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Explicit Instruction of Pragmatic Features: Its Impact on EFL Learners' Knowledge of Hedging Devices in Academic Writing

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Abstract

Hedging academic claims has been recognized as one of integral pragmatic features of academic writing in which most EFL academic writers seem to face substantial problems. Explicit instruction has been proposed by some scholars as an effective approach to make EFL writers aware of the importance, different forms, and pragmatic functions of hedging devices some of which are polysemous and polypragmatics (e.g., Hyland 1996a). The present study with the aim of shedding more light on the effectiveness of explicit instruction in improving the pragmatic knowledge of Iranian EFL learners in terms of hedging devices, investigates the acquisition and use of English modal auxiliaries as hedging strategies via applying a direct teaching strategy in the classroom. To this end a sample of 37 undergraduate students majoring in different fields of study were recruited and assigned into a control and experimental group. Explicit instruction of the modal auxiliaries as hedging resources was applied for the treatment group while the control group received only the regular academic writing instruction. A pretest and a posttest were administered to the two groups. The descriptive analysis of the scores as well as the results of the t-tests revealed a significant progress in the participants' linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of modal auxiliaries as hedges in the treatment group. The results also indicated that the experimental group outperformed the control group in acquiring and using modal verbs to hedge their claims. The findings of the study provide insightful implications for the administrators of educational programs.

***Keywords*:** hedging, modal auxiliaries, explicit instruction, pragmatic features, EFL context

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INTRODUCTION

Academic writing, as a prominent subcategory of academic discourse, is witnessing a rising development and experiencing an increasing research in its own history. This is possibly due to the emergence of a large number of novice writers/researchers across the globe who would like to convey the findings of their studies to other members of their academic communities making use of English as the dominant medium of communication of those communities. This fact requires them to be skillful writers to be able to transfer their ideas and knowledge to the given audience.

Successful writing, however, like other language skills, involves more than just knowing and using sounds, structures, vocabularies, and composition rules. Specifically, the ability to write academically requires researchers/writers to become aware of, and equip themselves with the ingredients and the prerequisites of academic writing skill so that they can communicate their ideas efficiently and effectively with the readership who is mostly experienced colleagues and established members of the community and are familiar with the features governing academic discourse. In other words, as Hyland (2009) puts it, EAP students and researchers need to gain mastery in the values and conventions of English academic discourses to be able to comprehend others' written productions in their disciplines, establish their professions in the community, and successfully convey their findings.

However, cross-cultural and cross-linguistic studies have revealed that inexperienced authors, particularly non-native writers, experience problems in applying and interpreting these features and conventions while writing for academic purposes (Chen, 2010; Hyland, 2002a; Hyland & Milton, 1997). The condition even becomes more complex when it comes to the EFL writers (Hyland, 2002a). A number of reasons have been proposed for the inability in manipulating these features properly on the part of non-native writers some of which have to do with the first language transfer, culture effect, and low English proficiency. One possible solution to this issue suggested by some scholars working on the issue in their studies has been the explicit instruction of the problematic features, such as hedging devices, to EAP students (Hyland, 1996a; Jalilifar, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Writing and Hedging

Academic writing does not simply equal a mere report of study results and research findings via producing a series of impersonal claims of fact which add up to the existing truth (Hyland, 1996b). It is a rather complex activity and regarded as a cultural and social behavior including interaction between writer and reader. In Hyland's (2005) words "a great deal of research has now established that written texts embody interaction between writers and readers," (p. 173). It is also believed that academic writing in general and research articles in particular are "a rhetorically sophisticated artifact which displays a careful balance of factual information and social interaction" (Hyland & Salager-Meyer, 2008, p. 13). Indeed, academic authors need not only to make the findings of their studies public, but also to express them in a persuasive way, and their success in obtaining approval for their work depends, at least to some extent, on the skillful manipulation of different interactive and rhetorical features (Swales, 2004). Some of these features include constructions and devices through which scholars add attitudes and stances to their claims which are of importance to scientific argument and are controlled by the norms and conventions of the speech community (Hyland, 2005).

Academic writing, like any other type of social activity, is produced within a specific community enjoying its own set of rules, conventions, and norms (Hyland, 2002a). Therefore, it is necessary for authors to master those conventions and rules to be able to write in a way accepted to the established members of the community. In other words, as Kharidar (2014) argues, authors, particularly novice inexperienced researchers, need to be completely aware of and follow such pre-established set of norms. The conventions and features governing academic discourse can be realized into so many different forms and structures within a text. Proper employment of hedging strategies in scientific texts is one such norm which must be observed by academic writers (Kharidar, 2014).

Authors apply hedges in their texts "to express a perspective on their statements" or on the claims of others, "to present unproven claims with caution and to enter a dialogue with their audience" (Hyland, 1998, p. 6). Hyland, furthermore, contends that they allow writers to express tentativeness and possibility, and they are essential features of and

central to academic writing where claims and propositions are hardly made categorically and objectively regarding their truth and where it is necessary to present statement and assertions with caution and precision. Essentially, hedges are used to represent absence of certainty and refer to "any linguistic item or strategy employed to indicate either a) a lack of commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition or b) a desire not to express that commitment categorically" (Hyland, 1998, p. 1).

Successful scientific writing, as a matter of fact, requires scholars to assess and present their claims in a way to allow and acknowledge alternative opinions since all statements need to be ratified (Algi, 2012; Hyland, 2005; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Nivales, 2011). Hyland (2005) believes that this, to a high degree, depends on the appropriate employment of different rhetorical strategies, of which hedging resources are among the most crucial. Some reasons have been presented in the literature for the requirement of hedging academic statements that can be approached from different perspectives. First, exploiting hedging strategies, authors try to mitigate their claims so as to decrease the risk of opposition on the part of readers by not accepting full personal responsibility for assertions. Second, considering hedges as strategies of being more precise in stating their research findings, writers would like their audience to understand that they are not going to claim that they have the final word on the subject. Third, hedging markers may also be perceived as face saving acts realized in the form of negative or positive politeness strategies through which scholars attempt to appear as a humble rather than an arrogant figure or an all-knowing person. The final reason for hedging incorporation in academic texts can be attributed to the conventions and rules governing academic writing; to put it in simple words, it is believed that applying a certain degree of hedging resources has become conventionalized in standard and typical academic writing by the academic community (Chen, 2010; Dafou-Milne, 2008; Doyuran, 2009; Fraser, 2010; Hyland, 2005; Varttala, 2001; Vold, 2006).

A tremendous number of studies have been conducted on the significant role of hedging in academic discourse in general and scientific writing in particular (e.g., Hyland, 1995, 1996b, 1998; Nivales, 2011; Vande-Kopple & Crismore, 1990; Varttala, 2001). However, gaining the ability to use appropriate hedging strategies in English to express doubt and uncertainty is essentially a complex and troublesome task for EFL writers, (Hyland, 1997). The reason for this difficulty could

lie in the fact that, in spite of their significant role, proficiency in the pragmatic aspect of these rhetorical features seems to be problematic to acquire in a foreign language (Hyland, 2002b). A large body of research has revealed that EFL learners face difficulties in interpreting and applying hedging resources appropriately (e.g., Bonyadi, Gholami, & Nasiri, 2012; Cabanes, 2007; Chen, 2010; Hyland & Milton, 1997). Having problems in learning, interpreting, and using hedging devices especially modal auxiliaries on the part of EFL writers is, to a high degree, the result of the complex nature of these structures, the extended types and number of lexico-gramatical devices expressing doubt and uncertainty, the lack of a clear-cut categorization for the linguistic forms expressing modal meaning, and eventually, the fact that these linguistic devices are multifunctional, polysemous and polypragmatic (Chen, 2012; Falahati, 2004; Hyland, 1996b, 1997; Lorenzo, 2008).

Hedging and Pragmatics

Pragmatic competence as an essential part of communicative competence has been generally defined by Ellis (2008) as the "knowledge of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior in a particular situation" (p. 956). Fraser (2010, p. 15) has also put forward a more elaborated definition of it as "the ability to communicate your intended message with all its intended nuances in any socio-cultural context ant to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended". Accordingly, it is critical for successful communication, although it has not been given the importance it deserves in foreign language classrooms (Hyland, 2005).

One dimension of pragmatic competence is the ability to produce and interpret vague language (Neary-Sundquist, 2013). Vague language is mostly used to fulfill several possible pragmatic roles; it can be utilized to express politeness, to construct solidarity with the addressee, or to soften a proposition (Yates, 2010). Vague language is often realized through the use of hedging devices (Neary-Sundquist, 2013) and is one of the inseparable pragmatic features of discourse in general and academic writing in particular (Hyland, 1995, 1998). Therefore, Hyland (2005) maintains that hedging is an area in which the absence of pragmatic competence can cause serious problems for successful communication of second language users. Unfortunately, similar to other areas of pragmatic competence, it has not been generally given enough emphasis in second/foreign language teaching (Fraser, 2010). Learners,

even those with an acceptable mastery of linguistic knowledge may experience problems in using hedging resources properly, in the right time and the right way to make their statement vague (Yates, 2010). This lack of familiarity with pragmatic aspect of hedges, according to Fraser (2010), results in L2 users whose discourse is grammatically flawless but who fail to achieve their communicative goals. He also argues that when non-native language users fail to hedge appropriately, they may be considered as arrogant, offensive, or impolite. On the other hand, miscommunication may occur, if they are not able to interpret the purpose of hedging.

In pragmatics, hedges denote hesitation, vagueness, indirectness, and politeness (Algi, 2012). Myers (1989) considers hedging sources as mitigating and politeness strategies since they are used to express a proper attitude in stating a proposition to the community and thus can be interpreted as positive and negative politeness. As Doyuran (2009, p. 87) puts it, academic writing also depends on the use of hedging strategies since "an academic knowledge claim is a threat or Face Threatening Act for other researchers". As a result, in academic discourse, hedging is perceived as a pragmatic device that creates meanings and helps writers to affect readers' comprehending of text and their attitudes towards both its content and audience (Hyland, 1998).

Pragmatics and Instruction

Pragmatic knowledge is not necessarily dependent on the knowledge of grammar and does not equally develop as grammatical competence increases. Bardovi-Harlig (2001, p. 28) states that previously conducted work on the issue suggests that "grammatical competence does not guarantee pragmatic competence" especially in EFL situations. Jiang (2006) reports that most EFL learners usually do not use pragmatic features, such as mitigating devices (hedges) in academic writing appropriately to soften communication acts and consequently their language products may seem odd, 'insensitive', 'direct', and even at times, 'rude'. This, according to her, is possibly due to the fact that they have little, if any, interaction with native speakers in authentic and real contexts, and their class materials, such as English textbooks, do not include and present pragmatic features as they are needed.

To find a solution, some pragmatic studies have focused on research investigating whether pragmatic features are teachable at all, whether

instruction of a given pragmatic feature is more influential than no instruction, and which teaching approach is more effective (Kasper & Roever, 2005). A large body of research have reported that pragmatic features appear to be teachable; that is to say, language learners who receive instruction on different pragmatic features seem to demonstrate better knowledge and ability than those who do not receive any instruction on the features (Eslami-Rasekh, Eslami-Rasekh, & Fatahi, 2004; House, 1996; Khatib & Safari, 2012; LoCastro, 1997; Lyster, 1994; Tajeddin & Hosseinpur, 2014; Whishnoff, 2000). Moreover, Takahashi (2010) in a meta-analysis of 49 pragmatic instructional studies found that intervention and instruction are influential in promoting pragmatic knowledge and ability of language learners. Generally, these studies have revealed that instructing EFL learners to raise their consciousness as well as providing them with metapragmatic information on pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic standards in the second language can be fruitful and promote pragmatic learning (Whishnoff, 2000).

Luckily, it is also believed that the ability to interpret and employ hedging devices, as pragmatic features, appropriately and effectively is a phenomenon that can be taught via direct instruction and by making student writers aware of their crucial functions in academic discourse (e.g., Hyland, 1998; Wishnoff, 2000). Unfortunately, very limited ESP/EAP courses include and teach interpersonal features of academic writing and it still seems that it is not common to teach EAP/ESP students explicitly about hedging strategies in most situations (Hyland, 1995; Wishnoff, 2000). On the other hand, hedging is a critical pragmatic feature that novice researcher writers need to be equipped with in order for their ideas and claims to be taken seriously (Nivales, 2011). As a result, as Falahati (2004) pointed out, it is, to a high degree, EAP/ESP teachers' responsibility to expose students to the appropriate use of epistemic modality and hedging devices in academic discourse. In other words, the students should be provided with metapragmatic information about the devices and their proper use in academic/scientific texts in accordance with the community standards and norms to compensate for the gaps existing in the textbooks.

Previous Studies

A large number of studies have emerged in the literature investigating the effect of instruction on the learners' acquisition of various aspects of pragmatic knowledge. However, most of these studies have focused on the production and use of different speech acts such as apology, request, complaint etc. (e.g., Alco´n & Pitarch, 2010; Mirzaei & Esmaeili, 2013; Silva, 2003; Tajeddin & Hosseinpur, 2014; Tajeddin, Keshavarz, & Zand-Moghaddam, 2012; Takimoto, 2007). Adopting different research designs, approximately all such studies have reported the fruitfulness of instruction of pragmatic knowledge and metapragmatic awareness in learners' developing pragmatic ability although some suggested that some specific instructional approaches are more effective than the others. Explicit instruction of pragmalinguistic structures and sociopragmatic conditions of specific pragmatic features is among those which are strongly proposed by the previous research. Nevertheless, although the research on evaluating the impact of pedagogical methods on pragmatic competence of EFL learners appear to be abundant and rich, few have focused on the pragmatic features of academic discourse in general and hedging strategies in particular. Vahid-Dastjerdi and Shirzad (2010), in an empirical study conducted on 94 Iranian EFL undergraduate students, attempted to investigate the possible effect of explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers on the learners' writing performance in three levels of proficiency. Analysis of the data obtained from both the pretest and the posttest revealed that generally the learners' writing abilities had improved in a significant way as the result of explicit instruction. However, it indicated that the intermediate group outperformed the elementary and advanced groups significantly. Although the results of this study are illuminating in its own turn, the pragmatic aspect of the metadiscurse markers does not seem to be investigated. In a more specific study, Alward, Mooi, and Bidin (2012) investigated the impact of explicit instruction on the Yemeni EFL learners' use of hedges and boosters as two subcategories of metadiscourse markers in persuasive writing. The findings of the study indicated that the experimental group had a significant improvement in using hedges and boosters in their writing tasks. Even though this study has dealt with hedges and boosters from a pragmatic point of view, it did not investigate them from the perspective of their specific functions in academic discourse. Another study attempting to examine the effectiveness of instruction on pragmatic

acquisition with a focus on the use of hedging markers in academic writing is Wishnoff (2000). She also investigated the possible transfer of such pragmatic training to a less planned and less formal written computer-mediated communication. Comparing the data obtained from both the experimental and the control groups, she reported a significant increase in the use of hedging markers in the research articles and the computer-mediated discussions written by the subjects in the experimental section.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As mentioned previously, most of the large body of research conducted on hedging cross-culturally and cross-linguistically has proposed explicit instruction as one possible solution to the problems EFL writers face with the acquisition and use of these devices in their scientific writings (e.g., Chen, 2010; Hyland, 1996a; Jalilifar, 2011; Vold, 2006). However, existing literature on hedges as pragmatic features of academic writing demonstrates that these markers have received little attention as the subject matter of different instructional approaches and methodologies in empirical studies (Wishnoff, 2000). The majority of previous studies on hedges mainly focused on contrastive analysis of discourse produced by native and nonnative speakers of English, particularly on science research articles (e.g., Hyland, 1996b; Tran & Duong, 2013; Vazquez & Ginger, 2008; Vold, 2006). Unfortunately, to the best knowledge of the present authors, few, if any, empirical study have been conducted to examine the effectiveness of explicit instruction, on the acquisition and use of modal auxiliaries as hedges in academic writing in Iranian context.

Therefore, the present study with the aim of filling the perceived gap sets out to explore whether explicit instruction of hedging devices leads to any improvement in EFL Iranian undergraduate students' learning and employment of the markers in academic texts. To this end, the following research questions will be addressed in the study:

1. Does applying explicit instruction lead to any significant development of pragmatic knowledge and use of the given hedging devices (modal auxiliaries) in the Iranian EAP undergraduate students?
2. Is there any significant difference in the enhancement of pragmatic knowledge of the given hedging devices (modal

auxiliaries) between those who receive explicit instruction and those who do not receive explicit instruction on the issue?

METHOD

Participants

The study participants were all undergraduate students majoring in various fields of studies and studying at Islamic Azad University of Gonabad, Iran. So English was considered as a foreign language for all participants. They were registered in an English academic writing course held for undergraduate students by the first author in one of the English language institutes in the city to enhance their linguistic and pragmatic awareness regarding some of the hedging devices in order to increase their ability to apply modal auxiliaries as hedging strategies appropriately. All the 37 participants were checked for the same cultural and linguistic background. That is, all were chosen to be Iranian L1 speakers of Persian so as to control for the possible discrepancies resulting from cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Their ages ranged from 21 to 23, with 26 females and eleven males. All of the participants were supposed to have taken and successfully passed all their mandatory ESP/EAP courses at their respective universities as a prerequisite for attending the study to guarantee the relative homogeneity. Furthermore, they were all checked for not attending any other academic writing classes but their mandatory ESP/EAP courses at university. The participants were also randomly divided into the experimental and control groups via using a table of random numbers. The control and the experimental groups comprised of eighteen and nineteen participants, respectively. All of the subjects were required to take part in the classes regularly. The subjects in the two groups participated in the classes three sessions a week for a time period of five weeks. In the experimental group, explicit instruction of linguistic and pragmatic features of modal auxiliaries as hedging devices was applied whereas in the control group only regular exposure to academic discourse features was conducted.

More specifically, the treatment involved several activities that were conducted through three phases and were included as part of the normal flow of the academic writing course. At the first phase, the participants in the experimental group were given a list of modal auxiliaries with their multiple definitions for each of which some examples were provided. All the markers with their definitions and their respective examples were

read aloud to them, and they were supposed to study and memorize the definitions at home and focus on the ways they were used in the example sentences. The second phase of the teaching includes the following sessions when various functions of the auxiliaries were discussed in class and more examples by both the teacher and the participants were presented. In the third phase, the participants were provided with some authentic academic passages and were asked to find the modal auxiliaries employed as hedges and identify their functions. Moreover, they were given cloze passages to choose the more pragmatically appropriate and qualified verbs to fill in the gaps.

As for the control group, the participants received the normal flow of the academic writing course including similar activities on the identification and use of modal auxiliaries as mitigating devices in academic writing without being provided with explicit instruction of their exact functions and uses.

Instrumentation

In order to collect the required data to address the research questions put forward previously, four instruments which were designed and employed in a study with the same aims but with a different treatment procedure by Talati-Baghsiahi and Khoshsima (2016) were adopted and administered in the study. Two of the instruments were used as the pretest measures to reach an idea about the homogeneity of the participants regarding the knowledge of hedging devices. The other two were applied as the posttests of the study to measure the participants' possible improvements caused by the teaching processes.

Pretest One

A 25-item researcher-made multiple choice test which was designed to assess the participants' linguistic and semantic knowledge of the modal auxiliaries in general. Each item includes a statement with a clear context for the participants to decide about the modal auxiliary which best completes the proposition semantically. The main purpose of this measure was to check whether the subject had the knowledge and ability to distinguish modal auxiliaries, which mainly convey different meanings. This is thought to be a prerequisite knowledge for them to use hedges pragmatically appropriate in their own discourse.

Pretest Two

To assess the subjects' knowledge of pragmatic and use of the same devices, they were also required to perform an academic writing task and to submit it to the class before the treatment started. It included a situation for which the participants were required to write at least a paragraph. The topics were chosen in such a way to concentrate on some common scientific issues.

Posttest one

The third instrument administered as a posttest was a parallel version of the one applied as the first pretest.

Posttest two

The fourth measure performed as the second posttest of the study was also a parallel version of the one used as the second pretest. The two multiple choice instruments (pretest one and posttest one) were analyzed and checked for item characteristics, reliability and validity in a pilot study carried out on 29 undergraduate university students of approximately the same conditions and qualifications of the sample of the study. Inevitably, after the analysis of the results of the pilot study eight test items of each test were revised and five of them in each test were crossed out. Moreover, it is worth noting that the multiple choice instrument used for the posttest phase of the study was designed in parallel with the one used for the pretest in terms of content, length, and level of difficulty. The content validity of these two instruments (pretest one and posttest one) were also approved by two academic members of university who are experts in the field.

No specific material other than the hedging devices was used in the study. The modal auxiliaries which are considered as hedges and their functions in academic discourse have been adopted from Hyland's (2005) taxonomy of hedges. They include: can, could, may, might, should, and would.

Data Collection

Before starting the treatment, the participants' baseline knowledge on use of hedging devices realized in the form of the auxiliary verbs was gathered from both the treatment and control groups through examining samples of their academic writings as well as utilizing the results of the 25-item multiple choice pretest which was administered at the starting

class session of the two groups. In order to score the writing samples, for each occurrence of the properly used hedging marker according to the context, one score was assigned. In the experimental class, explicit instruction of linguistic and pragmatic features of modal auxiliaries as hedges was applied after the pretest phase. Explicit instruction performed by the researcher in the experimental group included discussions about the importance of hedging academic claims and explanations about various ways of hedging the statements using modal auxiliaries. The participants in the treatment group were also provided with detailed information about the various meanings and functions each modal auxiliary can perform in different contexts to make them aware of the appropriate semantic and pragmatic uses of them. The students were then asked to complete some practice tasks in which they were supposed to choose the more appropriate and qualified verbs to fill in sentences. The explicit instruction was aimed at supporting the participants in their improvement of conceptual understanding of modal auxiliaries and their pragmatic functions that would assist them in employing them as hedging strategies in their academic writings. The participants in the control group only received the regular discussions on various aspects of academic writing but not any explicit explanations on hedging. Eventually, in order to find out if the treatment procedure led to any change in the participants' knowledge and behavior regarding the given hedging markers, the two groups of students were given the posttest and were asked to accomplish and submit their second academic writing tasks. The writing texts were then collected and examined for the appropriately used instances of hedging devices. The relative frequency of all epistemic modal auxiliaries, used as hedges, per one thousand words was counted and regarded as the score obtained by each subject in his/her writing task.

Data Analysis

To answer the previously posed research questions, the data obtained through both the pre- and the posttest stages were analyzed using SPSS version 22. At first, in order to ensure that the two groups of students were relatively equal in the knowledge and the employment of the given hedging devices, the pre-treatment data, obtained from the pretest tasks for both the control and the treatment group including the scores from the first academic writing task as well as the 25-item pretest, were

investigated. Accordingly, an independent sample t-test was computed (Table 2) to explore any possible differences between the two groups in terms of their gained scores. In addition, a two-tailed dependent sample t-test was calculated to determine if the students in the treatment section made any improvement from their pretest stage to posttest one (Table 3). At the end, the scores gained by the experimental group after the treatment in their posttest tasks were compared to those obtained by the control group via running an independent sample t-test to detect the probable differences between the two groups in extending the given knowledge (Table 4).

RESULTS

As discussed above, the main purpose of the study was to find answers to the two research questions having been posed earlier. To this aim, the collected data for the participants of the study attending the control and experimental groups from both the pre- and the posttest stages were analyzed by the SPSS software Version 22.

Results of Descriptive Analysis

The basic descriptive statistics in terms of the pretest and the posttest scores for the two groups of participants in this study are demonstrated in Table 1. Table 1 displays the number of subjects, the mean scores, the standard deviations, and the standard error of means of the control and the experimental groups.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for control and experimental groups

	group	number	mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
PRETEST	**Experimental**	19	9.53	3.22	0.74
	Control	18	9.06	2.46	0.58
POSTTEST	**Experimental**	19	26.68	4.04	0.93
	Control	18	15.83	2.93	0.69

As Table 1 demonstrates, the two groups of students participating in the study gained approximately similar mean scores in the pretest task: 9.06 and 9.53 for the control and the experimental groups respectively. Yet, a considerable difference is perceived between the mean scores obtained

by the two groups in the posttest tasks: 15.83 for the control group vs. 26.68 for the experimental group. This is positive evidence that subjects in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group in promoting the knowledge and use of the hedging devices under study after the treatment as the result of explicit instruction of linguistic and pragmatic functions of modal auxiliaries. Furthermore, Table 1 shows that the two groups of participants extended their knowledge of epistemic modal verbs noticeably from the pretest phase to the posttest phase.

Results of Inferential Analysis

In an attempt to answer the research questions posed earlier, the obtained data have been exploited and analyzed using different statistical tests. However, before that, it is needed to make sure that the participants of the two groups were relatively equivalent with regard to their previously achieved knowledge of modal auxiliaries as hedging strategies as a requirement for having a safe comparison in later phases. Accordingly, the students' scores in the pretest tasks from the two groups were analyzed using an independent t-test to explore whether there are any significant differences between them. It is also worth noting that all the related assumptions of the statistical tests had been met in advance (e.g., outliers, normal distribution, and homogeneity of variances). Table 2 demonstrates the outcomes of performed independent t-test for both groups' performances in the pretest tasks.

Table 2: The result of independent t-test for the control and experimental groups in pretest

		Levine's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (two-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Dif.	95% confidence Interval of the Dif.	
									Lower	Upper
Hedging (Pre)	**Equal Variances Assumed**	1.85	.183	-.497	35	.622	-.47	.95	-2.39	1.45
	Equal Variances Not Assumed			-.501	33.54	.620	-.47	.94	-2.38	1.44

As Table 2 illustrates, there seems to be no significant difference between the experimental group and the control group concerning their knowledge of the given hedging devices at the start of the study ($t(35) = -0.497$, $p \leq 0.05$). This is positive evidence for the fact that the two

groups of subjects entered the study with approximately equivalent level of knowledge regarding the given hedging resources.

First Research Question

Subsequently, in order that we can find an answer for the first research question about whether employing explicit instruction of the devices produces any significant impacts on the enhancement of the students' knowledge of the given hedging devices, the paired (dependent sample) t-test was run on the subjects' scores gained from the pre- and the posttest tasks by the experimental group. The results of the means comparison are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: The result of paired t-test for the experimental group in pre- and posttest

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% confidence Interval of the Dif.				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	**pretest-posttest**	-17.16	4.63	1.06	-19.39	-14.92	-16.14	18	.000

As the results in Table 3 indicate, the participants' scores in the posttest have been influenced significantly by the explicit instruction they received ($t(18) = -16.14$, $p \leq 0.05$, $d = 0.92$). To put it in simple words, the students of the treatment group developed considerably and meaningfully in terms of the knowledge and use of the given hedging markers as a result of the explicit instruction. It should also be mentioned that Cohen's effect size value ($d = 0.92$) demonstrated a high practical significance.

Second Research Question

With the purpose of detecting the possible differences concerning the effect of explicit instruction versus no specific instruction on the students, an independent sample t-test was run on the scores in the posttest for the control and experimental groups. The results of the

independent sample t-test for the two groups' posttest scores are reported in Table 4.

Table 4: The result of independent t-test for the control and experimental groups in posttest

		Levine's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (two-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Dif.	95% confidence Interval of the Dif.	
									Lower	Upper
Hedging (Post)	Equal Variances Assumed	3.53	.069	-9.30	35	.000	-10.85	1.17	-13.22	-8.48
	Equal Variances Not Assumed			-9.38	32.84	.000	-10.85	1.16	-13.21	-8.50

As Table 4 displays, the result of the independent t-test represents a significant difference between the two groups' obtained mean scores on the posttest tasks ($t(35) = -9.30$, $p \leq 0.05$, $d = 0.84$). In other words, the findings confirm that the treatment group receiving explicit instruction progressed much more in acquiring and using modal auxiliaries as hedges than the students attending the control group. Further, Cohen's effect size value ($d = 0.84$) suggested a high practical significance.

DISCUSSION

The present research was designed and conducted to examine the effect of explicit instruction on the acquisition and use of modal auxiliaries as hedging devices in EFL students' academic writing. To this end, a sample of 37 undergraduate university students majoring in different fields of study were enrolled and randomly assigned to the experimental and the control groups. The participants in the experimental group were exposed to explicit instruction of pragmatic features of modal auxiliaries as hedging strategies in academic texts while the control group received the regular course instruction with regard to these markers. The findings revealed that the explicit instruction employed in the study caused a significant and meaningful progress in the students' pragmatic knowledge and their ability to use modal auxiliaries as hedging strategies properly in academic texts.

Accordingly, the outcomes of the present study are in line with the findings of most previous research in the literature which verified the positive effectiveness of direct teaching of pragmatic features of writing

skill on learners' pragmatic ability (e.g., Allami & Serajfard, 2012; Alward, Mooi, & Bidin, 2012; Vahid-Dastjerdi & Shirzad, 2010; Wishnoff, 2000). Moreover, the research results provide additional support for the idea that pragmatic competence in general and pragmatic features of academic writing in particular are teachable.

The general implication of the study is that these findings are convincing evidence for us to conclude that explicit instruction can be more effective and beneficial in promoting undergraduate students' pragmatic knowledge of academic writing than presenting no specific instruction and merely exposing the students to academic text structures concerning the given hedging strategies particularly in an EFL context. The possible justification for the obtained results can be the fact that in EFL contexts and more specifically in Iranian academic situations, the students are not provided with sufficient authentic materials and, as a consequence, do not experience real situations in practicing and learning English within the national education system so much as they need for the acquisition of the pragmatic features of the language as well as its linguistic knowledge. Therefore, in situations like this where there is not enough contact with the real and authentic language due to the limitations of the education system, it seems reasonable that explicit teaching of pragmalinguistic structures as well as making the students aware of the sociopragmatic features via explicit instruction will lead to the students' knowledge and awareness of the pragmatic feature in language. This will cause them to use the language more appropriately and in accordance with the standards of the target language community. On the other hand, this awareness could also impede the transference of the first language pragmatic norms (i.e. using fewer hedging devices in discourse) to the second language application; hence, using more auxiliaries to hedge their academic claims appropriately.

Another outstanding implication of the study which can be understood from the results is that although learners' linguistic competence appears to be as the essential requirement for their acquisition and use of pragmatic knowledge (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999), it does not necessarily guarantee an equal degree of pragmatic ability in EFL learners. The subjects' linguistic ability in the present research appeared to be at a sufficient level for them to enjoy a similar degree of pragmatic knowledge concerning the proper use of hedging resources, such as auxiliaries, in their texts since they seemed to possess enough linguistic knowledge to interpret the meaning of the modal auxiliaries

and their purpose in texts as presented to them via the instruction. Moreover, this linguistic competence provided them with the ability to apply those devices in their writing tasks in a much larger number and more appropriately than they had in their texts in the pretest phase. Nevertheless, they appeared to lack that equal pragmatic competence at the beginning of the project as their low performance indicated in the pretest stage of the study. Therefore, it can be concluded that Iranian undergraduate students' learning pragmatic knowledge, specifically, the appropriate use of hedging devices in their academic writing, requires to be mediated with particular teaching approaches one of which could be explicit instruction. That is to say, direct teaching can be successfully utilized in EAP writing courses as a safe approach for enhancing EFL learners' pragmatic knowledge in general and the way to apply hedging strategies appropriately in academic discourse in particular.

As the results of the posttest revealed, the pragmatic ability of the students in the control group in terms of the hedges has also improved to some extent, but the degree of development is not as much as that of the experimental group. The relative progress of the participants in control group could be attributed to their normal development via the conventional and regular ways of learning.

All in all, according to the results of the study it can be claimed that the possible reasons for the Iranian EFL students' limited use of hedges, particularly modal verbs, in their academic texts may be of these two: First, they may not be aware of the necessity to hedge their claims and statements in academic discourse to express uncertainty, objectivity, and politeness. Second, they may not be aware of the pragmatic functions of English epistemic modal verbs in discourse in general and academic writing in particular. Both of these problematic situations can be overcome by applying a direct teaching of the markers, their functions as hedges, and the importance of hedging academic claims in academic writing classes.

Finally, as the outcomes of the current research indicated, it can be concluded that explicit instruction could be employed as an effective method in enhancing the Iranian EFL learners' achievements in pragmatic as well as linguistic knowledge regarding modal verbs as hedges in academic writing. Moreover, it can be inferred that direct teaching of pragmatic features of language structures may lead to a higher student achievement than merely exposing them to the language

products to acquire the ability. These findings also lend more empirical support for idea of the effectiveness of explicit instruction of pragmatic features in EFL contexts. They also implied that the pragmatic competence of EFL learners particularly in the area of hedging academic claims does not necessarily progress with the enhancement of learners' linguistic proficiency but needs to be intervened through special instructional approaches such as direct teaching.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Ultimately, based on the findings of the study it can be concluded that receiving explicit instruction is of great importance in developing students' pragmatic knowledge of modal auxiliaries as hedges since it has a positive influence on the number and variety of the modals used and the ways they used them in their texts. In that sense, the current study puts forward useful pedagogical implications that can provide important insights into the respectful teaching practices regarding hedging devices. That is, the outcomes of the study may imply valuable suggestions for the professionals involved in EFL educational administrations. More specifically, it probably has important implications for Iranian EAP curriculum developers, syllabus designers, instructors, and academic writing teachers as well as under- and post-graduate students who are willing to promote their ability in academic writing and reading in an acceptable way. However, the results may provide further insights to EAP writing instructors in the sense that they should take the responsibility to explicitly provide information about the various features of rhetoric in written discourse and focus on teaching hedges that are supposed to be one essential feature of academic writing quality.

Although this study is regarded as a strong contribution to the research supporting the effective and positive role of explicit instruction in enhancing the EFL learners' pragmatic competence, there seems, of course, to be a requirement for further research to be done not only in the domain of auxiliary verbs, but also with all other linguistic structures employed as hedges. Finally, almost no study can be conducted without any limitations and delimitations. The current study may also suffer from a limited sample size which might make the generalizability of the results difficult. Therefore, working on larger number of participants in later research would lead to more generalizable results. Furthermore, it is suggested that future studies examine this instructional approach on

samples with learners of different levels of linguistic proficiency to better explore the relative contributions of direct teaching to the learning process of pragmatic features of hedges. It is also proposed that future research compare the possible influences of different instructional approaches on leaners' pragmatic developments in the given area.

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