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ACTIVITIES TO FOSTER THE USE OF HEDGING BY ENGLISH LANGUAGE STUDENTS

ACTIVIDADES PARA POTENCIAR EL USO DE LA ATENUACIÓN RETÓRICA POR ESTUDIANTES DE LENGUA INGLESA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: In today's interconnected world, academic writing plays a crucial role since it allows professionals and scientists to disseminate their research and findings in their fields. Academic writing exhibits six main features: it is complex, formal, objective,

explicit, hedged, and responsible. Hedges are linguistic devices which writers use to present statements with accuracy and caution, without commitment, and protecting themselves from the audience's criticism. Despite its confirmed importance, hedging has received less attention leading to the lack of knowledge about this linguistic

resource and its inadequate use. Students of the course English Language with a Second Foreign Language (French) at Universidad Central "Marta Abreu" de Las Villas are faced with this problem since they have not received enough training about how to hedge in academic writing.

Objective: propose a set of activities to help these students to properly hedge in academic writing. Theoretical, empirical and statistical methods were used in the study. The results showed the necessity of fostering student's academic writing skills and hedging.

Results: designing and implementing more activities on hedging.

Conclusions: The proposed activities may be considered a contribution to the enhancement of the students' academic writing skills.

Key words: academic writing; categories of hedging; hedging; writing

RESUMEN

Introducción: En el actual mundo interconectado, la escritura académica tiene un papel crucial pues permite a profesionales y

científicos difundir sus investigaciones y resultados. La escritura académica se caracteriza por ser compleja, formal, objetiva, explícita, atenuada y responsable. La atenuación retórica es un recurso lingüístico para presentar las ideas con precisión y precaución, sin compromiso y protegiéndose de las críticas de los lectores. A pesar de su importancia confirmada, ha recibido poca atención, lo que ha contribuido al desconocimiento sobre su uso adecuado. Los estudiantes de la carrera de Lengua Inglesa con Segunda Lengua Extranjera (francés) en la Universidad Central "Marta Abreu" de Las Villas presentan este problema pues no han recibido suficiente preparación acerca de la atenuación retórica.

Objetivo: proponer un grupo de actividades para ayudar a estos estudiantes a emplear la atenuación retórica en la escritura académica adecuadamente.

Métodos: Se utilizaron métodos teóricos, empíricos y estadísticos. Los resultados demostraron la necesidad de potenciar la escritura académica de los estudiantes y el uso de la atenuación retórica.

Resultados: diseño e implementación de actividades sobre la atenuación retórica.

Conclusiones: Las actividades propuestas pueden considerarse una contribución para potenciar las habilidades de escritura académica de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: atenuación retórica; escritura académica; lengua inglesa.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing plays a key role and it is the primary form of communication within individual subject disciplines. It can be considered one of the steps of the academic research process which allows scientists to report their experiences, observations and solutions to an identified scientific problem. This type of writing comprises the writing of theses, articles, papers, projects and posters which usually involve reporting a research process as a composition. It may also be regarded as a discipline containing different parts from the title to bibliography as well as some attributes such as language, expression and form. One of the most essential characteristics of

academic writing is searching for, finding and evaluating information through mental processes and interpretation and reconstruction (Akkaya & Aydin, 2018).

In academic writing, the choice of certain rhetorical strategies is determined by the interaction between writers and readers. Academic writers need to express their claims accurately and modestly to meet the expectations of the readers, and gain acceptance for their statements. Hedges can serve as the interactive elements, which work as a bridge between the text information and the author's interpretation.

In 1973 Lakoff popularized the concept of hedging and defined hedges as those words which are used to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy (Lakoff, 1973). In addition, Hyland has been one of the many researchers noticing the importance of them. He understands hedges as important rhetorical devices used in academic writing since they show the writer's anticipation of opposition to somebody else's claims (Hyland, 1996).

As a typical feature of academic writing, hedging is a mechanism that

writers can use to manage attitude, proposition, and information in an academic piece of writing. This linguistic device embraces the use of tentative language to distinguish between facts and claims, and when writers are not certain about the facts they show they use phrases such as "It seems that" or "Probably". Moreover, hedging is used to maintain objectivity which is usually associated with the writer's credibility. Hence, using hedging or avoiding it has become an art in academic writing (Elheky, 2018).

Despite its confirmed importance and use in academic writing, hedging has received less attention by researchers and scholars, which leads to the lack of knowledge about this linguistic resource and its inadequate use. For that matter, the ignorance with regard to hedging has become a problem.

English language students at Universidad Central "Marta Abreu" de Las Villas (UCLV) are not alien to this problem since they have not received enough training about how to hedge properly. These students often use hedges in their papers but most of the time they do not do it adequately because either they do

not know how to do it or they do not know they are hedging. This situation led to the following **research question**:

How can we help second-year students of English Language with a Second Foreign Language (French) at Universidad Central "Marta Abreu" de Las Villas to hedge in academic writing?

Consequently, the **general aim** of this research was:

- To propose a set of activities to help second-year students of English Language with a Second Foreign Language (French) at Universidad Central "Marta Abreu" de Las Villas to hedge in academic writing.

In order to fulfill this general aim, three **specific objectives** were accomplished:

- To set out the theoretical foundations to support the proposal of activities to help second-year students of English Language with a Second Foreign Language (French) at Universidad Central "Marta Abreu" de Las Villas to hedge in academic writing.

- To diagnose the current situation concerning the use of hedges in academic writing by students of the degree course English Language with a Second Foreign Language (French) at Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas
- To design a set of activities in order to help second-year students of English Language with a Second Foreign Language (French) at Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas to hedge in academic writing.

The activities proposed in this research can contribute to the upgrading of students in their command of hedging when writing academic texts in English.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Defining writing and academic writing

Writing is a means of human communication in which language and emotion are represented with signs and symbols. It is a complement to speech, an instrument used to make languages readable. Moreover, writing has

been essential in preserving history, maintaining culture and disseminating knowledge.

Writing is one of the four skills in language learning together with speaking, listening and reading. It is the system of written symbols which represents the sounds, syllables or words of language, with different mechanisms such as capitalization, spelling, punctuation, word form and function. Through writing people can convey thoughts, ideas, and facts in easy and plain language. Thus, learning the art of good writing is essential in order to be successful at both academic and professional levels. In addition, good writing skills are necessary in order to achieve both educational and employable requirements (Satya & Rao, 2018).

Alfaki (2015) sees writing as a cognitive process which tests memory, thinking ability and verbal command in order to successfully express ideas because the proficient composition of a text is a sign of successful foreign language learning. Because of its use as a tool for effective communication of ideas, and in research work, learning how to write has gained

significant importance for the last two decades (Dar & Khan, 2015).

Academic writing, in turn, has its own set of rules and practices which may be organized around a formal order or structure in which to present ideas, and to ensure that these ideas are supported by author citations in the literature. According to Hyland (1994), it is believed that professional academic writing consists of a series of factual statements which are added to the truth, mainly in the hard sciences. It is now widely recognized, however, that any written text involves an interaction between writer and reader (Hyland, 1994). Indeed, readers try to predict the lines of thought of the writer, interrogate authors, and evaluate the work for its usefulness and importance to their own research.

At present, academic writing is experiencing both growing development and an increasing research in its own history. This could be the result of the emergence of a large number of non-expert writers and researchers who would like to share the findings of their studies to other colleagues of their academic communities by using

English as the prevailing medium of communication. Therefore, they are required to be skillful writers so that they can convey their ideas and knowledge to the given audience (Sarani & Talati-Baghshahi, 2017).

But like any other language skills, successful academic writing is not simply knowing and using sounds, structures, vocabulary, and composition rules. It is much more than that, in order to be able to write academically researchers and writers need to become aware of, and equip themselves with the elements and the fundamentals of academic writing skills for them to communicate their ideas efficiently and effectively with their readers who are mostly experienced colleagues and established members of the academic community and are familiar with the features governing academic discourse. In other words, they need to gain mastery in the values and conventions of English academic discourse for them to comprehend others' written texts in their disciplines, establish their professions in the community, and successfully convey the results of

their findings (Sarani & Talati-Baghshahi, 2017).

Features of academic writing

Although the accepted form of academic writing can vary considerably depending on the methodological framework and the intended audience, most college-level research papers require careful attention to the following elements (Education U.I, 2017):

Complexity

Written language is more complex than spoken language. Academic writing has longer words; it is lexically denser and it has a more varied vocabulary. In addition, the language has more grammatical complexity.

Formality

Academic writing is relatively formal. In general, this means that in an essay colloquial words and expressions should be avoided.

Precision

In academic writing, facts and figures are given precisely. The sources used must be the most reliable.

Objectivity

The written language is in general objective rather than personal. This means that the main emphasis

should be on the information and the arguments given, rather than the author. For that reason, academic writing tends to use nouns and adjectives, instead of verbs and adverbs.

Explicitness

Academic writing is explicit about the relationships in the text. Furthermore, it requires precise clear structure so the reader can follow the argument as clearly as possible. It is the responsibility of the writer to make clear how the various parts of the text are related. These connections can be made explicit by the use of different signaling words.

Accuracy

Academic writing uses vocabulary accurately. Most subjects have words with narrow specific meanings, so we have to make sure we use the adequate terms.

Responsibility

In academic writing the author must take responsibility for what he/she says, and must be able to provide evidence and justification for any claims he/she makes. This means justifying the agreements, or not, with what other author said and referencing correctly.

Planning

Academic writing is well planned. It usually takes place after research and evaluation, according to a specific purpose and plan.

Hedging

It is a technique common in academic writing used to evade strong claims or to soften the stance of the writer on a particular subject. Hedging has been the topic of research of several scholars and scientists throughout the years because of its importance in academic writing.

The notion of hedging

Although little agreement has been achieved with respect to the definition of the term hedging, by using hedging devices writers can attempt to demonstrate how their statements are accurate and, at the same time, they hide their faces in case their judgments undertake any possible falsification. The reason beyond using hedging is to imply some uncertainty for the text and that the author is not sure about what he/she argues in the text. Hence, hedging can be considered a device which the writer uses in order to convey his/her beliefs and

subjective standpoints about his/her claim (Elheky, 2018).

Lakoff pioneered the definition of hedges and coined them as those words which are used to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy (1973). This definition is used as a starting point in investigating hedging as a linguistic phenomenon. Although this concept was far from being concise and clear, it was developed further by other linguists such as Swales (1990), Salager-Meyer (1994) & Hyland (1996).

Since hedging acts as a face-saving strategy and represents the certainty of the scientists' knowledge on the study field, it is an important linguistic device which should be used for various reasons particularly in academic writing. Nevertheless, many non-native writers of English do not pay enough attention to this metadiscourse device. As a result, the fact that non-native writers avoid being confident in their scientific papers through the improper use of hedging may lead to invisibility of authorial standpoint over their statements (Demir, 2018).

When writing academic texts, authors should be very cautious because the inappropriate use of

hedging may lead to a counter-productive effect. In other words, its underuse may result in overstatement, whereas its overuse may bring about uncertainties on the credibility of the statements. Therefore, the correct use of hedges in academic texts may keep criticisms away from writers, and may increase persuasive power on the readers (Demir, 2018).

In the last decade the relationship between academic writing skills and the cautious use of hedges has also attracted the attention of many scholars who have studied it from different viewpoints. Wu (2017) compared the writings of expert writers and students and found that the former included more varied hedging devices than non-expert ones. A similar study was conducted by Sarani & Talati-Baghsiahi (2017) in order to determine the effectiveness of hedging devices on student writings. They concluded that it is very important to give students explicit instructions in developing their pragmatic knowledge of modal auxiliaries as hedging devices. Thus, they suggested that teaching pragmatic features of language structures in a

direct way may result in a higher students' achievement than simply exposing them to the language products to acquire the ability of hedging.

In their longitudinal study, Aull et. al. (2017) found that the more the students become proficient in writing, the more they use rhetorical devices in their writings. With respect to the difficulty of scientific communication for non-native writers, Chen & Zhang (2017) recommended that non-Anglophone academic writers should improve their ability in using rhetorical and stylistic devices such as hedging. They added that non-native writers should adapt to the Anglophone academic discourse standards and be considerate of their readers' experiences.

Categories of hedging in academic writing

Several authors divide hedging into two main categories or functions, which are in turn subdivided into subcategories. According to Hyland (1996), hedges convey a range of different functions simultaneously. This means that a hedge assigned to a category may also include meanings associated with the other

category. To understand it better, Hyland (1996) has categorized hedges in academic writing as indicated in the figure below:

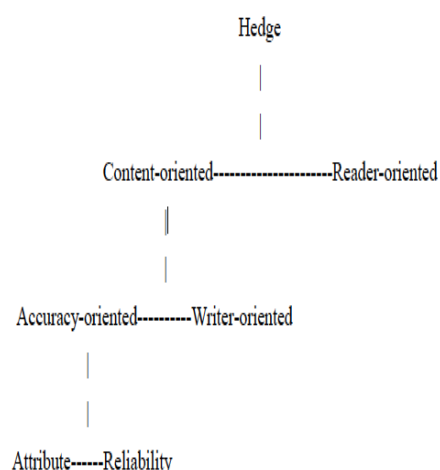


Figure 1. Categorization of hedges in scientific research articles (Hyland, 1996).

The distinction between the two main categories, which are reader-oriented and content-oriented is based on the principle that the former “mitigate the world and what the world is thought to be like the relationship between propositional content and a representation of reality; they hedge the correspondence between what the writer says about” (Hyland, 1996), while reader-oriented hedges deal with a relationship between the author and the audience; they see the reader as a person able to

participate in the discourse with an open mind and mark statements as merely provisional. Therefore, the distinction between content and reader-oriented hedges is that the former have to do with accuracy concerning the world, while the latter are associated with a regard for the audience and the established rules of conduct of the scientific community.

It means that writers need to express in a way in which they gain reader’s acceptance, no matter the differences on the reader’s points of view. These examples of reader-oriented hedges show that the reader’s acceptance is important in academic writing.

I believe that the major problem...

I suggest here that...

As shown in Figure 1, to understand hedging categories, content-oriented hedges subdivide into subcategories: writer-oriented and accuracy oriented. Writer-oriented hedges concern the writers desire to anticipate possible negative consequences of being proved wrong by limiting commitment to claims, blurring the relationship between a writer and his/her

proposition (Nash, 1990; Swales, 1990). A way of the writers for gaining credibility is making their statements the strongest possible, and at the same time avoiding personal responsibilities in the case there were opinions against. Hyland (1996) understands this as a contrast; the author diminishes his/her presence in the text rather than increasing the precision of claims. Here are some examples of writer-oriented hedges:

It seems that the data...

The evidence indicates that...

Academic writers try to find a balance between facts and the reader's judgment and at the same time, to present the information as accurate as possible. Accuracy-oriented hedges allow them to express more precisely and cautiously in areas of conceptualizations and in the scientific world. These kinds of hedges distinguish the actual from the inferential and imply that a proposition is based on the writer's plausible reasoning rather than reliable facts (Hyland, 1996). For example:

It is probable that...

It is generally believed that...

According to Hyland (1996), the category of accuracy-oriented hedges consists of two subtypes named *attribute* and *reliability* hedges. Attribute hedges may be seen as adverbs that express precision in terms of frequency or amount; for example: *approximately, generally, usually, about, among* others.

According to Lakoff (1973), on the other hand, reliability hedges express how the speaker feels about the sentence. Here, the writer explicitly uses hedging to express what he or she considers as the truth. For example:

Another possibility would be...

It was presumably because of...

Even though there are specific types of hedges, Hyland (1996) emphasizes that a given hedge does not always have a given function, but may involve multiple meanings.

Ways of hedging

At first, hedging was approached to a limited set of hedges, including lexical verbs and phrases such as *roughly, sort of, strictly speaking, and so on*. In the course of time, the

concept of hedging has come to be understood more broadly as including numerous ways of expressing uncertainty, vagueness, hesitation, etc. (Varttala, 2001). According to several authors (Hyland, 1996; Csongor, 2013, Varttala, 2001), a large number of different words can be used as hedges, such as lexical and modal verbs, adverbs, clausal elements and even the interrogative mode.

Lexical verbs

Lexical verbs conform the largest group of hedges, including verbs such as *indicate*, *suggest*, *appear*, *purpose*, *believe*, *assume*, and others, which appear frequently in academic writing. With impersonal phrasings, they indicate the writer's lack of confidence and allow readers to evaluate statements more accurately, when accompanied by personal attribution; however, they generally help to soften claims, functioning as reader-oriented hedges (Hyland, 1996). Lexical verbs are the means in which writers can indicate that they are presenting the information as an opinion or conclusion based on evidence.

Modal verbs

There are eight different modal auxiliaries that could be interpreted to express hedging: *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *should*, *will* and *would* (Varttala, 2001). According to some authors (Hyland, 1996, Csongor, 2013; Varttala, 2001), *might* and *may* are the modal verbs used the most when hedging. They express the writer's lack of confidence in the truth of the statement. For example:

This may produce...

One might think that...

Could is a modal verb that expresses both hedging and 'root possibility', it expresses ambiguity rather than the writer's assessment of the truth. Other auxiliaries such as *would* and *should*, are the principal markers of hypotheticality (Hyland, 1996). *Would* expresses caution rather than hypothesis. Its use in the following example softens the claim and does not force the reader to comply with it.

This result would favor the hypothesis that...

Should refers to the future and consequently has a more tentative meaning than *would*, expressing a less confident assumption of probability based on the known facts

(Hyland, 1996,). This modal verb “implicitly allows for the speaker to be mistaken” (Varttala, 2001). For instance:

The use of these mechanisms should increase if...

Will and *must* serve hedging functions by weakening confident assertion, by use of prediction and inference respectively (Hyland, 1996). *Will* is generally used when referring to the truth, and in general, it describes the author’s intentions, for example:

We are considering the data, so we will use... (Varttala, 2001).

Must is the modal verb that expresses confidence the most. That is why it is not so used when hedging, and often replaced by other modal auxiliaries such as *could*, because it softens the statement. The following examples evidence it:

Another reason for this must be...

would probably be replaced by:

Another reason for this could be...

Finally, *can* indicates possibility; it may “be interpreted as marking the information presented as less absolute in a way similar to *may*”

(Varttala, 2001), as illustrated in the following example:

The results can be extremely difficult to achieve.

Adverbs

There are numerous adverbs that are also frequently used as hedges since they express a more precise version of the proposition. In general, hedging adverbs perform accuracy-based functions (Hyland, 1996). For example:

The process could be almost entirely finished.

This could be partially caused by...

In turn, there are other adverbs that are perfect to convey how the truth of a proposition is perceived by the author. For instance:

This is generally because...

But probably, the most used adverbs in hedging are those that carry implications about the truth of a statement or the sense in which it is true or false (Hyland; 1996). Here, the writer establishes an opinion with caution:

This is probably because...

The results are possibly affected by...

Other adverbs express how the writer judges what it is considered

truth and shows a contrast with reality or limitations about the truth (Hyland, 1996). For instance:

This can be intuitively related to...

The results give essentially the same patterns.

Several adverbs can be used as hedges: *usually, slightly, occasionally, almost, likely, apparently, potentially, possibly, maybe, often, seldom, relatively, about, nearly, roughly*, among others (Varttala, 2001).

Clausal elements

There are also expressions that serve to state that what is said is not necessarily altogether accurate or absolute (Hyland, 1996). They are generally called clausal elements, though Hyland calls them *strategic hedges*. They are combinations of words that allow the writer to communicate cautiously. The following examples evidence it:

“limited knowledge” and in so doing “fix their work in an evidential context of uncertainty” (e.g. “We do not know whether”)

“doubts surrounding the experimental conditions” as far as the accuracy of the results obtained is concerted (e.g. “We have not

been able to determine precisely whether”) (Varttala, 2001).

Fairly common clausal hedging phenomena are *if-clauses* which may be used to “qualify commitment to the views of others, the validity of methods employed or the various explanations of the results obtained” (Varttala, 2001). Here are examples of if-clauses used as hedges:

According to the author, these findings, if valid, could demonstrate...

That could be the problem. If this is the case, it would explain...

Nevertheless, there are no patterns to follow concerning these clausal elements. Any expression used carefully by the authors to indicate their lack of commitment to the statement may be considered as a hedge.

Interrogative mode

Interrogative constructions may also be used to “signal an important unresolved issues [...] or to withhold commitment from a claim” (Hyland, 1998). They can refer to limited knowledge as well as clausal elements do; for instance:

Is this just an anomaly associated with our particular sample, or a

phenomenon unique to the last fast-food industry?

But which functional form is more nearly correct, particularly at longer or shorter lives? (Varttala, 2001)

Authors may respond to them in their work, but these questions are a way of engaging with the readers and expressing the uncertainty of the facts.

METHODOLOGY

The research herein presented was carried out at Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas, School of Humanities, English Language Course with a Second Foreign Language (French). The authors of the present paper held to a mixed-method approach since this method focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data. As a method, it provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone (Plano, 2011).

The whole research process was organized into three (3) main stages:

First stage: bibliographic review in order to construct a theoretical framework to systematize the main concepts associated with the topic of research and their relationships.

Thus, concepts such as writing, academic writing, hedging, categories of hedging and ways of hedging were analyzed and systematized.

Second stage: needs analysis concerning the current situation of hedging in academic writing in the degree course English Language with a Second Foreign Language (French). Thus, a sample of fifteen (15) fourth-year students of the academic year 2018-2019 were given a questionnaire, and seven (7) professors from the Department of English Language were given a similar questionnaire. A very important consideration to choose the sample was the academic level of students, the academic and scientific degree of professors as well as their willingness to cooperate with this research:

Academic level of students: Fourth year students of the English Language Course were chosen because in this year students are supposed to already be prepared to write different kinds of academic texts.

Academic and scientific degree of professors: Professors who have published scientific articles in

English as authors and as co-authors. Most of them hold scientific degrees of PhD and MSc, and academic degrees of assistant professor, associate professor or full professor.

Willingness: All of the students and professors were willing to cooperate.

Third stage: design of a set of writing activities to be utilized as an appropriate tool in the subject English Language in the second year of the aforementioned degree course. For designing these activities, the theoretical framework analyzed in the previous section was taken into account as well as the results of the needs analysis previously referred to.

Methods

In this research some methods were applied:

Theoretical methods: historical and logical, analysis and synthesis, inductive and deductive, structural and systemic. These methods were used for establishing the research process foundations.

Empirical methods: questionnaires and participant observation. The questionnaires were applied to determine students' opinions and professors' opinions

about hedging. The participant observation was applied for gaining a closer insight into students' practices concerning writing and hedging in academic writing.

Statistical and mathematical methods: percentage analysis, which allowed for the processing of data obtained from questionnaires.

Students' questionnaire

Fifteen (15) fourth-year students of the academic year 2018-2019 were provided with a questionnaire whose purpose was to explore students' general opinions and concerns on hedging in academic writing.

Professors' questionnaire

Seven (7) professors from the Department of English Language were given a questionnaire in order to explore how they evaluate the importance of hedging in academic writing, how they consider current students' hedging is, as well as what they think it should be done to improve students' hedging in academic writing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the students' questionnaire

The students' questionnaire consisted of five (5) questions. It was aimed at determining fourth-

year students' opinion about hedging and the teaching of hedging in their studies. The first question asked about the role hedging plays in academic writing. Most of the students (53.3 %) thought hedging is important, whereas the rest of students (46.6 %) evaluated it as very important.

In the second question, students were asked whether it is easy to hedge in academic writing or not. The overwhelming majority (66.6 %) considered it is easy, while (33.3 %) gave an opposite opinion.

Question # 3 focused on how prepared to hedge in academic writing students felt. The great majority of students (66.6 %) said they felt prepared and the other students surveyed (33.3 %) answered they did not feel prepared. The fourth question dealt with students' opinion about the teaching of hedging in their course of studies. The results of their answers are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Students' opinion about the teaching of hedging in their course of studies

Aspects	I agree	totally I agree	I disagree
Students need more hedging training	46.6 %	53.3 %	0 %
The training students receive on hedging is very good	0 %	20%	80 %
Students learn how to hedge with practice	6.6 %	53.3 %	40 %

Source: Authors' Elaboration (2019)

As for students' suggestions to improve the current situation of students' hedging in academic writing (Question # 5), most of the respondents (37, 5 %) suggested the practice of hedging through exercises and 18,75 % thought hedging lessons should be taught; 15,6 % suggested the inclusion of hedging in the design of the syllabuses; 12,5 % recommended that professors should give lectures on hedging. Two (2) students proposed to include books and studies on hedging in the bibliography and two (2) other students considered it is important

to call hedging by its name, since they know what it is but they had never heard the word. Only one (1) student recommended more research on hedging should be done.

Results of professors' questionnaire

The questionnaire given to professors comprised 4 questions. Its purpose was to determine their perceptions about students' hedging in academic writing and their preparation to hedge in this type of writing. The first question dealt with the role played by hedging in academic writing. The vast majority

(85,7%) evaluated it as very important in academic writing, whereas 14.2 % thought hedging is important.

Concerning Question # 2, on how much attention is given to the training of students in relation to hedging, all professors (100 %) stated that students should receive more training.

In the third question, professors were asked about fourth-year students' preparation for hedging in academic writing. It was striking to notice that 85,7% answered that these students are not prepared enough to hedge in academic writing.

The fourth question asked professors what should be done to develop students' ability to hedge in academic writing. 85,7% professors thought that this should be raised through exercises and the others said that students should read articles dealing with hedging.

Regularities obtained from the questionnaires

After analyzing the results obtained from the application of the questionnaires given to both students and professors the following regularities were observed:

- Most of the students and professors considered hedging is important in academic writing; nevertheless, they thought students are not prepared enough to hedge in academic writing.
- Most of the respondents thought that though hedging is easy, it has not received enough attention.
- The vast majority suggested exercises on hedging should be increased, as well as the use of materials and books that help improve the current situation of students' hedging in academic writing.

Description of activities to help students hedge in academic writing

The activities herein presented were designed based on the theoretical foundations of the research and the regularities obtained from the needs analysis described above. Depending on their level of difficulty, the activities were grouped into three (3) types: presentation, production and practice.

Presentation activities

Activity 1:

To introduce hedging the teacher could write the following sentence on the board:

Cuban children are smart

Then, the teacher asks the students: *Is this sentence true?* Probably, some students would say *no*, and some others would say *yes*. From there, the teacher could encourage students to change the sentence so everyone agrees. *What words could be changed or added?*

Now, they could get sentences like:

- Most Cuban children are smart.
- Cuban children are usually smart.
- Cuban children are smart compared to other children.

Activity 2:

Emma and Jake have different ways of writing and speaking. Emma is very subjective and usually generalizes, but Jake is more objective when expressing ideas. Who do you think wrote these statements?

- All Indian singers sing about love.
- It is said that migraine is caused by led lights exposition.

- Generally, my holidays were great.
- Eating fish and yoghurt will surely lead to stomach ache.
- Dogs often protect their owners.
- English people always drink tea with milk.

What do you think about Emma's statements? Are they really true?

How did Jake make his statements more objective?

Why are Jake's statements better?

Practice activities

With these activities, students should be able to learn how to identify hedging statements, which is essential prior to starting production exercises. Some examples of practice activities are provided below.

Activity1:

Order the sentences below from the strongest statement (1) to the weakest claim (6):

- a. The vaccine is probably effective. ____
- b. The vaccine is possibly effective. ____
- c. The vaccine is effective. ____

d. The vaccine is apparently effective. ____

e. The vaccine is said to be effective. ____

Activity2:

Circle the hedging statements in the sentences bellow and identify the different speech acts involved (e.g. *making a statement, disagreeing opinions, research claims, giving opinions*).

a. Students who take these lessons are more likely to do better at the university.

b. Scientific studies suggest that climate change could have very serious consequences for our planet.

c. The documentary reports that green tea can potentially prevent cancer.

d. Most people do not enjoy exercising, but it is probably the best thing you can do to improve your health.

e. One possibility is that prolonged sun exposure is likely to produce these changes in skin appearance.

Production activities

The following activities have as aim the production of hedging. Students should be able to produce their own

hedging statements and to gain some control in their academic writing.

Activity1:

Rewrite the sentence below by adding some hedging statements. Make as many changes as necessary.

a. Nobody enjoys doing household chores.

b. Every child loves eating chocolate.

c. If you learn computer skills, you will get a job.

d. A short person cannot play basketball professionally.

Activity2:

The following text could not get published in an academic journal, because the writer may appear arrogant and too certain about his/her ideas. To improve the text, add some hedging statements.

Electronic portfolios have become very popular in recent

years for showcasing one's skills and achievements online. They are a useful tool for gaining employment. Employers in China are interested in the concept of electronic portfolios and employers will look at them if they are given links to online portfolios in job applications.

CONCLUSIONS

Academic writing and, in particular, hedging in academic writing are two crucial issues which students of foreign languages should master because this may help them to be more critical and perceptive readers of their own work and that of others in the increasingly interconnected world.

The results obtained in the herein presented study demonstrated that both students and professors of the degree course English Language with a Second Foreign Language (French) at UCLV agreed on the necessity of improving student's academic writing skills and hedging by the design and implementation of more activities on hedging and by the use of books and other didactic materials.

The theoretical foundations of the research and the regularities obtained from the needs analysis were taken as the basis for the proposal of a set of writing activities to be utilized as an appropriate tool in the second year of the above-mentioned degree course. Taking into consideration their level of difficulty, these activities were grouped into three types: presentation, production and practice.

Though further studies on hedging in academic writing are necessary, the set of activities proposed can constitute a step forward in the fostering of English Language students' academic writing skills.

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