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Developing Academic Voice: A Study of Hedging in EFL Learners

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Abstract

Hedging means using words to make claims with less confidence. It helps to negotiate knowledge between the reader and the writer. For academic writing, it is a very useful skill. Most EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners haven't mastered hedging fully and tend to use informal words. This study focuses on the development of one specific skill, hedging, in a sample of one population, English Language Teaching (ELT) students. The population includes students of different levels of the ELT course. Based on the levels, the population is divided into two groups: the preparatory class students and the students in the third year of the ELT course. This study looks at the written work (text samples) of each of the student groups, and analyzes it using different criteria. The research is designed using a corpus-based mixed-methods approach and is informed by the work of Ken Hyland (1998). He identified different types of hedging and suggested classifications based on hedging words. For this research, a sample of 82 students, including 41 preparatory students and 41 third-year students, is used. The total number of words included in the text samples is 24,600. The text samples underwent both qualitative and quantitative analyses. In the analyses, different criteria were used to identify the number of hedges in a text sample (Hedge Count). Other criteria were used to identify the functions hedges served in each text sample. The analyses uncovered the students' academic voice and the stance they portrayed as writers. The third-year students exhibit a higher degree of sophistication in their writing, with increased hedging. The preparatory class students hedge using only first-person subjective (personal) hedging, while the third-year students hedge using an impersonal writing style, with increased use of more formal hedging words that reflect a higher degree of academic writing. The study emphasizes the value of direct teaching of hedging and academic stance. It also adds to learner corpus research by presenting findings on the enhancement of pragmatic and rhetorical skills concerning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) academic writing.

Keywords: hedging, academic writing, learner corpus, stance, EFL writing, ELT students

Introduction

Constructing academic discourse is not simply stating facts; it is the situational practice of constructing knowledge, negotiating meanings, and situating oneself within communities across academic disciplines. Hedge is a vital linguistic practice for accomplishing the aforementioned. A hedge is the use of linguistic tools to allow the writer or speaker to soften the strength of the claim, show uncertainty or the (low) likelihood of something happening, or to avoid stating something as an absolute claim. By hedge, writers or speakers show that they understand the provisional condition of knowledge and rather ask readers to be part of the knowledge interpretation and the argument construction rather than imposing absolute statements.

The widespread appreciation of hedge's importance in academic discourse is seen in all disciplines. Academic knowledge is often viewed as provisional, likely to evolve, and open to interpretations. Therefore, academic writers who are successful signal (and often implement) hedge as a means of self-protection and as a function of intellectual humility. Correctly applied hedge is a fundamental tenet of academic discourse and offers persuasive and credible constructions. On the contrary, writers may appear too confident or lose their authority; in all cases, it is detrimental to the reception of their work.

Among the many challenges faced by EFL students, the use of hedges is particularly problematic. Having a good understanding of grammar and vocabulary is not enough. Students must also comprehend the rhetorical and pragmatic aspects of language use.

Research has consistently demonstrated that EFL learners misuse or underuse hedges. Instead of using hedges that would be appropriate to the academic context, EFL students rely on a small set of expressions. This results in writings that display either excessive certainty or excessive subjectivity (Hinkel, 2005; Hyland & Jiang, 2018). These issues may negatively impact academic communication.

Learner academic writing research has focused on the role of metadiscourse in establishing academic writing proficiency and on research in academic writing. Hyland (2019) states that academic writing is not simply about the conveyance of information, but rather about the writer's ability to demonstrate an understanding of the discourse community and to engage readers. Hedging is important here because it allows one to adopt an academic stance and, as such, a fair degree of balance between the two. Given the importance of hedging in academic writing, its presence is seen as a strong indicator of one's academic writing proficiency.

The basis for this study's theory is Hyland's (1998) functional framework of hedging. Hedging, according to Hyland, is a pragmatic way of hedging writer's commitment to a claim. Hyland's framework of hedging includes, among other devices, the use of epistemic modals (may, might, could), lexical verbs (suggest, appear, seem), adverbs (possibly, perhaps, generally), nouns (possibility, assumption), and introductory phrases (I think, I believe). This hedging framework has had immense influence on the study of academic writing and has been extensively used in the study of EFL writing.

More recent studies show that the use of hedging devices depends on one's hedging proficiency, discipline, and writing style. Advanced writers create variety and show more flexibility with hedging than novice writers (Aull and Lancaster, 2014). Hedging studies using corpora have also shown that in the academic writing context, experienced writers prefer writing in an impersonal style and use discipline-specific hedging devices, while novice writers prefer writing in the first person and use hedging strategies that are more informal (Hyland & Jiang 2022). This suggests that as writers engage more with academic writing, their ability to use hedging devices will also improve.

Most studies have focused on hedging in academic writing, but few have examined the development of hedging within the same educational context. In particular, there is a gap in corpus studies focused on students in different cohorts of teaching degree programs. English Language Teaching (ELT) students are an important group to study, as they develop advanced academic writing skills and learn teaching pedagogy and language-related skills they will teach to their students. Learning about the development of hedging skills across different stages of their academic careers can provide insights into improving language teaching and curricula.

This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by analysing the use of hedging in the writings of preparatory-class and 3rd-year ELT students.By focusing on frequency, variety, and discourse function, this study investigates the development of hedging and aims to expand learner corpus research in EFL. The analysis of these two groups allows us to study the progressive refinement of students' academic writing at the various stages of a university-based language instruction program.

In addition, this study answers the call for more longitudinal and developmental studies from a corpus-based writing perspective (Biber et al., 2022). Unlike other studies where learner language is a static phenomenon, this study takes a developmental perspective and conceptualizes the level of academic writing as a result of the progressive exposure of students to a given discipline and the teaching and practice of academic writing. This perspective allows

us to study the development of students' perception of the rhetorical devices that enable them to engage in academic discourse.

The authors of the study expect that the outcomes will have an impact on both theory and practice. Theoretically, the study helps to better understand stance and hedging in EFL academic writing. Practically, the study has the potential to suggest hedging techniques to students at various levels of academic writing.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What types of hedging devices are used by preparatory-class and third-year ELT students in their academic writing?
2. How do the frequency and distribution of hedging devices differ between the two groups?
3. What discourse functions do hedging devices perform in the writings of preparatory-class and third-year ELT students?
4. What developmental patterns can be observed in the use of hedging devices across proficiency levels?

Method

Research Design

This research features a corpus-based mixed methods design to study the advancement of hedging ability of English Language Teaching (ELT) students. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses of hedging were employed, focusing on the frequency of hedging devices and their functional use, respectively. In the last few years, corpus-based methods have become especially crucial in the field of second language writing studies. They help identify patterns of language use in large collections of language-learner texts and inform researchers about language use and discourse practices (Biber et al., 2022; Paquot, 2023).

The quantitative analysis concentrated on the use of hedging devices and their distribution by proficiency level, and the qualitative analysis focused on the discourse functions of hedging devices in learners' writing. This design allowed a broad understanding of the hedging practices of students at different levels of academic writing in expressing hedged stance and meaning. The corpus contained 1,026 hedging devices across both learner groups and served the mixed-methods design.

Participants

Participants were 82 ELT students in a state university in Türkiye. The study included two groups at different levels of academic writing. The first group included 41 students from a writing preparation program who were novice English writers in an academic context and lacked knowledge of academic discourse. The second group consisted of 41 ELT students in year 3. They had years of formal instruction in academic writing and language teaching and had attended courses in linguistics and methodology. With this background, students in this group were more skilled in academic writing. These two groups helped to identify developmental variation in the use of hedging devices at varying levels of language proficiency.

Corpus Compilation

Essays written by learners in class formed the basis of the learner corpus. To enhance comparability, all learners were required to write argumentative essays on educational and social issues. During the writing, learners were not allowed to cite or refer to any sources or use any materials or aids.

The students from the preparatory course produced about 250 words each, yielding an overall corpus of about 10,250 words. The students in year 3 produced longer and more detailed essays, and on average each student wrote about 350 words, making a total of about 14,350 words. The total corpus, therefore, consisted of approximately 24,600 words.

Table 1: *Corpus Characteristics*

Group	Number of Students	Average Essay Length	Total Words
Preparatory Class	41	250	10,250
Third-Year ELT	41	350	14,350
Total	82	300	24,600

Analytical Framework

The analysis was based on Hyland's (1998) functional taxonomy of hedging devices. This framework classifies hedges into five major categories:Epistemic modal verbs, Lexical verbs, Adverbs, Nouns, and Introductory phrases. Examples of each category are presented below.

Table 2: *Examples of Hedge Categories*

Category	Examples
Epistemic Modal Verbs	may, might, could, would
Lexical Verbs	seem, suggest, appear, indicate
Adverbs	perhaps, possibly, generally
Nouns	possibility, assumption, tendency
Introductory Phrases	I think, I believe, in my opinion

Data Analysis

The corpus was manually coded according to Hyland's taxonomy. Following corpus linguistic procedures, all hedging devices were identified, categorized, and counted. Raw frequencies and percentage distributions were calculated for each hedge category. Because the corpora differed in size, normalized frequencies per 1,000 words were also calculated. This procedure ensured reliable comparisons between the two groups (McEnery & Hardie, 2022).

To enhance reliability, the coding process was conducted twice, with a two-week interval between them. Ambiguous cases were reviewed according to the definitions provided in Hyland's framework.

Results

Overall Distribution of Hedging Devices

A total of 1,026 hedging devices were identified across the corpus. Third-year students demonstrated both a higher frequency and greater diversity in hedge use than preparatory students.

Table 3: *Overall Distribution of Hedging Devices*

Category	Preparatory	Third-Year	Total
Modal Verbs	98	186	284
Lexical Verbs	44	132	176
Adverbs	63	101	164
Nouns	22	86	108
Introductory Phrases	181	113	294
Total	408	618	1,026

The findings indicate that introductory phrases constituted the largest category among preparatory students. In contrast, third-year students exhibited considerably greater use of modal verbs, lexical verbs, and nominal hedging expressions.

Table 4: *Percentage Distribution of Hedge Categories*

Category	Preparatory (%)	Third-Year (%)
Modal Verbs	24.0	30.1
Lexical Verbs	10.8	21.4
Adverbs	15.4	16.3
Nouns	5.4	13.9
Introductory Phrases	44.4	18.3

The results reveal striking differences between the two groups. Nearly half of all hedges used by preparatory students consisted of introductory phrases such as *I think* and *I believe*. However, third-year students demonstrated a more balanced distribution across categories.

These findings suggest a developmental movement away from highly personal forms of stance expression toward more academic and discipline-appropriate hedging strategies.

Table 5: *Normalized Frequencies per 1,000 Words*

Category	Preparatory	Third-Year
Modal Verbs	9.56	12.96
Lexical Verbs	4.29	9.20
Adverbs	6.15	7.04
Nouns	2.15	5.99
Introductory Phrases	17.66	7.87
Total Hedges	39.80	43.06

The normalized data indicate that third-year students used slightly more hedging devices overall. More importantly, they relied substantially more on lexical verbs and nominal hedges, both of which are commonly associated with advanced academic writing.Preparatory students, however, showed exceptionally high dependence on introductory phrases.

Functional Analysis of Hedging

The qualitative analysis revealed three major discourse functions: Expressing uncertainty, softening claims, and negotiating the writer's stance

Table 6: *Discourse Functions of Hedges*

Function	Preparatory (%)	Third-Year (%)
Expressing Uncertainty	31	42
Softening Claims	27	34
Negotiating Stance	42	24

Preparatory students primarily used hedges to express personal opinions and establish an individual stance toward the topic.

Examples include:

I think technology is very useful for students. I believe social media can be harmful. Such constructions indicate a conversational style and strong reliance on first-person positioning. Third-year students frequently employed impersonal constructions such as:

The findings may indicate that students benefit from collaborative learning, These results seem to support previous research, It could be argued that technology enhances learner autonomy. These examples reflect a more sophisticated understanding of academic discourse conventions.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research focused on the evolution of hedging competence and EFL students in academic writing. It compared the use of hedging devices in the writing of prep-class students and 3rd-year ELT students. Following Hyland's (1998) functional taxonomy, the research analyzed the use of hedging devices in 3rd year class students and prep students in terms of their frequency and the discursive functions. The results revealed several differences between prep and 3rd students and showed developmental trends in academic writing.

One important difference was the use of hedging devices in introductory phrases. Students used expressions such as I think, I believe, and in my opinion, which accounted for about 50% of the devices. This shows that beginner EFL students used subjective personal devices to express hedging and to position their claims in relation to their writing. Studies involving a corpus of learners have shown that beginner writers tend to carry informal speaking habits into their writing (Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Hinkel, 2005). It is therefore evidenced that the use of first-person hedging was due to the lack of linguistic competence and knowledge of writing conventions.

Third-year students used more complex hedging devices, such as modal verbs (may, might, could), verbs (suggest, appear, indicate), and hedging nouns (possibility, assumption). The use of these hedging devices indicates that students have greater knowledge of the structure of academic writing. Such findings show that advanced academic writers have more knowledge in hedging writing and are adept in using rhetorical devices in hedging writing and in establishing credibility (Hyland, 2005).

Instead of relying solely on their subjective viewpoints, advanced students seemed to adopt more objective stances and discipline-appropriate ways of expressing them. This seemed corroborated by the normalised frequency analysis. Despite usage of hedging being commonplace in both groups, third-year students engaged in denotative and nominative hedging to a greater extent. These types of hedging are regarded as more appropriate within advanced academic discourse, as they allow writers to assert a claim with a degree of hedging while retaining a degree of authorial control (Hyland & Jiang, 2022). The increased use of these types of hedging suggests that students gain greater awareness of the rhetorical demands of academic discourse as they progress through the different stages of university.

The functional analysis also demonstrated some developmental divergence. Hedging use in the preparatory class was mainly used to express personal opinions and certainties. Hedging was used more diversely in the third-year class to soften, express, and situate claims/arguments within the wider context of academic discourse. This finding agrees with

recent studies that place emphasis on the development of academic writing as a discourse skill combined with a degree of rhetorical engagement and audience awareness (Lancaster, 2016; Paquot, 2023).

There are several possible explanations for the observed developmental divergence. One is that third-year students have typically had greater exposure, through courses, to teaching of linguistics, methodology, literature, and language teaching. Greater exposure is evident through advanced instruction in disciplinary discourse and the scoping of academic phraseology. Another is that advanced students appear to have larger vocabularies and greater command of grammar, which enables them to use a wider variety of hedging. Ultimately, consistent practice with academic writing may enhance recognition of the epistemological foundations of academic discourse. This includes valuing a measured approach, exactness, and responsiveness to the audience.

The results underscore the need for direct instruction in hedging and stance-taking. Though students gain some hedging from reading academic texts, our results show novice writers largely stick to writing what they think. Teaching writing should go beyond teaching rules of writing, and address the use of hedging to achieve a particular effect in academic writing. Hedging corpus, genre analysis, and practice aimed at revealing discipline-specific hedging patterns should help students start to develop sophisticated voice in their writing.

The results also affect ELT teacher education. Future teachers need to be able to engage in academic discourse to teach their students how to do so. Explicit teaching of hedging, metadiscourse, and stance-taking should improve students' academic discourse and teachers' future professional practice.

Every study has limitations, and this one is no exception. The first is that all the texts were from a single institution, so the findings may not be generalizable. The second is that the study only examined one academic genre, in this case, argumentative writing, and the third is that this study employed a cross-sectional design. This study did not track the same participants to examine their progress over time; instead, it described two groups at different educational levels at the same time. Future studies may address these limitations by examining multiple academic institutions and genres and using a longitudinal design to track participants' progress over time. This study shows, in the language education offered at the university level, participants become better able to use hedging.

Hedging is an important part of academic writing, and the results show the need for systematic instruction in academic discourse practices in EFL contexts. Preparatory students relied on personal forms of hedging. In contrast, third-year students wrote with more variety and sophistication. Findings show that in the third year, students relied on traditional forms of uncertainty, while preparatory students relied more on conversational forms. This suggests that with age and experience, students create more standard forms of academic hedging.

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