

# Usage of Hedges in Thesis of Students Majoring in English

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**Abstract:** The present study focuses on the use of hedges in research articles written by students from the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education (FELTE) at Hanoi University of Languages and International Studies. The study examines thirty randomly selected thesis papers published between 2020 and 2022. The main objectives of the study are to analyze the taxonomy of hedge devices used by the students and identify the functions of these hedges in their papers. The analysis of the thesis papers reveals that students exhibit a preference for three types of hedging devices. Furthermore, the study finds that hedges are predominantly used in the conclusion and discussion sections of the sampled papers. The functions of the hedges used by the students primarily serve three purposes: expressing the writers' opinions with appropriate caution, reducing the likelihood of being criticized, and fostering a positive relationship between the writers and the readers. The research aims to shed light on raising students' awareness of the usefulness of hedging devices in academic writing and improving their motivation to use hedges effectively. Some pedagogical implications of the study are discussed. Hopefully, other teachers will find this interesting and helpful for their own situations.

**Keywords:** Hedging, academic writing, pedagogical implication, linguistic knowledge, pragmatic competence.

**Subject classification:** Linguistics.

## 1. Introduction

Academic writing is characterized by its objective representation of knowledge, as authors aim to integrate their new scientific work with existing research, utilizing interpersonal and ideational resources. Over the past three decades, academic writing has received significant scholarly attention due to its central role in the research process (e.g., Irvin, 2010; Drury, 2001).

Hedging is a vital aspect of academic writing, involving the expression of tentativeness and possibility. It is crucial for presenting unproven propositions with caution and precision.

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Hedging has been extensively studied in conversation analysis, where devices like “I think”, “sort of”, “maybe”, and “possibly” are commonly used to foster conviviality, facilitate discussion, display politeness, and ensure smooth communication (Hyland, 1995; Crismore, & Farnsworth, 1997). It contributes to establishing an appropriate rhetorical and interactive tone, conveying both epistemic (the writer's confidence in the truth of the matter) and affective meanings (the writer's attitude toward the subject matter).

In scientific writing, hedges play a critical role in gaining acceptance for claims from a powerful peer group, as they enable writers to present statements with accuracy, caution, and humility. Hedges help negotiate the perspective from which conclusions can be accepted. Despite the common belief that scientific texts are neutral accounts of factual information derived from nature (Benesch, 2008; Gilbert, & Muikay, 1984), they should be better regarded as socially constructed “rhetorical artifacts” (Hyland, 1998: 16) where authors, instead of presenting information straightforwardly, engage in the processes of negotiation and persuasion. Thus, the use of hedges allows writers to demonstrate a cautious commitment to the truth of the ideational material.

Existing studies on hedging have extensively covered various academic genres such as textbooks, conference paper presentations, and examiners’ reports. However, graduate students’ theses have received little attention in comparison, despite being an equally important academic discourse type. The literature on hedging primarily focuses on research articles (RA) and discusses how hedging is organized in different disciplines and across rhetorical sections. However, there is limited exploration of the exact pragmatic functions that these hedging devices serve, even though the underlying motivations for using hedges in academic texts are frequently emphasized.

Furthermore, while it is commonly believed that there may be variations in the use of hedges across disciplines (Varttala, 2001; Hyland, 1998; Salager-Meyer, 1997), there is a lack of studies that investigate whether there are differences in the motivations for using hedges across disciplines. This gap in the literature, along with the neglect of the topic in the context of students’ writing, creates a significant void that requires attention.

To address this gap, the present study aims to explore the use of hedges in research articles by analyzing thirty randomly selected thesis papers from students in the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education (FELTE) at Hanoi University of Languages and International Studies, published between 2020 and 2022. By describing the major hedging expressions and identifying their pragmatic functions, the research intends to provide additional insights to writing instructors and students regarding the pragmatic aspects of hedging.

Ultimately, the study hopes to shed light on raising students’ awareness of the usefulness of hedging devices in academic writing and enhancing their motivation to use hedges effectively. By filling the current gap in the literature, this research aims to contribute to a better understanding of how hedges are employed across disciplines and in students’ academic writing.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1 Taxonomies of hedges*

Indeed, hedges play a crucial role in academic writing, allowing writers to strategically position themselves, mitigate their statements, and anticipate reader responses by adjusting the level of certainty in their claims (Crismore & Farnsworth, 1990). The concept of hedges is generally defined as words or phrases used to avoid making overly precise commitments or to soften the strength of statements, as noted in the Oxford and Cambridge dictionaries. By introducing fuzziness, hedges make things less clear or precise, as described by Lakoff (1973).

The use of hedges in academic discourse is closely tied to the cognitive aspects of scholarly communication. Academics are deeply concerned with various forms of cognition, and the act of cognition itself inherently involves hedging (Hyland, 1998). Hedging involves the use of linguistic devices that make information less certain, indicating the writer's lack of complete commitment to the referential information provided. This aligns with Lyons' definition of epistemic modality, where the speaker explicitly qualifies their commitment to the proposition expressed in their utterance (Musa, 2014).

In academic writing, hedges serve as valuable tools to navigate the complex terrain of knowledge representation and scholarly communication. By carefully employing hedges, writers can convey their ideas with appropriate caution, acknowledging the limitations of their claims while fostering a sense of academic integrity and humility. Moreover, hedging enables writers to engage in nuanced discussions and establish their credibility within their respective disciplines. Understanding the nuances of hedging is crucial for both writers and readers, as it influences how knowledge is conveyed, interpreted, and evaluated in academic contexts.

The use of hedges in academic writing goes beyond a mere linguistic device; it is a strategic approach employed by scholars to navigate the intricate landscape of knowledge representation and scholarly communication. Through the skillful use of hedges, writers can strike a delicate balance between expressing their ideas with clarity and confidence, while recognizing the inherent uncertainties that exist in any academic discourse. This cautious approach reflects the writer's intellectual humility and contributes to the establishment of academic integrity and credibility.

Hedges play a significant role in shaping the tone and style of academic writing. By incorporating hedges, writers can present their arguments in a more diplomatic and respectful manner, avoiding the risk of appearing dogmatic or overconfident. The use of hedging also fosters a sense of open-mindedness, acknowledging the potential for further research and the continuous nature of academic inquiry.

Furthermore, hedges facilitate nuanced discussions in academic texts. They allow writers to explore multiple perspectives, consider alternative explanations, and acknowledge differing viewpoints, promoting a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. In doing so, hedges contribute to the richness of academic discourse, encouraging a culture of respectful intellectual exchange and critical thinking.

For readers, an awareness of hedges is equally important. Recognizing and interpreting hedges correctly enhance their ability to engage critically with academic texts. Understanding the level of certainty or uncertainty conveyed by hedges aids readers in evaluating the strength of the arguments presented and the reliability of the evidence cited. As a result, an appreciation for hedges promotes a more informed and discerning approach to reading and evaluating scholarly works.

In conclusion, hedges play a multifaceted and crucial role in academic writing. Beyond their linguistic function, hedges enable scholars to navigate the complexities of knowledge representation and scholarly communication with subtlety and precision. By using hedges effectively, writers foster an environment of intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and critical thinking within the academic community. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of hedges is essential for both writers and readers, as it influences how knowledge is conveyed, interpreted, and evaluated in academic contexts.

## *2.2 Identification of hedges*

For the identification and analysis of hedges in this research, Peter Crompton's taxonomy (1997) served as the framework. Crompton's unique taxonomy consists of six categories that capture different forms and structures of hedges in academic discourse.

The first category includes sentences with copulas other than "be". These are sentences in which a copula, such as "appear", is used to express uncertainty, as illustrated in the statement "The moon appears to be made of cheese".

The second category comprises sentences with epistemic modals. These sentences use modals like "might" to convey epistemic uncertainty, as in "The moon might be made of cheese".

The third category involves sentences with clauses that indicate the probability of the subsequent proposition being true, such as "It is likely that the moon is made of cheese".

In the fourth category, sentences contain sentence adverbials that relate to the probability of the proposition being true, for example, "The moon is probably made of cheese".

The fifth category includes sentences containing reported propositions where the author(s) can be regarded as responsible for any tentativeness in the verbal group or the non-use of factive reporting verbs, as illustrated by "I suggest that the moon is made of cheese" (5a) and "It is therefore suggested that the moon is made of cheese" (5b).

The sixth category encompasses sentences containing a reported proposition that posits the existence of a hypothesized entity, with the author(s) being responsible for making the hypothesis, such as “These findings suggest a cheese moon”.

Crompton’s taxonomy primarily focuses on the form and structure of hedges, specifically epistemic copulas/modals and adjectives/adverbs expressing probability, within academic discourse. While other linguistic resources can also serve as hedging devices, Crompton’s taxonomy deliberately selects “items of language” that are widely recognized as hedges within the academic community. However, it should be noted that this narrow selection excludes certain non-lexical hedging elements, such as tenses and questions. Nevertheless, lexical items are commonly associated with hedging in academic texts.

The decision to adopt Crompton’s taxonomy as the conceptual framework for the study was deliberate and well-founded. Crompton’s taxonomy, which focuses on form and structure, offers a systematic and comprehensive approach to identifying and analyzing hedges in academic discourse. By avoiding the influence of the corpus nature, as seen in Prince et al.’s (1982) classification, and avoiding overlap with Salager-Meyer’s (1994) classification, Crompton’s taxonomy provides a clear and distinct framework for understanding hedges in academic writing.

Crompton’s taxonomy is particularly suitable for this study as it allows for a detailed examination of various forms and structures of hedges, including epistemic copulas/modals and adjectives/adverbs expressing probability. By utilizing this taxonomy, the researchers can systematically identify and categorize the different types of hedges present in the sampled thesis papers from the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education (FELTE), Hanoi University of Languages and International Studies.

Moreover, Crompton’s definition of hedges in academic discourse, drawn from Lyons’ definition of epistemic modality, provides a clear and concise understanding of the function of hedges. According to Crompton, hedges are linguistic elements that speakers use to explicitly qualify their lack of commitment to the truth of a proposition they utter. This definition highlights the role of hedges in expressing uncertainty and caution in academic writing, emphasizing the nuanced nature of scholarly communication.

By applying Crompton’s taxonomy in the study, the researchers can systematically analyze and describe the major hedging expressions found in the thesis papers. The six categories provided by the taxonomy serve as a robust and reliable method for organizing the various forms of hedging devices used by the students. This structured approach ensures consistency and clarity in the analysis, enabling the researchers to draw meaningful insights regarding the use and functions of hedges in academic writing.

Table 1: Crompton's (1997) taxonomy of hedges

Categories of hedges	Concepts	Examples
H1	Epistemic copulas	The moon <i>appears</i> to be made of cheese.
H2	Epistemic modals	The moon <i>might</i> be made of cheese.
H3	Adjectives expressing probability	It is <i>likely</i> that the moon is made of cheese.
H4	Adverbs expressing probability	The moon is <i>probably</i> made of cheese.

### ***Previous studies***

Hedging is undeniably a crucial aspect of academic writing, as it empowers writers to manipulate both factuality and affect, prompting readers to make inferences about the intentions behind its use. For second language (L2) writers, proficiency in employing hedging devices is a valuable communicative resource, allowing them to wield language with subtlety, precision, and discrimination (Yang, 2013). Developing academic communicative competence is incomplete without a comprehensive understanding of hedging, as it aids in establishing a strong rapport with readers and experts in the field (Yang, 2013). Thus, a thorough grasp of hedging devices is pivotal for academic success and active participation in professional discourse communities.

L2 university students, particularly those undertaking honors or master's programs with research papers as term assignments, benefit significantly from mastering hedging forms (Nasiri, 2012). However, the level of indirectness and concession deemed acceptable in academic argumentation varies across cultures, leading to noticeable cultural differences (Fryer, 2012). Achieving proficiency in this pragmatic aspect can be exceedingly challenging in a foreign language (Dahl, 2004). Even students with a solid grasp of English grammar and vocabulary often produce direct and unhedged writing (Skelton, 1988). Notably, L2 students at Western universities have been observed to struggle with effectively modulating hedging (Bazerman, 1988). The use of modality, therefore, poses considerable challenges for linguistically unsophisticated writers of academic texts and represents an area of pragmatic failure among second language speakers. Consequently, there is a clear pedagogical rationale for addressing hedging as an important linguistic function and supporting learners in developing an awareness of its principles and mechanics. Thus, this paper reports on a study evaluating the adequacy of a wide range of ESP and EAP textbooks in providing learners with information on hedging devices.

Numerous significant studies have contributed to our understanding of hedging in academic writing. Hyland (1995) conducted an in-depth analysis of hedging in scientific research, emphasizing its significance in academic discourse and identifying various types and functions of hedging. Vande Kopple (2002) explored the rhetorical functions of

hedging in academic writing, examining its influence on author credibility and reader persuasion. Jalilifar & Alavi-Nia (2012) analyzed hedging in research article introductions, revealing its pragmatic and argumentative functions. Salager-Meyer (2008) investigated the use of hedging in medical research, considering the impact of genre and disciplinary norms. Jiang & Hyland (2016) analyzed disciplinary variations in hedging practices in research article abstracts. Swales & Feak (2012) provided practical guidance on the use of hedging in research papers, elucidating its rhetorical functions and strategies. Thompson (2001) investigated hedging in academic book reviews, emphasizing its evaluative and subjective nature.

The studies discussed collectively enrich our understanding of hedging in academic writing, illuminating its various dimensions and implications in diverse contexts. They highlight the importance of addressing hedging in language instruction, particularly for second language learners, and offer valuable insights for developing effective pedagogical approaches to enhance learners' grasp of hedging devices. By recognizing the significance of hedging in academic writing, educators can better equip L2 students with the necessary skills to communicate effectively in academic settings.

The observed prevalence of underuse and inconsistency in the use of hedges among Vietnamese writers in academic contexts highlights the pressing need for explicit instruction and practice to develop Vietnamese students' awareness, proficiency, and strategic use of hedges in their academic writing. By incorporating effective hedging strategies, Vietnamese writers can enhance their communication skills and meet the expectations of the international academic community.

Several studies have shed light on this issue. Nguyen (2010) conducted an analysis of academic writing samples from Vietnamese undergraduates, revealing a tendency to underuse hedges, resulting in writing that appears more assertive and less nuanced. Tran (2014) focused on the use of hedges in research articles written by Vietnamese scholars, identifying a lack of hedges in their writing and a preference for more direct and assertive language. Le (2017) explored the use of hedges in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) academic writing by Vietnamese graduate students, finding inconsistencies and a lower frequency of hedges compared to native English speakers. Pham (2020) investigated the role of hedges in academic speaking among Vietnamese undergraduates, discovering a similar pattern of underuse, leading to a lack of precision and nuance in their oral presentations.

However, despite considerable attention given to hedging in scholarly discourse, previous studies have tended to neglect or provide minimal attention to graduate students' theses, which represent an equally important academic discourse type. While various academic genres have received some focus in the literature, the scientific research article (RA) has been extensively studied. Additionally, the existing literature primarily examines

the organization of hedging (i.e., lexico-grammatical forms) in different disciplines and across rhetorical sections, often overlooking the exact pragmatic functions performed by these hedging devices. Furthermore, very few studies have investigated whether there is variation in the motivation for using hedges across disciplines.

The lack of attention given to the topic within the context of students' writing, coupled with the absence of pragmatic considerations in the existing literature, creates a void that needs to be addressed. Therefore, this present study aims to explore the use of hedges in research articles by examining thirty randomly selected thesis papers from the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education (FELTE) at Hanoi University of Languages and International Studies, published between 2020 and 2022. The study aims to describe the major hedging expressions and provide additional insights for writing instructors and students regarding the pragmatic aspect of hedging. The research endeavors to raise students' awareness of the usefulness of hedging devices in academic writing and enhance their motivation to use hedges effectively.

By conducting this study, educators and researchers can gain a more profound understanding of how hedges are utilized in graduate students' theses, offering valuable insights into the pragmatic functions of hedging in academic writing. The findings can inform the development of targeted instructional materials and strategies to assist Vietnamese graduate students in using hedges appropriately and effectively. Moreover, the research can contribute to filling the gap in the existing literature on hedging, specifically concerning its role in the context of students' academic writing. As a result, this study has the potential to enhance the academic writing skills of Vietnamese students, enabling them to engage more confidently in scholarly discussions and communicate their ideas effectively within the international academic community.

### **3. Research questions**

This study addresses the following research questions:

What is the frequency of hedge usage in students' theses?

How are hedges distributed in the Introduction, Results, Discussions, and Conclusions sections of students' theses?

The decision to exclude the Method section in this study is based on Salager-Meyer's (1997) suggestion that hedges, which are cautious or uncertain expressions, do not appear uniformly across various sections of academic papers. In particular, the Method section, being primarily factual and lacking discursive or interpretive content, tends to have the fewest hedges since it mainly consists of confirmatory statements.

#### 4. Methodology

This study examines a corpus of 30 theses from the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education (FELTE) at the University of Language and International Studies. The focus is on the Introduction and Discussion sections of these theses, specifically investigating hedge markers and their types based on Crompton's (1997) taxonomy. Crompton aimed to create a more practical and less ambiguous classification of hedges, resulting in six types of hedged propositions, as follows:

Sentences with copulas other than “be”.

Epistemic use of modals.

Clauses relating to the probability of the subsequent proposition being true.

Adverbials that pertain to the probability of the proposition being true.

Reported propositions, where the author(s) can be considered responsible for any tentativeness in the verbal group or the non-use of factive reporting verbs like “show” or “demonstrate”.

Sentences containing a reported proposition that hypothesizes the existence of entity X, and the author(s) can be considered responsible for making the hypothesis.

This classification was deemed comprehensive and functional in categorizing hedges. Initially, the researchers used the Antconc software, a corpus analysis tool, to analyze the explicit use and frequency of hedging devices. The research aimed to explore the forms and functions of hedges, and the frequencies of the different hedging devices were calculated as part of the analysis process.

Due to significant reasons, the corpora in the study were manually scanned instead of utilizing software. The primary objective was to identify the semantic referents of words; however, a concordance program could only provide statistical data regarding the words and not their semantic or pragmatic information. Consequently, the use of modal verbs posed a challenge since they often have multiple meanings depending on the context, such as dynamic (self-willingness or ability), deontic (obligations), or epistemic (possibility) interpretations.

For example, the modal verb “can” in the sentence “the results can provide useful information about...” can serve as a hedge. To accurately determine whether a word functions as a hedge or not, manual scanning of the data became essential. The researcher carefully examined the data to identify hedge words and subsequently categorized them using the taxonomy described in section 2.2.

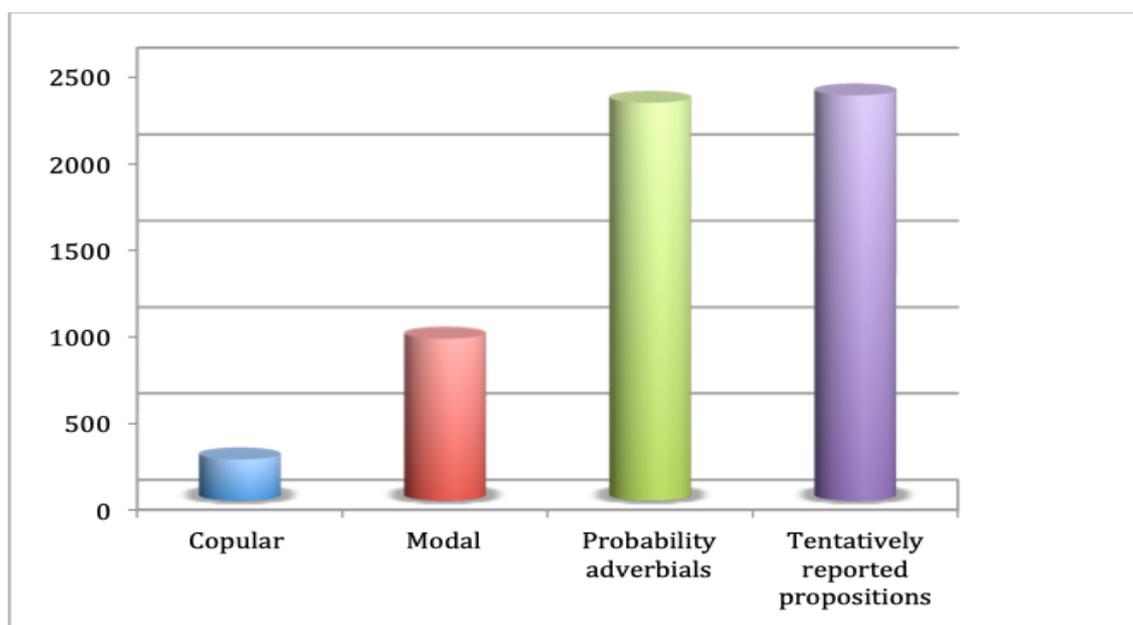
After categorization, the Chi-Square test was employed to investigate and analyze the data in the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program. Based on the statistical findings, scientific conclusions related to lexical hedges were drawn, allowing

the researcher to gain insights into the prevalence and usage patterns of hedges within the corpus. The decision to manually scan the data and employ statistical tests has likely contributed to a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the role of lexical hedges in the study.

## 5. Findings

Following Crompton's (1997) taxonomy, the study focused on four categories of hedges: copulas other than 'be', epistemic modals, probability clauses, and tentatively reported propositions and hypothetical propositions attributable to the author. Individual instances of these hedge devices were identified, and a comprehensive list of common hedging devices was compiled for each category. To simplify the analysis process, the last two categories, which both referred to tentatively reported propositions or hypotheses related to the existence of a proposition attributable to the author, were merged.

Graph 1 below presents an analysis of the frequency of copula usage in the theses written by students from FELTE. The entire corpus contained a total of 280,807 word tokens, out of which 5,823 instances were identified as hedges.



Graph 1: Analysis of the frequency of copula usage in the theses written by students from FELTE

The analysis of the theses written by FELTE students revealed that hedging devices were primarily represented by tentatively reported propositions and probability adverbials. These two categories accounted for a significant portion of the total instances of hedging used in the research articles, with 45% (2,345 cases) and 44% (2,302 cases) respectively. This suggests that the writers are strategically employing persuasive techniques by presenting their claims with a certain degree of uncertainty, using tentatively reported propositions and probability adverbials to capture the reader’s attention.

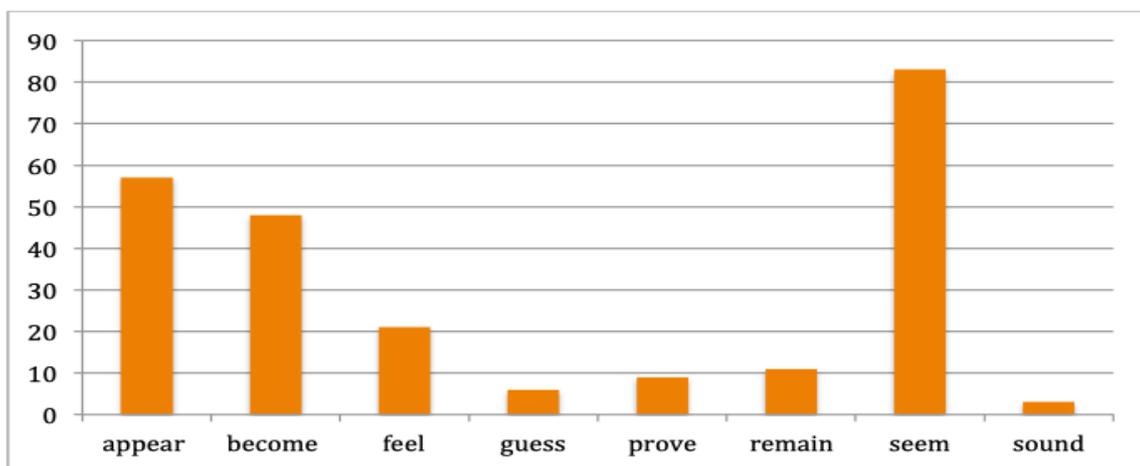
The data also points to various pragmatic motivations underlying the use of hedging by English students in their writing, which can be categorized into three main factors.

Firstly, researchers may choose to hedge their claims to indicate a level of uncertainty or lack of absolute certainty in their findings. This demonstrates academic integrity and honesty, as they acknowledge the limitations or potential variability in their research.

Secondly, using hedging allows researchers to protect themselves from potential criticism that could harm their reputation or undermine the credibility of their work. By hedging their statements, they create a buffer against possible challenges or counterarguments, ensuring that their arguments are not easily dismissed.

Lastly, hedging can be seen as an attempt by researchers to gain acceptability from their readers. By presenting their findings as tentative or probabilistic, they invite readers to engage with the research and contribute to the ongoing discourse in the field. This approach acknowledges the dynamic nature of knowledge and encourages further exploration and discussion.

Overall, the findings suggest that hedging is a common and purposeful rhetorical strategy employed by English students in their academic writing, serving various communicative and persuasive purposes.



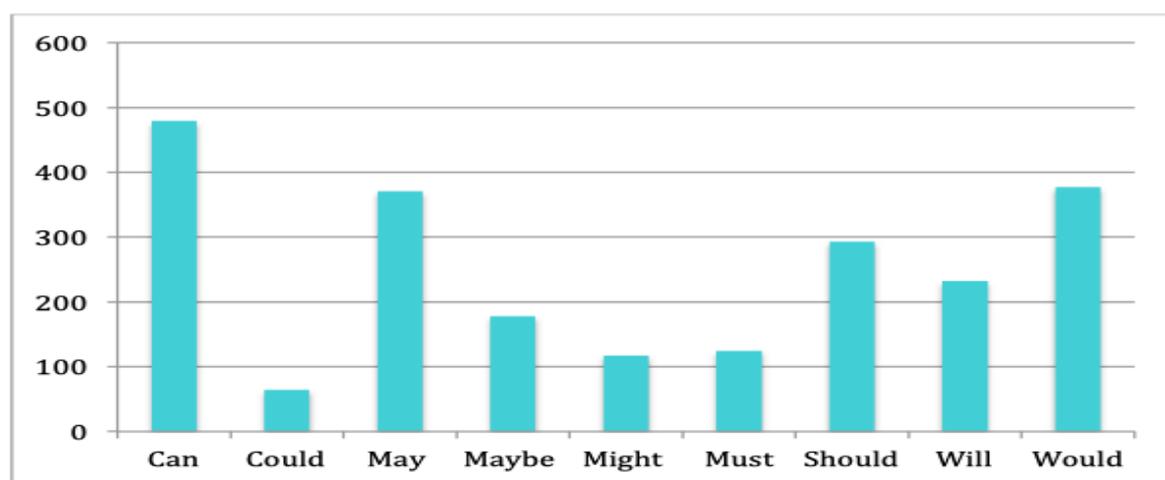
Graph 2. The Use of Copulas in FELTE Students’ Theses

The analysis of the theses by FELTE students has highlighted a significant presence of copulas in the Introduction and Discussion sections, especially the verbs “become”, “appear”, “seem”, and “feel”. These copulas serve to hedge within the students' writing, implying a certain level of caution or uncertainty in their claims.

Furthermore, the word list analysis reveals that the modal auxiliaries “can” and “would” rank among the most frequently used words in the theses. Specifically, “seem” appears 83 times, “appear” 57 times, and “become” 48 times, indicating a preference for these modals in hedging. In contrast, the hedges “prove”, “guess”, and “sound” appear much less frequently, with only 9, 6, and 3 occurrences, respectively, suggesting that students rely more on specific modals for hedging compared to other hedging devices.

Epistemic modals, such as “can”, “may”, “should”, and “would”, were also extensively examined as hedging devices in the study. These modal verbs were found to be the most frequently used modals in the students' theses, indicating their reliance on these modalities to express uncertainty and qualify their claims.

In summary, the analysis suggests that FELTE students tend to employ particular copulas and modal verbs as hedging devices in their writing, demonstrating their awareness of the importance of tempering certainty and expressing a cautious stance in their academic work.



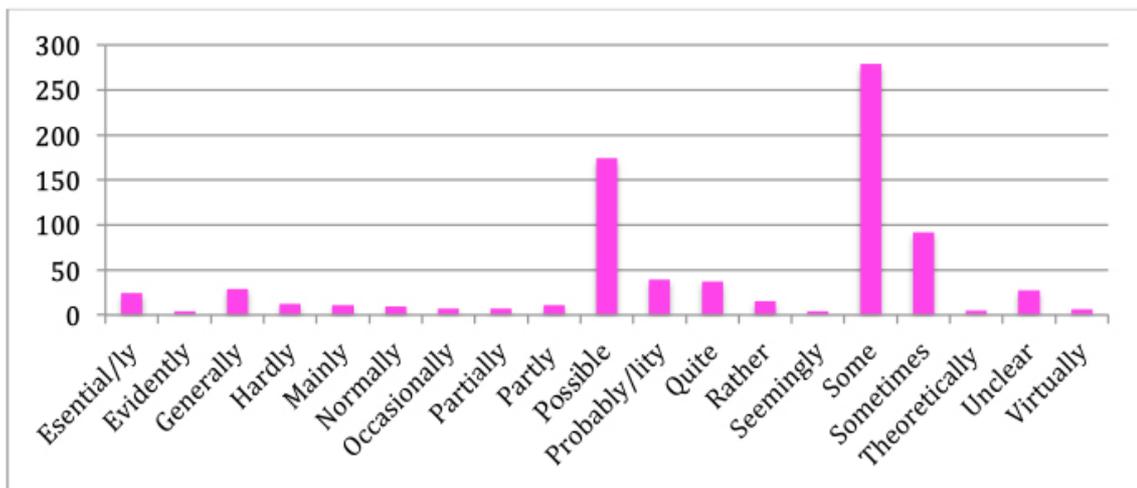
Graph 3. The Use of Epistemic Modals in FELTE Students' Theses

The analysis reveals that among the modal verbs examined, “would” is the most frequently used, appearing 377 times, indicating its high frequency in the students' theses. It is followed by “should” with 69 occurrences and “could” with 49 occurrences. Surprisingly, “can” ranks 24<sup>th</sup> in terms of frequency, suggesting that it is used less frequently compared to other modal verbs in the students' writing.

These modal verbs play a crucial role in academic writing, as they allow writers to express their level of certainty or uncertainty regarding a specific claim. By using modal verbs, writers can convey nuanced meanings and indicate the strength of their arguments, helping them present a more balanced and measured perspective.

Additionally, the study emphasizes the significance of adverbial markers in academic writing. These markers contribute to the overall strength of the author’s arguments by providing additional evidence to support their claims. The use of adverbial markers can enhance the persuasiveness and credibility of the writer's discourse, making it more convincing and reliable.

Furthermore, the analysis also includes the examination of the frequency of probability adverbials, as shown in graph 3. This examination likely provides insights into the students' use of language to express probabilities and possibilities in their research, further contributing to the understanding of hedging strategies employed in their academic writing.



Graph 3. The Use of Probability Adverbials in FELTE Students’ Theses

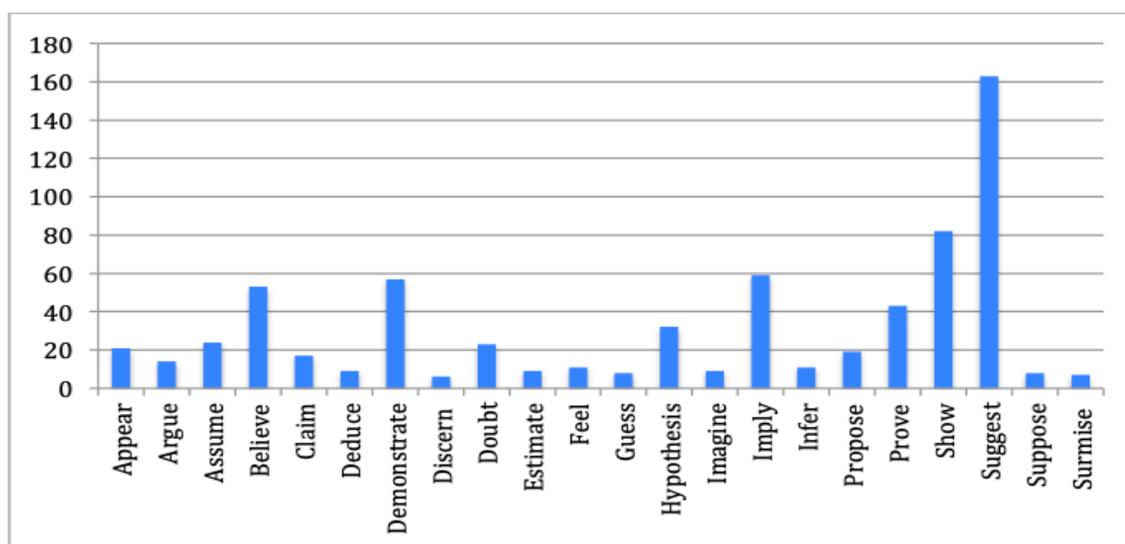
The analysis of adverbial markers in the theses written by FELTE students yielded interesting findings. The most frequently used adverbial markers were “some” and “possibly”, with “some” appearing 279 times, indicating its high frequency of usage. However, the usage of other markers, except for “possibility” and “sometimes”, was significantly low.

The study also emphasized the importance of using epistemic modals in theses to convey the writer’s level of certainty or uncertainty regarding specific claims. Among the modals examined, “would” was the most commonly used, appearing 377 times. Additionally, “could”, “can”, and “should” were also utilized relatively frequently across different subcategories of modals.

It is essential for FELTE students to consider the appropriate use of adverbial markers and modal verbs when composing their theses. These linguistic devices play a vital role in strengthening the author's arguments and supporting the evidence presented. Selecting and employing these markers effectively can significantly enhance the overall quality of their theses and improve the clarity of their ideas.

The study also examined the use of tentatively reported propositions and hypothetical propositions attributed to the author. However, the text does not provide specific findings or a detailed analysis regarding these two groups.

Lastly, the findings related to the use of tentatively reported propositions and hypothetical propositions attributable to the author are presented in graph 4, but further elaboration on these results is not included in the given text.



Graph 5. The Use of Tentatively Reported Propositions in Theses

In the theses from FELTE, the most frequently used tentative verbs for reporting propositions were “suggest”, “show”, “imply”, and “demonstrate”. These verbs appeared alternately 163, 82, 59, and 57 times, respectively. The choice of epistemic modals in theses can vary depending on the discipline and the specific research question being addressed.

Epistemic modals allow writers to convey a sense of probability or uncertainty about their claims. This cautious approach in interpreting findings is significant in academic writing. It is crucial for researchers to acknowledge the limitations of their research and consider the possibility of alternative explanations. Therefore, using such modals can be seen as a demonstration of academic humility and intellectual honesty.

Moreover, hedge devices like “it could be argued that” or “some evidence suggests that”, and intensifiers such as “clearly” or “definitely”, can be employed to strengthen the author’s argument and convey confidence in their assertions. Conversely, downtoners like “somewhat” or “partly” can be used to downplay the significance of a claim and express caution.

Overall, the use of these linguistic devices helps writers navigate the complex terrain of academic writing and effectively convey their ideas in a clear and balanced manner. By employing hedging and appropriate linguistic markers, FELTE students enhance the persuasiveness of their arguments and contribute to the credibility of their research work.

Table 1: Distribution of Hedges across Sessions in FELTE Students’ Theses

	Introduction	Results	Discussion and Conclusion
Copulas	78	88	95
Modals	191	223	462
Probability adverbials	132	747	1,184
Tentatively reported propositions	678	323	1,344

Table 1 presents an insightful analysis of the distribution of hedges in FELTE students’ theses across different sessions. Notably, the use of linguistic devices exhibits distinct patterns throughout the document. In the Introduction, copulas appeared 78 times, suggesting an initial cautiousness in presenting research ideas. However, in the subsequent Results section, the frequency of copulas slightly increased to 88, indicating a gradual shift towards more assertive language as students presented their findings. This trend continues in the Discussion and Conclusion section, where copulas are used 95 times, demonstrating the students’ growing confidence in drawing conclusions and making definitive statements.

Similarly, the usage of modals follows a similar trajectory. In the Introduction, modals were employed 191 times, indicating a prevalent use of hedging to express tentative ideas. As students progress to the Results section, the number of modals increases to 223, signaling a subtle shift towards more certain language when discussing research outcomes. The most significant surge occurs in the Discussion and Conclusion section, with 462 instances of modals, showcasing the students’ deliberate use of these linguistic devices to assert their interpretations, hypotheses, and tentative conclusions with a higher degree of conviction.

The trend in probability adverbials reveals a remarkable increase in their use as students advance through the different sections. In the Introduction, probability adverbials were used 132 times, indicating a moderate emphasis on expressing degrees of certainty and uncertainty. However, in the results section, the number rises to 747, reflecting the

students' heightened focus on carefully presenting statistical outcomes and implications. In the Discussion and Conclusion section, the frequency of probability adverbials reaches 1,184, underscoring the students' meticulous attention to acknowledging research limitations and emphasizing cautiousness in drawing conclusive statements.

Lastly, the analysis of tentatively reported propositions demonstrates a distinct pattern. In the Introduction, students employed 678 instances of tentatively reported propositions, implying a cautious approach in presenting research hypotheses and potential implications. In the Results section, the number decreased to 323, possibly suggesting a shift towards more definitive language when discussing research outcomes. However, the students reverted to a significant increase in the Discussion and Conclusion section, utilizing 1,344 tentatively reported propositions, possibly reflecting their awareness of the importance of presenting findings with humility and acknowledging the limitations of their work.

In conclusion, the distribution of hedges across sessions in FELTE students' theses indicates a gradual evolution in the use of linguistic devices to express certainty, uncertainty, and cautiousness. The transition from introductory sections to the conclusion showcases the students' strategic use of hedges, indicating growing confidence in their research findings while maintaining academic humility. The findings of this analysis provide valuable insights into the language practices of FELTE students and hold potential implications for language instruction and the effective communication of research results.

## 6. Discussion

Research Question 1: What is the frequency of the use of hedges in students' theses?

The use of epistemic modals in academic writing has been widely recognized as an effective strategy for conveying uncertainty, tentativeness, and hedging. This finding aligns with previous research conducted by scholars such as Hyland (2005) and Hu and Cao (2011), adding credibility to the present study's findings. In the context of FELTE theses, it is evident that writers tend to employ a greater number of hedges in the Conclusion section, aiming to present a tone of certainty that enhances their authority and credibility.

The study's results also corroborate existing literature on academic writing, which consistently identifies "can", "may", and "would" as the most frequently used modal hedges (Biber et al., 1999; Hyland, 1999). Specifically, within the FELTE context, epistemic verbs such as "can", "would", and "may" emerged as the most commonly employed modal hedges. By skillfully utilizing these linguistic devices, writers in FELTE theses effectively express uncertainty while striking a balance with the necessary academic tone and persuasiveness required in their scholarly work.

According to Silver's (2003) observations, epistemic markers in academic writing serve to convey the speaker's judgment regarding the certainty, reliability, and limitations of a proposition. These markers also play a vital role in providing commentary on the source of

the information presented. Given the prevalence of “can” in FELTE theses, a preliminary hypothesis can be formulated suggesting that students favor this modal because they often make predictions and recommendations for further research in their conclusions.

To support this hypothesis, an examination of the density of “can” usage in the concordance plots could reveal higher occurrences in the final parts of the Discussion and Conclusion sections. In these sections, students typically make suggestions for future research and explore potential connections between their own study and related research, thus making use of “can” to express possibilities and potential avenues of investigation.

Furthermore, the prevalent use of “can” in FELTE students’ theses suggests that authors often employ this modal to offer personal speculations or inferences about propositions or claims. The usage of “can” conveys a certain degree of hesitation and tentativeness, indicating that students are aware of the need to hedge their statements. This strategic use of hedges allows them to express their cautiousness and avoid making overly definitive claims. However, to gain deeper insights into this phenomenon, further investigation and analysis would be necessary to test the preliminary hypothesis and explore the specific patterns and motivations behind the students’ use of “can” in their academic writing.

Modal auxiliaries, being a primary means to express modality, play a crucial role in indicating the speaker’s commitment to the truth of a proposition. The frequent use of modal auxiliaries in the theses suggests that FELTE students skillfully employ these linguistic devices to express their opinions and research findings in a more persuasive manner. This proficiency in using hedges is further supported by the students’ demonstrated B2 (or above) language proficiency.

Interestingly, Vietnamese writers demonstrate a propensity to employ various hedging strategies to enhance the persuasiveness of their writing. By skillfully utilizing these strategies, they effectively present their opinions and research results modestly and persuasively, thereby increasing the likelihood of acceptance within the research community. Moreover, the use of acknowledgments in the theses primarily refers to the writers’ previous works, highlighting their academic background and contributing to effective interaction with their audiences.

Research Question 2: What is the distribution of hedges in the Introduction, Results, Discussions, and Conclusions sections of students’ theses?

The analysis of the distribution of hedges across different sessions in FELTE students’ theses reveals intriguing patterns that shed light on their language usage and rhetorical strategies. In the Introduction section, there were 1,079 instances of hedges, indicating an initial tendency towards cautiousness and uncertainty as the students lay the groundwork for their research. As the theses progress to the results session, the frequency of hedges rises to 1,381, signifying a subtle shift towards a more assertive tone when presenting research findings.

However, the most remarkable surge in hedges occurs in the Discussion and Conclusion section, with a substantial count of 3,085 instances. This surge suggests strategic

employment of hedging devices to navigate complex academic discourse and reinforce the students' arguments. The higher frequency of hedges in this section may reflect the students' desire to present a nuanced and comprehensive interpretation of their findings, acknowledging potential limitations and uncertainties while presenting strong claims.

The prevalence of hedges in the Discussion and Conclusion section aligns with the academic norms of cautiousness and humility in scholarly writing. By utilizing hedges strategically, FELTE students effectively demonstrate their intellectual rigor and academic integrity, enhancing the persuasiveness and credibility of their research.

These findings provide valuable insights into the language practices of FELTE students, highlighting their awareness of the rhetorical nuances and the pragmatic functions of hedges. The students' adept use of these linguistic devices reflects their high proficiency and command of academic writing conventions, showcasing their capacity to engage in sophisticated academic discourse.

The distribution of hedges across sessions in FELTE students' theses showcases a gradual evolution in language usage, with an increasing use of hedges from the Introduction to the Discussion and Conclusion section. This strategic use of hedging devices enhances the effectiveness and persuasiveness of the students' academic writing, underscoring their proficiency and competence in scholarly communication. The results of this analysis contribute valuable knowledge to the field of academic writing instruction and offer valuable pedagogical implications for further enhancing students' language proficiency and communication skills.

The findings of this study make a substantial contribution to our understanding of the writing practices of FELTE students and hold significant implications for pedagogy. Recognizing hedging as a vital linguistic element and promoting awareness of its principles and appropriate usage can lead to a substantial improvement in students' writing and communication skills within their respective fields. Therefore, incorporating instruction on hedging in language education is pedagogically justified, as it empowers students to become more adept and self-assured writers and communicators.

By developing their proficiency in strategically employing hedges, FELTE students can elevate the persuasiveness and impact of their academic discourse. The skillful use of hedges enables them to navigate complex academic arguments with precision and finesse, enhancing their academic growth and success in scholarly pursuits. By demonstrating a keen understanding of the nuanced language conventions, FELTE students can fortify the credibility and reliability of their research, thus elevating their scholarly contributions.

The study's findings shed light on the strategic use of epistemic modals in academic writing, particularly in FELTE theses. The consistent presence of "can", "would", and "may" as prominent modal hedges reinforces their significance in conveying uncertainty while maintaining academic rigor. Furthermore, the preliminary hypothesis regarding the prevalence of "can" suggests a deliberate choice by students to employ this modal to express possibilities and recommendations for future research. This research contributes

valuable insights to the understanding of hedges in academic discourse and provides a basis for further exploration of their role in scholarly writing.

## 7. Conclusion

The pedagogical implications of this study extend beyond the confines of academia. The development of strong writing and communication skills has broader implications for students' future professional endeavors. Effective communication is a key attribute valued across various industries and sectors, and the cultivation of these skills can significantly enhance students' career prospects and overall impact in their chosen fields.

The insights gained from this study underscore the importance of addressing hedging in language instruction to foster a new generation of skilled and confident writers and communicators. By equipping FELTE students with the knowledge and proficiency to strategically employ hedges, we empower them to succeed academically and professionally, making a meaningful impact in their respective disciplines and beyond.

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