Indirectness Features in Argumentative Essays of Costa Rican EFL University Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to determine the frequency of occurrence of a set of indirectness features in argumentative essays. A taxonomy of indirectness features developed by Hinkel (1997) was employed to classify the features under scrutiny into rhetorical, lexical/referential, and syntactic. The study followed a statistical descriptive design to describe a sample of 30 essays. The essays were written by a group of English as a Foreign Language students in a composition course at the western branch of the University of Costa Rica. The frequency of occurrence of indirectness features was calculated per 100 words with an average number of words in the essays of 798. Additionally, the percentage of each feature compared to total indirectness in the essays and the standard deviations of the frequencies were calculated for the analysis. The results revealed that the four indirectness features representing potential recurrent patterns were subordination, vague determiners, delayed claims, and unnecessary adjectivals. Due to the rhetorical or lexical nature of the features, the researchers recommend that instructors pay increased attention to vocabulary acquisition and to the organization of ideas when raising awareness of differences in communication style.

Key words: indirectness, academic writing, argumentation, second language writing, cross-cultural rhetoric

Resumen

El objetivo del estudio consistió en determinar la frecuencia con que ocurre un conjunto de características de expresión indirecta en ensayos argumentativos. Se empleó una taxonomía de características de expresión indirecta desarrollada por Hinkel (1997) para clasificar las características estudiadas como retóricas, léxicas/referenciales y sintácticas. El estudio siguió un diseño estadístico descriptivo de una muestra de 30 ensayos escritos por un grupo de estudiantes de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera en un curso de composición en la Sede de Occidente de la Universidad de Costa Rica. La frecuencia de las características de expresión indirecta se calculó por cada 100 palabras, con un promedio de 798 por ensayo. Además, para el análisis se calculó el porcentaje de cada característica con respecto al total de expresión indirecta en los ensayos, así como la desviación estándar de las frecuencias. Los resultados revelaron que las cuatro características de expresión indirecta que representan patrones recurrentes potenciales son: la subordinación, los determinantes ambiguos, las afirmaciones con sujetos en posición débil y las cláusulas adjetivales innecesarias. Debido a la naturaleza retórica o léxica de dichas características, los investigadores recomiendan que los docentes presten mayor atención a la adquisición de vocabulario y a la organización de ideas al crear conciencia de las diferencias en estilos de comunicación.

Palabras claves: expresión indirecta, escritura académica, argumentación, escritura en segundas lenguas, retórica intercultural

Introduction

The teaching of academic writing in English continues to gain importance worldwide as English establishes itself more and more as the lingua franca of academic exchange. Particularly for students of English and English teachers in training, mastering the conventions of academic writing is a pressing necessity since they will need the skills not only for their own work, but also to guide the work of others and help them participate in the international academic communities of their respective fields. Given the multitude of native languages and cultures of academics writing in English, achieving a common ground enabling all participants to communicate fluently and clearly emerges as a key goal of instruction.

The existence of cultural variation as a factor in writing has been addressed by a variety of researchers. The degree of indirectness, which can have an impact on clarity, has been studied as one of the dimensions of difference in discourse conventions of academic writing in L1 and L2. The studies have predominantly focused on the context of learners from a series of Asian countries writing in English as a second or foreign language. Among the scholars examining indirectness, Hinkel (1997) and Ji (2008) developed taxonomies for the classification of indirectness features; Xi and Guang (2007) studied indirectness in the organization of texts written by Chinese students; Alijanian & Dastjerdi (2012) looked at indirectness in argumentative texts by Persian students; and Uysal (2012) examined indirectness

in argumentative essays by Turkish students in the United States. Uysal (2014) also looked at differences in the use of indirectness devices in abstracts for conference proposals by Indian, Japanese, Turkish, and Anglo-American scholars. In the Latin American context, Félix-Brasdefer (2005) focused on the use of indirectness features in Spanish, but not explicitly on writing. Other authors have addressed indirectness features present in the English writing of Spanish students, but not directly as the focus of their studies (Bennett and Muresan, 2016; Gómez, 2010; Montaño-Harmon, 1991; Pérez de Cabrera, 2012, Saborío, 2007).

In English writing courses at the University of Costa Rica, indirectness has typically been handled within the context of wordiness caused by expletive constructions and overuse of the passive voice. However, there have been no studies exploring how these or other indirectness patterns occur in the writing of the student population. Data describing the production of the students in terms of this discourse dimension would help to understand their second language writing better and to focus the teaching of writing for academic purposes accordingly. Motivated by these considerations, the goal of this study is to examine how indirectness patterns occur in argumentative essays written by EFL Costa Rican students.

Differences in discourse patterns in academic writing in English and Spanish

An exploration of university websites supporting students in their learning of academic writing reveals a series of macro-linguistic features of this genre as conceived by English-speaking academic communities. The University of Manchester (2016), for example, describes academic writing as being consistent, having the appropriate level of formality, expressing ideas precisely, being concise, and being objective. Similarly, the Walden University Writing Center (2016) states that academic writing needs to be direct and clear and to state points immediately, as a result of restrictions on the use of indirect strategies for conveying meaning, which are characteristic of spoken communication. Other important characteristics are described by Gillet (2015), who emphasizes the linearity of academic writing in English, that is, the need for keeping discourse focused on a central idea without digressing from it or repeating information. Another essential feature described by the author is the need for explicitness. To achieve this, writers are expected to show the reader the relationships between parts of the text in an unequivocal manner. The implication of these features is that the customary pattern of English academic writing follows a sequence of focused steps rather than an extended explanation. Hence, writers from academic communities that do not emphasize the same degree of explicitness and a comparable focused progression will need to become familiar with these expectations if they are to perform successfully in English academic writing.

When writing in a language different from their own, writers may not be fully aware of the particular expectations placed by the new culture on its academic environment and, as a result, may not produce texts reflecting

its typical discourse. This problem was addressed by Kaplan (1966) in one of the first studies of its kind. The author exemplified the feedback often given to otherwise syntactically correct texts by non-native English speakers in academic settings in the US and explained comments such as "out of focus" or "lacks cohesion" and "lacks organization" as the result of writers using a "rhetoric and a sequence of thought which violate the expectations of the native reader" (p. 13). As for the expectations in question, the author sustained that the predominant thought patterns defining the style of writing in Anglo-American culture display a marked tendency to linear development, which does not digress from the main statement of content and whose parts all contribute strictly to that central idea.

Regarding awareness of expectations, Abdulkareem (2013) and Singh (2015) also pointed out that using an appropriate style involves a significant level of difficulty for second language writers in English. In the case of Romance languages, which include Spanish, several authors describe their prose as prone to long constructions which often digress from main ideas and take more time to develop the central point (Bennett and Muresan, 2016; Gómez, 2010; Kaplan,1966; Montaño-Harmon, 1991; Pérez de Cabrera, 2012). Bennett and Muresan (2016) sustain that Romance languages possess a notoriously complex style of academic writing and highlight that Spanish prose, in particular, tends to repetition, ornamentation, and elaboration while it also favors subordination. Kaplan (1966), on his part, claims that in Spanish, similarly to French, expository prose is allowed much more

room for digressions and for elements that may add interest to the text but no significant contribution to the structure of the central idea (p.18).

These features alone point to a difference from the expectations of directness, conciseness, and lack of repetition listed above as characteristic of English academic writing. Opinions are not unified on this point; authors like Monroy Casas (cited by Bennett and Muresan 2016) blame task types and the background of participants for findings about the non-linearity of Spanish. On the other hand, findings by Gómez (2010) suggest that Spanish academic prose is, in fact, heavily influenced by a tendency for lengthy sentences and subordination, which, again, suggests a difference from the standard of English academic discourse described above. Similarly, an extensive study of discourse features in Mexican Spanish by Montaño-Harmon (1991) points to a strong penchant for a fancy style containing conscious digression and lengthy "additive, explicative, or resultative relationships between ideas" (p.423). According to the author, this results in text organization lacking the enumeration of steps characteristic of English prose.

In the field of cross-cultural written discourse, Uysal (2014) has listed a number of cultural differences in a range of genres and linked to the use of various rhetorical structures. The structures include coordination versus subordination, the shape of organizational patterns, the shape of argument structure, the degree of coherence, the choice of cohesive devices, the emphasis on straightforward versus flowery language style, and reader versus writer responsibility for the clarity of ideas

(p.180). Culturally determined variations in these rhetorical structures result in more direct or indirect writing. Alijanian and Dastjerdi (2012) also describe the difference between straightforward and flowery language in terms of the direct vs. indirect continuum. For the authors, indirectness is a type of discourse with a style aiming to convey the author's communicative intention by means of circular strategies such as rhetorical questions; it also delays the statement of the main points by addressing other tenuously related points before the main idea is revealed (p.61).

Indirectness features in written discourse

Saying that the style of academic discourse in English is expected to be direct, clear, and concise is not meant to suggest that it is completely free of indirectness. Some degree of indirectness is present and necessary when stating results in a scientific article, for example, with the purpose of avoiding overgeneralizations and showing prudence in drawing conclusions or implications. The question is, then, what the correct degree of indirectness is in assertive academic writing. It follows that learning to express the exact degree of indirectness for a particular text with appropriate linguistic devices is an essential skill and, at the same time, a likely problem for non-native speakers of English expressing themselves in an academic style.

A taxonomy of features for examining indirectness in a text has been proposed by Hinkel (1997) and expanded by other authors. Hinkel has classified indirectness markers and strategies into three categories: Rhetorical, lexical/referential, and syntactic.

In the first category, rhetorical strategies and markers reflect an author's choices for the organization of ideas in a text. These strategies include delayed claims by means of expletives or long nominalizations, repetition of equivalent concepts with different words, and lengthy subordinations. The link between these features and indirectness is explained below.

According to Ferris (2014), repeated nominalizations overload a sentence and make it wordy, which deviates attention from its central claim (p. 156). In addition, it is and there is/there are expletives at the beginning of sentences should be avoided as they make writing less concise and more indirect (p. 159); in these constructions, the main claim appears later in the sentence with a verb in weak position and thus loses strength.

As for repetition strategies, Liu and Zhang (2012) describe them as double nouns of equivalent meaning (e.g. weaknesses and shortcomings), double verbs of similar meaning (e.g. continue to grow and develop), and superfluous adverbial intensifiers (e.g. strongly demand). Repetition functions as an indirectness strategy to the extent that it leads to accumulative argumentation rather than synthetic or analytic (Matalene, cited in Hinkel, 1997); however briefly, it automatically delays the progression of the text rather than continuing to the next idea.

Subordination becomes an indirectness strategy when it is used in complex constructions with multiple subordinate ideas, notably in thesis statements or topic sentences. This tends to confuse readers and leads the

writer to emphasize the subordinate ideas over the sentence's central claim (Ji, 2008, p. 4).

In the second category, lexical/referential indirectness strategies reflect an author's choices for referring to the concepts in a text. These strategies include vague determiners, hedging, and unnecessary adjectival clauses.

McCarthy (as cited in Hinkel, 1997) studied the determiners this, that, these, and those found in academic discourse in English. The author found that the determiners frequently act as referential hedges because they can express tentativeness. They function as indirectness devices when they perform the function of a vague reference, which is discouraged in formal written discourse.

Yagız and Demir (2014) define hedging as tentative language used to avoid certainty or to mitigate statements that may be subject to criticism. The strategy takes many forms, and researchers have proposed taxonomies for the classification of features achieving the hedging effect. Hinkel's taxonomy (1997) includes lexical devices, devices of possibility, quality devices, performative devices, and hedged performative verbs. Yagiz and Demir's taxonomy (2014) shares many features with Hinkel's, albeit with different denominations for some. Among their features, the authors list adverbs of frequency, quantifiers, epistemic modality verbs, epistemic lexical verbs, formal and informal adjectives and adverbs, nouns, conversational and informal devices, introductory phrases, and vague references. In both taxonomies, the features reflect a cautious intention concerning assertions about data or their interpretation. While appropriate hedging is necessary for the careful and precise handling of results and their implications, its use with other purposes can lead to weakening the author's claim and is considered unnecessary indirectness.

Relative clauses used in place of shorter adjective phrases introduce unnecessary distance between the subject and the verb in a sentence (Ferris, 2014). This results in indirectness particularly when the subject of a sentence is already clear and the adjectival phrase turns into a form of circumlocution easily replaced by a more precise lexical term.

In the last category, syntactic indirectness strategies are a result of an author's choices of sentence constructions. In this dimension, two structures have been studied in particular: The passive voice and conditional constructions. In the case of the passive voice, Uysal (2014) asserts that academic textbooks typically describe its appropriate use mainly as the means for describing methods or procedures while other uses are discouraged. In turn, Brown and Levinson (as cited by Alijanian and Dastjerdi, 2012) explain the role of the passive voice in indirectness through its ability to deviate the focus of attention from the agent of an action, which makes the central claim less confrontational and less likely to appear as threatening to the reader(p.66). This happens especially if the structure appears in a context different from a procedural description. As for conditionals, the absence of a direct claim inherent to their use results in indirectness given that the claim yields its place to a hypothetical statement whose implications must first be considered (Brown and Levinson as cited in Hinkel, 1997).

Indirectness in argumentative writing

The use of indirectness markers varies in different cultures and in different discourse practices. In the case of argumentative discourse, it is believed to be culturally bound and to some extent influenced by patterns of indirectness in as much as argumentation is considered face-threatening. Approaches to conflict are not the same across cultures; for example, there is a different commitment to the reader in the way writers develop their arguments in a text. While some cultures have a greater interest in developing factual evidence concisely and encourage a sense of individual reflection, others favor maintaining harmony and promoting consensus.

The language of argumentative texts poses a greater demand on the writer given that it requires careful articulation of both positive (supporting ideas) and negative (opposing ideas) arguments on a controversial topic, always with the overall purpose of convincing the reader to agree with the writer's point of view. Smalley and Ruetten (1995) characterize argumentative texts as being highly persuasive and logical in justifying a point of view to make it clear to the audience. This requires careful assertive language with a low degree of indirectness allowing the author's position to stand out clearly and unequivocally.

In the only previous study of differences in argumentative writing in English and Spanish in Costa Rica, Saborío (2007) examined features of argumentative essays written in both languages by a group of Costa Rican college students of English as a Foreign Language. The author found that the Spanish essays had more flowery language and "unchained sequences of details", while the English essays had a more linear development of ideas, shorter sentences, and higher occurrence transitional expressions (p.101). These results suggest that the participants in the study had at least some degree of awareness that writing in the two languages is different and, specifically, that English writing needs to be more direct. However, the data are strictly qualitative and do not provide a measure of the occurrence of the features examined.

According to Hazen, Hinkel, and Okabe (as cited in Uysal 2012), the findings of intercultural communication have provided evidence for the existence of different argumentation patterns across cultures. For example, this author reports that argumentative essays written by students from Eastern cultures contain a more careful use of hedges, a higher occurrence of ambiguous pronouns, and a much more frequent use of the passive voice than argumentative essays written by Anglo-American students. However, even if argumentative writing in English is expected to be more direct than in other cultures, some of its features make it more likely to contain indirectness than other rhetorical patterns. For example, Crowhurst (1990) claims that argumentative writing often makes use of devices that introduce indirectness such as long clauses including more complex constructions such as nominalizations (p.355).

Methodology

This study can be classified as statistical descriptive research as it aims to describe a sample of written production in terms of the number of occurrences of indirectness features. The features selected for scrutiny were taken from a more comprehensive taxonomy of indirectness features developed by Hinkel (1997) and encompassing three categories: rhetorical, lexical/referential, and syntactic. The indirectness features selected were:

1. Delayed claims: Verbs in weak position delaying the main claim of the sentence. Examples: Sentences with *it / there* expletives, long nominalizations, long infinitive constructions.
2. Repetition of concepts: consecutive restatement compounds using "and", "or", or "nor".
3. Subordination: In initial position and longer than the main clause; also, a long chain of subordinate clauses.
4. Determiners: *This, that, these, those, some, any, a lot of, several, many*, among others, in cases where the antecedent was vague or when the quantity needed to be more precise.
5. Hedging: modal auxiliaries of possibility and probability: *could, would, may, might, can*; adverbs of probability and frequency leading to perceived excessive caution in making claims.
6. Adjectival clauses leading to wordiness and circumlocution.
7. Passive voice used for purposes other than process description.
8. Conditionals used to hypothesize instead of making a strong claim, including clauses with if and unless.

Participants

The participants in the study were students in the Written Communication IV course in the second year of the Bachelor's program in Teaching English at the Western Campus of the University of Costa Rica. The expected proficiency level of students in this course is upper intermediate according to the course syllabus. Thirty students participated in the study; their ages ranged between 19 and 23.

Data

The writing assignment called for a 5-paragraph argumentative essay. The sample consisted of 30 essays ranging from 573 to 1267 words with an average of 798 words.

Procedure

The researchers counted occurrences of each indirectness feature in the essays, and upon obtaining the total number for each feature per essay, normalized the number of occurrences by calculating the frequency per 100 words. Afterwards, they calculated the mean frequency of occurrence of each feature for the complete sample. In addition, they calculated the percentage of occurrence of each feature compared to the total occurrence of indirectness in the sample. Next, they calculated the standard deviation for the frequency of occurrence of each feature. To conclude, they calculated the percentage of results falling within one standard deviation, thus identifying the number of typical results in the sample.
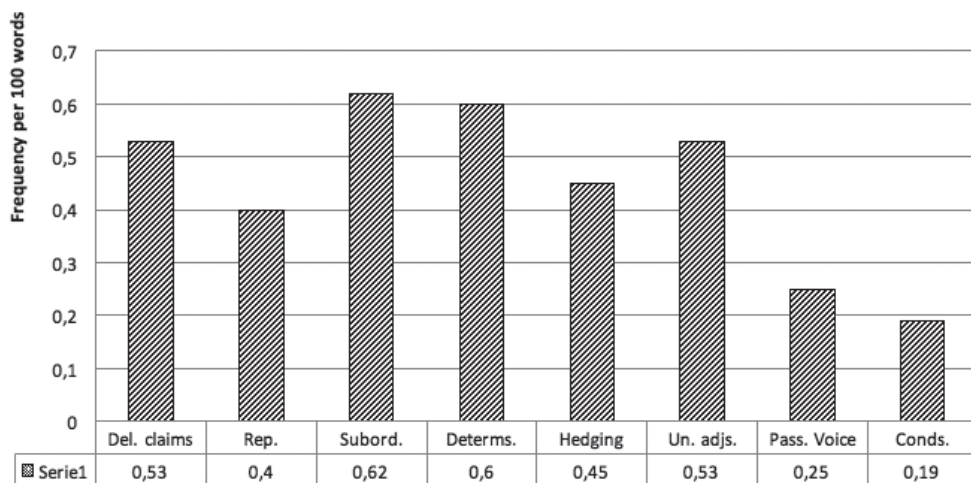
Results and discussion

To address the research inquiry, namely, determining the frequency of occurrence of a set of indirectness features in argumentative writing**,** three aspects have been examined: the mean frequency of occurrence of each indirectness feature per 100 words, the percentage of occurrence of each indirectness feature in the total sample, and the standard deviation in the frequency of occurrence of each feature as well as the percentage of results falling within the standard deviation.

Figure 1
Mean frequency of indirectness features

|	Del. claims	Rep.	Subord.	Determs.	Hedging	Un. adjs.	Pass. Voice	Conds.
Serie1	0,53	0,4	0,62	0,6	0,45	0,53	0,25	0,19

Source: Analysis of frequencies of indirectness features in argumentative texts, September 2016.

Figure 1 displays the mean frequency of occurrence of the selected features per 100 words. This shows that patterns of indirectness tend to occur with this distribution. The features with the highest frequencies are subordination, vague determiners, unnecessary adjectival clauses, and delayed claims. Hedging and repetition yield somewhat lower frequencies, while the frequencies for passive voice and conditionals drop to noticeably lower levels. The results for subordination seem to reflect the claims by Bennett and Muresan (2016), Gómez (2010), and Montaño-Harmon (1991) that the Spanish language favors subordination leading to lengthy sentences.

Figure 2
Percentage of total indirectness per feature
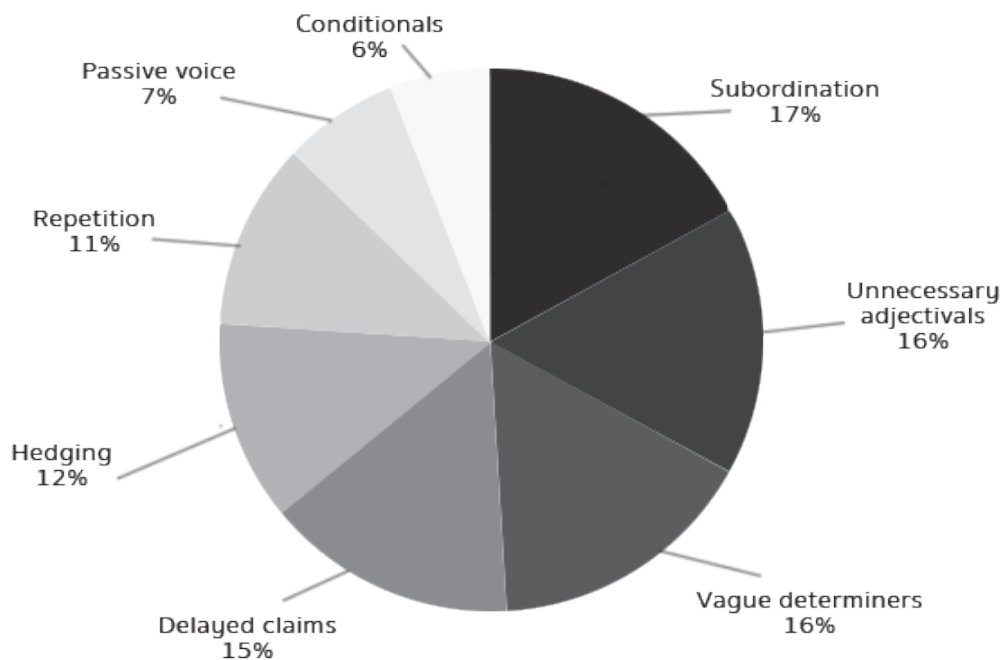
Source: Analysis of frequencies of indirectness features in argumentative texts, September 2016.

Figure 2 shows the occurrence of each indirectness feature as a percentage of total indirectness in the sample. The results mirror those of the mean frequency of occurrence per feature, but also help visualize the overall weight of each feature in the argumentative writing of the population in the study. The four most frequent indirectness features make up 64% of total indirectness. An examination of the scattering of the results using the standard deviation with the purpose of determining possible representative patterns follows.

Table 1

Comparison of the mean frequencies and the corresponding standard deviations

Indirectness features	*Mean frequency per 100 words*	*SD*	% of *f* within 1 *SD* of *M*
Delayed claims	0,53	0,34	63,33
Repetition	0,40	0,40	80
Subordination	0,62	0,40	70
Vague determiners	0,60	0,36	70
Hedging	0,45	0,45	73,33
Unnecessary adjectival clauses	0,53	0,25	70
Passive voice	0,25	0,19	63,33
Conditionals	0,19	0,19	53,33

Source: Calculation of standard deviation in the frequency of indirectness features in the sample, September 2016.

Standard deviations very close or identical to the value of the mean frequency reflect results typically varying from zero or very close to zero to twice the mean frequency. Results following this pattern are very different throughout the sample. This is the case of conditionals, repetition, and hedging, which suggests that there is no consistent pattern of occurrence and that individual students differ greatly from one another in the use of the features in question. The pedagogical implication is that these features do not need to be addressed as a recurrent problem, but rather be dealt with on an individual basis with students who exhibit the problem.

A similar reasoning applies here to the results for passive voice, with a standard deviation of around 76% of the mean frequency and some frequencies equal to zero. These results are not as scattered as those for the three features listed above, but they are nonetheless relatively scattered, and as such, are probably best addressed as an individual issue with students rather than as a shared problem.

The standard deviations for the remaining features are at least a third smaller than the mean, ranging from around 64% of the mean for delayed claims and subordinates to around 60% for vague determiners and to a lower 47% for unnecessary adjectival clauses. This, in addition to the relatively high percentages of results falling within the standard deviation in these cases, points to more stable results and to a likelier pattern of occurrence throughout the sample which is not as dependent on individual differences. The pedagogical implication

is that these four features need to be addressed explicitly in writing instruction as frequent sources of inappropriate indirectness.

A distinction must be made between the nature of the more relevant indirectness features identified and that of the less relevant features. Subordinates and delayed claims belong to the rhetorical dimension of indirectness and vague determiners and unnecessary adjectivals to the lexical/referential dimension. The implication is that established discourse habits and possible lack of vocabulary, respectively, may play an important role in the occurrence of indirectness. At least for discourse habits, this seems to support the findings of other researchers concerning cross-cultural differences. The less relevant features in the sample belong to the syntactic dimension, which suggests that instruction does not need to focus so much on this aspect in regard to preventing inappropriate indirectness.

Conclusion

The researchers identified four indirectness features representing potential recurrent patterns in the writing of the participants: subordination, vague determiners, delayed claims, and unnecessary adjectival clauses. Following these results, the four features require explicit attention when addressing forms of indirectness in the academic writing class. In addition, due to the rhetorical or lexical nature of the features, the researchers recommend that instructors pay increased attention to vocabulary acquisition and to the organization of ideas when raising

awareness of differences in communication styles. For this purpose, teachers should increase the focus on text analysis, for example by means of noticing strategies that can help students develop an understanding of expected rhetorical and referential forms. In this light, teaching materials should be adapted to the students' needs so that they emphasize the relevant features most frequently leading to indirectness. The guiding purpose should be to familiarize students with the characteristics of English academic writing through extensive exposure, analysis, and practice beyond the merely syntactic dimension. This implies a break from the frequent focus on syntactic features such as the passive voice as one of the main sources of indirectness.

This study was mainly text-based; thus, available data do not allow the researchers to assert whether any of the patterns identified are culturally bound. For future studies, the researchers recommend inquiring about students' reasons for their choices in writing in order to look into how their native culture may be shaping their L2 writing. In addition, the researchers suggest conducting a larger-scale study to compare the results with those of students at higher proficiency levels. The question is whether proficiency level has an impact on the use of indirectness or not. Additionally, the researchers propose examining the impact of rhetorical genres on students' use of language and the behavior of indirectness patterns across genres, particularly in a second or foreign language context. Finally, the researchers see a need for examining educational policies in writing courses in a foreign language context, seeking to foster reflection that can

lead to an understanding of differences in writing traditions between the L1 and L2. This should help students to make fully informed decisions concerning their writing and would offer them more opportunities to express themselves successfully in the L2.

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