Hedges and Boosters in the Yemeni EFL Undergraduates’ Persuasive Essay: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

The majority of research into EFL writing was on the area of linguistic competency (i.e. mastery of grammar and lexis). However, there is a need for investigating other pragmatic aspects of writing such as hedges and boosters which have not received the attention they deserve in the learners’ written discourse. The key reason for investigating these two markers stemmed from the assumption that linguistic competency does not ensure that a piece of writing is satisfactory. This paper attempts to examine the role of explicit instruction on the learners’ use of hedges and boosters. The instrument selected for this study consists of a persuasive writing task written by forty third-year undergraduate students majoring in English at Sana’a University. The writing persuasive task was recommended as an appropriate instrument to collect such type of data. The findings revealed that prior instruction had a positive impact on the learners’ use of hedges and boosters. The subjects of the experimental group had a significant improvement while the subjects of the control group did not. Based on the findings of the study, it is strongly recommended that teaching hedges and boosters is a useful way for EFL learners.

Keywords: Hedges, boosters, genre, persuasive writing, EFL writing, explicit instruction

Introduction

When EFL students transfer from high school to university, they face new challenges which involve certain conventions in writing persuasive genres such as written examinations, term papers, and persuasive essays. Thompson (2001) pointed out that persuasive writing in English is particularly problematic for non-native speakers who are often both linguistically and rhetorically inexperienced. In the same line, Tanko and Tamasi (2008) reported that research on persuasive texts to university students has become a major concern for people in tertiary educational institutions where little research, in general, and empirical research, in particular, is available. Research on students’ persuasive writing is relatively little compared to descriptive, narrative, and expository writing (Stephens, 2003). These studies suggest that students experience difficulty at the above-sentence level related to constructing claims appropriately (Hyland & Milton, 1997; Hinkel, 2004). This difficulty arises when EFL writers try to take a particular position on a usually arguable topic and attempts to persuade the readers to adopt that position. Based on the situation, the writer may resort to detach or weaken the force of the claims through the use of hedges or show confidence or certainty through the use of boosters. Hedges and boosters play a vital role in constructing appropriate stance when arguing a particular point of view. Any overuse or misuse of these two markers would result in a distortion of the value of the claim being presented.
Genre of Persuasive Essay

Intaraprawat (2002) defines persuasive essay writing as a kind of writing which attempts to persuade someone of something. The genre of persuasive essay writing entails a controversial issue in which the writer attempts to persuade his readers to agree or disagree with his point of view. Writers can successfully reach their readers through the features of metadiscourse markers. As stated by Williams (1981), metadiscourse provides a way of talking to the readers to make the text easier to perceive. Hyland (2004) stated that hedges and boosters can be recognized as two important features which play a vital role in producing persuasive writing. As a result, writers of EFL need to construct their claims with appropriate degree of hedges and boosters to make their readers accept what they believe in. To achieve this purpose, hedges and boosters are essential features, if appropriately used, which support the writer’s opinion and build writer-reader relationship. The opinion presented in the genre of persuasiveness is often associated with an indication of the writer’s degree of probability and certainty to his/her claims presented. To attain readers’ persuasion and acceptance, writers should make a balance between hedges and boosters (Hyland, 1998a).

Hedges and Boosters

The term ‘hedge’ was first introduced by Lakoff (1972) to refer to words or expressions which make meaning fuzzy or fuzzier. Unlike hedges, boosters stand at the other end of the extreme whereby the writer expresses his confidence and certainty in a claim. Holmes (1982b) and Salager-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 find support from 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 (1998d) stressed that boosters play important role if used in appropriate way in the text of persuasive writing.

Although most studies on hedges and boosters focus on spoken discourse of native speakers, a few studies have addressed this issue in EFL writing context (Shengming, 2009). Existing research on hedges and boosters indicate that these two markers received little attention in the EFL written discourse. The majority of previous studies on hedges and boosters mainly focused on native speakers of English, particularly on science research articles (Hyland, 1994, 1996a, 1999; Dafou-Miline, 2008; Hinkel, 2004 & Vold, 2006). Hedges and boosters used by EFL learners in their written discourse have been overlooked. This negligence has been acknowledged by Hinkel (2005), Lee (2006 & 2008) and Shengming (2009) that studies on hedges and boosters in EFL writing context are quite few.

Existing experimental research on hedges and boosters are notably little (Wishnoff, 2000; Crawford, 2003; Hinkel, 2005; Alireza et al., 2007; Martinez et al., 2008; Wu, 2008; Paravaresh et al., & 2008 & Kong, 2009). Therefore, the significance of this study has evolved from a recurrent problem that Yemeni EFL undergraduate students overuse and/or misuse hedges and boosters in their writing though they have a good level of linguistic competency. Writing, in general, and persuasive writing, in particular, involves more than just learning sounds, grammar, vocabularies, sentence patterns, and composition mechanics. As stated by Paravaresh and Nemati (2008), students can write better only when they are aware that texts consist of both the propositional and the metadiscourse markers. Thus, the writer’s goal is not only supplying information about the subject (i.e. text) but also representing his/her relation to readers and this is largely accomplished by the interactional metadiscourse markers.

Method

Sample

Forty undergraduate students (14 male and 26 female) enrolled in the Second Semester, 2010 were randomly selected from level three at the English Department, Sana’a University. All participants are native speakers of Arabic and their ages range between 22 and 25 years. They are relatively homogeneous in terms of their cultural background and academic education.

Instrument: pre- and post test

The instrument consists of pre- and post test writing task of persuasive essay. The open-ended writing was recommended by researchers as a valid instrument to collect such type of data (Oller, 1983; Hy-
land & Milton, 1997; Cumming et al., 2005 & Gebril, 2006 & Plakans, 2008). Thus, a persuasive essay was given to forty participants to write. The time given for the persuasive essay was one hour. The assigned task was modeled on almost similar writing task administered by the English Department, or that found in many writing textbooks. The writing task is given below:

“Write a persuasive essay not of more than 250 words in which you support your view that considers the Internet as a blessing or a curse. You should organize, demonstrate, and express your ideas in a persuasive manner so that others will agree with you. Imagine that your essay will be posted in an international website.”

**Treatment course**

Forty participants were divided into two groups: Twenty students in the experimental group (EG) and the other twenty in the control group (CG). Both the EG and the CG were then given the pre-test. Subsequently, the EG received 15 contact hours of direct teaching on hedges and boosters and the CG did not receive any training. The teaching materials on hedges and boosters were selected from the following textbooks: Academic writing for graduate students: A course for non-native speakers of English (Swales & Feak, 1994), Teaching academic EFL writing (Hinkel, 2004); English for academic purposes (Jordon, 1997) and Study writing: a course in writing skills for academic purposes (Hamp-Lyons, et al., 2006). These textbooks include substantial sections on different types of hedges and boosters in formal written texts and detailed classifications that could be taught to EFL learners at any level of proficiency.

The treatment course was carried out on the basis of the integration of the teaching-learning cycle created by Hyland (2003). As shown in Figure 1 below, teaching materials on hedges and boosters took students through three stages integrated in the genre-based lesson plan (see Appendix 1). First, the genre of the persuasive essay was explained. The lecturer defined the concept of hedging and boosting with illustrative examples. Then, students were given explanation for various types and functions of hedges and boosters. They were shown how to support their claims with examples, facts, evidence and opinions. This stage was called the presentation stage. The lecturer provided model texts and asked students to locate hedges and boosters and determine to which category they belong. This was the practice stage. The last stage was the production stage in which participants were given to write independently a persuasive essay.

![Figure 1. The teaching learning cycle (Hyland, 2003, P. 21)](image)

**The Post test**

Both the EG and the CG took the post-test in the same writing task. The instructions and procedures were the same given for the pre-test session. All participants were able to write on the task within the time allowed and seemed to have understood the task requirements. For purpose of validity, participants had not been informed about the focus of the study.
Inter-rater reliability and scoring scheme

Inter-rater reliability refers to the extent of agreement of two or more raters on a particular rating assessment. To establish a solid inter-rater reliability, the scripts of the pre-test and post-test were marked by three raters using EFL composition profile (Jacobs et al., 1981). Weigle (2002) indicated that the analytic rating scale created by Jacobs et al. (1981) is more reliable than holistic rating scale. Yet, rating these two tasks precisely may vary from rater to another because there is a plausible fluctuation in judgments (Gamaroff, 2000). To overcome this problem, researchers recommended that more than one rater can be assigned (Gamaroff, 2000). Therefore, three raters including the researcher were assigned to rate the participants' scripts. Following the rating process, each student's score was averaged to create a single score. The final score of the tests were the mean scores of the three raters. To determine the inter-rater reliability on the tests, Cronbach’s Alpha was used. The inter-rater reliability yielded high significant reliability of .95 for the scoring.

Data Analysis

The main purpose of this study is to examine effect of explicit intervention on hedges and boosters used by Yemeni EFL writers. To achieve this goal, the pre- and post-test of the experimental group and control group were first rated by three raters using Jacobs et al., (1981) scale to obtain the mean score of each task. Following this technique, the post test of the two groups was compared with the pre-test using the Paired Sample T-test. The second technique was to correlate the quantity of hedges and boosters in each task with students' scores. To achieve this, the application of the Paired Sample T-Test again was run to determine whether there is a significant difference between the overall quantity of hedges and boosters and students’ performance after the treatment course.

Results

Results of the essay rating of the Control Group

To begin with, the pre- and post-test of the control group were assessed by three raters using Jacob’s et al. (1981) scoring scheme. Then, the mean score of each task was obtained to see how each learner performed on his/her pre- and post-test writing. To determine the difference between the two tests, the results of the students' pre-test and post-test were compared through Paired Sample T-test. Table 1 below presents the mean scores of the writing quality of the pre-test and post-test of the control group.

Table 1: T-test comparing the mean scores of the writing quality of the control group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df.</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persuasive Essay:</td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-1.50</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>-1.44</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.165</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 1 indicates, the results of the pre-test and post-test of the control group is not significantly different (M=-1.50 SD=4.65), t (-1.44), P>.05. This result implies that students of the control group did not make any improvement as they were not exposed to course treatment.

Results of hedges and boosters of the control group

The results of hedges and boosters are presented in Table 2 below. From the table, the frequency of hedges and boosters is not much different in the pre-test and post-test. For example, the frequency of hedges dropped slightly from 599 in the pre-test to 573 items in the post-test. Similarly, boosters dropped from 372 in the pre-test to 338 in the post-test.
Table 2: Number of hedges and boosters used in the pre-and post-test of the CG

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hedges</td>
<td>Boosters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>599</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To determine whether hedges and boosters are significantly different, the results are presented in Table 3 below. The frequency of hedges and boosters in the pre-test and post-test of the control group were compared, using Paired Sample T-test. The results clearly show that the difference between the pre-test and post-test is not significantly different (M=70, 68 SD=14, 13), t (581), P>.05. This means participants in the control group, who did not receive any treatment, did not make an improvement.

Table 3: T-test of the pre- and post-test on the use of hedges and boosters by the CG

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>.581</td>
<td>.568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extracts from the pre-test and post-test of the CG

This section provides examples randomly selected from parts of the pre-test and post-test of the persuasive essays. Hedges were marked by single line while boosters were marked by double line.

Pre-test: Introduction

Ex. 1: “There are a lot of technology appears every day. Some of them useful and others are useless. Computer is one of the new technologies which included the Internet. Internet is a great achievement that has many advantages and disadvantages.”

Post-test:

Ex. 2: “Many technologies are appeared everyday and the one of them is computer. Computer has many inventions such as Internet. Internet is a great invention which has two sides, advantages and disadvantages.”

Pre-test: Body

Ex. 3: “Many disadvantages you will find in Internet for example: it causes some diseases like hurt the eyes. And some people have a dangerous disease as fat. In addition to some users use Internet in the most of day. So he will be a demoted person.”

Post-test:

Ex. 4: “Advantages of Internet are a lot and very important. Internet will affect on adults by many ways. The first way affects on their body like: hurt their eyes. They will be fat because they set most of the time in front of the computer to use Internet. The second effects on their minds when use it much.”

Pre-test-Conclusion:

Ex. 5: “In my point of view, internet is very important but who says not I’m sure he use it in a wrong way I mean carelessness of it’s advantages.”
Post-test:

**Ex. 6:** “In brief, Internet is a very important thing in our life and we can find whatever we want of information or entertainment by a right use not wrong use.”

The first plural singular personal pronouns were found common in the essay. The pronoun ‘we’ is associated with “collective identity” in that writers seek to get agreement from readers that their claims are true. Examples of ‘We’ are given below:

Inclusive ‘We’ as a writer-reader interpersonal marker

**Ex. 7:** “Many believe that internet makes people lazier, but we are at the twentieth first century. We need to be fast. Everything around us is moving fast so we need to keep up. Internet is facilitating things for people not making them lazy.”

Students were not aware of how to make distinction between the function of the pronouns reference. It has been noted that a combination of the singular and plural pronominal reference has been employed. Harwood (2005c) argues that pronouns are not only extensively used in NNS writing, but very often writers alternate between the use of the first singular ‘I’ and first plural ‘we’ in the same extract. Hyland and Milton (1997) noted that the use of personalized forms does not in itself indicate inappropriate tone; yet their frequencies, and informality in the EFL essays suggests a comparative lack of control of this genre. The finding of this study indicates that students are not systematic in their use of pronouns. The two examples below involve inappropriate shift between the first person singular and the first person plural.

**Ex. 8:** “Some people say that we have advantages more than disadvantages, but I am sure that we can control it; it will be helpful more than harmful”.

**Ex. 9:** “When one of our doctors asked me to do a research. I always look for books that I can use them, but I can’t find any. I turned over to the internet and look for the information that I need.”

Results of the essay rating of the experimental group

Results of the rating of the persuasive essay are given in Table 4 below. As indicated, it shows a statistically significant differences between the pre-test and post-test (M= 71, 75, SD=10, 9), t(31, 36), p<.05. This means that writing produced in the post-test was better than the writing produced in the pre-test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Sig.(2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre treatment test</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post treatment test</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results of hedges and boosters in the essay of the experimental group

Table 5 below provides the overall counts of hedges and boosters in the pre-test and the post-test of the essay of the EG. The results indicate that the frequency of hedges dropped from 467 in the pre-test to 288 in the post-test. Boosters, on the hand, dropped from 361 in the pre-test to 243 in the post-test.
To test whether a significant difference could exist between the pre-test and the post-test, Paired Sample t-test was conducted. Table 6 below presents the statistical results of the frequency of hedges and boosters in the persuasive essay. It indicates that there is a somehow significant difference between the two tests (M= 62, 60, SD=13, 12), t(2), p<.05.

Table 5: Hedges and boosters used in the pre- and post-test of the EG

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hedges</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boosters</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Hedges and boosters in the essay of the pre- and post-test of the EG

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The examples below involve hedges and boosters used in the pre- and post-test of the EG. Hedges are marked by single line while boosters are marked by double line. These examples show how students use hedges and boosters before and after the post- treatment test.

Participant #1 Introduction:
Pre-test

Ex. 10: “Nowadays technology is playing an important role in people life. The world is becoming a small village as we all know, and the Internet is playing the most obvious role in making this statement true. Definitely Internet is a blessing for many reasons.”

Post-test

Ex. 11: “Internet for the last twenty years has played an important part in modern humankind’s life. Internet plays a great role in the development of life. It makes the world as a small village and saves our time. Internet is considered to be one of the most easiest and fastest way of communication. Although Internet has its advantages, it has disadvantages.”

Participant #2 Body:
Pre-test

Ex. 12: “As internet has advantages, it has also disadvantages. For instance, people consider it as something which is available. They use it as if they find themselves like it. but actually they use it to open violent games for children for having fun.”

Post-test

Ex. 13: “Although internet has many positive elements, it has also negative elements. Many people use it in a wrong way as chatting rooms, opening websites which includes programs for children like violent games and furious websites.”
Participant #3 Conclusion:

Pre-test

Ex. 14: “In brief, internet is useful in communication, education, medicine and many other things. We cannot deny that internet makes our life easier and more comfortable.”

Post-test

Ex. 15: “In conclusion, internet has a positive effect on our life if we benefited from it properly in different fields like business, information and communication.”

After an explicit instruction on hedges and boosters through genre-moves of the essay, students’ showed their control of the genre. Table 7 below shows how a female participant developed her essay by stages or moves presented by Hyland (1990).

Table 7: Genre of the structure of the persuasive essay proposed by Hyland (1990)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Move</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage I: The Thesis Statement:</td>
<td>Internet has become important means in human life. Internet has its advantages and disadvantages. It has been used for many useful things like emails, shopping, entertainment, and others. Although internet has many advantages, it has many other disadvantages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage II: The Argument</td>
<td>Internet has become important means in human life. It has its own advantages and disadvantages. It has been used for many useful things like emails, shopping, entertainment, and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage III: The Conclusion</td>
<td>To sum up, Internet has advantages and disadvantages depending on the users. So, it is like weapon with two edges if we use it properly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the results of this study, the participants of the experimental group made an improvement in their post-test writing. The use of hedges and boosters by the EG was used more effectively and sparingly compared to the hedges and boosters used by the CG. The overall drop of hedges and boosters in this study implies that students utilized from the treatment course. The findings of this study is not similar to Wishnoff's (2000) that hedges were found higher in his experimental study. However, Jordan (1997) argues that hedges and boosters should be used sparingly or avoided altogether in academic writing. Therefore, the difference between the findings of this study and Wishnoff's was supported by Archibald (2001) that L2 writing is a complex skill in which the findings may vary from one another depending on the task at hand.

To sum up, it can thus be concluded that the findings of this study supports the view that explicit instruction designed to promote a pragmatic improvement seems to be powerful and beneficial for EFL learners (Schmidt, 1993; Jung, 2001; Perez-L1antada 2003; Simin & Tavangar, 2009).

References


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Harwood, N. (2005c). ‘We do not seem to have a theory ... The theory I present here attempts to fill this gap’: Inclusive and exclusive pronouns in academic writing. Applied Linguistics 26(3), 343-375.


Appendix 1 Lesson Plan

Teacher's Name _____ Ali Alward ______ Date : 08-05-2010 ______ Room : 3.5

Subject: Genre of Persuasive Essay
Level: 3rd Year Bachelor Students

Objectives:

At the end of the session, the students will be able to:

- identify the structure of the genre of the persuasive essay.
- Identify the features of each generic structure or stage of the essay.
- identify the linguistic features (i.e. hedges and boosters) in the moves of the essay.

Time frame: One Hour

Venue: Room 3.5

Materials: Computer projector, teaching materials

Procedures:

1. Modeling the text (presentation Stage) ______ Time spent: 20 m
   1. Expose students to the model of the persuasive essay.
   2. Give students explanation on the nature of the genre of the persuasive essay.
   3. Ask students to explore the moves or generic structure of the essay.
   4. Ask students to explore hedges and boosters across the genre-moves of the essay.
   5. Ask students to list hedges and boosters in the sample given and present the results to the class.

2. Joint construction (Practice stage) ______ Time spent: 20m
   1. Ask students to write a persuasive essay.
   2. Guide the students on constructing their claims appropriately.
   3. Examine carefully each claim across the whole text.
   4. Get the students to read and ask them to learn some important features of the text.
3. Independent construction (production stage)  Time spent: 20m

1. Ask students to write a persuasive essay cooperatively.
2. Get the students to construct their claims properly.
3. Ask the students to draft their essays.
4. After revising, have the students prepare a student-student discussion.
5. Ask the students to submit their revised tasks to the teacher.