

## **Hedging, Inflating, and Persuading in L2 Academic Writing**

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*This study analyzes the types and frequencies of hedges and intensifiers employed in NS and NNS academic essays included in a corpus of L1 and L2 student academic texts (745 essays/220,747 words). The overarching goal of this investigation is to focus on these lexical and syntactic features of written discourse because they effectively lend themselves to instruction in L2 academic writing courses.*

*The research discussed in this paper compares the NS and NNS frequencies of uses of various types of hedging devices and intensifiers in written academic prose: epistemic hedges (normally, relatively), lexical hedges (more or less, most), possibility hedges (in case, hopefully), down toners (a bit, simply), assertive pronouns (anyone, somebody), and adverbs of frequency (frequently, usually). In addition, the analysis also includes intensifiers, such as universal and negative pronouns (all, nothing), amplifiers (a lot, forever), and emphatics (extreme/-ly/, total/-ly/).*

*A detailed examination of median frequency rates of hedges and intensifiers in NS and NNS academic essays point to the fact that L2 writers employ a severely limited range of hedging devices, largely associated with conversational discourse and casual spoken interactions. These findings are further supported by a prevalence of conversational intensifiers and overstatements that are ubiquitous in informal speech but are rare in formal written prose.*

Research into the meanings and uses of hedging and intensifying devices in English saw its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, when a large number of publications emerged to discuss their functions in written and spoken discourse (e.g., Chafe, 1985, 1986; Chafe & Danielewicz, 1987; Hermeren, 1978; Huebler, 1983; Holmes, 1984). In pragmatics, research into various types of hedges has been primarily associated with politeness, vagueness, hesitation, uncertainty, and indirectness. The terms hedges and hedging generally refer to a large class of lexical and syntactic features of text that have the goal of modifying and mitigating a proposition (Leech, 1983; Levinson, 1983; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985).

In the 1990s, research on hedging emerged to account for the meanings, uses, and functions of politeness, vagueness, and mitigation in academic writing and other types of discourse. Many studies were based on the analyses of large written and spoken corpora of English, and to date, much has been learned about the uses of various hedging devices in written academic prose (Hoye, 1997; Kay, 1997; Pagano, 1994). In written text, hedging represents the employment of lexical and syntactic means of decreasing the writer's responsibility for the extent and the truth-value of propositions and claims, displaying hesitation, uncertainty, indirectness, and/or politeness to reduce the imposition on the reader (Hinkel, 1997; Swales, 1990; Swales & Feak, 1994).

In Anglo-American written academic prose, hedges are considered to be requisite with the general purpose of projecting "honesty, modesty, proper caution," and diplomacy (Swales, 1990, p. 174). According to Myers (1989), the uses of hedging are highly conventionalized in academic writing and appear to be particularly necessary in texts that include claim-making and/or expressing personal positions or points of view. However, the appropriateness of various types of hedges in specific contexts crucially depends on the norms of a particular discourse community (Swales, 1990). For instance, Stubbs (1996) found that the frequency of hedges in written prose differs substantially between such genre as newspaper news or travel reports, academic texts, and printed advertising. Channell (1994, p. 17) explains that in the academic and scientific communities, hedges have the function of face-saving devices to "shield" the writer from the commitment of the truth-value of the proposition. She emphasizes that L2 writers need to be specifically taught how to use hedging appropriately and to their best advantage.

In formal academic writing, hedging propositions and claims can take many forms, including the most common devices, such as epistemic hedges (*according to, actually*), lexical hedges (*about, in a way*), possibility hedges (*by chance, perhaps*), or vague indefinite pronouns (*someone, anything*). Similarly, intensifiers, e.g., universal pronouns (*nobody, everything*), amplifiers (*awfully, highly*), and emphatics (*exact, total*), are ubiquitous in spoken discourse and particularly in casual conversations (Brazil, 1995).

On the other hand, research on intensifiers has identified them as prevalent features of spoken and conversational discourse that have the function of heightening or lowering the effect of sentence elements or entire propositions (Leech, 1983; Quirk, et al., 1985), e.g., a definite truth, a great failure, a complete success. Like hedges, intensifiers can include a variety of lexico-syntactic devices, but most are associated with adjectival or adverbial modifying functions. In discourse, intensifiers have the function of exaggerating the actual state of affairs, reinforcing the truth value of the proposition, or emphasizing a part of or the entirety of a claim (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Levinson, 1983). In various languages, including English, the textual functions of intensifiers are not always dissimilar to those of hedges, when intensifiers serve to project added politeness, sincerity, and truthfulness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Quirk, et al., 1985), e.g., *you were a great help, and I am really thankful*. In English,

as well as in many other languages, hedges and intensifiers are numerous and their meanings and contextual functions are usually complex.

A number of studies have also shown, for instance, that intensifiers are largely associated with the informal register and can be relatively rare in written academic text. In fact, Channell (1994, p. 90) explains that in English, the main discourse function of intensifiers is to play the role of exaggeratives and create hyperbole to avoid referring to the actual truth, except to highlight the fact that the described object or number is large or important in the perception of the speaker (e.g., *a huge amount of money*). Additionally, Leech (1983, p. 146) points out that exaggerations and hyperboles are prevalent in conversations because they embellish the truth-value of the proposition or claim and thus have the function of enhancing politeness or displays of interest, e.g., *That was a truly delicious meal!* In fact, Leech comments that hyperbole may be, in a sense, “a natural tendency of human speech.”

In their corpus-based study of L2 text, Hyland and Milton (1997, p. 183) have noted that for the L2 writers of academic essays in English, being able to “convey statements with an appropriate degree of doubt and certainty” represents a major problem. In fact, according to these authors, many L2 writers employ assertions and claims significantly more frequently than speakers of British English of similar age and educational level. Other investigations have similarly shown that L2 writers often produce formal written prose that appears to be overstated with many exaggerated claims due to the comparative prevalence of intensifiers and exaggeratives in contexts where hedging devices would seem to be more appropriate (Hinkel, 2002, 2003a).

To date, comparatively few studies have addressed specifically how trained NNS writers employ hedges and intensifiers in their written academic texts, although such an analysis can be useful in developing curricula for L2 writing instruction. The purpose of this study is to analyze the types and frequencies of hedges and intensifiers employed in NS and NNS academic essays included in a corpus of L1 and L2 student academic texts (745 essays/220,747 words). The overarching goal of this investigation is to focus on these lexical and syntactic features of written discourse because they relatively effectively lend themselves to instruction in L2 academic writing courses.

To begin, the paper will briefly review the uses and textual functions hedges and intensifiers in written discourse and writing instruction in English, as well as in rhetorical paradigms in writing in other languages, specifically, the L1s of participants in this study. Then, following the presentation of the specific types of hedges and intensifiers examined in the corpus analysis, the details of the student corpus, the study methodology, and results will be discussed at some length. The paper concludes with a few suggestions for teaching the uses of hedges and intensifiers in L2 academic writing classes.

## **Hedges and Intensifiers in Academic Prose and Writing Instruction in English**

As has been mentioned, much research has been devoted to the importance of hedging in written academic prose (Bhatia, 1993; Chang & Swales, 1999; Myers, 1989, 1996; Swales, 1971, 1990). In addition, the need for teaching L2 academic writers to employ hedging devices appropriately has been highlighted in teacher training materials and textbooks published in the past decade. For instance, in his book for teachers of academic writers, Jordan (1997) includes a substantial section on diverse types of hedging in formal written prose and constructs a detailed classification of hedges that range from “shields” to “approximators” and “compound hedges” and that can be taught to L2 learners at practically any level of proficiency (p. 240-241). The author further points out that intensifiers need to be used sparingly or avoided altogether because in academic contexts, writers “need to be cautious” in their claims or statements. Similarly, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) discuss the functions and uses of hedging in formal writing and explain that academic writers often employ various types of hedging devices to distance themselves from the claims expressed in their text, as well as “soften” and mitigate their statements (p. 76). Dudley-Evans and St. John further point out that “learners need to be able to appreciate the role of hedging” in academic and professional genres and that the teaching of the functions and uses of hedges requires special attention.

However, despite the prominent role of hedges in research and materials for teachers of L2 academic learners, most student textbooks for composition and writing mention hedges very briefly or not at all. For example, in popular writing guides for university-level students, hedges, often called “limiting modifiers” (Beason and Lester, 2000; Hacker, 2002; Lunsford, 2003), are not discussed in detail, beyond the effects and meanings associated with their placement in a sentence. Most widely-adopted instructional texts specifically for L2 academic writers do not mention limiting modifiers or hedges of any type (Holten and Marasco, 1998; Leki, 1999; Smalley, et al., 2000; Raimes, 1999, 2004; Reid, 2000a, 2000b). Furthermore, none of these instructional texts geared specifically for L2 writing and composition include any information dealing with the pitfalls of employing intensifiers in formal writing or their casual conversational properties.

The reasons that the uses of hedges and the inappropriateness of intensifiers have not found their place in writing and composition instruction do not seem to be entirely clear, particularly in light of the research findings that both these types of textual features are often misused in learners’ L2 academic writing (Channell, 1994; Hinkel, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2003a; Jordan, 1997).

### **Hedges and Intensifiers in Written Discourse in non-Anglo-American Rhetorical Traditions**

Hedging propositions and claims in order to decrease one's responsibility for their truth-value and to project politeness, hesitation, and uncertainty is a characteristic of many rhetorical traditions. For instance, in Chinese written prose, hedging devices have a prominent function of marking the writer's attitude to a proposition or claim (Biq, 1990). Thus, to reduce the writer's responsibility, hedges are often intended to be ambiguous and can perform several discourse functions simultaneously, thus shifting the responsibility for inferring contextual meanings to the reader (Oliver, 1972). For this reason, hedges are considered to be requisite in Chinese written discourse.

The functions of an elaborate framework of hedges, and doubt, uncertainty, and vagueness markers in Japanese are described in the work of Maynard (1997) and McGloin (1996). According to these authors, in Japanese discourse hedges often play a role similar to the role they play in English. Hedges are a very common characteristic of Japanese discourse, especially when they refer to possibility or probability. In light of the fact that their number is comparatively large and their meanings are diverse, several can be employed in a proposition, depending on the writer's assessment of a potential imposition on the reader (Maynard, 1993).

Similar to the complex system of hedges in Chinese and Japanese, in Korean, hedges are employed as a strategy to minimize potential divergences of opinions, and lexical, phrasal, and structural hedges can be employed to make propositions or claims more or less polite, vague, or indeterminate (Park, 1990). In Korean, the use of hedges can involve a great deal of subtlety and deep understanding of contextual or situational politeness in discourse (Hwang, 1987). The Vietnamese rhetorical tradition closely adheres to classical Confucian rhetoric, and many similar features are found in Vietnamese and Chinese written prose (Nguyen, 1987; Taylor, 1995).

According to Chafe (1994) the construct of indefinite reference and/or attribution is far more complex and frequent in written discourse in such languages as Indonesian and Japanese than in English because only entities that are essential to the discourse flow are definitively marked. In these, as well as other languages, such as Korean and Japanese, indefiniteness markers can be highly diverse and have many different functions. Speaking broadly, in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Indonesian writing, the rhetorical purpose of hedges, uncertainty markers, and vague impersonal references is to reduce the writer's responsibility for the truth-value and factuality of a proposition by attributing the claim to someone else (e.g., *a wise man once said that ...*), presenting it as a vague general truth or commonly held opinion (e.g., *people say that ...*), and displaying uncertainty and hesitation (Hinds, 1983, 1990; Oliver, 1972; Yum, 1987).

Although exaggerations and overstatements are considered to be inappropriate in formal Anglo-American writing (Channell, 1994; Leech, 1983),

they are considered acceptable in persuasive writing in Confucian and Koranic rhetorical traditions. In classical Chinese rhetoric, which is common in Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese writing, as well as Chinese (Hinds, 1984, 1990; Nguyen, 1987; Taylor, 1995; Tsujimura, 1987) exaggerations and overstatements may be seen as a device of added persuasion and indirectness (Oliver, 1972). In many languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Arabic, amplification is seen as a valid and eloquent rhetorical device to convey the writer's power of conviction and/or desirability (Connor, 1996; Sa'adeddin, 1989; Tsujimura, 1987; Yum, 1987; Zhu, 1996), as well as intensity and emphasis (Taylor, 1995). In traditional Korean rhetoric, writers are inherently vested with the authority to persuade and can rely on various forms of ethos and overstatement if they deem it necessary (Yum, 1987).

In general terms, classical Arabic prose does not place a high value on hedges and understatements, and amplification and exaggeration are considered to be an appropriate means of persuasion. For instance, Connor (1996) and Sa'adeddin (1989) cite a number of studies that describe Arabic rhetorical expression as amplified and overassertive. They explain that in various types of Arabic prose, the oral tradition finds many manifestations in writing, including rhetorical overstatement for the purpose of persuasion.

As has been mentioned, intensification and amplification represent one of the marked features of L2 writing. For example, based on his corpus analysis of NS and NNS formal writing, Lorenz (1998) attributes the comparative over-use of intensifiers in L2 student writing to cross-cultural differences in the functions of hyperboles in written argumentation, as well as what he calls "over-zealousness." According to the author, many L2 writers "anxious to make an impression and conscious of the limitations of their linguistic repertoire ... might feel a greater need than native speakers to stress the importance" of what they have to say (p. 59). However, hyperbolic and inflated style can be damaging to L2 writers in terms of evaluations of their writing because it usually creates an impression of "unnatural" communication and particularly so, with weaker writers. Lorenz concludes that judicious uses of rhetorical emphases must be taught to avoid intensification that can be "semantically incompatible [and] communicatively unnecessary" in the contexts of academic argumentation.

### The Study

This study examines the ways in which speakers of such languages as English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Arabic employ hedges and exaggeratives in their L2 academic essays. Specifically, the study focuses on the median frequency rates of uses of various types of hedging devices and intensifiers in L1 academic essays of NSs and L2 academic essays of NNSs. The six hedging devices examined in this study include: epistemic hedges (e.g., *clearly*, *mostly*, *relatively*), lexical hedges (e.g., *kind of*, *maybe*), and possibility hedges (e.g., *perhaps*, *possibly*); downtoners (e.g., *a bit*, *nearly*, *partly*); assertive pronouns (*any-* and *some-* words); and adverbs of frequency

(e.g., *often, frequently, usually, occasionally*). In addition, three types of intensifiers are also included: universal pronouns (*every-* and *no-* words), amplifiers (e.g., *extremely, completely, totally*), and emphatics (e.g., *sure/for sure, no way*). By means of analyzing usage frequencies of these lexical features taken together, the study discussed in this paper undertakes to investigate whether NS and NNS students employed various types of hedges and intensifiers similarly in argumentation/exposition university essays, commonly required for placement and diagnostic testing of students' writing skills.

### *The Students*

The essays analyzed in the study were written by 745 NS and NNS students during routine placement and diagnostic tests in four U.S. universities. All students were admitted to and enrolled in their degree programs. The 626 NNS students who wrote the essays had attained a relatively high level of English language proficiency, sufficient for a university admission, and their TOEFL scores ranged from 533 to 620, with a mean of 593. They included 117 speakers of Chinese, 109 speakers of Japanese, 101 of Korean, 111 of Indonesian, 96 speakers of Vietnamese, and 92 of Arabic.

Of the NNS students, 82% were holders of U.S. associate degrees earned in various community colleges, and were admitted as transfers at the junior level in four-year comprehensive universities. These students had received three or more years of ESL and composition instruction in the U.S.: they had completed at least a year in academic intensive programs, as well as two years of academic college training. The remainder included 14% first-year students and 4% graduate students. The first-year students had graduated from U.S. boarding schools, and the majority had spent a minimum of three years in the U.S. The graduate students had also completed their ESL training in U.S. English for Academic Purposes programs and had resided in English-speaking countries for periods between 18 and 32 months. The 119 NS students were graduates of U.S. suburban high schools in three states on the east and west coasts and the Midwest and were enrolled in required first-year composition/writing classes.

### *The Data*

The prompts for NS and NNS essays were identical in every way (see below). The essay corpus simply consists of placement and diagnostic tests routinely administered to all students, and for this reason, no attempt was made to differentiate NSs or NNSs by gender or age. All students were given one class period (50 minutes) to write the essays.

The students wrote their essays in response to assigned prompts that were modeled on the Test of Written English, administered by the ETS, and MELAB, as well as those found in many writing/composition textbooks. In such prompts, as in those in this study, the intention is to elicit writing samples by providing context based on experiences typical of most young adults be-

ginning their studies in U.S. universities. All essay prompts were designed to elicit essays in the rhetorical mode of argument/exposition with the purpose of convincing/informing an unspecified general audience (e.g., Beason & Lester, 2000; Hacker, 2002; Leki, 1999).

The essays were written in response to one of three prompts:

1. Some people believe that when parents make their children's lives too easy, they can actually harm their children instead. Explain your views on this issue. Use detailed reasons and examples.

2. Many people believe that grades do not encourage learning. Do you agree or disagree with this opinion? Be sure to explain your answer using specific reasons and examples.

3. Some people choose their major field of study based on their personal interests and are less concerned about future employment possibilities. Others choose majors in fields with a large number of jobs and options for employment. What position do you support? Use detailed reasons and examples.

Of the total, 246 essays were written on Prompt (1), 240 on Prompt (2), and 259 on Prompt (3). The distribution of essays among the three prompts were proximate for students in each L1 group, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Distribution of Student Essays by Prompt*

<i>L1 Group</i>	<i>Prompt 1</i>	<i>Prompt 2</i>	<i>Prompt 3</i>
	<i>Parents</i>	<i>Grades</i>	<i>Major</i>
<i>NSs</i>	44	36	39
<i>Chinese</i>	39	39	39
<i>Japanese</i>	32	35	42
<i>Korean</i>	32	33	36
<i>Indonesian</i>	35	35	41
<i>Vietnamese</i>	34	30	32
<i>Arabic</i>	30	32	30
<i>TOTALS</i>	246	240	259

### Data Analysis

The hedges and intensifiers of each type in L1 and L2 essays were counted separately to obtain median frequency rates of use in the essays for each group of speakers: NSs, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Arabic. To determine whether NS and NNS students similarly employed hedging devices and intensifiers, the occurrences of epistemic, lexical, and



possibility hedges, assertive pronouns, frequency adverbials, downtoners, universal pronouns, amplifiers, and emphatics in student essay texts were tagged and counted by hand. Then the number of words in each essay was counted, and computations were performed to calculate the percentage rate of each feature use. For example, NS essay #1 for Prompt 1 consisted of 300 words and included 6 epistemic hedges (*according to, likely, normally*), i.e.,  $6/300 = 2\%$ , and 3 assertive pronouns ( $3/300 = 1\%$ ). The calculations were performed separately for each feature and in each essay.<sup>1</sup>

Because the number of essays written to each prompt by each L1 group of students were similar, the analysis of frequency rates of cohesion devices in students' texts was carried out based on pooled data for all essays combined. The Mann-Whitney U Test was selected as a conservative measure of differences between the NS and NNS data. The Mann-Whitney U Test compares two sets of data based on their ranks below and above the median, e.g., NS median frequency percentage rates of emphatics are compared to those in essays of Chinese, then to those of Japanese speakers, then to those of Korean speakers, etc.). Median frequency rates of 0.00 imply that fewer than half of the essays include a particular type of hedge or intensifier. However, even in such cases, if, for example, a particular hedging device or intensifier is identified in three essays of one set and in fourteen essays in another, the usage frequency values of these features may be significantly different.

### *Common Hedging Devices*

The types of hedges discussed in this study rely on the systems outlined in Brown and Levinson (1987), Huebler (1983), and Quirk et al. (1985) and are limited to those identified in the students' writing.

**Epistemic hedges:** *according to* (+noun), *actually, apparent(-ly), approximate(-ly), broad(-ly), clear(-ly), comparative(-ly), essential(-ly), indeed, likely, most* (+ adjective), *normal(-ly), potential(-ly), probable(-ly), rare(-ly), somehow, somewhat, theoretically, the/possessive pronoun very* (+superlative adjective + noun, e.g., *the/his/their very best/last minute/moment/dollar/penny/chance*), *unlikely*.

**Lexical hedges:** *(at) about, (a) few, in a way, kind of, (a) little* + noun, *maybe, like, many, more or less, more, most, much, several, something like, sort of*.

**Possibility hedges:** *by (some/any) chance, hopefully, perhaps, possible, possibly, in (the) case (of), if you/we know/understand (what [pronoun] mean(s)), if you catch/get/understand my meaning/drift, if you know what I mean (to say)*.

In English, epistemic and lexical hedges represent the largest classes of mitigation and softening devices. According to Levinson (1983), epistemic modification refers to the limitations of the speaker's/writer's knowledge that the listener/reader can infer from text or context. Epistemic adjectives and adverbs are among the most common hedging devices in published academic texts (Hyland, 1998, 1999), and among these, adverbs are more numerous than

adjectives. Unlike epistemic hedges that can modify entire propositions, lexical hedges, such as quantifiers of nouns (e.g., *many*, *several*) or vague adverbial and adjectival partitives (e.g., *much/a lot better*, *sort of delicious*) modify and delimit the meanings of nouns, adjectives, and adverbs (Quirk et al., 1985; Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990).

In various classifications, possibility hedges can also include those with meanings of probability, and the distinctions between them are a matter of judgment (Palmer, 1986, 1990). It is important to note that some of the hedges in this class can be highly conversational and presumptive in contexts where the shared knowledge between the writer and the reader is presupposed (but not necessarily accurately assessed) (Hinkel, 1997; Moon, 1994), e.g., *if you understand what I mean, if you can catch my meaning/drift*. When possibility hedges are employed in their presuppositional meanings, both spoken and written texts can lead to misinterpretations (Chafe, 1994).

**Downtoners:** *at all, a bit, all but, a good/great deal, almost, as good/well as, at least, barely, basically, dead* (+ adjective), *enough, fairly, (a) few, hardly, in the least/ slightest, just, (a) little* (+ adjective), *merely, mildly, nearly, not a* (+ countable noun, e.g., *thing/person*), *only, partly, partially, practically, pretty* (+ adjective), *quite* (+ adjective), *rather, relatively, scarcely, simply, slightly, somewhat, sufficiently, truly, virtually*.

The function of downtoners is the opposite of that of amplifiers (see below), i.e. to scale down the intensity of verbs and adjectives in text (Quirk et al., 1985). The purpose of downtoners in formal academic prose is to restrict the meanings and reduce the qualitative and emotive implications of verbs, adjectives, and abstract nouns (Hyland, 1998, 1999). Such downtoners as *a bit, basically, pretty*, or *really*, are rare in formal academic writing because they are usually associated with conversational discourse and the informal spoken register (Hinkel, 2002).

**Assertive pronouns:** *any-* words (*anybody, anyone, anything*), *any, some-* pronominals (*somebody, someone, something*), *some*.

Assertive pronouns modify nouns and noun phrases (Greenbaum and Quirk, 1990; Quirk et al., 1985), and assertive forms with *some-* or *any-* can have positive or negative presuppositions, respectively. According to Channel (1994) and Huebler (1983), the meanings and functions of assertives are similar to those of hedges.

**Adverbs of frequency<sup>2</sup>:** e.g., *annually, daily, frequently, monthly, per day/hour/year occasionally, often, oftentimes, seldom, sometimes, sporadically, regularly, usually, weekly*. For example, *Parents who work all day usually spoil their children because they hope that money will cover up their guilt. Children seldom want money instead of their parents.* (Arabic)

Adverbs of frequency ubiquitously function as hedges in spoken and written text. Based on the findings of her corpus analysis, Channel (1994) specifies that the meanings of frequency adverbs are inherently vague and that they are used in similar contexts as other indefinite quantifiers, vague participles, and lexical hedges. She also notes that frequency adverbs vary in the degrees of their formality and, for example, *sometimes* and *often* are far more conversational than *seldom* and *occasionally*.

### *Common Intensifiers*

In general terms, intensifiers have textual functions that are converse to those of hedges. In conversational discourse, including a hyperbole allows the writer to make a point without being precise (Channel, 1994) because exaggerations and inflated statements are not intended to be taken literally. According to Leech (1983, p. 148), however, hyperboles and exaggeratives can be particularly inappropriate in formal prose because their usage “brings about a distortion of the truth” and thus damages text’s credibility.

**Universal and negative pronouns:** *all, each*<sup>1</sup>, *every-* pronominals (*everybody, everyone, everything*), *every, none, no one, nothing*.

Universal and negative indefinite pronouns, such as *every-* and *no-* words, are marked exaggeratives, and they are hardly ever encountered in academic writing in English (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Universals and negatives mark the extremes of the continuum of meanings expressed by indefinite pronouns (see also Assertive Pronouns above).

**Amplifiers:** *absolutely, a lot* (+ comparative adjective), *altogether, always, amazingly, awfully, badly, by all means, completely, definitely, deeply, downright, forever, enormously, entirely, even* (+ adjective/noun), *ever, extremely, far* (+ comparative adjective), *far from it, fully, greatly, highly, hugely, in all/every; :spect(s)/way(s), much* (+ adjective), *never, not half bad, positively, perfectly, severely, so* (+adjective/verb), *sharply, strongly, too* (+ adjective), *terribly, totally, unbelievably, very, very much, well*.

Amplifiers represent a large class of intensifiers, i.e. adverbs that modify gradable adjectives or verbs and heighten their scalar lexical intensity (Quirk et al., 1985). In academic writing in English, such extreme amplifiers as *always* and *never* mark overt exaggerations, and their inclusion in formal prose is not considered to be advisable (Smoke, 1999).

**Emphatics:** *a lot* (+ noun/adjective), *certain(-ly), clear(-ly), complete, definite, exact(-ly), extreme, for sure, great, indeed, no way, outright, pure(-ly), real(-ly), such a* (+ noun), *strong, sure(-ly), total*.

In text, the purpose 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 characteristic of speech and conversational genre than of formal written prose (Chafe, 1985, 1994).

## Results and Discussion

The results of the analysis of hedging devices are demonstrated in Table 2. As the findings of the analysis show, in NNS essays, the employment of hedging devices presents a mixed picture. While the academic texts written by Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indonesian speakers included epistemic hedges at median rates (from 0.79 to 0.91) significantly higher than those encountered in the essays of novice NS writers (0.47), speakers of Arabic and Vietnamese employed significantly fewer of these textual features (median frequency rates 0.30 and 0.38, respectively). In the case of lexical hedges, the writing of Japanese, Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Arabic speakers included significantly lower median rates of hedging (from 0.27 and 0.51) than the NS prose (the median rate 0.60). The median rates of lexical hedges in the academic prose of Chinese and Korean speakers were largely similar to those in NS prose.

It is interesting to note that possibility hedges were not particularly popular in L1 and L2 essays alike, and fewer than half of all essays in any group contained these types of hedges (median frequency rates 0.00).

Speaking broadly, the median frequency rates of the three types of hedges imply that L2 academic prose contained fewer hedging devices than that of NS writers. In addition, however, L2 prose of, for example, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indonesian speakers, seems to rely extensively on epistemic (e.g., *according to*, *actually*, *most*, *normal(-ly)*) but not other types of hedges. To some extent, this finding may evince shortfalls in L2 writers' vocabulary and lexical ranges, when many L2 essays seem to recycle the same types of hedges repeatedly.

1. I actually disagree that grades do not encourage learning. According to my opinion, by the grade system instructors can realize which teaching skill is better for students, and which students need more attention. Normally, each student has his or her weak points, and without grading, many students do not do their best. Actually, grades can measure how well students achieve in their courses and control their school life. (Korean)

Table 2. *Median Frequency Rates for Hedging Devices*

NS and NNS Academic Essays %

<i>Features/LIs</i>	<i>NSs</i>	<i>CH</i>	<i>JP</i>	<i>KR</i>	<i>JN</i>	<i>VT</i>	<i>AR</i>
<i>Epistemic hedges</i>	0.47	0.91*	0.80*	0.85*	0.79*	0.38*	0.30*
<i>Range</i>	3.40	3.69	4.38	3.90	3.67	3.23	2.13
<i>Lexical hedges</i>	0.60	0.69	0.51*	0.55	0.27**	0.48**	0.30**
<i>Range</i>	4.63	5.63	3.53	12.50	1.74	2.65	2.13
<i>Possibility hedges</i>	0.00	0.00	0.00*	0.00*	0.00	0.00	0.00
<i>Range</i>	1.36	1.89	0.57	1.14	0.70	0.65	1.20
<i>Downtoners</i>	0.47	0.35*	0.39*	0.34*	0.47	0.35*	0.48
<i>Range</i>	3.80	3.33	4.17	2.34	2.96	2.26	3.19
<i>Assertive pronouns</i>	0.38	0.87**	0.93**	0.89**	0.93**	0.52*	0.77**
<i>Range</i>	2.22	7.14	6.77	7.07	6.29	2.63	6.38
<i>Frequency adverb.</i>	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.28*
<i>Range</i>	1.87	2.65	1.60	1.92	1.80	1.36	4.02

\*\* 2-tailed  $p \leq 0.05$

Note: all comparisons are relative to NS text.

\* 1-tailed  $p \leq 0.05$

In (1), the short excerpt from a student text includes four hedges, all of which are epistemic, and with the hedge *actually* repeated twice in four sentences. In addition, despite the writer's uses of hedges in each sentence (*actually, according to, normally, and actually*), the text does not appear to project "proper caution," or hesitation when advancing its claims (e.g., "students would not do their best if grades were not assigned" or "grades can measure student achievement and control"), as is requisite in written academic prose (Swales, 1990). Rather the example in (1) seems to point to the writer's restricted lexical range.

On the other hand, while the NS excerpt in (2) does not exhibit a great deal of academic sophistication, the hedging devices employed in this example clearly appear to be more diverse and varied than those in (1).

2. A grade is essentially an overall view of what one has learned. It also may indicate how one performs in a certain area while under stress. Presently, students devote their free time to studying and learning because they need high grades to allow them to go forward in life. The grade may help the student, as well as a mentor, determine strengths and weaknesses. In the case of weak students, a grade may challenge them to strive and do their very best. (NS)

Like in (1), the excerpt in (2) argues for the importance of grading for learning and is similarly short. The NS text consists of five sentences with three hedges, and among them two epistemic (*essentially* and *their very best*) and one possibility (*in the case of*). An additional consideration in the usage of hedges in the prose of both NSs and NNSs is that even among the hedges in the same class, the amount of lexical complexity can differ broadly. For instance, *actually* or *according to* are often encountered in conversational discourse and spoken interactions, while such items as *essentially* or *in (the) case of* are frequently associated with formal register and written academic prose (Holmes, 1988; Leech, et al., 2001). Thus, the combined uses of diverse types of hedging devices, as well as more lexically complex individual hedges in NS writing, can project an overall impression of greater lexical complexity, compared to the types and quality of hedges in NNS academic essays. This observation is further supported by the findings dealing with NS and NNS employment of downtoners and assertive pronouns.

Hoye (1997) explains that among downtoners, various items are distinct in the degree of their formality, lexical complexity, and frequency of usage. For example, such items as *at all*, *almost*, *at least*, *basically*, (a) *few*, *enough*, *hardly*, *just*, (a) *little*, *only*, *simply*, and *quite* are prevalent in the informal register and conversational discourse. On the other hand, formal and lexically-advanced downtoners, such as *fairly*, *mildly*, *partly*, *partially*, *scarcely*, *virtually*, are predominant in formal and written discourse. Leech, Rayson, & Wilson (2001) found, for instance, that *just* and *quite* seldom occur in formal written discourse, while *basically*, *few*, *little*, and *quite* are extremely common in conversation.

Although Indonesian and Arabic speakers employed downtoners at median frequency rates (0.47 and 0.48, respectively) similar to those encountered in NS texts, overall, other L2 essays includes them significantly less frequently (median rates from 0.35 to 0.39). More interestingly, however, such items as *at all*, *almost*, *basically*, *just*, *only*, *little*, and *few*, were prevalent in L1 and L2 student writing, although more lexically advanced downtoners, such as *merely*, *relatively*, and *sufficiently* were rare.

3. Only a few people choose voice studies as their major because there are no jobs in it. (Chinese)

4. *In Japan, my major was international economics, but I just couldn't make myself study for it.* (Japanese)

5. *I don't want to choose electrical engineering as my major at all, but my parents are totally upset about it.* (Korean)

6. *If I am choosing a major simply because there a lot of opportunities and a lot of money coming from that job, but I don't really enjoy what I am doing, then I can never be happy.* (NS)

In (3-6), L1 and L2 writers alike employed the types of downtoners that are commonly associated with informal and conversational discourse, e.g., *only, just, at all*, and *simply*, rather than those found in formal academic prose. In light of earlier research findings (Hinkel, 2002; Shaw and Liu, 1998), the prevalence of lexically simple and conversational downtoners in student writing is not particularly surprising. L2 learners who have a great deal of exposure to L2 interactions and informal discourse in English-speaking countries usually employ L2 conversational features at far higher frequencies than formal lexical and syntactic constructions found largely in formal academic texts.

Similarly, assertive pronouns, such as *anybody, anything, someone*, and *something*, are so lexically vague that they are often considered to be inappropriate in written academic prose (Channell, 1994). However, their median frequency rates in L2 writing of NNS in all groups (0.52 to 0.93) significantly exceeded those in L1 essays of NSs (0.38).

7. *Someone who really spoils their children and buys them anything they want does not care about them deeply.* (Indonesian)

8. *When somebody gives me bad advice, I ask my parents about it ....* (Arabic)

9. *my parents always say that if I work hard for something, I can get it, and I'll do anything to get my goal.* (Japanese)

On the other hand, in NS texts, assertive pronouns were far less common. In fact, many NS novice writers developed their texts without relying on the vague and conversational assertives to a great extent.

10. *Responsible parents prepare their children for the future, and those who indulge their offspring are doing them a disservice in the long run.* (NS)

11. *When parents raise their children, they need to keep in mind that their decisions are important for the well-being of the next generation.* (NS)

It would be difficult to see assertive pronouns as lexically sophisticated hedging devices, and the comparatively high rates of their occurrences in NNS essays point to the shortfalls in the L2 writers' accessible range of means to mitigate generalizations and claims in their prose. According to Greenbaum and Quirk (1990), assertive pronouns, such as *anything*, *someone*, and *anybody*, are largely avoided in formal discourse in English.

In line with earlier noted distinctions among more formal and less formal types of downtoners, the adverbs of frequency also differ in the rates of their occurrence in conversational or written discourse. In fact, a majority of L1 or L2 writers alike (with the exception of Arabic speakers) did not employ frequency adverbs in their essays (median rates of 0.00) possibly because those that are often encountered in spoken interaction are actually relatively few (e.g., *occasionally* and *sometimes*), while such items as *seldom* and *rarely* are highly infrequent (Channell, 1994).

On the whole, the data in Table 2 demonstrate that the frequencies and types of hedges in L2 academic writing are severely restricted and limited to those that are associated with casual spoken interactions (Hinkel, 1997, 1999, 2003a; Holmes, 1988; Hyland & Milton, 1997). As has been mentioned, the findings of this study are not particularly surprising, given that even in the case of academically-bound students, conversational discourse constitutes their preeminent venue of exposure to L2 and its discourse functions. Furthermore, because the uses and meanings of various hedging devices do not seem to be addressed in instruction in any degree of depth (if at all), it is not obvious that L2 academic writers can actually learn to employ them appropriately in the context of L2 formal writing.

In addition to a demonstrable lack of lexically-advanced hedging, NNS writers' essays seem to be prone to exaggerations and overstatements, possibly due to the high rates of universal pronouns, amplifiers, and emphatics in their texts. The data in Table 3 show that in NNSs' prose, the median frequency rates of the three types of intensifiers associated with exaggeration and inflation of the actual state of affairs (Quirk et al., 1985) significantly exceed those of NS novice writers.

The median frequency rates of universal pronouns (e.g., *nobody*, *nothing*, *everyone*, *everybody*) in L2 texts were 50% or higher (0.65 to 1.17) than those in L1 prose (0.44) of NSs.

12. *Everybody wants to get as high education as he or she can. ... Everyone wants to get a good grade on tests and exams because grades mean a lot for students.* (Korean)



Table 3. Median Frequency Rates for Maximizers in NS and NNS Academic Essays

Features/LIs	NSs	CH	JP	KR	IN	VT	AR
Universal pron.	0.44	0.89**	0.85*	1.17**	0.67*	0.91**	0.78**
Range	3.04	5.71	6.67	4.35	5.20	4.58	5.77
Amplifiers	1.70	3.21**	3.04**	3.18**	2.70**	2.36	3.23
Range	5.46	10.11	12.28	11.06	9.80	8.22	14.29
Emphatics	1.04	2.60**	2.67**	2.00**	2.27*	2.49**	4.12**
Range	4.26	7.50	10.85	8.64	7.91	6.25	13.01

\*\* 2-tailed  $p \leq 0.05$ 

Note: all comparisons are relative to NS text.

\* 1-tailed  $p \leq 0.05$ 

13. *Nobody* goes to a university to be a bank clerk for the rest of his life, and *nobody* says, I want to get a C in this class. (Japanese)

14. If you have no interest in this field, you will learn *nothing* from your classes. Can you do this job well even you get a degree in it? *Everybody* can't. (Chinese)

The uses of universal pronouns in L2 academic writing, as in examples (12-14) can project a hyperbolic and inflated impression (Leech, 1983), when the text appears to overstate claims with the goal of enhancing its persuasive qualities. As has been mentioned, in various rhetorical traditions other than Anglo-American, exaggeration and overstatement represent a valid rhetorical means of conveying the power of the writer's conviction and obvious evidential truths (Connor, 1996; Yum, 1987).

However, in keeping with the Anglo-American rhetorical tradition of avoiding the extremes of the graded scale in making claims (Chafe, 1986, 1994), NS students tended to rely less on such universal pronouns as no- and every- words.

15. For most people, getting education is important because they seek more choices in life, and making a living in the world today can be difficult. (NS)

16. Working in a field of study that interests you holds your attention because it is something you like, you will apply yourself and do a good job. (NS)

In (15-16), NS novice writers express ideas proximate to those found in NNS prose, e.g., that education is important most people and that one should choose a major that is of interest to him or her. However, based on the data in Table 3, the NS writers' claims appear to be hedged rather than overstated with the similar goal of projecting added persuasion and authorial credibility (Swales, 1990).

The disparity between the NS and NNS uses of intensifiers seems to be striking when it comes to the median frequency rates of amplifiers and emphatics. For instance, the rates of emphatics, such as *a lot*, *complete(-ly)*, *real(-ly)*, and *total(-ly)*, in NNS essays were two to four times greater than in those of NSs. In fact, it is the combined usage of amplifiers and emphatics that serves to impart a particularly overstated and exaggerated character to L2 academic text. For example, in (17), the generalization and assertions appear to be inflated to such an extent that, if taken literally, the writer's claims seem to be more incredible than persuasive.

17. *I always admire people who totally know their personal interests completely and choose their major field of study based on the interests. It is really a happy study, never a responsibility, a task, or even drudgery. Considering the Nobel prize winners, the same exact fact holds for every profession, for example, Bill Gates. Everyone wants to do what they totally love. But I think an important reason why a lot of people are miserable in their jobs is that they don't know their interests at all. If a person always does what others, such as his parents, his teachers, and his best friend, expect them to do, they will completely lose their ability to find out their own interest and then will spend the rest of their lives in great error. (Chinese)*

In this excerpt, the writer employs various means of intensification to convey her high degree of conviction within the constraints of her limited academic vocabulary. Hence, her text includes a relatively high frequency of amplifiers and emphatics (11 in a 131-word passage, on average about two per sentence) often considered to be inappropriate in formal academic writing (e.g., Channell, 1994; Jordan, 1997; Swales, 1990). It is important to note that practically all intensifiers identified in (17) predominate in casual conversational and highly informal registers, e.g., *always*, *totally*, *a lot*, *really*, and are rarely encountered in any other types of spoken genres, not even to mention those associated with formal writing (Brazil, 1995; Leech, Rayson, & Wilson, 2001).

On the other hand, NS writers, whose vocabulary ranges seems to be greater than those of NNSs, are able to express their ideas without relying on intensifiers to the same extent.

18. *Today's world presents us with far more choices than in the old days of our parents and grandparents. So, in many cases, it is difficult for young people to make good choices if they don't know themselves well. There are many reasons why people choose to study certain subjects. The two main reasons are the interest or love of a subject and the other is looking forward to future employment options. Both reasons have benefits and negative aspects. The benefits of choosing your area of study through your interests are doing what you enjoy. If you are interested in what you study, most often you are excited to learn, and therefore, learn more. Positives don't normally come without negatives. For about every positive aspect of going with your interests, there is also a negative. By going with your interest, you might be choosing a field of study that is exhausted, and there might not be room for a career, and you could be financially unstable.* (NS)

The essays of many NSs, such as the example in (18), contained markedly fewer amplifiers and emphatics than NNS texts. In (18), as in (17), the writer similarly advances the claims that many students are ambivalent about their choices of majors, that making such choices is difficult, and that to make a good choice, individuals need to know themselves first. However, in addition to a comparatively lower rate of intensifiers, the NS text in (18) also includes a number of hedges (e.g., *in many cases, many reasons, often, normally*) that also serve to create a general impression of academically-appropriate hesitation and a reduced degree of commitment to the text's claims. It would be difficult to argue that the NS text includes highly sophisticated and advanced lexis. However, on the whole, the text seems to take a balanced approach to developing its argument that most choices of majors have positives and negatives that need to be examined.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Teaching**

In general terms, an examination of median frequency rates of hedges and intensifiers in NS and NNS academic essays points to the fact that L2 writers employ a severely limited range of hedging devices, largely associated with conversational discourse and casual spoken interactions. These findings are further supported by a prevalence of conversational intensifiers and overstatements in the L2 writing that are ubiquitous in informal speech but are rare in formal written prose.

Despite the fact that various researchers of academic writing and L2 learners' texts have pointed to the need for instruction in the uses and functions of hedges and intensifiers in English (Channell, 1994; Holmes, 1988), it ap-

pears that these desirable or inappropriate features of L2 writing, respectively, are hardly ever addressed in instruction on written academic genres and text. This particular shortfall in the teaching of L2 writing may be particularly discouraging, given that hedging devices and intensifiers represent sentence- and phrase-based and relatively discrete lexical and syntactic features of academic text (Chang & Swales, 1999).

Furthermore, as earlier research demonstrated, even academically-bound L2 learners who pursue their language study in English-speaking countries obtain far more experience with and exposure to informal and conversational language varieties than formal written and academic register (Shaw and Liu, 1998; Hinkel, 2002, 2003b). Hence, these learners become well-versed in the uses of various informal features commonly found in spoken interaction rather than those that are valued in the written academic genres. It seems that NS novice writers without a great deal of background in producing academic writing are better prepared to employ these lexical and syntactic features in their academic essays than NNSs with years of academic L2 training. However, as numerous researchers and methodologists have noted, a lack of necessary skills in constructing formal academic text places NNS university degree-bound students at a great disadvantage when they compete for grades and academic achievement in the same courses and on par with NS students (e.g., Hinkel, 1997, 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Holmes, 1984 1988; Johns, 1997; Jordan, 1997; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998).

The teaching of the importance of hedging in L2 academic prose may require persistence and consistency on the behalf of the teacher because the need to hedge propositions and claims to show an appropriate amount of hesitation and uncertainty in writing is a textual feature more specific to the Anglo-American rhetorical tradition than to others. However, unlike the meanings and functions of various hedging devices, their contextual uses do not need to become very complicated. For instance, the uses of frequency adverbs, such as *often*, *frequently*, or *usually* are relatively easy to explain and practice. In addition, to increase L2 writers' accessible ranges of hedging devices, the frequency markers can be combined with somewhat more complex epistemic and possibility hedges that are often seen as more lexically advanced: the teaching of contextually flexible items, such as *likely/unlikely*, *probable/probably*, *possible/possibly* and *perhaps*.

Most importantly, however, L2 writing instruction needs to make L2 academic writers focus on the key differences between the types of lexical and syntactic features that differentiate formal written and informal conversational registers (Jordan, 1997). Thus, in addition to emphasizing the role of hedging devices in academic prose, L2 writing instruction must address those features that are considered to be undesirable and that should be avoided, e.g., *completely*, *really*, *totally*, and *no way*. To this end, the teaching of L2 writing needs to help L2 writers to expand their vocabulary and accessible ranges of lexicon that can provide them means of expressing their ideas without relying on intensifiers to develop effective rhetorical persuasion. In practical terms, the inflated quality of the text may not be complicated to edit by omitting or

replacing various pronouns, and modifying adjectives and adverbs that taken together, amount to overstated prose and exaggerated claims.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Reynolds (2001) carried out an empirical investigation of word and lexical repetition in L2 writing. The results of his study demonstrate that in L2 written, repetition does not necessarily reflect a higher or lower degree ESL writing development. Reynold's type/token analysis of lexis in almost 200 NS and NNS essays shows that in L2 prose, repetition occurs in T-unit clusters and depends on the essay discourse organization pattern, as well as the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of NNS writers. According to the author's findings, in L2 academic texts, significantly higher repetition values were identified in longer T-units (but not longer texts) produced by more advanced L2 writers or by speakers of particular L1s. The discourse functions of repetition in L2 writing are examined in detail in Reynolds (1995).

<sup>2</sup>Always and never refer to the extremes of the graded scale among frequency adverbs. In spoken or written discourse, these adverbs function as amplifiers (see Amplifiers). The meanings of always and never are distinct from those of other frequency adverbs they are "precise" (Channel, 1994, p. 116).

<sup>3</sup>The frequency counts of pronouns *all/each* included only in their rare occurrences as elliptical pronominals (e.g., *all study hard because they want to have career possibilities*). The adjectival uses of *all/each* (e.g., *all students*) were not included in frequency counts of universal pronouns.

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