

## THE USE OF HEDGING IN ACADEMIC WRITING BY ESL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NAWABSHAH

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### **Abstract**

*Hedging is a vital rhetorical device in academic writing which can be used to convey caution, uncertainty, and limited support of claims. The present study aimed at exploring the role of hedging devices in academic writing of the ESL undergraduate students of a public sector university in Nawabshah, Sindh, Pakistan. The purpose of this study was to investigate the kind, frequency and patterns of hedging used by students and the related problems. The qualitative document analysis design was used. The data comprised of 35 authentic student writing samples from the undergraduate final year students of English department at public sector university in Nawabshah . An analysis was made using the hedging taxonomy developed by Hyland (1998). The results showed that the students employed a few hedges per 1,000 words, which is an average of 13-15. Modal verbs (may, might, can, could) were the most salient of the category, while more advanced epistemic lexical verbs, adverbs and phrases were seldom used. Many claims were written as statements and this meant that there was only a narrow range and there was not much variation in the use of hedges. The study shows that the context of the ESL classroom poses challenges for ESL learners in regards to the use of hedging, a result mainly of L1 rhetorical transfer and insufficient explicit instruction. The results of these findings indicate that there is a need to pay more pedagogic attention to metadiscourse features in academic writing courses. The study makes some practical suggestions to incorporate the concept of hedging in public sector universities in Pakistan to enhance the ESL students' writing in a balanced, credible and academically competent manner.*

**Keywords:** Hedging, Academic Writing, ESL students, Metadiscourse, Pakistan, Rhetorical Strategies, Second Language Writing

### **1. Introduction:**

Characteristics of academic writing include being precise, objective, and prudent in presenting claims to knowledge. One of the basic rhetorical techniques that allows writers to obtain these characteristics is hedging—using linguistic devices to convey uncertainty, tentativeness or a lessened sense of commitment to a proposition than to a statement that would be treated as a fact. Some of the hedging devices are modal verbs like may, might, and could; epistemic adverbs like possibly, perhaps, and likely; lexical verbs like suggest, indicate, appear, and seem; nouns (e.g., possibility, likelihood); and phrases (e.g., it is possible that, to some extent, or in certain cases) (Hyland, 1996, 1998).

These resources have several important roles in the academic discourse. They enable writers to present the provisionality of scientific knowledge, to recognize the possibility of alternative interpretations, to shield themselves from potential falsification, and to “soften” claims and invite readers to participate in a conversation (Hyland, 1996). Hedging occurs especially in scientific research articles, as it is a way of negotiating knowledge in scientific

circles and of acknowledging the uncertainty of empirical research (Hyland, 1998). If writing is not properly hedged, it may seem assertive, dogmatic, face-threatening, and thus less credible and acceptable for expert readers.

Research on the importance of hedging has been extensively reported in applied linguistics and second language writing research. Early research by Hyland shows that hedges are a prominent aspect of academic prose, even more common than boosters (devices that reinforce claims) in research articles in disciplines (Hyland, 1994, 1996). In the context of science research articles, for example, the hedging devices are used often to hedge claims and to predict reader objections, resulting in a "cautious" but "authoritative" authorial voice (Hyland, 1996). This rhetorical practice is not only of the stylistic kind but is also highly practical, deriving from interpersonal and epistemic requirements of academic communication.

Hedging poses unique and documented problems for students learning English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Non-native speakers tend to bring rhetorical devices and cultural norms from their first language (L1) where the emphasis on directness might be more important or where other forms of politeness work. As a result, ESL writers tend to use hedges too sparingly, which may cause them to make flat or categorical statements, or they may use hedges excessively, which can cause them to have weak arguments or be vague (Hinkel, 2005; Wishnoff, 2000). Corpus-based comparisons consistently show that L2 writers have fewer hedging devices than the native English speakers, and use more of the boosters and conversational hedges rather than the more academic forms of hedges that are preferred in the discipline.

The patterns have been found in different ESL/EFL settings such as in Asia, Middle-East, and Europe. Many of the pragmatic functions associated with hedging are challenging for ESL students for a variety of reasons that often include limited explicit teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and limited exposure to authentic academic texts. Consequently, their writing can be seen as less sophisticated, less credible, less publishable in international journals, and therefore negatively influencing academic and professional outcomes.

### **1.1 Problem Statement**

Although hedging is an integral part of effective academic writing, ESL students are grappling with significant challenges in learning and using hedging appropriately. Many ESL writers overuse assertive language, which is characteristic of the L1, or are hesitant about using some of the conventions of L2. This mismatch can affect the perception of quality, credibility and trustworthiness of their work, which can have a negative impact. English is the main medium of instruction and assessment in the higher education system in Pakistan and students' hedging frequencies in this context are lower than the frequencies of native English writers, which may be due to the less frequent use of hedging as a strategy in the Pakistani culture and to the lack of focused pedagogical attention to metadiscourse features (Shafqat et al., 2022; Ali, 2025). The challenges indicate an ongoing disparity between the rhetorical expectations of global academic communication and students' readiness for ESL, calling for specific exploration and instructional interventions.

### **1.2 Research Objectives**

- To investigate the frequencies, types and patterns of hedging devices employed by ESL learners in academic writing and native speakers.
- To determine the linguistic, cultural, educational and pedagogical issues that are important for ESL students in acquiring and successfully applying hedging strategies.
- To explore and suggest effective instruction pedagogies for improving the competence in hedging of ESL learners with a specific reference to the Pakistani higher education context.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

1. What are the most frequently used and common hedging devices that are used by the ESL students' academic writing and native speaker's academic writing?
2. How do linguistic, cultural and educational factors affect the ESL student's use of hedging in academic texts?
3. What instructional strategies and pedagogical interventions are effective in enhancing ESL students' use of hedging appropriately in academic writing?

#### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

Theoretically, this study is significant for the second language writing, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), contrastive rhetoric, and metadiscourse research fields; practically, it is also important for the fields of second language writing and EAP. The book brings together international scholarly research trends and local Pakistani views to add depth to the existing knowledge of hedging in other cultural and educational environments. The findings can be used in curriculum construction, material development, teacher training and explicit instruction in Pakistani universities and other ESL settings. Finally, better hedging skills will benefit ESL students in their academic writing, which will lead to more effective, credible, and internationally acceptable academic writing, contributing to their academic achievement, research publication potential, and professional communication.

#### **2. Literature Review**

Hedging is one of the main features of scientific discourse that allows the writer to indicate caution, uncertainty, and a lessened commitment to the propositions. The chapter summarizes the scholarly literature on the definition and roles of hedges, their use in academic writing in both native and non-native languages, cross-cultural considerations, specific findings in the context of ESL writing in Pakistan, pedagogical approaches, and gaps in the literature.

Hedging are linguistic strategies used by writers to modify categorical commitment, suggest possibility instead of certainty and make statements more neutral (Hyland, 1996, 1998). They are commonly in the form of modal verbs, epistemic adverbs, lexical verbs, adjectives, nouns and phrases like it is possible that, to some extent.

The model developed by Hyland (1998) continues to be very influential. He classifies hedges, based on their content or their orientation, as content-oriented (accuracy-oriented, precision in claims) and reader-oriented (writer-oriented, protection of the writer's face, reader involvement). Hedges have epistemic uses (to indicate the degree of certainty) and interpersonal uses (to establish rapport and to avoid imposing). As a result, hedges are central in scientific discourse, as they indicate the provisional status of knowledge, and prepare for possible attempts to "challenge" texts and claims (Hyland, 1996).

This is supported by empirical corpus studies, which show that hedges are ubiquitous in academic articles, and are generally more numerous than boosters. Both Searle (1983) and Hyland (1998) studied a corpus of a particular discipline and concluded that hedges are used about once every 49 words, indicating that they are used to negotiate academic knowledge.

Studies always reveal that there are differences between native English speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS/ESL/EFL writers). Usually, native writers use a greater number of hedging devices that are used appropriately for a balanced, authoritative yet cautious tone. Unlike ESL/EFL students, however, many of the latter tend to overuse hedges or overuse a restricted set of hedges, which leads to overly assertive claims or vague and imprecise writing (Hinkel, 2005; Hyland & Milton, 1997).

Hinkel (2005) analyzed L1 learner and L2 learner essays, and revealed that the L2 learner writers' essays had fewer varied hedges and more boosters than L1 learner writers' essays, and that L2 writer's hedges were often transferred from the conversational or L1 rhetorical pattern of writers. The same situation can be seen in contexts of EFL in Asian countries. The emphasis on modal verbs such as may and can is observed in the use of such words by Malaysian ESL

undergraduate students, while there was little lexical variation in hedging (Manokaran 2026). Similar issues have been found among EL learners from Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and China: limited repertoires (Petschkij 2019, systematic review by the Vanderbilt author 2021); pragmatic functions (Petchkij 2019, systematic review by the Vanderbilt author 2021).

The challenges L2 writers face are related to the limited explicitness, L1 rhetorical transfer (where directness is valued in a cultural context), limited exposure to academic genres, and the difficulty of differentiating L1 epistemic from conversational hedging.

This study of hedging draws attention to the role of culture in hedging. Some discourse communities have a preference for direct assertion of authority, and Anglo-American academic culture values cautionary, dialogic presentations. This mismatch problem occurs with ESL learners from collectivist/HC culture (Hyland, 1998; Shafqat et al., 2022).

Local studies in the country of Pakistan give valuable inputs. Shafqat et al. (2022) compared Pakistani English writers' (PEWs) and native English writers' (NEWs) corpus-based research articles in the field of linguistics. They discovered that NEWs had more hedges (21.06 per 1000 words) than PEWs (12.96 per 1000 words) because of cultural trends toward assertiveness and a focus on direct expression in education.

Ali (2025) had used ICLE Pakistan corpus to investigate the argumentative descriptive essay by intermediate level learners from Pakistan. The study identified little and repetitive use of hedging devices, which points to a lack of explicit teaching at pre-university levels. Other nascent Pakistani research (e.g., Ghufuran, 2025) suggests that non-native writers might employ a greater number of hedges but mostly those of basic modal verbs, as opposed to strategic lexical ones, and that the writers use hedging more in a defensive manner than in a rhetorical one.

The results indicate that although the challenges that Pakistani ESL learners encounter are analogous to those others in the EFL context, they are set in a particular bilingual/multilingual educational setting in which English is the language of instruction, but local rhetorical norms remain intact.

Instructional interventions have the potential to be effective. Explicit teaching with genre based or data driven learning (DDL) raises awareness. Sun and Hu (2020) found that both direct and indirect corpus consultation had positive impacts on the use of hedges in EFL writing classes. The recognition and production of the comparative works are enhanced through the activities of consciousness raising, student and expert text comparison and focused practice using Hyland's model (Petchkij, 2019; Alsehibany, 2023).

Though many EAP textbooks and curricula have yet to give the importance of hedging beyond the modals, students are underprepared (Hyland, 1994). It is recommended that hedging should be incorporated into writing courses, authentic examples should be provided with the use of corpora, and feedback given in context.

Most of literature in the world is available, but not many are available in Pakistani context especially undergraduate and postgraduate level in all the disciplines. Little is found in the literature on Pakistan regarding longitudinal studies that follow the evolution of hedging competence, or experimental studies into specific pedagogical interventions aiming at this competence. Another emerging issue is how AI writing tools affect hedging. Another recent area of concern is the effect AI writing tools have on hedging.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This chapter presents the research design, participants, data collection, data analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

Research methods used in this study were qualitative research methods that used document analysis techniques. This method was chosen to investigate in detail the use of hedging devices

by ESL students in their natural academic writing. Qualitative document analysis enables the researcher to study authentic texts and to detect patterns, types and frequency of hedging, as opposed to the artificial experimental conditions found in quantitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

### 3.2 Research Site and Sampling

This study was conducted at Nawabshah, Sindh, Pakistan in a public sector university. Academic writing samples were purposefully sampled from ESL undergraduate students in the departments of English, Education and Social Sciences. The students were all English Language Learners and at least one had taken an academic writing course.

### 3.3 Data Collection

The data were 35 authentic student writing samples which included argumentative essays and assignment papers. These are written notes from final year undergraduate students with their permission. The length of each sample was from 300 to 800 words. Included only naturally produced student work for course assignments. Analysis was conducted with all information removed from the personal data, thus preserving confidentiality.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Based on the hedging taxonomy by Hyland (1998), 35 writing samples were analysed. Each text was carefully read multiple times. The hedging devices were identified manually and classified into the different types of hedging, including modal verbs, epistemic lexical verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and phrases. Hedging devices were counted (occurrences per 1000 words). Patterns of use, underuse or overuse were observed. Qualitative illustrations from students' writing were selected to illustrate findings. Secondly, thematic analysis was used to detect the commonalities and problems of the use of hedging in the corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

The approval of the appropriate students of the university was sought. All students who had writing samples taken gave written permission. Participation was voluntary. All documents were anonymized using codes (e.g., S01, S02). Data was preserved in a secure manner and only used for academic research.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative document analysis of 35 student writing samples collected from undergraduate ESL students at a public sector university in Nawabshah, Sindh. The results are presented in a thematic form, based on the category and the frequency of hedging devices, typical patterns found, and the prominent problems. The findings are then discussed with reference to the literature.

### 4.1 Types and Frequency of Hedging Devices

The analysis of the 35 essay texts (totaling some 28,000 words) showed that hedging devices were present but used sparingly. An average of 13-15 devices per thousand words was found for the average frequency of hedges. This rate is not as common as in a native or expert academic writing. Modal verbs were by far the most common type of hedging device. The words *may*, *might*, *can* and *could* were often used by students. Occasional lexical verbs used were *suggest*, *seem*, *appear*. Epistemic adverbs (possibly, perhaps, probably) and phrases (it is possible that, to some extent) were used rarely.

#### 4.1.1 Students' Writing

- "Students' attention can be negatively impacted by social media.
- "This issue can be addressed through improved teaching skills."
- "Technology will impact how we learn."

In many paragraphs, students did not hedge at all, for instance when writing about the impact social media has on students' concentration, or about the way technology changes the way we learn.

#### **4.1.2 Common Patterns Observed**

The number of hedging devices is small. A very limited range of basic modal verbs was used by students. More varied or sophisticated hedging expressions were rare. This led to a repetition of the same terminology in the various essays.

#### **4.1.3 Underuse of Hedging**

Many claims were made as factual statements, rather than being qualified. This was particularly evident in argumentative writing where students held firm views on issues like education, technology, and social issues.

#### **4.1.4 Inconsistent Use**

A few students hedged in one paragraph and made unhedged statements in the following paragraph. This led to an uneven tone in the writing.

#### **4.1.5 The effect of L1 Rhetorical Style.**

There was an apparent directness in many of the writings, often a characteristic of some local writing styles. Often students wanted statements that were clear and direct rather than tentative.

### **5. Discussion**

Based on the results, it can be concluded that the public sector university in Nawabshah has a problem in the use of hedges in academic writing of ESL students. The lower frequency and the lesser diversity of hedges are consistent with the findings of various studies conducted in ESL settings especially in Pakistan. Pakistani English writers are less likely to use hedges as compared to native writers and in some cases display a higher level of dedication to statements (Shafqat et al., 2022). Hinkel (2005) and Manokaran (2026) have found other ESL contexts in which learners tend to use only simple modal verbs and fail to use a wider range of modals.

Some of this can be attributed to several reasons. First, students can bring their rhetorical inclinations from their native language where there may be a greater appreciation for direct expression. Second, it seems that at the undergraduate level, academic writing instruction does not seem to give sufficient attention to metadiscourse features like hedging. Third, many students have little access to authentic academic writing which demonstrates good use of hedges.

Lack of use of hedging may impact the sense of quality and academic legitimacy of student writing. In the international and even local higher education setting, 'appropriate' hedging will reflect critical awareness and caution in knowledge claims (Hyland, 1998). If claims are too grandiose, writing may lack sophistication and be open to attack.

It is significant, however, to note that some students, too, did try to hedge, indicating increasing sensitivity to the need to take care in academic discussion. This indicates that there is room for improvement with targeted teaching.

In general, the results have shown that there are gaps between the approach that students use in writing academic texts and the approach that is expected for effective academic writing. This discrepancy requires more explicit and systematic instruction on how to hedge in undergraduate English and academic writing.

### **5.1 Key Findings**

This study examined ESL undergraduate students at public sector university in Nawabshah in Sindh, Pakistan in their academic writing and the use of hedges in their writing. A total of 35 student essays and assignment papers were analysed using a qualitative document analysis approach to determine the types, occurrence and patterns of hedging devices. An analysis was undertaken using Hyland's (1998) taxonomy of hedges.

The analysis showed that ESL students employed the hedging devices sparingly, and the average number of hedges per 1,000 words was 13 – 15. Devices used most often were modal verbs, which included may, might, can, or could. Rarely were more advanced hedges used,

such as epistemic lexical verbs (suggest, indicate), adverbs (possibly, perhaps), and phrases (it is possible that, to some extent). The authors of the essays made many claims that were absolute and stated without qualification. Students used a small variety of hedges and were inconsistent in using them in their writing. These patterns are typical of a style of communicating that is direct, rather than tentative and cautious as is found in academic writing.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study results show that ESL students at the public sector university of Nawabshah have noticeable problems in the usage of hedging in their academic writing. They show some knowledge of simple hedges as manifested in the use of modal verbs but the overall application and variety of hedges is limited. Failure to use hedging can make it look as if their academic work is less sound or accurate. The results corroborate the previous research by Hinkel (2005), Hyland (1998), and Shafqat et al. (2022), which have identified L1 rhetorical transfer, inadequate explicit instruction, and lack of academic conventions as problems with which ESL writers are likely to struggle.

Explicit teaching of hedging devices is to be included in the academic writing instruction. The introduction of awareness exercises for hedging, for example by comparing student text with published articles and exercises using various types of hedges in context, may be helpful. For teachers, they may include these tasks to focus on metadiscourse features in the current writing courses. The practice of hedging is one area where students' ESL writing can be improved so that they can write more balanced, credible and internationally acceptable academic writing. This is particularly important for students aiming for higher studies or research publications.

### **6.1 Future Recommendations**

- To do more extensive study with more number of student samples at different university of Sindh and other provinces of Pakistan for wider understanding.
- Explore efficacy of explicit hedging instruction using pre-test and post-test experimental designs.
- Discuss the role of hedging in various academic genres including research proposal, theses and research articles produced by Pakistani ESL students.
- Analyze how the use of AI writing tools affects students' hedging in academic writing.
- Make a comparison between undergraduate and postgraduate ESL students in terms of the use of hedges.

To sum up, it is vital to know how to hedge in writing for academic purposes. The present study points out that this is an important rhetorical element that should be paid more attention during the teaching and learning of ESL writing in the public sector universities in Pakistan. Targeted pedagogical support enables ESL students to improve their more complex and effective academic writing skills. In educational settings, there is expected to be a critical awareness and caution in knowledge claims which requires appropriate hedging (Hyland, 1998). Too definite claims are less likely to appear sophisticated or less subject to criticism.

It needs to be noted, however, that a few pupils did try to use hedging to indicate that they needed to be cautious in their academic arguments, but with an increasing awareness of this. This implies that there is a need for improvement with targeted instruction.

The overall results indicate that there is a gap between what students are doing and what they are expected to do when writing academically. The gap requires a more explicit teaching of hedging strategies in the background of the undergraduate English and academic writing classes.

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