

Hedging in Research Articles about English Language Teaching Written by Thai and Native Speakers of English

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the extent to which hedging expressions are used by Thai and native English authors in a corpora of research articles. The hedging devices investigated include modal verbs, lexical verbs, adjectives, adverbials, nouns, It/There introductory phrases, and compound of these hedging in each research article section. The findings revealed that Thai authors tended to use fewer and more limited items and means for expressing hedging in academic writing than native authors. Hedging expressions were frequently employed in the discussion section of research articles, and were employed the least in the method section. Modal verbs, lexical verbs, and adverbials were the three most common characteristics of hedging found in the corpora.

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาการใช้กลวิธีหลีกเลี่ยงการผูกมัดตนเองในการเขียนบทความวิชาการภาษาอังกฤษโดยผู้เขียนชาวไทยและเจ้าของภาษา โดยศึกษาความถี่ของการปรากฏคำในรูปแบบกลุ่มคำกริยาช่วย คำกริยา คำคุณศัพท์ คำกริยาวิเศษณ์ คำนาม และวลีที่ขึ้นต้นด้วย “เป็น” และ “มี” รวมทั้งการประกอบกันของคำในแต่ละส่วนของบทความวิจัย ผลการศึกษาพบว่า จำนวนคำที่ใช้และความถี่ของการใช้คำต่าง ๆ เพื่อหลีกเลี่ยงการผูกมัดตนเองในการเขียนเชิงวิชาการของผู้เขียนชาวไทยน้อยกว่าจำนวนคำที่เจ้าของภาษาใช้ และการประกอบกันของคำรูปแบบต่าง ๆ เพื่อเน้นการหลีกเลี่ยงการผูกมัดตนเองมีจำนวนน้อยและไม่ซับซ้อน ในด้านลักษณะการใช้กลวิธีหลีกเลี่ยงการผูกมัดตนเอง ปรากฏว่า ทั้งผู้เขียนชาวไทยและเจ้าของภาษาจะใช้กลวิธีนี้ในการเขียนส่วนอภิปรายผลมากที่สุด และใช้น้อยที่สุดในการเขียนส่วนวิธีดำเนินการวิจัย โดยมักจะใช้มากในรูปแบบกลุ่มคำกริยาช่วย (modal verbs) คำกริยา (lexical verbs) และคำกริยาวิเศษณ์ (adverbials) ตามลำดับ

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Background

Hedging is a language device which is commonly employed in both spoken and written communication to indicate that speakers/writers are not certain or lack commitment to the truth of their statements (Lyons, 1977: 797). Crompton (1997) added that authors may not indicate that they lack certainty to give opinions through the use of impersonality and passivization, but rather express politeness and/or humbleness. Since written discourse is a long-lasting source, writers need to qualify their claims in order to protect themselves from any criticisms afterwards (Hamp-Lyons and Heasley, 1993: 90-91). In academic writing, it is necessary for writers to be honest to readers, and to be cautious in reporting research and making propositions. Being accurate in thoughts and conveying and knowing how to employ hedging in academic writing properly is significant. Employing hedging devices, thus, helps reduce the degree of commitment to the truth of their claims. It is, therefore, essential for the authors to be responsible for the truth of their propositions or their claims which are based on their judgments. For example, hedging such as through modal verbs (may, might, could) indicates that the writer does not fully claim about the topic being discussed. Other forms of hedging include adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal expressions (possible, perhaps, probability), modal lexical verb (believe, assume), IF-clauses, question forms, passivization, impersonal phrases, and time reference (Hyland, 1994: 240).

Hedging is common in academic writing as it helps writers to qualify their propositions. One place where hedging can be found is research articles (RA), where authors share their scholarship findings in order to enter the discourse community. According to Swales (1990), RAs generally contain four sections, which are the Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion (IMRD). Each section has different communicative purposes. The motivation for conducting a piece of research and its significance can be found in the introduction. The research procedure and research findings are described in sequence in the method and results sections, respectively. The discussion section presents interpretation of research results and researchers' comments or recommendations.

Ken Hyland has conducted a number of studies on hedging. Hyland (1996a) examined the frequency, functions and realizations of hedges in order to discuss the importance of hedging devices in scientific writing, and a range of strategies for teaching

L2 students to recognize and use hedging devices properly. He found that hedging devices are a significant feature of successful academic writing which L2 students need to learn in order to use appropriately. It is therefore essential for ESP courses to help L2 students to improve their writing and understanding of how to hedge properly by helping students realize expert writers' hedging strategies and developing the proper use of hedging forms. Hyland and Milton (1997) conducted a comparative study of the expression of doubt and certainty in examination scripts between Hong Kong and British learners. The findings revealed that Hong Kong learners relied on a more limited range of devices, proposed stronger commitments, and clearly had major problems in expressing a precise degree of certainty. Hyland (2000) explored how fourteen Cantonese undergraduates responded to hedges and boosters in an academic text. The study concluded that most of the students were unaware of the hedges and boosters in the given academic text. In addition, hedges seemed to be more invisible than boosters. Three students failed to notice a hedge at all from the text whereas at least one booster was noticed by every student.

Apart from Hyland, other researchers have also realized the importance of hedging in academic writing. Crompton (1997), for example, wrote up an argumentative academic article about hedging in academic writing. He pointed out that the responsibility of writers for their claims should be taken into account when identifying hedging, and proposed six main characterizations of hedging which are copulas other than 'be', epistemic modals, clauses relating to probability, adverbials relating to probability, reported propositions with the existence of authors, and reported propositions with the non-existence of authors. Hinkel (1997) conducted a comparative study of indirectness devices used in native and non-native speaker students' essays. The study concluded that non-native students, who were Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Indonesians, employed rhetorical questions and tags, disclaimers and denials, vagueness and ambiguity, repetition, several types of hedges, ambiguous pronouns, and the passive voice more than native students did. Lewin (2005) studied both authors' and readers' identification of hedging in scientific texts. The study found that the authors' identification was not similar to the hedges identified by linguists. In addition, politeness was not the authors' general motivation for hedging in their texts. Furthermore, PhD students as readers of the study identified hedging more than the authors intended.

Hyland (1995) supported the advantages of learning about hedging saying that knowledge about hedging enables learners, especially non-native speakers (NNSs), to have

a clear understanding of the interactional and rhetorical nature of scientific RAs such that they can perform more effectively in today's academic research world. Also, the greater the understanding of hedging, the better the understanding of academic writing.

However, most studies have been conducted in scientific or medical discourse. Consequently, it would be beneficial if more studies were conducted in English educational discourse. Not only understanding the role of hedging in academic writing through the view of readers, but knowing how and when to hedge appropriately as writers is also necessary for Thai students. In addition, Thais who participated in most studies of hedging appear to be a small part in a large group of NNS, and none of the studies have mainly studied hedging by Thai writers. Furthermore, suggested categories of hedging by Crompton (1997) seem to be feasible for further study, but none of the studies about hedging have chosen to follow his proposed criteria. Therefore, it is interesting to explore how Thai writers use hedging devices in English academic writing in comparison with native English writers, and employ Crompton's proposal as one of the frameworks in this study.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the extent to which hedging was used by Thai and native English language authors in research articles in academic journals printed in Thailand. The specific objectives of the study were to compare the extent to which hedging was used by Thai and native English authors in the selected RAs, to explore the frequency of occurrence of hedging in each RA section in the corpora, and to investigate the frequencies of characterizations of hedging as proposed by Crompton (1997).

Method

1. Data Collection

Twenty RAs selected from journals of language teaching and learning published in Thailand were the corpus of the study. The selected journals were drawn from the years 1997 to 2006. The keywords "Teaching, Pedagogy, English Language Teaching or ELT or Instruction" were used as a criterion for selection of the articles. The Thai RAs (TH corpus) were drawn from five academic journals published in Thailand: 1) *Pasaa*, an academic journal on language and language teaching, published by the Language Institute of Chulalongkorn University, 2) *Reflections*, an academic journal on language and language teaching, published by the Department of Applied Linguistics,

King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, 3) Journal of English Studies, an academic journal on language and language teaching, published by the Department of English, Thammasat University, 4) Humanities Journal, an academic journal on language and language teaching, published by the Humanities Faculty of Kasetsart University, and 5) Studies in Languages and Language Teaching (SLLT), an academic journal on language and language teaching, published by the Department of Foreign Languages, Mahidol University. The RAs written by native speakers of English (NA corpus) were collected from the ELT Journal, which is published by Oxford University.

2. Data Analysis

In order to analyze hedging in the RAs collected, abstracts, quotations, tables, diagrams, transcribed dialogues, and examples were first excluded from the RAs. Each RA was then read thoroughly and marked for its communicative purpose in four sections: I,M,R,D. When there was a combination of purposes, for example, a section that indicated both results and discussion, the section with the combination was classified as R. Accordingly, the section with a combination of interpretation of the research findings, comments and recommendations of the study, and conclusion in some RAs was classified as D.

Next, a table of analysis of hedging was developed. Two English native readers were asked to analyze whether each underlined item was a hedge or hedging in each statement. After the analyses of both native readers were obtained, their answers were compared individually. Only the items for which both readers agreed on 'Yes' (no matter what the degree of certainty) were counted and classified according to the six characterizations proposed by Crompton (1997) which are:

1. Copulas other than 'be,' e.g. The moon appears to be made of cheese.
2. Epistemic modals, e.g. The moon might be made of cheese.
3. Clauses relating to probability, e.g. It is likely that the moon is made of cheese.
4. Adverbials relating to probability, e.g. The moon is probably made of cheese.
5. Reported propositions with author existence,
 - 5.1 Explicitly designate author, e.g. I suggest that the moon is made of cheese.
 - 5.2 Implicit entity, e.g. It is therefore suggested that the moon is made of cheese.
6. Reported propositions with non-existent author, e.g. These findings suggest a cheese moon.

Other epistemic hedging items used for the analysis are those compiled by Hyland and Milton (1997), Jordan (2004), Holmes (1988), and Hyland (1996b).

Last, a computer program, “Concapp Concordance and Word Profiler Version 4” was employed in order to count the frequency of the hedging items in the corpus.

Results

The main findings of the study are described together with discussion in the following.

1. Occurrences of Hedging Found in the Corpora of RAs

Table 1 shows that Thai authors in the study employ hedging considerably less frequently than native authors in every section of RAs.

Table 1 Occurrences of Hedging in each RA Section in the TH and NA Corpora

RA Sections	TH		NA	
	No. of	%	No. of	%
	Occurrences		Occurrences	
Introduction	19	5.31	64	17.88
Method	8	2.23	13	3.63
Results	32	8.94	55	15.36
Discussion	50	13.97	117	32.68
Total	109	30.45	249	69.55

As can be seen in Table 1, hedging is most frequently used in the D section and least frequently in the M section of both the TH and NA corpora. However, Thai authors employ hedging in the R section more often than the I section. This is in contrast with the findings of Swales (1990), where native authors tended to employ hedging in the I section more frequently than in the R section. The I and D sections written by native authors were rich in hedging devices compared with the R section, which aims to report the findings objectively. It is possible that Thai authors are likely to report findings of the study in R section of RAs more subjectively.

Regarding Crompton's classification of hedging shown in Table 2, epistemic modals were the most frequently used hedging device by both Thai (17.63%) and native authors (28.69%) in the study. However, Thai authors used hedging less than the native authors in all classes, especially reported propositions with an explicitly designated author. This also suggests that Thai authors hardly represent themselves in writing RAs. In other words, native authors appear to claim responsibility for their uncertain or arguable propositions straightforwardly.

Table 2 Occurrences of Hedging following Crompton (1997)

Characteristics of Hedging	TH		NA	
	No. of	%	No. of	%
	Occurrences		Occurrences	
1. Copulas other than 'be'	9	2.37	41	10.79
2. Epistemic Modals	70	17.63	109	28.69
3. Clauses relating to probability	11	2.89	28	7.37
4. Adverbials relating to probability	10	2.63	35	9.21
5. Reported propositions (existence)				
5.1 Explicitly designated author	2	0.53	23	6.05
5.2 Implicit entity	3	0.79	6	1.58
6. Reported propositions (non-existence)	13	3.42	23	6.05

In brief, an epistemic modal is the most used device to express hedging in RAs of both Thai and native authors. However, the number of hedges occurring in the RAs written by Thai authors was noticeably less than in those by native authors. Interestingly, the R section written by Thai authors seemed to contain more hedging than the I section. This is opposite to native authors whose hedges were found in the I section more frequently than the R section.

2. Discussion and Implications

The findings indicate that both Thai and native authors employ hedging in RAs in the field of English language teaching. However, the items for hedging found in the

study indicate that Thai authors may have a more limited range of devices for expressing hedging than native authors.

However, the meanings and the precise degree of certainty of modal verbs are rather complicated and difficult for interpretation by non-native learners (Holmes, 1982). For example, the use of items in the past form indicates weaker certainty than the use of items in present form. The use of *could* and *might* also indicates more uncertainty than the use of *can* and *may* (Montgomery, 1982). Since the meanings of *may* and *might*, which are permission and possibility (Quirk et al., 1972), can be understood clearly, Thai authors, therefore, tend to select these words to express hedging more frequently than other epistemic modal verbs.

Apart from the frequent use of *can*, *could*, *may* and *might* to express hedging in both the TH and NA corpora, the use of *would*, *should*, *be able to*, and *allow to* are found only in the NA corpus. *Would* is the past form of *will*, and indicates weaker probability with respect to a proposition than the use of *will*. However, Thai authors in the study did not use *would* as a device for expressing hedging. It could be that *would* expresses rather complicated meanings, such as, willingness, insistence, characteristic activity, hypothetical meaning in main clauses, and probability, that Thai authors have difficulty dealing with. Interestingly, a great number of *shoulds* are used in the TH corpus, but none of them is used epistemically. Thai authors seem to employ *should* as 'deontic' modality. In other words, Thai authors tend to indicate what to or not to perform. This might be due to Thai culture of 'appropriateness'. In fact, this point is in agreement with one of the purposes of language used in Thai cultural communication, which is for teaching purposes, as stated by Nakornthap (cited in Rungjang (1993) and Chanchaisakulwat (1994), who categorizes Thai culture in communication by the purposes of language use which are for teaching, communication, and creative purposes.

In addition, epistemic adjectives and *It/There* introductory phrases expressing hedging found in the study implies that Thai authors tend to have limited devices to hedge. For example, *Possible* is the only epistemic adjective used for hedging in the selected RAs written by Thai authors while various words such as *certain*, *appeared*, and *assumed* are found in native authors' RAs. *It/There* introductory phrases used to express hedging in the NA corpus are also more varied. While '*It...that*' is the only pattern of the

introductory phrase used by Thai authors, 'It...that, It...to, There..., and There...that' are used by native authors. This suggests that enlarging the repertoire for conveying hedging in academic writing is needed for Thai scholars. Other forms of hedging, especially epistemic nouns such as believing, indication, likelihood, and possibility emphasize the point since these hedging forms found in the study were employed only by native authors.

Furthermore, Thai authors in the study tended to employ 'single' hedging in a sentence whereas native authors normally combined hedging devices in a sentence. That is, Thai authors were likely to employ hedging devices in a less complex way than native authors. This point might be influenced by Thai academic writing instruction which emphasizes a 'simple, clear, concise, and well-arranged' sentence (Changkhwanyuen, 2005).

In sum, hedging in academic writing is commonly and frequently found in native authors' RAs, especially in the D and I sections whereas hedging is mostly found in the D and R sections of Thai authors' RAs. In addition, the characteristics of hedging used in the selected RAs of both Thai and native authors were quite varied. However, epistemic modals, lexical verbs, and adverbials were found to be the three most frequent characteristics of hedging employed in the corpora of RAs. Both Thai and native authors in the study employ hedging in their work, but native authors tended to have a greater variety of hedging items and means of expressing hedging in writing a research article. This certainly is relevant to academic writing instruction for Thai learners.

3. Implications for Teaching Academic Writing

Although non-native authors' written works are unlikely to be native-like, non-native authors can learn how to make propositions in academic writing wisely. This study indicates that epistemic devices as a means of expressing hedging are essential for non-native learners to master not only the how and when to express hedging in academic writing properly, but also a greater variety of linguistic devices for hedging (Lewin, 2003). Academic writing courses should place more emphasis on linguistic resources which are considered to be one of the major problems found in non-native learners' work (Shaw and Liu, 1998: 248). It might be helpful to introduce hedging to students early in the program timeline. As Blue (1991) reported in his paper, pre-session courses could also help learners to improve their academic writing skills effectively.

Conclusion

The findings from the study indicate the differences in how Thai and native authors employ hedging in writing RAs. Apparently, Thai authors seem to have limited means for expressing hedging, and also employ hedging devices less frequently than native authors. This suggests that Thai authors need to include hedging more effectively in their academic writing in order to be more successful in the international academic community.

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