

*A Comparative Corpus Study on the Use of
Academic Hedges and Boosters in Applied Linguistics*

Hui-Ya Chen, National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan

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Abstract

Hedges and boosters are two types of linguistically important strategies employed in academic writing. While hedges and boosters have been widely explored, previous studies focus on targeting the use of hedges and boosters in journal articles and conference papers in linguistics, computer engineering, second or foreign language teaching and learning. The investigation of Taiwanese students' academic use of hedges and boosters in Master's theses in applied linguistics has not been fully researched. The purpose of this paper aims to compare how the use of hedges and boosters in Taiwanese graduate students' theses are different from those in native writers' thesis writing. Two corpora were established. The English Native Speaker (NS) corpus was composed of 46 theses written by native graduates in the United States. The English as a Second Language Learner (L2) corpus was built with a collection of Taiwanese graduate students' 46 theses from 10 different universities. The theoretical framework developed by Hyland (1998a) and Varttala (1998) was adopted. A list of 164 commonly-used hedges and boosters was compiled based on Varttala's (1998) classification of hedges and Hyland's (1998a; 2005) examples of hedges and boosters. The compiled list could be entered into AntConc (Windows 2014), and the major grammatical categories of hedges and boosters employed by L2 writers and native writers in applied linguistics could be derived. The findings are summarized as follows. First, L2 writers use lesser hedges and more boosters than native writers. Second, L2 writers tend to rely heavily on using certain hedges and boosters.

Keywords: academic writing, hedges, boosters

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Introduction

Hedges (i.e., expressions of tentativeness) and boosters (i.e., expressions of certainty) are two types of linguistic resources which have been proved rhetorically important strategies in persuading the readers and have a significance influence on readers (Dafouz-Milne, 2008; Durik, Britt, Reynolds, and Storey, 2007). Hedges and boosters have also been perceived as two interactional features used widely by scientific writers to indicate the opposite viewpoints on an issue they address (Hyland, 2005a). Hedges and boosters are employed to signal an author's subjective stance over entire propositions.

Hedges and boosters are prevalent features in academic writing (Hyland, 1998a, 1998b); therefore, it is necessary for the second language learners (L2) to have a better understanding of hedges and boosters. However, mastering the rhetorical strategy is challenging for L2 learners as indicated by many previous studies (e.g. Hyland, 1998a; Chen, 2010). Past research has been conducted to investigate the use of hedges and boosters in abstracts of academic journal articles in applied linguistics (Hu and Cao, 2011), research articles in computer engineering (Zarei and Mansoori, 2011b), and experts' research articles in linguistics (Sultan, 2011). The investigation of Taiwanese graduate students' academic use of hedges and boosters in master's theses in applied linguistics has not been fully explored. In previous studies in applied linguistics, research focus was placed on journal articles and conference papers (e.g., Chen, 2005).

The purpose of the present study aims to gain a deeper understanding of how Taiwanese graduate students employ hedges and boosters in academic writing, and compare how the use of hedges and boosters in Taiwanese graduate students' theses are different from those in native writers' writing.

Conclusion

Previous research indicated that adverbs occurred more often than verbs in students' academic writing when they expressed doubt and certainty (Holmes, 1983; Hyland, 1996a). However, concerning the distribution of hedges by categories, the primary categories of hedges in the native corpus and L2 learner corpus in the present study were the same grammatical category, modal auxiliary, and followed by verbs, rather than adverbs. A possible explanation may be that there were more verbs as hedges included in the compiled list. The least frequent category of hedges appeared to be nouns in the two compiled corpora. Regarding the distribution of boosters by categories, the primary categories of boosters in the native corpus and L2 learner corpus were the same category, verbs, but the second categories in the native and L2 learner corpus were different: the former was adjectives, and the latter was adverbs. In terms of usages of hedges and boosters in L2 graduates' own academic theses, they employed hedges more frequently than boosters from intra-group analysis. However, from inter-group analysis (Figure 1), the L2 graduates tended to use boosters more often compared with the native graduates (Figure 1).

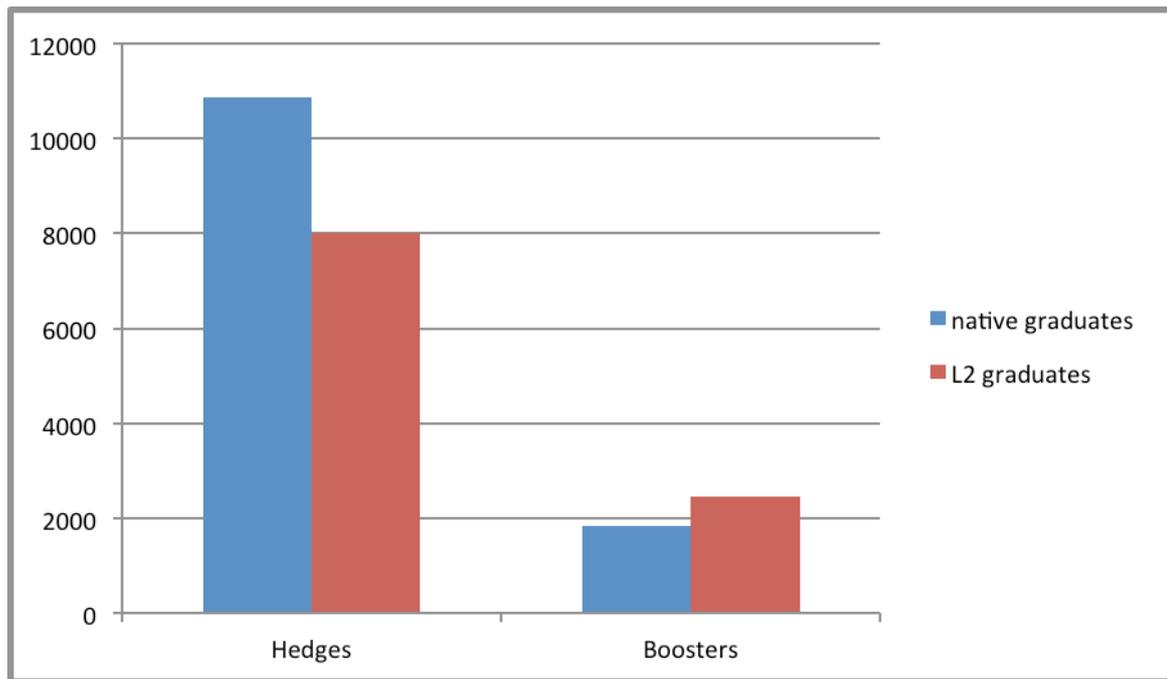


Figure 1. Total numbers of hedges and boosters in both corpora

Previous research indicated that English native authors employed hedges more frequently than Chinese authors. Furthermore, there was significant difference of booster usage between English native writers and Chinese writers. The results of the present study confirm those of Hu and Cao (2011). Past research proposed that Chinese writers appeared to adopt a more indirect writing style when presenting perspectives (Bloch and Chi, 1995). Our findings are consistent with those of the empirical study discussed above. However, there are important differences regarding other aspects of the current study. The current study indicates that Taiwanese L2 graduates employ more boosters than English native writers in academic writing. One possible explanation may be that non-native English graduates are still not familiar with the writing conventions belong to a specific discipline. Another possible reason might be that individual writing style plays a role on L2 graduates' performance of academic writing.

There were considerable similarities of usage such as *would and may* among the top six most frequently used hedges or boosters in both native and L2 learner corpora, although with strikingly different frequencies. Both native graduates and L2 graduates made substantial use of modal verbs, particularly *would and may* to express uncertainty and tentativeness; the findings are compatible with those of Martin (2008). The past research (Holmes, 1983; Hyland, 1996a) indicated that student writers preferred to use adverbs over verbs as hedges more frequently in their academic writing. In the present study, native writers tended to employ adverbs as hedges in their theses writing, which confirmed Holmes' (1983) and Hyland's (1996a) findings. Nevertheless, the result of present study indicated that L2 writers preferred to use verbs as hedges or boosters in addition to adverbs in their academic writing, which was revealed in Table 4. One possible reason may be that there were more verbs as hedges and boosters included in the compiled list. Past research even demonstrated that native English writers used the strategy of subjectivization (e.g., *I/we think*) very infrequently (Martin, 2008). Nonetheless, the result of the current study exhibited that

both native graduates and L2 graduates preferred to use the colloquial verbs, such as think and know, to express certainty and uncertainty. One possible explanation may be that students tend to adopt an overly spoken style in their English for Academic Purpose (EAP) writing. However, the colloquial verbs appeared more frequently in L2 graduates' academic writings than natives' theses writing, which suggests that L2 graduates still do not differentiate between writing style (formal) and spoken style (informal) clearly.

The results indicated that L2 graduates were less familiar with the academic writing conventions than their native counterparts, which may result from their culture, L1 influence, and the complex nature of modal expression usage. Therefore, teachers should employ explicit teaching to facilitate students to learn how to apply modal verbs as hedges and boosters correctly and appropriately. Teachers should also take students' proficiency level into consideration when teaching students to achieve the rigorous standards of academic writing. The proficiency level of native writers is higher than that of L2 writers. That is, the vocabulary knowledge between native writers and L2 learners is different. English native writers will have more word choices than L2 writers. When native writers attempt to make their assertions, they will choose more appropriate words to correspond to the contexts. Additionally, since hedging and boosters are contextual phenomena, teachers should provide examples with contexts to inform students of the correct usage of a specific word. Furthermore, an overemphasis on the instruction of using only modal verbs as hedges and boosters in textbooks should be noticed, because presenting only certain parts of information to students may lead to misunderstanding as they might think only those limited linguistic devices in the textbooks could be used to express their perspectives.

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Contact email: hui.ya.chen1989@gmail.com