

Epistemic stance construction in L1 and L2 undergraduate argumentative writing

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Kang, Jia. 2017. Epistemic stance construction in L1 and L2 undergraduate argumentative writing. *SNU Working Papers in English Linguistics and Language 15*, 53-67. The current study examined whether and how Korean L2 undergraduate writers' epistemic marker use pattern differs from that of English L1 undergraduate writers. The quantitative and qualitative analysis revealed that L2 writers overall relied on a limited range of epistemic markers compared to L1 writers. Specifically, L2 writings appeared to be characterized by assertive tone and strong writer commitment due to the lack of diverse hedging expressions and over/mis-use of *I think* construction and the modal verb *will*. These findings provide some pedagogical implications for EFL writing classes that it would be more effective to teach L2 writers a wide range of epistemic markers and their function variations in diverse usage contexts. (Seoul National University)

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1. Introduction

In the field of rhetoric and L2 writing, there has been a growing awareness of the need to view writing as a social engagement practice between the writer and the readers (Hyland, 2005; Ivanič, 1998; Ivanič & Camps, 2001). Under this perspective, a piece of writing is not viewed as entirely objective and impersonal, but instead seen as reflecting the writer's identity or self-understanding. That is, writers not only communicate propositional contents in their writings, but they also convey their own stance or attitudes toward those contents. This shifting view on the nature of writing naturally led to increasing interest in linguistic resources that writers employ in order to project their voices in their writings.

The metadiscourse model, first proposed by Hyland (2005), is one of the most influential frameworks on this kind of self-reflecting language resources. In this model, metadiscourse is defined as “the interpersonal resources used to organize a discourse or the writer’s stance toward either its content or the reader.” Further, Hyland makes a distinction between *interactive* and *interactional* resources in this model. *Interactive* resources are used to organize a discourse in such a way that readers are well-guided along the logic of the text and *interactional* resources are concerned with establishing writers’ personalities in the text. As metadiscourse features in general are highly context-dependent (i.e. differ across genres and languages) (Fuentes-Olivera et al., 2001), making use of these features in a context-appropriate way is one of the most crucial aspects of a successful writing practice.

The appropriate use of metadiscourse features is also important in an academic writing context. Especially, the use of two interactional metadiscourse features in Hyland’s framework, hedges and boosters, has received much attention due to their significance in academic writings. Specifically, hedges are resources that writers use to withhold their commitment to the proposition by leaving room for alternative viewpoints. Various expressions including *possibly*, *seem*, and *in my opinion* are used as hedging devices in writings. On the other hand, boosters, such as *certainly*, *obvious*, and *the fact that* allow writers to show a strong certainty in a proposition. In the context of academic writing in general, writers are required to use these expressions to mark their epistemic stance and thereby enhance their rhetorical power and credibility. In other words, establishing authors’ epistemic identity appropriately in different parts of a piece of writing is important to convey its ideational content effectively.

The appropriate use of epistemic stance markers is also an important subject in L2 writing studies. Previous studies on L2 writing have revealed that many L2 learners tend to borrow their L1 writing conventions when writing in L2 (Hinkel 1994; Kaplan 1988). This

implies that acquiring and making use of L2 rhetorical devices are quite challenging for L2 learners. Further, these studies emphasize the importance of investigating how rhetoric of L2 writers from various L1 (and cultural) backgrounds differ from each other. In this context, therefore, the current study aims to examine whether and how Korean L2 writers' usage pattern of one specific set of rhetorical devices, boosters and hedges, differ with the usage pattern of L1 writers.

2. Literature Review

Previous comparative studies on Korean L2 learners' use of interactional metadiscourse features in academic writings have reported inconsistent findings, necessitating additional studies on the topic. First, some studies have revealed that English L1 writers use interpersonal metadiscourse more frequently than Korean EFL learners. Kim (2009) compared newspaper columns written by British L1 writers and argumentative writings written by Korean L2 undergraduates in terms of the writers' metadiscourse usage patterns. The results showed that British L1 writers used more interpersonal metadiscourse features compared to Korean L2 learners. More specifically, it was revealed that Korean L2 writers' usage frequency of hedging expressions was significantly lower than that of their L1 counterparts. The author explains that this results might be partly due to the fact that Korean undergraduate L2 writers' proficiency levels are not high enough to use interactional metadiscourse devices. That is, L2 writers with limited proficiency tend to consider only the formal aspects of language, overlooking the importance of the functional and social aspects of language.

The results of Kim (2009) and its interpretation is in line with the study of Huh and Lee (2016). In this study, the authors examined Korean EFL undergraduates' metadiscourse usage patterns in non-discipline persuasive writings. The results indicate that hedges, along with some

interactive metadiscourse features, are crucial factors determining the student writing quality. To be specific, both the frequency and diversity of hedges used in student writings were found to be correlated with writing quality. Also, a regression model showed that the use of hedges explained over 30% of writing quality variances. Further, the qualitative analysis showed that Korean EFL learners overall used a limited range of linguistic forms of stance markers. These results together indicate that Korean L2 learners do indeed experience difficulties in deploying interactional metadiscourse features, which might be ameliorated as the writers' proficiency increases.

There are, however, studies which show slightly different results. For instance, some studies have found that Korean L2 students' writings contained more hedges compared to L1 writers' texts. Choi and Ko (2005) compared Korean postgraduates' research papers and master's theses in the Applied Linguistics field with journal articles in the same field written by L1 expert writers, in terms of the writers' hedging strategies. The results indicated that Korean postgraduate writers used more hedges than L1 expert writers. However, L2 writers' more frequent hedge uses were mostly centered around a limited set of linguistic forms and expressions. Also, they sometimes used particular modal verbs in an inappropriate context, hinting at their misunderstanding of the use of these hedging items.

Similarly, Hwang and Lee's (2008) comparative study reported that Korean EFL writers used significantly higher rate of amplifiers compared to native English writers. Although the study does not borrow the metadiscourse framework mostly adopted in other studies on the topic, it is focused on the usage pattern of expressions which enable the writers to establish objectivity in writings, which is closely related to writers' epistemic stance construction. Considering that amplifiers express a high degree of certainty and conviction (Bieber, 1988), the interpretation of this study can be fitted into the framework of interactional metadiscourse and epistemic stance markers.

As mentioned earlier, it can be observed that no converging results were found regarding the epistemic marker use patterns of Korean L2 writers. This might be due to the fact that different baseline L1 and target L2 writer groups were selected in these studies. For instance, Kim (2009) chose EFL undergraduate students as a target group, while Choi and Ko (2005) selected postgraduate students' writings. As for baseline L2 writings for comparison, Kim (2009) and Hwang and Lee (2008) selected L1 journalists' columns and L1 language teachers' persuasive writings respectively. As a result, the variance in writer group characteristics might have influenced the results of these studies. Therefore, it is implied that establishing a solid theoretical or practical grounds for selecting writing samples is important for further researches on this topic.

In this context, the current study aims to compare Korean L2 undergraduate students' non-discipline argumentative writings with English L1 undergraduate students' argumentative writings. First, a rather broad genre of argumentative writing was chosen because the goal of advancing writers' opinions and interpretations about certain propositional contents is commonly involved in a wide range of academic writing genres. Therefore, the generalizability of the study is expected to be more guaranteed. Also, it was considered that argumentation, more than any other communicative task, requires a careful use of epistemic markers, which are the focus of this study. Finally, undergraduate student writings were selected for both L1 and L2 groups for comparison. This decision was made based on the assumption that comparing L2 writers' writings with those of highly competent L1 writers might exaggerate both L2 writers' lack of language proficiency and the need to develop it.

3. Research Questions

The current study seeks to provide answers to the following questions:

1. Do English L1 undergraduate writers and Korean L2 undergraduate writers differ in terms of the frequency and diversity of epistemic marker use?
2. Do English L1 undergraduate writers' and Korean L2 undergraduate writers' epistemic marker use show a difference in terms of their usage contexts and discourse functions?

4. Research Methods

4.1 Corpus

The study is based on two corpora of argumentative writings, each written by English L1 undergraduate writers and Korean L2 undergraduate writers. L1 writing corpus consists of 20 argumentative essays from Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (10251 words) and L2 writing corpus consists of 35 paragraph writing samples written in *College English 1* classes at Seoul National University (9440 words).¹ All writing samples were randomly selected and checked to have been written in response to a variety of topics. As L1 samples were mostly multiple-paragraph-long essays while L2 samples were one-paragraph writings, L2 writing samples were additionally collected in order to adjust the difference in the number of words between the two corpora.

4.2 Identifying boosters and hedges

Epistemic markers in the two corpora were searched and then coded 1) as either booster or hedge and 2) for its part of speech for further analysis.

¹ The use of these writing samples were approved in advance by College English Program at Seoul National University.

In the process, boosting and hedging expressions were manually identified instead of relying on a predefined set of lexical items. This is due to the fact that one form of a lexical item might perform different functions in different contexts. The following examples illustrate this point:

- (1a) First, we have to be aware that it is fully **possible** that AI would make a mistake, just like human.
- (1b) I think that people who don't have money are deprived of their **possible** happiness that they can have with money.

In (1a), the word *possible* is used as a hedging expression in that it signals to readers that the following proposition *AI will make a mistake, just like human* is the writer's prediction on future possibilities, rather than a solid fact. On the other hand, the word *possible* in (1b), despite the identical form, is used with its literal meaning of 'able to be done or achieved.' These cases of multiple form-function mappings provide the need to closely examine the contexts of potential epistemic marker items.

4.3 Data analysis

Once epistemic markers in two corpora were identified and coded, quantitative analysis was first conducted. In order to compare the frequencies of epistemic markers between two corpora with unequal number of words, the frequency of epistemic markers per 1,000 words was calculated for each corpus. Also, in order to determine whether the differences in the use of epistemic markers by L1 and L2 writer group were statistically significant, the frequency of epistemic markers per 100 words was calculated for each writing sample and statistical analysis were performed on these data sets.

Additionally, in order to examine the distributional pattern of epistemic markers across word class categories, the frequency per 1,000 words was

calculated for each word class subcategory within both booster and hedge categories. Here, the word class categories include lexical verb, modal verb, adverb, adjective, noun, and miscellaneous (e.g. *in my opinion*). Then, based on this data set, the categorical frequencies (i.e. distributional patterns) of epistemic markers were compared between L1 writings and L2 writings.

Then, apart from the quantitative analysis, a discourse-analytic approach was undertaken to examine how certain epistemic markers were used in different contexts in L1 and L2 writings. Specifically, epistemic markers with a relatively high frequency of occurrence were closely examined in terms of their lexico-grammatical co-occurrence patterns and positional distributions within a piece of writing. Also, it was observed whether epistemic markers with identical forms serve different discourse functions in L1 and L2 writings.

5. Results

5.1 Quantitative analysis

The frequency distribution patterns of overall epistemic markers in two corpora are summarized in Table 1. In the table, it can be observed that English L1 writers used more epistemic markers than Korean L2 writers. Especially, it should be noted that the two writer groups showed more difference in the frequency of hedges (13.45 per 1,000 words) than in the frequency of boosters (1.38 per 1,000 words). From this, it can be inferred that Korean L2 writers do not use epistemic markers as freely as their L1 counterparts, especially in case of hedging expressions.

Table 1. Frequency of overall epistemic markers in L1 and L2 writings

	L1 writings		L2 writings	
	Raw frequency	Per 1,000 words	Raw frequency	Per 1,000 words
Booster	113	11.02	91	9.64
Hedge	227	22.14	82	8.69
Total	340	32.68	173	18.33

This is also evidenced by the results of the independent samples t-tests. The t-test results for frequency (per 100 words) measures of overall epistemic markers showed that there is a significant difference in the use of overall epistemic markers between L1 ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.89$) and L2 ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 1.07$) writer groups ($t(53) = 5.430$, $p = .000$). Also, additional t-tests were conducted for respective frequency measures of boosters and hedges. The results indicated that while L1 writers ($M = 2.15$, $SD = .82$) used more hedging expressions than L2 writers ($M = .84$, $SD = .77$) ($t(53) = 5.950$, $p = .000$), L1 ($M = 1.11$, $SD = 0.67$) and L2 ($M = .95$, $SD = .61$) writer groups showed no significant difference in terms of the use of boosting expressions ($t(53) = .872$, $p = .387$).

Further, the distributional pattern of epistemic markers across word class subcategories is summarized in Table 2. First, it is noticeable that both L1 and L2 writers most relied on modal verbs, with regard to both boosters and hedges. This is possibly due to the fact that one-word modal verbs, which are familiar to most language users, can be easily fitted in to any usage contexts without lexical constraints. Additionally, in terms of L2 writers, it might be the case that they experience difficulty handling a wide range of epistemic markers, mostly relying on a limited set of familiar expressions including modal verbs (Choi & Ko, 2005; Huh & Lee, 2016).

Another point to be noticed here is that L2 writers used more lexical verbs as boosters than L1 writers. This is rather surprising, considering that L1 writings show higher frequencies of epistemic markers in almost

all other subcategories. The results of qualitative analysis, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section, have provided a clue to this observation. In an in-depth reading of L2 writing samples, it was revealed that Korean L2 writers used the expression *I think* very frequently. In fact, almost all tokens of lexical verb boosters in L2 writings were *think* used with the first-person pronoun *I*. Therefore, Korean L2 writers' higher usage frequency of lexical verb boosters can be understood as deriving from L2 writers frequently using fixed expressions in their writings.

Table 2. Categorical distribution of boosters and hedges in L1 and L2 writings (per 1,000 words)

	L1 writings		L2 writings	
	booster	hedge	booster	hedge
Lexical verb	0.88	2.93	3.70	0.64
Modal verb	5.46	12.19	2.75	5.19
Adverb	2.73	4.00	1.69	2.01
Adjective	0.68	0.59	0.53	0.11
Noun	0.59	0	0.32	0.32
Miscellaneous	0.59	2.44	0.74	0.42

Lastly, Table 3 presents the top ten most frequently used epistemic markers in the two corpora. In this table, it can be first observed that the top ten most frequent epistemic markers account for respectively 56.47% and 81.50% of overall epistemic marker use in L1 and L2 writings. This implies that the range of epistemic markers is more restricted in L2 writings compared to L1 writings. Secondly, modal verbs tend to be ranked higher in the lists of both groups of writers, which has earlier been observed in Table 2. This again indicates that both L1 and L2 writers heavily rely on modal verbs to express their epistemic stance in their writings. Finally, while hedges including *would*, *may*, *could* and *seem* are ranked higher than boosters (except *will*) in L1 frequency list, in L2

list, boosters *think* and *will* are ranked higher than hedging modal verbs such as *would*, *could*, and *may*. This observation again leads to the conclusion that Korean L2 writers use more boosters than hedges, whereas English L1 writers use more hedges than boosters.

Table 3. Top ten most frequent epistemic markers in L1 and L2 writings

L1 writings		L2 writings	
would	66	think	40
may	31	will	31
will	26	would	19
could	20	could	10
seem	13	may	7
always	8	quite	6
almost	8	never	5
sure	7	of course	4
think	7	possibility	4
fact	6	might	4
Total	192 (56.47%)	Total	141 (81.50%)

5.2 Qualitative analysis

A discourse analytic approach to L1 and L2 writings has revealed that Korean L2 writers display a few different patterns in using epistemic markers compared to English L1 writers. First, it was observed that Korean L2 writers relied on a small set of expressions across all word class subcategories. As for adverbs, for instance, L1 writers deployed various expressions including *absolutely*, *probably*, *somewhat*, and *surely*. On the other hand, L2 writers' adverb usage was centered around a small set of high-frequency adverbs such as *always* and *often*. Also, in many cases, L2 writers used adverbs to present numerical or factual information. This is in contrast with L1 writers who used adverbs for

more rhetorical purposes in a wide variety of contexts. Also, while L1 writers used various phrasal expressions including *some kind of* and *as far as I'm concerned*, L2 writers mostly used *of course* and *in my opinion*.

This is also the case with lexical verbs. As mentioned earlier, almost all lexical verb use of Korean L2 writers was devoted to the verb *think* used with the first-person pronoun *I*. This is likely due to the fact that, in many English writing classes in Korean universities, students are taught to propose the main ideas of their writings with strong conviction and full commitment. Despite the fact that *I think* in some contexts can function as a hedging expression (for this reason, *I think*, in the current study, was coded as a booster only when it came with the topic sentence of a writing sample), not an instance of this kind of *I think* was found in L2 students' writings. This supports the findings of Kim (2009) that many L2 writers do not understand, and therefore, do not make use of the hedging function of *I think* or *I believe*.

The assumption that the high frequency of *I think* in L2 writings can be explained in terms of the formulaic teaching practice is also supported by a typical distributional pattern of *I think* within a piece of a L2 student's writing. In the majority of L2 writing samples, *I think* appeared in discourse-initial and discourse-final positions with a topic sentence.

- (2) **I think** it is not appropriate to reduce the sentence of sex offenders who committed their crime under the influence of alcohol. Actually in Korea, ... It means we lose our citizens and we lose our country power. So for these reasons **I think** we should not care the influence of alcohol when judges pronounce the sentence of criminals.

This pattern seems to be related to the paragraph writing convention of 'topic sentence - supporting details - concluding sentence,' which is emphasized in Korean English writing classes. That is, L2 writers tend

to heavily, and mechanically, rely on fixed expressions they learn in their language classes.

Another point noted was that Korean L2 writers often used boosters *will* and *will not* (*won't*) in writings to present their opinions while English L1 writers preferred to use hedging modal verbs like *would* or *could* instead. That is, while L1 writers used 'polite' modal verbs in suggesting their opinions or predictions, possibly out of the need to avoid doing face-threatening acts, L2 writers frequently used boosting modal verbs in similar situations. Following example writing samples of a L2 writer ((3a)) and a L1 writer ((3b)) illustrate this point:

(3a) There are a lot of reasons to support my opinion. First, if sex offenders receive reduced sentence frequently, many people **will** drink alcohol and commit crimes on purpose. That **will** make our drinking culture unclean.

(3b) By banning fox hunting the law **would** probably drive the sport 'underground' as it were and the participants **would** find some way around it.

Additionally, while L1 writers casually used *would* and *could* to present their opinions, L2 writers used these modal verbs in the limited context of conditional or counterfactual 'if ..., would/could' constructions, which also hint at the influence of formulaic writing instructions in Korean L2 writing classes. Therefore, *would* and *could* in L2 writings were mostly used with suppositional interpretations, as in the following example:

(3c) So we can never say that the wealth is not essential for living. Bangladesh people who said that they are happy **wouldn't** say like this **if** they didn't have minimum amount of wealth.

6. Conclusion

This study examined English L1 and Korean L2 writers' epistemic marker use patterns from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. The results are in line with some previous studies which showed that L2 writers use a limited set of interactional metadiscourse features due to their lack of L2 proficiency. Specifically, it appears to be that many L2 writers are not equipped with linguistic resources needed to use hedging expressions appropriately in their writings. Building on these findings, the current study provides some pedagogical implications for EFL academic writing classes in general. Instead of emphasizing some formulaic expressions or writing conventions to L2 writers, who often lack linguistic proficiency to make creative use of these resources, it might be more helpful to present a wide range of interactional metadiscourse features and their varying functions depending on the contexts.

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