

Epistemic Rhetorical Stance: Hedges and Boosters in L1 and L2 Students' English Writing*

Chan Hee Kim · Hong Won Suh**
(Yonsei University)

Kim, Chan Hee & Suh, Hong Won (2014). Epistemic Rhetorical Stance: Hedges and Boosters in L1 and L2 Students' English Writing. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 22(2), 61-93. A key aspect of academic writing involves delivering writer's argument with an appropriate degree of mitigated expression and strong assertion. However, positioning statements with balanced qualification and certainty remains a formidable challenge for second language learners. Despite its significance, we know little on the use of epistemic devices in Korean students' English writing. The purpose of this paper is to compare the expression of doubt and certainty in English writing by Korean students to those of native speakers based on the learners corpora. The results indicate that Korean learners take a stronger stance in their statements, relying on a narrower range of lexical items with simpler constructions, compared to their British counterparts. Importantly, a detailed analysis regarding the language proficiency reveals that usages of epistemic metadiscourse markers in L2 essays are strongly related to the proficiency levels. Lower ability bands exhibit a heavy reliance on limited items with strong assertions while higher proficiency bands prefer alleviated expressions rather than strong assertions by employing more hedges, representing balanced distributions across lexical items.

Key Words: Academic writing, L2 writing, Metadiscourse, Stance, Epistemic modality, Hedges, Boosters, Language proficiency

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** The first author is Chan Hee Kim, and the corresponding author, Hong Won Suh.

1. Introduction

Writing in the English language is playing an increasingly important role in academic institutions around the world. Despite its essential role in academic and professional development, however, writing in the academy is considered to be the most demanding task for L1 students, and even more challenging for L2 writers (Brown & Hood, 1989; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Hyland, 2003b). Moreover, research on writing has not been approached via a single principle, but rather through various approaches (Bloor & Bloor, 1991; Hyland, 2009; Park, 2006). In the field of composition studies, it is reported that successful academic writing requires not only high-level proficiency in English grammar and vocabulary but also effective persuasion skills such as logical argumentation, clear exposition, and rapport with the reader. Specifically, in order to communicate effectively, writers attempt to employ interactive and interactional linguistic resources “to help to guide the reader through the text” and “to involve the reader collaboratively in the development of the text” (Thompson, 2001, p. 58).

In particular, the writer’s ability to express doubt and certainty is crucial in academic writing: writers appeal to readers by “balancing conviction with caution, either investing statements with the confidence of reliable knowledge, or with tentativeness to reflect uncertainty or appropriate social interaction” (Hyland, 1998(a), p. 349). As mentioned in Coates (1987), the epistemic comment enables writers to convey their statements with an appropriate degree of certainty in what they write. In other words, the appropriate use of hedging and boosting devices is expected to play a crucial part in successful academic writing. Even though the mastery of hedges and boosters is significant to L2 writers, this aspect of language use is known to be problematic for them. A number of studies have proved that L2 writers have not gained a satisfactory understanding of the concept and practice of the epistemic expressions. For example, previous studies have observed that L2 writers not only have difficulty in expressing statements with a degree of certainty or qualification (e.g., non-native speakers reveal a strong tendency towards boosting markers, whereas hedged expressions are typical in L1 users’ writings) but also are only able to employ a limited range of markers that are at their disposal (Allison, 1995; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995).

While these epistemic metadiscoursal markers (i.e., hedges and boosters) may have considerable impact on L2 writers, however, little attention has been paid to them so far. Specifically, not much is known about how Korean learners conceptualize and convey hedges and boosters in their academic writing, and in what sense Korean learners' employment of these devices is similar or different to those of native speakers. More importantly, no research has been found to determine differences among Korean learners with regard to language proficiency levels based on the large and balanced learner corpus.

This paper aims to examine how Korean students make use of epistemic metadiscoursal markers by investigating ranges and frequencies of lexical items based on a large corpus of Korean students' English essays, in comparison with that of British native speakers. In addition, this research attempts to determine whether the expressions of certainty and doubt are interrelated with the language proficiency levels of L2 students based on the written placement test.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Epistemic Expression: Hedges and Boosters

In the field of metadiscourse research, there are two major interactional metadiscourse features that help writers to express doubt or certainty about the information and statements they provide, and these are referred to as hedging and boosting expressions: "they enable writers to express their assessment of possibilities and indicate the degree of confidence in what they say" (Coates, 1987, p. 112). A considerable amount of literature has proved the theoretical and practical importance of the epistemic modality markers as a part of discourse resources for managing information and revealing a posture towards one's propositions and readers (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Quirk et al., 1985; Yule, 1998). Accordingly, the ability to manage one's certainty and qualification undoubtedly plays a key role in the field of academic writing, which expects writers to deliver propositional information and personal views with a balanced degree of doubt and certainty. Balancing these hedging and boosting devices, however, is reported to be a difficult task not only for L2

writers (or speakers) but also L1 writers (or speakers), and both groups particularly have difficulties in modifying their assertions with hedging devices (Allison, 1995; Hyland & Milton, 1997).

As mentioned above, a number of studies have reported that utilizing epistemic modal expressions appropriately in academic writing is a complex and demanding task for novice writers, for modality is typically divided into two types (epistemic modality and root modality), and modality can simultaneously express various meanings (Halliday, 1973; Holmes, 1984; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002; Quark et al., 1985; Yule, 1998).

Epistemic modality is primarily associated with “the speaker’s [writer’s] assumptions or assessment of possibilities” and “indicates confidence (or lack of confidence) in the truth of the proposition expressed” (Coates, 1983, p. 13). Root modality, on the other hand, has to do with interactional meanings instead of logical possibilities (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002; Yule, 1998). Examples of epistemic and root modality are presented below (1).

- (1) a. Mike *must* be in New York.
 b. Mike *may* be in New York.
 c. You *must* leave the classroom now.
 d. You *may* leave the classroom now.

In the case of example (1a), the speaker or writer is conveying his or her confidence in the propositional information that Mike is currently in New York, while the replacement of the modal verb *must* with *may* reduces the level of assertion considerably as can be seen from the example sentence (1b). In other words, hedged expressions “allow writers or speakers to take a rhetorical stance, to downplay their statements and anticipate audience response by adjusting the degree of certainty they give to their claims” (Hyland, 1994, p. 241). On the other hand, as shown in example (1c) and (1d), root modality enables writers to convey the meaning of obligation expressed by the modal verb *must* or permission signaled by *may*. Modal expressions are, therefore, potentially complex for second language learners, and the complexity may lead student writers to the misuse of epistemic modality in their English writing.

In addition to the complex characteristics of modality, making one's argument effectively with an appropriate tone of hedging and boosting devices is another anticipated difficulty for L2 users, for the epistemic meaning can be signaled in many different ways in various genres. Even though modal verbs such as *must*, *may*, *might*, etc. have attracted many researchers as the main source for epistemic expressions, other grammatical classes also can be signaled to express epistemic meaning (Holmes, 1984; Hyland & Milton, 1997; McEnery & Kifle, 2002; Oh, 2007). According to Holmes (1988), the epistemic meaning can be realized by about 350 lexical devices and these can be classified as lexical verbs (e.g., *think*, *believe*, *appear*), adverbials (e.g., *probably*, *indeed*, *definitely*), nouns (e.g., *possibility*, *doubt*, *belief*), and adjectives (e.g., *clear*, *certain*, *possible*).

These epistemic devices can be recognized not only by their grammatical classes, but also by their semantic categories. As Hyland and Milton (1997) have suggested, supported by other researchers (McEnery & Kifle, 2002; Oh, 2007), epistemic meanings can be delivered along a continuum of semantic category: certainty (e.g., *certainly*, *must*, *argue*, *in fact*, etc.), probability (e.g., *would*, *seem*, *probable*, *believe*, etc.), possibility (e.g., *may*, *might*, *possible*, *perhaps*, etc.), usuality (e.g., *always*, *often*, *usually*, etc.), and approximation (e.g., *about*, *approximately*, *almost*, etc.). Although a few researchers have conceded that this categorization may be arbitrary to some extent, several other researchers have found them useful in analyzing students' use of epistemic expressions in terms of the semantic notion. Given the fact that epistemic expressions are achieved through various ways, students may find it difficult to pick up the appropriate tone for building their argument with doubt and certainty with proper devices.

In the realm of metadiscourse study, these epistemic signals are mostly practiced by hedges and boosters in the written communication. As mentioned earlier, the expression of doubt and certainty (i.e., hedges and boosters) is considered to be central to the rhetorical and interpersonal character of any mode of written communication (Hyland, 1998a). As one of the effective communicative strategies, to put it another way, hedges and boosters are primarily concerned with increasing or reducing the voice of writer's arguments. To be specific, experienced academic writers attempt to obtain readers' acceptance for their statements by harmonizing assertions with

caution, either positioning statements with the certainty of trustworthy information, or with tentativeness to express uncertainty in the writing (Hyland, 2005a). In other words, numerous studies have observed that successful writers are required to gain mastery use of hedges and boosters to express his or her doubt and certainty in the written discourse (Hyland & Milton, 1997; Hyland, 1998a; Park, 2006; Uhm et al., 2009).

As one of the most distinguishing metadiscourse markers, hedges (e.g., *perhaps*, *might*, *possible*, etc.) embody a weakening of a statement through modification and qualification. Hedges are acknowledged as the most studied metadiscourse feature, and they also function as indicators showing the writer's commitment or decision to accept the alternative tones and viewpoints. In doing so, writers succeed in withholding complete commitment to a proposition, and this is central to the rhetorical characteristic of the successful academic writing (Hyland, 2005a). The hedged expressions, in general, indicate that the information or knowledge is represented as opinion rather than approved fact. In addition, from the linguistic perspectives, these hedging expressions can also be found in clusters or chunks, reinforcing the uncertainty of the writer's knowledge or information in the process of writing. In sum, hedges indicate that a statement is built on the writer's conceivable reasoning rather than convinced information, and they are usually realized in the clustering construction.

Boosters, on the other hand, are devices such as *clearly*, *obviously*, and *indeed*, and they help writers to convey their convictions and assertions of proposition with confidence. In doing so, writers succeed in representing rather a strong claim about a proposition. In addition, the boosting markers help writers to promote involvement and solidarity with the audiences, emphasizing common knowledge, and finally directing engagement with readers. In other words, the proper use of boosting expressions helps writers to strengthen an argument by stressing the mutual or shared expressions or knowledge with their readers to share a common ground.

To conclude, these epistemic metadiscoursal markers, i.e., hedges and boosters, are one of the significant aspects in the academic convention where writers handle language effectively to adopt positions, show viewpoints, and signal allegiances with audiences (Hyland, 2005a). In addition, hedges and

boosters are also one of the most important discourse markers in the written text not just because they are one of the most frequently shown metadiscourse markers in the academic writing, but the balanced manipulation of hedges and boosters signals the writers' willingness to communicate with readers more effectively by acknowledging alternatives and conveying commitment to the contents of the texts and their readers. As Hyland puts it, "they work to balance objective information, subjective evaluation and interpersonal negotiation, and this can be a powerful persuasive factor in gaining acceptance for claims" (Hyland, 1998a, p.353). The characteristic way that writers employ the hedges and boosters to convey epistemic stance is expected to be different according to its text and language users, and these issues will be addressed in the following section.

2.2. Hedges and Boosters in L1 and L2 English Writing

A number of studies have proved that L2 writers have difficulties in manipulating epistemic features in their writings (Allison, 1995; Cheng & Steffensen, 1996; Hu, et al., 1982; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995). Researchers have indicated that the L2 writers' statements tended to have a direct and unqualified voice, compared to those of L1 users. For example, Hu, Brown, and Brown (1982) proved that Chinese L2 writers took a more direct and convincing stance in their English writing by employing strong modals than the native speakers did. Allison (1995) also pointed out that Hong Kong ESL undergraduate writers frequently made strong assertions and commitments that lack reliable knowledge. McEnery and Kifle (2002) who had examined Eritrean learners reported that while these learners also made use of a limited array of epistemic devices, they were more indirect than native speakers. With regard to the proficiency level of ESL writings, Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1995) observed the metadiscourse features in ESL students' essays, and they found that the use of hedges and emphatics (i.e., boosters) were quite remarkably shown with various expressions in good ESL students' writing in comparison with the lower level students' English essays.

A few studies have observed these epistemic metadiscoursal markers in L2

academic writing in comparison with those of L1 writers (Allison, 1995; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Kim, 1999; Oh, 2007). Allison (1995) observed English essays written by freshman students of humanities at the University of Hong Kong. A set of 27 English essays were assessed and analyzed by the researcher with the criteria of lexical choices expressing assertive and alternative voices in the academic writing. The examples represented in the paper marked similar tendency among L2 students: they tended to write one's statement with a strong voice rather than an alternative voice, choosing lexical devices in order to convince their opinion with boosting devices.

Hyland and Milton (1997) investigated two sets of corpora to investigate the epistemic expressions in the examination scripts of Hong Kong students' English writing and the English essays written by British students (L1). In this study, Hyland and Milton attempted to analyze the range and frequency of lexical devices expressing doubt and certainty in these corpora. The results indicated that L2 writers used a narrower range of epistemic metadiscourse markers and seemed to have significant difficulties in conveying the proper use of hedging and boosting devices. To be specific, the Hong Kong students (L2) showed syntactically simpler structures and limited range of features. More importantly, the analysis confirmed that the academic essays of L2 students were generally characterized by firmer assertions than L1 writers, which resulted in contributing to the stronger commitments in their English writing.

On the other hand, the L1 writers employed more devices of tentative and cautious expressions, with about two thirds of the lexical devices functioning as hedges (only a third in the L2 writings). For instance, epistemic modal verb *will* occurred twice as often in the Hong Kong students' writing while *would*, more tentative version of *will*, appeared twice as frequently in the L1 students' writing. With regard to grammatical classes, L2 writers showed the tendency to depend heavily on modal verbs than other grammatical classes such as epistemic noun, adjectives, adverbials, and lexical verbs while L1 writers displayed a wider range and frequency of other grammatical classes, specifically, epistemic adverbials showed about 55% of occurrences. Hyland and Milton (1997) also analyzed hedging and boosting devices in terms of a semantic classification: probability, possibility, certainty, usuality, and

approximation. The analysis showed that L2 writers used more than 50% of certainty markers while L1 writers employed around 30% of certainty devices. With probability markers, L2 students employed about 20% of those markers while more than 30% of those revealed in the L1 students' writing. In sum, Hyland and Milton (1997) argued there were considerable differences in the use of the certainty and qualification markers between L1 and L2 groups, exhibiting that the academic writing of L2 appeared to be firmer, authoritative, and stronger when compared with L1 writing, and their finding was consistent with those of Hu, Brown, and Brown (1982) and Allison (1995).

Chinese students' struggles to present their doubt and certainty appear to be corresponding to Korean students' use of hedging and boosting devices in their academic writing to some extent. There are a few studies that have investigated how Korean students in the college level deliver the epistemic meaning in their English writings. Kim (1999) investigated the rhetorical functions of whole metadiscourse markers between NS, EFL advanced learners, and EFL basic learners, and his study displayed that Korean students were reported to employ fewer epistemic markers (i.e., hedges and emphatics) in comparison with NS writers.

Oh (2007) also investigated the hedging and boosting metadiscoursal markers in Korean college students' English writings in comparison with those of native speakers of English. In this study, a collection of academic essays written by college students from several universities in Korea was examined in comparison with the L1 corpus by investigating the ranges and frequencies of epistemic lexical items. The results showed that the Korean L2 learners depended on a limited range of hedges and boosters. Compared with the L1 students, for example, Korean students exhibited the strong tendency to use limited epistemic markers (e.g., *think*, *always*, *opinion*) while they significantly less employed other devices (e.g., *would*, *seem*, *argue*). In addition to very narrower range of markers, L2 learners revealed undistributed uses of epistemic markers in terms of the grammatical and semantic category. In general, Korean writers were inclined to exhibit stronger voice to their statements than the native speakers of English.

Lee and Park (2008) examined the types and quantity of the epistemic devices, particularly focusing on the distribution with grammatical classes. For

Lee and Park's study, the academic writings of 52 sophomore students in the field of medicine enrolled in English Reading & Writing class were analyzed to observe how the epistemic expressions are addressed appropriately in their English writings. The results showed that L2 students in medical field employed very limited frequency of epistemic metadiscoursal markers specifically with modal verbs and sentence adverbials. In their study, students' uses of hedges and boosters were heavily dependent on modal verbs such as *can*, *will*, *may*, *would*, and *must*. As mentioned in Hyland and Milton (1997), L2 students in this study also tended to make his/her argument with the strong confirmation using boosting expressions such as *never* and *always*. They also suggested that L2 learners needed to be exposed to the appropriate use of epistemic metadiscoursal devices explicitly to modify and qualify their statements in the academic writing in English.

To summarize, numerous studies have attempted to prove the significance of writer's epistemic rhetorical stance on the propositional information and their statements in the field of academic writing. Importantly, it has been suggested that the academic writing of L1 and L2 users presented strikingly significant differences in employing these hedging and boosting markers: comparing with L1 writers, L2 writers' voices are generally more assertive rather than modified, showing inappropriate use of hedges and boosters in the convention of the academic writing, and they also have difficulty in presenting doubt and certainty with much limited use of hedging and boosting devices.

Although these extensive studies have analyzed the metadiscoursal markers in the writing of ESL or Chinese students, we know little about how hedging and boosting markers are presented in the academic writing of Korean students. More importantly, it would appear that no single study exists which sufficiently observes the differences in their use of these markers among Korean students with the focus on the proficiency levels, and it may be necessary to investigate the different use of epistemic markers between the Korean learners to improve students' writing ability (Oh, 2007).

3. Methods

3.1. Data

The data for this paper consist of two sets of corpora - i.e., Yonsei English Learners Corpus (YELC)¹⁾ for a non-native speaker and Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS) for a native speaker. The NNS corpus compiled for this study is a random selection of YELC, which consists of English essays written by incoming freshman students at a major university in Korea. The essays are of argumentative mode, and the each of six topics concerned with social issues (the pros and cons of smoking in public places, anonymity of the internet, mandatory military service, corporal punishment in school, animal testing, and using a mobile phone while driving) was randomly given to a student. To be specific, the randomized YELC corpus that was used for the present study consists of about 80,000 words comprising 351 essays. The essays in YELC had been already assessed and classified by native English faculty instructors at the College English Department, and the proficiency bands in the placement test range from A1 to C2 level (A1, A1+, B1, B1+, B2, B2+, C1, and C2)²⁾.

Table 1. Corpus Size for YELC and LOCNESS

Study Corpus	YELC	LOCNESS
Tokens	79,207	79,201
Types	5,309	7,298
Participants	351	142

1) YELC is a large learners corpus, which is a collection of English essays written by Korean students, admitted to Yonsei University (Seoul, Korea), for the Yonsei English Placement Test (YEPT), and for the present study 2011 version of YELC was used. The participants of the YEPT in 2011 were 3,564 students, and students mostly formed a homogenous group in their age (from 18 to 20 years old) and overall academic ability as they were accepted to the same university. In the writing section of the YEPT, students are required to write a 300-word argumentative/persuasive essay in 30 minutes.

2) The assessment criteria of YEPT were mostly based on the assessment framework for the writing section from Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

Second corpus, compiled as a reference native-speaker corpus, was also randomly selected from the LOCNESS corpus. It is a corpus of native English essays written by British and American university students, and the British sub-corpus was used for the present study. The randomized LOCNESS (BSC) for this study consists of around 80,000 words comprising A level 142 English essays. The mode of essays is argumentative and expository, and topics include the parliamentary system, transportation, fox hunting, the national lottery, boxing, French Intellectual tradition, and a single Europe. The basic statistics with the tokens and types of each NS and NNS corpus are provided in Table 1.³⁾

In addition to the comparison of hedges and boosters between L1 and L2 group, the YELC was analyzed according to each proficiency band. For this analysis, the written scripts from level A1 and C2 were excluded. The writing samples for the A1 band, the lowest ability band, were not appropriate for this study as they contain a number of errors that cannot be recognized and a small number of words. The written texts of C2 band, the highest ability band, were not included in this study as there are only two essays. Each corpus from the different band group consists of similar size of tokens, i.e., about 11,000 words, which allows us to observe the direct comparison of the range and frequency of epistemic makers between these groups (See Table 2).

Table 2. Corpus Size for Each Proficiency Band of YELC

YELC	A1+	A2	B1	B1+	B2	B2+	C1	Total
Tokens	11,292	11,359	11,253	11,290	11,297	11,303	11,413	79,207
Types	1,543	1,624	1,635	1,731	1,813	1,744	1,979	5,309
Participants	91	56	50	40	39	38	37	351

3.2. Data Analysis Procedure

The overall frequency and density levels were assessed using WordSmith Tools 5.0. In order to search the hedging and boosting markers, this study made use of two major functions (Concord and WordList). The searching words on the

3) All words in each corpus have been lemmatized for an accurate comparison between two groups.

epistemic metadiscourse markers were mostly based on a list of 157 items from Hyland's (2005a) classification of hedges and boosters (See Appendix). Then, all cases shown in the concordance list were examined by the researchers to ensure that the selected items express doubt or certainty in the context, since the nature of epistemic metadiscourse markers is highly dependent on its context. In the case of markers consisting of more than two words (e.g., in my opinion), text converter function was utilized. In doing so, it was possible to search the phrase and calculate these phrases as one single device (e.g., in-my-opinion). The resulting data was presented with the comparison between the LOCNESS and the YELC corpus, and then comparison between the proficiency bands among YELC was followed in terms of (a) the frequency and density levels of epistemic devices, (b) the distribution of the lexical devices according to the grammatical and (c) semantic categories, and finally students' uses of hedges and boosters were also investigated qualitatively in order to observe the different patterns that the L1 and L2 users exhibited in the academic writing.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Frequency and Range of Epistemic Metadiscourse

The use of epistemic devices selected from the randomized YELC and LOCNESS is presented through quantitative analysis: the raw frequency of overall epistemic metadiscourse markers followed by density level, realization of these markers through the grammatical and semantic categories, and hedges and boosters in LOCNESS and YELC (proficiency levels).

4.1.1. Overall Frequency and Density of Epistemic Devices

The total number of lexical devices used to convey doubt and certainty in the two corpora is shown in Table 3. The analysis reveals obvious differences in the overall frequencies: The L2 writers employed epistemic metadiscourse markers less frequently than the L1 writers. This result is consistent with the finding of Kim (1999), which illustrated the different level of frequency and density of hedges and emphatics between L1 and L2 writers (Korean students),

indicating that Korean undergraduate students made significantly less use of lexical devices to convey their doubt and certainty.

Table 3. Total Number of Lexical Devices Used to Convey Epistemic Meaning

	YELC	LOCNESS
Total devices	2,095	2,776
Density per 100 words	2.64	3.50
Density per 300 words	7.93	10.51

A comparison of the normalized frequencies of the epistemic devices shown in the two corpora also reveals differences between two groups: while L1 students normally use 3.50 epistemic devices per hundred words, Korean students use 2.64 epistemic devices per hundred words. Despite the different levels of frequency and density, there are notable similarities in the use of lexical devices between YELC and LOCNESS: six common lexical devices (i.e., *will*, *would*, *could*, *may*, *think*, *feel*) reveal among the top 10 most frequently used devices to convey epistemic meaning in both L1 and L2 students' academic writings (see Table 4).

Table 4. Most Frequent Items of Epistemic Devices in Rank Order

YELC			LOCNESS		
Rank	Item	Frequency	Rank	Item	Frequency
1	<i>think</i>	404	1	<i>would</i>	596
2	<i>will</i>	274	2	<i>will</i>	386
3	<i>could</i>	136	3	<i>could</i>	211
4	<i>would</i>	126	4	<i>may</i>	167
5	<i>may</i>	89	5	<i>possible</i>	62
6	<i>know</i>	74	6	<i>believe</i>	60
7	<i>of-course</i>	73	7	<i>think</i>	54
8	<i>always</i>	55	8	<i>feel</i>	52
9	<i>might</i>	55	9	<i>argue</i>	49
10	<i>feel</i>	54	10	<i>seem</i>	47
Top 10		1,340			1,684
Top 20		1,659			2,044

A closer look at the occurrences of the epistemic stance features (top ten most frequently used devices) in the YELC and LOCNESS indicates some considerable differences between two groups. Despite the fact that six common items (*would*, *will*, *could*, *may*, *think*, *feel*) occurred among the top 10 devices, the frequency of these common devices between the two groups shows quite a few differences. For example, as can be seen from Table 4, epistemic *would* occurs nearly five times more frequently in the LOCNESS than YELC, and L1 writers' frequent use of *would* rather than *will* implies NS students' preference for more tentative expressions. Interestingly, on the other hand, the employment of lexical verb *think* displaying one's certainty is exclusively shown in YELC, occurring almost eight times more frequently than those of British students. L2 students' overuse of *think* is in line with the findings of Hyland & Milton (1997) and Ringbom (1998). In addition, the epistemic verbs *argue* and *seem* are shown as one of the most frequent lexical verbs in LOCNESS while none of these are shown in the top 10 most frequent markers in YELC. It is reported that *argue* and *seem* are one of the most frequently employed lexical items conveying doubt and certainty in the academic writing (Holmes, 1988; Serholt, 2012), and these verbs are not shown in the top 10 epistemic devices in YELC.

Table 5 Most Frequent Items of Epistemic Devices (YELC Proficiency Bands)

	A1+		A2		B1		B1+		B2		B2+		C1	
	Items	Freq.	Items	Freq.	Items	Freq.	Items	Freq.	Items	Freq.	Items	Freq.	Items	Freq.
1	<i>think</i>	97	<i>think</i>	90	<i>think</i>	66	<i>think</i>	50	<i>think</i>	45	<i>will</i>	33	<i>think</i>	30
2	<i>will</i>	44	<i>will</i>	49	<i>will</i>	43	<i>will</i>	48	<i>will</i>	30	<i>think</i>	26	<i>will</i>	27
3	<i>know</i>	19	<i>could</i>	25	<i>could</i>	15	<i>would</i>	29	<i>could</i>	24	<i>could</i>	25	<i>could</i>	26
4	<i>of-course</i>	17	<i>always</i>	12	<i>know</i>	13	<i>of-cou rse</i>	17	<i>may</i>	20	<i>would</i>	24	<i>would</i>	25
5	<i>maybe</i>	15	<i>would</i>	11	<i>of-cour se</i>	13	<i>may</i>	16	<i>would</i>	19	<i>might</i>	10	<i>may</i>	20
6	<i>sometimes</i>	13	<i>know</i>	11	<i>would</i>	12	<i>might</i>	13	<i>know</i>	14	<i>really</i>	10	<i>believ e</i>	14
7	<i>always</i>	12	<i>of-cour se</i>	11	<i>may</i>	10	<i>could</i>	11	<i>usually</i>	11	<i>believe</i>	10	<i>might</i>	10
8	<i>may</i>	11	<i>may</i>	9	<i>really</i>	9	<i>know</i>	11	<i>feel</i>	10	<i>true</i>	7	<i>actual ly</i>	10
9	<i>could</i>	10	<i>might</i>	7	<i>might</i>	7	<i>alway s</i>	9	<i>find</i>	10	<i>feel</i>	6	<i>argue</i>	8
10	<i>find</i>	10	<i>feel</i>	7	<i>always</i>	7	<i>really</i>	9	<i>of-course</i>	8	<i>argue</i>	6	<i>rather</i>	8
Totals		76.3%		72.7%		68.8%		67.40%		65.4%		60.8%		59.5%

Overall, YELC contains a more restricted range of epistemic metadiscoursal markers, with the twenty most frequently employed markers accounting for nearly 80% of the total. Interestingly, the limited use of epistemic markers in YELC may be due to the English writings of the lower proficiency bands among L2 students (See Table 5).

As shown in Table 5, the data of YELC indicates L2 students' strong preference for lexical verb *think* (one device occurred every 200 words), and this may result from the lower proficiency level students' writings. The epistemic verb *think* is exclusively used in the writings of the two lowest groups (A1+ and A2) occurring almost three times as often than the top two proficiency level groups (B2+ and C1) in the YELC data. In addition to the epistemic verb *think*, the common epistemic devices *always*, *know*, and *of course* (top 10 epistemic markers in YELC) are employed more frequently in the four lower ability groups (A1+, A2, B1, B1+) to express their certainty. While *always*, *know*, and *of course* are commonly used devices in the four lower proficiency bands, the epistemic verb *argue* is unique to both two highest proficiency levels, where *argue* is represented as one of the ten most frequently used items in both B2+ and C1 levels.

As noted above, the L2 writers tend to depend heavily on a narrower range of epistemic devices, compared with the L1 writers (e.g., top 20 items account for around 80% of the total), and this finding may be due to the lower ability groups' heavy dependency on the limited lexical items. For instance, ten most frequently used items account for more than 70% of the total epistemic devices in both the lowest proficiency bands. Interestingly, the analysis in YELC reveals that the level of range of epistemic modifiers steadily increases as the proficiency level of students' writings goes up. While top ten items constitute more than 75% of the epistemic devices in the two lowest groups in general, only around 60% of the epistemic devices were covered by the top ten items in both the top two ability groups.

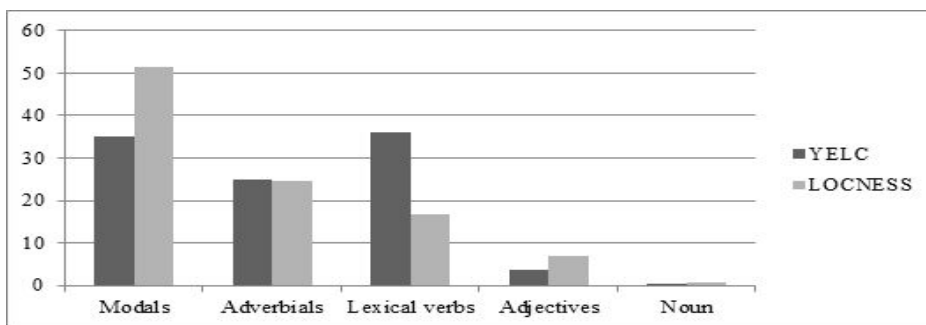
4.1.2. Grammatical Distribution

In the field of metadiscourse studies, epistemic devices have been extensively studied in terms of grammatical classes (Back, 2011; Coates, 1983; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Oh, 2007). In order to examine how Korean students employ the

lexical items in terms of the grammatical classification, an analysis on the frequency of epistemic devices was conducted regarding the grammatical distribution. (See Figure 1).

As can be seen in Figure 1, there are striking differences between YELC and LOCNESS in the distribution of epistemic devices across grammatical classes. The L2 writers reveal much stronger preference for lexical verbs (36%) in comparison with the L1 writers (16.7%), while L1 writers show a stronger preference for modal verbs (51.3%) compared with the L2 writers (35%). The next frequent grammatical category in the YELC data is modal verbs (35%), followed by adverbials (25%), adjectives (3.7%), and noun (0.3%). In the LOCNESS corpus, the next grammatical class is adverbials (24.6%), followed by lexical verbs (16.7%), adjectives (6.8%), and noun (0.6%).

Figure 1 Distributions of Epistemic Devices by Grammatical Category in YELC and LOCNESS

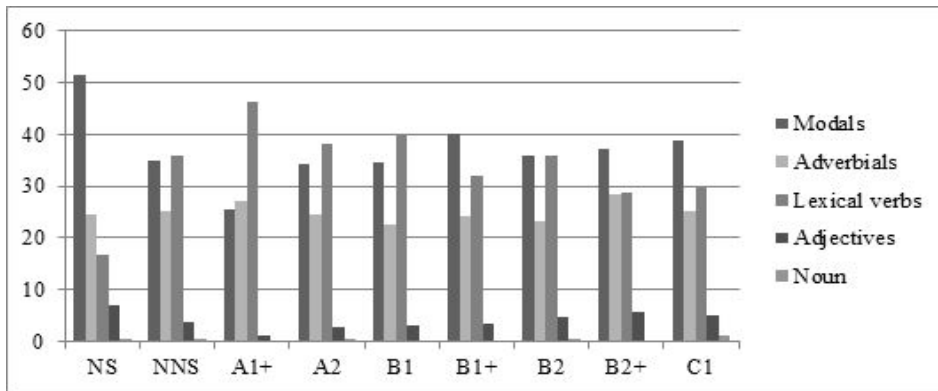


The 'non-nativeness' of the academic writing in YELC, however, needs to be observed with caution. As discussed above, the analysis of the YELC data with the proficiency level suggests there are several differences in students' usage on the epistemic devices: lower ability groups show their restricted use of lexical items, compared with the higher level ability groups. With regard to the grammatical classification, the three lowest ability bands (A1+, A2, and B1) show the disproportionate attention in using the epistemic markers, particularly with lexical verbs, while the proportion of grammatical category tends to be evenly distributed with the increase of proficiency levels (See Figure 2).

In particular, as figure 2 shows, over 38% of the lexical verbs occur in the lowest three groups (A1+: 46.4%, A2: 38.2%, B1: 39.9%), and the use of lexical

verbs decreases with the proficiency level except for the B2 band. The top two bands are the only groups that employ less than 30% of the lexical verbs (C1: 29.8, B2+: 28.7%). Moreover, the limited use of modal verbs as epistemic devices in YELC appears to be related with the restricted use of modal verbs in the lower bands. Specifically, A1+ level, the lowest band, contains only 25% of the modal verbs to express the epistemic meaning, and this figure seems to largely contribute to the lower proportions of modal verbs in the YELC data, which reveals significantly lower level of modal verbs. To conclude, English writings in YELC exhibit the restricted use of epistemic metadiscoursal markers with regard to the grammatical class, and it should be emphasized that this narrower employment of lexical items seem to be related with the proficiency level of students' writing.

Figure 2 Distributions of Epistemic Devices by Grammatical Category in LOCNESS and YELC (Proficiency Bands)



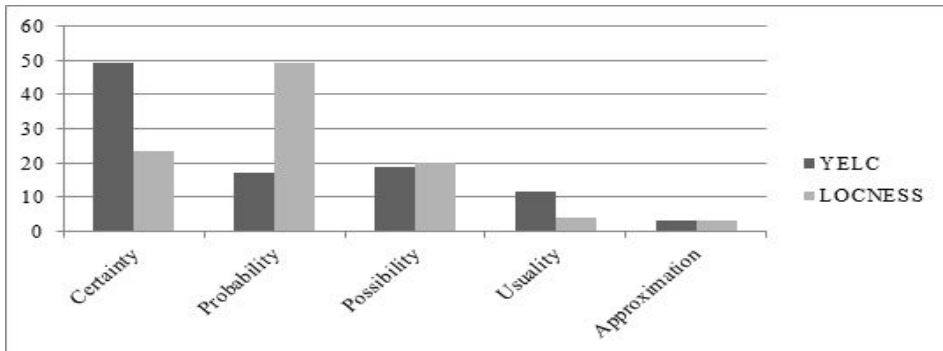
4.1.3. Semantic Category

A number of metadiscourse studies have identified the epistemic metadiscoursal markers in relation with the semantic category, as epistemic devices are to express various degrees of certainty. In this section, the distribution of epistemic features in YELC is compared with LOCNESS in terms of semantic categories (i.e., certainty, probability, possibility, usuality, and approximation). Then, the different use of epistemic devices across semantic classifications between the proficiency levels in YELC will be followed. As

shown in Figure 3, YELC and LOCNESS exhibit the different degrees of certainty and tentativeness when L2 and L1 writers attempt to convey epistemic meanings: there are considerable differences between the two groups particularly with the certainty and probability (See Figure 3).

In the YELC data, L2 writers make use of about half devices (49.2%) from the certainty category while L1 writers employ less than 24% from the same category. In addition to the certainty category, L2 writers employ epistemic devices from the usuality category more than three times (11.6%) than the L1 writers (3.9%). When it comes to the probability, on the other hand, L2 writers employ about 30% less devices (17.3%) than the L1 writers (49.4%) to express probable comments. This finding confirms the results of the previous studies suggesting that L2 writers tend to express their statement in a more assertive voice with certainty markers in comparison with L1 group.

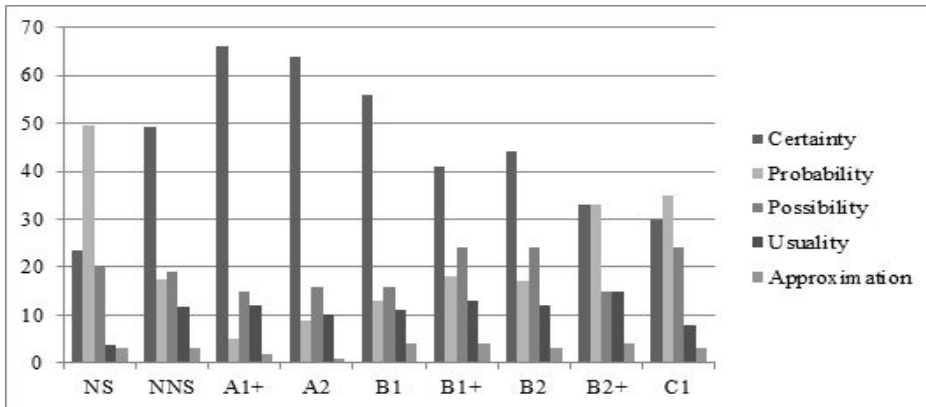
Figure 3 Distributions of Epistemic Devices by Semantic Category in YELC and LOCNESS



Specifically, as can be seen from the Figure 4, there are clear differences in the use of certainty markers between the three lowest proficiency bands (A1+, A2, B1) and the four higher bands (B1+, B2, B2+, C1). The certainty markers constitute more than 50% of the total in the lowest ability groups (A1+: 66%, A2: 64%, B1: 51%), whereas these markers account for around 40% in the other groups (B1+: 51%, B2: 44%, B2+: 33%, C1: 30%). In the certainty scale, the proportional use of certainty markers tends to increase as the proficiency levels decrease. Interestingly, the proficiency level B1+ appears to be the threshold which broadly distinguishes the higher levels from the lower levels in terms of

grammatical and semantic categories. In addition to the certainty markers, there are marked differences in the use of probability markers, particularly with the top two highest level groups representing more qualified expressions than the other groups. In the top two ability groups B2+ and C1, more than 30% of probability markers were employed (B2+: 33% and C1: 35%).

Figure 4 Distributions of Epistemic Devices by Semantic Category in LOCNESS and YELC (Proficiency Bands)



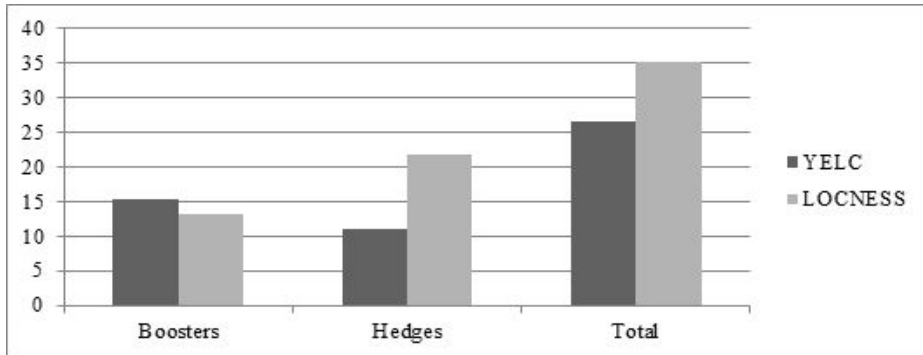
4.1.4. Hedges and Boosters in YELC and LOCNESS

The expression of doubt and certainty is commonly realized by hedges and boosters, which are “central to the rhetorical and interactive character of academic writing” (Hyland, 1998(a), p. 349). Both rhetorical stance markers in the academic writing, hedges and boosters, are employed to balance the objective information with subjective stance in academic writing, and these epistemic expressions are evaluated as a comprehensive strategy in attaining acceptance from the readers. The hedged expression is generally employed to soften one’s statements, and this strategy is one typical feature of the academic writing. Stressed expressions realized by boosters, on the other hand, are usually employed to deliver writer’s certainty, and they function to strengthen his or her opinions in the writing.

Figure 5 exhibits the level of frequencies and densities of hedges and boosters employed in each corpus. As can be seen, there are a number of frequency and density differences, specifically in the use of hedges between the

YELC and LOCNESS data. A comparison of normalized frequencies of the total hedges and boosters in the two corpora reveals several differences: L2 writers employ 2.64 epistemic devices per hundred words and 3.50 devices for L1 writers.

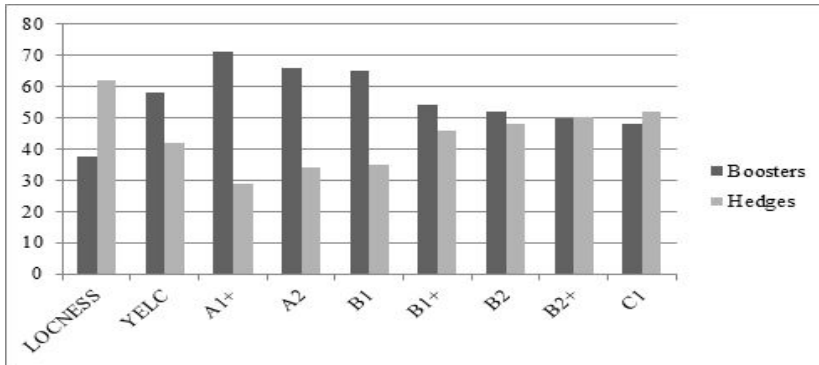
Figure 5 Density of Hedges and Boosters in YELC and LOCNESS (per 1,000 words)



It should be pointed out, however, that L2 writers' high frequencies of the amplifiers in the YELC data may be due to the lower proficiency levels. Figure 6 displays the frequencies of the hedges and boosters according to the proficiency level in the YELC data. Figure 6 below clearly demonstrates the differences on the use of hedges and boosters between the ability bands, and also indicates that the distributions grow closer to the usage of LOCNESS as the proficiency level increases. The three lowest bands reveal very uneven distribution of hedges and boosters, implying that these groups appear to have significant difficulties in expressing their statements with doubt and certainty markers. In conveying epistemic expression, boosters constitute more than 65% of the total expression in the three lowest bands (A1+: 71%, A2: 66%, B1: 65%), although hedges are considerably underused than the other bands accordingly (A1+: 29%, A2: 34%, B1: 35%). The other bands (B1+, B2, B2+, C1), on the other hand, display more evenly distributed percentage in expressing epistemic meaning, compared to the lower level bands. Specifically, the L2 writers in the top two bands B2+ and C1 seem to value more hedged expressions (e.g., B2+: 51%, C1: 52%) than certainty (e.g., B2+: 49%, C1: 48%), which is found out to be the typicality of the L1 writing from LOCNESS. Interestingly, the borderline

distinguishing the lower level from above level appears to exist between B1 and B1+ in terms of the epistemic usage in the YELC data.

Figure 6 Distributions of Hedges and Boosters in LOCNESS and YELC (Proficiency Bands)



4.2. Different Patterns of Epistemic Metadiscourse Markers

4.2.1. Lexical Choices between YELC and LOCNESS

It has been suggested that the different usage of epistemic expressions between L1 and L2 writers is interrelated with the different patterns of these markers to certain extent (Hyland & Milton, 1997; Oh, 2007; Park, 2006). According to Oh (2007), NNS writers may not be confident in presenting the full range of patterns to deliver the epistemic meanings, failing to produce some patterns that are favored by NS writers.

However, even though L2 writers tend to express their doubt and certainty with heavy reliance on the lexical verb in their writing, the construction of epistemic lexical verbs is expected to be simpler than the L1 writings. For example, lexical verbs *argue* and *expect* can be constructed with several different patterns, and these verbs are known to be complex for L2 students to use with an appropriate construction in academic writing. In particular, Korean learners of English are reported to have some difficulties in using them with various patterns (Choi & Ko, 2005; Oh 2007). Example sentences below (2), (3), (4), and (5) show the different constructions of epistemic verbs *argue* and *expect* between YELC and LOCNESS.

- (2) YELC (*argue noun/that*: 27 cases out of 27)
- a. For these reasons, I strongly *argue that* all Korean men do not have to be forced to complete military service. (B1+)
 - b. Of course, it is bad to be physically punished, but I *argue that* punishment should not be compared with any physical engagement. (B1)
- (3) YELC (*expect noun/that*: 4 cases out of 4)
- a. However, accident is not what you can *expect* and what you can foresee. (B2+)
 - b. Through physical punishment, we can *expect* trouble children to calm being school activity. (B1)
- (4) LOCNESS (*be argued that, argue against*: 20 cases out of 49)
- a. It is difficult to *argue against* these criticisms.
 - b. It *is* sometimes *argued that* they can mount the fox back at home, but most times the fox is son damaged by the gunshot wound that only its head is mountable.
- (5) LOCNESS (*be expected to/that*: 6 cases out of 9)
- a. January 1993 *is expected to* witness the creation of the single European Market.
 - b. The Ministry of Agriculture would *be expected to* clarify once and for all whether it was safe or not and then prove it to try and get people to eat beef again before it became too late.

As one of the most significant probability markers, epistemic adverb *probably* was exclusively shown in the writing samples in LOCNESS. It has been suggested that sometimes epistemic devices are shown together with other devices, particularly with hedged expressions, and the epistemic adverb *probably* tends to be preceded by epistemic modal verbs *would* in the L1 academic writings (Hyland & Milton, 1997; Oh, 2007). By aligning hedging adverb *probably* with epistemic modal *would*, one attempts to weaken the force of claims in the clustering construction.

- (6) YELC (*would + probably*: 1 case)
- a. If we eliminate the military service bound for men, the size of the

army *would probably* shrink and there will be bigger chances that we might again fail to protect unprotected civilians. (C1)

(7) LOCNESS (*would + probably*: 17 cases)

- a. By banning fox hunting the law *would probably* drive the sport 'underground' as it were and the participants would find some way around it.
- b. This would affect everyone in Britain, so it *would probably* be the most widely opposed move.

4.2.2. Syntactic Choices between YELC and LOCNESS

There is a consensus among metadiscourse researchers that significant differences are found in presenting the epistemic expressions at the syntactic level between the NS and NNS groups (Choi & Ko, 2005; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Oh, 2007; Park, 2006). L2 students' simpler constructions of epistemic expressions at the sentential level can also be found in regard to the placement of epistemic adverbials. According to Swales and Feak (2012), it is uncommon to place sentential adverbs at the beginning of the sentence in the expert's academic writings, and it is recommended to place these markers at the middle or end of the sentence for better understanding. In the present study, it has been useful to compare the placement of the epistemic adverbials between the NS and NNS groups. For example, sentence adverbials such as *in fact*, *in my opinion*, and *of course* are mostly placed at the initial position of the sentence examples in YELC, whereas L1 writers reveal more balanced use of the epistemic adverbials in terms of positioning at the initial or medial position as shown in examples (8) and (9).

(8) YELC (*in fact*., *in my opinion*, *of course*)

- a. *In fact*, there is no student whom need no way but punching him to fix his behavior. (C1)
- b. *In my opinion*, using cellular phones while driving must be stopped as soon as possible. (B1+)
- c. *Of course*, parents keep watching their children and keep acting like school teachers. (B1)

(9) LOCNESS (*in fact, in my opinion, of course*)

- a. Cases before British courts and the European Court of Justice have clearly shown that Community law does *in fact* prevail over UK law.
- b. A “super” perfect baby will soon be introduced which, *in my opinion*, isn't morally correct.
- c. Besides, to keep the air in public areas clean, the matter *of course*, it takes money, more precisely, the tax from citizens.

A final aspect of epistemic metadiscoursal devices is the tendency of the clustering patterns that expert writers show in academic writing. As Lyons puts it, “there is a kind of concord running through the clause, which results in the double realisation of a single modality” (Lyons, 1977, p. 808). The LOCNESS corpus indicates that more than about 20% of the modalized sentences comprise at least two epistemic devices, generally functioning to downgrade the force of the statements in the writing. As can be seen from the examples below, the LOCNESS data show the tendency of L1 writers to employ more than two hedging devices:

(10) LOCNESS

- a. Whilst to a *certain extent* I *may* be guilty of having an island mentality, I wouldn't go as far as to say Britain is in danger of handing all control over to faceless bureaucrats in Brussels or Strasbourg.
- b. It *would* be *unlikely* to sell in Europe and too costly to sell further afield, and other than human consumption beef has few major uses.

Similar concord runnings within the clause in the YELC data, however, reveal fewer epistemic clusters (13%), and these expressions are generally used to strengthen their claim rather than softening which is the typicality of L1 expert writings:

(11) YELC

- a. The people agree with the state *must not have known* the users of the Internet. (A1)
- b. He *must be quite* upset if she misses the call. (B2)

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the epistemic metadiscoursal markers as the rhetorical stance to compare how certainty and qualification markers are employed between the two groups (i.e., L1 and L2) based on two learners corpora (i.e., YELC and LOCNESS). The quantitative and qualitative analyses on hedges and boosters reveal considerable differences in the use of epistemic features between the L1 writers and L2 writers. In order to achieve the purpose of the paper, the frequency, density, and range of epistemic metadiscoursal markers were examined quantitatively, and several patterns of epistemic expressions were analyzed qualitatively. In addition, these analyses on the writing in each proficiency level in YELC were conducted.

In comparison with L1 writers, Korean learners of English depend on a relatively narrow range of epistemic features. The learner group overuses very limited lexical items (e.g., *think, know, of course, etc.*), although with much less employment on other epistemic devices (e.g., *would, could, may, probably, etc.*) compared to L1 writers. The Korean learners overuse epistemic lexical verbs in terms of grammatical category, showing unbalanced use of epistemic devices. They tend to show strong voice on their statements by revealing more certainty markers. One of the significant findings to emerge from this study is that the problematic concept and practice of hedges and boosters are linked to proficiency levels among Korean learners. While the lower ability bands exhibit heavy reliance on a limited range of hedges and boosters, simpler construction, and strong conviction, higher ability bands, particularly the top two bands, display balanced use of hedges and boosters, various patterns and forms, and qualified statements. This implies that this central aspect of language use can be developed by explicit instructions, as higher level L2 learners appear to have acquired the better understanding of the academic convention.

With regard to the pedagogical perspective, some researchers in the metadiscourse study have argued that it may be necessary for writing instructors to raise awareness of the pragmatic importance of epistemic devices in academic writing. Explicit instructions for L2 writers are also needed to raise L2 student's awareness in presenting their argument with appropriate degrees of probability (Hyland & Milton, 1997). For example, as Salager-Meyer suggested, paraphrasing exercises may assist L2 writers to acquire the mastery use of epistemic devices by replacing boosters with hedges or vice versa in the writing exercise (Salager-Meyer, 1994).

Still, the pragmatic importance of metadiscourse markers is largely overlooked in the L2 writing pedagogy (Allison, 1995). In order to improve student's writing, particularly in expressing the doubt and certainty in the academic writing, it is recommended that further research be undertaken in the following areas: Firstly, given the fact that Korean students appear to have difficulty in stating their argument with unbalanced use of hedges and boosters in general, teaching materials such as English school textbooks need to be investigated to determine whether or not the conventional use of epistemic features is properly represented the same way that expert English users make use of. Secondly, the metadiscourse study, particularly hedges and boosters, also needs to be further studied in terms of the writing assessment. As this paper suggests, the use of hedges and boosters appears to be related with the proficiency level of English writing. As shown in the present study, it would be interesting to investigate the possible connection between the use of metadiscourse markers and the proficiency levels of student writings as the hedges and boosters would probably be another way to judge the levels of students' performances on the writing examination. Even though no study has proved the relationship between the assessment criteria and use of metadiscoursal markers, they may contribute to the assessment field in the academic writing to evaluate the proficiency levels of student's writing. These studies would be necessary to help student writers to acquire the central rhetorical convention in academic writing, particularly at the college level.

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Appendix: List of Hedges and Boosters Examined in This Study

These are the search items used in this study as potentially realizing metadiscourse functions. It must be remembered, of course, that all items can realize either propositional or metadiscoursal meanings and that many can express either interactive or interpersonal meanings. Every instance should therefore be studied in its sentential context (Hyland, 2005a, p. 218). Some items were also selected from Hyland & Milton (1997)'s study.

Boosters

actually	of-course	broadly	mostly
always	prove	certain-amount	often
believe	proved	certain-extent	on-the-whole
believed	proves	certain-level	ought
believes	realize	claim	perhaps
beyond-doubt	realized	claimed	plausible
certain	realizes	claims	plausibly
certainly	really	could	possible
clear	show	couldn-t	possibly
clearly	showed	doubt	postulate
conclusively	shown	doubtful	postulated
decidedly	shows	essentially	postulates
definite	sure	estimate	presumable
definitely	surely	estimated	probable
demonstrate	think	fairly	probably
demonstrated	thinks	feel	quite
demonstrates	thought	feels	rather
doubtless	truly	felt	relatively
establish	true	frequently	roughly
established	undeniable	from-my-perspective	seems
evident	undeniably	from-our-perspective	should
evidently	undisputedly	from-this-perspective	sometimes
find	undoubtedly	generally	somewhat
finds	will	guess	suggest
found	without-doubt	indicate	suggested
in-fact	won-t	indicated	suggests
incontestable	Hedges	indicates	suppose
incontestably	about	in-general	supposed
incontrovertible	almost	in-most-cases	supposes
incontrovertibly	apparent	in-most-instances	suspect
indeed	apparently	in-my-opinion	suspects
indisputable	appear	in-my-view	tend-to
indisputably	appeared	in-this-view	tended-to
know	appears	in-our-opinion	tends-to
known	approximately	in-our-view	would
must	argue	largely	wouldn-t
never	argued	likely	
no-doubt	argues	mainly	
obvious	around	may	
obviously	assume	maybe	
	assumed	might	

Chan Hee Kim

Department of English Language and Literature

Yonsei University

Yonsei University 50 Yonsei-ro, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul 120-749, Korea

Phone: (02) 2123-7516

Email: chanhee@yonsei.ac.kr

Hong Won Suh

Department of English Language and Literature

Yonsei University

Yonsei University 50 Yonsei-ro, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul 120-749, Korea

Phone: (02) 2123-2306

Email: hwsuh@yonsei.ac.kr

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