



The Gender Construct in the Use of Rhetorical Appeals, Hedges and Boosters in ESL Writing: A Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This study investigated and analyzed the use of rhetorical appeals, and the presence of hedges, and boosters in the argumentative essays of ESL learners. It is aimed at exploring the linguistic differences between male and female writers in terms of how they put forward their claims in an argument and how they appeal to their audience. The study found that male ESL learners prevalently use logical appeal in the development of their argumentative essays while the female learners use emotional appeal. On the other hand, the female learners use more hedging and boosting devices in their argumentative essays than male learners do. The results

and findings of this study may contribute essential knowledge to linguists in constructing gender differences in the writing of argumentative essays in the context of ESL.

Keywords: rhetorical appeal; hedges, boosters; logical appeal; emotional appeal

Introduction

Gender is perceived as a ‘social product’ (Aydinoglu, 2014, p. 233). This means that society dictates differences between males and females. In a similar vein, Tannen (1995) explained that the distinct ways girls and boys socialize is influenced by their communication with adults who adhere to social stereotypes in respect of social behavior and norms. This is seen as an ‘encoding’ process that is carried out until adulthood and results in different communication styles between genders. In addition, Tannen (1995) ardently claimed that gender roles are prescribed by society. Indeed, society possesses the power that shapes the concepts of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’, and it is evident in many respects – from the types of apparels to be worn, hairstyles, color preferences, vocation and profession choices, language preferences and other facets of life. Despite the varying notions on and about gender, authors come to a consensus on the belief that gender is a construct of importance across cultures and societies (Gormley, 2015).

Research on gender and language is considered to have started in the 70s with the emergence of sociolinguistic investigations (Aydinoglu, 2014). One of the first works that promoted the essence of gender in language and language variation use is that of Labov (1966). One of Labov’s findings on the impact of gender on language use is the preference of women to use the prestigious language form. Labov (1966) also contended that the use of a non-standard form of language is associated with masculinity, which is often considered the reason for men’s choice in the kinds and forms of language they use.

Since then, studies have been carried out to investigate the differences between males and females in terms of language and language-related variables and their effects within particular contexts. Such studies include Öztürk and Gürbüz (2013), which studied the impact of the gender variable on both the speaking anxiety and motivation of Turkish university students; Head (1999; cited in Van De Gaer, Pustjens, Van Damme, & De Munter, 2007), which probed into gender differences in the language interests of the respondents; Lamb (1997; in Van De Gaer et al., 2007), which investigated attitude towards languages across gender; Park and French (2013), which looked into the existence of gender differences in the foreign language

anxiety of respondents from Korea; Salahshour, Sharifi and Salahshour (2013), which examined gender differences in the use of language learning strategies; Alieto (2018), which explored the gender differences in attitude towards the mother tongue among pre-service teachers; and Rillo and Alieto (2018), which scrutinized gender differences in the language attitude of the respondents with regard to Philippine English.

At this point, previous studies have shown linguistic differences between males and females. Protivínský and Münich (2018) even strongly claimed that gender differences in language use, proficiency and learning is an established trend and a common empirical finding. Lakoff (1973) reported that girls use language more collaboratively to express intimacy, while boys use language to show competition and their position in the group. Further, Keroes (1990) reported that in academic writing tasks females' writing style is more personal. In addition, Holmes (1988) found that female writers are more likely to include discussion of relationship in their writings than male writers.

On another note, Nippold, Ward-Lonergan and Fanning (2005) maintained that in writing argumentative essays students must embrace a certain view and work hard to convince the readers to agree. The act of convincing involves the use of appeals. Forbes and Cordella (1999) explained that argumentative discourse is a speech activity where participants express dissenting opinions with the use of linguistic strategies in a framework of turn taking. A fully developed essay includes a statement of an opinion with support, a statement of a counterargument, a rebuttal and a concluding statement that supports the initial opinion. Thus far, argumentation writing has been very challenging to students. This academic task does not only require students to have linguistic competence, but also demand ideas and a careful presentation in persuasive and appealing manners. This becomes a concern of many teachers.

There are different definitions for argumentation. Ketcham (1917) defined argumentation as the art of persuading others. It includes writing and speaking that are persuasive in form. It is further described that persuasion means influencing others to think and act in a particular way. MacEwan (1898) explained that argumentation involves the process of proving and disproving a proposition. The purpose of such process is either to establish truth, trigger a new belief, or correct errors in the mind. Despite these varying definitions, the common idea is that persuading an audience is the goal of argumentative writing (Mshvenieradze, 2013).

In a composition class, students must aim to persuade their teachers or instructors that their idea is valid or more valid than others'. When a writer manages to support their claims and cause some impact on readers such as changing their opinion and making them act in the

writer's favor, only then is argumentation effective (Mshvenieradze, 2013). Connor (1996) claimed that an effective argumentative discourse should be one that is employed with both rational and affective appeals.

Writing an argumentative essay involves persuasion through the use of reasoning. Reasoning includes the use of critical cognition, analytical skill, good memory and purposeful behavior, which places "logos" or logic to be the most important notion (Mshvenieradze, 2013). In other words, "logos" is an appeal to audiences' sense of logic. On the other hand, the sense of reasoning through persuasion could also be an appeal to emotion or feelings. This rhetorical appeal is known as "pathos". Therefore, this study accounts for the logos (known also as the rational or cognitive appeal) and pathos (known also as the emotional or affective), in line with the analysis in Kamimura and Oi (1998), in which they probed the difference of two cultures in terms of argumentative style.

A number of previous studies have been conducted on hedges and boosters using different approaches. Some researchers have focused on the different politeness strategies in spoken and/or written discourse based on gender (Coates, 1987). Another approach was used to investigate the effects of powerful versus powerless language styles on their listeners (Hosman & Siltanen, 2006). The study suggested that hedging devices in arguments show lack of assertiveness in putting forward claims. Finally, there have been studies conducted concerning hedges and boosters in academic writing for both professional researchers, as well as second language students of English (Holmes, 1988; Hyland, 1994, 1996, 2000; Hyland & Milton, 1997).

The term hedge was introduced to describe "words whose job is to make things more or less fuzzy" (Lakoff, 1973). Hedges mitigate the writers' certainty about or reduce their commitment to the propositions, but boosters increase the certainty in the propositions made by the writers.

In relation to gender, the study of Crammond (1998) on 355 essays written by undergraduate students found that there were some prominent features found in female students' formal writing. These features were the use of tentative constructions like: hedges, such as "maybe," "might," "I think," and qualifiers, such as "nearly," and "sometimes," which are also found in females' spoken language (Holmes, 1984). Crammond (1998, cited in Francis, Robson and Read, 2001), suggested that qualifiers of the formal argument are lessened when hedges are used. In addition, hedging makes arguments pliable to the audience. Francis, Robson

and Read (2002) found that males are more likely to be argumentative and companionable with the formal style compared to their female colleagues.

The crucial importance of hedges and boosters lies in the fact that readers expect claims to be warranted in terms of the assessments of reliability they carry, and appropriate in terms of the social interactions they appeal to. These devices help academics gain acceptance for their work by balancing conviction with caution, and by conveying an appropriate disciplinary persona of modesty and assertiveness (Hyland, 1996). Hedges and boosters therefore express both interpersonal and ideational (or conceptual) information (Halliday, 1994), allowing writers to communicate more precise degrees of accuracy in their truth assessments. Indeed, in carrying authorial judgments, hedges and boosters can actually convey the major content of an utterance.

This study is aimed at identifying the rhetorical appeals and hedges and boosters in the composition of argumentative essays among grade 11 ESL students to describe the differences in their writing styles. Through the analysis of the employment of essential devices put forth in constructing an argumentative essay (i.e. rhetorical appeals and hedges and boosters) in the context of ESL students, this study may contribute essential knowledge to linguists in understanding gender differences in writing.

More specifically, this study was aimed at answering the following questions:

1. What kinds of rhetorical appeals do the male and female ESL writers dominantly use?
2. Is there any significant difference in the use of rhetorical appeals between the male and female ESL writers?
3. Which gender dominantly uses hedges and boosters in their argumentative essays?
4. Is there any significant difference in the use of hedges and boosters between the male and the female ESL writers in their argumentative essays?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we looked at three frameworks. In order to identify rhetorical appeals, we used the Rhetorical Theory by Micheli (2008), while the accounting of the hedges and boosters used the Stance and Engagement Theory by Hyland (2005). In addition, the Difference Theory by Tannen (1990) was used in analyzing the language used by the male and female participants as shown by their use of rhetorical appeals and hedges and boosters.

Firstly, the Rhetorical Theory accounts for Aristotle's famous definition of rhetoric as an ability in each to see available means of persuasion (Micheli, 2008). Aristotle explained that there are three parts of "pisteis" (proofs) provided through speech, the pathos (appeal for emotions/feelings); logos (appeal for logic); and ethos (appeal for ethics/morality). Furthermore, Micheli (2008) claimed that justification in the development of an argumentative discourse, written or spoken, must be developed based on any of the three types of claim/argument presentation. Also, he reiterated that arguments can only be successfully presented through any of these types. In this study, there were only two appeals that were found prevalent in the development of the participants' argumentative essays, namely the logical appeal and the emotional appeal.

Secondly, the Stance and Engagement Theory of Hyland (2005) details writer-oriented features of interaction and refers to the ways academics annotate their texts to comment on the possible accuracy or credibility of a claim, the extent they want to commit themselves, or the attitude they want to convey to an entity, a proposition or the reader. In this theory, Hyland (2005) enumerated and clustered boosters and hedges as common devices used by the writers in the presentation of their claims or arguments. Hedges are devices like *possible*, *might* and *perhaps*, that indicate the writer's decision to withhold complete commitment to a proposition, allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than accredited fact while Boosters are words like *clearly*, *obviously* and *demonstrate*, which allow writers to express their certainty in what they say and to mark involvement with the topic and solidarity with their audience. Thus, in this study, the use of these features in the participants' argumentative essays were examined and analyzed.

Finally, the Difference Theory by Tannen (1990) was explored to present the differences in the use of the writing devices by the male and female participants' argumentative essays. Tannen (1990) reported that the language used by males and females are represented by six contrasts, namely: status vs. support; independence vs. intimacy; advice vs. understanding; information vs. feelings; orders vs. proposals; and conflict vs. compromise. In this study, the Difference Theory was put to test the differences in the styles of the male and female participants in writing their argumentative essays.

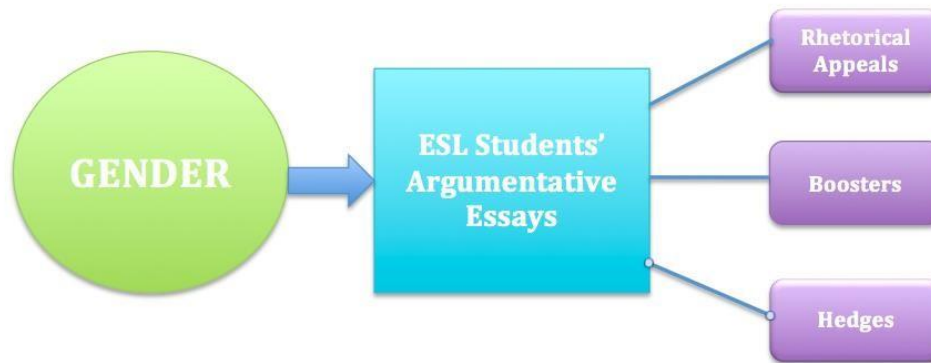


Figure 1. *Gender as an influencing variable on the use of rhetorical appeals, boosters, and hedges in ESL students' argumentative essays*

Figure 1 presents gender as the independent variable, and the use of rhetorical appeals and boosters and hedges that are found in argumentative essays as the dependent variables. In this framework, we instigate that their use of rhetorical appeals and hedges and boosters are implicit and explicit, respectively, in the students' argumentative essays and could trigger gendering in students' written discourse, particularly in advancing and forming their arguments or claims.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design. In order to determine the dominant rhetorical appeals as well as the use of hedges and boosters used in the argumentative essays of the ESL students, and the significant differences between males and females, frequency count, mean and inferential statistics were used. The quantification of data and the generalization of results from a sample to the population of interest is the purpose of the study.

Corpus

This study analyzed 50 argumentative essays, of which arguments revolved around the topic of death penalty. The instruction given to the students was: "Are you in favor of Death Penalty? Present your claims and arguments." Each essay comprises of at least three paragraphs including the essential parts of an essay (i.e. introduction, body, and conclusion). The length of each essay ranges from a minimum of 150 words to a maximum of 500 words. There were

25 essays composed by male students and 50 essays by female students with a mean total of 327.44 and 295.76 numbers of words in the essays respectively.

Participants

There was a total of 95 grade 11 ESL students enrolled in the STEM and HUMMS strands of the SHS program who wrote an argumentative essay on the topic given. Only 25 male students and 25 female students were chosen as participants in the study. The ages of the students ranged from 16-17 years old.

Procedure

Before the commencement of the study, a permission letter was addressed to the school director and the school principal. After the permission was granted, one of the researchers went to the classrooms to ask the students to write the essay on a whole sheet of paper in one hour. The finished essays were retrieved and only 50 essays were randomly and purposely selected (i.e. 25 male participants' essays and 25 female participants' essays) from the 96 essays. Each essay contains the student's age, name, and gender. They were also asked to write the gender of their preference.

The coding of the rhetorical appeals and the use of boosters and hedges through handtagging was carried out by labelling **B** for the presence of a booster in the argument; **H** for hedge; for the rhetorical appeals, **LA** for logical appeal (logos); and **EA** for emotional appeal (pathos). Also, the total number of words per essay and the mean percentage of each occurrence were written on the essay paper. The presence of these devices in the ESL students' argumentative essays was accounted through frequency counting and was treated statistically.

Method of Analysis

In this study, we analyzed the argumentative essays of the grade 11 ESL students' argumentative essays through hand tagging and coding. For the identification of the presence of boosters and hedges as devices in presenting arguments or claims, we referred to the classification presented by Hyland (2005) while for the identification of rhetorical appeals, the Rhetorical Theory by Micheli (2008) was utilized.

Two approaches were employed to account for the occurrence of boosters and hedges and rhetorical appeals used by both genders in this study. First, qualitative approach was utilized to determine the boosters, hedges, and rhetorical appeals, which are considered as

categorical variables of the study. Second, descriptive statistics was used to determine the frequency of boosters, hedges, and rhetorical appeals in the ESL students' argumentative essays. Furthermore, in identifying whether there are significant differences in the use of boosters and hedges and rhetorical appeals based on gender, the Chi-Square Test of Homogeneity was used.

A specific counting of the occurrence of boosters and hedges in the students' essays was carried out by dividing the occurrence of the hedges or boosters to the number of words per essay multiplied by a 100 (e.g. 10 occurrences of boosters in an essay with 310 words; i.e. $10/310 \times 100$). This is to prorate the occurrences of the writer-oriented features to the number of words present in an essay.

In the categorization of the occurrences of the boosters and the hedges, a scale covering the ranges of occurrences with corresponding descriptors was used to allow the computation for the Chi-Square Test of Homogeneity.

Table 1 presents the scale in the categorization of the occurrences of hedges and boosters in the argumentative essays.

Table 1
Occurrences of Hedges and Boosters in the Argumentative Essay Scale

| Range | Descriptor |
|------------|----------------------|
| 4.69- 6.06 | Always Occurring |
| 3.32- 4.68 | Frequently Occurring |
| 1.95- 3.31 | Seldom Occurring |
| 0.59- 1.94 | Never Occurring |

Table 1 shows that the lower boundary is at 0.59 occurrences while the higher boundary is 6.06. The computed interval is at 1.37.

Results and Discussion

Table 2 shows the two rhetorical appeals that were found evident in the argumentative essays of the male and female ESL SHS students:

Table 2*Rhetorical Appeals Used by the Male and Female Grade 11 Students*

| Gender | Rhetorical Appeal | f | % | Fisher's Exact Test of Difference |
|---------------|--------------------------|----------|----------|--|
| Male | Logical Appeal | 18 | 72.00 | p < 0.551 |
| | Emotional Appeal | 7 | 28.00 | |
| Female | Logical Appeal | 15 | 60.00 | |
| | Emotional Appeal | 10 | 40.00 | |

p-value = 0.05 level of significance

In Table 2 it could be seen that both male students and female students use logic as a dominant rhetorical appeal in writing their argumentative essays with 72.00 percent and 60.00 percent of occurrence respectively. Comparing the two genders, the male students use more logic as an appeal in composing an argumentative essay. Flynn and Schweickart (1986) agreed that male writers and female writers argue distinctively in writing; males tend to be more competitive while females appear more affiliative. Harding's (1990) concluded that formal (academic) writing is a "masculine discourse." He further reported that male's writing was more objective, authority-oriented and impersonal. This shows, accordingly, that females are emotional in their writings while males have control over emotion and subjectivity. The reason for subjectivity in females' writings is that they allow personal experience to intrude (Keroes, 1990) thus, emotional in appeal.

Since the p-value (alpha) is less than the Fisher's Exact Test of Difference (0.551), it only implies that there is no significant difference between gender and the use of rhetorical appeals in writing the argumentative essay.

Table 3 shows the occurrence of hedges in the argumentative essays of the male and female ESL learners.

Table 3 Occurrence of Hedges in the Argumentative Essays of Male and Female ESL Learners

| Gender | f | Mean % | Pearson Chi Square Test of Difference |
|---------------|----------|---------------|--|
| Male | 142 | 1.80 | |
| Female | 190 | 2.62 | p < 0.088 |

p-value = 0.05 level of significance

Table 3 shows that the female students use more hedges in their argumentative essays with a mean percentage of occurrences of 2.62 while the male students with 1.80. Crammond (1998) claimed that females use more hedging devices to soften their claims in their arguments. Furthermore, Francis et al. (2002) mentioned that the use of hedges makes the claims more pliable to the audience. Similarly, Tannen (1990) instigated that females have the tendency to use more hedges than males. The females' tendency to use more hedging devices does not show lack of confidence in their claims, but rather are employed in the discourse as a set of politeness strategies to achieve solidarity with their readers (Holmes, 1990).

However, in this study, the p-value (alpha) is less than the Pearson Chi square Test of Difference, which means that there is no significant difference in the use of hedges between the male and the female argumentative essays. Newman, Groom, Handelman, and Pennebaker (2008) also found out in their study that females used more hedges than males but also revealed no significant difference.

Table 4 shows the occurrence of boosters in the argumentative essays of the male and female ESL learners.

Table 4

Occurrence of Boosters in the Argumentative Essays of Male and Female ESL Learners

| Gender | f | Mean % | Pearson Chi Square Test of Difference |
|---------------|----------|---------------|--|
| Male | 135 | 1.72 | |
| Female | 147 | 2.00 | p < 0.193 |

p-value = 0.05 level of significance

It can be seen in Table 3 that the female students use more boosters in writing their argumentative essay with a mean percentage of 2.00 while the male students with 1.72. Hyland (1994, 2000) suggested that the writer's degree of confidence is evident in expressing arguments or claims with a degree of certainty that is best illustrated through his/her use of boosting devices. The results in Table 4 counter the findings of Fahy (2002) who observed that males use more boosters in their academic discourses than females. Lakoff (1975) and Holmes (2001) proposed that the females' less use of boosting devices in their discourses indicates their tentativeness and hesitancy to express their views. On the contrary, Hosman (1989) stated that boosters can only be as powerful only in the absence of hedges.

The p-value (alpha) is less than the Pearson Chi Square Test of Difference result (mean %=0.193) and implies that there is no significant difference in the use of boosters in writing the argumentative essays between the male and the female ESL learners.

Conclusion

This study has shown how male and female ESL learners write their arguments and claims. Male ESL learners prevalently use logical appeal in the development of their argumentative essays while the female learners use emotional appeal. The use of logic in the presentation of male learners' arguments and claims make them more cognitive in the development of their ideas. On the other hand, female learners tend to appeal to emotions or feelings to achieve solidarity with their audience. Female learners also use more hedging and boosting devices in their argumentative essays than male learners. Despite the fact that in this

study the male learners considerably wrote longer essays than their counterparts, the female learners still managed to include more hedging and boosting devices in their essays. This supports the notion that females' language is associated with prestige.

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