

Investigating the Use of Hedges in Iraqi EFL College Students' Essay Writing

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Abstract

Although academic writing is an objective and factual writing, hedges can appear and be used in such writing. In fact, hedges can be considered as a significant feature in such academic writing. The following study is an attempt to explore the awareness of Iraqi EFL college students of hedges usage in their essay writing. The following study follows a comparative method of analyzing the essays of the students. The study is focused on analyzing the essays of the students at the third stage. The result shows that a little number of students uses some of the hedge devices, whereas a decent amount of students do not focus on hedges in their essays writing.

Keywords: hedges, awareness, essay writing

1. Introduction

One of the most interesting topics to investigate is hedges and their usage in written language. Although many researches were written on the topic of hedges, but such researches focused on larger types of discourse such as research journals and articles. Student's essays are not so much focused on when it comes to hedges. In other words, student's articles do not get much attention when it comes to investigate hedges. According to Wales (2014, p. 197) a hedge is a term that is used in discourse analysis and the field of speech act theory. It is defined as a way that the writer uses to tone down his statement or utterance. In everyday life, hedges are also used in people's communication. This can be achieved by the usage of modality and the usage of adjectives, so as to lessen the riskiness of what they say.

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The aim of this research is to investigate the awareness and the degree of usage of hedges among the essays of Iraqi EFL college students.

The hypothesis is that most Iraqi EFL college students do not focus so much on hedges; their essays lack the usage of such tools.

This study is limited to investigate the essay writing of the Iraqi EFL college students at the third stage at the University of Baghdad, College of Education-Ibn Rushd, and AL- Mustansiryiah University, College of Basic Education for the year 2018-2019.

This study is important not only for EFL college students, but also for EFL college instructors. That is because it sheds the light on a topic that is not so much investigated . It is hoped that this research could bring a type of understanding to such topic.

1.2 What is a Hedge?

Markkanen and Schröder (1997, p. 3) illustrate the idea of hedges by giving Collins (1987) definition of hedges which says that if someone wanted to protect himself from something that is unwanted or unpleasant then he will shield himself to guard himself from this thing. On the same basis, in linguistics, if someone wanted to avoid a question, problem or not to commit himself to a specific decision, then he will use a protective shield to hedge himself.

According to Johnstone (2018, p. 162) hedges are defined as different ways that one can use to reduce or minimize the certainty level that is claimed by an utterance, some of the examples would be 'I think', 'I guess', and 'sort of'. In addition, Johnstone (2018, p. 255) explains further by saying that hedges are defined as ways and strategies that one can use to make him distance or away from the meaning of an utterance. Modal verbs are one of these strategies, tag questions are also considered as another strategy of hedging. The following is an example of a tag question:

1- "This is the place to turn, isn't it?"

Modal verbs are also used to function as hedges, for example:

2- "That might be a good idea"

Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 145) also define hedges as phrase or a word that modifies or adjusts the degree or the level of a noun phrase or predicate in a set .Put it in another way, hedges can be used to say that a certain expression is true in certain respects, or it can be used to say that the level or the degree of an expression is truer than one might expect.

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An example of this would be:

3- “*You are quite right*”.

Yule (2010, p. 148) says that people use various kinds of expressions, and these expressions are called hedges. Such expressions are used by people to show that they are paying attention to the four maxims while being co-operative participants in conversation. He defines hedges as a type of words or phrases that are used by people to show the other people that what is being uttered is not sufficiently complete or correct. In other words, the person who says something can use hedges to let people know that he is not sure about what he is saying, or that what he is saying is not necessarily complete or correct. People can use different types of hedges expressions like “kind of” or “sort of” to clarify the degree of the accuracy of their statements, for example:

4- “*His hair was kind of long*”.

The above example contains an expression of a hedge. Other types of expressions are sometimes used by people when they begin their conversational contributions to indicate that what they are saying is possibly –not certain- and may –not must- will happen. An example of this would be “*i think*”.

1.3 Lowering Fuzziness

Piotti (2014, p. 21) says that, in the work of Lakoff, another interesting view about hedges is that one can use such devices to decrease the fuzziness of a statement. Such thing is true when the conceptual accuracy is required, but the limitation of the language concepts is considered not to be precise to make the precise presentation of reality. In this respect, Burns (1991, p. 8, as cited in Piotti (2014, p. 21) clarifies this phenomenon by saying that sometimes, one is faced by cases in which a predicate applies for one end and fails at another, but one remains unsure what to say about the in between cases.

Brown (1995, p. 10 as cited in Piotti (2014, p. 21) explains that in the science field, conceptual categories of the language are not always capable of revealing or showing the complexity of a phenomenon. Therefore, writers and speakers use the linguistics items of hedges. An example of ‘vegetable’ is given by Lakoff (1973, p. 459 as cited in Piotti (2014, p. 21) to exemplify this matter. In fact, this example holds different layers. In other words, the vegetable example can show different levels of representation. One can notice this if he looked carefully at those two statements:

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5- Carrots are vegetables

6- Pickles are vegetables

It will be obvious that one statement will be more representative than the other. In the above examples, it is clear that carrot can represent the category of vegetable more than pickles do. However, if one is required to be more accurate, then he will need to focus on the peripheral and not the central representation of the category. Varttala (1997, p. 9, as cited in Piotti (2014, p. 21) says that the conceptualization can be hedged. in other words, a good solution is to use hedges to represent the Pickle as in:

7- "*Pickles can be viewed as vegetables*".

1.4 Academic Writing and Hedges

Hyland (1998, p. 6) says that although there is a common belief that the academic and scientific writing is considered as a serious or a group of objective statements that connect only to the truth, hedges can be found in such writing. He also says that hedges are found in a huge amount and can play an important and significant role in such academic writing.

Hyland explains that the usage of hedges is important in the academic writing because even the most guaranteed scientific suggestions have a specific period for their acceptance. In academic writing, one does some measuring and weighing. This can be seen since one brings evidences and then must weigh these evidences. After that, one must reach and draw conclusions from the examined data so as the others accept these conclusions .Nash (1990, p. 10, as cited in Hyland (1998, p. 6) support Hyland by saying that in academic writing, the writer criticizes and evaluates the data and the information that he is putting in an accurate, objective and a fully way. He continuous by saying that for centuries, the aim of academic writing was to give objective facts and subjective evaluations.

Hyland (1998, p. 6) argues that academic writing requires explicatory statements. This is because it is a type of writing that is crucially concerned with various verities of cognition, and cognition is hedged; because the writer provides and delivers assessments to the information which he writes. Instead of providing information that are objective, impersonal or factual, an effective academic writing relies on various ways that show or present argumentation to the information to highlight the writers own opinions and informs the readers about these opinions. Therefore, hedges in academic writing are ways of introducing new claims or information for ratifications.

Hedges are also considered as a major feature that makes the research articles. Hedges make the writer capable of expressing a viewpoint on the

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information that he provides, hedges also make the writer capable of presenting unproven information but in a cautious way. In addition, hedges create a type of dialogue between the writer and the readers. (Hyland, 1998, p. 6)

1.5 Hedges and Disciplines

As it was explained above, in academic writing, hedges appear. An interesting thing to ask is what the rates of such hedges across different disciplines?

In his comparison between various research articles in soft sciences and hard sciences, Hyland (2005, p. 145) says that the category of hedges appears in both hard and soft fields. However, the category of hedges appears more frequently in soft fields. This is because soft sciences are more interpretive than hard sciences. Hyland continues by saying that writers, in soft sciences, are required to redirect the readers to enter in various negotiations about the arguments that appears in the soft sciences. Such thing creates a space for the readers to discuss and give different interpretations for the different arguments. The fact that the results in the soft sciences are more open to various interpretations puts the writer in a position where he must work harder to show that his views and arguments are more significant than the other interpretations that the readers make.

One may ask why there are more hedges in the soft fields. Hyland says that one of the reasons that hedges are more frequent in the soft fields is that the writers cannot express or report the results of the research with full confidence or with the similar assurance of shared assumptions. In soft disciplines, writers need to put their arguments in a careful way, and this can be achieved by the usage of hedges. (Hyland, 2005, p. 146)

This is for the usage of hedges in the soft fields, as for the hard sciences, Hyland continues by arguing that those writers who write for hard sciences disguise themselves behind the text. In other words, writers often use the objectivity to cover their interpretative actions. One way to minimize and reduce the researcher role in the research is to minimize the use of hedges. (Hyland 2005, p. 147)

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1.6 Hedges Classification

Piotti (2014, p. 32) says that the researcher Myers -in his research about the usage of politeness in academic articles in the science of biology- was one of the earliest people who tried to offer a classification of hedges. He based his work on the work of brown and Levinson. Myers made a list of hedges devices that are available in English. Myers (1980, p. 20, as cited in Piotti, 2014, p. 32-33) included various devices, these include:

- 1- Syntactic and Lexical items, like modal verbs'.
- 2- Modifiers like 'probably and plausibly'.
- 3- Non-factive verbs usage like 'suggest'.
- 4- Avoiding the use of statements that go with 'the verb to be'.
- 5- The usage of expressions such as 'it is unlikely'.
- 6- The usage of personal attribution like 'I would like to'.
- 7- The usage of impersonal attribution like 'the findings, the results'.
- 8- Using apologies 'I hope that those... forgive me'.

Piotti (2014, p. 33) continues by saying that Myers appears to show that lexical items are the types of hedges that appear in scientific texts. Likewise, Hyland (1994, p. 245, as cited in Piotti (2014, p. 33), says that when hedges are used by native speakers to express tentativeness and doubt, the choice will mainly fall on lexical items. Also, Hyland says that although it is hard or perhaps impossible to provide a complete taxonomy of the lexical items of hedges, these lexical items can be identified through an inspection of the literature on hedges and examining authentic texts. All in all, Hyland says that these collections of lexical items represent five prototypical classes such as:

- 1- Nouns such as 'idea and notion'.
- 2- Main verbs such as 'believe and argue'.
- 3- Adjectives such as 'probably and potential'.
- 4- Adverbs such as 'perhaps and possibly'.
- 5- Modal auxiliaries such as 'may'.

Piotti (2014, p. 35) says there are number of factors that determines what hedges are. Clemen (1997, p. 243, as cited in Piotti (2014, p. 35) says that such types of factors include the intention of the writer or the speaker, the background knowledge of the speakers, discourse type, and the colloquial situation. Therefore, Piotti (2014, p. 35) says that a detailed contextual examination and analysis is required to recognize what can be known as a hedge and label it as a hedge.

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2. Methodology

The following section is the practical side of the study; this section explains the type of the procedure which was used in the analysis. It also shows the number of the essays that were investigated and the instrument that was used to get these essays. Hyland (2005b) model was used to identify the hedges devices.

2.1 Procedures

The following study is one which is based on quantitative -descriptive approach in the analysis of the data. In other words, students were asked to write essays on a particular subject, and then these essays were collected, examined and investigated to count the number of occurrence of hedges in these essays.

2.2 Participants

As it was stated above, this study is based on the essays of the students as a material for the analysis. The essays of the students were collected, checked and analyzed. The students' writings were carefully examined and investigated to show the frequency appearance of hedges. The total number of the essays that were examined is 40. Twenty students' essays were taken from Ibn Rushd-college of Education-University of Baghdad, and the other twenty essays were taken from students who study at the college of Basic Education at AL- Mustansiriyah University. The essays were selected randomly from the third year students for the year 2018-2019. The reason for choosing two different colleges is to examine the percentage of hedges usage between the students of these two colleges.

2.3 Research Instrument

The examined data are the students' essays. Students of the two colleges were asked to write an essay and to give their opinions on particular topics in the essay they write. Students wrote descriptive essays about their favourite teacher in the college and why they consider him/her their favorite one, or place that they have recently visited and liked, and what are the reasons that made them like this place. Students were asked to write their essays in a monthly exam situation. The reason for this is to get the most accurate and authentic opinions from the students.

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2.4 Data Analysis

The below table shows the various types of the hedge devices that were focused on in analyzing the students essays. As the table shows there is a huge lack in the usage of these devices in the student's essays. In addition, it seems that some of the devices such as (may, could) appear a little bit more than the other devices. The hedge device 'may' seems to have the highest occurrence among the devices with a rate of (45%). The reason that the percentage of 'may' is more than might indicates the preference of the students when it comes to choose from two similar words. One can also notice that other devices such as (probable, possible, possibly, probably, likely and perhaps) are not used by students from both colleges. A reason for this may stem from the fact that students are not familiar with such heavy words in their essay writing, the reliance is more on the easiest words such as 'may' 'might' 'can' and 'could'. All in all, the results show that students at Ibn-Rushd College tend to use hedges a little bit more than the students at the College of Basic Education. However, the percentage at both colleges remains at a low level.

	Hedges	<i>Basic Education</i>		<i>Ibn-Rushd</i>		Total	Percentage
		<i>No.</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>percentage</i>		
Modal Verbs	<i>could</i>	5	25%	7	35%	12	30%
	<i>may</i>	8	40%	10	50%	18	45%
	<i>might</i>	2	10%	4	20%	6	15%
	<i>should</i>	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	<i>would</i>	5	25%	3	15%	8	20%
	<i>will</i>	0	0%	2	10%	2	5%
	Adjectives	<i>possible</i>	0	0%	0	0%	0
<i>probable</i>		0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
<i>likely</i>		0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Adverbs	<i>perhaps</i>	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	<i>possibly</i>	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	<i>probably</i>	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	<i>usually</i>	2	10%	2	10%	4	10%

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Table (1): The percentage of hedges at the two colleges

2.5 Discussion

After analyzing the essays of the third year students, the result showed a lack in the usage of hedges devices in their essays. As it can be seen, a very small number of devices were used in the essays. This thing gives an indication that most of the students who are supposed to be at higher academic level are not aware of the function that these devices add to the text. In other words, one can see that most of the students do not focus on hedges devices, although these devices help in covering their writing when they give their opinions about a particular subject. In addition, with the help of such devices, they can approach the topics they are writing about in a careful way; especially if they were supposed to talk about topics that involve complex issues that require different opinions for their solutions. However, in writing the essays, some of the students used some of the well-known modal verbs to represent their ideas about the topic which they were supposed to talk about.

It is worth knowing that a small number of the students were able to use some modal verbs as a hedge device, an example of this would be:

- *The teacher used this method in teaching. This method may be good than the other methods.*
- *Such type of understanding usually results from good planning to the lesson.*
- *People might be wrong about their opinions of this restaurant.*
- *This type of events could make people visit the zoo a lot.*
- *People say that such type of teaching would results in better outcomes.*
- *Some say that this park will be a good tourist destination.*

But it remains unsure whether those students used these modal devices knowing that they would function as hedge devices or just a matter of coincidence, a further investigation is required.

2.6 Conclusion

This current study was focused on the investigation of the usage of hedges devices in the essays of the university students; more specifically it was directed toward seeing if these students are aware of such devices in their writing. The results of this study showed that there is a low understanding of these devices among the university students. There is a lack in the usage of these devices between the university students. In addition, it is also noticed that a little number of students used some of these devices. There is a

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tendency to rely on some of the well-known devices such as the modal verbs. Another subsidiary issue is that the students essays are repetitive in its content, in other words, students rely on previously memorized essays to write their essays. Such thing would prevent them from giving their opinions and expressing themselves.

All in all, these results mean that there is a little focus on this topic in essay writing classes. Students need to be more enlightened about this topic. Moreover, students need to be more confident in their writing abilities and not to be afraid to express their opinions. Knowing the benefit of using hedges devices and the implementation of these devices will help the students in giving their writing the appropriate weigh and evaluation. One of the suggestions is that it would be really helpful to arrange workshops in the universities to highlight the importance of how to be a highly effective writer by giving the students the secrets and the strategies that lead them to be so. By doing so, students can take a step further; they can evolve and have the confidence to express their views and ideas in more upper and advanced types of academic writing such as researches, theses and dissertations.

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التحقيق في استخدام التحوط في كتابة المقالة للطلاب العراقيين المتعلمين
للغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية

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المستخلص

على الرغم من ان الكتابة الاكاديمية هي كتابة موضوعية وواقعية، الا ان التحوطات يمكن ان تظهر وتستخدم في مثل هكذا كتابة. في الواقع، يمكن اعتبار التحوط ميزة هامة في الكتابة الاكاديمية. الدراسة الحالية هي محاولة لاستكشاف الوعي لدى الطلاب المتعلمين للغة الانكليزية كلغة ثانية لاستخدامهم التحوطات في مقالاتهم. تتبع الدراسة الحالية طريقة مقارنة لتحليل مقالات الطلاب. تركز الدراسة على تحليل مقالات الطلاب في المرحلة الثالثة. اظهرت النتائج ان عددا قليلا من الطلاب يستخدمون بعضاً من ادوات التحوط، بينما عدد لا باس به منهم لا يركزون على هذه الادوات في كتابات مقالاتهم

المصطلحات الرئيسية للبحث / تحوطات، الوعي، كتابة المقالات