

# Hedges and Boosters in English Academic Writings as L1 vs. English as a Foreign Language for Persian Nurse

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## Abstract

Conveying an appropriate degree of doubt and certainty is a problematic point for Persian nurses in their English academic writing, that it is essential aspect for an effective and successful writing. Since how to interact these strategies is varied in different disciplines and environment, introducing the appropriate voice is crucial for persuasion and stating attitudes in academic writing. In order to investigate the problem this paper compares expression of caution and certainty on an electronic corpora of 204956 Words, almost equal numbers of words in both NS and NNS articles of the similar field and number of article. The corpus analysis reveals significant differences between the two groups comprising problems in conveying the appropriate degree of hedges and intensifiers. The overall distribution of expression of doubt and certainty indicates some similarities and differences between the two discourse in field. The findings provide some pedagogical implications for improving Persian nurses' academic writing.

**Key words:** Doubt, Certainty, Hedges, Boosters

## INTRODUCTION

English writing plays a very significant role not only for novice writers but also for expert ones in various fields of study. Despite its essential role in academic and professional development however, writing in the academy is considered to be the most demanding task for L1 students, and even more challenging for L2 Writers (Brown & Hood, 1989; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Since writing is a multidisciplinary approach, it requires high proficiency in different aspect of language such as vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure. Moreover standing a balanced qualification is also another important skill in academic writing.

Hyland believes that "effective academic writing actually depends on interactional elements which supplement propositional information in the text and alert readers

to the writer's opinion" (Hyland, 1994) i.e. the writer's ability to provide the reader with a cautious analysis of the collected data is what marks a good article, thus it helps to alternative interpretations. Within linguistics, this is referred to as epistemic modality, which is described as an indication of a speaker's confidence or lack of confidence in the propositional information that he/she supplies (Coates, 2003). These expressions of doubt and certainty are known in literature as hedges and boosters (Holmes, 1990).

One significant way in which the author's degree of confidence can be expressed in academic writing is through the use of hedges and boosters (Hyland, 1994, 2000). Whereas hedges such as *seem*, *suggest*, and *indicate* are expressions of doubt in relation to the propositional information provided, boosters such as *clearly* and *obviously* are expressions of the author's certainty (2000: 179). Without awareness of epistemic modalities it would be hard to state what you exactly mean, and it can cause problem in stating attitude to the readers. It might cause soSSme misunderstanding in what the writer means that it shows the significance of awareness of epistemic modality in both writing and communicating ideas in everyday life.

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In everyday conversation hedges are usually represented through auxiliary verbs lexical verbs, and by epistemic adjectives, adverbs. Common conversational forms includes like perhaps, I guess, maybe, quite and sort of, while prosody, tag questions, verbal fillers and hesitation markers also function as hedges when they are used to attenuate the strength of an utterance (Coates and Cameron, 1988; Holmes, 1995). Holmes (1984) identifies two basic strategies for expressing different degrees of commitment (certainty) and detachment (doubt): *boosting* and *attenuation or hedging* (Vassileva, 2001) that they would be helpful in delivering writer's view, claims and assertion which they are curtail for a successful and influential academy writing. Its a curtail issue to convey an appropriate degree of certainty and uncertainty that it demands different researches in every discipline.

There are some various studies on hedging and boosting in research papers of different disciplines and in their rhetorical sections. The studies which are conducted in this area have shown that there are some variations in the use of hedges and boosters across disciplines. Some of them have concentrated on gender variations concerning the use of different strategies in both spoken and/or written discourse (Coates, 1987; Holmes, 1990). Some other researchers investigated the impact of powerful and powerless language styles on a listener (Hosman & Siltanen, 2006) there have been some research on hedges and boosters in academic writing for both L1, as well as L2 (Holmes, 1988; Hyland, 1994, 1996, 2000; Hyland & Milton, 1997). Some researcher have used hedges to protect the addressor in possible negative results from criticism (Jalilifar & Alavi, 2012) In so doing, the cautious addresser decreases the commitment to the proposition (Capone & Nodoushan, 2014; Mohammad A Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Mohammad Ali Salmani Nodoushan, 2015).

Studies have observed that successful writers are required to gain mastery use of hedges and boosters to express his or her doubt and certainty in the written discourse (Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Uhm, Moon, Lee, & Oh, 2009). They ought to pay more attention to the use of hedges and boosters in stating how to claim or disclaim. Unlike spoken discourse where frequent use of hedges may be viewed as features of powerless language (Holtgraves & Lasky, 1999), hedges in academic writing convey a cautious approach to the material or research results being presented, which in turn helps "academics gain acceptance for their work" (Hyland, 2000). There is still a big requirement for research in the hedge and boost concepts in the fields such as nursing in both NS and NNS' novice and Expert academic writers.

These concepts are almost ignored or it is in an area of very low attention in nursing academic writing in Iran, while it

represents a significantly effective role for interacting EAP. The significance relies in carrying both the correct degree of confidence by the Persian speaking nurses, and stating an attitude to the readers in their academic writers. It is one of the major problems for Persian speaking nurses, who use different degree of forces in both spoken and written discourse, so learning about how to increase or decrease their force of statement is essential to be effective and successful in their academic writing in English.

Delivering the suitable degree of confidence or its lack is varied among different cultures and languages, thus comparing the way English academic writings with other languages are beneficial.

This study aims to find out if the Iranian Persian nurses may carry an appropriate degree of caution and certainty to convey their attitude to the reader in their academic writing in English or if they are aware of such beneficial strategies. To do so it compares how Persian NNS of English and NS nurses hedge and boost in the academic writing in English by analyzing lexical items used to meet the purpose in their published English articles. It concentrates on the way Persian speaking nurses in Iran use hedging and boosting strategies in academic writing comparing with NS academic writing on the same field and similar context. The study seeks to determine the way both groups state their claims and disclaims in academic writing discourse.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data for this study includes two sets of published corpora articles along with interviews of the same discourse. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches together looks for a deeper explanation of writing of these groups and helps to gain a more meaningful interpretation. The first corpora consist of twenty articles of Persian speaking nurses' academic writing in higher education level that its compared with the second one that comprises the same number of native speaker academic writing of the same field and level. To have homogenous data the articles were selected based on four criteria for both NS and NNS: having Abstract, Introduction, having Discussion, and Conclusion. Gender difference was not considered in data selection.

The articles were selected randomly from the magazine that the sources are in appendix 1. The articles of both groups were converted into electronic corpora of 204956 Words, almost equal numbers of words in both NS and NNS articles, were searched for lexical expressions of hedging and boosting. Using AntConc Tools, a Concordancepro grammar Word List the number of most frequent words

was clarified and it helped to extracting the most frequent hedges and boosters of each of the two corpora. To determine the range and frequency of lexical expressions of doubt and certainty in these corpora in general and, the occurrence of hedges and boosters across nursing disciplines of four rhetorical sections of research articles mentioned above. A list of such items common to native speaker usage was prepared based on a list of items compiled from grammars, dictionaries, and earlier studies, from Holmes (1988), Hyland (1996a), Hyland and Milton (1997), and Quirk et al (1972), as well as from the most frequent items in the articles themselves. Holmes' (1988) classifies the lexical devices used to express doubt and certainty into five grammatical classes: modal verbs, lexical verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and nouns. Then after determining frequency of hedges and boosters, Sentence analyses were used to compare the sentence structures in the clarified area of hedges and boosters.

The interviews were conducted with experienced researcher/writers from the mentioned disciplines involving open-ended interview prompts closely related to the research objectives, that it allows other topics to be followed-up if required in the discussion. Interviews seem to be very helpful way of bringing the insider's view to the analysis, to have a closer description of cultural practices in terms of its members' understandings in considerable detail.

The corpus study aims to emphasize the importance of boosting and hedging in academic writing and the extent of disciplinary variation. Then using interview data the pragmatic effects of these features as a means of interpreting is discussed.

## RESULTS

This study aimed to investigate the way Persian speakers nurses use hedges and boosters in general and across disciplines of four rhetorical sections of research articles in introduction, discussion, results and conclusion sections of their scholarly articles for persuading the readers of the findings of their studies. In other words this study seeks to find out to what extent Persian nurses employ hedges and intensifiers in their English academic writing.

The quantitative results represent the distribution of hedges and boosters in nursing published research articles in both native and non-native articles in order to find out their similarities or differences in general. The results also show the distribution of hedges and boosters across four rhetorical sections of research articles separately: Abstract, Introduction, Discussion, and Conclusion. Table 1 along

with the first Chart indicates that the total number of the devices signifying hedges or intensifiers is 1432. The results reveals that the number of hedges used in NS's nursing academic articles is outnumbered NNS's articles almost about one third, while the numbers of boosters used reveals a quiet slight difference in both disciplines, a slight increase in NNS's articles

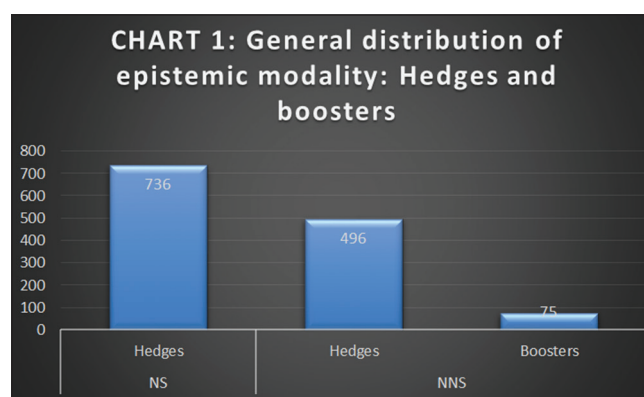
According to Table 2 and the second Chart, modal hedges such as can, may, should and would are the most frequent types of hedges in both NSs and NNSs while adverb hedges such as sometimes is the least frequently used ones. Although the most frequent ones are almost the same in both groups there is still a significant difference in frequency number. That is, on the whole, the writers employed the same specific kinds of hedging and booster devices in unequal frequency rate.

Table 3 and the third Chart shows the most frequently occurring devices used to boost, revealing the significance of a relatively big number of boosters in overall view distribution in NS nurses' articles vs. the NN nurses' articles. The results in this part show that there is a quiet slight difference in the number of the times in which the two groups of authors used the boosters in general.

After the overall distribution, the frequency of hedges and boosters are analyzed across four sections of nurses 'research articles. The results indicate the more frequency rate of hedges in conclusion, discussion, introduction, and abstract respectively with conclusion in the highest frequency in both N/NNS. It represents that the frequency of Hedging devices is almost twice more in NS vs. NNS

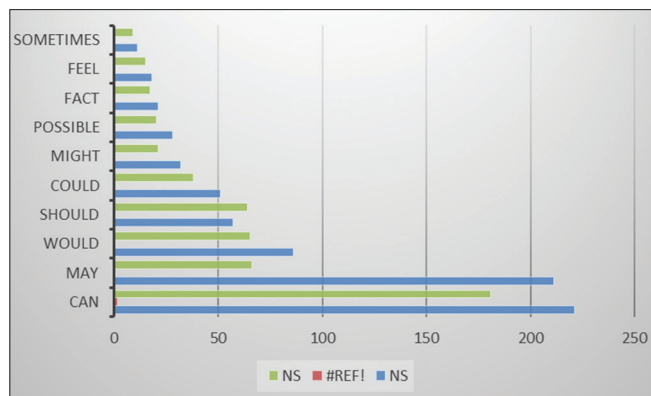
**Table 1: General distribution of epistemic modality: Hedges and boosters**

NS		NNS	
Hedges	Boosters	Hedges	Boosters
736	125	496	75
Total: 861		Total: 571	

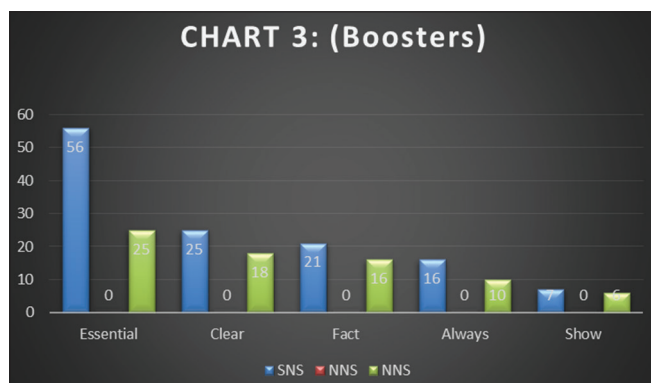


**Table 2: Most frequent items of epistemic devices in rank order (Hedges)**

NS			NNS		
Rank	Item	Frequency	Rank	Item	Frequency
1	Can	221	1	Can	181
2	May	211	2	May	66
3	Would	86	3	Could	65
4	Should	57	4	Should	64
5	Could	51	5	Would	38
6	Might	32	6	Fact	21
7	Possible	28	7	Possible	20
8	Fact	21	8	Sometimes	17
9	Feel	18	9	Feel	15
10	Sometimes	11	10	Might	9

**Table 3: Boosters**

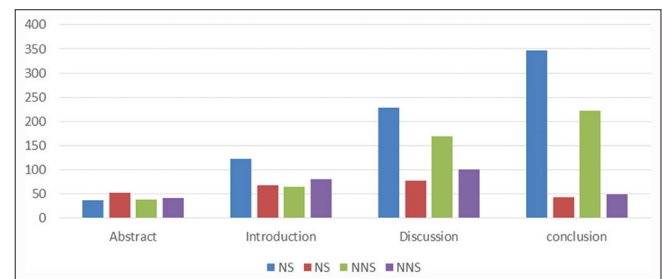
NS			NNS		
Rank	Item	Frequency	Rank	Item	Frequency
2	Essential	56	2	Essential	25
4	Clear	25	4	Clear	18
5	Fact	21	5	Fact	16
6	Always	16	6	Often	10
7	Show	7	7	Certain	6



except for the abstract part which is in quiet similar numbers. It also represents comparing the frequency of numbers of booster shows quiet significant higher level of boosters in discussion parts in NNS comparing with the NS, while there is a slight difference in other rhetorical parts.

**Table 4: Frequency of hedges and boosters across four sections of nurses 'research articles**

	Abstract	Introduction	Discussion	Conclusion
NS				
Hedges	37	123	229	347
Boosters	52	68	78	43
NNS				
Hedges	39	65	170	222
Boosters	42	81	101	49



Then after determining frequency of hedges and boosters, one hundred sentences were selected for analyses. The sentence structures reveal that both NS/NNS have used almost similar structures in their academic writings. Here are a few of one hundred sentences which were analyzed by details.

The earliest history of the patient can be challenging in nursing diagnosis. (NNS)

It may be harder to control, but insulin can be added to the analysis solution. (NS)

Source of stress in different studies may be attributed to cultural or educational reasons. (NNS)

Both B12 and foliate levels may be lower than normal with Metformin use. (NS)

Communication of these findings is essential to impact nursing practice. (NS)

Addressing this problem is essential to improve the quality of life. (NNS)

Among the analyses sentences there are both simple and complex structures that they show similar structures for both N/NNS writings. Therefore there is no such a difference in the sentence structures used in both corpora.

The interview section provides more details to represent a deeper understanding of how N/NNS represent their caution or certainty in their speech and writing discourse. Despite the significance of hedges and boosters, lack of awareness makes it hard for some academic authors to



convey an appropriate degree of certainty or uncertainty in English writings (Table). Some of the NNS authors believe they were not aware of degree of certainty or uncertainty power in conveying the meaning and they claim that they have stated their meaning the way that they do in their L1. Another one believes since it is very important point, how to convey the attitude to the patient, in medicine fields so everybody in the field pay attention to how to do them in both writing and speech. One of the NS writers thinks that it is an important point for the nurses to take care of how they make an effective persuasion in every language. It would affect the patient, their treatment, the coworker, or anyone in the discipline, so it is a significant point for everyone in medical fields including the nurses to take care of it in their speech or writing. The findings of the present study highlight the requirement for training L2 writers in the use of hedges and boosters if their speech and writing are to be more native-like.

## DISCUSSION

Conveying the appropriate degree of certainty or uncertainty play a very significant role in conveying the attitude of the author in an academic writing in all field, nurses included. The study aims to help teachers and practitioners to plan curricula that meet Persian speaking Iranian nurses need.

The result of the previous Salager-Meyer discusses the distribution of hedges across different rhetorical sections of medical research articles. (Salager-Meyer, 1994) The results showed the discussion sections contain the highest numbers of hedged devices, whereas the Method section is the lowest number of hedged rhetorical section. Hyland (1996a, 1996b) reveals the significance of hedges and boosters in academic writing. The distinction is dramatically illustrated by the fact that over 70 percent of all hedges occurred in humanities/social science papers and they were over twice as frequent in philosophy, marketing, and linguistics, as in physics and engineering. Philosophy and marketing papers show considerable use of boosters. However, the science and engineering papers were heavily underrepresented in the number of boosters. Varttala has found that the relative frequency of hedges was higher in the field of economics than in medicine and technology (Varttala, 2001). Falahati results indicate that the three disciplines show some considerable differences in the use of hedges. The psychology research articles contain the highest amount of hedges, whereas the relative overall number of hedges in medicine and chemistry research articles was about 57% less than psychology. (Falahati, 2006) Alimorad and Sahragard (2012) have drawn the conclusion that Persian writers, like other non-native writers, employ

intensifiers more frequently than native writers. The authors argued that Persian writers in English even utilize hedging devices less frequently than intensifiers.

The result of the present study reveals the more frequency rate of hedges is in conclusion, discussion, introduction, and abstract respectively with conclusion in the highest frequency in both N/NNS. It represents that the frequency of Hedging devices is almost twice more in NS vs. NNS except for the abstract part which is in quiet similar numbers. It also represents comparing the frequency of numbers of booster shows quiet significant higher level of boosters in discussion parts in NNS comparing with the NS, while there is a slight difference in other rhetorical parts. Overall, on the results in both quantitative and qualitative area indicates that teaching and learning how to write linguistically-and rhetorically-appropriate academic discourse with respect to target community is of great importance in conveying the appropriate attitude of the Persian Iranian nurses in academic writing.

After all, there will be a point that it is significant to mention here which claims most of the readers are NNS of English that their understanding would form through cultural background. So it demands more studied on cultural aspect in forming how to interact ideas in both academic writing and speech.

Comparing N/NNS' academic writing raise an important query; since mostly their readers are NNS, should NNS hold their voice of witting or is it necessary to be native like sounded in written performance in the academia.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Sources of the selected articles

Iranian Journal of Nursing and Midwifery Research | January

February 2016 | Vol. 21 | Issue 1

Iranian Journal of Nursing and Midwifery Research | July-August 2015 | Vol. 20 | Issue 4

AJN ▼ March 2017 ▼ Vol. 117, No. 3

Journal of Professional Nursing, Vol. 30, No. 6 (November/December), 2014

Journal of Professional Nursing, Vol. 33, No. 1 (January/February), 2017

Journal of Professional Nursing, Vol. 30, No. 2 (March/April), 2014

**APPENDIX 2****Appendix 2****List of Hedges and Boosters**

Compiled from Quirk *et al.* (1985), Holmes (1988), Hyland (1996a, 1998), Hyland and Milton (1997), and Varttala (2001).

**1. List of Hedges**

<b>Modal Verbs</b>	<b>Adverbs</b>	<b>Relatively</b>	<b>Probable</b>
Can	About	Reportedly	Rare
Could	Allegedly	Roughly	Relative
May	Almost	Seemingly	Remarkable
Might	Apparently	Seldom	Rough
Should	Approximately	Significantly	Significant
Will	Around	Slightly	Slight
Would	Arguably	Sometimes	Small
<b>Lexical Verbs</b>			
Appear	Barely	Somewhat	Substantial
Argue	Commonly	Strongly	Theoretical
Assert	Conceivably	Substantially	Typical
Assume	Considerably	Supposedly	Uncommon
Attempt (to)	Doubtless	Tentatively	Unlikely
Believe	Fairly	Theoretically	Usual
Claim	Frequently	Typically	Well-Known
Conclude	Generally	Unlikely	<b>Nouns</b>
Consider	Given that	Usually	Alternative
Doubt	Greatly	Vastly	Approximation
Estimate	Highly	Virtually	Assertion
Evaluate	Hypothetically	Widely	Assessment
Expect	Largely	<b>Adjectives</b>	Assumption
Feel	Likely	Apparent	Belief
Hypothesize	Mainly	Approximate	Chance
Imply	Markedly	Common	Claim
Indicate	Maybe	Conceivable	Conclusion
Interpret	Modestly	Considerable	Doubt
Maintain	Mostly	Consistent with	Estimate/-ion
Note	Nearly	Frequent	Evaluation
Offer	Normally	General	Expectation
Observe	Occasionally	Hypothetical	Hope
Perceive	Often	Improbable	Idea
Presume	Partially	In accord with	Implication
Propose	Partly	Indicative	Indication
Prove	Perhaps	Large	Interpretation
Report	Possibly	Likely	Likelihood
Seem	Potentially	Little	Opinion
(can be) seen	Practically	Main	Possibility
Speculate	Presumably	Major	Premise
Suggest	Primarily	Modest	Probability
Suppose	Probably	Noticeable	Proposal
Suspect	Provided (that)	Plausible	Suggestion
	Quite	Possible	Tendency

## 2. List of Boosters

### Modal Verbs

Can't	Plainly
Couldn't	Precisely
Have to	Really
Must	Surely
Will	Truly
Won't	Totally
Would	Thoroughly
<b>Lexical Verbs</b>	Unarguably
Assure	Undeniably
Confirm	Undoubtedly
Demonstrate	Unquestionably

### Adjectives

Do	Absolute
Establish	Certain
Find	Clear
Indicate	Complete
Know	Confident
Predict	Definite
Reinforce	Essential
Show	Evident
<b>Adverbs</b>	Exact
Absolutely	Extreme
Actually	Impossible
Always	Inevitable
Assuredly	Obvious
Basically	Really
Certainly	Perfect
Clearly	Plain
Completely	Real
Definitely	Sure
Entirely	Thorough
Essentially	Total
Evidently	True
Exactly	<b>Nouns</b>
Explicitly	Certainty
Extremely	Confidence
Factually	Evidence
Fully	Fact
Fundamentally	Precision

Indeed  
Indisputably  
Inevitably  
In fact  
Intensively  
Necessarily  
Never  
No doubt  
Obviously  
Of course  
Patently