A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF HEDGES AND BOOSTERS IN ENGLISH ESSAY WRITING OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Human beings communicate with each other and this communication is not only limited to speaking however, human beings also exchange information through writing communication. Communication through writing is not only limited to presenting information rather it requires taking the trouble of walking through the reader's perspective. Therefore, Metadiscourse emphasizes when we write, we also negotiate with others and make predictions that what kind of effects we are going to have on our listener. The secondary domain interactional Metadiscourse consists of hedges and boosters. These subcategories play a crucial role in mitigating the claim and creates interpersonal solidarity. The current study aims to explore hedging and boosting Metadiscourse markers in second language students' essays. The employment of linguistic devices would be analyzed through the MetaPak corpus tool. This research is significant since it would bring awareness to employing hedges and boosters. It would allow students to write more interestingly and persuasively. Further, to obtain findings four different disciplines English, Psychology, Electrical Engineering and Mechanical Engineering have been taken under study. Moreover, this study has been supported by Hyland's (2005) model. The study found relatively less employment of hedges and booster in the undergraduate students' essay with a total of 1727. Further, an in-depth analysis unveiled that undergraduate students mostly remain reluctant to employ different hedges and boosters. Most of the times, they have been spotted to employ repeated hedges and boosters. However, many of the hedges and boosters have been found with zero occurrences. The findings suggest that undergraduate students remain significantly assertive while presenting knowledge. Hence, there is a need to teach academic writing in all programs. Additionally, findings will help future researchers who might conduct a study in the same area of research. It is anticipated that our study would aid in bringing awareness to employing hedges and boosters in academic writing.

Keywords: Hedges, Boosters, Linguistic devices, Second language writer

1.1 Introduction

Human beings communicate through language and communication through language is not always limited to the exchange of ideas, it also depicts the attitude and personality of an interlocutor (Hyland, 2005). Consequently, during communication, we establish interaction effectively by employing metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005). Metadiscourse offers the notion that language is not only concerned with the world, or exchanging ideas, it has a relation with itself too. This self-relation allows the reader to understand the communicated idea in an effective and convincing way (Hyland & Jiang, 2018). In academic writing, rhetorical objectives of the writers can be achieved well by anticipating the reader's response (Hyland, 2005). Academic writing involves the negotiation of knowledge, social roles, propositions made. This negotiation conveys the writer's own attitude that how h/she has aligned him/herself with the presented piece of knowledge, role, and proposition made. Hence, a writer needs to come up with credible self-display in the text. This credible self-display brings that writer attempts to respect the reader's point of view. Meanwhile, s/he also tries to let the reader know the opinion s/he holds. The text creator produces the text along with claims of certainty and aims to create intended tentativeness in the claims too. This blend of tentativeness and certainty display the writer as confident but negotiable. According to

Swales and Feak (2012), students are required to accomplish academic writing tasks focusing on persuading the audience. This practice involves their writing needs to be visible from the perspective of academic conventions showing a deference for their respective audience. Their possible audience could be examiners, teachers or their peers. To embed persuasion in academic writing, metadiscourse can offer a viable framework of communication. In order to meet the expectations of readers, writers make use of linguistic resources which allow their work to look original and valid against the convictions. This involves writer-oriented features such as hedges and boosters that demonstrates the way writers convey their convictions, commitments and judgments (Hyland, 2006).

Hedges refer to the absence of categorical commitment, the expression of possibility rather than certainty, and is typically realized by lexical devices such as *might, probably* and *seem.* However, boosters for instance, *always, definitely* and *obviously* allow writers to express certainty plays a pivotal role in the development of interactive tone. An essay as an academic genre ought to have a beginning, middle and ending. This three-dimensional structure may involve the opinions and arguments in the student's essay writing. Further, Students' writing performance is likely the most essential factor in defining a degree of achievement at university level (Philips, 1979). Hence, academic writing needs to have both interactional elements, hedges (i.e., expressions of tentativeness) and boosters (i.e., expressions of certainty) in order to have a significant impact on readers.

Therefore, a lot of work has been done on certainty and uncertainty markers in the context of research articles (Vassileva, 2001), dissertations (Haukifu & Kangira, 2018) and political speeches (Jalilafar & Alvi, 2012); however, little attention has been paid on the university students' essays written in non-native context especially in Pakistan. Therefore, keeping this shortfall in mind, the purpose of the present study is to explore the employment of hedges and boosters in student essays through a corpus tool named MetaPak (Abbas, Shehzad and Ghalib, 2017). The reason, for selecting undergraduate student essays is to observe their level of understanding and exposure regarding the employment of hedges and boosters in academic writing.

1.2 Research Objectives
- To explore hedging markers being employed in the student essays at the undergraduate level
- To explore boosting markers being employed in the student essays at the undergraduate level

1.3 Research Questions
1. What hedging expressions are being employed by the students in their essays at the undergraduate level?
2. What boosting expressions are being employed by the students in their essays at the undergraduate level?

1.4 Significance of the Study
The study is significant since it attempts to analyze the application of hedges and boosters in second language essays. Since hedges and boosters help in constructing a more interesting and plausibly written text, therefore, it is essential to pay attention to the student writing specifically with regard to the employment of hedges and boosters. This study would develop an awareness among the second language learners to employ hedges and boosters in their writings to communicate confidence but in a prudent way. Additionally, this study offers a noteworthy contribution to the existing pool of knowledge with respect to the employment of hedges and boosters in the Pakistani context. This study would also contribute to Pakistan National Corpus of English, a project funded by the Higher Education

Commission, Pakistan. This project is based on English as second language learner's writings and offers to explore language patterns in several ways.

1.5 Delimitation of the Study

The study has been delimited to written essays of undergraduate students. Further, the study has been narrowed down to the essays of four different disciplines including Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, English and Psychology. The undergraduate student essays were collected from only two different universities, which the researchers were able to access easily. To keep the study manageable, we collected thirty essays each from all the four selected disciplines making a total of one hundred and twenty essays. Additionally, the word limit for each essay was set to 500 words only.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Hedges and boosters as linguistic resources play a vital role in the construction of academic knowledge. There is a need for strengthening and weakening the information to meet the expectations of the audience. This strategy helps the audience in understanding the meaning easily (Akbas & Hardman, 2018). Communicative interaction takes place between the reader and writer through writing and the tools that writers use to convince the reader is metadiscoursal. Meta discourse, therefore, is important for writing instructions of academic writing and tend to assist both native and non-native writers in conveying information effectively (Hyland, 2005).

Meta discourse theorists appear to have different visions about theoretical foundations and definitions. Consequently, they offer models with different classifications and functions. Based on the Williams model, Kopple (1985) proposed metadiscoursal taxonomy. Later many scholars adopted it. However, they, including Kopple later on revised and modified the model. Because Kopple's (1985) taxonomy was also found with overlapping functions between attributors and narrators, and attitude and commentary markers. Interestingly, Kopple (1998) himself revised his taxonomy and renamed the validity markers with epistemology markers and placed the attributors and narrators under the category of "Evidentials''. He also combined hedges and boosters under the single category "Modality Markers''. Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffenson (1993) adapted Kopple's (1985) model and offered a new model of metadiscourse. Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffenson (1993) renamed the category of text connectives as "textual markers". Moreover, they made another category named "interpretive markers". They shifted announcements, illocution markers and code glosses under the interpretive markers. According to Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffenson (1993) announcements, illocution markers and code glosses help the readers to understand the writer's intended purpose.

Tse and Hyland (2004) set out three fundamental principles to reexamine the theoretical foundations of metadiscourse. They further posit that the theoretical aspects of metadiscourse can only be found meaningful in the relevant context. Based on three fundamental principles, Hyland (2005) used the terms; interactive and interactional markers. Hyland (2005) proposed the Interpersonal Model of Metadiscourse that distinguishes Hyland's (2005) model from the previously proposed models. The recently proposed model only contains two principal categories, interactive and interactional metadiscourse. Interactive metadiscourse makers create the informational flow within the text that make the text coherent. The interactional category establishes the relationship between reader and writer. The interactional resources guide the readers towards a specific interpretation. Since Hyland's (2005) model seems to be more effective as it addresses the fundamental flaws. Hence, to analyse the data, we have adopted Hyland's (2005) model for the current study.

Hedging has been under consideration by many scholars for since long. However, boosting has got less attention. Grabe and Kaplan (1997) explored that it is difficult to separate them. Different scholars have intentionally studied only hedging in their studies. Such as Hyland (1994), Vartalla (2001), Meyer (1994). However, the current study follows the concept of hedge proposed by Hyland (2005). He asserts that hedging is respect for alternative views, hence withholding full commitment. As mentioned before, it is necessary to gain acceptability among the intended audience. Therefore, text producers sound uncertain within the text, if their statement would found acceptance without affecting their credibility. Rashdi, Sarfraz (2025) explores the significance of writing and publishing scientific papers in the social sciences, highlighting its importance in advancing scholarly communication, professional advancement, and networking. Furthermore, it examines how these practices 1258 contribute to securing scholarships, research grants, and international mobility, all of which play a critical role in fostering both career growth and the well-being of individuals.

Boosters are considered the other side of the same coin, however, having the opposite functionality as a hedge. Unlike hedges, boosters close the door for discussion. In academic writing, the accomplishments of the desired goals depend upon the deployment of hedges and boosters. When hedges and boosters combine, they markedly contribute to successful communication. In contrast to the hedging markers which tone down the proposition, boosters give strength to communicative force. Hence, helps the writer to assert the proposition in a confident manner (Hyland, 2005).

Although hedges and boosters are equally interesting topics, however, Vazquez and Giner (2009) solely focused on boosters. They found that boosters assist in introducing new knowledge. Vazquez and Giner (2009) assert that research writers need to employ more boosters in the discussion section. However, another study conducted by Hyland (1998) on hedges and boosters. He found that hedging devices exceeded boosters by reflecting the crucial importance to present a claim provisionally.

In the context of media, Yazdani, Sharifi & Elyassi (2014) carried out a study to examine the role of interpersonal markers such as hedges and boosters in the 9/11 English front page newspaper article. This study was informed by Hyland's (2005) classification of interpersonal metadiscourse markers. The study revealed that American journalist employed more hedges, however, boosters were seemed to be the least employed markers. In particular, hedges such as probability adverb (*e.g.apparently, probably, possibly*) occupied the highest position in the newspaper articles followed by epistemic verbs (e.g. *could, might, seem, indicate*) and probability adjectives (*e.g. possible, most*). Further, the most extensive boosters were verb (e.g. *show, prove*) and the least used boosting devices by journalists were adverbs (*e.g. obviously, absolutely*). Additionally, the study revealed that there is a less significant difference in the use of hedges and boosters as a verb, however, considering the use of adverb as hedge and booster, a higher frequency of adverbs as the hedges were employed in comparison to boosters as an adverb. Yazdani, Sharifi and Elyassi (2014) posits that journalists preferred to remain cautious, uncertain and conservative.

The ability of a writer to engage the readers affects the grades of student that are awarded for their essay writing (Mei, 2007). Adding to that, for successful academic writing interactional features such as hedges and boosters of metadiscourse plays a significant role since they enable the writer to create interpersonal solidarity while considering alternative voices (Hyland, 2005).

According to Intaraparwat and Steffenson (1995), when writers consider their audience, they adopt an appropriate voice to establish their credibility. One can effectively reach his audience through metadiscourse features. Therefore, Intaraparwat and Steffenson (1995),

collected twelve essays with good marks and twelve essays having poor marks, written by the learners of English as a second language to analyze the metadiscourse features. They found that six good essays employed all metadiscourse features and very few metadiscursive features were found in the essays having low grades. Hence, Intaraparwat and Steffenson (1995), suggest that students need to learn metadiscourse features.

Cheng (1994) introduced a method of teaching metadiscourse. His methodology involves students to read different articles on metadiscourse and gave exercises to the students. He further asked the students to correct wordiness by removing excessive metadiscourse markers and then use them in their writings. He observed a significant improvement in the students' writings. Moreover, the findings revealed that students also considered their audience and hence create writer and reader bond in their writings.

To trace the disciplinary trends, Hyland and Jiang (2018) investigated metadiscourse markers. They selected four different disciplines from the fields of hard sciences and soft sciences. All the linguistic items have been investigated through the lens of Hyland's (2005) model, however, and *or* were considered by default options hence, excluded from the transitional markers. Moreover, the findings maintained through a mixed-method approach indicated surprising trends of an immense decrease in the number of interactional markers and a potential increase in the interactive features. Additionally, to be specific, the study realized a huge fall in boosters. Strikingly, the findings revealed the divergent directions taken by both the domains of sciences. Similarly, Hyland (2004) analyzed 20 masters and 20 doctoral theses from each of six different academic disciplines to trace the disciplinary variation. These theses were written by the students of Hong Kong with Cantonese as their first language. In order to gain insights on the adopted preferences two students from M.A and two PhD students from each discipline were interviewed. The corpus-based study revealed that significant uses of hedges constitute 41% of the interactional marker. To present the claim with caution *May, could* and *would* were found the higher frequency items. Overall social sciences discipline employed more metadiscourse markers than the hard sciences. Students in the hard field employed relatively more Endophoric markers. The study further found that students of social sciences remain rational and logical in their writings.

Few researchers from Pakistan have examined hedges and boosters such as Batool, Majeed and Zahra (2019), Zafar, Akhtar, and Zahra, (2019), Abbas and Shehzad (2018) and Zafar (2018). Batool, Majeed and Zahra (2019) investigated substantially prevailing hedges and boosters in Pakistani Opinion Articles. For this purpose, they had randomly selected fifty newspaper editorials from five Pakistani newspapers. They extracted these markers by using MetaPak (Abbas, Shehzad & Ghalib, 2017) software. They found *would, could* and *should* as most occurring marker. Further, the researchers unveiled that *could* and *would* remain dominant hedges with a frequency of 58. Moreover, *may, maybe* and *might* together having the sum of 75 also remain dominant as hedges. However, *should* having the frequency 58 occurred as a booster. Moreover, boosters such as *must, never* and *fact* were also found with the frequency of 28, 24 and 22 respectively in the corpus. The corpus-based study further revealed that *evidently, undeniable, clearly* and *of course* were the least occurring booster

Moreover, back in 2017, the supreme court in Pakistan has made a joint investigation team (JIT) to probe the Panama case. After completing the investigation the team had submitted the report containing thousands of words. Taking this report into consideration, Abbas and Shehzad (2018) attempted to explore the employment of hedges and boosters in the legal genre. The researchers witnessed the uses of boosters such as *true, fact, false, failed, shows* and *admit*. However, frequently used hedges were *most, could, would, claim(s, ed)* and *prima facie.* Besides, Zafar (2018) also examined hedges and boosters in research articles through

corpus-based study. She found boosters for instance *found that showed* occurred predominantly and served the function of certainty. However, hedges such as *perhaps, possible* and *might* were used to show deference in research articles.

It becomes evident after reviewing prior researches that although much significant work has been done in the area of research articles (Vassileva, 2001: Vazquez & Giner 2009: Hyland & Jiang, 2018: Hyland, 1998: Akhtar & Zahra, 2019) theses (Haufikua & Kangira, 2018: Akbas & Hardman, 2018 and Hyland ,2004) political speeches(Jalilafar & Alvi, 2012), legal reports (Abbas & Shehzad, 2018), persuasive essays (Intaraparwat & Steffenson, 1995), exams scripts (Hyland & Milton, 1997) and newspaper (Yazdani, Sharifi & Elyassi, 2014). Significant researches are conducted by scholars in the area of hedges and boosters, however, only a few studies have been conducted in the Pakistani context concerning students' essays. Moreover, *MetaPak* an exclusive corpus tool for metadiscourse analysis developed by Pakistani researchers also contribute to bringing a novel shift in my study (Abbas, Shehzad & Ghalib, 2017). Further, my research holds a unique posture because it takes into account the recent data collected from the students which would provide the latest results.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study involves the quantitative research approach. To examine the applications of hedging and boosting devices in the students' essays, the present study has adopted Hyland's (2005), metadiscourse model. According to Hyland (2005) "Metadiscourse is the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community." This notion of metadiscourse is exploited with an idea that writers have a leading interaction with their readers. This process involves following three principles of metadiscourse (Hyland & Tse, 2004).

1. Metadiscourse is distant from prepositional aspects of discourse.
2. Metadiscourse refers to aspects of the text that embody writer-reader interaction.
3. Metadiscourse refers only to relations that are internal to discourse.

Several categorization systems have been established for the markers of metadiscourse. (Crismore, Markkanen and Steffensen, 1993; Hyland, 2005; Vande Kopple,1985). Vande Kopple's (1985) proposed a metadiscourse taxonomy whose classification includes seven varieties of metadiscourse marker and it further categorized into textual and interpersonal types. It is difficult to apply this taxonomy in practice because of functional overlaps and the vagueness of the classifications. One problem is the difference between attributors and narrators, specifically in academic writing where citation performs different functions. Consequently, Crismore, Markkanen and Steffensen (1993) revised the categorization, however, they retain the two key domains, they divided textual metadiscourse by adding temporal connectives which they later removed.

This concept of metadiscourse was further reexamined by Hyland where he clarified the vague distinctions. Hyland put forth the classification of metadiscourse by aligning himself with Vande Kopple's (1985) categorization of metadiscourse. His framework firmly believed in the interaction with the audience or reader and identifies two main domains as interactive and interactional metadiscourse. The manifestation of interactive sub-categories is a transition, frame markers, evidentials, endophoric markers and code glosses. However, interactional metadiscourse categories are categorized as Hedges, Boosters, Engagement markers, Attitude markers and Self-Mention**.**

This study focuses on the application of hedging and boosting elements only, which are the secondary domains of interactional metadiscourse markers. Therefore, Hyland (2005) model

has been adopted to analyze hedges and boosters. The list of hedges and boosters is provided in appendix 2 having potential expressions of hedges and boosters (Hyland, 2005). Although, this model carries some limitations like sometimes metadiscourse and propositional function may play the same role in writing. Despite certain weaknesses, the model offers comprehensibility and a dynamic view of speech, we may unknowingly monitor our speech production by analyzing the sort of impact our listener has.

Data Collection

Firstly, the data for the current study was collected from two different universities after obtaining the permission of the respective subject teachers. Secondly, we enlisted seven possible topics for essay writing. These topics were then presented to students of selected disciplines and they were told to write an essay on the topic they feel convenient with and can express their thoughts easily. To explore metadiscourse interactive markers, hedges and boosters, each undergraduate student was told to write an essay containing 400 to 500 words on a selected topic. The seven different topics that were provided to undergraduate students are listed below:

1. Social media
2. Knowledge is power
3. Global warming
4. Unemployment
5. Friendship
6. Obedience to elders
7. A memorable journey

Thirdly, the data has been collected from four different disciplines namely, English, Psychology, Electrical Engineering and Mechanical Engineering with a convenient sampling technique. Finally, the corpus has been compiled containing essays of Second language learners. You can witness below in figure 3.1 the corpus size of each discipline.

Table 3.1 Total Essays and Size of Corpus

Discipline	No. of Essays	Corpus Size
English	30	14931
Psychology	30	6990
Electrical Engineering	30	5011
Mechanical Engineering	30	11167
Total	**120**	**38099**

As you can see table: 3.1 depicts the differences in corpus sizes of each discipline. This is because students from the selected discipline rarely follow the word limit. Few of them exceeded and some of them could not reach the prescribed word limit. Here the question on the representativeness of the specialized corpus arises. Therefore, to ensure the representativeness of the constructed corpus, normalized value has been calculated by 1000 per word of the corpus (Meyer, 2002).

3.2 Corpus Compilation

Corpus has been compiled by keeping in mind the specific frame of samples and research questions. The collected data was in handwritten form; hence, we firstly typed all the essays (120) to store them in electronic form. During the typing process, all the grammatical errors

made by students were ignored. Besides, the structural annotation of the typed files was also taken into consideration. Structural annotation involves the coding of each file such as keeping the record of the word count of each essay along with the registration number and topic selected by the particular student. The corpus size was 38099 words. The compiled corpus would also be part of PNCE (Pakistan National Corpus of English) a project of the Higher Education Commission, Pakistan. PNCE contains various corpus-based genres and students' essay is one of them. Nevertheless, to extract metadiscourse markers such as hedges and boosters, this specialized corpus was run through the corpus tool MetaPak (Abbas, Shehzad, & Ghalib, 2017).

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents data analysis which has been done quantitatively. Firstly, through the quantitative method, the overall occurrence of hedges and boosters has been examined. Secondly, the choices regarding hedging and boosting resources made by students have been observed in the four selected disciplines.

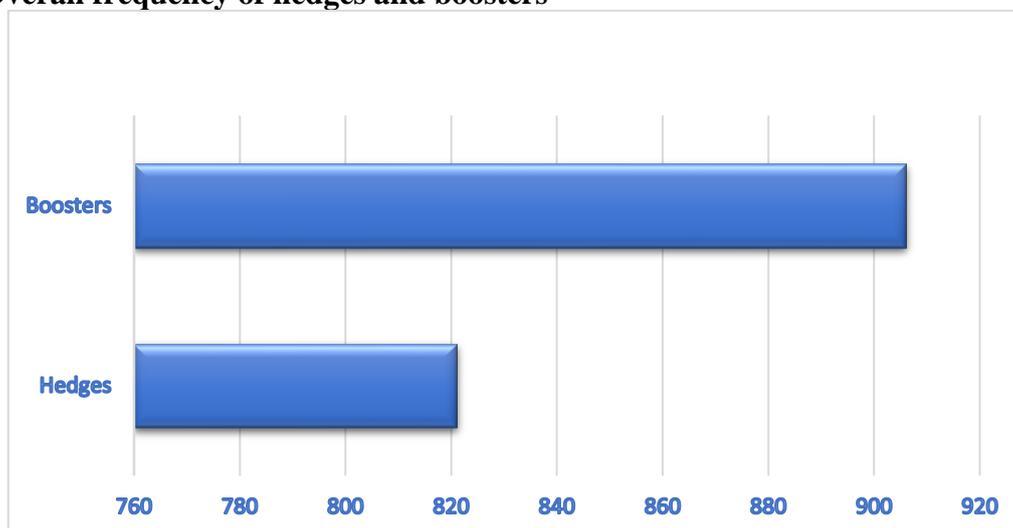## 4.1 Overall frequency of hedges and boosters

Figure 4.1 Overall frequency of hedges and boosters

Based on figure 4.1 the writers of the essays selected and analyzed seem to prefer employing boosters more in their writings. Boosters account for *53%* of the corpus size, however, hedges account for *47%*. This identification has been done through a corpus tool named MetaPak (Abbas, Shehzad & Ghalib, 2017) which identifies hedges and boosters with the total occurrence of *1727* former containing *821*. However, the later consists of *906*. Out of *38099* words, only *1727* hedges and boosters were found in the current study. This reveals somewhat less employment of hedges and boosters in undergraduate students' essays in the Pakistani context. Additionally, the study has also found new hedges and boosters. To name newly explored hedges these are *a little, nearly, at least, most likely, sort of, kind of* and *can*. Newly examined boosters include *not necessary, strongly, easily, extreme, extremely, very, every, badly,* and *cannot, accept, failed, truth, wrong, will*.

Quantitative findings revealed that undergraduate students sought to present the piece of knowledge with somewhat less but repeated hedging and boosting markers. As we can see in table 4.1 (see appendix III), students have used few boosting devices such as: *very (15%), should (14%), every (8%), always (7%) know (6%), think (4%), true (4%), show (3%).* In the

case of hedges, the study found *can (31%) about (15%), most (9%), feel (3%), around (2%), may (3%), kind of (2%), felt (2%), feeling (2%).* However, zero occurrences have been observed of many boosting expressions in students' essays. To name a few: *doubtless, definitely, undoubtedly, obviously, of course, evident, beyond doubt, certainly, decidedly, demonstrate, demonstrated, establish, established, in contestable, indisputable, undeniable, without doubt.* This uncovers that students attempted to create interpersonal solidarity or tried to be seen certain by employing repetitive lexical choices by creating monotonous writing.

Similarly, based on the results in table 4.2 (see appendix IV) rare hedging devices have been employed by the undergraduate students in their essays. The frequently occurring hedges include: *can (31%) about (15%) most (9%),* and *feel (3%).* Moreover, students appear to overlook a few hedging resources given by Hyland (2005). For instance, *tend to, estimate, uncertain, apparently, appear, appeared, argues, argued, assumed, broadly, certain amount, certain extent, claim, doubtful, estimate, from my perspective, from this perspective, guess, indicate, indicates, in my opinion, ought, perhaps, plausible, possible* and *uncertain.* Therefore, employment of less but repetitive hedges indicates that undergraduate students are spotted to present knowledge with less hesitancy, caution and respect.
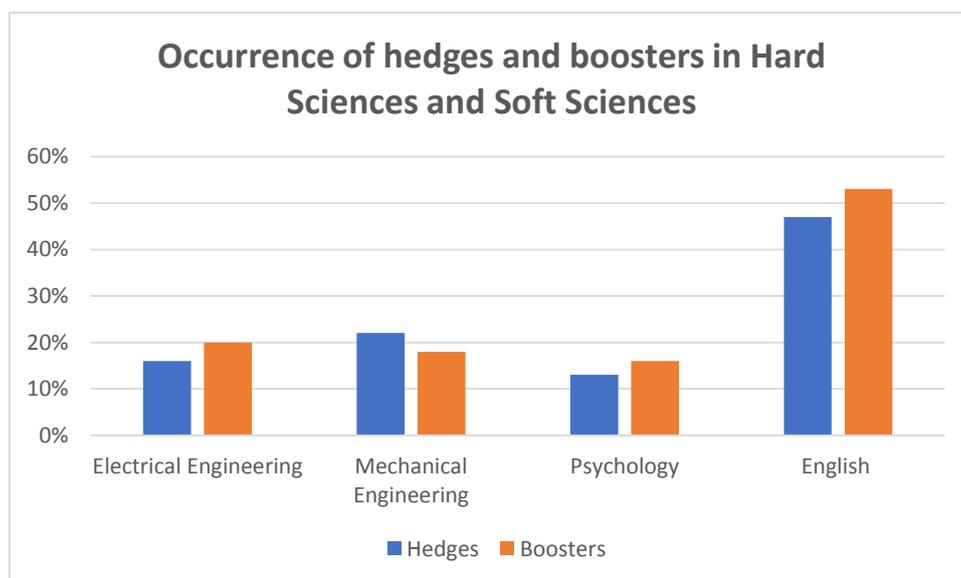

Figure 4.2 hedges and boosters in Hard and Soft Sciences

Surprisingly, the discipline of psychology has been found with less occurrence of hedges (*13%*) and boosters (*16%).* However, the students from the discipline of English have been found to deploy more hedges (*47%*) and boosters *(53%).* Moreover, the undergraduate students from Electrical Engineering have been found to employ *16%* hedges and *20%* boosters. Similary, the undergraduate students of Mechanical Engineering have also been found with less occurrence of hedges (*22%*) and boosters (*18%).*

In essence, limited hedges and boosters are discovered in the texts of undergraduate students. Thus, with a view of finding diverse frequencies, we attempted to analyze all hedges and boosters in isolation (See Appendix V & VI.) Percentages are shown in table 4.1 and 4.2 demonstrate that few hedging and boosting choices have been spotted in undergraduate essays written by the students of four different disciplines namely English, Psychology, Electrical Engineering and Mechanical Engineering. Corpus tool MetaPak (Abbas, Shehzad & Ghalib, 2017) has assisted us in analyzing that few boosting devices such as *obvious,*

prove, believed, surely, strongly, not necessary, extreme, extremely, and *badly* have earned complete negligence on the part of students of hard sciences. However, the employment of repetitive boosters such as *know, never, always, actually, believe, feel, must, really, show, should, think, easily, wrong, every, will* and *very* seems predominant in hard and soft sciences. Additionally, hedges such as *about, around, may, most, possible, should* and *a little* has been found in all the selected disciplines but hedges marker such as *assume, frequently, generally, in general, likely, often, on the whole, relatively, tend to, typical, usually, would, atleast, most likely,* and *sort of* has been found in social sciences only.

The findings regarding *may* and *would* depict a parallel picture with Takimoto (2015). He examined the frequencies of hedges and booster in research articles. He found *may* and *would* accounts for *12%* of the total hedges. However, in the current study when we also found an instance *may* followed by *not,* one might feel that the writer has been inclined towards the creation of uncertainty.

One plausible reason for negative transfer could be that perhaps it is the interference of the first language that the writer followed in English essay writing. It could also be claimed that second language writers are somewhat inexperienced which is demonstrated in making such claims. Undergraduate students because of having a lack of experience might try to be assertive and confident in a way that the presented piece of information could get acceptance from the reader. However, with limited details to support the presented knowledge they may not be successful.
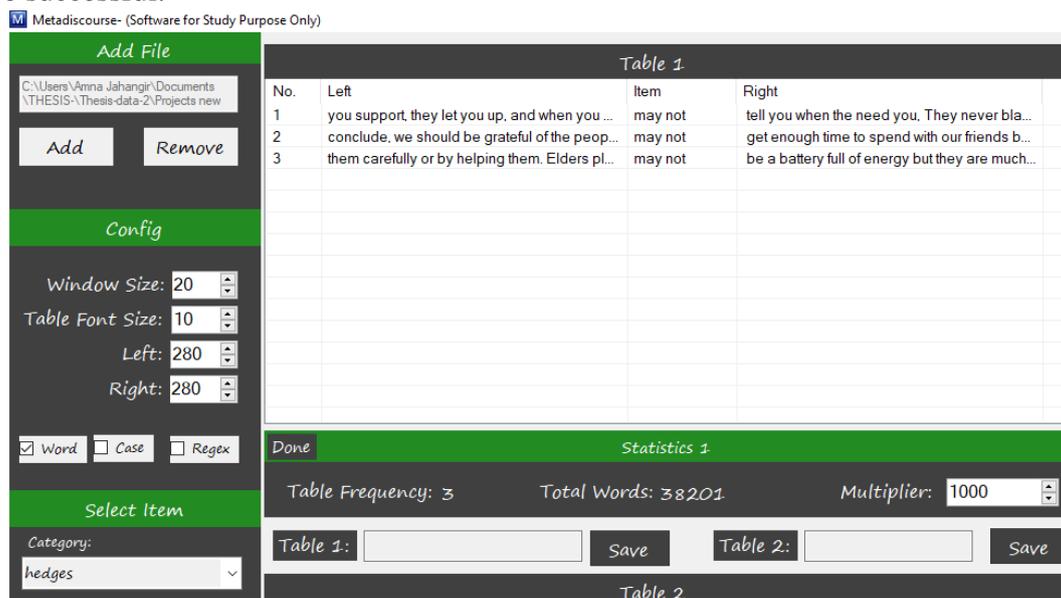

Figure: 4.1 Concordance for may not

Hyland and Milton (1997) in their research found frequent employment of model verb *may* in second language students' essays. They found that *may* was used to show possibility. In a similar vein, Serholt (2012) investigated different sections of academic essays at the undergraduate level. The study found that model verb *may* has been the second most frequently employed hedging marker by second language students of English. In the current study *may* has been found as the 5th most occurring hedging marker.

It is noteworthy that a booster creates interpersonal solidarity, but it also makes us look more assertive. Because it restricts alternative voice. Hence no dialogue takes place under its occurrence (Hyland, 2008). Batool, Majeed and Zahra (2019) also highlighted that boosters

in the context of Pakistan are used to sound more assertive. This draws a parallel picture with the current study. This shows that undergraduate students seem to be unaware of academic conventions.

Moreover, employment of hedging and boosting devices inform the reader about assured knowledge presented to the reader suggesting that undergraduate students in Pakistan present an assertive piece of information. One reason to present an assertive piece of information could be that writers may intend to influence the audience in order to achieve their communicative goal. Additionally, another plausible reason could be that undergraduate students might be less familiar with the notion of academic conventions of writing for making claims. As Hyland (1996) puts it, purposive uncertainty could be achieved via hedging markers and it widely opens the dialogue between the text producer and text consumer. Even if it is indirect it helps the writer to gain acceptance for whatever piece of knowledge is presented.

These findings contradict with Serholt (2012), Yazdani, Sharifi and Elyassi (2014). Serholt (2012) examined the overall occurrence of hedges and boosters and found that second language learners employed more hedges over boosters. Yazdani, Sharifi & Elyassi (2014) also depicted the contradictory stance regarding the overall employment of hedges and boosters. Their findings unveiled that the writer preferred hedges; however, boosters occupied the low number of occurrences in the newspaper genre.

Concerning the consistency, these findings are consistent with the results of Abbas, Shehzad and Ghalib (2017) who conducted a study by compiling a corpus of Joint Investigation Reports (JIT) reports. They found that boosters were more prominent in these reports. Hyland and Milton (1997) also found a similar portrayal in exam scripts produced by the students. Their corpus-based study unveiled that second language students remain assertive and certain; hence, they received lower grades in their exams due to less justified assertion

Markkanen and Schroder (1997) posit that written texts are not only produced to inform or report they are produced also to meet the expectations of the audience and to convince them. Therefore, it could be expected that academic writing could be worded in such a way that it can gain acceptance. Meanwhile, the hedging and boosting choices employed by students may affect the way the reader might interpret the knowledge. Hence, the linguistic choices signalling certainty and uncertainty leads us to present credible knowledge.

It could be possible that the writer has made assertive statements so that he could look confident and may avoid creating vagueness in his writing. The writer might possess the idea that by doing so he would get acceptance from the reader. However, it could also be argued that an undergraduate writer has completely avoided the audience while writing. This makes the information to be less convincing for the reader as he might be against the idea. Hence, the undergraduate writer in the current study impeding the freedom of the reader to come up with an alternative idea. Following Hyland (2005) it is crucial for the writer to present information while engaging the audience. Thereby conveying interpersonal meaning without affecting its credibility.

To conclude, unfortunately, according to the findings of the current study undergraduate students seem to remain reluctant to engage the readers, therefore, they need to adopt a reader-oriented approach in order to convey their message effectively.

5.0   CONCLUSION

The findings of this study unveiled that undergraduate students in Pakistan employed recurrent hedges and boosters. They were lacking the awareness of employing a variety of hedges and boosters. The comprehensive analysis of undergraduate essays showed zero

occurrences of few boosters such as *doubtless, definitely, undoubtedly, obviously, of course, evident, beyond doubt, certainly, decidedly, demonstrate, demonstrated, establish, established, in contestable, indisputable, undeniable, withoutdoubt.* To name few hedges overlooked by undergraduate students in the current study were, *tend to, estimate, uncertain, apparently, appear, appeared, argues, argued, assumed, broadly, certain amount, certain extent, claim, doubtful, estimate, from my perspective, from this perspective, guess, indicate, indicates, in my opinion, ought, perhaps, plausible, possible* and *uncertain.*

To be specific, the overall occurrence of boosters remained a little higher (*53%)* than the hedges (47%). The most occurring boosters in the current study were: *very (15%), should (14%), every (8%), always (7%) know (6%), think (4%), true (4%), show (3%).* In the case of hedges, the study found *can (31%) about (15%), most (9%). feel (3%), around (2%), may (3%), kind of (2%), felt (2%), feeling (2%).* In the Pakistani context, the undergraduate students remain reluctant to involve the reader in their writings. They appeared to be assertive and barely imagined the intended audience. For instance, hedging marker *about* has been found with *15%* occurrence, *most* accounts for *9%* and *feel* accounts for *3%* only and the rest of the hedges accounts below 3% of the total hedges employment. Hence, this study sheds light on second language learner's needs to develop competence in academic writing and suggests bringing it into practice by designing curriculum or classroom activities.

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