Hedging in L1 and L2 student writing: A case in Turkey

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Introduction

This study aims to analyze the occurrence of metadiscoursal features in student essays written in Turkish and in English. The main focus is on the occurrence of hedging devices in Turkish and English argumentative essays.

Rhetoric and metadiscourse

Rhetoric refers to the functional organization of discourse with reference to its social and cultural context (Valesio 1980). It examines how people use language and other symbols to convince others of their ideas (Bazerman 1988, Al-Qur'an 1994). Metadiscourse consists of "self-reflective linguistic expressions referring to the evolving text, to the writer, and to the imagined readers of that text" (Hyland 2004: 133). Through metadiscourse writers reveal their positions for or against ideas and show how they organize and relate ideas with regard to the norms of a specific discourse community (Halliday 1994).

The place of metadiscourse and rhetoric in foreign language learning

In the literature about the writing of foreign language learners, there is an emphasis placed on the close connection between rhetoric and metadiscourse. As Smalley, Ruetten and Kozyrev (2001) indicate, an argumentative essay needs to be logical in order to be persuasive. Consequently, authors are expected to position themselves for or against an idea and to state their opinions explicitly. When doing this in a second/foreign language, writers who do not feel entirely confident resort to metadiscoursal techniques, which include hedges and intensifiers.

Taxonomies of metadiscourse

This study is based on Hyland's (1998) and Hinkel's (2005) taxonomies of metadiscourse markers, with a specific focus on hedges.

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1. Hyland's taxonomy helps reveal writers' intentions as they discuss certain points and attempt to gain credibility and acceptability from their readers (Table 1).

2. Hinkel's taxonomy is featured in her study (2005) in which she analyzes types and frequencies of hedges and intensifiers employed in native and non-native speakers' academic essays. The results of her study reveal that non-native writers of English used fewer hedging devices in their essays than natives did (Table 2).

Table 1. Functions of metadiscourse in academic texts (Hyland 1998: 442)

Textual Metadiscourse

Category	Function	Examples
Logical connectives	express semantic relation between main clauses	*in addition, but, therefore, thus, and*, etc.
Frame markers	refer to discourse acts or text stages in an explicit way	*finally, to repeat, our aim here, we try*, etc.
Endophoric markers	refer to information in other parts of the text	*noted above, see Fig 1, Table 2, below*, etc.
Evidentials	refer to source of information from other texts	*according to X/Y (1990), Z states*, etc.
Code glosses	help readers grasp meanings of ideational material	*namely, e.g., in other words, such as*, etc.

Interpersonal Metadiscourse

Category	Function	Examples
Hedges	withhold writers' full commitment to statements	*might, perhaps, it is possible, about*, etc.
Emphatics	emphasize force or writers' certainty in message	*in fact, definitely, it is clear, obvious*, etc.
Attitude markers	express writers' attitude to propositional content	*surprisingly, I agree, X claims*, etc.
Relational markers	refer to or build relationship with readers in an explicit way	*frankly, note that, you can see*, etc.
Person markers	refer explicitly to authors	*I, we, my, mine, our*, etc.

Table 2. Categorization of hedging devices and intensifiers (adapted from Hinkel 2005, Hyland 1998)

Hedging Devices

Category	Function	Examples
Epistemic hedges	clarify the writers' stance	a) adverbials (e.g., *clearly, mostly, relatively, actually*, etc.), b) epistemic modals (e.g., -ability markers); c) epistemic verbs (e.g., claim, suggest)
Lexical hedges	soften the strength of statements	*kind of, may be*, etc.
Possibility hedges	express probability	*perhaps, possibly*, etc.
Downtoners	downplay the significance of propositions	*a bit, nearly, partly*, etc.
Assertive pronouns	highlight the significance of propositions	*any-* and *some-* words, etc.
Adverbs of frequency	express prevalence of occurrence in statements	*often, frequently, usually, occasionally*, etc.
Direct/indirect person markers	refer to the view point of the author directly or indirectly	*I, we, my, mine, our, people, people's* etc.

Intensifiers

Category	Function	Examples
Universal pronouns	refer to a general authorship/audience	*every-* and *no-* words, etc.
Amplifiers	increase the size or effect of statements	*extremely, completely, totally*, etc.
Emphatics	emphasize force or writers' certainty in message	*sure, for sure, no way*, etc.

Hedging in academic writing

In general, hedges can be defined as any linguistic expression indicating either an incomplete commitment to the truth value of a statement or a deliberate attempt to hide the authors' real intentions. In academic writing, hedges help writers to distance themselves from the message in the text or to hide their presence in the text. Analyzing the use of hedges in L2 writing reveals the ways in which native and non-native speakers' perceptions, interpretations and reflections about issues and concepts vary across cultures and disciplines (Connor 1996, 2002; Eustace 1996; Hofstede 1997, Kaplan 1966, Kubota 1999,

2004, LoCastro 2008, Precht 1998, Wolfe 2008). Through the use of hedges an author shares responsibility for the interpretation of her/his claims with the reader. Hedging also helps writers to express their intentions in either a tentatively implicit or a strongly explicit way. Since learners or users of a second language do not have full linguistic and pragmatic competence in L2, they might want downplay their personal presence and the assertiveness of their claims by using hedges. This becomes more marked when the practice of hiding one's presence in a written text is standard in their L1 writing.

Hedges across cultures

Studies of cultural practices have shown that German and Finnish learners of English use stronger claims and a more authoritative tone (Markkanen & Schröder 1992). Compared to British writers, Cantonese writers rely on a more limited range of hedges, emphatics, and other metadiscoursal features (Hyland & Milton 1997). Chinese secondary school students tended to use connectives, validity markers, code glosses and emphatics in their essays (Krause & O'Brien 1999). Native speakers of Norwegian use more metadiscourse markers when writing in English than native speakers of English use in their writing, and the Norwegians are less inclined than the native English speakers to signpost the successive sections of a paper (Blagojevic 2004).

A number of studies have investigated the use of hedging in a Turkish context. Can (2006) analyzed Turkish and American university students' argumentative essays for the occurrence and frequency of metadiscoursal features. He included two sets of essays in his analyses, one set written by monolingual students in Turkish and by bilingual students in Turkish and in English, the other set written by monolingual American students in English. The results of Can's study revealed that, while all participants (Turkish and American) used metadiscoursal features in argumentative essays, the frequencies and types of these features varied from one group to the other. In their essays, monolingual American students used more emphatics to reinforce their position on issues while Turkish students used fewer hedges in their English essays. Results of Can's study showed that American students were more assertive and direct in their writing. Moreover, the American students emphasized their presence in the text through the use of boosters like "*I believe,*" "*obviously*" and "*of course*" more often than the Turkish participants. Bilingual Turkish students used more emphatics in essays written in Turkish than in essays written in English. In another study of hedges in student essays, Wu and Rubin (2000) came up with similar results. Bilingual English speakers used more first person markers in essays written in English than in essays written in Taiwanese.

In two other studies in a Turkish context, Fidan (2002) analyzed scientific articles from various disciplines in Turkish academic journals and books. She based her analysis on Hyland's (1998) taxonomy of metadiscourse markers (see Table 1). Her analysis shows that Turkish academic writing encompasses more textual metadiscourse markers than interpersonal metadiscourse markers. She concluded that Turkish authors use more hedges and than any of the other metadiscourse markers. In another study, Doyuran (2009) focused exclusively on interpersonal metadiscourse in academic writing in engineering and

linguistics. Her analysis revealed that students used hedging in various forms: hedging expressed by means of epistemic verbs, e.g., *iddia etmek* 'claim', *önermek* 'suggest'; copulas, e.g., *görünmek* 'seem'; epistemic modals, a combination of the ability suffix *-ebil* 'able' or 'can' with the aorist *-ir* 'simple present tense suffix'; inferential modal, *mEll+dIr* 'must', adverbials, e.g., *tamamen* 'completely', *büyük ölçüde* 'to a great extent'; clauses relating to the probability of the subsequent proposition being true, e.g., *muhtemeldir ki* 'probably', *olasıdır* 'possibly'; passive forms of epistemic verbs, e.g., *-il* as in *iddia edilmektedir* 'it is claimed that'; and rhetorical devices, e.g., *bu sismik veriler ... gösteriyor* 'these seismic variables indicate'.

Methodology

Routinely in their university years, students such as the participants are expected to produce various written assignments in which they state and justify a position for or against an idea, e.g., answering a question during an exam or writing a research paper. In this study, Doyuran's (2009) work is used to categorize occurrences of hedges and intensifiers in their argumentative writing.

The study attempts to answer the research question: Does Turkish freshman students' use of hedging devices in essays that they write in English differ from their use of hedging devices in essays that they write in Turkish?

Seventy-four freshmen attending an English medium university in Istanbul participated in the study (59 females and 15 males). Native speakers of Turkish, non-native speakers of English, they were all studying English language teaching in the Department of Foreign Language Education. Their ages varied between 18 and 20. The total number of essays analyzed in the study (in Turkish and in English) was 148.

Data collection procedure

The students wrote their Turkish and English essays at different times. Usually, they wrote the Turkish essay two weeks in advance of the English essay. Both essays were written in response to a prompt in the appropriate language, the sort of prompt usually given to students on standardized tests (e.g., TOEFL). The two prompts were carefully written, translated and compared, so that they were as close to identical as possible.

> English prompt
> "Many people say that the Internet is the most important invention ever." Do you agree or disagree with this and if not, what do you believe to be more important? Use specific reasons and examples to support your opinion.

> Turkish prompt
> "Birçok insana göre 'internet' günümüzün en önemli buluşudur." Yukarıdaki görüşe katılıp katılmadığınızı ve eğer bu fikre katılmıyorsanız sizce hangi buluşun daha önemli olduğunu nedenleriyle birlikte destekleyici örnekler vererek açıklayınız.

Data analysis

All occurrences of hedging devices in each essay were listed and coded according to the categories developed by Hinkel (2005). The data analysis was carried out manually since there was no known text-analysis program for Turkish (Doyuran 2009: 91). Microsoft Excel was used to normalize the raw frequencies of hedges and intensifiers per running word. The number of words in the English essays totaled 13,024, those in Turkish totaled 14,800.

Results and discussion

As seen in Table 3, the participants of this study used hedges in their English and their Turkish essays. Although they used hedges more often in their English essays, the results were consistent with those of Can (2006), Doyuran (2009) and Fidan (2002) on the use of hedges in academic essays by Turkish writers in various contexts.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of hedges

Metadiscourse markers	English essays		Turkish essays	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	(%)
Hedges	762	5.85	516	3.49

The most frequently occurring categories of hedges in the students' essays were epistemic hedges and direct/indirect person markers. The following examples illustrate how students use hedging devices when expressing their opinions in an implicit or explicit way. In Example 1, Student A does not want to reveal his opinion and so distances himself from the text through the use of epistemic hedges and collective pronouns.[1]

> Example 1 / Student A[2]
> English essay: "*We can find much information about everything.*"
> Turkish essay: "*İnsanlar internet üzerinden istedikleri her bilgiye …*
> *ulaşabilirler.*"[3]

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1 See Bayyurt (2010) for a more extensive discussion of these findings in a broader perspective including other metadiscourse markers such as intensifers.
2 The examples have not been edited in any way.
3 Due to the vowel harmony rule in Turkish language, the first vowel of the suffix is influenced by the preceding vowel in the word root. In this case, the ability marker formula {-Ebil} becomes {-abil} when preceded by 'a'.

In Example 1, the student uses the plural/collective first person pronoun *we* and the epistemic hedging device ability marker *can* in the English essay to reveal his ideas about the Internet. In his Turkish essay, the same student uses an indirect person marker *insanlar* 'people' and the epistemic hedging device ability marker *-ebil* to minimize his presence in the text.

In Example 2, Student B, similar to Student A, reveals his viewpoint about the advantages of the Internet through the use of hedges.[4]

> Example 2 / Student B
> English essay: "Because of it's many advantage a lot of ***people*** argues that internet is the most important invention so far."
> Turkish essay: "[...] *İnternetin genel olarak fayda ve zararlarına baktığımızda İnternetin **insan** yaşamında artık farkedilebilir ve vazgeçilmez bir yeri vardır.*"

In Example 2, in his English essay, student B uses *people* as the subject of his statement, thus avoiding any personal confrontation with the reader. Similarly, in the Turkish essay, he prefers to hedge his opinion by using the suffix *-miz* that stands for the pronoun *we*[5] and the mass noun *insan* 'people' to express the significance of the Internet in people's lives. Instead of expressing his point of view directly, the author prefers, in both essays, to express it indirectly, either by including the reader (*we*) or by attributing the opinion to others (*insan*).

As Hyland (1998) points out, writers may use hedges in their texts if they choose to be reserved or to avoid possible rejection of their ideas by their audience. Such devices enable Turkish writers to hide their authorial identity and to suppress their presence in the text (Bayyurt 2010). Examples 1 and 2 illustrate this point by the use of *insanlar* 'people', *insan* 'people', *ulaşabilirler* 'can be reached', and *farkedilebilir* 'can be recognized'. Ambiguous and indirect statements, as in Example 1, enable authors to avoid the criticism of readers whose experience with the Internet might be different. An indirect style of writing may employ a variety of hedging devices.

Conclusion

Hedging enables the writer to minimize his/her presence in an essay and to highlight the tentativeness of his/her assertions. The students who participated in this study used hedging to obscure their authorial identity while still advancing their opinions. Generalizing about the way Turkish students write would be hasty at this point. It should be

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4 See Bayyurt (2010) for a more extensive discussion of these findings in a broader perspective including other metadiscourse markers such as intensifers.
5 Since Turkish is an agglutinating pro-drop language, suffixes represent person pronouns such as the case of *-miz* in Example 2.

emphasized, however, that the analysis of hedges and intensifiers in this study suggests the need to investigate their use in Turkish writing more thoroughly. Mapping the use of all types of metadiscourse markers in a larger corpus of Turkish academic writing would be worthwhile. Collecting data in academic writing classes at state universities could be a significant first step.

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