

## *A Study of EFL Master students' Erroneous Use of Stance Markers in Exam Essays in the Subject of Applied Linguistics*

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*The present paper deals with a preliminary qualitative study of the use of stance markers in expository essay exams. More specifically, it aimed to answer the following research question: what do errors in the use of the features of authorial stance in exam essays in the subject of applied linguistics reveal about master students' knowledge about a central debate in the discipline of their specialization? To answer this question, a corpus analysis of twenty-two exam essays randomly chosen on the basis of convenience have been identified, transcribed, and analysed by two raters following Hyland's (2005) model. The corpus analysis has revealed that the erroneous use of stance features, namely hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mention was due to an inadequate level of mastery of the conventions of academic writing as well as a superficial knowledge of the epistemological underpinnings of a central debate in their field of specialization.*

### **Keywords:**

academic writing, applied linguistics, essay exams, stance features, erroneous use.

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### **Introduction:**

Academic discourse analysis assumes that disciplinary language represents a construction of scientific reality rather than an objective reflection of it. In other words, disciplinary discourses are viewed as linguistic representations of scientific knowledge instead of being considered as reflecting a set of impersonal and universal truths. According to the proponents of this view, academic discourse is persuasive in nature and this characteristic—which is most manifest in the soft science, applied linguistics included—explains expert writers' inclination to deploy a plethora of linguistic devices and strategies in crafting their texts, taking into consideration the conventions and epistemological underpinnings of their discipline, to interact with their readers in view of persuading them about the tenability of their arguments.

Consequently, a burgeoning literature in applied linguistic research has been devoted to the study of the patterns of these interactions in different disciplines. Uncovering such patterns renders them learnable. Hence, integrating the teaching and assessment of these patterns in advanced EFL writing curricula is susceptible to enhance markedly English as a foreign language learners' appropriation of the defining features of the disciplines in which they bid entry.

An important aspect that has attracted the attention of those engaged in the study of authors' interactions with their fellow disciplinary audiences is the construct of stance. According to Bahrani et al. (2018:70), "problems in presenting an effective authorial stance have frequently resulted in poor evaluation of a writer's text and research potential". Using corpus methodologies, an ever-growing number of studies have attempted to determine the linguistic choices that expert academic writers systematically make to convince their readers of the normality and acceptability of the position that they adopt vis-à-vis the intricate and controversial issues in their discipline. As a result, several models have been proposed to characterize the discursive features that allow academic authors to forge a voice in their disciplines.

### **1. Statement of the Problem**

One of the most influential models that have been found to be particularly suitable to serve as heuristic for the scaffolding and evaluation of EFL/ESL writers' development of their authorial

stance as a key pre-requisite for gaining and maintaining membership in a disciplinary discourse community is Hyland's model (2005). This model, it should be noted, proposes a bi-dimensional approach to analyzing writer-reader interaction: stance and engagement. The former refers to the discursive devices used by writers to position themselves vis-à-vis disciplinary debates and, hence, assert a voice as established members of the discipline in question. As for the latter, it concerns the discursive features used by authors to cater for the needs and expectations of their readers to compel them to accept the logic underlying their arguments. The second dimension, i.e., engagement, is, I assume, more demanding and lies beyond the academic writing proficiency of most EFL students under study, thus, my analysis of students' essay performances focused on just the first dimension, i.e., stance.

Developing a discipline-specific stance should be adopted as one of the overarching goals of master education. To achieve this demanding yet rewarding goal, master students should not wait until they embark on writing longer pieces of academic writing like dissertations and research articles to cater for this primordial dimension, as is, unfortunately, the prevalent practice in our EFL context. To succeed in this endeavor, these students need to engage in a lengthy apprenticeship process that should start at the earliest stages of this level. Subject area teachers are expected to create in their classroom the necessary conditions that would allow master students to socialize to the discipline-specific discursive features of their discipline and gradually develop an authorial stance. Adopting the essay as the main assessment tool in the content modules of the curriculum instead of discrete point tests would make it possible for teachers to monitor students' development of the function under study and enhance their progress using fine-tuned feedback. Despite its importance, however, this area remains an under-researched aspect of academic writing especially in the Algerian context as can be demonstrated by simple internet search.

Hence, the present paper used Hyland's (2005) model as a framework for evaluating a group of EFL master students' ability to express their stance in real examination essays in the subject of applied linguistics. Based on the results of this analysis, some suggestions for enhancing the development of the dimension under study are provided. In the light of the above, this study seeks to answer the following question: what do errors in the use of stance features reveal about students' grasp of a central debate in the subject of applied linguistics?

The choice to focus exclusively on the errors rather than on the correct use of stance features was motivated by the attempt to reveal students' current hypotheses about the rules underlying the use of those features in the academic writing in applied linguistics. Hence, an analysis of these errors is primordial to determining the adequate steps and strategies that should be mobilized by teachers of applied linguistics to enhance master students' development of this important dimension of the academic writing proficiency.

## **2. Literature Review**

Academic discourse analysis methodology is underpinned by relativist view to scientific truth which underscores the role of subjectivity in the interpretation and dissemination of academic knowledge. Following this view, academic discourse is not reflection of reality, but rather a construal of it. In other words, academic writers' subjectivity mediates the way their perception, comprehension,

interpretation, and, consequently, their symbolic representation of scientific truth in terms of a disciplinary discourse. Academic writers need to interact with their readers to persuade them to accept their positions. What follows is a review of some literature related to stance in academic discourse analysis.

## 2.1. Definition of Authorial Stance

The view to academic writing as an objective representation of scientific facts, has given place to a constructivist view to academic discourse. This shift has highlighted the importance of the dialogic dimension of academic discourse and made it a central research theme in academic discourse studies. Four defining features of this discourse emerged from the plethora of studies that tackled this issue: 1. the persuasive nature of academic discourse, 2. the discipline-specificity of the rhetorical features of academic arguments, 3. the diversity among language groups in staging arguments, 4. the writer-reader negotiation of ideas (Bahrani et al., 2018). An important dimension that enables authors to craft discipline-specific acceptable argument is authorial stance.

## 2.2. Hyland's (2005) Model

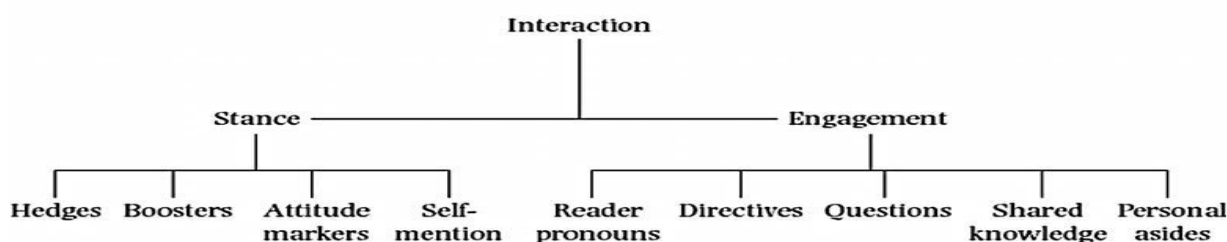


Figure 1: Hyland's (2005) bi-functional model to interaction in academic texts (Based on Hyland (2005:5))

Hyland (2005) is the pioneering and the most influential framework in academic writing literature that offered to study interpersonal discourse through grouping a set of features—that have been hitherto approached separately—under two macro-functions: stance and engagement. While the former, which is writer-centered, is coded using hedges, boosters, attitude markers and self-mention, the latter is rather reader-centered and achieved through reader pronouns, directives, questions, shared-knowledge, and personal asides. Table 1 provides examples of stance resources in academic research articles.

It is worth noting that hedges refer to the language devices that an author willingness to put his position into perspective and to signal his openness to accept alternative opinions regarding the topic under discussion. As for boosters, the author does exactly the opposite by manifesting a firm adherence to a given position and a complete rejection of other point of views. Regarding attitude markers, they denote the features whereby the author expresses her subjective reaction to a particular proposition. Lastly, self-mention refer to the features whereby the author asserts an explicit presence in the text. Taken together, the four features enable the author to adopt a position vis-à-vis a relevant debate within a disciplinary context.

Given its complexity, novice researchers and students experience huge difficulty in asserting a clear and disciplinary relevant stance. Citing Hyland (2004), Bahrani et al (2018) summarizes students' problems in adopting an authorial stance in three elements: lack of confidence in deploying stance

markers, lack of self-mentions to assert an authorial identity, and the prevalence of the descriptive function over a persuasive orientation marked by a stance.

**Table 1: Examples of Stance Resources in Academic Research Articles based on Hyland Model (Bahrani et al, 2018, 74)**

Resources	Examples
Hedges	Possibly, might, perhaps, ...
Boosters	Clearly, demonstrate, beyond, doubt, ...
Attitude markers	Agree, hopefully, remarkable, ...
Self-mentions	I, my, our, mine, your, the author, ...

### 2.3. Some Research on Authorial Stance

Hyland's(2005) model has been adopted as a framework for studying issues related to authorial stance within different academic writing settings. Smith and Johnson (2017), for instance, conducted longitudinal study of the effect of instruction on students' use of stance and engagement resources in essays across different disciplines. Their seminal work indicated that explicit instruction and disciplinary feedback have a positive effect on students' awareness of disciplinary norms and rhetorical strategies as far as stance and engagement resources are concerned (Smith & Johnson, 2017). In the same vein, Jones et al. (2019) used the same model to investigate qualitatively and quantitatively the effects of genre-specific feedback on students' development of authorial stance. This study also provided evidence about the positive effects of instruction on students' development of stance features (Jones et al., 2019). Hyland's model was also used by Brown and Smith (2020) to investigate authorial stance in professional communication. Their study also showed the usefulness of this model to the study of communicative strategies across diverse professional settings (Brown & Smith, 2020). Although this review is far from being systematic or comprehensive, but these different studies pointed to the effectiveness of the model in question in the study of stance resources in both academic and professional communication.

Hence, the model provides a sound heuristic for evaluating students' mastery of discipline-specific academic discourse and also for fine tuning instruction and feedback to their current level.

## 3. The Study

### 3.1 Sample

The corpus analysed in this study was compiled by a systematic selection of 22 essay-based exam papers in the subject of applied linguistics written by students attending the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the master course of didactics of English as a foreign language at the university of Jijel. It is also worth mentioning that the sample was randomly selected on the basis of convenience.

In an attempt to analyse students' use of stance features in an essay-based exam in the subject of applied linguistics, this study was conducted. The sample under study consists of 30 essay-based exam papers in the subject of applied linguistics generated by master one student of English at MSBYU, Jijel who were asked to provide a one and half timed response to the following question: Dell Hymes coined the term 'communicative competence' in reaction to Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance. Discuss in the form of a coherent and cohesive essay. The

essays were first collected , and, then, typed in Microsoft Word format so as to facilitate the analysis.

### 3.2. Results and Data Analysis

The essays that have selected were analysed with a focus on errors in the use of stance features to gauge the level of the respondents’ grasp of content in the subject of applied linguistics. It is worth noting that only the sentences that were deemed more representative of the erroneous use of the features under study were selected for the following analysis.

#### 3.2.1. Hedges Erroneous Use

**Table: Examples of erroneous use of hedges**

Essay 1	-“Initially, Chomsky said that knowledge or grammar rules are innate...”
Essay 2	-“Dell Hymes idea of language as a set of ways of speaking is an alternative to the idea of language as grammar...”
Essay 3	-“Chomsky considers it as a set of abstract rules whereas, Dell Hymes views it as a set of ways of speaking.”
Essay 4	-“Chief among the things that made Dell Hymes an influential linguist and anthropologist is his huge contribution...”
Essay 5	“...a kind of language that grounded in the social context of itself and a culture that focuses on speaking and communication...”
Essay 6	“The main concern of the linguistic theory according to Dell Hymes is that competence and performance diachrony was attacked by introducing the communicative competence.”
Essay 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Noam Chomsky, founding father of SLA, introduced the term 'Linguistic Competence' viewing language as an abstracted set of rules”</li> </ul>
Essay 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Dell Hymes is one of the prominent scholars in the sociolinguistics movement, he was well known for his sides concerning the actual use of language”</li> </ul>
Essay 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “One of the famous debates rised between two outstanding figures in the field of 'Applied Linguistics'...”</li> </ul>
Essay 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Before Dell Hymes, Chomsky introduced his idea that is in acquiring a language competence is perfect...”</li> </ul>
Essay 11	“The idea of language as grammar has been dominant until Dell Hymes’ came up with the idea of language as a set of ways of speaking”
Essay 12	“The ethnography of speaking approach tended to prove that speech cannot be separated from its sociological and cultural factors that help shape linguistic form and create meaning...”
Essay 13	“Hymes did not Stop there, instead he proposed a new approach...” Explanation:
Essay 14	“...so that, he argued that competence and performance can not be separated from each other.”

Essay15	“...and this means that the norms of speaking varies across culture for example in the American culture...”
Essay16	“These alterations comprise differing interpretations of various components of speech across culture.”
Essay17	“Hymes was always concerned with language in use...”
Essay18	“In conclusion, language is much more than numerous rules of grammar...”
Essay19	“The ethnography of communication offers a system of concepts that can be used to conceptualize the basic phenomena of study and a set of components to analyze these phenomena.”
Essay20	“Dell Hymes was one of the most prominent linguists that his theories contributed in the field of linguistics and Ethnography of communication.”
Essay21	“It is a concept that deals with language related problems”
Essay22	“To understand fully the norms, Systems and rules of applied Linguistics which maintained a socially accountable role Demonstrated by its central interest to Language-related real world problems, we need first to understand how Language is viewed over time by different scholars.”

The above table shows that a slight majority of the examples clearly lack hedging. The sentences extracted from essay 1, essay 2, essay 3, essay 4, essay 5, essay 6, essay 7, essay 8, essay 9, essay 10, and essay 11 are good illustrations of this situation. The students who produced the sentences in question failed to demonstrate their interpretation or perspective on the propositions they expressed in those sentences. More alarmingly, the lack of hedging betrays a superficial grasp of Dell Hymes’s contribution to the debate sparked by Chomsky’s revolutionary ideas about the need to set a distinction between competence and performance and to adopt the former as the sole object of linguistic study. For example, the assertion about Chomsky's statement in essay 1 lacks hedging to indicate the author's interpretation of Chomsky’s controversial stance vis-à-vis the innateness of grammar knowledge. The same was also observed, for instance, in the sentence extracted from Essay 4; the phrase "Chief among the things" clearly lacks hedging to indicate the author's evaluation of Dell Hymes’s contribution to the debate in question. The phrase "One of the famous debates rised" in the sentence extracted from essay 9 needs also to be hedged to reflect the author's viewpoint. The fact that the student mentions “applied linguistics” instead of the broader field of “linguistics”, which is the relevant choice in this case, provides further evidence of the superficial knowledge that students have about the topic under discussion. In essay 11, the phrase "has been dominant" should also be hedged to reflect the author's interpretation of Dell Hymes’s contribution.

Regarding the rest of the examples in the table; an interesting pattern also emerged. Although these sentences were somehow hedged, but the hedging devices used displayed a sense of uncertainty rather than a confident relative position based on a thorough understanding of the linguistic debate under study. For instance, the phrase "tended to prove" in the sentence extracted from essay 12 introduces uncertainty. Instead of implying that the ethnography of speaking approach only

“tended to prove” something, it would be stronger to assert what the approach actually showcases about language phenomena. The same also applies to the sentence extracted from essay 13; The use of "did not stop there" is a hedge that weakens the assertion. But the use of this device implies hesitation or uncertainty and it would have been more direct to state “Hymes further proposed...” The use of the phrase “comprise differing interpretations” in essay 16 seems to be a hedge at first glance, but this phrase casts a sense of uncertainty. The author could have used “These alterations encompass differing interpretations...” as a more straightforward alternative. In the same vein, the example extracted from essay 19 did not depart from the observed pattern; the phrase "offers a system of concepts that can be used to conceptualize" introduces a hedge in the guise of a suggestion rather than a direct assertion. A more confident hedge would have been "The ethnography of communication provides a system of concepts...". Similarly, the phrase "we need first to understand" in essay 22 employs a hedge, implying that understanding the historical views of language is merely a suggestion rather than a necessary step. A more assertive choice would have been to state that idea as follows: "Understanding how language is viewed over time by different scholars is essential to fully grasp the scope of the historical development of human understanding of language phenomena”.

All in all, the patterns observed in the data reveal that the erroneous use of hedges is generally manifested through two aspects: 1. lack of hedging, and 2. the use of devices that betray a sense of uncertainty rather than a confident, well-informed stance supported by an adequate grasp of the literature related to the debate under discussion.

### 3.2.2. Erroneous Use of Boosters

**Table: Examples of erroneous use of boosters**

Essay 1	“Dell Hymes was one of the most prominent linguistics that his theories contributed...”
Essay 2	“Dell hymes was a prominent American linguist whose theories significantly influenced the field of sociolinguistics.”
Essay 3	“Dell Hymes was a highly influential figure in the field of linguistics.”
Essay 4	“Dell hymes was a well-known linguist who revolutionized the field of sociolinguistics.”
Essay 5	“Dell Hymes was a pioneering linguist whose work reshaped the study of sociolinguistics.”
Essay 6	“Dell Hymes was a groundbreaking linguist who transformed the field of sociolinguistics.”
Essay 7	“Dell Hymes was a revolutionary figure in linguistics who redefined the study of sociolinguistics.”
Essay 8	“Dell Hymes was one of the most influential linguists in history, whose work reshaped the field of sociolinguistics.”
Essay 9	“Dell Hymes was a transformative figure in linguistics who revolutionized the study of sociolinguistics.”
Essay 10	“Dell Hymes was a seminal figure in the field of linguistics whose work

	fundamentally altered the study of sociolinguistics.”
Essay11	“Dell Hymes was an iconic figure in linguistics who forever changed the landscape of sociolinguistics.”
Essay12	“Dell Hymes was a legendary figure in the field of linguistics whose work had an indelible impact on sociolinguistics.”
Essay13	“Dell Hymes was a titan in linguistics whose contributions to sociolinguistics are unmatched.”
Essay14	“Dell Hymes was a giant in linguistics whose impact on sociolinguistics cannot be overstated.”
Essay15	“Dell Hymes was a luminary in the field of linguistics whose insights into sociolinguistics remain unparalleled.”
Essay16	“Dell Hymes was a titan in the field of linguistics whose theories revolutionized the study of sociolinguistics.”
Essay17	“Dell Hymes' theory of communicative competence completely transformed the field of linguistics.”
Essay18	“Dell Hymes' focus on communicative competence revolutionized our understanding of language use.”
Essay19	“Dell Hymes' introduction of the ethnography of communication marked a paradigm shift in linguistics.”
Essay20	“Dell Hymes was a trailblazer in the field of linguistics, reshaping our understanding of language and communication.”
Essay21	“Dell Hymes' theory of communicative competence was groundbreaking, fundamentally altering our approach to language study.”
Essay22	“Dell Hymes' concept of communicative competence revolutionized the field of linguistics, forever changing how we understand language.”

Regarding the erroneous use of boosters, the table above shows that although the authors used boosters, their assertions were couched in overly emphatic language that is more typical of a literary rather than an academic style which requires more nuanced language that acknowledges differing perspectives or limitations.

In the overriding majority of the examples, the scope of Dell Hymes’s contribution was magnified without the provision of the necessary evidence to support the claims. In some of these examples, Dell Hymes was qualified as being “the most prominent linguist” (essay1), “a prominent American linguist” (essay 2), “a highly influential figure” (essay 3), “a well-known linguist” (essay 4), “a pioneering linguist” (essay 5), “a ground breaking linguist” (essay 6), “a revolutionary figure” (essay 7), etc. Moreover, in the same examples, Dell Hymes was credited with having “transformed”, ”revolutionized”, ”reshaped”, ”redefined”, ”fundamentally altered”, etc. While acknowledging that Dell Hymes’s contribution to the study of language was significant, it should also pointed out that these assertions are expressed in terms that depart markedly from the cautionand balance expected in academic writing.

Even more striking is the students' use of some adjectives that are completely strange to an academic register to qualify Dell Hymes; Dell Hymes as a figure, for instance, was qualified as being "seminal" (essay 10), "iconic" (essay 11), "legendary" (essay 12), "titan" (essay 14 & 17), "giant" (essay 15), "luminary" (essay 16), and even a "trailblazer" (essay 21). The use of these adjectives shows that the authors in question were eager to impress their audience, in this case, the teacher, without any regard to the conventions of academic style.

Furthermore, instead of using boosters to show a firm adherence to a particular position in an ongoing academic debate relevant to their discipline, in this case the psycholinguistic Vs. the sociolinguistic position towards the issue of competence, the papers under study tended to exaggerate the scope of Dell Hymes's contribution without providing supporting evidence. In the sentences extracted from essay 17, essay 18, essay 19, essay 21, and essay 22, there was a clear transition from a focus on the person of Dell Hymes to a depicting "communicative competence" as marking a major paradigm shift. These statements exaggerate Hymes's contribution without providing specific evidence or context to support the claim. Moreover, academic writing typically requires more nuanced language that acknowledges the complexity of scholarly influence and the contributions of other scholars.

### 3.2.3. Erroneous Use of Self-mentions

Table: Examples of erroneous use of self-mentions

Essay 1	"In my opinion, the most important aspect of applied linguistics is its practical application."
Essay 2	
Essay 5	"I believe that applied linguistics plays a crucial role in addressing real-world language-related issues."
Essay 10	"I argue that Dell Hymes' concept of communicative competence offers a valuable perspective on language use."
Essay 15	"According to me, applied linguistics has greatly benefited from Dell Hymes' concept of communicative competence."
Essay 22	"Dell Hymes came with an opposite idea that reject Chomsky's idea."

The examples in the table above show that the erroneous use of self-mention was the least observed among stance devices. Overt errors in the use of self-mention was found only in five out the twenty two essays selected for the present study. As instances of self-mentions, these students used expressions like "in my opinion ..." (essay 1), "I believe..." (essay 5), "I argue...", and "according to me..." (essay 15). Hyland (2005) suggests that overt self-mentions like "in my opinion" can be seen as unnecessary and overly subjective in academic writing. Instead, the writer could present their argument more objectively by stating the importance of applied linguistics without explicitly referring to their opinion. In the same vein, while it's important for the writer to take a stance and argue their point, overt self-mentions like "I argue" can be seen as redundant in academic writing.

Hyland suggests that the argument should be clear from the content itself without needing to explicitly state that the writer is arguing.

In each of these examples, the self-mentions introduce subjectivity or unnecessary redundancy into the writing, which may not align with the conventions of academic discourse as outlined by Hyland's model. Academic writing typically aims for objectivity, clarity, and conciseness, so writers should be cautious when using overt self-mentions in their work. In other words, the authors' explicit presence in the texts under study was unjustified.

### 3.2.4. Erroneous Use of Attitude Markers

**Table: Examples of erroneous use of attitude markers**

Essay 1	"Obviously, Dell Hymes' concept of communicative competence is superior to Chomsky's narrow view."
Essay 2	"Certainly, Dell Hymes' approach to communicative competence offers a more holistic perspective."
Essay 3	"Undoubtedly, Dell Hymes' concept of communicative competence revolutionized the field of applied linguistics."
Essay 4	"Admittedly, Dell Hymes' approach to communicative competence is far more practical than Chomsky's theoretical framework."
Essay 5	"Evidently, Dell Hymes' concept of communicative competence offers a comprehensive understanding of language use."
Essay 6	"Obviously, Dell Hymes' theory of communicative competence surpasses Chomsky's outdated perspective. "
Essay 7	"Clearly, Dell Hymes' concept of communicative competence provides a more nuanced understanding of language use."
Essay 8	"Unquestionably, Dell Hymes' contributions to applied linguistics have been invaluable."
Essay 9	"Without a doubt, Dell Hymes' concept of communicative competence offers a more nuanced understanding of language use."
Essay 10	"Certainly, Dell Hymes' approach to communicative competence represents a significant advancement in the field of applied linguistics."
Essay 11	"Undoubtedly, Dell Hymes' theory of communicative competence offers a more comprehensive framework."
Essay 12	"Admittedly, Dell Hymes' concept of communicative competence provides a more holistic perspective."
Essay 13	"Evidently, Dell Hymes' approach to communicative competence is far more practical than Chomsky's theoretical framework."
Essay 14	"Clearly, Dell Hymes' concept of communicative competence surpasses Chomsky's outdated perspective."
Essay 15	"Obviously, Dell Hymes' contributions to applied linguistics have been invaluable."
Essay 16	"Unquestionably, Dell Hymes' concept of communicative competence

	offers a more nuanced understanding of language use.”
Essay17	“Without a doubt, Dell Hymes' approach to communicative competence represents a significant advancement in the field of applied linguistics.”
Essay18	“Certainly, Dell Hymes' theory of communicative competence offers a more comprehensive framework.”
Essay19	“Indeed, Dell Hymes succeeded in shifting the focus from linguistic competence to communicative competence.”
Essay20	“Dell Hymes' framework was undoubtedly a significant departure from Chomsky's linguistic competence.”
Essay21	“Hymes' theory unquestionably represents a paradigm shift in applied linguistics.”
Essay22	“For sure, Dell Hymes' perspective on communicative competence offers a more nuanced understanding.”

As mentioned above, attitude markers refer to the features whereby the author expresses her subjective reaction to a particular proposition. As the examples in the table above show, the students have in the overriding majority of cases used synonymous adverbs to imply the superiority of Dell Hymes' contribution or concept of “communicative competence” without acknowledging potential areas of debate or criticism. In this regard, the authors used “obviously” (essay 1, and essay 6), “certainly” (essay 2, and essay 10 ), “undoubtedly” (essay 3, essay 11, and essay 20 ), “evidently” (essay 5, and essay 14, ), “clearly” (essay 7), “unquestionably” (essay 8, essay 16, and essay 21 ). The repeated occurrence of some adverbs suggest that their use is most probably due to instruction or the prevalence of certain habits that have been ignored in teachers’ feedback. To express the same function, essay 9 and essay 22 used the phrases “without a doubt” and “for sure” respectively. Such errors undermine the critical engagement required in academic discourse and oversimplifies the discussion over the issue of language competence.

On the other hand, the repeated use of “admittedly” to express, most probably, a concession or acknowledgment of opposing views regarding language competence, but fails to provide a balanced assessment or justification. This undermines the credibility of the writer's argument and overlooks the nuances of the debate expected in academic settings.

### 3.3. Overall Analysis

According to Hyland’s (2005) model, interactions in academic texts are accomplished through the enactment of two systems: stance and engagement. Stance refers to a set of linguistic resources deployed by expert academic writers so as to interact with their fellow disciplinary readers and to make them accept their arguments. In the light of this, the four stance features in Hyland’s model have been selected for analysis in 22 exam essays in the subject of applied linguistics. The essays ,it should be noted, dealt with the students’ positions regarding a central debate in linguistics, namely the controversy over the type of competence which is more feasible as the object of linguistic enquiry, the grammatical sentences of a language, Chomsky’s position, or all the utterances that are more or less grammatical ,but suitable to the context, Dell Hymes’s view.

The results discussed above revealed that the erroneous use of hedges was either due to a lack of hedging devices or the use of such devices in a way that betrays hesitation to take a clear position rather than confidence in supporting a particular view vis-à-vis the controversial issue under consideration. As regards the erroneous use of boosters, the results showed that errors in the use of these features emanated from the bias towards an unjustified magnification of Dell Hymes's contribution. Although the errors in self-mentions were the least occurring, the situation was most probably due to avoidance rather than real mastery. The erroneous cases in self-mention use were due to oversubjectivity or a clear departure from the conventions of academic writing. Lastly, the erroneous use of attitude markers was caused by a tendency to exaggerate the importance of Dell Hymes' contribution at the expense of that of Chomsky without the provision of the necessary justifications or evidence.

As far as the debate over the issue of competence is concerned, a quick look at the literature shows that although 'Dell Hymes's concept of "communicative competence" [was] intended as a counterconcept of Chomsky's "linguistic competence..."', 'sociolinguistics [was not] designed as a countermovement to Noam Chomsky and his transformational generative grammar' (Paulston and Tucker, 2006: 27). 'They were simply two schools which appeared around the same time', add Paulston and Tucker (2006: 27). Although Dell Hymes's idea of 'communicative competence' have been embraced by applied linguists, this notion served only as an 'intellectual anchor', according to Flowerdew (2013:7) and as a fully-fledged new paradigm as it has been wrongly represented in students' papers. Thus, the erroneous use of stance features in the essays in question stemmed from both a departure from the conventions of academic style, in general, and a discrepancy with the epistemological underpinnings of the debate over competence in modern linguistics, in particular.

### **Conclusion:**

The results generated by the present study remain indicative rather than conclusive and are thus far from providing any firm ground for generalizability. These results, however, provide evidence that students' erroneous use of stance features in exam essays provide good indicators of their low level of apprenticeship to the conventions of the academic writing as well as their superficial knowledge about one of the central debates in the field in which they specialize. Therefore, these results provide perspectives for future larger scale and more rigorous research. They also offer insights for improving the quality of instruction and fine tuning feedback to enable master students to adopt an effective authorial stance in the subject of applied linguistics.

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