

Hedging Across Genres and Genders: Task and Gender Patterns in Korean EFL Learners' Hedging Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Despite substantial research on hedging in academic writing and spoken interaction, few studies examine how the same learners deploy hedges across argumentative writing and request speech acts, particularly with respect to gender, power relations, and social distance in Korean EFL contexts. This exploratory study addresses that gap.

Twenty-two Korean EFL undergraduates (11 female, 11 male), classified as intermediate to advanced based on their Korean College Scholastic Ability Test scores, completed an argumentative essay and a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) comprising four prompts that systematically varied power asymmetry and interlocutor familiarity. Each text was segmented into T-units, and hedges were coded using a modified Salager-Meyer (1994) taxonomy at satisfactory inter-rater reliability ($\kappa = .72$). Raw hedge frequencies and type distributions were compared using descriptive statistics, independent-samples *t* tests, and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests.

Overall hedge frequency did not differ significantly between the two genres ($p = .26$), although emotionally charged intensifiers were more frequent in the DCT than in the essay ($z = 2.17$, $p = .03$). Shields, particularly modal auxiliaries, predominated in both genres. Female participants produced more hedges than male participants in both the DCT ($p = .005$) and the essay ($p = .014$), with large effect sizes across all power and familiarity conditions ($d = 0.92$ – 1.25). This advantage held even though male participants were, if anything, the slightly more advanced group, so the gender difference does not appear to be a by-product of proficiency. Given the modest sample and the use of raw frequency counts, the gender and genre patterns are best read as consistent within this cohort and as a strong basis for confirmation in larger, length-normalized studies.

The genre-invariant reliance on modal shields suggests that these learners favored cognitively accessible forms over more pragmatically demanding devices such as approximators and compound hedges. The greater use of intensifiers in the DCT indicates that hedge selection may be sensitive to interpersonal demands, especially in low-power requestive scenarios. The observed gender pattern is consistent with the multifunctionality account of Coates (2013) and Holmes (1990), under which hedges may serve politeness and relational functions rather than signaling uncertainty alone, though the present data cannot establish its source.

Pedagogically, the shared overreliance on modal shields points to an underdeveloped pragmatic repertoire across learners. Rather than targeting any single group, instruction could expose all learners to a broader range of hedging devices through genre-sensitive tasks that vary in power and social distance, supporting context-appropriate deployment in real-world English communication. The gender pattern is best treated as a direction for larger-scale research rather than a basis for differentiated instruction at this stage.

Keywords: hedges, discourse genre, gender, power relations, social distance, argumentative writing, request speech acts

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