Modification of the Illocutionary Force by Information Technology Students in In-Class Debates

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Abstract

Information technology (IT) students are a specific discourse community whose oral communication in English for specific purposes (ESP) predominates at all levels of their university studies and future workplace activities in the multinational IT sector. Since IT students' pragmatic competence in performing communicative functions is essential for their effective communication in an academic setting and a global work environment, it is important to investigate this aspect of their language systematically and carefully. Accordingly, this paper deals with IT students' modification of the illocutionary force while participating in structured in-class debates on controversial issues related to their field of study. In-class debates enable ESP learners to develop the ability to collect, organize and critically evaluate information from different sources, clearly communicate ideas, examine and evaluate evidence, and effectively present, consider and refute arguments. Since in-class debates are based on learners' spontaneous communication and immediate responses, they seem to be a suitable instrument for eliciting samples of learner language. Identification and analysis of metadiscourse markers, in particular boosters and hedges, were made through the corpus-based analysis of transcribed debates in Sketch Engine. The analysis revealed that students used different boosters and hedges for both increasing and reducing the illocutionary force. Besides, the ways IT students used boosters and hedges reflect how they assume and share their professional knowledge and experience in their discourse community.

Keywords: *ESP learners, in-class debates, pragmatic competence, illocutionary force, boosters, hedges*

1. Introduction

In ESP language teaching and learning context, in-class debating is consistent with a learner-centred approach since it encourages authentic interaction between learners as active agents who share their own knowledge, experience, skills and ideas. Besides, structured in-class debates enable ESP learners to improve communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, enhance disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning, provide a very unique educational experience, and offer excellent pre-professional training [7, 9, 17]. Given that ESP learners' pragmatic competence in performing communicative functions is essential for their effective communication in an academic setting and a global work environment, it is important to investigate how they modify the illocutionary force especially through corpus analysis. The key methodological issue for investigating learner language is "what kind of performance provides the most valid and reliable information about competence" [8, p. 21]. Since in-class debates are based on learners' spontaneous communication and immediate responses, they seem to be a suitable instrument for eliciting samples of learner language. As Ellis and Barkhuizen [8, p. 26] note, the 'vernacular style' (or 'casual style') represents "what learners are capable of producing when they are not consciously focused on form," thus it reflects their implicit rather than explicit knowledge of English as a second language (ESL).

This paper deals with ESP learners' modification of the illocutionary force in in-class debates on controversial issues related to the field of IT. The paper undertakes to discover which metadiscourse markers learners used to increase and reduce the illocutionary force.

2. Theoretical Background
2.1 Modifying the Illocutionary Force
The illocutionary force can be either increased (accentuated) or reduced (attenuated). The differentiation between attenuation and accentuation should be understood as a 'dine' or 'illocutionary force gradation' reflecting the degrees of the speaker's commitment to the content of the message [19, p. 67]. Both accentuation and attenuation of the illocutionary force reflect the speaker's relationship with members of a discourse community [15]. Communicative strategies used for increasing or reducing the illocutionary force are boosting and hedging [11, 14, 19]. Boosters and hedges are considered as complementary devices, so their role in argumentative discussions is to maintain stability between conflictive objectives. Their use can tell us something about the force the speaker uses to make their assertion, and their estimation of the situation. Through boosting "the meaning becomes reinforced, underlined, exaggerated, explicit," through hedging it becomes "subdued, indirect and implicit" [19, p. 66]. Through hedging, the speaker implies that a statement is based on plausible reasoning rather than on certain knowledge, and it allows the audience certain freedom to dispute it, whereas boosters allow the speaker to negotiate the status of their information, help them to establish its perceived truth by strategically presenting it as consensually given [11, 14].

Van Eemeren et al. [20, p. 29] use the alternative terms "propositional attitude indicators" for boosters and "force modifying expressions" for hedges, and they classify them as "indicators of standpoints". They further explain that when the speaker uses a propositional attitude indicator (e.g. *I really believe that, I think that, I'm sure that*) they not only make it obvious that they believe something, but they also "assume that the listener needs this extra information to understand that the assertion involves a (subjective) notion of the speaker," and similarly, the speaker who uses a force modifying expression (e.g. *in my view, it is quite certain that, of course*) does not only signal that they want to assure the listener of something, but they also assume that, "without this addition, the listener would not understand that they want to assure him of something".

2.2 Empirical Studies on the Modification of the Illocutionary Force in ESL Learners' Spoken Discourse
Empirical research into attenuation and accentuation of the illocutionary force in ESL learners' spoken discourse is relatively rare. Müller [16] analyses and compares how native (Americans) and non-native (Germans) speakers of English use metadiscourse markers *so*, *well*, *you know* and *like* during retelling and discussing a silent movie. Aijmer's [2] analysis of similarities and differences between native and non-native (Swedish) speakers of English showed that Swedish learners overused *well* as a fluency device to cope with speech management problems, but they underused it for attitudinal purposes. Probably most empirical studies dealing with metadiscourse markers used by ESL learners were published by Buysse [5, 6] who investigates the metadiscourse markers *so, well* and *you know*. While all the empirical studies reviewed focus on a particular metadiscourse marker used by ESL learners in a general academic English context, a more complex and systematic analysis of ESP learners' spoken technical discourse focused on modification of the illocutionary force is still missing. For this reason, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: What metadiscourse markers did IT students use for increasing/reducing the illocutionary force?
RQ2: What functions did the different metadiscourse markers perform in relation to IT students discourse community?

3. Methodology and Data
3.1 Participants and Corpus
A total of 34 students of the first year of the bachelor's study programme at the Faculty of Information Technology at Brno University of Technology in the Czech Republic participated in eight debates that lasted 131 minutes in total. The students' English language level is B2 according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). Students discussed the following propositions related to their study programme focused on IT: 1) Human labour should be replaced with artificial intelligence*;* 2) The Dark Net should be regulated like the rest of the Internet; 3) Closed platform is better than open platform and 4) Firefox is better than Google Chrome. Each of these propositions was discussed twice by two different teams, so the learners' corpus consists of eight debates in total.

Transcripts of all debates were uploaded and analysed in a corpus manager and text analysis software Sketch Engine. The whole corpus of IT students' online debates includes 8 transcribed debates, 20,052 tokens, 17,016 words and 1,110 sentences.

3.2 Identification and Analysis of Boosters and Hedges

Two methodological approaches were used to analyse modification of the illocutionary force: a corpus analysis and a manual analysis. The aim of the corpus analysis was to consider typical boosters and hedges which contribute to the modification of the illocutionary force and analyse their functional and distributional patterns. In some cases, there were also different meanings of some words and expressions (e.g. *just*, *like, I think, you know*), so these had to be assessed manually. Table 1 shows the most frequent boosters and hedges students used in in-class debates.

Booster	Number of Hits	Percent of the Whole Corpus	Hedge	Number of Hits	Percent of the Whole Corpus
will (not)	89	0.4438	would (not)	102	0.5087
just	61	0.3042	like	81	0.4039
really	55	0.2743	well	66	0.3291
I/we think	46	0.22956	should (not)	54	0.2693
believe	31	0.1546	I/we think	53	0.2643
actually	23	0.1147	just	24	0.1197
very	21	0.1047	could (not)	20	0.09974
true	16	0.07979	I mean	19	0.09475
so	15	0.07481	probably	19	0.09475
always	10	0.04987	might (not)	15	0.07481
I, we (all), they know	10	0.04987	you know	14	0.06982
pretty	10	0.04987	may (not)	13	0.06483
definitely	9	0.04488	maybe	13	0.06483
sure	9	0.04488	possible	13	0.06483

Table 1. Occurrence of boosters and hedges in in-class debates.

As Table 1 demonstrates, the most frequent booster was *will*, which corresponds to the findings of other studies focused on the modification of the illocutionary source [14, 15]. Students used *will* to put forward their propositions with confidence (Example 1) and express certainty of their predictions (Example 2).

(1)   *We **will** do our best to lay out the bright sides of this topic.*
(2)   *So just monitoring the traffic like this **will** not really fix anything.*

Speaker-oriented attitudinal boosters *I believe*, *I/we know* (Example 3) and *I/we think* emphasize the students' subjective attitudes and make their utterance more assertive.

(3)   *As **I believe**, **we** all **know** that the more eyes that view code the quicker you can catch errors and make the necessary changes to uphold quality source coding.*

Assurances such as *actually, definitely* and *sure* belong to highly assertive speaker-oriented boosters that reflect students' certainty and conviction. Similarly, emphasizers *really, pretty, very, always* and *so* intensify the meanings of gradable adjectives, adverbs, verbs and quantifiers [10, 15]. Students used them to attract their listeners' attention and stress the relevance of their arguments for their opponents (see Examples 4, 5, 6 and 7).

(4)   *Well you don't **really** need DNS if you want to connect to a server...*
(5)   *I think this is a **pretty** big detriment to your arguments.*
(6)   *PlayStation Nintendo and Xbox have had a history of success, and they have **always** been **very** popular among the customers.*
(7)   *The risk isn't **so** high.*

Students used boosters to increase the illocutionary force of propositions and demonstrate commitment to their statements, thereby asserting their conviction and restricting the negotiating space available to their opponents. However, the boosters can also serve the ends of positive politeness because they reflect the respect for their opponents' views and the assumed background professional knowledge in the discourse community of IT students.

The metadiscourse marker *just* belongs to context-sensitive markers that can have different functions in different contexts [12, 13, 19]. *Just* was one of the most frequent markers occurring in debates.

Despite Brown and Levinson's [4] and Wierzbicka's [21] claim that *just* reduces the illocutionary force, Aijmer [1] and Beeching [3] argue that *just* can either reduce or increase the illocutionary force. In the minimising contexts, Beeching [3] relates *just* to the conventional implicature of 'merely', which applies at the speech act level, rather than at the word level. Erman [1997, as cited in 3] observes that in particular young people often use *just* to maximise the effect of their utterance. Aijmer [1] points out that *just* as a booster occurs in collocations with attenuating markers (such as *might* in Example 8 and *a bit* in Example 9), gradable adjectives, exaggerative prosody, and in negated sentences when the speaker wants to dispute a point, while *just* as a hedge often occurs in requests and it reflects negative politeness (see Example 10).

(8) …*because you might **just** get scams and not get anything at all.*
(9)   *It is **just** a bit easier to track down the users who are participating in these activities…*
(10) … *and let me **just** say something that might not have been said so that everybody's in the loop.*

Another context-sensitive marker was *I/we think*. Example 11 illustrates *I think* as a 'deliberative' booster in the initial position with level stress to add weight to his statement and express certainty and reassurance. *I think* as a "tentative" hedge occurred more frequently in the corpus. Example 12 illustrates the occurrence of *I think* in the final position pronounced with falling intonation which expresses uncertainty and tentativeness [12] and acts as a softener or negative politeness marker, expressing primarily affective meaning.

(11) *So **I think** that the Dark Web should be either regulated or as visible as a regular web.*
(12) *It automatically offers you to translate this page **I think**.*

The negative politeness strategy employed through modals, such as *would, could, might* and *should*, reflects the students' need to avoid face-threatening acts when discussing controversial and to a certain extent sensitive topics. Similarly, the purpose of *like* (Example 13) is to hedge the potentially critical and emphatic stance the speaker could be perceived as taking.

(13) *That's my point **like** that you can download pretty much anything.*

Besides, the use of *would, could, possible* and *probably* (Example 14) demonstrates the need to signal the lack of relevant information when making their judgements. They also demonstrate students' doubt and respect for the opposing teams' views and indicate that information is presented as an opinion rather than an officially recognized fact.

(14) *But in order to monitor the internet as we said before it **would probably** have to be... er... not encrypted.*

The speaker-oriented hedge *I mean* (Examples 15) functions as a conversational gambit opening a new topic or suggesting a new viewpoint.

(15) ***I mean** if you want security you should just download the Blueberry or something like that.*

We can see that while hedging functioned as a referential means (expressing uncertainty, doubts, assumption, lack of competence to make a judgement) and an affective means (showing tact), boosting enabled students to assume common ground with their opponents and emphasize discourse community membership [see also 18, 19].

4. Conclusion
IT students as a specific discourse community are a very complex group encompassing many specializations whose goals may vary with the rapid development in their field. Members of this community communicate with each other by attending lectures, seminars, meetings, workshops and conferences within an international environment. Their pragmatic competence is therefore indispensable for achieving success in both academic and future professional settings. Increasing the illocutionary force functioned as a positive politeness device and indicated that students assumed shared ground and stressed their discourse community membership. Boosters thus allowed students to negotiate the importance of their information and establish its perceived truth by strategically presenting it as something consensually given. Asserting, disagreeing and rebutting during a debate

also constitute face-threatening acts or impositions on the self-image of their opponents which students mitigated by using different types of hedges.

This paper might be regarded as a contribution to the studies of learner language. The results of the analysis show that focusing on metadiscourse markers is a crucial aspect of ESP learning and teaching and should not be neglected and that research on learners' spoken language might provide interesting and valuable insights for ESP teachers. Even though ESP coursebooks and learning materials usually include sections with linguistic means to express different communicative functions, analysing ESP students' use of metadiscourse markers in in-class debates might help teachers to identify both frequent and rare metadiscourse markers and adapt the learning materials accordingly. Moreover, by engaging in a variety of different speaking activities (debates, role plays, simulations, etc.) with different purposes, students can develop and improve their pragmatic competence.

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