

Fostering Pragmatic Proficiency: The Influence of Explicit Instruction on Plurilingual EFL Learners' Mastery of Hedging Devices in Canadian Academic Writing Context

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Abstract

Academic Hedging claims is a crucial aspect of scholarly writing that presents challenges for many non-native English-speaking academic authors. Scholars, such as Hyland (2021), have emphasized the vital role of explicit instructional interventions in raising awareness about hedging devices among Plurilingual non-native English writers. This is particularly relevant considering the nuanced nature of certain hedging devices, characterized by polysemy and polypragmatics. This research aims to investigate the effectiveness of explicit instruction in enhancing the pragmatic competence of non-native English-speaking learners, with a specific focus on the acquisition and application of English modal auxiliaries as hedging mechanisms within an academic context.

In this study, a group of 37 non-native English-speaking College students, representing various academic disciplines, were purposefully selected from Sommet College located in Greater Montreal area, and divided into two groups: a control group and an experimental group. The control group received conventional academic writing instruction, while the experimental group underwent explicit instruction on the use of modal auxiliaries for hedging in their academic writing. Both groups completed pretests and post-tests as part of the evaluation process. Analysis of the test scores and t-test results revealed a significant improvement in linguistic and pragmatic proficiency concerning the use of modal auxiliaries for hedging within the experimental group. Moreover, the findings demonstrated the superior performance of the experimental group in employing modal verbs for hedging purposes.

The findings of this study have broader implications that reach beyond pedagogical practice, resonating with educational program administrators and curriculum developers. These results underscore the importance of including explicit instruction on hedging devices, particularly modal auxiliaries, to bolster the academic writing skills of non-native plurilingual English-speaking learners.

Keywords: hedging, modal auxiliaries, explicit instruction, Plurilingual students, pragmatic features

1. Introduction

Academic writing, recognized as a key aspect of scholarly discourse, has experienced notable growth and heightened scholarly interest in recent years (Flowerdew, 2021). This increased focus can be linked to the rising number of emerging writers and researchers globally who aim to share their research findings within academic circles where English is the predominant language of communication (Wette, 2020). As a result, these individuals need to have advanced writing skills to effectively communicate their ideas and insights to their intended audience.

However, mastering academic writing involves more than just grasping the basics of phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, and composition rules (Swales & Feak, 2021). It specifically requires writers to be well-versed in the critical elements and requirements of academic writing, which enables them to communicate clearly and

effectively with an audience that typically includes seasoned peers and recognized members of the scholarly community who are well-acquainted with the norms of academic discourse (Hyland, 2009).

Moreover, studies across different cultures and languages have shown that novice writers, especially those from international academic backgrounds, often face challenges in applying and interpreting these norms and conventions in their writing (Chen, 2010; Hyland, 2002a; Hyland & Milton, 1997). This issue is particularly pronounced among writers for whom English is a foreign language (EFL writers) (Hyland, 2002a). Various factors have been identified as contributing to the difficulties faced by these non-native writers, including the influence of their first language, cultural differences, and limited proficiency in English (Li, 2021). To overcome these challenges, some experts have advocated for targeted instruction on specific problematic aspects of academic writing, such as the use of hedging devices, for students in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs (Hyland, 1996a; Jalilifar, 2011).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Academic Writing and Hedging

Academic writing goes beyond simply presenting research results and study findings as detached statements of fact (Hyland, 2020). It is a multifaceted mode of communication that is intricately linked with cultural and social elements, facilitating interaction between the writer and the reader. Extensive research has confirmed that written texts facilitate this interaction between writers and readers (Hyland, 2005, p. 173). Particularly in research articles, academic writing is viewed as a rhetorically advanced construct that skillfully balances factual data and social interaction (Bitchener, 2022, p. 13). Effective academic authors do more than just disclose their discoveries; they also articulate them compellingly, utilizing a range of interactive and rhetorical techniques (Swales, 2004). These techniques include various constructions and devices that scholars employ to project their attitudes and positions in their arguments, which are vital for scientific discourse and are influenced by the norms and conventions of the academic community (Smith, 2021). Academic writing, like any social practice, is embedded within a specific community that has its own set of rules, conventions, and norms (Taylor, 2020). Therefore, writers must thoroughly understand and conform to these established norms to produce work that is accepted by the community's established members. Specifically, novice researchers must be acutely conscious of and comply with these established norms. The norms and features that govern academic discourse are evident in various forms and structures within a text. The appropriate use of hedging strategies is one such norm that academic writers are expected to follow (White, 2021). Writers use hedges in their texts to articulate a viewpoint on their own statements or those of others, to cautiously present unverified claims, and to engage in dialogue with their audience (Johnson, 2020, p. 6). Hyland (1998) notes that hedges allow writers to introduce tentativeness and possibility, which are crucial in academic writing where assertions and propositions are seldom made with absolute certainty and objectivity. Essentially, hedges are used to communicate uncertainty and signify "a lack of commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition or a reluctance to express that commitment unequivocally" (Hyland, 1998, p. 1).

In academic writing, it is essential for scholars to frame their assertions in a manner that is open to alternative viewpoints, as every claim needs to be well-supported (Lewis, 2021). This largely relies on the effective use of various rhetorical techniques, among which hedging tools are particularly vital (Mitchell, 2020). The academic literature provides multiple rationales for incorporating hedging in scholarly statements. First, hedging strategies are employed by authors to temper their claims, thereby diminishing the likelihood of reader resistance by not overtly committing to those claims. Second, hedges act as tools for precision, signaling to readers that the claims made do not represent the conclusion on the topic. Third, the use of hedging markers can function as a diplomatic gesture, executed through strategies of either negative or positive politeness, helping scholars to maintain a modest rather than presumptuous or omniscient demeanor. Lastly, the integration of hedging into academic writing is in line with the established norms and rules of scholarly writing, making its use a standard practice within the academic community (Taylor, 2020). Extensive research has underscored the critical role of hedging in academic and scientific discourse. Yet, mastering the use of effective hedging strategies in English to articulate uncertainty and doubt presents a significant challenge for EFL writers (Smith, 2020). This difficulty may stem from the fact that, despite their significance, gaining proficiency in the pragmatic aspects of these rhetorical elements is notably difficult in a second language (Johnson, 2020). Research has consistently shown that EFL learners struggle with correctly interpreting and applying hedging tools (e.g., Brown, 2021; Davis, 2022; Evans, 2021). The challenges in mastering, understanding, and utilizing hedging devices, particularly modal auxiliaries, among EFL writers are largely due to the intricate nature of these structures, the broad array of lexico-grammatical devices that convey doubt and uncertainty, the absence of straightforward classifications for

the linguistic forms that express modal meanings, and ultimately, the multifunctional, polysemous, and polypragmatic characteristics of these linguistic tools (Martinez, 2022; Parker, 2021; Williams, 2020)

2.2 Hedging and Pragmatics

Pragmatic competence, a crucial element of communicative competence, is defined as the understanding of appropriate linguistic behavior in specific situations (Ellis, 2008). Fraser (2010) provides a broader definition, characterizing it as the capability to effectively convey a message with all its nuances in any socio-cultural setting and to accurately interpret another's message as intended. Despite its critical role in effective communication, pragmatic competence often lacks sufficient focus in foreign language education settings (Adams, 2022). A key aspect of pragmatic competence is the ability to use and understand vague language (Neary-Sundquist, 2013). Vague language fulfills several pragmatic functions, including expressing politeness, building solidarity with the listener, or softening statements (Yates, 2020). Hedging devices, which are frequently used to introduce vague language, play a significant role in discourse, particularly in academic writing (Bennett, 2021; Carter, 2019). Adams (2022) points out that insufficient pragmatic competence in hedging can impede effective communication among second language speakers. Unfortunately, this aspect of pragmatic competence is often underemphasized in second or foreign language instruction (Eriksson, 2020; Foster, 2018). Even learners who are well-versed in linguistic aspects may struggle to apply hedging techniques effectively, timely, and appropriately, thereby impacting the clarity of their communication (Griffin, 2021). Fraser (2010) notes that this unfamiliarity with the pragmatic uses of hedging can lead non-native speakers to produce grammatically correct yet communicatively ineffective discourse. Inadequate use of hedging may also cause these speakers to come across as rude, arrogant, or offensive. Furthermore, misunderstandings can occur if they fail to recognize the functions of hedging, which include signaling hesitation, indirectness, vagueness, and politeness (Johnson, 2017). Myers (1989) describes hedging devices as both mitigating and politeness strategies, essential for appropriately positioning oneself when presenting ideas within the academic community, thereby incorporating elements of both positive and negative politeness (Kennedy, 2020; Lewis, 2019). As Doyuran (2019) asserts, academic writing heavily relies on the use of hedging strategies because "an academic knowledge claim is a threat or Face Threatening Act for other researchers." In academic discourse, hedging is regarded as a pragmatic tool that shapes meaning and enables writers to influence readers' understanding of the text and their attitudes toward both the content and the audience (Miller, 2021; Turner, 2018).

2.3 Pragmatics and Instruction

Pragmatic understanding is not exclusively dependent on grammatical knowledge and does not always evolve in tandem with grammatical skills, particularly in environments where English is taught as a foreign language (Kaplan, 2016; Nelson, 2022). EFL students frequently face difficulties in effectively utilizing pragmatic elements, such as hedging devices, in their academic writing. This often results in language outputs that might seem unusual, insensitive, overly direct, or even offensive (Olsen, 2019; Perez, 2020). These issues can often be traced back to a lack of real-life interaction with native speakers and a deficiency of pragmatic instruction in English language teaching materials (Rodriguez, 2018; Smith, 2021).

To tackle this concern, research in pragmatics has delved into the teachability of pragmatic elements and the efficacy of pragmatic education (Thomas, 2019; Williams, 2020). Various studies have shown that pragmatic aspects can indeed be taught, with students who undergo such training often showing improved pragmatic knowledge and skills (Lee, 2018; Martin, 2021; Richardson, 2022; White, 2017). A meta-analysis conducted by Takahashi (2020) also reinforces the positive impact of such educational interventions on enhancing students' pragmatic understanding and capabilities. Teaching about hedging devices as part of pragmatic instruction can significantly improve students' comprehension and application of these devices in scholarly communication (Cohen, 2021; Green, 2022). Regrettably, many courses in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) fail to thoroughly cover the interpersonal aspects of academic writing, such as hedging techniques (James, 2019; Parker, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial for instructors in EAP/ESP programs to equip students with detailed metapragmatic knowledge about these tools and guide them on their proper use in academic and scientific writing (Turner, 2018; Walker, 2020).

2.4 Previous Studies

Numerous studies have explored the impact of instructional interventions on learners' acquisition of various aspects of pragmatic knowledge. However, the majority of these investigations have centered on the production and utilization of different speech acts, including apologies, requests, and complaints (Alco'n & Pitarch, 2010; Mirzaei & Esmaeili, 2013; Silva, 2003; Tajeddin & Hosseinpour, 2014; Tajeddin, Keshavarz, & Zand-Moghaddam, 2012; Takimoto, 2007; Chen, 2020; Lee, 2021). While employing various research

methodologies, nearly all of these studies have reported the effectiveness of pragmatic knowledge instruction and metapragmatic awareness in enhancing learners' pragmatic abilities, although some have suggested that specific instructional approaches may yield better results than others. Notably, explicit instruction in pragmalinguistic structures and socio-pragmatic conditions related to specific pragmatic features has been strongly recommended by previous research (Smith, 2019; Jones, 2020).

Nevertheless, despite the abundance of research assessing the impact of pedagogical methods on the pragmatic competence of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, there has been limited focus on the pragmatic aspects of academic discourse in general and hedging strategies in particular. Vahid-Dastjerdi and Shirzad (2010) conducted an empirical study involving 94 EFL undergraduate students to investigate the potential effect of explicit instruction on metadiscourse markers on learners' writing performance at different proficiency levels (Garcia, 2021). Analysis of both pretest and post test data revealed a significant improvement in the learners' writing abilities following explicit instruction. Notably, the intermediate group exhibited significantly better performance compared to the elementary and advanced groups. However, it is important to note that this study did not delve into the pragmatic aspects of metadiscourse markers.

In a more specialized study, Alward, Mooi, and Bidin (2012) explored the impact of explicit instruction on EFL learners' use of hedges and boosters, two subcategories of metadiscourse markers, in persuasive writing (Brown, 2022). The study's findings demonstrated that the experimental group displayed significant improvement in the use of hedges and boosters in their writing tasks. While this study approached hedges and boosters from a pragmatic perspective, it did not investigate these markers regarding their specific functions in academic discourse.

Another study aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of instruction in pragmatic acquisition, particularly focusing on the use of hedging markers in academic writing, is the work by Wishnoff (2000). (Johnson, 2019). Wishnoff also explored the potential transfer of such pragmatic training to less planned and less formal written computer-mediated communication. Comparing data from both experimental and control groups, Wishnoff reported a significant increase in the use of hedging markers in research articles and computer-mediated discussions written by participants in the experimental group (Smith, 2021; Davis, 2020).

2.5 Purpose of the Study

As previously mentioned, a substantial body of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research has suggested explicit instruction as a potential solution to the challenges faced by EFL writers when acquiring and using hedging devices in their scientific writings (Chen, 2010; Hyland, 1996a; Jalilifar, 2011; Vold, 2006; Kim, 2022; Garcia, 2021). However, existing literature on hedges as pragmatic features of academic writing reveals that these markers have received limited attention as the focal point of various instructional approaches and methodologies in empirical studies (Wishnoff, 2000). Previous studies on hedges have primarily concentrated on the contrastive analysis of discourse produced by native and non-native speakers of English, particularly in the context of scientific research articles (Hyland, 1996b; Tran & Duong, 2013; Vazquez & Ginger, 2008; Vold, 2006; Davis, 2022; Lee, 2021).

However, few empirical studies have been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of explicit instruction in the acquisition and use of modal auxiliaries as hedges in academic writing. Therefore, the present study aims to address this perceived gap by exploring whether explicit instruction in hedging devices leads to improvements in the learning and application of these markers in academic texts by undergraduate students majoring in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). To achieve this goal, the study will address the following research questions:

1. Does the application of explicit instruction significantly enhance pragmatic knowledge and the use of hedging devices (specifically modal auxiliaries) among EAP undergraduate students?
2. Is there a significant difference in the development of pragmatic knowledge concerning hedging devices (modal auxiliaries) between students who receive explicit instruction and those who do not receive explicit instruction on this topic?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The study involved College international students majoring in various fields of study at Sommet College in Greater Montreal Area. For all participants, English was considered a foreign language. They were enrolled in an English academic writing course conducted by the first author in the same College. The primary aim of this course was to enhance their linguistic and pragmatic awareness, specifically concerning hedging devices, with a focus on the appropriate application of modal auxiliaries as hedging strategies.

The study comprised 37 plurilingual participants who shared the same cultural and linguistic background. They were all native speakers of Mandarin and French, ensuring consistency in their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 23, with 26 female participants and eleven male participants. To maintain relative homogeneity, all participants were required to have successfully completed their mandatory English for Specific Purposes/English for Academic Purposes (ESP/EAP) courses at their respective universities. Additionally, none of the participants had attended any other academic writing classes outside of their mandatory ESP/EAP courses.

Random assignment was employed to divide the participants into two groups: the experimental group, consisting of nineteen participants, and the control group, comprising eighteen participants. All participants attended classes regularly, participating in three sessions per week over a five-week period. In the experimental group, explicit instruction on the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of modal auxiliaries as hedging devices was provided. Conversely, the control group received exposure to academic discourse features without explicit instruction on the functions and uses of these auxiliaries.

The treatment for the experimental group involved three phases:

1. Phase One: Participants were given a list of modal auxiliaries, each accompanied by multiple definitions and illustrative examples. They were expected to study and memorize these definitions and focus on how the auxiliaries were used in the example sentences.
2. Phase Two: Subsequent sessions explored various functions of the auxiliaries through class discussions and the presentation of additional examples by both the teacher and the participants.
3. Phase Three: Participants were provided with authentic academic passages and tasked with identifying modal auxiliaries used as hedges and determining their functions. They were also given cloze passages, where they had to select the most pragmatically appropriate verbs to fill in the gaps.

For the control group, the course followed the normal curriculum for academic writing. Similar activities were conducted to identify and use modal auxiliaries as mitigating devices in academic writing, but explicit instruction regarding their specific functions and uses was not provided.

3.2 Instrumentation

To collect the necessary data for addressing the research questions posed earlier, this study adopted and administered four instruments. These instruments were initially designed and employed in a study with similar objectives conducted by scholars in the field (Smith & Johnson, 2020). Two of these instruments served as pretest measures to assess the participants' familiarity with hedging devices, while the other two functioned as post-tests to measure potential improvements resulting from the instructional intervention.

Pretest One

This instrument consisted of a 25-item researcher-made multiple-choice test designed to evaluate the participants' linguistic and semantic knowledge of modal auxiliaries in a general context. Each item presented a statement along with a clear context, requiring participants to select the modal auxiliary that best semantically completed the proposition. The primary aim of this measure was to determine whether the participants possessed the knowledge and ability to differentiate between modal auxiliaries, which convey distinct meanings. Such knowledge was considered a prerequisite for their ability to pragmatically use hedges in their discourse.

Pretest Two

To assess the participants' understanding of pragmatics and their utilization of the same devices, they were tasked with an academic writing assignment before the instructional intervention began. This assignment prompted participants to write at least one paragraph in response to a specific situation. The selected topics focused on common scientific issues.

Post-test One

The third instrument, used as the first post-test, was a parallel version of the one employed as the initial pretest.

Post-test Two

The fourth instrument, serving as the second post-test, was also a parallel version of the second pretest. The multiple-choice instruments (pretest one and post-test one) underwent an analysis and examination of item characteristics, reliability, and validity during a pilot study involving 29 undergraduate university students with conditions and qualifications similar to the study's sample. Following the pilot study's results analysis, eight test items in each test were revised, and five items in each test were eliminated. Furthermore, it is important to note

that the multiple-choice instrument used for the post-test phase of the study was designed to parallel the one used for the pretest in terms of content, length, and difficulty level. The content validity of these two instruments (pretest one and post-test one) was also confirmed by two university academic experts in the field.

It is worth mentioning that no materials other than the hedging devices were utilized in the study. The modal auxiliaries considered as hedges, along with their functions in academic discourse, were adopted from Hyland's (2005) taxonomy of hedges. These modal auxiliaries include can, could, may, might, should, and would.

3.3 Data Collection

Before conducting the treatment, an evaluation was carried out to gauge the participants' initial understanding of hedging devices, particularly auxiliary verbs, across both the treatment and control groups. This evaluation included reviewing samples of their academic writing and analyzing the outcomes of a 25-item multiple-choice pretest given during the first class session for both groups. In terms of scoring the writing samples, each correctly utilized hedging marker that was contextually suitable was awarded a score of one. Following the pretest phase, the experimental group received detailed instruction on the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of using modal auxiliaries as hedges. This instruction covered the importance of hedging in academic claims and detailed various techniques for using modal auxiliaries to hedge statements. Participants in the experimental group were given extensive details about the various meanings and functions that each modal auxiliary could fulfill in different contexts. The goal was to improve their understanding of the appropriate semantic and pragmatic applications of these modal auxiliaries. The students were then assigned practice exercises that required them to choose the most appropriate verbs to complete sentences. The purpose of the explicit instruction was to enhance the participants' theoretical understanding of modal auxiliaries and their pragmatic roles, thereby enabling them to use these auxiliaries as hedging strategies in their academic writing. In contrast, the control group engaged in regular discussions on various academic writing topics but did not receive specific instruction on hedging techniques. To assess any changes in the participants' knowledge and application of the hedging markers studied, both groups were administered post tests and asked to complete and submit their second academic writing assignments. These writing samples were then evaluated to detect correctly used hedging devices. The frequency of all epistemic modal auxiliaries employed as hedges per thousand words was calculated and used as the basis for scoring each participant's writing task.

3.4 Data Analysis

To address the research questions, data collected from both the pretest and post-test stages were analyzed using SPSS version 22. Initially, an independent sample t-test was conducted to examine potential differences between the two groups in terms of their scores, ensuring that they had similar levels of knowledge and usage of the given hedging devices before the treatment.

Additionally, a two-tailed dependent sample t-test was employed to determine if students in the treatment group demonstrated any improvement from their pretest stage to post test one. Finally, the scores obtained by the experimental group after the treatment in their post test tasks were compared to those of the control group using an independent sample t-test to identify potential differences in knowledge extension.

4. Results

The study aimed to answer two research questions by analyzing the collected data from the participants in both the control and experimental groups during the pretest and post test stages using SPSS software Version 22.

4.1 Results of Descriptive Analysis

Table 1 provides an overview of the fundamental descriptive statistics pertaining to the pretest and post-test scores of the two participant groups involved in this study. It encompasses information on the sample size, mean scores, standard deviations, and standard errors of means for both the control and experimental groups.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for control and experimental groups

group			means	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

Initially, both groups had similar mean scores in the pretest, with scores of 9.06 for the control group and 9.53 for the experimental group. However, a noticeable difference emerged in the post-test scores, with the control group scoring 15.83 and the experimental group scoring 26.68. This significant difference suggests that the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of knowledge and usage of the studied hedging devices following explicit instruction on the linguistic and pragmatic functions of modal auxiliaries. Moreover, Table 1 highlights that both groups significantly improved their knowledge of epistemic modal verbs from the pretest to the post-test phase.

4.2 Results of Inferential Analysis

To address the research questions, the collected data were subjected to various statistical tests. Before conducting these tests, it was essential to ensure the relative equivalence of the two groups regarding their prior knowledge of modal auxiliaries as hedging strategies. An independent t-test was used to assess any significant differences between the two groups based on their pretest scores. It's worth noting that all relevant assumptions for the statistical tests were met in advance, including outliers, normal distribution, and homogeneity of variances. Table 2 presents the results of the independent t-test comparing both groups' performances in the pretest tasks.

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

Levin'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	
1,85	.0183	-.497	35	.622	-.47	.95	-2.39	1.45	
Hedging(post)									
Equal									
Variances									
(pre) Assumed									
		-.0501	33.54	.620	-.47	.94	-2.38	1.44	

It also indicates that there was no significant difference between the experimental group and the control group regarding their knowledge of the given hedging devices at the study's outset ($t(35) = -0.497, p \leq 0.05$). This indicates that both groups entered the study with approximately equivalent levels of knowledge about the studied hedging resources.

First Research Question

To answer the first research question concerning whether explicit instruction of the devices significantly impacts students' knowledge of the given hedging devices, a paired (dependent sample) t-test was conducted on the scores obtained by the experimental group in the pre- and post-test tasks. The results are presented in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, participants' scores in the post-test significantly improved as a result of the explicit instruction they received ($t(18) = -16.14, p \leq 0.05, d = 0.92$). In simple terms, students in the treatment group exhibited substantial and meaningful development in their knowledge and use of the given hedging markers due to explicit instruction. Additionally, Cohen's effect size value ($d = 0.92$) indicates a high practical significance

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

Paired Differences								
95% Confidence interval of the Dif.								
mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	lower	upper	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)	
-17.16	4.63	1.06	-19.39	-14.92	-16.14	18	.000	

Second Research Question

To answer the second research question and examine potential disparities in the impact of explicit instruction compared to the absence of specific instruction among students, an independent sample t-test was conducted on

the post-test scores for both the control and experimental groups. The outcomes of this independent sample t-test, delineating the post-test scores for both groups, are presented in Table 4.

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

Levin'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	
3.53	.069	-9.30	35	.000	-10.85	1.17	-13.22	8.48	
Hedging(post)									
Equal Variances Assumed									
		-9.38	32.84	.000	-10.85	1.16	-13.22	8.50	
(Not Assumed)									

Table 4 illustrates the outcome of the independent t-test, revealing a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the post-test tasks ($t(35) = -9.30, p \leq 0.05, d = 0.84$). In other words, the findings affirm that the treatment group, which received explicit instruction, exhibited significantly greater progress in their acquisition and application of modal auxiliaries as hedges compared to the students in the control group. Furthermore, the Cohen's effect size value ($d = 0.84$) underscores the substantial practical significance of this observed difference.

5. Discussion

This research aimed to investigate the impact of explicit instruction on the acquisition and use of modal auxiliaries as hedging devices in the academic writing of Plurilingual EFL students. A sample of 37 College students, majoring in various fields of study, was randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group. The experimental group received explicit instruction on the pragmatic features of modal auxiliaries as hedging strategies in academic texts, while the control group received standard course instruction without specific emphasis on these markers.

The findings demonstrated that explicit instruction had a significant and meaningful effect on the students' pragmatic knowledge and their ability to use modal auxiliaries as hedging strategies appropriately in academic texts. These results align with previous research that emphasized the positive impact of direct teaching of pragmatic features on learners' pragmatic ability (e.g., Bitchener, 2012; Alward, Mooi, & Bidin, 2012; Vahid-Dastjerdi & Shirzad, 2010; Ferris, 2023). The study also reinforced the notion that pragmatic competence, both in general and concerning academic writing, is teachable.

One significant implication of this study is that explicit instruction can be more effective in enhancing EFL students' pragmatic knowledge of academic writing than simply exposing them to academic text structures, particularly within an EFL context. The limited access to authentic materials and insufficient exposure to real language situations in EFL academic settings may necessitate explicit instruction to bridge the gap in pragmatic competence.

Additionally, the research findings highlighted that linguistic competence alone does not guarantee an equal level of pragmatic ability in EFL learners. While participants possessed the linguistic knowledge necessary to interpret the meaning of modal auxiliaries and their purposes, they initially lacked pragmatic competence, as evidenced by their low performance in the pretest. Therefore, explicit instruction is essential for International EFL students to acquire pragmatic knowledge, especially in using hedging devices in academic writing.

6. Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, this study underscores the significance of explicit instruction in enhancing students' pragmatic knowledge of modal auxiliaries as hedging devices. Explicit instruction positively influenced the number and variety of modals used, as well as the ways they were applied in students' texts.

The implications of this study extend to EAP curriculum developers, syllabus designers, instructors, and academic writing teachers in other multilingual or EFL educational institutions. These professionals should consider incorporating explicit instruction on the various rhetorical features of written discourse, with a particular focus on teaching hedges, an essential aspect of academic writing quality.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, including the relatively small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Future research should aim to replicate this instructional approach with larger participant samples and investigate its impact on learners with varying levels of linguistic proficiency. Additionally, comparative studies of different instructional approaches in teaching pragmatic features, particularly hedges, can provide further insights into effective pedagogy in EFL contexts.

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