

## Use of hedging in students' seminar abstract

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### Abstract

Postgraduate students most often are required to have a seminar class which enables them to be exposed to some of advanced academic writing. One of the things they need to write is an abstract. This is a way of condensing and packing a whole writing in one paragraph considering the basic components of the research work (research article, seminar paper, or thesis). Though, many researchers analysed and examined a rhetorical structure of research article, which abstract is an important part, but every few examine the use of hedging in students' abstract writings. Therefore, this paper analyse and identify the use of hedging in some selected students' abstract focusing on the five taxonomy of hedging by Salager-Meyer (1994). Nine postgraduate students' abstract were selected and analysed to identify and classify the hedging used. The findings revealed that the postgraduate students seems to be employing the five taxonomy of hedging in their abstract, except the for Author's reaction type of hedging.

**Keywords:** Abstract, Hedging, Research Article, Rhetorical section, seminar

### 1. Introduction

In many postgraduate studies programmes, students are most often required to register for a seminar class. This could prepare them to an advanced academic reading and writing (Prior, 1991) <sup>[10]</sup>. Therefore, a good seminar paper should be written well skilful and professional like any other academic work (Riekkinen, 2009) <sup>[12]</sup>. It is pertinent to note that an academic writing should be a tactical way of looking at what others said about what you wish to write- either to distal or proximate yourself from others position. To achieve this, therefore, one need to employ the use of hedging. Use of hedging in writing would probably soften criticism (Prince, Frader, & Bosk, 1982; Riekkinen, 2009) <sup>[9, 12]</sup>. As Nasiri (2012) <sup>[7]</sup> observe that the use of hedging would be determined by the writer's background. More so, hedges in research articles might create a good relationship between the writer and his target audience (ibid).

However, according to Hyland and Milton (1997) <sup>[5]</sup> many academic writers face some challenges on how to present facts and ideas with uncertainties and doubts; thus, they often end up making a full commitment and involvement to issues which they should have clouded when making claims and/or taking position. Consequently, Fuertes-Olivera, Velasco-Sacristán, Arribas-Baño, and Samaniego-Fernández (2001) conclude that most articles written by novice writers seems not to be well connected and somehow present claims and facts arrogantly and offensively.

Structure of academic writing are examine by many researchers (GEÇIKLİ, 2005); some of the elements identified by researchers include, the research article, seminar paper, thesis, book chapter (Stubbs, 1996) <sup>[16]</sup>. Salager-Meyer (1994) <sup>[15]</sup> technically refer to the structure of academic writing as the rhetorical sections, and one of the rhetorical sections is abstract. The style and pattern of writing an abstract is somewhat different from the generic feature of a research

article (Flowerdew, 2005; Lorés, 2004) <sup>[1, 6]</sup>. Many researchers have studied the organizational structure of research article. In his analysis, Flowerdew (2005) <sup>[1]</sup> find out that there are different corpus-based analysis which are based on genre approach, and most of these concentrated on the analysis of the generic structure of a research article. However, very few examine and analyse the choice and use of hedges in abstract writing. Despites abstract is an important component in any research article (Ren & Li, 2011; Stubbs, 1996) <sup>[11, 16]</sup> which condense the whole research article into a paragraph (Pasco, 2002) <sup>[8]</sup>. The abstract packed the background, method, result, and conclusion of a research work (Hyland & Ong, 2000; Woodbury, Boyd, McNaughton, & Gregoire, 2005) <sup>[4, 8]</sup>. Hence, abstract is the most read part of a research article (Ren & Li, 2011) <sup>[11]</sup>, and thus, need to be written carefully and cautiously (Lorés, 2004) <sup>[6]</sup>.

To write a good abstract, the use of hedging could be crucial in order to avoid arrogant presentation of claims and facts from the beginning of the work (abstract). A writer should sound polite and persuasive in his writing to attract more reader. There are different types of hedging devices, see also (Riekkinen, 2009; Rounds, 1981, 1982; Salager-Meyer, 1994; Tran & Duong, 2013) <sup>[12-15, 17]</sup>. However, in this paper, the five taxonomy of hedging by Salager-Meyer (1994) <sup>[15]</sup> are considered. These include;

- i) Shield which include the use of: *can, could, may, might, would, to appear, to seem, probably, to suggest*, among many others. These are modal verbs used as hedges to show possibilities.
- ii) Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency, and time which include the use of: *often, approximately, roughly, about, occasionally* among many others. These are used to express mindfulness and careful consideration facts and ideas presented.

- iii) Emotionally charged intensifiers which include the use of: *extremely difficult/interesting, of particular importance, unexpectedly, surprisingly*. These used as hedges to show the distal or proximal position.
- iv) Compound hedges which include the use of: *could be suggested, would seem likely, and would seem, somewhat* among many others.
- v) Author’s reaction expressing doubt and direct involvement which include the use of: *I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that*, among many others.

Therefore, this paper aimed at analysing and examining the use of types of hedging in abstract written for a seminar paper by postgraduate students.

**2. Methodology**

An abstract written and submitted by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) postgraduate students who registered for seminar course in 2015/2016/1 was chosen as the corpus for this assignment. For that, 9 abstracts submitted for this course were selected and analysed in order to investigate the use of hedges. The abstract was published on the students’ eLearning portal by the professor. The seminar class chosen for this

assignment demands students to write an annotated bibliography of 10 thematically related articles in additional to critical review of 25 related articles. In the end of the course, the students presented an in-class paper under the watch of their professor.

To analyse the hedges, the five taxonomy of hedges by (Salager-Meyer, 1994) <sup>[15]</sup> were the main focus. Hedges devices used in the abstracts were recorded and their percentages were computed manually.

**3. Findings and Discussion**

Based on the analysis and identification of hedges used in the abstracts selected, there seems to be use of some hedges by the writers in the abstracts. This answered the research question 1: Are hedging used in abstract writing?

It is important to note that for the purpose of this assignment, the five taxonomy of hedges by Salager-Meyer were the guide for the examination. And the result indicated that four (4) out of the five (5) types of hedges identified by Salager-Meyer were employed by the writers in this study. The table below give the comprehensive analysis of the hedges and their types employed in the abstracts examine.

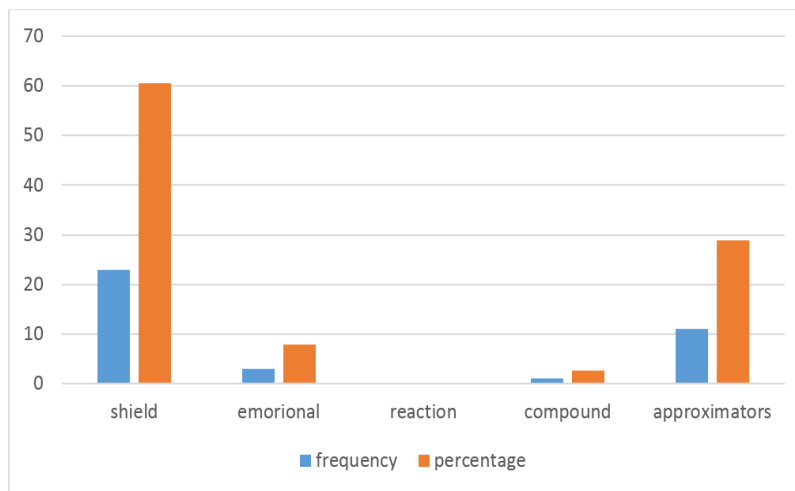
**Table 1:** Frequency and Percentage of Hedging Used according to Abstract

Abstract number	Shield	Emotionally Charged Intensifiers	Author’s Reaction	Compound Hedges	Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency, and time	Total hedges per abstract	Total number of words per abstract	% of hedges used per abstract
Abst.1.	4	-	-	1	1	6	277	2.17%
Abst.2.	1	1	-	-	2	4	313	1.28%
Abst.3.	3	-	-	-	2	5	286	1.75%
Abst.4.	2	-	-	-	-	2	240	0.83%
Abst.5.	4	2	-	-	1	7	294	2.40%
Abst.6.	2	-	-	-	-	2	292	0.68%
Abst.7.	2	-	-	-	2	4	323	1.24%
Abst.8.	3	-	-	-	2	5	278	1.80%
Abst.9	2	-	-	-	1	3	263	1.14%
Total	23	3	-	1	11	38	2566	1.48%

There were 2566 words in total, the total number of hedges used in total is 38, making 1.48% of the total words used in the 9 abstracts under investigation. According to the individual hedging types, the least frequent type of hedge use is the compound hedges which accounted for 2.63% out of the total number of hedges used in all. However, shield hedges accounted for 60.53% out of the total hedges types used by the writers. All the five taxonomy of hedges mentioned by Salager-Meyer is reported to be present in the abstracts analysed, except the author’s reaction which accounted for 0%. This has answered the research question 2: What are the hedges used in abstract? It will interest us to note that, the common hedge type used by this young writers seems to be the shield type and the most unpopular hedge type appeared to be the author’s reaction.

Lack of hedges in writing may create overstating of assertion and over confident presentation of claims (Sheldon Elena,

2013). In this analysis, one may quickly guess the writers as novice. The writer could have used tactical way to express their doubts and direct involvements with the appropriate use of author’s reaction hedging style in the writing. Salager-Meyer (1994) <sup>[15]</sup> maintain that use of hedge is not evenly distributed in the research article rhetorical section. The most dominated section with hedge seems to be introduction and discussion. Therefore, writing which is not well hedges could have suffer set back in publication process (Sheldon, 2013). The abstract should be written professionally to avoid criticism (Tran & Duong, 2013) <sup>[17]</sup>. This could be achieved with the use of hedges. Thus. writing an abstract seems to be more than just presentation of synopsis of the whole research article but a can serve as a persuasive part of the article which may attract reader to first read and decide whether to read the whole text or not.



**Fig 1:** Frequency and Percentage of Types of Hedges Used

The hedges used includes *Shield*, *approximators*, *emotional charged intensifiers*, and *compound hedges* except for the *author's reaction* expressing doubt and direct involvement. Some few examples of author's reaction expressing doubt and direct involvement include the use of phrases like *I believe*, *to our knowledge*, *it is our view that*. However, none of such phrase was found in the analysis. Below are examples of how the hedges were used in the writing:

#### i) Shield

They are modal verbs used as hedges to show possibility, capability, and suggestive tendency. These include the use of *can*, *could*, *may*, *should*, *might*, *would*, *to appear*, *to seem*, *probably*, *to suggest*, these are few examples. For example:

- **Abstract 1:** Yunus *et al.*, (2013) recommended that learners *need* to be motivated. (Suggestive use).
- **Abstract 2:** ... before they *can* successfully teach them to [sic] their students .... (Indicating capability).

#### ii) Emotionally charged intensifiers

These types of hedges are used to show distal or proximal position of the writer to the report. In other word, it indicate the position/stand of the writer. These include the use of *extremely difficult/ interesting*, *of particular importance*, *unexpectedly*, *surprisingly*. For example:

- **Abstract 3:** Some *other interesting points* found out from the research.... (Indicating proximal position of the writer)
- **Abstract 4:** *One of the interesting techniques* is shared reading ... (indicating proximal position of the writer).

#### iii) Compound hedges

The use of combination of hedges in an expressions showing indirectness of the writer's position/stand. Some few examples include the use of *could be suggested*, *would seem likely*, *would seem*, *somewhat*. For example:

- **Abstract 5:** Researchers *could have suggested* the use of autonomy-supportive climate... (A clouded expression of idea).

#### iv) Approximators

Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency, and time are used to express mindfulness and careful consideration of facts

and ideas. Some few examples include the use of *often*, *approximately*, *roughly*, *about*, *occasionally*. For example:

- **Abstract 6:** Some of the factors (sic) led to significant achievement... (Quantity, mindful expression of facts)
- **Abstract 7:** Most studies find that reading and writing are highly related. (Quantity, mindful expression of facts)
- **Abstract 8:** Many studies advocate extensive reading ... (Quantity, mindful expression of facts)

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this analysis has shown that students writing abstract for seminar seems to use hedges in their writing. And the common type of hedges out of the five taxonomy of hedges examine is the shield and proximators as shown in table 1. Therefore, one could conclude that the students, despite being novice writer, tried in employing hedges in their writing. Moreover, the finding also revealed that the students seems not using hedge to cloud their doubt and direct involvement in writing as no use of author's reaction type of hedges was employed through the 9 abstracts analysed.

The use of hedges in academic writing reported to been a source of establishing a good relationship between the writer and the reader. In addition, it can serve as a way to reduce open criticism of the author's claim and stand. For this, therefore, young writers need to employ the appropriate hedges in their writing to be accepted by the other members of the discourse community. Without the proper use of hedges, many writing though factual but may sound arrogant and too authoritative. This may make many young writer to be denied chances for publications which is one of the important indexes of academic growth.

#### 5. Suggestion

Seminar professors and lecturers should enlighten postgraduate students the importance of hedging stands and claim in academic writing. They should teach hedges and how to use them in writing. This may polished the writing of the postgraduate.

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