

Hedges and Boosters in the US College Application Essays: A Corpus-Based Comparative Study between the US Middle and the US top College Application Essays

Chonlagarn Incharoensak

Language Institute
Thammasat University
E-mail: chonlagarn.i@gmail.com

Chanika Gampper

Language Institute
Thammasat University
E-mail: chanika.g@litu.tu.ac.th

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Abstract

The present study examines the use of hedges and boosters in college application essays written by Thai students who were accepted into the US middle colleges and international students who were accepted into The US top colleges. The hedges and boosters that express epistemic modality are the main focus as writers' attitudes are critical in college application essays. Concordancing was used to search for epistemic hedges and boosters which were analyzed according to Hyland's taxonomy of forms and functions. More tentative expression was used than confident prediction in the US middle college application essays, as hedges were employed more frequently in the US middle than in the US top college application essays. Epistemic hedges in college application essays were found to express probability or display writers' uncertainty, while epistemic boosters were employed as a certainty marker. Certain forms and functions as well as grammatical environments of hedges and boosters determined whether they convey epistemic modality.

Keywords: hedges, boosters, corpus-based study, college application essay, epistemic modality

1. Introduction

1.1 Hedges, Boosters & Epistemic Modality

Many language learners find the ability to express doubt and certainty appropriately in English difficult. Yet, acquiring skills in making claims and assertions with appropriate degree of justification and social

interaction with the readers is essential for effective writing (Hyland & Milton, 1997). Such strategies as expressing writers' certainty and establishing their points of view appropriately while appealing to the readers by social interactions and warranted claims are realized by hedges and boosters (Hyland, 2002).

Hedging and boosting devices belong to interactional metadiscourse which functions as a tool for evaluation and engagement that helps highlight the writers' perspectives and guide the readers to interpret them in a way that the writers intended (Hyland & Tse, 2004). The definition of hedges and boosters given by Hyland (2005) is as follows:

Hedges are devices such as *possible*, *might* and *perhaps*, which indicate the writer's decision to recognize alternative voices and viewpoints and so withhold complete commitment to a proposition. Boosters, on the other hand, are words such as *clearly*, *obviously* and *demonstrate*, which allow writers to close down alternatives, head off conflicting views and express their certainty in what they say. (p. 52-53)

Hedges and boosters belong to the semantic domain of modality as they are concerned with the *writer's personal attitudes* toward the propositional content. Particularly, epistemic modality is considered as a propositional modality that deals with how a speaker/writer expresses his/her attitudes toward the *truth-value of a proposition*. Palmer (2007) categorized epistemic modality into three types of judgment including speculation (expressing certainty or uncertainty), deduction (inferring from observable evidence), and assumption (inferring from what is generally known), most of which overlap with hedging and boosting. Coates (1995) referred to the expression of epistemic modality as "the speaker's assumptions, or assessment of possibilities, and, in most cases, it indicates the speaker's confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of the proposition expressed" (p. 55).

In the same vein, hedging and boosting devices are used to convey writers' tentativeness and possibility or assurance and certainty (Hyland, 1998b). An example given in Hyland and Milton's research on the *Qualification and Certainty in L1 and L2 Students' Writing* (1997) is that *always* and *never* belong to the boosting or certainty category and other less determinate forms belong to the doubt/qualification or hedging category. Modal auxiliaries are mostly considered to be the most distinct way to express epistemic meanings (Coates, 1983). However, epistemic meanings can be expressed through many lexical devices, including modal verbs (will, would), verbs (think, feel), adverbs (actually, maybe), and adjectives (true, possible) (Hyland & Milton, 1997).

These epistemic expressions can convey different meanings, depending on the contexts in which they appear. Statements that contain epistemic comments

show the degree of writer's certainty in the truth proposition as well as writer's qualification, for example, how they make assertions with appropriate degree of deference and modesty (Hyland & Milton, 1997). In accordance with Coates (1987), epistemic features of the language allow writers to express how much confidence they put in their propositions or how they assess the possibilities. Therefore, the investigation of *how* each of the hedges and boosters is used to express epistemic meanings in actual sentences is conducted in this research.

1.2 The US College Application Essay

The US college application essay is a personal piece of writing which requires writers to reflect on their knowledge and experiences and make their own judgment and evaluation. Each of the college applicants is required to submit a college application essay to the admission committee of the university of their choice along with admission test scores, transcripts, recommendation letters and other related documents. The essay prompts which are made available at <https://www.commonapp.org> generally ask the applicants to write about themselves, for example, "some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story" (The Common Application, 2009).

The main characteristic of the US college application essays is the expression of writers' opinion. According to McGinty (1995), college application essays require the student writers to think objectively and express their opinions about their personal experiences through reflection, evaluation and judgment. Although the essay prompts encompass the tell-us-about-yourself theme which intends for the students to write with subjective point of view, the students need to follow academic styles, instead of writing solely with emotion or indulging themselves. Clearly, the essay should reflect how the students construct knowledge out of the disengaged reflection of their own experiences through certain use of language and through the process of thinking about thinking, or metacognition.

Moreover, McGinty (1995) commented further that college application essays are actually a measurement for judging which applicants are prepared for academic tasks especially academic writing during college, which most of the time requires students to voice their opinions. Students should establish their own voice as also suggested by Hoyer (as cited in Institute for Broadening Participation, 2016) that "...your tone in the essay should reflect what is special, unique, distinctive, or impressive about you. Find a tone of voice that is confident without sounding arrogant..." (When You Are Writing section, para. 2)

With its combination of personal and impersonal characteristics, the college application essay is a projection of an academic identity, which the high-school students were expected to assume and were evaluated by their stances

and alignment with the values of the universities or the programs of studies. Nevertheless, regarding the mixing characteristics of college application essays, it was also found by Hyland (2002) that the authorial identity in academic writing became more visible and personal. By using first person pronouns and their corresponding determiners, academic writers portrayed their authorial identities more obviously. It was suggested that writers could gain credibility as they projected their identities in their evaluations and commitment to their ideas.

2. Literature Review

Most studies of the use of hedges and boosters were conducted on research or academic writing. Previous studies that examined the differences in the use of hedges and boosters in L1 academic writing (e.g., Crismore & Farnsworth 1990; Salager-Meyer, 1994; Grabe & Kaplan, 1997) revealed similar findings and the importance of hedges which helped writers appropriately qualify their statements and invite readers to open discussion. Hyland (1998a) found from his research on research articles in eight disciplines: mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, marketing, philosophy, sociology, applied linguistics, physics, and microbiology, that more hedges are employed than boosters, especially by writers in humanities/social sciences. However, Hyland (1998a, p. 25) commented that “further research is needed to extend this study into other disciplines and genres, and into the use of other discoursal features.”

In the discourse of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), most studies on the use of hedges and boosters by L1 and L2 learners showed that L2 learners employed stronger claims and more limited variety of hedges and boosters in their academic writings than their L1 counterparts. For example, the study of Markkanen and Schröder (1997) showed that German and Finnish learners of English used more boosting devices than their native counterparts. In addition, Milton and Hyland (1999) found that L2 Cantonese students employed stronger expression and more authoritative tones in their academic essays than native English-speaking writers. However, a recent study revealed that Chinese EFL learners, regardless of their overall language proficiency, used more hedges than L1 writers in their argumentative essays (Hu & Li, 2015).

There have been a few studies in the use of hedges and boosters by Thai students. In academic writing, it is revealed that hedging devices were employed more frequently than boosting devices, and it is also suggested that the dominant use of hedging by Thai students might be a result of the culture of politeness. While boosters are most frequently realized by adverbs, hedges are most frequently realized by modal verbs. (Getkham, 2016). Moreover, Sukhanindr (2008) found that Thai authors used fewer and more limited items for hedging than their native counterparts. Apart from academic writing, the use of hedges and boosters by Thai students is also found in the research on authorial stances

in classroom speeches, which show that Thai students used limited items for booster adverbs and hedge modal verbs, since they were taught a very limited number of lexical choices (Siribud, 2016).

Hyland and Milton (1997) examined the use of epistemic modality between L1 and L2 Hong Kong high school students in their argumentative texts and categorized epistemic devices into different degrees of certainty and qualification, ranging from certainty (highest probability), probability (medial probability) to possibility (low probability). However, the present research does not adopt this categorization since it does not aim to compare the degree of certainty between L1 and L2 writers.

Nevertheless, two main concepts of modality are categorized according to the nature of the possible world where the validity of a proposition depends on the contexts (Hyland 1998b). First, deontic modality conveys a sense of ability, obligation and necessity in the propositions. For example, the modal verb *must* in “All students *must* submit the assignments today” indicates that all students are obliged to submit the assignments today. Second, epistemic modality is concerned with writers’ evaluation of the possibility and their degree of confidence towards the propositions (Coates, 1983). For instance, the modal auxiliary *must* in “She *must* be tired after a long day at work,” indicates the possibility of the truth-value of the proposition evaluated by the writer. Thus, unlike deontic modality, epistemic modality can convey writers’ attitudes toward propositional contents.

It is worth noting that the meanings of modal auxiliaries are polysemous (Huddleston, 1971), meaning that each of the modal auxiliaries can convey different meanings and their linguistic forms do not specifically relate to only one function. For example, *could* can simultaneously express ability, permission and possibility (Hyland & Milton, 1997). According to Coates (1983), the meanings of modal auxiliaries do not reside in the form themselves. Instead, each of their assigned meanings depends on certain utterances that contain them. By focusing on the epistemic modality, some modal verbs that convey deontic modality were excluded from this research, as they do not express writers’ attitudes toward propositional content. The modal verbs that convey deontic meanings include *could*, with the meaning of expressing ability, as in “He *could* speak Russian,” *should*, with the meaning of giving advice, as in “You *should* stop smoking,” and *must*, with the meaning of expressing obligation, as in “You *must* obey the law.”

All of the modal verbs conveying epistemic meanings are listed in table 1.

Table 1: The meanings of modal verbs related to the expression of epistemic modality.

Modal	Epistemic function meaning	Paraphrase	Example
Would	Past prediction Hypothetical prediction	I confidently expected I expect given unlikely conditions	If he had come, I <i>would</i> have gone. If I were you, I <i>would</i> say sorry.
Could	Tentative possibility	I believe / perhaps	I <i>could</i> be home late.
Might	Epistemic possibility	I believe / perhaps	I <i>might</i> be home late.
May	Epistemic possibility	I believe / perhaps	I <i>may</i> be home late.
Should	Tentative assumption based on inference	I assume / probably	This <i>should</i> be a good idea.
Must	Confident inference based on deduction	I am sure	She <i>must</i> be over 90 years old.

Source: Data Adapted from Coates (1983)

3. Research Questions

1) What are the frequencies of hedges and boosters that express epistemic modality in the US middle college application essay corpus and the US top college application essay corpus?

2) What is the grammatical distribution of hedges and boosters that express epistemic modality in the US middle college application essay corpus and the US top college application essay corpus?

3) How do the hedges and boosters in the US middle college application corpus and the US top college application corpus express epistemic modality?

4. Methodology

4.1 Corpus

This study is based on two corpora: a corpus of the US middle college application essays, all of which were written by Thai high-school students who were accepted into middle-ranking universities in the U.S. and a corpus of the US top college application essays, all of which were written by international high-school students who were accepted into top-ranking universities in the U.S. or the Ivy League. The distinction between the US top and the US middle colleges was made according to Ivy Global (2018). Sixty US college application essays were selected, amounting to a total word count of 34,070. Table 2 summarizes the composition of the corpus.

Table 2: General information about the corpus

Corpus	Number of essays	Number of words
The US middle college application essays	30	18,561
The US top college application essays	30	15,509
Total	60	34,070

Despite the differences in educational and societal backgrounds underlying between the two corpora, there are considerable similarities. All of the essays included in this study used the same set of prompts and guidelines for the US college application essays which were published between the years 2009 and 2010 and can be accessed online from the website of The Common Application (2009). The prompts generally require students to recount and reflect on some of their personal stories, with a limit of no more than 650 words. Each of the essays in the corpus contains nearly the same amount of words, ranging approximately from 420 to 649 words, and is similarly written in informal or personal register. Therefore, although the essays in the two corpora were not written to respond to the exact same prompts, a broad comparison can be made between them.

4.2 Data Collection

Thirty US middle college application essays were purposively collected from a college consulting company in Bangkok with regard to two main criteria: firstly, the writers of the essays were Thai high-school students who were accepted into middle-ranking universities in the U.S., and secondly, the essays were written in reflective style. Thirty US top-ranking college application essays were randomly selected from a free online book in PDF titled *50 Successful Ivy League Application Essays* compiled by Tanabe and Tanabe (2009).

After gathering all the US college application essays, a total of 60 essays in Microsoft Word format were converted into plain text files to be compatible with a free online concordancing program called AntConc. The titles of the essays, the writers' names, and other attached images or symbols were excluded from the analysis on the assumption that these elements did not relate to the use of hedges and boosters. Word counts in table 1 above represent the cleaned-up texts. Regarding the anonymity of the writers, the text files were saved in a sequential numbering system, 1-30, followed by the abbreviation TH or IVY, representing the US middle college application essays and the US top college application essays respectively. TH files were stored in a folder named TH text and IVY files were stored in a folder named IVY text. The file naming convention was applied to the data analysis.

4.3 Data Analysis

In answering the research questions, first of all, the list of hedges and boosters taken from Hyland (2005) was compiled for the concordance searches in this study. The complete list of hedges and boosters adopted from Hyland (2005) is included in Appendix. Secondly, two spreadsheets of hedges and boosters were created in an excel file named *AntConc RESULT*, to keep a record of frequencies and source texts. Thirdly, all the occurrences of hedges and boosters in the US middle college application essays and the US top college application essays were respectively identified by the concordance program, AntConc. Then, each of the concordance lines was elicited and categorized into either hedge or booster in the spreadsheets, with the meaning of each hedge and booster, which is based on the context of its actual sentence, in the right column. Finally, each of the hedges and boosters elicited from the software was manually checked for its epistemic modality. Hedges and boosters that did not express epistemic modality were excluded from this research since they did not convey writers' attitudes toward propositional content, for example, some occurrences of *could*, *should*, and *must* which conveyed deontic modality, and some non-modalized hedges and boosters which were used in narrative (We trudge through the snow as quickly as *possible*) or in interrogative statement (What could *possibly* go wrong?).

To respond to the first question, the hedges and boosters that express epistemic modality from the two corpora were counted and ranked based on their frequencies. For the second question, the hedges and boosters that express epistemic modality were classified into each grammatical category, including verb, modal verb, adverb, and adjective, and were counted. Lastly, to respond to the last question, the epistemic modality of hedges and boosters between the two corpora was carefully examined with regard to each of their contexts.

To establish reliability of the coding system, the researcher invited her thesis advisor to check the reliability of the categorization of hedges and boosters regarding the epistemic modality. Regarding the shared semantic characteristics of the two corpora, 50% of the categorization of hedges and boosters in the US middle college application essay corpus, was checked by the advisor and 50% of that in the US top college application essay corpus, was checked for quality control. 95% of the results matched, while the rest was reconciled.

5. Results and Discussion

This study bases the analysis of hedges and boosters and epistemic modality on the studies of Hyland and Milton (1997) and Hyland (1998b). By comparing the two corpora of college application essays, the present study aims to examine the frequencies, forms and functions of hedges and boosters

employed by applicants who were accepted into middle-ranking colleges and those who were accepted into top-ranking colleges in the U.S. With the different approaches to the classification of forms and functions which were previously conducted in academic and research writing, this research intends to recreate the findings in such personal writing as the college application essay.

To respond to the first research question, the information in table 3 shows the differences in the frequencies of hedges and boosters between the US middle and the US top college application essays.

Table 3: Frequencies of hedges and boosters between the US middle and the US top college application essay corpora

Category	The US middle college application essay corpus	The US top college application essay corpus	TOTAL
Hedges	105	55	160
Boosters	100	109	209
TOTAL	205	164	369

Source: Data Adapted from Coates (1983)

Overall, hedges (n=105) were used more frequently than boosters (n=100) among the US middle college applicants, all of whom were Thai. This finding was similar to the research on authorial stance in Thai students' doctoral dissertations which revealed that hedging devices were employed more frequently than boosting devices (Getkham, 2016).

However, the frequency of hedges in the US middle college application essay corpus was almost twice that in the US top college application essay corpus by comparing the frequencies of hedges between the two corpora, which contrasted with the findings from the previous studies on research writing which revealed that Thai authors used fewer hedges than native authors (Sukhanindr, 2008; Worawanna Petchkit, 2016). This might indicate some conceptual differences that the US middle college applicants, all of whom were Thai, favored tentative expression, while the US top college applicants, all of whom were international, favored confident prediction. Moreover, the dominant use of hedges by Thai students might be culturally inherent in polite and face-saving manners (Getkham, 2016).

Next, to respond to the second research question, the information in table 4 showed how hedges and boosters in the US middle and the US top college application essay corpus were separated into grammatical categories including verbs, modal verbs, adverbs, and adjectives.

Table 4: Grammatical distribution of hedges and boosters between the US middle and the US top college application essay corpora

Category	The US middle college application essay corpus	The US top college application essay corpus	TOTAL
Hedge	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency
Verbs	16	9	25
Modal verbs	39	16	55
Adverbs	49	30	79
Adjectives	1	0	1
Booster	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency
Verbs	53	39	92
Modal verbs	5	8	13
Adverbs	40	58	98
Adjectives	2	4	6

The preference of hedges over boosters among Thai students was also confirmed by the frequencies of hedges in the US middle college application essays, which were higher than those in the US top college application essays in every grammatical category. This is reflected in most of the claims made by writers of the US middle college application essays which were less strong or more qualifying than those made by writers of the US top college application essays.

Across the two corpora, both hedges and boosters were most frequently realized by adverbs, with the total frequencies of 79 and 98, respectively. This supported what Hyland and Milton (1997) discovered about hedging and boosting adverbs—that writers might find adverbs easier to use for expressing their attitudes to their statements and adjusting the degree of commitment in their claims since the use of adverbs did not entail many grammatical and lexical concerns. In comparison, verbs were less frequently used as hedges and boosters than adverbs, with verb boosters (92) outnumbering verb hedges (25). This was similar to the finding in Hyland and Milton (1997) showing that both L1 and L2 students prefer using adverbs over lexical verbs which could signal less overt or less precise degree of writer's commitment to propositions in their academic essays.

Modal verb hedges hugely outnumbered modal verb boosters, with a frequency of 55 against 13. This can be explained by the fact that *must* was the only modal verb booster used across the two corpora. It was also similar to the findings from the previous studies in argumentative writing which usually revealed that modal verbs that qualified statements or expressed doubt (hedging) were used more frequently than those that expressed certainty (boosting) (Hyland & Milton, 1997; Chen, 2012). Moreover, it was found that modal verb

boosters were used more frequently in the US top college application essays, whereas modal verb hedges were more frequently used in the US middle college application essays, all of which were written by Thai high school students.

For the third research question, the epistemic meanings of modal verbs, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives were examined based on Hyland (1998b)'s categorization. It is important to note that modal verbs were analyzed differently, since it was found that some of them did not express epistemic modality or could only express deontic modality.

5.1 Epistemic Modality in Modal Verbs

Modal verbs expressed only one type of epistemic meaning which was possibility/probability. Although some modal verbs that did not convey epistemic modality or conveyed only deontic modality are described below, they were not included in this study.

Would

Would was mainly used to express the meaning of hypothetical prediction which had epistemic function (Coates, 1983). The hypothetical meaning of *would* conveyed more suggestive sense and greater diffidence of the writers (Leech, 1999). For example:

- a) I set out to create a piece that **would** encourage the audience's nostalgia <23TH>
- b) It **would** be a privilege to work alongside scientists <8IVY>

The epistemic *would* was mostly used in personal writing to express writers' tentativeness toward their expression. In this case, the function of *would* here was softening a claim or a categorical assertion, yet implying no lack of commitment to the propositions, compared to the use of *might*. For example:

- a) Here, I think, Mozart **would** agree. <29TH>
- b) I never thought that my diet **would** be a cause of my acne <27IVY>

However, *would* that marked the past tense of *will* was excluded from this research since it did not express epistemic meanings by referring to the predictability of some action or states in the past (Coates, 1983). For example:

- a) It was unique because each day we **would** wake up expecting a new problem. <3TH>
- b) My mother **would** read at bedtime, at my request, nature field guides instead of nursery rhymes. <8IVY>

Could

According to Coates (1983), there are two main uses of *could*: the first one is deontic meaning, which is in a past tense form of deontic possibility

can, concerning the outcomes as a result of external enabling or disabling conditions, and the other was epistemic possibility, referring to the writer's assessment of the likelihood of the truth of the propositions.

In agreement with Coates (1983), Palmer (1990, p.7) further commented that the deontic meaning was concerned with 'the ability or volition of the subject of the sentence'. For example:

- a) I had learned together, and I discovered I **could** create full-fledged remixes! <27TH>
- b) I rushed as fast as I **could** to make my bed <23IVY>

On the other hand, the epistemic meaning dealt with 'the writers' opinions' (Palmer, 1990, p. 36). Epistemic *could* was used to express the hypothetical meaning. For example:

- a) The suspension of the chord **could** resolve into six different chords <29TH>
- b) a coat of sunblock were inexpensive products that **could** reduce breakouts <27IVY>

Should

It is important to note that the deontic modality of *should*, which carried the meaning of advice, "the speaker's degree of authority and/or conviction" (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 85), was predominantly used in the US middle college application corpus. *Should* referred to obligation and necessity (Coates, 1983), as it showed how the writers made judgements about what was right or appropriate. For example:

- a) how the professor has successfully challenged what society thinks he **should** research strengthened me in my decision <21TH>
- b) my older brother intervened, suggesting that we **should** try to "understand" Mom more <30TH>

On the other hand, epistemic *should* expressed the assessment of probability based on the writers' subjective interpretation of facts, which was less tentative than *would* (Coates, 1983). In other words, the probability of events based on reasoning or logical probability of *should* concerned writers' inference or prediction (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 85). For example:

- a) Second, I thought that we **should** prioritize the strategy <2TH>
- b) I make a mature decision on how I **should** try to help the world as a whole. <3IVY>

May/Might

The epistemic meanings of *may* and *might* were found in the US middle and the US top college application corpora, although both *may* and *might* were more predominantly used in the US middle college application corpus than the US top college application corpus. *May* and *might* similarly expressed writers' lack of confidence in the possibility (Hyland, 1998b). For example:

- a) Though our title **may** sound cute, guinea pigs are used in science <3TH>
- b) But there's another test that **may** work. <10IVY>
- c) I learned that defending my sound principles **might** be perceived as strange. <9TH>
- d) there's what **might** have been Orbit gum on the floor among the other thousand wads <16IVY>

With the predominant use of *might* over *may* in the US middle college application corpus, it was suggested Thai high school students preferred using *might* as a marker of logical possibility over *may* in their college application essays. This contrasted with the finding of Hyland and Milton (1997) revealing that non-native speakers of English predominantly used *may* as the preferred marker of possibility in their L2 argumentative essays.

Must

The deontic modality of *must*, which expresses a sense of obligation and necessity (Coates, 1983), was only found in the essays of Thai students. For example:

- a) First, in the Thai culture, the young **must** respect the old <2TH>
- b) all agreed beforehand that every participant **must** be responsible for their own backpacks <10TH>

As a device of epistemic modality, *must* was used to express the inferential certainty that writers deducted from facts known to them. Being paraphrased as "I am sure," the epistemic use of *must*, therefore, indicated writers' high degree of certainty (Hyland, 1998b, p. 106). For example:

- a) In order to achieve a greater goal, I **must** first coordinate and unite the perspectives. <2TH>
- b) That moment where I realize that, people are depending on me, and I **must** do my best to help them. <10IVY>

It can be concluded that modal auxiliaries expressed one type of epistemic meaning which was possibility/probability. Accordingly, the following section discusses other types of epistemic meanings in verbs, adverbs, and adjectives.

5.2 Epistemic Modality in Verbs

Three types of epistemic verbs, including cognition verbs, non-factive reporting verbs, and tentative linking verbs, were found in the two corpora.

5.2.1 Cognition verbs

This type of verb was related to the mental status or mental processes of the writers whose views were reported. They were mainly used to introduce writers' propositions which were based on subjectivity rather than empirical evidence (Vartalla, 2001, p. 122).

In college application essays, the verb hedges and boosters that followed a personal subject *I* carried epistemic modality. The emphasis on the subjectivity realized by the abundant use of first-person pronoun *I* reflected the typical feature of personal writing which required explicit writer involvement in assessing their propositions. Writers both in the top and middle college application corpora modified their propositions by the use of subjectivity. Moreover, it was found that the cognition verbs such as *feel*, *suspect*, *think*, *believe*, *find*, and *know* were frequently used across the two corpora. For example:

- a) **I feel** that most of my growth occurred outside of the classroom <1IVY>
- b) **I now suspect** that I have to rebrand my club <5TH>
- c) **I thought** those were the qualities that made the perfect percussionist. <28IVY>
- d) as **I believe** the quickest way to reduce energy consumption is through small, easy-to-control behavioral change. <20TH>
- e) It was during my aunt's illness that **I realized** I could use my natural love of science to benefit others facing similar challenges. <8IVY>
- f) **I know** now that my mindset and emotion altered the failures in my work. <23TH>
- g) **I've found** that diminished chords work best where uncertainty is an integral part of the song. <29TH>

It can be seen that the authorial presence was clearly indicated by the use of the first-person pronoun *I*. The following propositions in subordinate clauses were modified by the cognition verbs following the first-person pronoun *I* in the main clauses, which altogether carried a sense of subjectivity and personal conjecture. Particularly, the subjectivity allowed the readers to assume that only the writers *knew* the source of knowledge or

evidence and drew conclusion from it. Hence, the combination of the personal pronoun *I* and the cognition verbs presented the writers' opinions and enabled them to be personally responsible for making epistemic judgment (epistemic modality).

5.2.2 Non-factive reporting verbs

Non-factive reporting verbs were used for making claims by writers or asserting writers' ideas (Vartalla, 2001, p. 121). Most of these verbs included performative verbs which required performative interpretation (Hyland, 1998b, p. 120). For example:

- a) Furthermore, the entire project has **shown** me that my passion for environmentalism <1TH>
- b) I finally **showed** that two of the three viruses were correct <5IVY>

The verb booster *show* was the only non-factive reporting verb found in the college application essays. As can be seen, it was used to report the results of the writers' research as in a) and present the writers' proposition as in b). This type of verb can combine with abstract rhetor as in a) or with personal pronoun to overtly express authorial presence as in b). With the use of the non-factive reporting verb, it was suggested that the reported propositions which were often in subordinate clauses introduced by *that* were based on the writers' subjective opinions.

However, most of the non-factive reporting verbs found in college application essays such as *argue*, *establish*, and *show* were not considered as hedges and boosters that were associated with epistemic modality since they did not express writers' personal attitudes toward the propositions. For example:

- c) after all, my brothers and I still **argue**. <30TH>
- d) I recruited 4 students and **established** the school's first debate/speech club <25TH>
- e) I have no awards or medals to **show** for my particular achievement. <27IVY>

As seen from example c)-e), these verbs did not provide any epistemic justification that the writers used to modify the strength of their claims. In fact, none of these sentences contained writers' claims, and none carried any modality either.

5.2.3 Tentative linking verbs

These verbs referred to tentativeness expressed by the writers through the assertion of their ideas or claims made in other sources being referred to (Vartalla, 2001, p. 123).

Seem and *appear* were the two most frequent tentative linking verbs found in the college application essays. They were often used in impersonal structures, comprising dummy subjects such as *it* and *there*. For example:

- a) and **it seemed** that everybody, including my grandma, would vote for the same person <7TH>
- b) **It appears** all your cells are dead. <15IVY>
- c) In between them **there seems** to be some kind of dust. <19IVY>

It can be clearly seen in a)-c) that the invisibility of writers that was realized by anticipatory or dummy subjects (*it*, *there*) contributed to the objectivity of the claims. By allowing writers to distance themselves from the propositions, these tentative linking verbs together with empty subjects carried less subjective connotation than the cognition verbs with personal pronouns.

Apart from dummy subjects that replaced the human agents as subjects, the other strategy for impersonalization that was found in the college application essays was faceless subjects. For example:

- d) Connections and prestige **tend** to beat out hard work, wisdom, and values, <18TH>

In example d), the writer used the tentative linking verb *tend* to tentatively propose that under certain circumstances there was a tendency for connections and prestige to beat out hard work, wisdom, and values. As can be seen, the combination of faceless subjects and tentative linking verb *tend* imparted more objectivity to the claim made by the writer.

Nevertheless, the objectivity expressed by some impersonalized forms, including dummy subjects (*it*, *there*) and faceless subjects, was found less frequently than subjectivity in the college application essays. Writers employed these impersonalized forms to make the reference to the writers or the source of their epistemic judgements vague when they justified their claims (Hyland & Milton, 1997). Rather, objectivity was related to evidentiality which was a type of epistemic modality that was based on the judgements mutually agreed by writers and certain groups of people whom were assumed by writers to have access to the source of evidence and share the conclusion based on it (Takimoto, 2015). As a result, the objectivity of the shared judgements was made clearer through the emphasis on writers' invisibility and the evidential expression of the discourse-oriented hedge verbs.

5.3 Epistemic Modality in Adverbs

Two concepts of modification were clearly found in the use of adverb as hedges and boosters in the college application essays. Despite the

different concepts, adverb hedges and boosters similarly contained epistemic meanings as they expressed writers' attitude toward the propositions.

The first concept related to how adverb hedges and boosters modified writers' commitment to propositional content. In other words, the relationship between the writers and the propositional content was changed by adverb hedges and boosters which expressed writers' certainty or uncertainty. By doing this, adverb hedges and boosters conveyed epistemic meanings through writers' judgments of the propositions. The category of hedge and booster adverbs with this concept found in the college application essays were certainty/doubt adverbs.

5.3.1 Adverbs of certainty or doubt

These adverbs, including *maybe*, *probably*, *perhaps*, and *possibly*, conveyed writers' degree of certainty or doubt toward the propositions; therefore, they carried writers' epistemic modality (Hyland, 1998b, p. 140). For example:

- a) Or **maybe** there has always been a special part of me that wanted to get out <12IVY>
- b) I'm not sure what I want to do with my life yet - **perhaps** a career in sports medicine or physiotherapy. <8TH>

It can be seen that epistemic meanings of the adverb hedges above were conveyed by indicating writers' uncertainty toward the proposition that was probably true as in a) or withholding writers' commitment as in b).

In contrast, adverb boosters with this concept, which included *actually*, *really*, *truly*, *definitely*, *certainly*, *clearly*, *undeniably*, and *indeed*, indicated writers' certainty toward the proposition. For example:

- a) making it harder and harder to **actually** describe the few subtle and transcendent moments of life <1IVY>
- b) I **certainly** risked accepting this ugly reality when I supported my family's decision to uproot itself <29IVY>
- c) but even then I was scared to say how I **really** felt <15TH>
- d) But it took a moment like this to make me **truly** appreciate what I have <11TH>

From the examples a)-d), it was noticeable that adverb boosters carried epistemic meanings as they similarly emphasized the fact, the truth or particular feelings stated by writers in the propositions. Moreover, the use of these epistemic adverb boosters indicate a strong link between epistemic modality and intensification or boosting (HE, 2017).

The other concept of adverb hedges and boosters dealt with how they were used to modify words or phrases within a proposition. In this concept, the class membership between certain linguistic items within a

proposition was marked by hedges and boosters. For example, adverb hedge *sometimes* (e.g., *Sometimes I ignore this voice*) and adverb booster *always* (e.g., *people always try to find my flaws*) would affect the class membership of particular items within a proposition. This concept of adverbs was mainly realized by attribute hedges (Hyland, 1998a), which refer to the type of hedges that restricted the range of the claim or its generalizability in terms of frequency and quality within the propositions, instead of diluting writers' certainty or withholding their commitments. Hedge and booster adverbs with this concept could be found in adverbs of frequency, adverbs of indefinite degree, and adverbs of approximation.

5.3.2 Adverbs of frequency

These adverbs were used for making the propositions more or less categorical by boosting or hedging, which indicated whether the claims made by the writers could be applied in most cases (Vartalla, 2001, p. 129). Four adverb hedges including *usually*, *sometimes*, *often*, and *frequently* were found in the college application essays to be inherently indefinite, allowing writers to make their proposition less categorical. For example:

- a) the best solution is **usually** to try to stand in that person's shoes and see what they're dealing with <30TH>
- b) I **often** think about how I managed to say yes <12IVY>

As seen from example a) and b), the adverb hedges *usually* and *often* restricted the frequency or the temporal range of the statements. On the contrary, unlike other adverb boosters that emphasized writers' degree of certainty, the adverb boosters like *always* and *never* emphasized the frequency within the propositions and indicated writers' commitment to their categorical assertion. For example:

- c) I tried my best to work it out; this was how I **always** work anyway. <27TH>
- d) However, until 10th grade, I **never** had the opportunity to contribute to medical research <7IVY>

From the examples c) and d), *always* boosted the verb *work* by conveying the meaning of 'at all times; on every occasion.' On the other hand, *never* boosted the verb *had* by conveying the meaning of 'not at any time; not on every occasion.'

5.3.3 Adverbs of indefinite degree

These adverbs conveyed writers' epistemic modality through the qualification of their statements, which indicated varied degree of precision based on writers' subjective assessment in relation to their prototypical meanings (Hyland, 1998b, p. 140). The adverbs of indefinite degree that were

found in the college application essays included *quite*, *somewhat*, *mostly*, *rather*, *fairly*, and *largely*. For example:

- a) This is **mostly** about other's expectation and wants <24TH>
- b) It is **quite** wrinkled and brown and white hair has invaded the scalp. <19IVY>

From the examples, the statements in a) and b) were generalized by the use of attribute hedges such as *mostly* and *quite* that dealt with the quality range of the claims and, as a result, made the statements less absolute.

5.3.4 Adverbs of approximation

The adverbs of approximation were used to provide tentative approximation by allowing writers to modify the degree of precision in quantifying expressions or numerical data, especially when writers saw the approximation fit certain purposes (Hyland, 1998b, p. 140). The adverbs of approximation that were found in college application essays included *almost*, *around*, *roughly*, *approximately*, and *about*. For example:

- a) and spending **approximately** 170 hours of the past month manipulating human embryonic stem cells (HESCs), I was back to square one... <15IVY>
- b) I learned that a crowd always arrived at **roughly** the same time: 11:23 <14TH>

As seen from the examples, the precision of the propositions in a) and b) were modified by such attribute hedges as *approximately* and *roughly*, which, as a result, limited the range of quality in the propositions.

All in all, the adverbs of frequency, adverbs of indefinite degree, and adverbs of approximation were concerned with how linguistic elements relate to each other within the propositions, while the adverbs of certainty/doubt dealt with how writers made themselves relate to the propositions by the use of linguistic elements. Nevertheless, all of them similarly conveyed writers' attitudes toward the validity of their assertions through the degree of (un)certainly, frequency, (in)definiteness, and approximation.

5.4 Epistemic Modality in Adjectives

Adjectives of probability were the only type of epistemic adjectives found in the two corpora.

5.4.1 Adjectives of probability

These adjectives were used to convey degrees of probability by allowing writers to assess the certainty of the truth of proposition, which, as a result, conveyed epistemic modality (Hyland, 1998b, p. 30).

Unlikely, *sure*, and *true* were the only three adjectives of probability that were found to convey epistemic modality. For example:

- a) An ordinary high school student taking on the role of CEO is simply **unlikely** <2TH>
- b) I'm **sure** I'll wake back up in a few minutes, but not yet. <30IVY>
- c) And it's **true** that the military government has been increasing arrests of outspoken opponents. <7TH>

From the examples above, adjective hedges and boosters conveyed epistemic meaning as they modified writers' commitment to propositional content. It can be seen in a) that the adjective of probability or adjective hedge *unlikely* expressed epistemic modality by indicating writers' uncertainty toward the proposition that was probably true, due to its meaning as '*not likely to happen, not probable*'. In the same vein, in b) and c) the adjective of certainty or adjective boosters such as *sure* and *true* conveyed epistemic modality by emphasizing the writers' confidence toward the propositional content.

Otherwise, the adjective hedges and boosters that were used to modify nouns did not carry any modality and the sentence, therefore, was non-modalized. For example:

- d) We planned out **possible** errors and countermeasures for late production. <2TH>
- e) I embarked on an unexpectedly difficult and emotionally trying quest for **clear** skin <27IVY>

6. Conclusion

Given that the main objective of the present study is to find the differences in frequencies, forms, and functions of hedges and boosters used in two different corpora of college application essays, the three research questions as well as the pedagogical implications and some limitations are delineated here in an attempt to elaborate more on the results. To respond to the first question, it can be clearly seen from the quantitative result that boosters were used more frequently than hedges across the two corpora. Thai students prefer tentative expression, as opposed to the US top college applicants who are likely to favor confident prediction, as reflected in the more predominant use of hedges in the US middle college application essay corpus and the more predominant use of boosters in the US top college application essay corpus.

The differences in the grammatical distribution between the two corpora were examined to answer the second research question. Adverb boosters and modal verb boosters were used more frequently in the US top college application essays; on the contrary, adverb hedges and modal verb hedges were used more frequently in the US middle college application essays. Interestingly,

adverbs were the most frequently used grammatical category both as hedges and boosters, which suggested their simplicity of expression, due to the lack of grammatical and lexical concerns. Moreover, verbs were the only grammatical category whose frequencies of both hedges and boosters in the US middle college application essays were higher than those in the US top college application essays, while adjectives were used as boosters more frequently in the US top college application essays than in the US middle college application essays.

To respond to the third question regarding the forms and functions of the epistemic hedges and boosters used between the US top and the US middle college application essays, it was found that certain forms and functions as well as grammatical constructions of hedges and boosters determined whether they could convey epistemic modality. Particularly, hedges and boosters across the two corpora most frequently expressed epistemic modality through the use of cognition verbs and the adverbs of frequency which clearly showed the writers' degree of certainty or commitment toward the evaluation of their knowledge or experiences. In general, hedges used in the college application essays were found to express probability or display writers' uncertainty, whereas boosters were employed in the college application essays as a certainty marker.

As suggested by Hyland that more attention should be paid to the use of hedges and boosters, especially for the non-native English speakers who find it hard and are unfamiliar with these important interpersonal devices, (Hyland & Milton, 1997) some pedagogical implications should be directed especially to Thai high school students who want to excel in writing college application essays. First, they should be made aware of the differences in the use and non-use of hedges and boosters in the essays. Materials developers should consider creating tasks that ask students to discuss the removal and replacement of hedges and boosters, which could be a good starting point for them to see the importance of the epistemic meanings and the varied degrees of certainty in a text (Hyland & Milton, 1997). Second, based on the results which showed that Thai students employed boosters less frequently than the international students, certain boosters, especially adverb and adjective boosters such as *definitely*, *truly*, *certainly*, *sure*, and *certain* and some of their patterns, for example, *I'm sure that*, *it is certain that* should be taught to Thai students. Finally, due to their polysemous features, the degree of possibility/probability of modal verbs and the differences in the use of modal verbs with epistemic and deontic modality should be explicitly taught.

Nonetheless, the limited essay samples could restrict the ability to generalize the findings to a wider population since the essays from the US middle college application corpus were written by Thai students who had relatively high levels of English language proficiency in comparison to the general population of Thailand. To add knowledge about generalizability of the

findings, further researches should be conducted on a larger number of essays, comparing between Thai learners who had low levels of English language proficiency and native speakers. In addition, due to the different approaches to taxonomy that give mixed results, other frameworks that examine the correlation between the forms and functions of hedges and boosters would be of great benefits to both students and teachers.

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Appendix

Boosters	known	appeared	might	tended to
actually	must	appears	mostly	tends to
always	never	approximately	often	typical
believe	obvious	argue	ought	typically
believed	obviously	argued	perhaps	uncertain
believes	prove	argues	plausible	uncertainly
certain	proved	around	plausibly	unclear
certainly	proves	assume	possible	unclearly
clear	realize	broadly	possibly	unlikely
clearly	realized	claim	postulate	usually
conclusively	realizes	claimed	postulated	would
decidedly	really	claims	postulates	wouldn't
definite	show	could	presumable	
definitely	showed	couldn't	presumably	
demonstrate	shown	doubt	probable	
demonstrated	shows	doubtful	probably	
demonstrates	sure	essentially	quite	
doubtless	surely	estimate	rather	
establish	think	estimated	relatively	
established	thinks	fairly	roughly	
evident	thought	feel	seems	
evidently	truly	feels	should	
find	true	felt	sometimes	
finds	undeniable	generally	somewhat	
found	undeniably	guess	suggest	
incontestable	undisputedly	indicate	suggested	
incontestably	undoubtedly	indicated	suggests	
incontrovertible	Hedges	indicates	suppose	
incontrovertibly	about	largely	supposed	
indeed	almost	likely	supposes	
indisputable	apparent	mainly	suspect	
indisputably	apparently	may	suspects	
know	appear	maybe	tend to	