

## **Mapping the Use of Boosters in Academic Writing by Malaysian First-Year Doctoral Students**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article details an attempt to understand better how first-year doctoral students construct persuasive arguments in academic writing by exploring the patterns of boosters in drafts of doctoral research proposals. Eight Malaysian first-year ESL doctoral students produced 43 drafts of doctoral research proposals across four areas of study in education during their first year of doctoral studies. These drafts were analysed by coding the various linguistic items used to persuade readers of a text, and the analysis was based on Hyland's (2005) model of metadiscourse. Results show that the (i) overall frequency of booster markers used is relatively low (n=158), reinforcing the argument that first-year doctoral students lack understanding about the interaction between booster markers and the context in a more complicated discussion in academic writing such as the doctoral research proposal. Then, the (ii) further analysis of booster marker sub-categories indicates that Malaysian first-year doctoral students struggle to make appropriate booster markers with different meanings and strengths in academic writing when used in context. Therefore, our study suggests that direct and explicit teaching of using various booster markers categories should be implemented in postgraduate writing courses to heightened the students' perceptiveness regarding semantic features associated with creating convincing arguments in academic writing.

*Keywords:* Academic writing, arguments, boosters, first-year doctoral students, metadiscourse, persuasion

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In the established concept of academic writing as interactional and dialogic, persuasion is seen as an essential feature to realise communicative purposes between the writer and the reader in a text (Ho

& Li, 2018; Hu & Cao, 2011; Hyland, 2005a, 2010; Swales, 2004). In this regard, establishing a good rapport with readers is one of the aims of academic writing. Hyland (2005a) emphasised that boosters provide an impression of conviction and confirmation. It means that in a persuasive genre like academic writing, boosters, which is a group in metadiscourse, can function to persuade readers by making appeals to rationality, credibility and character, and emotions (Hyland, 2005a). In other words, with boosters, academic writers can express referential knowledge and enhance the persuasiveness of their claims among members of the academic community. Therefore, appropriate choice of boosters becomes central in creating academic arguments to fulfil the competing demands of persuasion and objectivity in academic writing.

With the competing demands of persuasion and objectivity in academic writing, academic writers' skills of employing complex linguistic devices (e.g., booster markers) are critical to the negotiation of meaning and in creating convincing academic arguments (Ho & Li, 2018; Hyland, 1998b, 2010). In this case, the employment of linguistic devices in academic discourse is expected to be regulated by general communication rules and practices and accepted by the readership in the wider academic community. Apart from these constraints, linguistic negotiation is equally important with which writers can interact, assist the writer (or reader) to express an opinion, and persuade the readers

of the arguments. This negotiation involves ways academic writers project themselves in academic writing to make the text more convincing. It can be achieved, for example, through the use of boosters (Crismore & Farnsworth, 1989; Dafouz-Milne, 2008; Hyland, 2005a, 2010).

Hyland (2005b, 2010, 2019) and other researchers (Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Ho & Li, 2018) acknowledged persuasion as an important characteristic of academic discourse towards successful academic writing. It is related to the basic nature of academic writing, in particular, forming an objective opinion. The writers' emphasis should be on statements and arguments they wished to present to the readers, not the writer themselves. Following this emphasis on objectivity in academic writing, it is not surprising that scholars find the need to use persuasive devices (booster markers) to engage the readers and convince them of the real (true) value of what is being stated. Here, interaction in academic writing is essentially important for the function it performs when constructing new knowledge. In other words, readers need to assimilate and understand the writer's new information because what counts as a convincing argument is managed for a particular audience of the discipline involved (Hyland, 2017).

Despite recognising boosters as a rhetorical device that can help writers achieve persuasion in academic writing, little empirical research has focused on booster markers in academic writing (Hyland, 1998a, 2004; Ngampradit, 2020; Peacock, 2006;

Vazquez & Giner, 2009). Most of the studies either solely attended to hedges (Crismore & Kopple, 1997; Vazquez & Giner, 2009) or studied hedges and boosters simultaneously (Hu & Cao, 2011; Takimoto, 2015; Vazquez & Giner, 2009). While simultaneous studies of hedges and boosters have extended our understanding of the role hedges and boosters play to balance subjective evaluation and objective information, booster markers were underrepresented in such studies (Ngampradit, 2020). For instance, little is known about how the writer's new knowledge or propositional content will gain more strength and become more reliable through booster markers. Hyland (1998a) expressed it "Even less is known about the role of firm assertion [...] boosters have received little attention in postgraduate writing [...] further research is needed" (p. 350). Hyland's statement helps rationalise the need to examine the semantic features and pragmatic functions of booster markers in postgraduate writing, such as the doctoral research proposal that has rarely been addressed.

In a similar view, research in academic writing has long established that functional metadiscourse plays an essential role in academic writing, owing to different communicative functions (Farnia & Mohammadi, 2019; Ho & Li, 2018; Hong & Cao, 2014; Hyland, 2005a, 2010; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Kim & Lim, 2013; Lee & Deakin, 2016; Li & Wharton, 2012; Mur-Duenas, 2011; Musa et al., 2019). Thus, as a way to understand the functional metadiscourse in negotiating meanings in a text and

establishing a connection with readers of a text, our previous study (Lo et al., 2020) examined the use of metadiscourse in academic writing across four areas of study in education. The results showed that the frequency of all linguistic expressions in the writing drafts differs across time between first written drafts and the final written drafts, collected within the study period. Furthermore, the statistical data indicated that first-year doctoral students writing in different fields of educational research seemed to be inexperienced at using linguistic expressions to signal the intended relationships.

Accordingly, the current study is complementary to our previous ones (Lo et al., 2020). This study is primarily conducted due to the importance of creating convincing arguments in academic writing and the limited studies that explore the use of booster markers among emergent academic writers who write in different fields of educational research. In other words, despite a growing literature that deals with the utilisation of booster markers, however, to the best of our knowledge, few studies, if any, have probed the semantic features of how each category of booster markers (e.g., *boosting lexical verbs*, *boosting phrases*) have different meaning and strength in academic writing when used in context (Demir, 2017; Ngampradit, 2020). Such a gap necessitates a focus on the use of booster markers by Malaysian first-year doctoral students to persuade and convince the readers of their arguments in academic writing. This article aims to shed light on the

booster markers patterns in Malaysian first-year doctoral students' drafts of doctoral research proposals to create convincing arguments. Thus, this study highlights the importance of employing an appropriate choice of boosters in the relevant context. The research question guided this study is: What are the frequency, sub-category, and type of booster markers used by first-year ESL doctoral students who are at the stage of writing their doctoral research proposals?

### **Boosters in Academic Writing**

According to Hyland (2005a), boosters are communicative strategies that use linguistic means to increase or reduce the force of an academic argument. As proposed, boosters can persuade readers of the writers' assertions, restrict the negotiating space between the writer and a reader, and indicate a mutual understanding between writer and reader based on shared community membership. In this case, boosters constitute part of the rhetorical elements in academic writing used by academic writers to achieve their communicative purposes. For such reasons, the importance of boosters in academic discourse lies in their contributions to appropriate context and in signalling the intended relationship with the readers. That is, boosters do not only help writers to achieve communicative purposes, but also reflect writers' degree of confidence in the readers.

The idea of boosters as rhetorical and persuasive strategies has engaged many researchers, who view writing as a space that allows writers to draw on unspoken

conventions of precision and as a form of meaning-making (Hyland, 2005a). Such a view asserts that boosters can influence the interpretation of propositional information in academic writing. Boosters are, therefore, viewed as a tool that marks the writers' conviction and, at the same time, simultaneously projects uncertainty and confidence while presenting their assertions to the readers, thus making their writing more persuasive (Hyland, 1998b, 2005a, 2010; Ho & Li, 2018; Lee & Deakin, 2016). These research studies show that, persuasion in academic writing can be influenced by the use of boosters and also the positioning of and engagement with the readers. It also shows that the appropriate choice of booster markers can persuade the readers in academic writing.

Given the nature of boosters as a persuasive device, appropriate choice of boosters in the relevant context can increase the writers' commitment to action in two ways, namely expressing certainty and emphasis. In expressing certainty and emphasis, it is not uncommon for writers to initially present information or knowledge that both writer and reader shared. It is known as the use of propositions about the available information. This move is widespread when writers introduce propositions dealing with new knowledge. However, when dealing with new knowledge, the writers need to deploy relevant boosters and attach propositions containing new information to offer vital support to the argument, strengthen the writers' position, and leave readers without a doubt (Hyland, 2010).

Doing so, will allow writers to pave the way to highlight specific parts of their statements, enhance persuasiveness through convincing arguments, and perhaps, manage the interaction between writer and reader more effectively.

The importance of these booster markers as a rhetorical device in academic writing was part of Hyland's (2005a) list of metadiscoursal boosters, which are significant to facilitate writers' efforts to create a convincing argument. Hyland's list of metadiscoursal boosters consists of six categories: adjective, adverb, determiner, modal, verb, and phrases. These six boosters are linguistic items that emphasise certainty and construct rapport by marking involvement with the topic and the readers, taking a joint position against other voices (Hyland, 1999). The common characteristics of these booster markers include the modification of words or phrases within a proposition and writers' commitment to the propositional content. For example, *we must believe* (e.g., we must believe that), and *we know* (e.g., we know that) within a proposition will alter the writers' commitment to the propositional content. As boosters are concerned with the writers' confidence in their claims and propositional content, their use strengthens an argument by emphasising the mutual experiences needed to draw the same conclusions as the writer. Therefore, boosters imply that a statement is based on the writers' certainty rather than authority, indicating the extent to which the writer is willing to entertain alternatives and convey a commitment to the text content (Hyland, 2005a).

The literature on boosters acknowledges the vital role of booster markers in the advanced academic writing genre (e.g., postgraduate writing; Hyland, 2004). In particular, the prospect of using appropriate booster markers has the potential to inform the ways academic writers build a sense of capability in presenting new knowledge to their audience. In other words, the new propositional information could be assimilated by the audience and understood the way the writers intended. As a result, appropriate choices of booster markers in academic writing are more likely to convince and persuade readers of the writers' claims, together with disciplinary membership and identity implied (Hyland, 2004, 2009). Several studies (Demir, 2017; Hyland, 2000; Ngampradit, 2020; Vassileva, 2001) have shown that booster markers are an indispensable part of academic writing conventions because they help introduce writers' new knowledge that is presented to the readers to gain more strength and become more reliable, contributing to the growing knowledge development of the discipline involved.

Previous studies of booster markers in academic writing have explored a range of genres such as advertising (Fuertes-Olivera et al., 2001), newspaper editorials (Dafouz-Milne, 2008), research articles (Demir, 2017; Hyland, 1998a; Peacock, 2006; Vassileva, 2001; Vazquez & Giner, 2009), and doctoral dissertations (Ngampradit, 2020). For example, Hyland (1998a) noted that boosters "mark involvement and solidarity with an audience, stressing

shared information, group membership, and direct engagement with readers” (p. 350). Likewise, these research studies show that persuasion in discourse (e.g., new propositional information contained in a statement) can be achieved by employing an appropriate choice of booster markers. It also shows that booster markers can be used to convince readers by strengthening writers’ claims and academic arguments in academic writing (Hyland, 1998a; Ngampradit, 2020).

In recent research studies, Ngampradit (2020) studied the use of boosters in applied linguistics doctoral dissertations of English native writers in the United States and non-native Thai writers from Thailand. This cross-cultural metadiscourse analysis adopted part of Hyland’s (2005a) list of metadiscourse boosters (adjectives, adverb, verb, modal) in the process of searching for booster markers and analysis. It was found that the American writers used more booster markers and demonstrated a wider variety of boosters than the Thai writers. Demir (2017) discussed how native (Anglophone) and non-native writers (non-Anglophone) of English used lexical boosters in their research articles to have native-like academic texts. The study adopted Vassileva’s (2001) taxonomy of boosters (modal, verb, adjective, adverb, determiners), and the corpus consists of articles from diverse English Language Teaching (ELT) journals. It was found that Anglophone writers showed a variety of lexical boosters to produce cohesive and understandable written text compared to non-Anglophone writers.

Although these comparative studies have identified the similarities and differences in the use of metadiscourse boosters in applied linguistic dissertations and research articles on ELT, more research is needed to extend the scope of comparison between writers in postgraduate writing within an L2 context and explore the ways each booster markers have different meanings and strengths in academic writing when used in context. Following the perspective of functional metadiscourse boosters, this study adopted Hyland’s (2005a) list of metadiscourse boosters, which capture the basic principle of communication and have been proven effective in eliciting the types of boosters. Table 1 presents the list of metadiscourse boosters.

## METHODS

This study follows the same methodological procedure as the first study (Lo et al., 2020), as described in the following.

### The Study

This study is based on analysing of 43 drafts of doctoral research proposals written by eight first-year ESL doctoral students across four areas of study in education from an established Malaysian research university. These drafts, a total of 64,500 words altogether, were collected from first-year doctoral students during their first year of a doctoral studies. The focal point of this study was on the three sections of doctoral dissertation, namely: introduction, literature review, and methodology. It is important to note that these written drafts

Table 1  
List of metadiscoursal boosters

Grammatical types	Booster items
Adjective	<i>certain, obvious, clear, definite, sure, true, evident, undeniable, doubtless, incontestable, incontrovertible, indisputable</i>
Adverb	<i>actually, always, certainly, conclusively, decidedly, clearly, definitely, obviously, really, surely, evidently, undeniably, undoubtedly, in fact, indeed, never, truly, of course, (no/without/beyond) doubt, incontrovertibly, indisputably, undisputedly</i>
Determiner	<i>article (a/an, the), demonstrative (this, that, these, those), possessive (my, your, his, her, its, our, their), quantifier (many, much, more, most, some, a great amount of, a good deal of, a considerable amount of, a great body of</i>
Modal	<i>must (possibility), have/has to, be to + infinitive, need to</i>
Verb	<i>believe(d/s), demonstrate(d/s), establish(ed), find(s), know(n), prove(d/s), realise(d/s), show(ed/s/n), think(s), thought, conclude, confirm, enhance, convince, demonstrate, ascertain, establish, ensure</i>
Phrases	Researchers <i>believed</i> that self-confidence <i>actually</i> raise the prospect... from a <i>great amount of study</i> , we <i>know</i> that discourse devices are lexical conventions that....

Note. Adopted from Hyland's (2005a) list of metadiscoursal boosters

were not edited works of others. The only criterion for collecting research proposal drafts was that these writings had to be a part of their doctoral studies. The intention of analysing these drafts was to explore ways emergent academic writers fulfil the competing demands of creating convincing arguments and objectivity in academic writing, of which boosters emerged as a key thread in their efforts to develop as academic writers. Therefore, this article focuses on the use of boosters in academic writing, specifically, on unpublished and ongoing written works within the academic context, which, surprisingly, has not been studied more extensively (Hyland, 2015; Vassileva, 2001).

### Data Collection

The corpus analysed in this study was collected in the year 2019. On average, about six to seven drafts of the research proposals were collected from each participant

during their first year of doctoral studies. It is necessary to mention that there was no minimal or maximum number of drafts that the participants have to fulfil. Instead, the participating first-year doctoral students were encouraged to provide their drafts at any time during their first year of doctoral studies from January–December 2019. The purpose of not setting the minimum and the maximum number of drafts was to reduce the participants' level of stress within the timeframe of writing their doctoral research proposals, such as the demand of providing a draft every month. The data collection period was one year, as it is not longitudinal research due to time constraints.

### Data Analysis

This study employed a corpus-based design, using quantitative methods. First, the general distribution, average density, and frequency counts were examined using AntConc Build 3.4.3 software developed by Anthony (2014)

for quantitative analysis. It is essential to highlight that manual analysis was carried out after identifying, comparing the variations, and noting signs of change due to the fuzziness of metadiscourse linguistic expressions of boosters in different contexts. Hence, manual analysis was performed by repeating close reading (looking at all booster markers in context). Further analysed, specific booster markers (e.g., *clearly*, *clear*) tend to be multifunctional and context-dependent to avoid ambiguous results. Next, booster markers with different spellings across the forms of English were tagged throughout the reading process (e.g., *analyse* and *analyze*).

During this manual analysis, the booster markers were coded with reference to Hyland's (2005a) model of metadiscourse. Then, the doctoral research proposal's written drafts were read, and the identified metadiscursive expressions were made about Hyland's definition of metadiscourse, classification and typology of metadiscourse. However, this study did not rely solely on the list of metadiscourse. In Ho and Li's (2018) research, it was noted that the metadiscursive of a particular linguistic expression should be made in context instead of ticking off on a list. It is crucially important and relevant in the case of this study, as these participants were writing in different fields of educational research, and relying solely on the list is exhaustive, as the corpus size is 64,500 words altogether. Finally, these identified booster markers were further categorised into a more detailed distribution of boosters (e.g., boosting adjectives,

boosting adverbs, boosting determiners, boosting modal auxiliaries, boosting lexical verbs, and boosting phrases).

### Analytical Strategies

The analysis of this study adopted the taxonomy of boosters, comprised of six categories: phrases, lexical verbs, modals, determiners, adverbs, and adjectives (Hyland, 2005a; Vassileva, 2001). The first analytical step consists of general distribution and frequency counts with the help of AntConc Build 3.4.3 software. Then, in examining the identified boosters, the tokens of the six categories of boosters were carefully analysed, individually and manually, based on the context in which they occurred and taking into account their functional meaning. Finally, in-text analysis, each booster marker and its function are explained below and accompanied by excerpts obtained from the participants in this study. To illustrate:

- (a) To increase or strengthen the force of a statement

Example 1: This approach *clearly showed* that the decision to start up a social venture is determined by the institutions in which it occurs (management, planning and policy draft)

- (b) To emphasise the writers' certainty and commitment to propositional information

Example 2: Some instructors believe all class handouts *must* be prepared in advance, taking away the spontaneity in the face-

to-face classroom (curriculum and instructional technology draft)

- (c) To persuade readers of the writers' ideas and claims

Example 3: *In fact*, stressful events that happened in work contribute to a person's feelings and behaviour, observed in many other psychology studies.... (counselling and psychology draft)

- (d) To express collegiality, avoid disagreement and being open to different interpretations in the academic community

Example 4: Therefore, it *can be asserted* that teachers have dual roles: being an instructor and, at the same time, an assessor (Rea-Dickins, 2004; language and literacy education draft)

Finally, further analysis of booster markers sub-categories based on the adopted taxonomy of boosters was carried out. As Hyland (2005a) emphasised, boosters are also known as certainty markers, emphatics and intensifiers. These markers are an indispensable part of writing conventions, particularly in academic writing, as it helps to create an emphatic impression in the reader and frame messages that appeal to appropriate community-recognised relationships. Furthermore, it means that presenting complex ideas with appropriate use of booster markers and positioning in a sentence could result in writing being more accessible to the readers with a degree of authority that increases the persuasion effect in writing (Hyland, 2000).

## Ethics

Before collecting the data, ethical approval was obtained from the university. Participation in this study adhere to the Research Governance Framework of the institution and is entirely voluntary. First, participants were offered a face-to-face verbal explanation of the study and accompanied with written information. Then, a consent form that explained the nature of the participants' involvement and sought for the participation was given. The participants were also given a period of time (one day up to one week), to consider the invitation. Following this, a face-to-face meeting was arranged to address any questions that potential participants may have. After the participants agreed with the specifications in the consent letter and had the letter signed, steps to maximise confidentiality and maintaining research integrity, as research practice became the researchers' objective. For example, all identified elements were removed from the data and instead coded and assigned pseudonyms.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings obtained from the analysis of 43 corpora (drafts of doctoral research proposals) produced by eight first-year doctoral students during the writing time of their doctoral research proposal. Following is the overall analysis of booster markers employed in academic writing, which shows that the frequency of booster markers usage differs across the four areas of study in education. Finally,

the distribution of booster marker types identified in the data is presented. In this final section, further analysis of booster markers sub-categories was carried out to observe more closely what linguistic expression was used by participants, related to persuading and convincing the readers of the truth of their propositions as writers.

**Overall Frequency of Booster Markers in Academic Writing**

Table 2 below shows the overall frequency of the various categories of booster markers (boosting phrases, boosting lexical verbs, boosting modal auxiliaries, boosting determiners, boosting adverbs, and boosting adjectives) used in the 43 drafts of doctoral research proposals across four areas of study. Here, it is essential to note that the following sections on booster markers are more detailed than other linguistic items because the former differentiate how each booster marker has a different meaning and strength in academic writing while linguistic

items carry general language functions. For example, adverbs modify a verb, an adjective, or a whole sentence. In contrast, boosting adverbs depends on the context in which they occur. Their connotation relies upon the quality and type of the linguistic item that is modified, largely adjectives. Meanwhile, boosting adverbs may be unable to change the semantics of utterance. However, they can considerably modify its meaning with emphasis and stress to indicate importance. Essentially, boosting adverbs performs a specific function (to intensify the meaning, amplifying the meaning of a word, or toning down the feeling of the word) and show a degree of strength when used in context (from strongest to the weakest form).

As shown in Table 2, the overall frequency variations of booster markers are different in the first-year doctoral students’ drafts of doctoral research proposals. From the data, booster markers are most frequently found in drafts from

Table 2  
*Overall frequency of various categories of booster markers from 43 drafts of doctoral research proposal*

Booster markers	CIT	EMPP	EPC	LALE	Sum of each category
Boosting phrases	1	1	0	1	3 (1.9%)
Boosting lexical verbs	8	7	2	4	21 (13.3%)
Boosting modal auxiliaries	20	14	3	12	49 (31.0%)
Boosting determiners	8	5	1	2	16 (10.1%)
Boosting adverbs	25	21	4	16	66 (41.8%)
Boosting adjectives	1	1	0	1	3 (1.9%)
Total booster markers count	63(39.9%)	49 (31.0%)	10 (6.3%)	36 (22.8%)	158 (100%)
No. of sentences	1256	1000	1368	1296	4920
Average density	0.05	0.05	0.01	0.03	0.14

*Note.* CIT = Curriculum and instructional technology; EMPP = Educational management, planning, and policy; EPC = Educational psychology and counselling; LALE = Language and literacy education

curriculum and instructional technology, N= 63 (39.9%), followed by educational management, planning, and policy, N= 49 (31.0%), language and literacy education, N= 36 (22.8%), and education psychology and counselling, N= 10 (6.3%). Indeed, this variation of booster markers usage across four areas of study could result from various reasons, such as the different levels of awareness on booster markers functions in academic writing among these first-year doctoral students. In addition, this could also be their pre-conceived writing experiences, where there could be a lack of understanding regarding the interaction between booster markers and context, especially in a more complicated discussion in academic writing such as a doctoral research proposal. Nonetheless, it is worthy to note that, as emphasised in our previous study (Lo et al., 2020), the different levels of metadiscourse used in academic writing across different areas of study do not propose that the field of practice is different. However, it is more of how the participants used the booster markers to engage in their field of research.

Table 2 shows that boosting adverbs recorded the highest frequency, N= 66 (41.8%), in all written drafts compared to other booster markers. This stronger preference for boosting adverbs could be attributed to the fact that first-year doctoral students needed to indicate different ways of expressing their certainty about a proposition to their readers. Thus, boosting adverbs were used frequently to foreground the certainty of the statements or places to emphasise the information presented to the

readers: '*clearly*', '*obviously*', '*extremely*', and '*highly*', instead of adopting a more conservative or neutral tone (Hyland, 2004). However, it does mean, that although these expressions could increase the doctoral students' commitment as writers to their claims, they became more vulnerable as their claims might be proven otherwise. Accordingly, inappropriate or overuse of adverbs can give the impression that the writer is subjective towards the topic. As a result, some of these first-year ESL doctoral students might focus on replacing '*-ly*' adverb with the adjective or verb or limiting adverb use in academic writing.

Additionally, Table 2 shows an interesting phenomenon, whereby drafts from educational psychology and counselling have the lowest, N= 10 (6.3%) frequency of booster markers in the corpus. This very low normalised frequency of occurrence could be due to emergent academic writers' lack of understanding in the context of interaction or less appreciation for boosters as a communicative strategy that could increase or reduce the force of propositions. In other words, they might be less invested engaging in a discussion as writers with their readers. Therefore, it is unlikely that this low usage of booster markers found in drafts from educational psychology and counselling is due to the differences in practice. Seen in this light, the ways students engage with their chosen research field is different seem to be more relevant.

Overall, this low use of boosters generally reflects the first-year ESL doctoral students' uncertainties in employing appropriate

boosters in an ESL context. These students are likely facing more challenges to using booster markers in relevant registers because they are required to negotiate the academic language and linguistic demands in an ESL context, in which many of them may not be fully proficient yet (Hyland, 2019). In this case, first-year ESL doctoral students' linguistic insecurity in creating arguments and expressing themselves as writers may be potentially related to their second language writing proficiency. This finding also supports other studies with the view that ESL learners are less skilful in employing boosters in relevant registers that complement the formal nature of academic writing (Demir, 2017; Hinkel, 2004; Ngampradit, 2020). Hinkel (2004), for instance, found that most ESL learners in her studies resort to using "I think" or "it is really good" when they need to express emphasis as opposed to using more standard forms of the same function, which points to a lack of register awareness.

### Distribution of Booster Markers in Academic Writing

Figure 1 shows the frequency of occurrences and ranked distribution of the booster markers found in the 43 drafts of a doctoral research proposal.

As shown in Figure 1, it is necessary to highlight that there is limited use of boosting phrases (e.g., *it is essentially important, as it is known*) and boosting adjectives (e.g., *obvious, undeniable, beyond doubt*) by these emergent academic writers. This limited use of boosting phrases and adjectives may indicate that first-year doctoral students could consider themselves as writers in their propositions as a risk. It is particularly relevant in first-year doctoral students, who do not have a clear disciplinary understanding of their areas of studies yet. In simple terms, when first-year doctoral students who are newcomers to the academy are uncertain about their disciplinary knowledge, they might be uncomfortable boosting their propositions

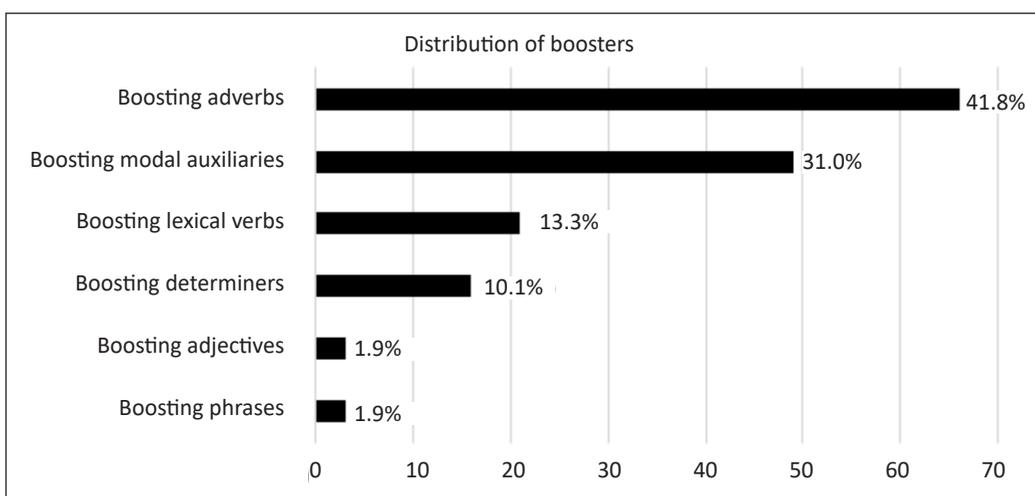


Figure 1. Distribution of booster markers in academic writing

to a certain degree. However, it should be noted that, as they gradually become more able to present arguments supported by reliable sources, they are likely to feel more comfortable using confidence markers as strong as ‘*obviously*’ and ‘*undeniably*’.

From Figure 1, boosting adverbs (e.g., *clearly*, *extremely*, *highly*) recorded the most, N= 66 (41.8%) frequent sub-categories of booster markers in the corpus. This frequency far surpassed that of other categories of boosters. This high usage of boosting adverbs suggests that such words are seen as the primary means through which first-year doctoral students convey their personal opinions about the research title as emergent academic writers to their readers. This result attests to the fact that is boosting adverbs help writers to support a claim or express certainty with confidence. In relation to the aspect of writers’ certainty, these first-year doctoral students likely intend to promote their ideas and hope that their propositions would be accepted by the readers, who represent the wider academic community. It is consistent with what Hyland (2005a) observed in his study, revealing that, writers used words such as *clearly*, *decisively*, and *obviously* to sway the reader and create unity with the audience.

As shown in Figure 1, the second most frequent sub-category is boosting modal auxiliary (e.g., *can*, *may*, *might*). Within the hierarchy of boosting modal auxiliary, ‘*would*’ has the highest total frequency of usage compared to other categories of booster markers. This result implies that emergent academic writers like first-year doctoral students favour this category of a marker to express their confidences as writers over arguments in their academic writings. It should be noted that the difference in the distribution of boosting adverbs, N=66 (41.8%) and modal auxiliary, N= 49 (31.0%), was small when comparing the distribution of different categories of boosting markers. This difference may indicate that emergent academic writers were less skilful in expressing logical possibility. It is also plausible, as first-year doctoral students do not have clear understanding of their intentions as academic writers yet. As a result, they may be putting forward a general statement based on their observations that is more likely to result in over-claiming or over-generalising.

Another important point to consider is that these boosting modal auxiliaries denote either deontic or epistemic modality (Table 3). From Table 3, two different kinds of meanings can be expressed by boosting modal auxiliaries, known as deontic and

Table 3  
*Boosting modal auxiliaries in different categories and meanings*

<b>Boosting modal auxiliaries</b>	<b>Deontic (intrinsic) meaning</b>	<b>Epistemic (extrinsic) meaning</b>
will, would, shall	volition	prediction
can, could, may, might	permission, ability	possibility
must, should	obligation	necessity

epistemic. Deontic represents a degree of volition, permission, ability, and obligation, while epistemic conveys a degree of chance through logical prediction, probability, or necessity (Biber & Finegan, 1989; Hyland, 2005b; Orta, 2010). While boosting modal auxiliaries helps to indicate the logical possibility, particular emphasis is placed on the use of each boosting modal auxiliaries, considering that each has a different meaning and degree of strength when used in context to demonstrate the critical function of stance expression. To illustrate:

- (a) You *can* create position in writing through attitude towards the topic discussed.
- (b) You *could* create position in writing through attitude towards the topic discussed.
- (c) You *may* create position in writing through attitude towards the topic discussed.
- (d) You *might* create position in writing through attitude towards the topic discussed.

With regard to deontic meaning, examples (a) to (d) show the decreasing ranking in permission. Sentence (a) indicates the strongest form of permission, and (d) is the weakest and most polite form of such ranking.

Considering the importance of creating convincing arguments in academic writing, semantically, accurate sentences are essential to convey the intended meaning according to the functions of the boosting modal auxiliaries used. However, Hyland and Milton (1997) emphasised that modal

auxiliaries could sometimes be ambiguous in their meanings as they are multi-functional, as shown in the research data. For example, the linguistic marker, such as, *could* can express ability and permission as well as possibility. It is consistent with what Hyland and Milton (1997) observed in their study, revealing that novice writers struggled to relate particular linguistic markers to specific functions as deontic and epistemic meanings can be signalled in many different ways. It, in turn, could lead to great difficulties, specifically for first-year doctoral students, in negotiating the meaning of the proposition with the readers.

The third most frequent sub-category is boosting lexical verbs (e.g., *demonstrated*, *showed*, and *proven*). Within the hierarchy of boosting lexical verbs, ‘*showed*’ and ‘*demonstrated*’ was most favoured, N=21 (13.3%) by these emergent academic writers who are writing in different fields of educational research. Further analysis of these boosting lexical verbs showed that the two most frequent sub-types of boosting lexical verbs are empathic verbs and empathic (Table 4).

Table 4  
Percentage of sub-types in boosting lexical verbs

Boosting lexical verbs	Empathic verbs	Empathic
demonstrated	41%	-
showed	53%	-
proven	-	6%

Table 4 shows the frequency of boosting lexical verbs used by these first-year ESL doctoral students. Among these three

boosting lexical verbs (*demonstrated*, *showed*, and *proven*) used by these first-year ESL doctoral students, emphatic verbs and emphatic were found. Emphatic is a form that involves adding an adverb before the verb to the existing sentence (e.g., *strongly*, *completely*, *really*). The emphatic forms are used in only two tenses, the present tense and the past tense. It is because the emphatic form must address something that either has happened or is currently happening.

While boosting lexical verbs helps to express action or other predicate meaning, emphatic and emphatic verbs clearly have the effect of emphasising the verb in question with a greater degree of attention and stress to it. To illustrate:

- (a) Written language is used in everyday social contexts.
- (b) Written language is *increasingly* used in everyday social contexts. (Emphatic form)

With regard to emphatic form, examples (a) and (b) show the increasing emphasis and stress in the sentence. Sentence (b) indicates a greater degree of attention and (a) shows a weaker extent of emphasis. In contrast, an emphatic verb is a form that involves combining some verbs to the present tense (*do* or *does*) and to the past tense (*did*). To illustrate:

- (c) The normality assumption verified via SPSS *did show* a violation. (Emphatic verbs form in the past tense)
- (d) Proper usage of grammar, although necessary, *does not lend* itself to effective writing. (Emphatic form in the present tense)

Regarding the form of the emphatic verbs, example (c) emphasises the fact that something (*did show*) happens while (d) gives greater emphasis (*does not lend*) to the idea expressed by the verb.

As shown in Table 4, the strong use of emphatic verbs (*demonstrated*, *showed*) may reflect that first-year doctoral students who were required to write in a second language, in which many may not be fully proficient (Matsuda et al., 2013) wanted to use expressions that are of less complex in terms of lexico-grammar such as, '*proven*' or other expressions (e.g., *in fact*, *no doubt*; Ho & Li, 2018). It is also likely that these emergent academic writers prefer to avoid complex expressions as they view such markers as being restricted to spoken language. However, Simon-Vandenberg and Aijmer (2003) note that such complex emphatic expression is frequent in both spoken and written discourse. The accurate usage in an appropriate context can signal the intended relationship. More importantly, these boosting lexical verbs can perform acts, such as expressing a strong conviction that will give rise to persuasive effects on readers. The fourth most frequent sub-category is boosting determiners (e.g., *a considerable number of*, *a great number of*, *a large number of*). While boosting determiners helps to identify specific or generic things and ideas (using articles and pronouns) and how many things are (in terms of numbers), special emphasis is placed on the use of each boosting determinant considering that, each has a different degree of strength when used

in context to clarify words and sentence precision. To illustrate:

- (a) *A great number of* past studies that explored classroom writing competence found that most learners are still facing difficulties....
- (b) *A large number of* past studies that explored classroom writing competence found that most learners are still facing difficulties....
- (c) *A considerable number of* past studies that explored classroom writing competence found that most learners are still facing difficulties....

With regard to the determiner type in the above examples, examples (a) to (c) show the decreasing ranking in quantity. Sentence (a) indicates the strongest form of quantifying, and (d) is the weakest form of such ranking. This result implies that first-year doctoral students tend to express caution to some extent in academic writing. To a certain degree, this suggests that these emergent academic writers prefer detachment to commitment in writing their doctoral research proposals. In response to this aspect of caution and detachment in writing, it is vital to highlight that, although writers are encouraged to pledge for plausible reasoning, researchers have warned about mixing writers caution with lack of involvement or engagement

in writing because they might not be sufficiently persuasive, if writers are always accommodating (Crismore & Farnsworth, 1989; Dafouz-Milne, 2008; Hyland, 2005a; Lee & Deakin, 2016).

The figures in Table 4 illustrate the further analysis of sub-types of boosting determiners and revealed that some boosting determinants were utilised more than others. Finally, Table 5 presents the percentage of sub-types in boosting determiners.

As shown in Table 5, ‘will’ was used most (59%) by the doctoral students. While ‘will’ is the most commonly used boosting determiner in the corpus, it is worthy to note that ‘will’ characterises the highest degree of certainty within the hierarchy of boosting determiners. This relatively high degree of occurrence could be because such function word does not have other forms or synonyms to be replaced with. For example, first-year doctoral students express their reference of ideas or phrases in the context with the use of ‘will’ that perform one grammatical function within sentences in the English language.

The data in Table 5 shows an imbalanced distribution of boosting determiners was spotted, and only four types of boosting determiners (*will*, *many/much*, and *quite*) or otherwise known as quantifiers, were used by these first-year ESL doctoral students. The former (*will*) being the most

Table 5  
Percentage of sub-types in boosting determiners

Boosting determiners	a great number of	a large number of	a considerable number of
Determiner types (n)	10	5	2
Degree of occurrence	59%	29%	12%

frequent and the latter (*quite*) being the least frequent boosting determiner expressions. It indicates that first-year doctoral students depend on limited varieties of boosting determinants. Perhaps, these first-year doctoral writers have inadequate linguistic repertoire in boosting expressions and lack of facility and certainty in using these markers effectively in creating convincing arguments in academic writing (Ho & Li, 2018; Hu & Cao, 2011; Hyland & Milton, 1997).

## CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to understanding better academic discourse in academic writing by exploring the patterns of booster markers in drafts of doctoral research proposals. The focus of this article was twofold. First, to find the differences in frequency, sub-categories, and types of boosters employed by emergent academic writers, like first-year doctoral students writing in different fields of educational research. Second, on a more specific level, to focus on the persuasive role of booster markers in academic writing.

The overall findings have shown a relatively low degree of booster markers (n=158) in these first-year ESL doctoral students' written drafts of their research proposals. To some extent, using boosters in a text might be influenced by individual choice as writers to engage with and in constructing a persuasive text that appeals to their chosen fields of research. However, these choices are likely not only constrained by discourse norms, rhetorical styles of each

discipline, and disciplinary characteristics, but also by the first-year ESL doctoral students' understanding of the role of interaction and engagement in academic writing. It is supported by Ngampradit's (2020) studies that found L2 writers with little knowledge of reader-writer interaction and lower language proficiency appear to use fewer booster markers in their academic writing.

In addition, this study has shown that the booster markers occurrence varies for all participants in the drafts across four areas of study in education across time, during their first year of doctoral studies. Here, it is clear that the doctoral students' second language proficiency and metadiscourse booster markers knowledge, may have contributed to how they employ booster markers in their writing. It should also be noted that according to previous research, lower use of boosters in academic writing could be due to writers' lower language proficiency and lack of lexical diversity in academic writing (Ngampradit, 2020). Therefore, these first-year ESL doctoral students may face more challenges in the L2 writing process because they need to develop second language proficiency in creating convincing arguments, familiarise themselves with the institutional and disciplinary writing conventions while negotiating a representation of self to create a particular writer identity.

A relatively low number of booster usage was also recorded in the further analysis of booster markers sub-categories, resulting in weaker persuasive appeals. It

suggests that first-year doctoral students need to become more familiar and confident in choosing and positioning various booster markers in creating a persuasive text. Such a skill would further signal the intended relationship and engagement with the readers more effectively. While the number or variety of booster markers deployed in academic writing do not automatically enhance the persuasiveness of an argument and the writing as a whole (Ho & Li, 2018), a reluctance or lack of awareness of the existence, as well as, use of booster markers means that the emergent academic writer does not have one of the tools of the trade, as it were, at his or her disposal.

Therefore, the pedagogical implication of this study is that greater attention should be paid to the introduction and explanation of semantic features of boosters associated with the purpose of persuasion in academic writing. Furthermore, the lower and less varied use of booster markers in academic writing by first-year ESL doctoral students in this study was written by those who have completed a research project in their master's degree. Their limited use of booster markers might result from insufficient input of metadiscoursal booster markers knowledge during their master's degree education. Thus, teachers and the curriculum should emphasise the forms and functions of various booster markers in postgraduate education. With this, the students' perceptions can be trained to understand the semantic features of persuading and convincing readers in the writing.

Hyland (2019), suggested that students with realistic writing strategies do not necessarily foreground the idea that they can employ linguistic expressions (e.g., booster markers) effectively in writing. Therefore, future research can be carried out to examine how boosters were deployed to pursue persuasive appeals through qualitative analysis of emergent academic writers' written work. It will allow us to understand better the issues of overuse, underuse, and ineffective use of boosters and provide pertinent information on the needs of emergent academic writers in creating convincing arguments and constructing persuasive texts in academic writing.

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