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Boosters in the Writing of Kurdish Learners of English

A B S T R A C T

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Boosters have a significant role in academic writing; they help writers represent their beliefs, opinions, and evaluations with confidence. This paper aims to identify, analyse and classify the frequencies and types of boosting devices in the corpus comprising essays written by Kurdish Learners of English to express certainty in their English academic writing and if there seems to be a gender related difference. The results indicate that Kurdish learners depend on a narrow range of boosting devices; moreover, there are significant differences between female and male groups in using boosters. Female students are found to be more likely to make firm assurances to the statements they give. The results can have implications for foreign language teachers in that they should take measures to familiarize their students with the boosting devices, help them to increase their awareness of the way they organize their writing and show them how to use such devices in an appropriate way.

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التحفيزات في كتابة المتعلمين الكرد باللغة الإنكليزية

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الخلاصة:

التحفيزات لها دور مهم في الكتابة الأكاديمية إذ يساعد الكتاب على تمثيل معتقداتهم وآرائهم وتقييماتهم بثقة. يتناول هذا البحث تحديد وتحليل وتصنيف ترددات وأنواع أجهزة التعزيز في كتابات المتعلمين الأكراد باللغة الإنكليزية من خلال مقارنة نطاقات وترددات الأجهزة المعجمية المستخدمة في مجموعة المقالات كتبها هؤلاء وما إذا كان هناك فرق متعلق بالجنس. تشير النتائج إلى أن المتعلمين الأكراد يعتمدون على مجموعة ضيقة من أجهزة التحفيزات ، علاوة على وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية بين مجموعات الإناث والذكور في استخدام التحفيزات ، ووجد أن الإناث أكثر استخداماً للتحفيز من الذكور ، كما يمكن لنتائج البحث أن تكون لها آثار على معلمي اللغات الأجنبية من حيث أنه يجب عليهم اتخاذ تدابير لتعريف طلابهم بأجهزة التعزيز ، ومساعدتهم على زيادة وعيهم بالطريقة التي ينظمون بها كتاباتهم ويوضحون لهم

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحيزات ، المتعلمون الأكراد ، اليقين ، التكرار ، الكتابة الأكاديمية

Introduction

The ways that writers convey their judgements, opinions, commitments and views have long been approved as an essential part of writing and studies have attempted to account for these meanings in a variety of ways. Holmes (1984, 1990), uses boosters to refer to the writer's judgments, emotions, or point of view about something, and others have defined these various lexical devices as stance (Biber and Finegan, 1989), attitude (Halliday, 1994), engagement (Martin, 1997), epistemic modality (Hyland, 1998), evaluation (Hunston and Thompson, 2000), appraisal (White, 2003), metadiscourse (Hyland 2005a; Adel 2006) and Rhetorical persuasion (Gillaerts and Van de Velde, 2010). On the other hand, boosters are words such as certainly, must, show and clear expressing degrees of commitment or seriousness of intention Holmes (1982). In other words, they signal the writer's confidence regarding the plausibility of his utterance, and have an important role in building relationships between participants (Holmes, 1984). However, they are found to be difficult for language learners to use them effectively in instructional materials since there are several different forms of realizing boosters in languages (Hyland, 2000). Learners' problems with certainty expressions are principally due to the enormous range of devices that can be used for this purpose and to the fact that they can often convey several meanings at once. Moreover, what is a proper degree of assertion in a given context can vary across languages. Hence the frequency of boosters varies across culture and language proficiency (Kaplan 1976) rhetorical norms, power relationships and throughout various disciplines (Holmes, 1988). However, there is not much known about how Kurdish learners conceptualize and express boosters in English, and in what ways they are comparable to and/or distinct from native speakers. Thus, more research work on boosting devices across a variety of academic disciplines is required. Such research is important to the study of academic writing, since it might provide a clearer understanding of boosting, one of the techniques that writers use to convince readers. By describing the difficulties and problems that Kurdish learners face in using boosting devices in English, the present paper hopes to contribute to teach this technique to Kurdish learners of English. To fill this gap, it tries to study how boosters are expressed in the their writing. Making an attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most common boosting devices that the students use in their writing?
2. Is there any gender-related differences across different rhetorical sections of essay writing?

3. Is there any significant difference in the frequency of boosting devices in different sections of essay writing?

2. Methodology

2.1 The Sample

The sample of the paper is one hundred fourth year students (50 males and 50 females) from College of Education / University of Salahaddin of the academic year (2018-2019). The students are chosen randomly from one hundred forty eight students. The participants were asked to write a timed argumentative essay of 200 words on advantages and disadvantages of studying in a large class, and the total number of the words is 20,000.

2.2 Data Analysis and procedure

This paper aims to identify, analyse and classify the frequencies and types of boosting devices that Kurdish learners employ to express certainty in their English academic writing, hence the manual count is used to record the number of words and the specified boosting devices in academic writing, based on Holmes (1988), Hyland and Milton (1997) and Hyland (2005a). First the frequency of boosters are examined and categorized to their grammatical class. Then they are identified across various sections of academic writing. Finally a contrastive analysis is conducted between male and female groups to identify if there is gender-related differences.

Boosters should be analysed in context since the same linguistic device such as 'would' can express willingness, intention, predictability, prediction and volition, on the other hand, the same lexical device can be expressed in many different ways (Coates, 1983). For example, the case of 'show' in:

1. The analysis shows the following results.

Can be considered as a boosting marker, while in the sentence

2. I will show you the way.

Cannot be. Such an ambiguity leads to the difficulty of identifying which of the linguistic devices are boosters and which are not, therefore it is important in the current paper to analyse the data within the context.

3. Findings and Discussions

In this section , Kurdish learners of English corpus are identified, analysed and classified in terms of frequencies and types .First the total number of boosting devices are counted and their percentage are computed, as shown in (Table -1-)

Table -1-
Overall Frequency of Boosters

Corpus	Total	Boosters	Per 200 words	Percent
KLE	20,000	385	% 3.35	% 1.925

KLE=Kurdish learners of English

Generally Kurdish learners of English in this analysis depend on a small range of boosting devices, (385 within 20,000 running words i.e. %3.35 devices per two hundred words).Then the male and female student groups are computed in terms of frequencies and types of boosters (see Table 2).

Table-2-
Frequency of Boosters in Male and Female Corpus

Groups	Total	Boosters	Per200 words	Percent
Male	10,000	118	2.36	%30.649
Female	10,000	267	5.34	%69.350
Total	20,000	385	3.35	%100

Following Table (2) there is a significance difference between both groups, the female students are more likely to use boosters (267 within 10,000 running words i.e. %5.34 devices per two hundred words) than the male students (118 within 10,000 running words i.e. %2.36 devices per two hundred words).This shows that female students are more likely to use stronger expressions in their writing than male students. The finding of the study is consistent with Serholt (2012) that females make strong assertions to the written discourse .However it

contradicts with others such as Francis, Robson and Read (2001); Tse and Hyland (2008) and Yeganeh and Ghoreyshi (2015) who found that male students are much more confident and used more strong commitments than their counterparts. Following Hyland (1998:358), the choices of these devices “are to some extent affected by individual personality factors, such as self-confidence and experience. Such choices are socially shaped and restricted by the possibilities made available to them by the discourse conventions of their disciplines”. The overall distribution of boosters in three rhetorical sections by male and female students is calculated .Table (3) shows the total number of words, the total frequency of boosters, and their frequency in both corpora.

Table -3-
Frequency of Booster Devices across Three Sections of Both Corpora

Groups	Introduction		Body		Conclusion		Total	
	Boosters							
	F	p	F	p	F	p	F	P
Male	6	%1.558	105	%27.272	7	%1.818	118	%30.649
Female	12	%3.116	227	%58.961	28	%7.277	267	%69.350
Total	18	%4.675	332	%86.233	35	%9.090	385	%100

The table shows that boosters in both groups are frequently used in the body section (%86.233) this is not surprising since this is the place to analyse the problem, support and justify the main ideas of the thesis statement ,strengthen them and lead readers through discussion with strong sentences (Kirszner and Mandell ,2008). Followed by the conclusion section (%9.09) where it is usually contains a summary of the main findings and put forward claims about the future plans (Swales and Feak, 1994) .Many authors like to put a strong last sentence to end their claims. While the least frequency section is in the introduction (%4.675) where the students justify the investigation through showing the problem and emphasizing the significance of the topic, as it intends to be short and precise, hence contains a few frequencies of boosters. Moreover

the table shows the significance of a relatively big number of boosters in overall view distribution in female students group versus the male students' group. Furthermore, the result of the study shows that some boosters use more often than others. The list of the top sixteen most frequently used devices in this paper is given in Table (4).

**Table -4 -
Most Frequent Boosting Devices in Rank Order**

Male Group				Female Group		
Rank	Boosters	Frequency	Per cent	Boosters	Frequency	Per cent
1	Must	23	%19.491	Must	70	%26.217
2	Cannot	18	%15.254	Cannot	32	%11.985
3	Know	12	%10.169	Will not	25	%9.363
4	Believe	12	%10.169	Of course	21	%7.865
5	Will not	10	%8.475	Know	19	%7.116
6	Of course	9	%7.627	Always	16	%5.992
7	Always	9	%7.627	Could not	15	%5.617
8	Could not	8	%6.779	Have to	12	%4.494
9	Certainly	6	%5.084	Show	10	%3.745
10	Necessarily	5	%4.237	Prove	10	%3.745
11	Have to	3	%2.542	In fact	9	%3.370
12	Clear	2	%1.694	Believe	9	%3.370
13	True	1	0.847	Actually	8	%2.996
14				Essential	5	%1.872
15				Confident	4	%1.498
16				Sure	2	%0.749
Total		118	%100		267	%100

According to (Table 4) there are considerable similarities in the specific items used despite differences in the overall frequencies of boosting devices between the two student corpora .For example ,the most frequently five boosters in both groups are (must ,cannot ,will not ,of course, know). Apparently ,Modal boosters such as ‘must’, ‘cannot’, ‘will not’ in addition to the lexical verb ‘know’ and adverbs ‘of course’ and ‘always’ are the most frequent types of boosters in both groups, while the adjective ‘true’ is the least frequent ones, Although ‘must’ is found in both groups, it occurs three times more frequently in the female groups than in the males ,which confirms that female students prefer some confident positive expressions to convey their certainty in what they say .Moreover, the students’ preference for modal verbs may belong to first

langue transfer or may indicate that they have got inconsistent attention in foreign language academic writing (Hyland, 2000). This result is consistent with (Hyland and Milton, 1997) who have found that foreign language learners rely heavily on modal verbs and adverbs and less on lexical verbs. According to them, adverbs are easier for the foreign learners to use because there are no grammatical and lexical complications involved in the use of adverbs. The reason seems to be that they are more overt means of showing the author's commitment to a proposition. Moreover Holmes (1988) states that English foreign language books put greater focus on teaching modal verbs as ways of expressing certainty to foreign learners. Possibly this emphasis may be one of the reasons why students use modal verbs a lot in this paper .The following examples illustrate some of the cases where boosters are used in the students' academic writing, the essay section and the students' gender are specified in parentheses:

3. Students must study in small class with limited number of learners to understand the lessons well (Female, Body).
4. Large class will not help students to have enough opportunity to participate during the lesson.(Male, Body)
5. In large class ,students cannot understand in appropriate way and the syllabus will not be easy for them to understand (Female, Body)

The modal boosters are recognised to be polysemous (Coates, 1983), students make use of boosters to further increase the power of persuasion of what is being said. After all, their hypotheses, even if statistical and precise, are subject to explanation and must be defended from possible counter-hypothesis (Vázquez and Giner, 2009). Both groups of students make significant use of modal verbs to convey persuasion meanings, although they are more frequently used by female students. 'Must' is the preferred marker of certainty for both groups but together with 'cannot', 'will not' and 'could not', is more frequently used by female students. In the above (3) and (4) examples, students have used the boosters 'must' , 'will not' to assure the truth of their propositions. In (5), the use of booster is even twice, to increase affirmation and power, and work as a clear rhetorical strategy when the student makes a claim. 'Must' is the central modal of inferential assertion in spoken speech (e.g. Collins, 1991). Adverb boosters too are easier for foreign learners to use, not because they are more prevalent in speech than writing (Holmes1982), but they are "syntactically more mobile in clause structure and offer clear accessible distinctions" (Quirk et al 1985:438). Equally significantly, the students prefer to use adverbs in sentence-initial position. For example, there are (30) occurrences of the adverb 'Of course' in the students groups, and the majority (23 cases) are found in the sentence-initial position, with the rest (7 cases) being evenly divided between the middle and the final sentence. It seems the spoken register affects the students' choice

of the position of adverbs within a sentence where they frequently occur in the sentence-initial position, but it can also be seen that the initial position has another impact. A boosting device in the initial position enables the booster to affect the entire following clause which does not function the same as placing the booster in the middle or at the end of a sentence. Examples (6) to (8) are a few examples of boosters in initial position. Furthermore, 'of course' regularly expresses certainty and strengthens the speech act in which it occurs. Studying its distribution in females' and males' writing in (Table 4) proves that it is more frequently used by Kurdish Female students rather than male students, a finding which is in line with Lakoff(1975) who predicted that females could employ more strong commitments than males. The following examples illustrate students' inclination in using adverb 'of course' in sentence-initial position:

6. Of course, studying in large class has a bad effect on students learning since it will limit opportunity for participation (Male, Introduction).
7. Of course, studying in large class has both advantages and disadvantages for students (Female, Introduction).
8. Of course, in large class students cannot learn very well because of their large numbers (Female, Body).

Adverb boosters such as, 'certainty', 'in fact', 'always', 'actually', although they occur less often than 'of course', are used to encourage writers to express their confidence about what they say and to mark their engagement with the topic and their solidarity with their readers (Hyland 2005b). In example (9), the student is trying to convince the audience of the truth of the statement. He seems to be hindering any other perspectives that may rise in relation to the topic. In (10) the student similarly conveys a rather concrete description of reality and in (11) the student expresses his certainty with confidence. In the following examples, the students place boosters in the footnotes of the text:

9. It is certainly difficult to study in large class since students will not have enough chance to understand. (Male, Body)
10. Studying in large class is, in fact, has both advantages and disadvantages.(Female, Body)
11. Studying in large class always affecting students' comprehension (Female, Body)

On the other hand, boosters such as (know, believe) which express writers' certainty is in fact overused by Kurdish learners of English. Similar results are confirmed by Wang and Zhang (2007) that Chinese students overused such lexical verbs in their academic writing. This indicates that the foreign language

learners have not mastered a large number of lexical boosting devices, and such verbs are ones that are most accustomed to them. The limited number of these verbs shows students' vagueness on how to use these devices properly in stating claims and their poor understanding with norms of academic writing (Hyland and Milton 1997). Students can vary in expressing certainty by using "personal and impersonal styles" (Leech and Svartvik, 2003:13). In personalised form, the students use the first person pronoun to explicitly express their commitments as in (12)

12. I believe studying in large class is wasting time(Male, Introduction)

On the other hand, in impersonalised style, the students do not refer to themselves or to the readers, hence, they can implicitly express their commitments as in (13 and 14):

13. It is proved that studying in large class has lots of disadvantages(Female, Body)

14. This shows that students will learn nothing in such atmosphere(Female, Conclusion)

In (12) the student expresses the certainty of expected outcomes, in (13) the student introduces the booster 'proved' to show that he is very much confident in the truth of his propositions while is trying to suppress alternatives or perspectives on the topic of analysis. In (14) the student uses 'show' to emphasize the strength and suggest the efficacy of the relationship between facts and claims. Students also face difficulty in using impersonal forms appropriately in academic writing; this yields a number of errors such as faulty tense choices as in (15) or misusing empty subjects as in (16):

15. It is believing that students will understand nothing in large class(Male, Body)

16. It is sure; students cannot get benefit from it (Female , Body)

Furthermore, both groups have used a limited number of adjectives: 'essential', 'confident' and 'sure' in the female group while 'clear' and 'obvious' in the male group account for almost all the forms. This finding is inconsistent with Biber (2006b) who states that adjectives are common in academic prose than in conversation or fiction. Syntactically, some adjectives have that-clauses and to-clauses as complements (Leech and Svartvik, 2003) adjectives with that-clauses have 'it' as subject as in (17), other adjectives have a finite that-clause as complement (that can usually be omitted) as in (19) there is also a class of adjectives with an infinitive-clause after introductory it as in (18):

17.It is clear that teacher- centred class plays a big role in creating a relationship with the students.(Male ,Conclusion)

18.It is essential to know that studying in a large class is not serving educational system(Female , Body)

19.I am sure (that) no one will get benefit in teaching in large class(Female , Body)

Students have presented these propositions with confidence. They boost commitments by expressing actual meanings, strengthen the relationship between available evidence (Hyland, 2005b).Moreover, students also face problems in combining two boosting devices together and sate their persuasion inappropriately as in (20) :

20.I am confident that is certainly true not to study in large class (Female , Body)

The fact that many students use boosters but are unable to achieve an adequate degree of certainty in their writing indicates the problems they face in using such devices.

Conclusion

The results of this paper show that students depend on a narrow range of boosting devices , it is also found that female students are more frequent in using boosters than males . They are commonly more confident in expressing their views and used a more emphatic writing style. Also, boosters are more frequently used in the body section than in the introduction and conclusion sections. Moreover, the students have not used all types of boosters , in fact ,they are repeating certain boosting expressions in writing and facing lots of difficulties in choosing the appropriate ones .Thus, it is important for language teachers and educators to propose accurate materials to practice the students in using such devices appropriately at different proficiency levels , also attention should be paid to the differences between Kurdish and English written discourse to minimize the language transfer in writing.

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