

Using hedges in research articles of applied linguistics: Native and non-native patterns

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Abstract

Students and researchers need to be able to master hedging as one of the most significant resources for academics in order to be recognised as members of a scientific community and get their papers published in journals whose language of publication is English. This paper presents the results of reviewing 100 English language research articles (RAs) in applied linguistics, discussing the importance, frequency and distribution of hedging categories in different sections of RAs (namely Abstract, Introduction, Method, and Results) authored by native (NESs) and non-native speakers (NNEs) through employing Salager-Mayer's (1994) classification. The analysis of Chi-square was conducted and the observed value of Chi-square ($\chi^2=5049.7 \geq \chi^2_{\text{obs}}=3.84, df=1$) showed that NESs and NNEs differed significantly in using hedges in their RAs. The findings indicated that in all sections but *Introduction*, non-native speakers outperformed their native counterparts in employing different hedging categories. NESs had hedged 48.7 times more than expected in the *Introduction* part while the frequency of hedges in other sections was lower than the expected rate; however, this rate was not the same for NNEs. Accordingly, the *Introduction* part may be considered as one of the major sections on which NNEs need to be given instructions to hedge as much as expected. NNEs must move beyond the view that the *Introduction* section of RAs is merely a detached and factual section

which should be reported directly without reviewing the literature embedded therein.

Keywords: Hedging, shield, approximator, emotionally-charged hedges, research article

1. Introduction

Available evidence (Conner & Mbaye, 2002; Hyland, 2000; Paltridge, 1993; Parkinson, 2011; Warschauer, 2000; Warschauer & Ware, 2006; Weigle, 2002) points to the overwhelming role of English as a medium of communication in international research fields. Scientific publications take advantage of English language, specially written, as an international language to convey and share information in various scientific fields. The dominant use of English is increasing with its recognition as a “lingua franca of scientific research” (Hyland, 1998, p.8) by non-native English speakers (NNESs) who are striving to get published in international and even national journals where the language of publication is English. Accordingly, the NNESs’ needs for having the appropriate writing knowledge and skill are undeniable in order for them to participate in this discourse community and get the guarantee of having the widest possible audience for research.

Communication is one of the main goals of using a language and this is of paramount importance for its speakers, either in written or spoken discourse. To this end, writers or speakers do their best to get their hearer(s) or reader(s) involved in an interaction and participation in a dialogue. Reaching this goal is only possible by choosing the most appropriate language devices in both genres. Hedges are among these language devices, the occurrence of which is widely known and well-documented. As Coates (1987) and Holmes (1995) mentioned, hedging in casual speech where it is perhaps twice as frequent as written discourse has received the most attention as a significant resource for speakers in order to keep the conversation going. Furthermore, hedges are abundant in science and they are representative of essential elements of argumentation, ratification, and

representation of new knowledge. Rounds (1982) also summed up that hedging is a basic feature in academic discourse that enables the writers to show their certainty and doubt towards their statements, to reflect the amount of confidence they put on their claim, and to have a dialogue with their readers. By means of hedging, the writers allow their readers to judge the credibility of their assertions.

While the literature emphasises the importance of hedging, Hyland (1998) has asserted that we know little about its use, frequency, and different disciplines or genres. Crystal (1995), who attempted to shed some light on parts of English language studies that have not received enough attention, has reported the lack of research on hedging over the past decades. Furthermore, it appears that interest in modality and hedging in the research literature has not been widely reflected in pedagogical materials. The importance of hedging indicates a further need for greater and systematic attention to this interpersonal communicative strategy as a mitigation of face threatening acts (FTA). Hyland (2000) also added that this kind of authorial participation is the central aspect of interactive devices of academic writing and they are often considered secondary to the purpose of conveying propositional information. With regard to what was mentioned, learning to express doubt and certainty in English is a complex and important task. From another perspective, hedges as epistemic devices also pragmatically act as politeness markers. Accordingly, preparing materials or writing textbooks and investigating the most appropriate way of teaching these devices deserve attention.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Hedging

Lakoff (1972, as mentioned in Arjmand & Fat'hi, 2011) first introduced the notion of hedging. The pragmatic implications were not initially concerned; however, the logical properties of words and phrases and their capability to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy mostly received attention. Prince, Frader, and Bosk (1982), following Lakoff's concept, claimed that hedges can make things fuzzy either by propositional content proper (i.e. *approximator*) or by relating the propositional

content and the speaker, to say, the speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition conveyed (i.e. *shield*).

Contrary to the notion of fuzziness or vagueness, Rounds (1981) claimed that "hedges are not used simply to cover oneself and to make things fuzzy, but can be used to negotiate the right representation of the state of the knowledge under discussion to achieve greater preciseness in scientific claims" (p. 151, cf. Arjmand & Fat'hi, 2011). Salager-Mayer (1994) made the same claim and explained that fuzziness attributed to the hedged statements undermines some of the fundamental functions of hedging because the writer is trying to be more precise in reporting the findings of his/her research with the use of hedged statements. House and Kasper (1981, cited in Wishnoff, 2000) include hedges among other mitigating devices in their politeness marker category as *downgraders*. Markkanen and Schroder (1988) consider hedges as "a strategy for minimising the threat to face that which lurks behind every act of communication" (p. 171). Consequently, Myers (1989) counts hedges in scientific writing as a politeness strategy when it marks a claim, as a means of getting acceptance of the community or readers.

Scientific writing and academic discourse are fraught with interpretive statements in which the writer(s) put personal perspective forward, along with referential information. Making any claims or evaluating the previous research based on literature, as Hyland (1996 b) puts it, demands greater precision, accuracy, and caution from writers in order to meet the discourse community's expectation and to gain acceptance for their statements. Myers (1989) claims that a hedged statement in academic writing is considered as the most appropriate perspective for offering a claim to the community. Hence, the significance of hedges as the pragmatic features of texts is crystal clear.

2.2 Categories of Hedging

Classification of hedges can be done in various ways. As a general rule, hedges can be divided into two groups, that is, lexical and non-lexical. Many researchers (Hyland, 1996; Meyer, 1998; Prince, Frader, and Bosk, 1982; Zuck & Zuck, 1987) have classified these rhetorical devices based on other categories. For example, Prince et al. (1982) categorised hedges into two types: *approximators* and *shields*, each of which contains other subcategories (i.e. adaptors, rounders, plausibility, and attribution). Hyland (1996) also classified hedges based on their function in a text into *factive* and *non-factive* words, each of which includes its own subcategories too.

One of the most comprehensive classifications is done by Salager-Meyer (1994). In this categorisation; five types of hedges are proposed:

1. Shields contain all modal verbs expressing possibility; semi-auxiliaries (e.g. *appear, seem*); probability adverbs (e.g. *probably, likely*); and epistemic verbs (e.g. *suggest, speculate*).
2. Approximators are word(s) or phrases expressing quantity, degree, frequency and time (e.g. *approximately, roughly, around, about, somewhat, quite, often, occasionally*).
3. Authors' insufficiency and doubt, which are categorised as word(s) or phrases expressing authors' personal doubt and direct involvement (e.g. *I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, in our point of view, to the best of our knowledge, we assume*).
4. Emotionally-charged expressions are taken as comment words used to project the authors' reactions (e.g. *extremely difficult/interesting, dishearteningly weak, of particular importance, surprisingly, particularly encouraging, unexpectedly*).
5. Compound hedges - combination of several hedges - can be considered as the last type of this classification (e.g. *may suggest, would seem likely that, it seems reasonable to assume, it would seem somewhat unlikely that*).

2.3 Empirical Studies on Discourse Markers and Hedging

Discourse markers have recently caught the attention of many researchers both in papers and in book-length studies. As can be observed, some researchers were interested in dealing with a whole range of discourse markers (Brown & Yule, 1984; Byron and Hyman (1997); Dastjerdi & Shirzad, 2010; Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 1982; Widdowson, 2007; among others); however, others narrowed their study down and focused on them separately (Arjmand & Fat'hi, 2011; Dueñas, 2009; Hyland, 2000; Jucker 1993; Zuck & Zuck, 1987).

Byron and Hyman (n. d.) studied the role of discourse markers in dialogues and claimed that discourse markers facilitate conversational moves by acting as important first clues to these moves. Discourse markers also provide a noticeable amount of information about the current speaker's orientation to information provided initially; therefore, they should be exploited by dialogue systems to coordinate the shared beliefs. They also noted that, in order to collaborate in the same way as humans do, our systems must construct utterances signalling mutual understanding of shared information and discourse structure in an appropriate way. The use of discourse markers makes the system's utterances seem more natural to the users and aid them to figure out the discourse intent of the upcoming move.

Dastjerdi and Shirzad(2010) investigated the impact of explicit instruction of discourse markers on advanced, intermediate, and elementary EFL learners' writing performance and concluded that explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers improves EFL learners' writing ability. Their findings also indicated that learners at the intermediate levels improved significantly, compared to those at advanced and elementary levels.

As the literature documents, some researchers have also carried out research to shed some light on the concept of hedging as an aspect of discourse markers and claimed that hedging is used differently across different disciplines. Harder (1982, as pointed out in Taylor and Tingguan, 1991), stated that Japanese writers frequently insist on their preconception that they should forcefully argue and support their writing instead of just suggesting possibilities. Using elicitation

and thinking aloud techniques, Hyland (2000) came to the conclusion that the efforts of academic writers to mitigate their claims and withhold certainty from their propositions may be ignored by non-native learners, either by failing to notice the items themselves or by attributing an inappropriate degree of certainty to them. Varttalla (2001) investigated the use of hedging in three different disciplines (i.e. economics, medicine, and technology) and reported that the frequency of hedged statements is highest in economics and three times higher than the other two disciplines. He proposed that the object of the study, the different types of materials and methods used to investigate these objects, and the general nature of the discipline are among the main reasons for such variation. Bloor and Bloor (1993) investigated techniques by which economists make their claims in research articles and asserted that the amount of hedging employed by researchers in research articles is closely associated with the type of claims made in their studies. They concluded that economic texts are less hedged than biology ones.

Hyland (1994) studied a corpus of 24 textbooks prepared for EST (English for Science and Technology) and EAP (English for Academic Purposes). He concluded that the general interest in modality in research literature is not represented in the pedagogic materials. Moreover, he claimed that EAP writing texts are more fraught with hedges than ESP writings. Doing a quantitative and comparative study on hedges, Yang (2003) proposed that the Introduction, Discussion, and Results sections contain the greatest number of hedges in English research articles.

In the same vein, many studies have emphasised the variation of hedges in different fields and in different rhetorical sections of RAs. There seem to be few (if not any) studies conducted in the field of applied linguistics on the distribution and occurrence of hedged statements used by native and non-native speakers. West (1980) proposed that the discourse or rhetorical structures of texts in different languages might vary greatly and this kind of variation should be heeded for the language teaching programmes. Hyland (1998) considered the lack of materials devoted to this topic as one of the fundamental sources of why

hedging is problematic to non-native speakers. Wishnoff (2000) claimed that mastering hedges can prove elusive for non-native speakers and unqualified and direct writing usually distinguishes non-native speakers from their native counterparts. Considering the growing literature on discourse markers, especially on hedges, this study was carried out to reveal more facts on the use of the rhetorical hedged statements made by native and non-native speakers in applied linguistic articles. The findings can be useful for language teaching since they provide non-native speakers with rhetorical skills, make them act much more like professional writers or their native counterparts, and avoid having direct and linear writings. “The good news for NNEs is that many researchers believe that learning how to use hedging devices effectively is something that can be taught by making learners aware and drawing their attention to hedging and by direct instruction (Wishnoff, 2000, p. 123). Accordingly, these sophisticated skills in writing will provide NNEs with the opportunity to get more papers published in international language journals issued in English. To this end, the present study was undertaken to determine: (a) the differences between NESs and NNEs in the use of hedged statements, and (b) the occurrence of different categories of hedges among four sections of RAs written by NESs and NNEs. The following comprehensive research questions were addressed:

- Are there any significant differences in the use of hedging categories in applied linguistic RAs and their sections (namely Abstract, Introduction, Method, and Results¹) written by NESs and NNEs?
- Are there any significant differences between NESs’ and NNEs’ use of hedging categories (namely approximators, emotionally-charged

¹ As one of the limitations of this study, some 120 out of 300 emails on the originality of authors were returned. Due to this fact, the researchers had to include some articles in which the *Results*, *Discussion*, and *Conclusion* were not segregated. Therefore, these sections were merged and analysed together in all articles. Accordingly, *Results* in the present study practically refers to results, discussion, and conclusion.

expressions, compounds, shields, and authors' doubt) in English applied linguistic RAs?

3. Method

3.1 Materials

In this study, 300 contributed emails were sent to the authors in order to ascertain their originality as NESs or NNEs. The number of authors per article ranged from one to four and they mainly had the traditional AIMR (Abstract, Introduction, Method, and Results) approach. Out of 300 RAs, 120 emails were returned. To answer the aforementioned questions, 100 English research articles (RAs) in the field of applied linguistics were randomly selected from three different leading journals of applied linguistics, namely *TESOL quarterly*, *System*, and *RELC*; 20 other articles were ignored so as to have an equal number of RAs authored by native and non-native English speakers. All selected articles were divided into two groups, those written by NESs (n=50) and those by NNEs (n=50). These NESs were mostly from English speaking countries including Canada, Australia, the United States, New Zealand, and the like. NNEs were mainly from Pakistan, Iran, Nigeria, Malaysia, and so on. The research articles were all limited to those published within the ten year period 2000-2010 due to the assumption that time influences the style of writing. The corpus contained 780,000 words and the average length of each article was 6,500 words.

3.2 Procedure

In order to identify and classify hedges in different sections of RAs, expressions including verbs, adjectives, adverbs, nouns, and modals expressing uncertainty and doubt were recognised. Salager-Mayer's (1994) classification was taken as a guideline. Due to the different interpretations made from different hedging devices, decisions were made based on their epistemic meanings. The recognised hedges were classified into the specified groups by the researchers. In order to have inter-coder reliability for reaching a similar conclusion, 3 other experts in the

field of applied linguistics also separately coded the data. Cases of any coding inconsistencies were discussed and resolved by the researchers and experts. In order to study the distribution of hedges in different sections of research articles, the number of hedges per category was counted in all the RAs and then the same procedure was carried out for each section of the RAs separately.

3.3 Data Analysis

The frequency of hedging devices appearing in each category was obtained for each section and then for the whole article based on lexical items specified in the Salager-Meyer's classification. One-way Chi-square analysis was done to probe any significant difference between being a NES/NNES and the use of different types of hedges in writing RAs. One-way chi-square analysis was run due to the unequal total number of words for each category selected (approximately 460,000 words for NNESS' articles and 320,000 words for NESs').

4. Results

The main purpose of this study was to determine whether NESs and NNESSs differ in the use of the hedges and in the use of various hedging categories based on Salager-Meyer's (1994) classification in different sections of RAs.

4.1 Hedges in Applied Linguistic RAs by NESs and NNESSs

For the first question, the researchers examined whether or not NESs and NNESSs differed in the use of hedging in RAs. To this end, the total number of hedged statements was counted to facilitate the needed data for forthcoming steps. As can be observed in Table 1, NESs employed 6,408 out of 320,000 words as hedges, while NNESSs used 9,552 out of 460,000 words as hedges to mention their doubt and uncertainty.

Table 1. The frequency of hedges in each set of the data

	Total number of hedges	Total number of words
NESs	6408	320000
NNESs	9552	460000
Total	<i>15960</i>	<i>780000</i>

Subsequently, Chi-square analysis was carried out to probe any significant difference between NESs and NNESs in employing hedges while writing RAs. Chi-square observed value for the whole papers is ($x^2=5049.7 > x^2_{critical}=3.84, df=1$). This value is greater than the critical value of 3.84 at 1 degree of freedom. Based on the obtained information, it can be concluded that NESs and NNESs performed differently in the use of hedges through their research articles.

To narrow down the scope of comparison, a series of Chi-square analyses were carried out to investigate the use of hedges in different sections of RAs written by native speakers and their non-native counterparts (represented in Table 2). The values of Chi-square analysis observed in the Abstract ($x^2=48.41, df=1, p=0.00 \leq .05$), Method ($x^2=13.46, df=1, p=0.00 \leq .05$), Results ($x^2=682.4, df=1, p=0.00 \leq .05$) sections indicated that the observed values surpassed the critical value of 3.84 at 1 degree of freedom. Accordingly, significant differences do exist between NESs' and NNESs' use of hedges in these three sections of research articles. On the contrary, as can be observed in Table 3, the Chi-square value ($x^2=3.06, df=1, p=0.00 \leq .05$) obtained in the Introduction section is lower than the critical value and the probability of the existence of a significant difference between NESs and NNESs was rejected.

Table 2. Chi-square analysis of the use of hedging in different sections of articles by NESs and NNESs

Section		Native/ Nonnative
Abstract	Chi-Square	48.419 ^a
	df	1
	Asymp. Sig.	.000
Introduction	Chi-Square	3.066 ^b
	df	1
	Asymp. Sig.	.080
Method	Chi-Square	13.460 ^c
	df	1
	Asymp. Sig.	.000
Result	Chi-Square	682.438 ^d
	df	1
	Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 63.7.
b. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 1158.7.
c. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 475.7.
d. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 1679.0.

In the following step, the frequency of hedges in both groups was also analysed through the 16th version of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). To find out whether or not NESs and NNESs had used hedges more or less than expected, the residuals were calculated. According to the results, it can be concluded that NNESs in the Abstract, Method, and Results sections have used hedges at more than the expected rate, while NESs did not achieve the expected rates in these three sections. The findings are not same for the *Introduction* section since the residual values for NESs (+48.7) and for NNESs (-48.7) indicate that native speakers employed hedges in the Introduction section at more than the expected rate (Table 3).

Table 3. Observed, expected, and residuals between NESs' and NNESSs' use of hedges

Section		Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Abstract	Native	82	127.3	-45.3
	Non-native	109	63.7	45.3
	Total	191		
Introduction	Native	2366	2317.3	48.7
	Non-native	1110	1158.7	-48.7
	Total	3476		
Method	Native	886	951.3	-65.3
	Non-native	541	475.7	65.3
	Total	1427		
Result	Native	2484	3358.0	-874.0
	Non-native	2553	1679.0	874.0
	Total	5037		
Whole paper	Native	6408	10640.0	-4232.0
	Non-native	9552	5320.0	4232.0
	Total	15960		

All of the aforementioned findings addressed the first question and clarified the differences between NESs' and NNESSs' use of hedges. As a result, it can be figured out that significant differences generally do exist between these two groups and specifically in the Abstract, Introduction, Method, and Results sections but not in the Introduction section of applied linguistic RAs.

4.2 The use of hedging categories in applied linguistic RAs by NESs and NNESSs

The second question was addressed to investigate whether or not there are significant differences between NESs' and NNESSs' use of different hedging categories (namely *approximators*, *emotionally-charged expressions*, *compounds*, *shields*, and *authors' doubt*) according to Salager-Meyer's (1994) classification. In order to find answers to this question, a series of Chi-square tests (Table 4) was carried out to compare the frequencies of different hedging categories in applied linguistic RAs written by NESs and NNESSs.

As observed in Table 5, observed Chi-square values represented for *compounds* ($x^2=123.3$, $df=1$, $p=0.00 \leq .05$), *approximators* ($x^2=177.9$, $df=1$,

$p=0.00 \leq .05$), *authors' doubt* ($x^2=12.11$, $df=1$, $p=0.00 \leq .05$), and *shields* ($x^2=9768.5$, $df=1$, $p=0.00 \leq .05$) are greater than the critical value of 3.84 at the same degree of freedom. Since the observed values of Chi-square exceed the critical value it can be concluded that there are significant differences between NESs' and NNESSs' use of hedging categories, namely *compounds*, *shields*, *authors' doubt*, and *approximators*. **

Table 4. Chi-square analysis of hedging sub-categories

Types of Hedge		Native –Nonnative
Compounds	Chi-Square	123.359 ^a
	df	1
	Asymp. Sig.	.000
Approximators	Chi-Square	177.970 ^b
	df	1
	Asymp. Sig.	.000
Author's doubt	Chi-Square	12.118 ^c
	df	1
	Asymp. Sig.	.000
Emotionally charged	Chi-Square	.690 ^d
	df	1
	Asymp. Sig.	.406
Shield	Chi-Square	4768.538 ^e
	df	1
	Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 103.7.
 b. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 1582.7.
 c. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 69.3.
 d. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 263.0.
 e. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 6678.3.

On the other hand, the observed Chi-square value for *emotionally charged* hedges ($x^2=.69$, $df=1$, $p=0.00 \leq .05$) is lower than the expected critical value of 3.82 at 1 degree of freedom. Accordingly, there is no significant difference between NESs' and NNESSs' use of *emotionally charged* hedges and this was consistent. The positive values of Residuals (presented in Table 5) suggest that NNESSs employed different hedging categories (according to the Salager-Mayer's (1994) classification), compared to NESs.

Table 5. Observed, expected and residual between NESs' and NNESs' use of hedging sub-categories

Types of Hedge		Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Compounds	Native	115	207.3	-92.3
	Non-native	196	103.7	92.3
	Total	311		
Approximators	Native	2732	3165.3	-433.3
	Non-native	2016	1582.7	433.3
	Total	4748		
Author's doubt	Native	115	138.7	-23.7
	Non-native	93	69.3	23.7
	Total	208		
Emotionally charged	Native	515	526.0	-11.0
	Non-native	274	263.0	11.0
	Total	789		
Shield	Native	8749	13356.7	-4607.7
	Non-native	11286	6678.3	4607.7
	Total	20035		

Collected data confirmed the accuracy of these findings. The NESs have occasionally made very strong claims, as shown in the following example:

Example 1. It is one of *the most fundamental* dimensions of teaching [...] (Discussion, NESs)

However, making such strong claims was less frequent among NNESs. Furthermore, the NNESs used the “*shield*” category 4,607 times more than the expected rate. Accordingly, *shields* were significantly the most frequently used hedging category between NNESs and *emotionally charged hedges* had the least number of occurrence among others.

The following are some examples derived from different sections of RAs written by NNESs in which writers used modals, probably as one the major parts of the shields, for expressing doubt and uncertainty:

Example 2. This ability *should* be emphasised in teacher training [...]

(Introduction, NNESs)

Example 3. Teachers *should not* habitually switch to L1 [...]

(Introduction, NNESs)

Example 4. It *may* be inappropriate syntactically, semantically, [...]

(Method , NNESs)

Example 5. The ignorance *might* stem from lack of sufficient observation [...] (Results, NNESs)

Example 6. The groups *could* divide their subtopics [...] (Results, NNESs)

Example 7. At other times it *would* be cumbersome and futile to explain a word [...] (Abstract, NNESs)

Some fundamental similarities could be searched for among the *Abstract* sections of English language teaching RAs written by NNESs and NESs in the way that both groups, simply, had made use of modals such as *may, might, etc.* and epistemic verbs such as *appear, seem, etc.* more than other hedging words in the category of *shields*. Here are some examples extracted from their use of shields:

Example 8. Learning styles *may* influence learner language learning [...] (NNES)

Example 9. Conclusions *might* be premature [...] (NNES)

Example 10. It *would appear* that this selection [...] (NNES)

Example 11. However these *seem* to conflict with the culturalist [...] (NNES)

Example 12. Firstly, recast *may* give way to other types of feedback [...] (NNES)

Example 13. The findings *suggest* the important feature of [...] (NES)

Example 14.....L2 processing of more educated L2 learners *may* not hold for [...] (NES)

5. Discussion

Hedges as essential elements of academic argument help the researchers cautiously structure their research articles. The analysis of hedging categories in English applied linguistic RAs between NESs and NNEs revealed that, even though Wishnoff (2000) has claimed that NNEs tend to be more direct in some fields of study, the same claim cannot apparently be made about the authors of applied linguistic research articles. Regarding the use of hedges in different sections of research articles, the *Results* section of the papers written by NNEs include much higher number of hedged statements than the expected rate. These results did not confirm the findings of Yang (2003), who has asserted that the *Introduction* section of RAs is one of the sections which contain the most hedges in English RAs.

Paltridge and Starfield (2007) pointed out that the *Discussion* section is where the writer should move beyond their data and have integration of their findings and existing theories. Accordingly, this section contains an overall review of the significant findings of the study and consideration of the findings in the light of existing research studies. As Hyland (2000) and Varttala(2001) mentioned, besides the Introduction section, the Discussion section is another section in research articles containing the most number of hedged statements. Parkinson (2011) asserts that research articles are a much studied genre through different perspectives. He also added that writing a *Discussion* section of articles or thesis is demanding for students to master. It involves making different kinds of arguments which persuade or dissuade readers from accepting writers' or others' claims. Students or writers will benefit from receiving lexico-grammar and functional parts of words to be used in a discussion. Regarding this section of RAs and the frequency of used hedges, it is good news for NNEs to be informed that they have done this demanding job successfully. The abundance of hedged statements in the Discussion section confirms the fact that NNEs are aware of

the instability of predictions made as the result(s) of a study. The findings of the present study also indicate that although some researchers (Arjmand & Fat'hi, 2011; Varttala, 2000; among others) claimed that in some fields like economics, medicine, etc., native speakers were more successful in hedging, however, in the field of Applied Linguistics, NNSs outperformed their non-native counterparts and used hedged statements more frequently.

The findings of the present study proposed that the *Introduction* section is the only section of English language teaching research articles in which NNESSs used hedging categories less than expected. However, contrary to our study and according to some other studies (Hyland, 2000; Varttala, 2001), the *Introduction* section of research articles was considered as one of the parts containing more hedging devices since this section is a state-of-the-art review of the field of study including current developments, controversies and breakthroughs, previous research and relevant background theory, as Paltridge and Starfield (2007) put it. Mentioning such statements in the study to be carried out, either in support or rejection, needs to be done carefully. In a research article, in addition to the Discussion section, the Introduction section plays specific roles in initiating a research study (Ahmad, 1997; Anthony, 1999; Duszak, 1994; Lee, 2001; Samraj, 2002; Swales, 1990; Swales and Najjar, 1997; Taylor and Chen, 1991). The results of analysing NNESSs' *Introductions* showed that these writers tended not to hedge their statements, and were assertive, mostly using different forms of the verb 'to be'. By citing numerous studies, which focus on the same issue, these authors hope to build an argument to support their own work. This, as was said before, serves to justify the publication of the study "by showing that the author's contribution to the discipline, whilst previously established as significant and reference-worthy, is as yet incomplete" (Swales 1990, P. 138). To use Gilbert and Mulkey's expression (1984, p. 87), the examples provided above are part of a "subtle and organised social analysis". The beliefs expressed are presented in a way which enables the authors to contrast them unfavourably with those of another group of scientists, to which the authors themselves belong. What is particularly noticeable about such examples is how the beliefs which they summarise are prepared for

immediate rejection. Instead of presenting the central idea as a reasonable, though inconclusive, interpretation associated with at least some experimental evidence, it is brought in the text as a mere assumption. The feeling is conveyed that, although the ideas expressed in such sentences have been presented for some time, they have no firm scientific foundation and are not to be taken seriously. The nature of such sentences prepares the readers to expect and welcome the contrasting views to be presented by the researchers in the remaining sentences of their Introduction.

It should be noted that the authors' desire to emphasise a knowledge gap (which justifies their own research), and to contrast other researchers' views with their own, was not as intense in NNEs' articles as it was in the native articles because, as we previously stated, NNEs do not pretend as much to universality and generalisation as native writers do.

To sum up, typical hedges in the *Introduction* section of the two groups of writers allow the researcher to establish what Swales (1990, p. 155) calls an "early niche" for the research being reported, as if none of the evidence the researchers are using is conclusive.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that in the natives' *Discussion* section (contrary to what was observed in the *Introduction*) shields mostly took the form of verbal modality rather than epistemic verbs. It is most likely because the primary rhetorical function of this section is to make claims about the research findings (i.e., to explain the statistical findings in non-statistical English), to summarise the results, to state conclusions and suggestions with reference to previous research or the current work, to set further questions sometimes with possible explanations and references, and to elaborate on future developments and applications in the field of study.

Shields, as was mentioned in previous sections, include all modal verbs which present possibility, semi-auxiliaries, probability adverbs, and epistemic verbs. Verbal modality composes the major proportion of the *shields* category. The use of modals may support the findings that modal verbs are frequently used to enhance the qualitative and quantitative information as well as to adapt the

degree of certainty on the author's part to make it more suitable (Kubui, 1988; Selinker, 1979; Tarantino, 1991; Trimble, 1985).

These functions call for analysis and synthesis of the information which has to be transmitted through language structures with consequent influence on choice and value of grammatical categories, argument type, functions and exposition strategies (Weaver, 1953). Thus, the very high frequency of hedges in this section may be due to the fact that the claim is the core of the *Discussion* and, as Tarantino (1991) argues, every structure and function in the text must produce reasons for its justification. It is in this last section of research papers that writers speculate, argue, contrast and extrapolate from the described results, and at the same time avoid stating results too conclusively so that the readers can note that the authors are not claiming to have the final word on the subject.

6. Conclusion

The main purposes of the present study were to investigate the applied linguistic community's consensus over the use of hedging strategies in their research articles, on one hand, and to examine the extent to which non-native speakers make accurate use of these significant strategies when writing their articles in English, on the other hand. Native and non-native writers' use of hedging strategies was compared through analysing English applied linguistic research articles written by native speakers and Persian speakers. The study tried to determine the similarities and differences in the use of hedging and its categories as proposed by Salager-Meyer (1994) in different sections of the articles. The observed differences can be utilised in teaching so as to enable those studying English to make appropriate choices about the way they write research papers in English in terms of hedged claims. Furthermore, it tried to inform teachers of writing who may wish to develop a better understanding of the different hedging strategies preferred by the students so that they can help their students accordingly. The understanding of writing conventions by non-native English students can help teachers of writing provide better instruction to their students entering disciplinary communities in which they are seeking membership.

Apparently, the ability to hedge statements is of paramount importance for communication and membership in the research society. Considering hedges as politeness markers also comments on the fluctuations existing in academic discourse communities and emphasises the multi-functional character of these discourse markers in gaining acceptance for claims. Hedges, as powerful discourse markers, should be instructed carefully. Fortunately, the result of the present study indicates that the use of the hedged assertions made by non-native students/writers in the field of applied linguistics is as common as their use by the non-native speakers. Based on the current findings, it will also be safe to claim that our pedagogical EFL programmes should be focused on familiarising EFL students with the significance of hedging in reporting the literature in which they did not satisfy the expectations. Students should be aware of the necessity of mediating their claims and of distinguishing the observed facts and interpretations in order to be effective readers and writers of scientific genres in the Introduction section. Swales' (1987) emphasis on the importance of teaching writing of the literature in research articles is consistent with the current claims. The present study was carried out based on a comparison between NNEs and NESs in the field of applied linguistics, while further studies should be extended to other fields of study in order to conduct comparative studies in the use of hedging categories.

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Appendix A (NESS)

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Appendix B (NNESS)

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