Clausal-elements	2.16	0	1.65	3.06

The results of the analysis, as shown in table 2, indicated that the total frequency of hedges and boosters across four rhetorical sections of bilingual articles (27.4and 9.8 per 1000 words) was higher than that of monolingual EFL learners’ research articles (21.5and 7.9 per 1000 words). This finding is consistent with the claims of Dijkstra (2003, as cited in Modirghameneh, 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 (30.1and 11.56per 1000 words) was higher than that of the articles written by male EFL learners (24.4and 8.2per 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 (17.4and 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.

Table 3
The percent of hedges and boosters in monolingual and bilingual EFL students’ research articles

Percent of occurrence								
Expression	Hedges		Boosters		Hedges		Boosters	
Category	Monolingual Male	Monolingual female	Monolingual male	Monolingual female	Bilingual male	Bilingual female	Bilingual male	Bilingual female
Modal-verbs	26.50	26.57	16.27	17.30	28.43	24.83	4.55	11.02
Lexical-verbs	16.60	20.93	39.53	39.79	28.22	24.72	59.99	41.50
Adverbs	19.26	28.35	11.62	23.46	14.38	28.46	14.44	33.11
Adjectives	19.26	16.45	20.94	15.30	9.67	8.80	4.46	7.64
Nouns	15.50	5.76	11.61	4.08	8.87	2.21	14.45	2.93
Clausal-elements	2.85	1.91	0	0	0.40	2.50	2	3.77

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 used 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.

Conclusion

Hedges and boosters are complex devices with a variety of functions, and they are central to the negotiation of claims and effective arguments in academic writing (Farrokhi & Emami, 2008). 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 are outlined as follows:

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.

1. 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.
2. There was a similarity in the distribution of boosters between monolingual male and female EFL learners' research articles.
3. There was a similarity in the use of hedges in bilingual male and female EFL learners.
4. The highest incidence of boosters in the articles of male and female EFL learners was in the Discussion and the lowest in the Introduction.
5. The highest occurrence of boosters in bilingual male and female EFL learners was in the Discussion and Conclusion sections and the lowest in the Abstract and Introduction sections.
6. In both monolingual and bilingual male and female EFL learners' research articles, lexical verbs were used as boosters.
7. In monolingual male and female EFL learners' research articles, lexical verbs, modal verbs, and adverbs were used as hedges.
8. The occurrence of hedges in bilingual EFL learners' research articles was higher than that in monolingual EFL learners' research articles.

9. 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.
- 10 There was a difference in the use of hedges between monolingual male and female EFL learners' research articles.
11. There was a difference between bilingual male and female EFL learners in the use of boosters in research articles.
12. 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.

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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).

Biodata

Mir Ayyoob Tabatabaei has been a lecturer at Payam-e-Noor University of Salmas (west Azarbayjan) since 2012. He is a PhD student at Roberts College in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Different research articles have been written and published in ISI; ISC listed Articles as well as conferences all of which are available online.

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