Investigating the Features of Academic Writing in Research among Undergraduates

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Abstract— In academic settings, academic writing is a specialized style of writing that adheres to specific rules and guidelines. As noted by Smith (2019), it is characterized by a formal and unbiased tone, precise terminology, and adherence to established norms. This study aims to explore two aspects of academic writing: the use of hedging and the frequency of personal pronouns. To facilitate future research, a mini-corpus called the "Academic Writing in Research Corpus" (AWRC) is introduced. This corpus will serve as a valuable resource for investigating the patterns and tendencies related to hedging and the use of personal pronouns in academic writing. By exploring these aspects, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the linguistic characteristics of academic writing, providing insights into the ways in which authors employ hedging strategies and the role of personal pronouns in scholarly discourse. The findings will contribute to future research endeavors in this area. The study focuses on undergraduates from the Faculty of Law at General Sir John Kotelawala Defense University. The research design involves collecting proposal writings from this group as representative samples. The collected data will be processed and analyzed to quantify the frequency of hedging and personal pronoun usage. A comparative analysis will be conducted to compare these usage patterns across different proposals. Statistical techniques may be used to determine the significance of any observed differences. This research design will provide valuable insights into the frequency and patterns of hedging and personal pronouns in research writing by undergraduate students.

Keywords— Academic - Writing, Research, AWRC

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing plays a vital role in the generation and dissemination of knowledge, and researchers employ various strategies to enhance the effectiveness and clarity of their work. This comparative research delves into the utilization of corpora in academic research and explores how different studies approach the use of hedging and personal pronouns. The objective of this research is to shed light on the benefits and consequences of these linguistic choices within the context of academic discourse by examining relevant studies. By analyzing these approaches, this research aims to provide insights into the impact and implications of language choices in academic communication.

Corpora, extensive compilations of written or spoken texts, have emerged as invaluable assets for academic writers. Scholars utilize corpora to meticulously scrutinize linguistic patterns, discern prevalent collocations, and acquire profound understandings of language usage within particular contexts. Through the analysis of authentic language data, researchers are empowered to make well-informed decisions concerning language selection in their own writing, encompassing aspects such as the strategic implementation of hedging and the usage of personal language.

Hedging in academic writing requires adopting cautious and mitigating phrasing to express skepticism or qualify assertions. It enables authors to acknowledge the limitations of their arguments, consider other interpretations, and demonstrate intellectual humility (Hyland, 1996). Scholars commonly employ hedging to avoid overgeneralization and to present their findings as uncertain rather than absolute facts

The present research follows a structured framework consisting of an Introduction, Methodology, Data Analysis, and Conclusion. The Introduction section sets the stage by providing an overview of the research objectives and the significance of the study within the academic domain. It highlights the specific aspects under investigation, namely the usage of hedging and the frequency of personal pronouns in academic research writing. The Methodology section outlines the research design employed to address the research question. In this case, the focus is on undergraduate students from the Faculty of Law at General Sir John Kothalawala Defense University, and a representative sample of proposal writings is collected for analysis. The Data Analysis section involves processing and analyzing the collected proposal writings to quantify the frequency of hedging and personal pronoun usage. Comparative analysis is conducted to examine variations in usage patterns across different proposals, and statistical techniques may be applied to determine the significance of

observed differences. The Conclusion section presents the key findings derived from the data analysis and discusses their implications in relation to the research objectives. It provides a summary of the research outcomes and offers insights into the linguistic characteristics of academic writing, particularly with regard to hedging strategies and the role of personal pronouns. Finally, the study concludes by presenting recommendations for future research, highlighting potential areas for further exploration, and suggesting avenues for expanding on the findings of the present study.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

Corpus research offers researchers a comprehensive understanding of the usage of academic materials through various academic writing methods. By employing both quantitative and qualitative approaches, researchers can delve into the frequency, distribution, relevance, and functions of specific linguistic characteristics. According to Hyland (2016), this combined approach enables scholars to grasp how academic language is constructed, agreed upon, and comprehended. Quantitative techniques, such as identifying frequencies and variations associated with particular linguistic features, are complemented by qualitative analysis that investigates the purposes and significance of these features in their contextual settings. This mixed-methods approach provides for a more nuanced examination of the numerous characteristics of academic writing and helps to a better understanding of the complexities of language in the academic context.
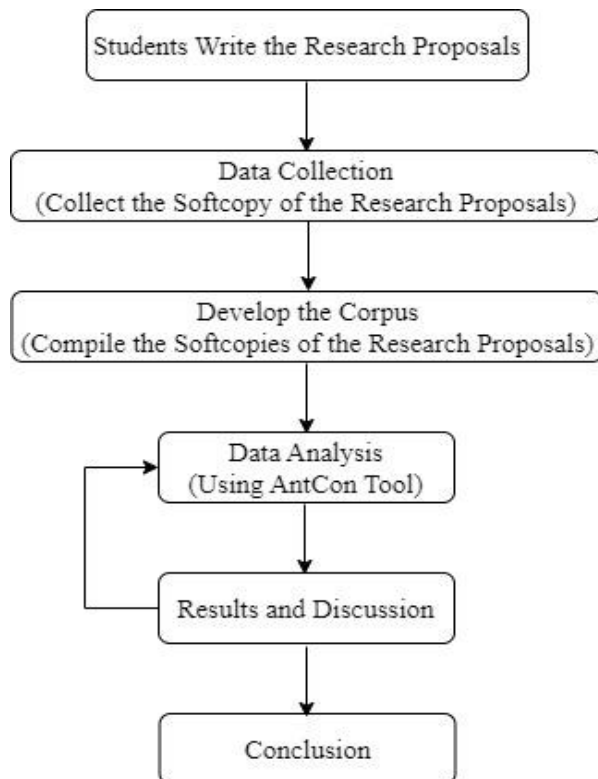

Figure 1 – Research Design

The primary focus of the present research was to investigate the frequency of hedging and personal pronoun usage in research writing by undergraduate students. To achieve this, a sample of twenty-six research proposals was obtained from students belonging to the 38th intake of the Faculty of Law at General Sir Kothalawala Defense University. The sample consisted of twenty-two-day scholars and four foreign students, all within the age range of 20 to 23 years. The research objectives encompassed examining the utilization of hedging in academic research writing, exploring the frequency of personal pronoun usage in academic research writing, and introducing a mini corpus, namely the Academic Writing in Research Corpus (AWRC), to facilitate future research endeavors.

The subsequent step involved creating a mini corpus as a tool for data analysis. "A corpus is a body of systematically gathered texts or transcribed speech to represent a particular function of a language that can serve as the basis for linguistic analysis and description (Park & Nam 2017)".

The research proposals of all twenty-six students were extracted into a text file, excluding unnecessary details such as titles, sub-headings, spaces, and punctuations. To compile the mini corpus, the data from the text files were copied into the AntConc Concordance, a software tool that was downloaded for this purpose. Subsequently, the frequency option in AntConc was utilized to gather the respective findings. Through comparative analysis, these findings were then evaluated to draw conclusions.

III. DATA ANALYSIS

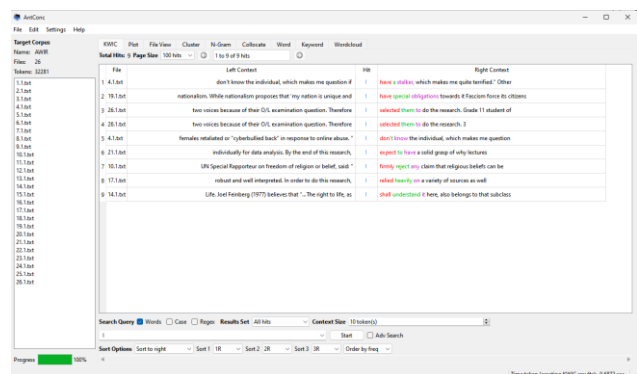### II. Using of personal Pronouns

Figure 2- Comparison of using "I" and "We" forms in academic research writing

In academic writing, the primary focus is on presenting information and ideas in an objective manner, prioritizing evidence and logical reasoning over personal opinions or subjective experiences. Overusing the first-person pronoun "I" can introduce bias and subjectivity, shifting the focus from the subject matter to the author. Moreover, it can result in repetitive sentence structures and unnecessary

self-references. Hence, it is recommended to exercise restraint when using the first-person pronoun in order to maintain an objective and concise writing style. By minimizing the use of "I," writers can enhance the clarity and effectiveness of their academic work, ensuring that the emphasis remains on the content rather than the author's personal perspective.

Indeed, it is crucial to acknowledge that the appropriate usage of the first-person pronoun "I" in academic papers can vary depending on disciplinary norms, research methodologies, and the specific writing context. While personal viewpoints and experiences can hold relevance, it is essential to integrate them thoughtfully into the broader scholarly discourse and adhere to the conventions and expectations of academic writing. As demonstrated by the data provided, the frequency and manner in which students employ the pronoun 'I' in their academic writing can significantly impact the overall academic conviction of their work. Striking a balance between incorporating personal perspectives and maintaining a scholarly tone is key to achieving an effective and persuasive academic writing style.
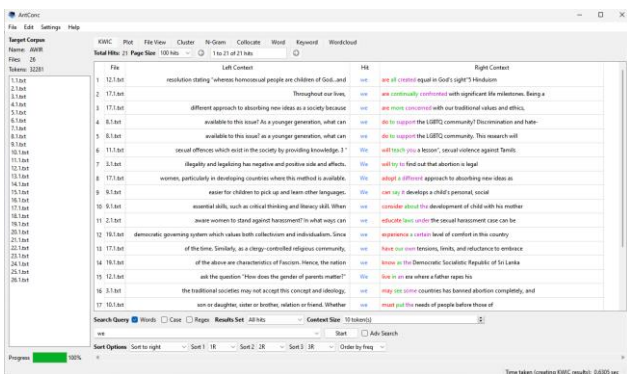

Figure 3- Usage of the pronoun "we" in research proposals

Using the pronoun "we" without clearly defining the individuals or groups it represents can result in ambiguity. Without specifying who exactly is included in this collective, readers may find it challenging to identify the specific actors or contributors involved in the research or argument being presented. This lack of clarity can impede the understanding of the work and diminish the overall effectiveness of the writing. It is crucial to provide explicit information about the parties included in the pronoun "we" to ensure transparency and facilitate comprehension for readers.

Achieving a balanced and appropriate use of pronouns, including "we," in academic texts is essential for ensuring clarity, precision, and a nuanced representation of individual and collective viewpoints. Authors must carefully consider the context, disciplinary standards, and specific objectives of their writing when determining the

acceptable use of pronouns. The provided statistic indicates that the usage of the pronoun 'we' in the context mentioned violates academic conventions and formalities. Moreover, using 'we' in individual research can indicate a lack of understanding of proper grammar among undergraduate students. It is crucial for authors, especially students, to adhere to established grammar rules and academic writing guidelines to maintain the integrity and professionalism of their work.

While examining the distribution of pronouns "we" and "I" in research papers can provide valuable insights, it is equally important to acknowledge the potential negative implications of imbalances in their usage. In this analysis, "we" accounts for 65.4% and "I" for 34.6%, highlighting the need to consider their respective drawbacks in academic writing. While the inclusion of "we" and "I" can enhance reader involvement, excessive use of either pronoun can lead to reader disengagement. An over-reliance on "we" may create a sense of detachment or alienation from the discourse, while the overuse of "I" can convey a self-absorbed or egotistical tone. To maintain reader interest and engagement, it is crucial to strike the right balance between inclusivity and individual expression. By finding this equilibrium, academic writers can effectively convey their ideas while maintaining a sense of connection with their readers.
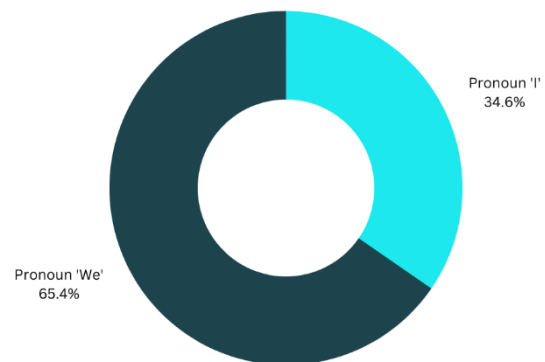

Figure 4: Comparison between the usage of pronouns I and We

In conclusion, examining the usage of pronouns "we" and "I" in academic papers highlights the potential negative consequences of imbalances in their usage. These disadvantages encompass issues of clarity, a subjective or personal tone, the risk of bias, a disregard for disciplinary standards, and a potential decrease in reader interest. Striking a balance between these pronouns is essential for effective communication, authenticity, and reader engagement within the academic writing context. By achieving this equilibrium, writers can maintain a clear and objective tone while still conveying their ideas and

fostering meaningful engagement with their readers. It is crucial to recognize the importance of thoughtful and deliberate pronoun usage in order to uphold the integrity and impact of academic writing.
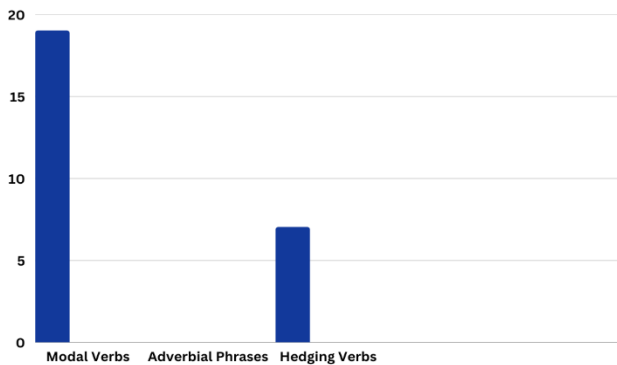
Hedging Frequency

Figure 5: Usage of types of hedging in Academic writing

The utilization of modal verbs in proposal writing holds significant importance as it allows writers to convey their attitude, express varying degrees of confidence, and underscore crucial elements of the proposal. This descriptive study specifically focuses on examining the usage of commonly employed modal verbs within 17 out of 26 proposals authored by students. By analyzing the patterns and frequencies of these modal verbs, this study aims to shed light on their role in shaping the rhetorical stance and persuasive impact of proposal writing.

Modal verbs play a crucial role in proposal writing as they allow writers to convey a range of attitudes, including certainty, possibility, duty, and recommendation. In the context of hedging, it is notable that 19 out of the 26 undergraduate students included modal verbs in their proposal writing. The frequency of usage varies among these modal verbs, but it appears that students heavily rely on modal verbs in their proposals to articulate their objectives and perspectives. Common modal verbs employed by undergraduates include "will," "would," "should," "could," and "may." The presence of these modal verbs indicates the students' intention to express their intentions and navigate the nuances of their proposals effectively.

Based on the research findings, it has been observed that adverbial phrases are not commonly utilized in undergraduate proposal writing. This suggests that students may not employ adverbial words to provide additional information or modify actions, situations, or circumstances in their proposals. The absence of adverbial phrases indicates that students may rely on alternative linguistic strategies, such as the use of modal verbs and specialized word choices, to convey their ideas and assertions effectively within their proposals. The reliance on these alternative methods may compensate for the limited use of adverbial phrases in undergraduate writing, allowing students to express their thoughts and claims in a concise and impactful manner.

In academic writing, particularly in the context of proposal writing, the use of hedging verbs serves the purpose of introducing caution, ambiguity, or qualification. The statistical analysis reveals that undergraduates exhibit a relatively low frequency of hedging verb usage in their proposals, with only 7 out of the 26 students incorporating hedging verbs. This suggests that students may not rely on hedging verbs as extensively as they do on modal verbs. It is important to acknowledge that the specific choice and frequency of hedging verbs employed by students may vary, influenced by individual writing styles and academic conventions. Therefore, it is essential to consider the nuances of each student's usage of hedging verbs within the broader context of their writing.

It is important to acknowledge that the findings of this research are based on the specific dataset analyzed and provide a general overview of the patterns observed in undergraduate proposal writing. It is crucial to recognize that individual writing styles and disciplinary conventions may vary among students, which can influence their use of language and writing patterns. Therefore, while this research provides valuable insights into undergraduates' proposal writing, it is essential to consider the unique characteristics and variations that may exist within individual writing styles and disciplinary traditions.

IV. CONCLUSION

Academic writing holds great significance in the process of knowledge creation and sharing, and scholars employ diverse strategies to enhance the efficiency and lucidity of their work. This comparative research focuses on investigating the usage of corpora in academic research and delving into how various studies tackle the use of hedging and personal pronouns. The primary goal of this research was to provide a deeper understanding of the advantages and drawbacks associated with these linguistic choices within the realm of academic discourse, through a comprehensive examination of pertinent studies. By analyzing and evaluating these approaches, this research aims to offer valuable insights into the impact and implications of language choices in academic communication.

The primary objective of academic writing revolves around the contribution it makes to the existing reservoir of knowledge pertaining to a specific subject (Brown, 2018). Through rigorous research, meticulous examination of pre-existing literature, and the presentation of original ideas, academic writers enhance intellectual discourse and

expand the boundaries of knowledge. Furthermore, academic writing serves as a catalyst for intellectual advancement and facilitates the dissemination of information within the realm of academia on a global scale (Jones, 2020).

The current study, utilizing sample data, has provided a comprehensive analysis of the usage of personal pronouns and hedging in academic writing, specifically within research proposals. The findings from the data have revealed that students possess limited awareness of the distinctive features of academic writing, as evidenced by their excessive use of first-person pronouns such as "I" and "We." Additionally, the study has highlighted the inadequate utilization of adverbial phrases in research writing. Consequently, it is recommended to prioritize the instruction of diverse hedging techniques in research writing, as this will prove advantageous in both academic and professional contexts. Such an approach will contribute to the development of effective communication skills within these domains.

V. RECOMMENDATION

1) The utilization of a mini corpus can be employed to effectively analyze and identify errors in academic writing. By incorporating a small collection of texts representative of the academic context, researchers and educators can gain valuable insights into common mistakes and areas that require improvement.

2) Consider implementing the use of a mini corpus in school education, particularly at the onset of university education. Introducing students to the analysis of authentic academic texts early on can familiarize them with the conventions and expectations of scholarly writing, enhancing their academic preparedness.

3) Emphasize the development of academic literacy as a central component across all degree programs to cultivate a stronger academic culture. By prioritizing the acquisition of essential academic skills, such as critical reading, effective writing, and proper citation practices, students can enhance their ability to engage in rigorous scholarly discourse and contribute meaningfully to their respective fields.

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