

## A CORPUS-BASED SMALL-SCALE STUDY OF THE SELF-MENTION WORD “WE” AND HEDGES WORD “CAN” AND “MIGHT”

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article focused on study self-mention word “we” and hedges words “can” and “might” by using corpus-based analysis method. The results were found that the self-mention word “we” is more used in business research articles than in medical research articles, and the study also found that the business research articles written by Chinese speakers prefer to use the word “we” more often than native English speakers. In addition to that, native English writers of medical research articles prefer to use the hedges word “can” rather than “might”, which could show assertiveness and objectivity.*

**KEYWORDS:** Stance Corpus, self-mention, Hedges word

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### INTRODUCTION

#### Purpose of the study

In order to develop a better understanding of the different uses of stance in English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP), a small-scale research project has been carried for this study using a corpus-based analysis method with a focus on the self-mention word “we” and the hedges words “can” and “might”. English for Special Purposes (ESP) has been defined as learning English in specialised areas and fields, such as business, medicine, law and engineering (Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998). English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) is a subcategory of the ESP founded on the view that disciplines differ in terms of the rules that govern them and the skills required of those who practice them, and that while generalisations can be made that apply to all disciplines, the differences between them are greater than the similarities (Hyland 2006). Hyland points out that ESAP also involves teaching the particular discipline-related skills and language, which he did a lot of study by using corpus.

Corpus-based analysis method can allow ESAP teachers to analyse and compare texts in different disciplines. Gavioli (2005) indicates that specialised text corpus are very useful instruments for isolating and providing important lexical, grammatical or textual information to support ESAP classes. Moreover, using corpus software to create corpus from specialised texts is easy and inexpensive, thanks to the internet, as many tools and materials can be found online. Based on my teaching experience of many ESAP classes, Chinese university students are very confused about when to use the self-mention word “we” (Hyland 2005) in academic writing and how to distinguish the hedges words “can” and “might” (Hyland 2005) when writing. How to use stance properly is an ongoing difficulty for Chinese students who are learning ESAP English writing because of the lexical difference between the language of Chinese and English.

The journal articles used for the corpus have been chosen from the fields of business management because most Chinese students studying in the UK prefer to major in business according to the statistics from Xinhua news agency (2016), one of the biggest news agencies

in China. since the usage of Chinese and English languages is so different, and English is not their first language, Chinese speakers are confused about how to use self-mention word “we” and hedges words “can” and “might” in their research theses written in business English. So, in this study, the differences and the different functions of usage between business articles written in English by native English speakers and those written by Chinese speakers will be explored by looking at the self-mention word “we” and the hedges words “can” and “might”.

In addition, in order to further investigate the usage of self-mention and hedges in business English writing, this study also makes a comparison between the research articles published in English written by native English speakers in the “soft” discipline of business management and the “hard” discipline of medicine research articles (because medicine is one of the most popular majors in Queens University Belfast) written also by English native speakers by looking at self-mention word “we” and the hedges words “can” and “might”. In this study, as in Hyland’s study in 2001, the term “soft” science discipline refers to social science and natural science is called “hard” science discipline.

### **Outline**

This paper is structured as follows. The focus and rationale for the study are introduced in the first section. The second section provides the theoretical background in relation to stance and hedges through a review of the literature. In the third section, there is the introduction of how the corpus was built and how the articles were selected. In the fourth section, the results of the analysis are presented and discussed. Section five examines these results from a pedagogical perspective. Finally, some conclusions are drawn in section six.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The term “stance” is defined as the expression of “individual feelings, attitudes, values and assessments, including attitudes of the speakers, the certainty of their veracity, how they get access to the information, and what kind of views they are taking” (Biber 2006). Stance also reflects the writer’s efforts to project themselves into their articles to express their integrity, involvement, credibility and the nature of the relationship between them and their readers (Paxton et al. 2008).

According to Hyland (2005), stance is divided into four parts: Hedges, Boosters, Attitudes Markers and Self-mention. A short definition is also given by Hyland (2005) that: “Hedges are words like might, possible and perhaps, which indicate the writer’s decision to withhold complete commitment to a proposition, allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than accredited fact.” Regarding the definition of boosters and Attitude markers, Hyland (2005) states that “Boosters, on the other hand, are words like clearly, obviously and demonstrate, which allow writers to express their certainty in what they say and to mark involvement with the topic and solidarity with their audience and Attitude markers means the writer’s affective, rather than epistemic, attitude to propositions, conveying surprise, agreement, importance, frustration, and so on, rather than commitment.” The self-mention’s definition which is the most important one in my study, as indicated by Hyland is to use first person pronouns and possessive adjectives to show affective, propositional and interpersonal information.

Self-mention is particularly important because it can express an authorial voice which may portray the author as an expert or a trustworthy member of a certain discipline (Mur Dueñas 2007). In Mur Dueñas' (2007) opinion, scholars must establish a trustworthy image in order to convince their readers that their research is sound. Hyland (2001) indicates that self-mention is used to present propositional, affective and interpersonal information through first-person pronouns and possessive adjectives. Self-mention is related to the desire to present oneself as a knowledgeable and reliable colleague, thereby gaining credibility for one's theories or research ideas from the perspective of the authors (Hyland 2004). Ivanic (1998) believes that when writers portray themselves as an authorial self, that may affect their discursive self. Self-mention has been accepted in many research disciplines, and the convention of avoiding the first person in academic writing has been less strictly enforced than before. In the biological sciences, for example, the use of the first person rose 213% between 1965 and 2015 (Hyland & Jiang 2017). Hyland (2012) believes that using self-mention to construct a text not only functions to persuade readers, but also to engage them in the article. It is a strong instrument with which authors establish their authority and project their stance. Hyland (2001) also indicates that by using personal pronouns, most commonly the word "we", readers are brought into the text as discourse participants. His study concluded that through the use of the inclusive word "we", the bond between writer and reader is heavily emphasized; the word "we" is the most common reader device in the corpus and is widely used to express peer solidarity and membership in a certain discipline; it can also be employed to stress the involvement of the writer and the reader in exploring a topic together. Moreover, the use of self-mention differs depending on the writer's cultural background. Research by Leedham and Fernandez-Parra (2017), for example, showed that Chinese and Greek students prefer to use "we" in their writing more times than British students. Also according to Mur Dueñas (2007), there are five functions of the self-mention: explaining a procedure; making a claim, statement or argument; stating a hypothesis, a wish or expectation; showing results or findings; and outlining the steps followed in the research article. In this study, the self-mention "we" in the corpora is analysed according to these five functions.

The present study focuses on hedges words "can" and "might" which are also called modal verbs. Modal verbs can be used to express an author's stance on two levels (Vázquez 2010), first, to show the degree of certainty and second, to give permission or express obligation or necessity. According to Biber (1999), modal verbs can be divided into two modalities, *intrinsic* and *extrinsic*. Taking the modal verbs "can" and "might" as an example, their intrinsic modality meaning is permission/ability; their extrinsic modality meaning is possibility. Intrinsic modality, which is also referred to as "epistemic" modality, indicates the speaker's or writer's judgment of the truth of a statement and their attitude toward their listeners or readers (Yang et al. 2015). Extrinsic modality expresses obligation, necessity, expectation and permission (Milica 2016). In this study, the different usage of hedges words "can" and "might" are compared between business research articles and medicine research articles.

## METHODOLOGY

In keeping with the small scale of this study, the texts are limited to 17 research articles (RA) written in English. All the articles are from peer-reviewed international journals and are freely available online. The business study articles included in this study have been divided into two groups: those written by English native speakers, identified by the names of the authors in the brief biographical details provided in the article, and those written by native Chinese speakers

writing in English, identified by the same method. As it indicated in the book “New Directions in English Language Corpora”, the optimum sample size of corpus is 20,000 words. So, in order to keep each sample in each corpus to have the word number to the optimum sample size, 5 research articles written by native English speakers in business research with the words token 40170 from the *International Journal of Business Management & Economic Research*, 8 research articles written by native English speakers in medicine research with the words token 21611 from the *International Journal of Medicine*, 4 articles from the *Journal of Chinese Economic and Business studies*, which is an English journal popular for Chinese academics of business to publish their papers in English, with the words token 27688 are chosen. For the comparability criteria, all the writers had at least a university degree, thus guaranteeing that they were familiar with academic and research writing practices.

The analysis has been carried out using a combination of concordance software and manual analysis. To analyse the articles, the concordance software AntConc was used. The articles were first converted into text using the software AntfileConverter, which tables and references had been taken out of the text. Three corpus were then set up to enable a comparative analysis of the words “we”, “can” and “might” using AntConc: business articles written by native English speakers (BAN), medical articles written by native English speakers (MAN) and business articles written by Chinese speakers (BAC).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Analysis of the self-mention word “we”

In this section, the frequency of the self-mentioning word “we” is analysed in this three corpus: BAN, MAN, BAC. Then the difference of the frequency is discussed. After that, the frequency of the function of the self-mention word is also analysed and discussed. And lastly, the conclusion is made regarding the findings.

A search of the BAN corpus identified 50 occurrences containing the self-mentioning word “we”, which equates to a frequency of 1.24 per thousand words. By contrast, in the MAN corpus, there are only 3 occurrences containing the self-mentioning word “we”, which equates to a frequency of 0.13 per thousand words. In the BAC corpus, there were 64 occurrences containing the self-mention word “we”, which equates to a frequency of 2.31 per thousand words.

**Table 1: The frequency of self-mention word “we”**

	BAN	MAN	BAC
Per 1000 words	1.24	0.13	2.31

As Table 1 shows, the self-mention word “we” is used more often in business research articles (frequency 1.24) than in medical research articles (frequency 0.13) written by native English speakers. This finding is consistent with the conclusion reached by Hyland (2001), that in the “soft” social sciences, the word “we” is used more frequently than in hard sciences and engineering fields. The reason for this, Hyland argues, is that writers in the hard sciences seek to downplay their personal role in order to highlight the results of their research.

In relation to the business research articles included in this study, those written by Chinese scholars use the self-mentioning word “we” more frequently than those written by native English speakers, a frequency that is almost double. This finding is consistent with the results of a study by Leedham and Fernandez-Parra (2017), which found that Chinese students use “we” more frequently than British students when writing in English.

Differences in the self-representation of the writer in these articles may be due to cultural differences of academic writing convention, and these differences could influence the frequency with which self-mention is used in research articles (Mur Dueñas 2007). Leedham and Fernandez-Parra (2017) also observed differences in academic writing conventions from one culture to another. They reasoned that this result could be because Chinese writers are unaware of the conventional practice of avoiding self-mention in academic writing, since in China there is no such tradition. The reason for this might be that in Chinese writing, people like to use “we” to start a judgement or conclusion in their writing. This might require further research in such an area. Leedham and Fernandez-Parra (2017) found that the first-person plural pronoun “we” used in research articles written in English by Chinese writers was significantly more than in those by native English speakers, which as it shows in their study that Chinese students’ use of “we” was two and a half times higher than that of British students.

The results from a comparative analysis of the usage of the self-mention word “we” in the corpora are shown in Table 2 below.

### The functions of the self-mention

**Table 2: The frequency of the usage of the self-mention word “we”**

	BAN		BAC		MAN	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
1.Explaining a procedure	19	38	23	36	1	33
2.Making a claim	18	36	17	27	2	67
3.Stating hypotheses	5	10	4	5	0	0
4.Showing results	5	10	8	13	0	0
5.Outlining steps	3	6	12	19	0	0

The self-mention word “we” found in the corpus has more than one meaning, and thus we will analyse the differences in the following table. Examples of some of the various rhetorical functions of “we” identified in a study by Mur Dueñas (2007) are analysed below in the paragraphs as well.

### Explaining a procedure

Table 2 demonstrates that the self-mention word “we” in BAN and BAC is used most frequently to explain a procedure for business academic articles. The result is in line with Hyland’s (2001) assertion that the main reason for writers to use the first person is to explain the work they have done and to convey their important role in building a sound interpretation of a certain phenomenon and procedure. And regarding this function, it can be seen that the usage frequency of this function in business academic writing is similar between native English writers (38%) and Chinese writers (36%). However, regarding hard science and soft science

comparisons, there is a slightly but not significantly difference in usage of “we” as the function of explaining a procedure between the **BAN** (38%) and **MAN**(33%) corpus. In fact, this study produced the same results as the research conducted by Hyland (2001), who found that using “we” to explain a procedure is the most common feature in most of the disciplines analysed in that study.

Examples from the corpus BAN, MAN, BAC above:

BAN: 1. Therefore, we decided to present the straightforward version that [...]

MAN: 2. In this article, we have concentrated equally on treatment and [...]

BAC: 3. Based on the above consideration, we make inference on weak-form efficiency for China’s four share markets.

### **Making a claim**

Another frequent function of the word “we” is to make a claim. In **MAN**, the figure is 67%, which is almost the number that of **BAC** (36%)and **BAN** (27%) combined. Hyland (2001) suggests that self-mention can help build the impression that the writer is a trustworthy colleague by projecting a firm and confident authorial self-image. In the hard science, this firm and confident authorial self-image could be beneficial for hard science researchers to show how certain they are about their results. This function of making a claim for self-mention was found to be the second most important feature to emerge from the analysis.

Examples from the corpus BAN, MAN, BAC above:

BAN: 1. In this paper, we treat GDP and enrolment as endogenous variables and create instruments for them [...]

MAN2. We strongly counsel against this practice if airway or respiratory compromise is a prominent feature.

BAC: 3. We are now in a position to pose several questions regarding their informational efficiency [...]

### **Stating hypotheses**

A third function of the self-mention word “we” in the corpus is to state hypotheses. In this context, the function often occurs in the introduction section and sometimes is re-emphasized in the results and discussion sections to demonstrate support for the hypotheses (Mur Dueñas 2007). As Table 2 shows, the word “we” was used for the function of stating hypotheses is 10% in **BAN**, while in **BAC** is 5% and in **MAN** it is not used at all for this purpose (0%). This function shows that in the business journals, English native speakers often leave themselves some space for their prediction. While in Chinese culture this omission would show a lack of confidence, and thus Chinese writers would try to avoid such usage or less use of this function. When making comparisons between the hard science and soft sciences, in the medical journals written by native speakers, the results of avoiding the use of this function in may show that writers would prefer to display their confidence and objectivity in their research results.

Examples from the corpus BAN, BAC above:

BAN: 1. We expect to become international in character during the current year.

BAC: 2. We assume that firms extract all rents and pro-Equation (3) [. . .]

### Showing results and outlining the steps

The fourth most common function of “we” in the corpus is to show results. The most frequently used for this function is in the **BAC** corpus (13%), while in the **BAN** corpus, this function showed much less (5%), and not at all in the **MAN** corpus (0%). These findings show that Chinese speakers would prefer to use the self-mention word “we” more frequently to present the results of their research in business research articles. Similarly, in relation to the function of outlining the steps, when writing business research articles, Chinese speakers are most likely to use “we” (19%) compared with native English-speaking authors of articles in the **BAN** (6%). Regarding soft science and hard science comparison, native business research article writers would be more often to use “we” to express the function of showing results and outlining the steps, compare with the native medicine research article writers.

Examples from the corpus BAN, BAC above:

Function 4:

BAN: 1. We found that under certain conditions, the removal of copyright laws for recorded music is [...]

BAC: 2. We find that the A-share markets perform better than B-share markets [...]

Function 5:

BAN: 1. We first introduce a two-period OLG model into the future market.

BAC: 2. Secondly, we look at the Basel Committee core principles on [...]

From the above analysis, we could say that the native English writers in business studies prefer to use “we” more than those in the “hard” sciences such as medicine. This finding is in line with the study made by Hyland (2004) that in the humanities and social sciences field, students would demonstrate perspectives from themselves; they may try to display a stance about their research topic by using a “coherent and individual contribution” to their disciplinary fields. He also mentioned in the same article that in the hard science, writers would choose to be more objective and try to minimise the personal role to imply that whoever conducted the research would produce the same results.

In business research articles, judging from Table 2 above, “we” is used primarily to explain a procedure or to make a claim. Business research articles written in English by Chinese speakers differ from articles written by native English speakers in that the use of the self-mention word “we” is higher in the BAC corpus than in the BAN corpus. This may be because there is a habit in Chinese traditional writing of using the word “we” to show the connection between the author and the reader. This finding is in line with the traditional view of academic writing in the English-speaking world, which avoids using the self-mention word “we” in an effort to demonstrate the author’s objectivity. As Hyland (2001) states, the convention of impersonal reporting is a concept founded on the positivist assumption that academic research is purely objective.

### Analysis of words “can” and “might”

The use of hedges in soft science fields is very important, as emphasised by Hyland (2004) that fields such as business studies “require elaborate exposition and considerable tentativeness in expressing claims”. While in contrast, he also points out that hard science is relying on more quantitative methods and “they tend to express their arguments as proofs based on these”. According to Ignacio Vázquez Orta (2010), the word “might” is used only to indicate the logical possibility, while at the other extreme the word “can”, which is especially ambiguous, which may be interpreted as indicating either logical possibility or ability. In other words, the word “can” is more assertive than the word “might”.

From Table 4, the word “can” occurs 63 times in the BAN corpus, 59 times in BAC and 129 times in MAN. The word “might” occurs 14 times in BAN, 6 times in BAC and 4 times in MAN. These figures equate to the percentages shown in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: The frequency of words “can” and “might”**

	BAN		BAC		MAN	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Can	63	1.6	59	2.1	129	5.4
Might	14	0.35	6	0.22	4	0.16

As can be seen from MAN of Table 4, writers in the “hard” sciences prefer to use the word “can” more than the word “might” compare with the “soft” science as it shows in the MAN (5.4%) and BAN (1.6%). As Ignacio Vázquez Orta (2010) indicates, the degree of certainty implied by the word “can” is much greater than “might”, indicating that authors are more assertive in academic writing in the “hard” sciences. One explanation for this finding may be that because hard science draws conclusions from experiments, the research results from that discipline are more direct. As results in the soft sciences are more subjective than in the hard sciences, authors may seek to prevent their opinions from colouring their arguments by expressing their ideas more indirectly.

## PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

### Implications of the findings of this study

Hyland (2001) asserts that self-mention plays an essential role in mediating the relationship between writers’ arguments and their discourse, allowing the writer to be both a servant of the discipline and an originator of conviction. In different disciplines, authors prefer to use self-mention to different degrees to convey their professional knowledge, demonstrate their confidence and express their conviction in their arguments. In this way, writers gain readers’ support and deep understanding of the writers’ arguments. It also has great relevance for ESP teaching, especially in academic writing in different disciplines. Students can gain an advantage by mastering this technique in order to persuade their own readers when in the future they begin to publish their research papers within their disciplines. Regarding ESP academic writing, it is beneficial for students to be aware of the function of the self-mention word “we”.



This is especially true for Chinese students, who do not completely understand the meaning of the self-mention word “we”; not only can it help them become better writers, but also it can improve their understanding of academic articles in different disciplines. Moreover, by teaching students to understand the functions of the self-mention words, teachers can guide the students towards determining the purpose of the author’s use of such words and finally lead students to express the meaning of the functions by using self-mention words in their own academic writing. For example, as the current study has shown, Chinese writers tend to use the word “we” in the business research articles more often than English native writers do. Thus, as part of their business writing classes, teachers should teach Chinese students to reduce their use of “we”, especially on the function of outlining the steps, and focusing more on stating the hypothesis, as we can see from above study in the table 2. In this way, students could write more like native English speakers. And when teaching students to write hard science subjects, teachers should suggest Chinese students to reduce huge usage of self-mention “we”, and try to keep as objective as possible in the hard science articles.

From Table 4 we can see that Chinese writers tend to use hedges words or modal verbs less often than native English-speaking writers to express their confidence in their results. This may be because there is a lack of certain modal verbs in Chinese characters, suggesting that teachers should focus on this area when teaching writing for academic purposes to Chinese students. Moreover, disciplinary differences in the use of hedges should be noted by English teachers and writers. The main difference is that the tone of writing in the hard sciences is more impersonal and assertive than in the soft sciences. When teaching Chinese students to write academic English in hard science, such features should be taught accordingly within the different subject areas.

### **Implications of corpus-based teaching**

For Chinese English teachers, an introduction to corpus-based analysis methods to university students could help their students go beyond the traditional views of academic writing and could help students to use different styles and patterns when writing in different disciplines. Since the mid-1980s language corpus have been shown to be a useful computer-assisted tool for language learning and teaching (Cotos 2014), and the use of corpora has now become more popular, especially in the area of academic writing. Using corpus-based analysis for ESP teaching purposes can be beneficial for both students and teachers. The benefits of the method are derived from four characteristics of the corpus (Biber & Reppen 2015): (1) it is empirical, analysing the patterns of natural texts in use; (2) analysis is based on a large collection of natural texts; (3) it uses computers to analyse these texts efficiently; and (4) it utilizes both quantitative and qualitative analytical skills. Thus, using computer-based corpus analysis in class can help teachers interpret the pattern of the language features more easily. It is also very easy to manage, given that many college teachers and students now have easy access to a computer and the internet. There are many free corpus software packages available online, which makes it much easier to encourage the use of corpus-based analysis as a language teaching and learning method. Teachers and students could collect academic articles in certain disciplines and explore the authentic expressions and features by themselves and try to identify features that they could use. They could also put their writing into the corpus and compare them with the published articles in the same area and make corrections, which could make their writing practices more efficient. At the very least, a corpus is a highly efficient, low-cost, convenient tool with which both teachers and students can explore academic writing.

## CONCLUSION

This study has explored the corpus-informed research and learning in ESP studies, especially in relation to academic writing in various disciplines. Corpus is used to examine the stance, more specifically the use of the self-mention word “we” and the hedges words “can” and “might”. This small study is conducted by a small-scale study conducted using the corpus tool AntConc. The results indicate that the self-mention word “we” is used more often in business research articles than in medical research articles. This is because writers of business research articles prefer to use “we” to persuade their readers by showing that they are standing on the same side; also, the reason is that in the “hard” sciences, writers tend to demonstrate more impersonality and neutrality. The study also found that business research articles written by Chinese speakers tend to use the word “we” more than native English speakers due to cultural differences in relation to academic writing conventions. In addition, native English writers of medical research articles prefer to use the hedges “can” rather than “might” to show assertiveness and objectivity. In the business research articles, by contrast, native English writers are more reserved about their attitude towards their findings.

In summation, applying the corpus-based research method to academic writing could make language studies and research more effective for both teachers and students. And since computers and internet access are readily available in many countries, there should be more pedagogical application of corpus in language education. But there are some limitations to this study. Because the scale of this study is very small, the results cannot be generalised. More large scale studies should be conducted in this area, and future studies should include data from more disciplines within the hard and soft sciences to make the results more accurate. Also, one of the limitation is that different journals have different styles of writing, if all the articles no matter written by English native writers or written by Chinese writers, could be chosen from the same journal, it will make the results more convincing. Finally, the pedagogical implications of corpus-based research and learning should receive further attention in China, because there are few research articles from China in this area of study.

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