Indirectness in Arabic-Speaking EFL Learners' Writing: A Cultural Perspective

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Abstract. The use of indirectness in discourse varies according to culture. In writing, this disparity often leads to misinterpretation of discourse, especially when readers and writers have different perceptions of what constitutes an appropriate degree of directness. The present paper investigates the use of five types of syntactic and rhetorical indirectness markers and strategies in 60 English argumentative essays written by Arabic-speaking learners. The linguistic exponents of each device are quantitatively described. This is followed by a qualitative analysis of excerpts from the texts to show how writers exploit the selected devices and the possible cultural interpretations of their use. The implication of this study is to reveal the way improper management of indirectness in English writing by non-native speakers may affect their academic texts' comprehension from an English reader's perspective. The ultimate goal is to derive insights related to teaching the appropriate degrees of indirectness in English academic writing.

Keywords: essay; communication style; culture; indirectness; writing.

الملخص.يخــتلف استخدام الأسلوب غير المباشر أو المراوغة في الخطاب باختلاف الثقافة ، وفي الكتابة غالباً ما يؤدي هذا التباين إلى سوء تفسير الخطاب خاصة عندما يكون للقارئ و الكاتب تصورات مختلفة عن درجة الصراحة والمباشرة الأنسب في الخطاب. تبحث هذه الورقة كيفية استخدام خمسة أنواع من الأدوات النحوية و البلاغية للأسلوب غير المباشر في 60 مقالاً جدلياً باللغة الإنجليزية كتبه متعلمون ناطقون بالعربية.   وقد تمت معالجة المؤشرات اللغــوية لكل أداة مستعملة في هذه النصوص معالجة كميـة، ثم تـم تحليل نوعي لمقتطفات من النصوص المدروسة لإظهار كيفية استغلال الكتاب للأدوات المحددة وكذا لتبيان العوامل الثقافية المبررة لاستخدامها. إن الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو الكشف عن الطريقة التي قد يؤثر من خلالها الاستخدام غير السليم للأسلوب غير المباشر في الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية من قبل المتعلمين الأجانب على فهم نصوصهم الأكاديمية من منظور القارئ الإنجليزي. والغايـة النهائية هي استخلاص رؤى تعليمية تتعلق بتدريس الدرجات المناسبة من الأسلوب غير المباشر في الكتابة الأكاديمية باللغة الإنجليزية.

الكلمات الدالة. مقال؛ أسلوب الاتصال؛ ثقافة؛ المراوغة؛ الكتابة

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1 - Introduction

The close relationship between cultural value systems and communication styles has become well-established. It is held that communication, in both speech and writing, is relatively easier as long as people who participate in any interface are of the same cultural background (Žegarac, 2008), but additional factors might come into play. Mutual understanding is almost assured when the participants roughly share the norms for the construction and interpretation of messages inherent in their cultural value systems. However, complexities arise when the parties have dissimilar cultural backgrounds, and this oftentimes engenders hesitation, misinterpretation of discourse and high potential for antipathy between interlocutors (Corbett, 2011). According to these assumptions, it is expected that second/foreign language learners would find it strenuous to grasp meanings or get their messages across in speech or in writing without possessing a clear perception of the communication norms of the target language.

Indirectness is one of the communication styles. The dissimilarities in its use in writing have been widely researched in a variety of ESL and EFL academic contexts to detect the way writers conceal or disclose their real messages and the relationship between their tendencies and their respective cultures (Hinkel, 1997; Hinkel, 2002; Tran, 2007; Alijanian and Dastjerdi, 2012; Uysal, 2012; Uysal, 2014; Drid, 2015; Xu, 2015).The main issue is the measurement of what constitutes acceptable degrees of indirectness exponents in English academic writing and the extent to which non-native writers comply with the norms of explicitness favoured in Western circles (Hinkel 1997). A considerable amount of research has been devoted to determining cultural effects on being indirect in the writings of Western, Confucian, and Arab students and other groups, taken as culturally homogeneous communities. Arabs are said to favour indirectness (Zaharna, 1995; Davies and Bentahila, 2012; Fegali, 1997). Thus, it is expected that Arab learners would be inclined to use higher rates of indirectness markers in their English writing. However, further investigations are still needed to examine writing tendencies of Arab ESL/EFL learners in narrower cultural circles as long as the cultural groups mentioned above can be seen as internally heterogeneous. Also, the findings of previous research need to be validated across a variety of writing genres.

Tracking this line, the present paper addresses the extent to which some selected indirectness markers are used in argumentative essays written by Algerian EFL learners following Hinkel's (1997) model. The main purpose is to assess the rates of using these devices in the students' texts in comparison with those recorded in native writers' texts. The findings indicate that vagueness and ambiguity markers are relatively high in frequency, whereas some hedging devices fall below expected rates. The uses of the other devices were not atypical. Based on these results, the paper revealed the way improper management of indirectness in English writing by non-native speakers may impinge on their academic texts' comprehension from an English reader's perspective. Eventually, implications for the teaching of indirectness markers' use in English argumentative texts were extracted.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Communication Styles. To have a clearer perception of how indirectness in speech or writing may be judged and perceived differently, delineating the sense of communication styles and demonstrating their bearing on the success or breakdown of communication seem

to be essential. Giles and Powesland (1975) explain that a communication style is the manner one transmits some content, not the content itself. Richard and Street (1988) identify it as a set of particular patterns of linguistic, vocal, and non-verbal behaviours which carve literal meaning. In the same way, Spencer-Oatey (2008) describes a communication style as a general form of interaction or a manner of language use that exhibits constellations of co-occurring features. It includes verbal (linguistic, paralinguistic) and non-verbal behaviour (gesture, space and touch). Spencer-Oatey (2008) states:

> All aspects of language use and interactional behaviour can be reflected in the style, including choice of vocabulary and syntax, prosody and paralinguistic behaviour (e.g. intonation, stress, tone of voice, pitch, pacing, pausing and loudness) as well as non-verbal behaviour (e.g. gestures, spatial relations and touch). (p.28)

Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) stress that communication styles shape the manner individuals accept and interpret verbal messages. Conceived in this way, understanding others' communication styles may be regarded as a determinant of successful communication.

Researchers have set matrices for communication style categorization. Spencer-Oatey (2008) observes that the attributes which distinguish communication styles are typically presented in dichotomous forms. These include (1) positive politeness vs. negative politeness, (2) involvement vs. independence, (3) associative expressiveness vs. distance, (4) directness vs. indirectness and (5) self-enhancement vs. self-effacement. Other specialists add (4) talk vs. silence (Ting-Toomey 1999) and rationality vs. emotion (Peterson 2004). In *Effective Communication Skills*, the distinctions in communication styles are placed in on matrix (See Figure 1), and they vary along two axes: Expressiveness and Assertiveness.
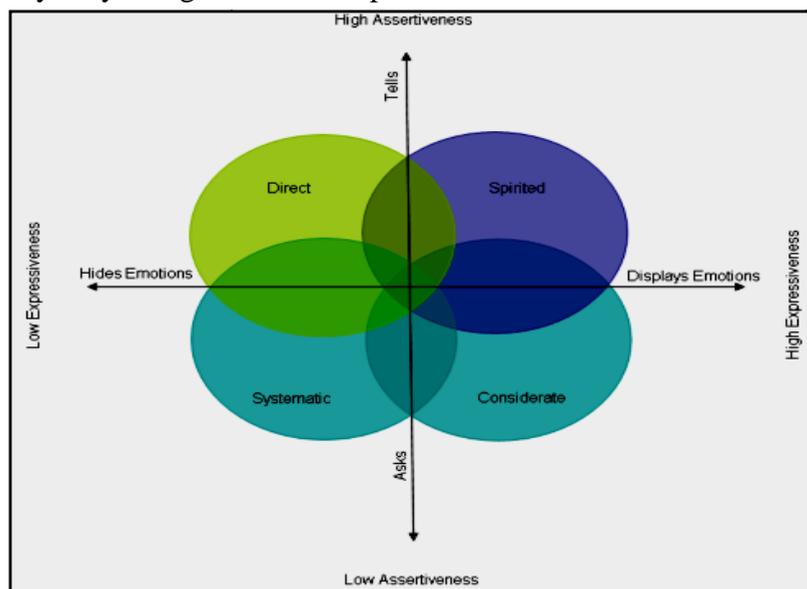
Figure 1: The communication styles matrix

Style variation can sometimes constitute an impassable barrier to smooth communication. While knowledge of words and their morpho-syntactic combinatory systems is cardinal to encode messages, style dissimilarity might prevent communicators from delivering their messages in a form that is easily decodable by their interlocutors, even when lexis and grammar are accessible to the other party (*Effective Communication Skills*).

Research has shown that several factors govern communication style variation. Richard and Street (1988) cite studies where focus was put on formality of the setting, context or class. They also alluded to research where behavioural, affective and cognitive differences were highlighted, or where psychological, cultural or motivational factors were given consideration. All in all, it is not possible to relate communication style dissimilarity to a single variable.

The strong effect of individual's culture on the way they communicate has become the centre of attention of intercultural communication specialists, enhancing several studies which investigate the characteristic communication tendencies of some cultural groups. Examining cultural groups' inclinations, one notices that differences in communicative styles may impede intercultural communication since the act of understanding in communication is far more complex than mere similarity in linguistic system. To know a linguistic code is not a sufficient warranty for an unforced or efficient communication with people from other cultures or ethnic groups (Gudykunst, 1991). In Zegarac's (2008) words:

> The more familiar communicators are with particular culture-specific assumptions, the more they are at risk of failing to realize that these belief-assumptions may not be available to their interlocultors, which may lead to misinterpretation.(p.65)

Based on the cultural value systems' dissimilarity, the inclination to be direct and highly assertive in some communities, for instance, may be considered a sign of disrespect, vulgarity and fierceness in other communities. In the same way, indirectness may be seen as deviousness, while repetitiveness can regarded as redundancy and linearity as monotony (Clyne, 1987; Samovar et al., 1995; Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005).

2.2 Indirectness and Culture

Indirectness (sometimes referred to as *indirection*), one of the chief communication styles, has been widely researched in recent decades. It refers, according to Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988), to the degree to which language users disclose their intentions by means of overt communication. They define an indirect style as the "verbal messages that . . . conceal speakers' true intentions in terms of their wants, needs, and goals in the discourse situation"(p.100). In the same line, Lustig and Koester (2010) distinguish between the direct and indirect styles in terms of either being unambiguous in revealing the speaker's true intents or masking factual wants and needs with vague statements. According to Ting-Toomey (1999), among the many aspects of cultural variability, two particularly are most useful to fathom the use of indirectness in communication: individualism/collectivism (Hofstede, 1980; Hofsted, 1991), and low-context/ high-context communication (Hall, 1976).

Collectivistic societies are said to favour indirectness. In these societies, people are relatively committed to cooperation, mutual support, harmonious relations and primacy of group interests. For Triandis et al. (1988), the personal goals of individuals tend to be directed in a way that complies with the goals of some stable collective. As a result, individuals remain attached to their in-groups even if they exercise high demands. Such general features manifest themselves in the individuals' verbal communicative tendency to conceal individual intentions and comply with the whole group to keep it intact. Ellis and Maoz (2003) state, in this connection, that indirectness is reflective of the cultural predisposition to discretion and

sensibility to the context in the course of interpersonal interaction. It is a tool to achieve politeness and save face. Gudykunst (1991) demonstrates that such cultural attributes are manifested in communication even when people are not speaking their native language. Davies and Bentahila (2012), in an elaborate discussion of the Anglo-Arab intercultural communication, explain that high-context cultures, those inclined to rely on context for the interpretation of messages, have a tendency to prefer indirectness and implicitness, while low-context cultures are said to attach importance to lucidity and outspokenness.

Some broad generalizations have been made regarding the inclination of Arabs to be indirect, a propensity emerging from their collectivistic, high-context cultural affiliation. Zaharna (1995) argues that Arabs opt for indirect, unclear and indistinct statements as a way to avert public loss of face, especially because of being collectivistic. "This . . . stems from the function of language as a social lubricant aimed at promoting social harmony" (p. 249). In the same vein, the ethnographic studies of Katriel introduced the general notion of *musayra (*or *musayara)*, a term referring to the act of accommodation to the other party in the course of communication for the sake of maintaining face and congruent social relations with them. It is thought that it shapes Arab communication patterns (Ellis and Maoz, 2002). Feghali (1997) states, "A major function of *musayara* is to constrain individual behavior in such a way as to protect the social realm from the potential disruption that may result from individual expression" (p. 358). This general communication pattern is thought to be the source of repetition, elaboration, affectiveness and indirectness in Arabic (as cited in Ellis and Maoz, 2002 and 2003). Other scholars account for indirectness in Arabic in terms of high-context / low context communication. Hofstede (1991) explains:

> [In high-context communication] little has to be said or written because most of the information is either in the physical environment or supposed to be known by the persons involved, while very little is in the coded, explicit part of the message. This type of communication is frequent in collectivist cultures . . . A low-context communication is one in which the mass of information is vested in the explicit code, which is typical for individualist cultures.(p. 109)

In the light of this, one can postulate that Arabic-speaking learners will be influenced by their native language hypothesized communication norms when using a foreign language. It should be emphasized, however, that the view of a single Arab culture, as it appears in introductory courses of intercultural communication, is now being questioned. According to Zaharna (2009), there has been a recent interest in researching significant distinctions among the collection of cultures within the Arab world rather than highlighting the dissimilarities between the "Arab" culture and the other cultures. This seems to be an attractive line of research given the vastness of the Arab world. Thus the study of communication style differences in sections of the Arab world can yield useful insights which may assist in corroborating or refuting the broad overgeneralizations made in the literature.

2.3 Analysing Indircetness in Writing. The study of indirectness has been undertaken within many theoretical frameworks. Cheng (2003) and Tsuda (1993) mention the pragmatic theory

of conversational implicature (Grice, 1975), research on communication style (Lakoff, 1973), speech act theory (Searle, 1975), politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and the study of discourse organization patterns (Kaplan, 1987; Scollon and Scollon, 1995). Working in these frameworks, researchers have developed numerous tools to empirically investigate the use of indirectness by associating it with linguistic expressions, discourse patterns or semantic choices. Within the politeness theory paradigm, Brown and Levinson (1987) have demonstrated that indirectness is the most face-saving strategy. In this connection, Cutting (2002) explains that it permits hearers to understand the illocutionary force of the utterances they receive, but it gives them the option of ignoring them, allowing the speakers to retreat behind the literal meaning. Of course, as Holtgraves (2002) argues, reasons other than politeness may account for indirectness, and politeness may be transmitted by ways different from indirectness. Therefore, these two constructs are not necessarily the same.

Following Brown and Levinson's (1987) categorization, Hinkel (1997) has proposed an analytical framework to measure indirectness in writing consisting of 21 devices which fall into three broad categories: (1) rhetorical markers, (2) lexical and referential markers, and (3) syntactic markers and structures. The model developed by Hinkel (1997) is meant to offer operational tools that can pinpoint differences across languages in using indirectness. It also assists researchers in assessing the extent to which writers of different backgrounds comply with the appropriate degrees of indirectness advocated in English academic writing. With regard to its comprehensiveness, a number of studies have applied (sometimes partially) the parameters outlined in this model for the analysis of indirectness in various genres across languages (Hinkel, 2002; Tran, 2007; Alijanian and Dastjerdi, 2012; Uysal, 2012; Uysal, 2014). Because of the dearth of ample research on Algerian learners' use of indirectness strategies in their English writing, the present researcher has investigated in a previous work the use of some selected devices (Drid, 2015), and in the present study further markers are focused on to reach additional empirical evidence on the matter. The main purpose is to measure the rates of using these devices in Algerian students' argumentative texts in comparison with those recorded in native writers' texts. Additionally, the author seeks to fathom the extent to which the postulated cultural effects are at work and to highlight idiosyncratic usages which may be due to other non-culture bound factors.

3- Method and Tools
3.1 Corpus.
The methodology of this study is based on the analysis of a textual corpus wherein indirectness markers are set as the main linguistic features to explore. The data gathered were elicited via a writing test which required the production of two argumentative essays according to two writing prompts. This was handed to 30 Algerian Master students of English specializing in two main streams. The participants were chosen according to their accessibility and their linguistic background. Algerian dialectal Arabic is the first language of all the participants. They have learnt French as a first foreign language, English as a second foreign language in subsequent stages of their education and finally have majored in English studies. The total number of elicited texts is 60.
3.2 Procedure.

Five indirectness strategies were examined in the students' argumentative essays. They fall in two main categories: rhetorical strategies and lexical/referential markers, as indentified by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Hinkel (1997). Table 1 summarizes the selected markers.

Table 1. Indirectness devices

Marker category	Marker type	Marker sub-type
Rhetorical strategies	**a.** Vagueness & ambiguity	- Numerical quatifiers
		- Non-numerical quantifiers
		- Scalar qualifiers
		- Classifiers
Lexical and referential markers	**b.** Hedges and hedging devices	- Lexical hedges
		- Possibility hedges
		- Quality hedges
		- Performative hedges
		- Hedged performative verbs
	c. Downtowners	/
	d. Diminutives	/
	e. Point of view distancing	/

For each type of marker, the linguistic exponents identified in Hinkel (1997) were searched for. These are listed below:

a. Vagueness and ambiguity (Vag/Amb):
  – **Numerical quantifiers:** *a lot, approximately, around, between, many, much, number of, piece(s), tons of, dozens, hundreds, thousands, millions, xx or yy, xx or so, several.*
  – **Non-numerical quantifiers:** *xx aspects of, xx facets of, at least, at best.*
  – **Scalar qualifiers :** *excellent, good, bad, always, usually, often, occasionally, sometimes, never, large, small, high, low, tall, short, hot, warm, cool, cold, wet, damp, dry.*
  – **Classifiers:** *and all, and all that, and that, and so on, things like that, stuff like that, who knows*
  – *I am concerned, I would like to, I want to, I think, I believe, I understand. what/ why, whatever [*pron*] wants/does, the whole bit, the whole works.*
b. Hedges and Hedging devices (Hed):
  – **Lexical hedges (Hed 1):** *(at) about, in a way, kind of, maybe, more or less, most, something like, sort of.*
  – **Possibility hedges (Hed 2):** *by (some/any) chance, hopefully, perhaps, possibly, in case (of), (if) you/we know/ understand, if-structures (non-conditional).*

- **Quality hedges (Hed 3):** *as is (well) known, (as) you/everyone know(s), (as) people say, one/you may/might/can say, they say.*
- **Performative hedges (Hed 4):** *apparently, basically, certainly, clearly, definitely, likely/ most likely/very likely, obviously, undoubtedly, seemingly, supposedly, surely.*
- **Hedged performative verbs (Hed 5):** *want to/would like to /can/ may + performative verb: ask/call/comment/discuss/explain/note/mention/point out/remark/speak/state/tell.*

c. Downtowners (Down): *at all, almost, hardly, nearly, only, partially, partly, practically, slightly, somewhat*

d. Diminutives (Dim): *a little, little, a bit, a little bit, a few, few*

e. Point of view distancing (PVD): *I/we feel, I wonder, I worry*

The study used both quantitative and qualitative analyses of indirectness devices. The quantitative treatment involved computing frequency counts of the specified indirectness markers in the corpus using the *Antconc* concordance tool. It calculates word counts in each text and produces concordance lists of the specified items in the context where they occur. The study of co-text (the text neighbouring the linguistic item) in concordance lists permits the analyst to exclude manually the instances which are not relevant and get more accurate frequencies of occurrence. In order to measure the degree to which the analyzed texts display indirectness in comparison with the rates recorded in native speaker texts as reported in Hinkel (1997), median values were computed for each type of markers. For each essay, the percentage rate of the selected device is calculated as follows:

 Ratio (%) = frequency of occurrence in essay x 100/ number of words in essay.

The median values of the obtained ratios were then compared with native speaker median values (See Appendix 1). Alongside this, the uses of the examined devices were qualitatively described to reach an understanding of the tendencies of writers and detect the potential improper functional manipulation of indirectness markers in writing.

4. Results and Discussion

The results, as shown in Table 2, revealed that the cumulative word count of the corpus is 15141. The average word number of each essay is found to be 252.35 words per essay. As regards the frequency counts of each exponent of indirectness, it appears that the most frequently used strategy is vagueness and ambiguity with 159 instances, followed by hedging with 43 occurrences, while point of view distancing and downtowners are scarcely used in the corpus with 12 tokens for each. The use of diminutives is hardly found, with only one instance (See Appendix 2).

Table 2. Indirectness devices frequency

N° of essays	N° of words in corpus	Word mean	Vag/ Amb	Hed	Down	Dim	PVD	Total
30	15141	252.35	159	43	12	01	12	227

Note: Vag/Amb: vagueness & ambiguity; Hed: hedges; PVD: point of view distancing; Down: downtowners; Dim: diminutives.

Concerning the degrees of using the selected indirectness devices in comparison with native speaker usage, the quantitative results in Table 3 indicate that globally the device that was found to exceed native speakers' proportions (0.00) is vagueness and ambiguity, with a median of (0.96). By contrast, one type of hedges, that is, lexical hedges, did not appear as expected. The median of this device (0.00) falls significantly below native speaker use (0.75). This means that in at least half of the texts, no lexical hedge is used. Apart from these findings, no other differences were detected.

Table 3. Frequency and median values for the use of indirectness devices

Device type	Vag/ Amb	Hed 1	Hed 2	Hed 3	Hed 4	Hed 5	Hed	Dwo n	Dim	PV D
Freq	159	18	4	15	4	2	43	12	01	12
Median (%)	0.96	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.12	0.00	0.00	0.00
NS median (%)	0.00	0.75	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	/	0.00	0.00	0.00

Note: Hed1: lexical hedges; Hed2: possibility hedges; Hed3: quality hedges; Hed4: Performative hedges; Hed5: hedged performative verbs; NS: native speaker; Freq: frequency.

An in-depth qualitative examination of the obtained results has some significance vis-à-vis the extent to which the writers' cultural background influences the use of indirectness in writing. In the first place, the empirical results suggest that the participants, who are Arabic-speaking advanced learners, are very much inclined to use vagueness and ambiguity markers. In the literature, vagueness and ambiguity are designated as face-saving strategies, using politeness theory terms. However, they occasionally appear in English academic writing, where they ought to be employed sensibly. Hinkel (1997) explains that when writers resort to this strategy in academic writing, on the one hand, they reduce their responsibility for the precision of their claims, and on the other, they lessen imposition on the reader. In a number of studies, non-native speakers of English were found to relatively utilize more ambiguity markers than appropriate in Western contexts. Particularly, Arabs are said to favour this strategy given their collectivistic cultural value system. "As with almost every collective society, social harmony among in-group members is valued among Arabs, who rely on indirect, ambiguous statements to lessen the potential for loss of face during interactions (Samovar et al. 2013, p. 254-255). The findings of this study substantiate such a claim. The most widely employed markers of this category in the corpus are the numerical quantifiers (*a lot, many, number of*), the scalar qualifiers (*good, always, high, large*), and the classifier (*and so on*). The following excerpts show such uses:

> . . . *A lot of* people in the world think that. . . **(txt 60)**
> . . . and there are *many* examples that illustrate this view. . . **(txt 3)**
> . . . such ruling positions in society for *a number of* reasons. . . **(txt 25)**
> . . . students can manage to become *good* communicators. . . **(txt 8)**
> . . . women have *always* faced a problem. . . **(txt 19)**
> . . . this end opened *large* debates between. . . **(txt 45)**
> . . . literature, civilization, linguistics *and so on*. . . **(txt 20)**

In these cases, the participants use words and expressions which are sweeping in scope, indefinite and non-precise. They create paucity in the amount of information given and indistinctness, causing the manner maxim of communication to be flouted (Grice, 1975). This is one of the "off-record" strategies indentified by Brown and Levinson (1987) as a means to perform a face threatening act while keeping face.

As for the use of hedges, the observed low rates of lexical hedges as well have some implications. In general, Ciubancan (2015) explains "Hedges are expressions used to communicate the speaker's weak commitment to the information conveyed. By hedging, speakers moderate the assertive force of their utterances" (p. 250). In English academic writing, the use of hedges is advocated on account of their effect on the level of assertiveness in discourse. For Swales (1990), they create truthfulness, reservation, appropriate watchfulness and discretion, features required in academic discussions. The role hedges play in mitigating claims complies with the requirements of rational debates. Lack of hedging in academic writing may lead to questioning the credibility of the writer (Hyland, 1996). In this study, lexical hedging devices especially are used in a relatively limited manner. Except for the hedge *most*, none of the exponents appears in the data. The extracts below illustrate its use:

> . . . they have succeeded in *most* of them. . . **(txt 35)**
> . . . *most* of men don't encourage their wives. . . **(txt 19)**
> . . . women today will contribute in *most* of domains. . . **(txt 21)**

With the exception of this case, few other types of hedges appear in the corpus but with percentages almost similar to native speaker proportions. These include the quality hedges *can say*, *they say*; the performative hedge *clearly,* and hedged performative verbs *would like to say.* The following are some detected examples:

> . . . *they say* a woman can be a mother and working. . . **(txt 47)**
> . . . we *can say* that women are discouraged. . . **(txt 27)**
> . . . and we observe *clearly* women's invasion in this field. . . **(txt 31)**
> . . . *I would like to say* that it is the task of teachers. . . **(txt 8)**

Based on these findings, it is concluded that the participants in this study seem not to abide by some acceptable degree of using some hedges common in native speaker writings. One can postulate here that the appropriate rates of using hedging devices in English academic writing must be highlighted to non-native writers so that their academic texts demonstrate more credibility.

The rates of the rest of selected indirectness devices (downtowners, diminutives and point of view distancing) were not found to be problematic. The medians of these devices were identical to native speaker medians. The most common ones which appeared in the data are the downtowners *at all* and *only*, the diminutive *few*, and the point of view distancing markers *I wonder*, *I think* and *I believe* used to varying degrees. Below are some instances of their use as they appear in the data:

. . . *I think* our religion shows many examples of great women . . . **(txt 3)**

. . . For this, *I believe*, linguistics is very essential in learning English . . . **(txt 6)**

. . . voting is not a problem *at all* in Muslim countries . . . **(txt 51)**

. . . there were *only* men who participated in this election . . . **(txt 59)**

. . . for me with *few* experiences, even she has proven to manipulate . . . **(txt 49)**

. . . Many students, including me, *wonder* of the usefulness of such modules; . . . **(txt 8)**

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Our findings on the use of indirectness in argumentative writing demonstrate that Algerian EFL learners whose writings were under scrutiny do not make an exception particularly in their tendency to use vagueness and ambiguity markers in their academic texts. The influence of the communication styles of their first language is clear. On the other hand, the significantly low rates of some hedges in their texts do not meet what is estimated as an appropriate degree of indirectness in native speaker texts and refute the overgeneralizations of previous research on Arabs' writing inclinations. These detected dissimilarities are significant in that they indicate the degrees of divergence between native speakers of English and foreign language learners in using some lexico-grammatical exponents of indirectness in their writing. In spite of such generalized results, three core theoretical issues should not be overlooked. The first is related to the ambiguity of the notion of "a native speaker of English", the second has to do with the assumption that the Arab world is culturally homogeneous and the third relates to stylistic (dis)similarities between Standard Arabic and the other dialectal forms used in different parts of the Arab world. Such additional factors may call for an overall reconsideration of previous research findings.

Practically, some implications can be inferred from the results of this study for EFL writing instruction in the Algerian tertiary context. It is true that the perception of appropriateness in indirectness is culture-specific and that the tendency to encourage explicitness instead of vagueness and indirection seems to involve a strong Anglo-centric bias. However, EFL/ESL learners ought to be sensitized to the requirements of English academic writing so that they participate effectively in the academia (where English is the principal lingua franca) without misreading, especially if they are expected to disseminate their work to international readerships. This aspect of writing ought to be underlined in EFL writing classes to assist Algerian Arabic-speaking learners to communicate smoothly without giving the sense of uncertainty or the implication of excessive assertiveness in what is communicated in their texts. Intercultural communication can be facilitated if learners are first made aware of the incongruity existing between English and Arab communication styles. Following textbooks in English academic writing, which give practical insights to learners so that they manage the pragmatic tool of indirectness properly, EFL writing instructors can

devise writing activities which contrast indirect markers to increase sensitivity to their consequences on the messages transmitted in texts. After all, writing instruction should be directed in such a way that it meets the very particular writing difficulties of specific groups rather than following theoretical overgeneralizations on cultural characteristics. At the end, it is stressed that discussions of indirectness use in writing can be enriched by underlining cultural factors; however, other influencing variables must not be discarded.

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Appendix 1: Hinkel's (1997) Findings

Strategy/marker	NS	CH	KR	JP	IN
(i) Rhetorical strategies and markers					
Rhetorical questions/tags	[0.00	0.38]*	0.42]*	0.41]*	0.44]*
Range	0.63	1.94	2.72	1.94	3.43
Disclaimers/denials	[0.00	1.10]*	0.85]*	1.18]*	0.88]*
Range	2.50	3.33	2.72	5.21	2.59
Vagueness/ambiguity	[0.00	0.15]*	0.72]*	1.00]*	1.40]*
Range	0.71	4.84	3.25	5.36	6.25
Repetition	[0.00	0.00]*	0.00]*	0.00]*	0.00]*
Range	1.11	3.20	1.85	3.33	3.47
Irony	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Range	0.91	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
(ii) Lexical and referential markers					
Hedges					
Lexical	[0.75	0.68	1.41]*	1.70]*	1.38]*
Range	3.22	3.55	4.73	4.69	6.90
Possibility	[0.00	0.00]*	0.00]*	0.00]*	0.00]*
Range	1.35	0.93	0.41	1.53	0.00
Quality	[0.00	0.70]*	0.36]*	0.81]*	0.13]*
Range	0.65	2.53	2.94	4.69	2.33
Performative	[0.00	0.43]*	0.00]*	0.00]*	0.00]*
Range	0.42	2.13	4.55	0.69	0.86
Hedged performative verbs	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.41	0.31
Range	1.29	1.61	1.35	2.86	2.27
Point of view distancing	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Range	0.90	0.00	1.42	1.53	0.00
Downtoners	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Range	0.54	0.00	2.47	0.22	0.31
Diminutives	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Range	1.03	0.74	0.57	1.07	0.00
Discourse particles	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Range	0.77	0.39	1.11	0.69	0.78
Demonstratives	[0.51	0.93]*	0.86]*	0.85]*	0.78]*
Range	2.16	2.22	1.60	2.27	2.69
Indefinite pronouns					
Universal and negative	1.00	1.52]*	1.17]*	1.01]*	1.16]*
Range	2.41	3.02	3.54	3.57	4.28
Assertive/nonassertive	[0.50	1.72]*	1.94]*	1.52]*	0.95]*
Range	2.63	4.10	3.82	6.07	5.68
Understatements	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Range	0.82	0.22	0.00	1.09	0.43
(iii) Syntactic markers and structures					
Passive	[0.00	0.83]*	0.81]*	0.42]*	0.79]*
Range	1.61	2.75	1.48	1.00	1.56
Nominalization	0.25	0.33	0.00	0.56	0.49
Range	1.96	2.27	2.14	3.21	2.38
Conditionals	0.00	0.00	0.22	0.34	0.00
Range	2.05	2.32	2.78	3.30	1.72

Appendix 2: Indirectness devices in the corpus

Txt	N° of words	V/A	%	H	%	H2	%	H3	%	H4	%	H5	%	H	%	PVD	%	Down.	%	Dim.	%
1	210	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	275	2	0.73	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
3	384	6	1.56	0	0	1	0.26	0	0	1	0.26	0	0	2	0.52	1	0.26	0	0	0	0
4	187	2	1.07	2	1.07	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1.07	0	0	2	1.07	0	0
5	505	2	0.4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.2	0	0	0	0
6	580	4	0.69	1	0.17	1	0.17	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.34	3	0.52	0	0	0	0
7	322	3	0.93	3	0.93	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0.93	1	0.31	0	0	0	0
8	402	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.25	1	0.25	2	0.5	0	0	0	0
9	289	2	0.69	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10	335	3	0.9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.3	0	0
11	233	2	0.86	0	0	0	0	1	0.43	0	0	0	0	1	0.43	0	0	0	0	0	0
12	224	3	1.34	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.45	0	0
13	207	8	3.86	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.97	0	0
14	266	1	0.38	1	0.38	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.38	0	0	0	0	0	0
15	144	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.69	0	0
16	232	2	0.86	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
17	122	4	3.28	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
18	102	1	0.98	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
19	326	5	1.53	1	0.31	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.31	0	0	0	0	0	0
20	306	5	1.63	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
21	289	5	1.73	2	0.69	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.69	0	0	0	0	0	0
22	269	1	0.37	1	0.37	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.37	0	0	0	0	0	0
23	297	0	0	1	0.34	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.34	1	0.34	0	0	0	0
24	226	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
25	171	1	0.58	1	0.58	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.58	0	0	0	0	0	0
26	202	4	1.98	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
27	117	4	3.42	0	0	0	0	1	0.85	0	0	0	0	1	0.85	0	0	0	0	0	0
28	153	1	0.65	0	0	0	0	1	0.65	0	0	0	0	1	0.65	0	0	0	0	0	0
29	242	2	0.83	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30	157	3	1.91	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
31	376	3	0.8	1	0.27	0	0	0	0	1	0.27	0	0	2	0.53	0	0	0	0	0	0
32	255	3	1.18	1	0.39	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.39	0	0	0	0	0	0
33	195	1	0.51	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
34	216	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
35	266	3	1.13	1	0.38	0	0	1	0.38	0	0	0	0	2	0.75	0	0	0	0	0	0
36	267	2	0.75	1	0.37	0	0	1	0.37	0	0	1	0.37	3	1.12	0	0	0	0	0	0
37	271	1	0.37	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
38	240	4	1.67	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
39	238	3	1.26	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
40	343	10	2.92	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
41	280	1	0.36	0	0	0	0	1	0.36	0	0	0	0	1	0.36	0	0	0	0	0	0

42	301	1	0.33	0	0	0	0	1	0.33	0	0	0	0	1	0.33	0	0	0	0	0	0
43	151	3	1.99	0	0	0	0	1	0.66	0	0	0	0	1	0.66	0	0	0	0	0	0
44	200	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
45	195	4	2.05	0	0	1	0.51	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.51	1	0.51	0	0	0	0
46	148	2	1.35	0	0	1	0.68	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.68	2	1.35	1	0.68	0	0
47	194	2	1.03	0	0	0	0	1	0.52	1	0.52	0	0	2	1.03	0	0	0	0	0	0
48	157	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.64	0	0	1	0.64	0	0	0	0	0	0
49	150	2	1.33	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.67
50	238	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
51	400	2	0.5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.25	0	0
52	310	2	0.65	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.32	0	0
53	281	7	2.49	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.36	0	0
54	289	3	1.04	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
55	236	4	1.69	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
56	290	3	1.03	1	0.34	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.34	0	0	0	0	0	0
57	236	1	0.42	0	0	0	0	2	0.85	0	0	0	0	2	0.85	0	0	0	0	0	0
58	241	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.83	0	0	0	0	2	0.83	0	0	0	0	0	0
59	177	3	1.69	0	0	0	0	1	0.56	0	0	0	0	1	0.56	0	0	1	0.56	0	0
60	226	5	2.21	0	0	0	0	1	0.44	0	0	0	0	1	0.44	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total		159		18		4		15		4		2		43		12		12		1	
MED			0.96		0		0		0		0		0		0.12		0		0		0