

Exploring the interaction across the texts of non-native speakers of English: Compiling reliable learner corpora to identify hedging and boosting in argumentative writing in EFL context

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The aim of the present paper is to report the findings related to the use of hedging and boosting resources by non-native novice writers of English in their argumentative essays (drafted and final versions) that was compiled as a special learner corpus during the academic year of 2015-2016. As Tono (2016) highlighted, learner corpora can play a significant role as “a powerful pool of documenting language learning progression” (p. 48) if we compile corpora efficiently. In the present study, after compiling learner corpora following Granger (1994), we aimed to explore hedging and boosting resources employed by Turkish learners of English, who use English as a foreign language, while writing an essay by following a process writing approach (Badger & White, 2000) with methodological and pedagogical contributions. We specifically focused on raising the awareness of the modality markers among L2 learners, i.e., hedges and boosters, as interactional resources (Thompson, 2001) using learner corpus given that the function of interactive resources through which the reader interprets the text by means of the interaction of the text and reader (see Hyland, 2004).

To create reliable and efficient sampling, we considered the following empirical corpus design issues: (i) We used the design criteria to build corpus that was based on learner and task variables (see Granger, 2003); (ii) we concentrated on the ‘representativeness’ through paying attention to the range of genres included (McEnery, Xiao & Tono, 2006) and (iii) we also updated the corpus for ‘permanence’ (Hunston, 2002) with the texts from the same group of learners, which can be considered as the methodological contribution of the present study. We want to highlight that the permanence will maintain for the sustainability of the corpus in the same research setting. The approximately 145,000-word learner corpus with two sub-corpora included (1) 90 very first composed versions and (2) 90 very last revised versions of argumentative essays written by the same pre-service English language teachers (age range from 19 to 25 years old) who study English in an EFL context in Turkey. 90 learners, whose proficiency levels in English were self-evaluated between intermediate and upper-intermediate, were assigned to produce written argumentative essays. Such a specialized corpus was purposefully intended for the sake of “giving insights into patterns of language use in particular settings” (Koester, 2010, p. 67).

The sub-corpora of the research were analysed by using WordSmith Tools 7.0 to see if there was a change in the usage of hedging and boosting resources by the learners between their very first versions and final versions of argumentative essays. The results of the analysis based in the first versions showed that Turkish writers of English employed more boosters in their drafted versions than hedges. However, it is interesting to note that the later analysis of the final versions of the same argumentative essays indicated a decline in the use of boosters after the explicit instruction of hedges and boosters in the classroom by providing examples from the drafted versions of the learners. This can be linked to a transfer issue from their L1 based on the claim of Akbas (2014), who suggested that Turkish L1 writers tend to employ

more boosters in their writing. Considering the fact that novice writers of the study did not have enough experience with the traditions of writing in English, they might have applied their previous knowledge to the writing in the target language. This was also confirmed with the written feedback received from the learners at the end of the academic year. On the other hand, it was observed that the analysis of the final versions were more fruitful in terms of the hedging resources.

Although a number of studies suggested that corpora can be a valuable resource to produce classroom materials (e.g., Cobb, 1997; Cullen & Kuo, 2007), surprisingly, corpus-based activities still have not completely reached the classroom (see Gavioli, 2005; Römer, 2006 for criticisms) particularly for assessments in the mainstream classrooms. To contribute to the literature, we prepared materials from learner corpus of our research in Turkish context to raise awareness on hedging and boosting as a part of Advanced Reading and Writing course syllabus as course materials and assessment in the classroom. Also, we collected written feedback from learners anonymously to find out the efficiency of use of learner corpus in the classroom. We will provide sample classroom materials and written feedback to show how learner corpus data could be better exploited considering the needs of learners in the mainstream classrooms. Pedagogical perspectives are provided for material design and classroom methodology.

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