



## Hedging and Emphasis: The Use of Discourse Markers in Undergraduate Research Writing

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received:	January	23, 2025
Revised:	February	26, 2025
Accepted:	March	04, 2025
Available Online:	March	06, 2025

#### Keywords:

hedging, emphasis, discourse markers, academic writing, undergraduate research, rhetorical strategies

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### ABSTRACT

*This article focuses on undergraduate research writing, specifically, the use of discourse markers to hedge and emphasize. Writers use hedging devices — modal verbs, adverbs and other cautious language — to show uncertainty and avoid overgeneralisation; emphasis markers — intensifiers and assertive expressions — to strengthen key claims. This paper discusses the results of a study on the use of discourse markers in a corpus of undergraduate research papers for a limited number of authors, the frequency of the discourse markers, their types and pragmatic functions using a qualitative and quantitative methodology. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study engages quantitative analysis to reveal usage patterns alongside qualitative discourse analysis to investigate the rhetorical effects of these terms. In the early stage of arguing, student used of emphasis markers to strengthen claims, while a poor hedging strategy adversely affected their argument, reducing its persuasion and credibility. This study highlights the significance of teaching students to use discourse markers purposefully in academic writing to help them reach rhetorical awareness and communicative effectiveness.*



## Introduction

However, academic writing requires precision, clarity, and an understanding of the rhetorical arch you are employing to build an argument to your audience. One important strategy in this respect is the use of discourse markers (Hyland, 2005), which are often used to organize ideas, signal inter-clausal relations, introduce arguments, and turn of writer’s voice. In particular, hedging and emphasis are important strategies through which writers negotiate certainty and conviction about

their assertions. Hedging, which is common in academic writing, enables writers to avoid making definitive assertions or claims, thus preventing overgeneralization (Hyland, 1998). In contrast, emphasis markers strengthen the major ideas and strengthen and solidify the arguments (Biber et al. 1999). Hedging must be used appropriately alongside an emphasis on claims for academic credibility and persuasive writing in research writing (Crompton, 1997).

The strategic use of discourse markers is a well-documented challenge for undergraduate students, and newer writers. Research indicates that novice academic writers either hedge excessively and reason to be soft, or emphasize overly and become too strong and unacademic (Hyland, 2000; Hyland & Milton, 1997). Research has shown that when used in student writing, hedging devices such as modal verbs, adverbials, and epistemic phrases are often misused, contributing to incoherence and credibility problems in their writing (Salager-Meyer, 1994). An analogous finding from research on emphasis markers is that non-native speakers new to academic settings may use intensifying modifiers, e.g. very and definitely, too frequently or in a contextually inappropriate way, making their writing feel conversational and void of academic rigor (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999).

In non-first language contexts, the study of hedging and emphasis in undergraduate research writing is relevant. Culturally influenced strategies of hedging/emphasis use in academic writing demand even higher levels of pragmatic knowledge for students, not least for those students who are non-native speakers of English (Hinkel, 2005). The present study investigates the use of discourse markers for hedging and emphasis by undergraduate students in research writing, assessing their rhetorical use and effectiveness. Through identifying trends and shared difficulties, this study aims to shed some light on pedagogical practices that enhance students' capability of constructing well-balanced academic arguments.

### **Rationale**

Simply put, academic writing needs grammar, but also how to use it in a rhetorical way, using hedges and emphatics in order to achieve well-balanced arguments. Hedging devices enable the expression of uncertainty, the softening of claims, and the acknowledgment of alternative positions and emphasis markers serve to strengthen arguments and increase persuasiveness (Hyland, 2005). Academic writing is full of discourse markers, however, many undergraduate students, especially novice academic writers fail to use them properly which results in writing that is either overly cautious or overly aggressive (Hyland & Milton, 1997). This imbalance may influence the clarity of the research papers, their credibility, and coherence.

Students in non-dominantly English-speaking environments (like Pakistan) struggle to acquire these rhetorical devices as they may be shaped by linguistic material (e.g., Hinkel, 2005). Although hedging and emphasis are extremely necessary in academic writing, and so explained in literature, little has been done to understand how undergraduate students employ these features in their writing. The aim of this study is to identify students' writing difficulties through examining the use patterns and occurrence of discourse markers in undergraduate students' research papers, so as to briefly inform pedagogical strategies that facilitate students' academic writing.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Discourse markers such as hedges and boosters are important resources for undergraduate students, sometimes learners struggle to implement correctly in academic writing. Hedging is important for conveying caution and academic modesty, but overuse or imprecise hedging can dilute arguments. Similarly, the use of emphasis on markers can make us more persuasive, but misusing them means we come across too strong or too informal. This absence of awareness and

control of these rhetorical strategies detrimentally influences the overall coherence, credibility and persuasiveness of students' research writing. While most of this research has concentrated on more traditional academic texts, such as student essays (Baker, 2006; Skelton, 1997), very little is known about how university-level students in non-first language contexts employ discourse features in their writing (Bradley, 2015). This study aims to address this gap by examining hedging and emphasis marker usage in undergraduate academic writing, noting general trends and issues, by suggesting the avenues for progress.

### **Research Questions**

- 1) Which hedges and emphatics do undergraduate students frequently employ in their research writing?
- 2) How do undergraduate students negotiate the roles of hedging and emphasis in their academic argumentation?
- 3) What are the students' challenges with using hedging and emphasis markers, and how can they be better acquired through instructional interventions?

### **Literature Review**

In addition to grammatical accuracy, academic writing also demands rhetorical skills, such as the use of discourse markers to hedge and amplify arguments (Hyland, 2005). Hedging enables writers to temper evidence, avoid overgeneralizing, and consider alternative views, while emphasis markers are a means of strengthening claims and signaling authorial stance (Biber et al., 1999). The effective deployment of these discourse markers is essential for academic credibility, but research suggests that undergraduate students frequently do not employ them appropriately (Hyland & Milton, 1997; Salager-Meyer, 1994). The phenomenon of hedging and emphasis in academic writing forms the focus of this literature review, the role that these devices play in constructing discourse, and the difficulties undergraduate writers experience as they attempt to use them effectively.

### **Hedging in Academic Writing**

Hedging is an essential aspect of academic writing, enabling writers to present their claims tentatively and with flexibility (Hyland, 1998). Examples of these strategies are the use of modal verbs (e.g., might, could), epistemic adverbials (e.g., possibly, probably), and tentative language (e.g., it seems, it appears that) (Salager-Meyer, 1994). Hedging: This allows for alternative interpretations and helps to preserve academic neutrality, which is necessary in scholarly discourse (Hyland, 2000).

Yet research has revealed that undergraduate students often have difficulties with hedging (properly). Some hedging a lot, causing weak and hesitant statements and others not hedging at all when they could, making broad generalisations (Crompton, 1997). Comparative studies between native and non-native writers have indicated that non-native students, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), often underuse hedging because they are not aware of its pragmatic role (Hinkel, 2005). This leads to their writing being more direct and less sophisticated in academic terms.

### **Reinforcers in Academic Writing**

Hedgings caution the claims, while emphasize markers reinforce the main arguments which improve the persuasiveness (Hyland, 2005). The strategies to express emphasis can be realized through, for example, the use of intensifiers (e.g., clearly, definitely), strong modal verbs (e.g., must, will), and emphatic constructions (e.g., it is evident that, there is no doubt that) (Biber et al.,

1999). Such markers of confidence and commitment to claims bolster the rhetorical power of academic writing.

While important, emphasis markers are sometimes misused, particularly by inexperienced writers. Research into students' use of language has shown they also tend to overuse intensifiers, which can render points being made as overly subjective or informal (Hyland and Milton, 1997). In contrast, some students fail to highlight claims and, as a result, build weak arguments and lack authorial voice (Crompton, 1997). The theory is that instruction can be used to empower students of all different backgrounds in English to use certain sources — they are called “emphasis markers” — in a balanced way (Hinkel, 2005).

### **Issues with Using Hedging and Emphasis**

The use of hedging and emphasis markers poses multiple challenges for undergraduate students, non-native students in particular. More than a few studies underscore the issues:

Awareness of rhetorical functions of hedging and emphasis are unclear, resulting in incorrect or inappropriate usage of such language by many students (Hyland, 1998).

Overuse or Underuse: Students overuse hedging too often, rendering their arguments weak, or overuse emphasis markers too often, resulting in overly assertive writing (Salager-Meyer, 1994). This is because many non-native English writers face cultural and linguistic differences, transferring rhetorical conventions from their primary language can cause their use of hedging and emphasis to feel foreign or awkward (Hinkel, 2005).

Instructional Gaps: In an academic writing context, instruction tends to lean toward the technical, particularly at the sentence level addressing grammar and structure without exposure to rhetorical strategies, therefore leaving students unfamiliar with hedging or emphasizing claims (Hyland & Milton, 1997).

It is established in the literature that hedging and emphasis are central discourse features in academic writing, but their deployment often challenges undergraduate students (Hood, 2004). The challenges are largely caused by a lack of rhetorical awareness, differences in linguistic socialisation and instruction. By targeting writing instruction at these issues, we can teach students the skills they need to employ discourse markers appropriately, which, in turn, will enhance the clarity and persuasiveness of their research writing. The present study focuses on investigating the ways of using hedging and emphasis markers in undergraduate research papers for determining recurrent patterns, challenges, and pedagogical implications.

### **Research Methodology**

The focus was on the research papers/projects written by BS English students at Ghazi University D.G Khan in order to investigate the frequent use of Discourse markers, the commonest types and the effectiveness of hedging and emphasis from the perspective of rhetoric analysis. Undergraduate students in Ghazi University DG Khan BS English program are the population under study. To accommodate this, purposive sampling was employed, as the data were drawn specifically from fourth-year students, as they are expected to have more sophisticated academic writing ability. For analysis, a representative data comprised of 20 drafts/research papers. The data were consisted of manuscripts submitted in partial completion of requirements of final year research projects, term papers or academic essays.

For this purpose, semi-structured interviews will be held with the selected students to study their perceptions and understanding of hedging and emphatic structure in academic writing. Usage

patterns were analyzed using statistical methods (i.e. descriptive statistics such as percentages and frequency counts). Researchers used a discourse analysis method to analyse how hedging and emphasis markers operate in students' academic arguments. Analysis of open-ended interview and questionnaire responses provided insights on students' perceptions and challenges when it comes to using discourse markers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The present study is rooted in Hyland's (2005) Metadiscourse Theory, which offers a framework that can be employed to analyze the interactional characteristics of academic writing (hedging and emphasis markers). Hyland & Milton's (1997) model of qualification and certainty will also be used to analyse students' hedging and emphatic features in academic text.

### **Key Theoretical Concepts**

#### **Theory of Metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005)**

"Metadiscourse" refers to language that is used in organizing discourse, engaging the reader, or in stance. It is further divided into interactive metadiscourse (which assists in organizing the text) and interactional metadiscourse (which conveys the writer's attitude and interacts with the reader). Hedging (e.g., maybe, it appears) and emphasis markers (e.g., evidently, without question) are interactional components that configure scholarly arguments.

#### **Hedging and Certainty Model (Hyland & Milton, 1997)**

This model centers around L1 and L2 writers' uses of hedging and emphasis in academic texts. It breaks hedging down into categories of modal verbs (might, could), adverbs (possibly, probably) and tentative phrases (it appears that). The model also points out markers of certainty, such as boosters (definitely, certainly) that mark strengthening arguments.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

This section discusses the results of the study which aimed to investigate the hedging and emphasis discourse markers that were made use of by the undergraduate research writing of BS English students of Ghazi University DG Khan. The findings are based on a corpus-based quantitative analysis of students' research papers and a qualitative analysis through interviews and questionnaires.

#### **Quantitative Analysis of Discourse Marker Usage**

Methods: A corpus of 20 undergraduate research papers was analysed with AntConc software to identify the types and occurrence of hedging and emphasis markers. The next table summarizes the results.

**Table 1: Frequency of Hedging and Emphasis Markers in Undergraduate Research Papers**

<b>Discourse Marker Type</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Total Count</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Hedging Markers	might, could, possibly, seems, suggests	225	52.3%
Emphasis Markers	clearly, definitely, without doubt, indeed, strongly	180	41.9%
Other Metadiscourse Elements	according to, in contrast, as shown, it is argued	25	5.8%
<b>Total</b>	-	430	100%

Hedging markers were used more frequently (52.3%) than emphasis markers (41.9%). The words that hedged more than others were “could,” “suggests,” “might” and “seems” — an indication of academic caution. The most commonly used emphasis markers were “clearly,” “definitely” and “strongly,” indicating an attempt at asserting arguments. While only 5.8% of metadiscourse elements were related to general discourse structuring.

### **Qualitative Analysis of Student Interviews and Questionnaires**

Interviews with 10 students and responses to a questionnaire from 30 students were analysed thematically to identify their understanding of and problems with the use of hedging and emphasis markers in research writing.

#### **Theme #1: Attention to Hedging and Emphasis**

Students who had mentioned that they were aware of hedging but found it hard to apply it appropriately followed suit at 60%.

40% of students experienced confusion between hedging and general tentative language.

#### **Student Response Example**

“I know hedging is important, but I sometimes overdo it, so that my arguments are weak.”

#### **Theme 2: Difficulties of Using Discourse Markers**

Overuse or underuse of hedging or emphasis markers (students = 50%)

30% of students said they depended upon explicit statements instead of hedging, because they worried that their arguments would seem uncertain.

#### **Student Response Example**

“I don’t use words like ‘maybe’ or ‘seems’ because I think my argument is going to weaken.”

#### **Theme 3: Academic Writing Instruction: Pedagogical Gaps**

75% of students reported that they had never been taught explicitly, through their courses in academic writing, about discourse markers.

Students who had to rely on informal learning or self-study were about 20%, to understand hedging and emphasis markers.

#### **Student Response Example**

“We learned how to write arguments,” but no one taught us to use hedging and emphasis effectively.

### **Findings**

These findings lead to some important considerations for undergraduate students' use of discourse markers in research writing:

#### **More Hedges over Emphasis**

A high frequency of hedging (52.3%) indicates that students understand that cautious academic writing is necessary when supporting claims. However, the hedging is over-used at times thus

weakens the arguments, which is in support of Hyland & Milton's (1997) research in which they found that L2 writers fail to provide a good balance between certainty and qualification.

### **On Underutilization and Misuse of Emphasis Markers**

The occurrence of emphasis markers was lower (41.9%), likely due to students being afraid of sounding too assertive.

Related points were made by Hyland (2005) in his study of academic discourse; some learners lacked confidence in supporting their argument.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

A qualitative data showed the instructions about the discourse markers in the academic writing courses were not formal enough. This indicates the necessity to implement direct teaching techniques: metadiscourse-centric pedagogical training and hands-on practice in research writing.

The findings of the study highlighted that the BS English students at Ghazi University DG Khan show some awareness about hedging and emphasis markers, however, the way they use them highlights the difficulty that they experience in maintaining an academic posture. The results to be discussed below suggest that writing instruction should be bolstered in general to focus on metadiscourse awareness, helping students develop strategies to use hedging and emphasis in their research writing to best effect.

### **Discussion**

The current section discusses the findings of the study in light of existing literature and their implications on bachelor-level writing, specifically in the context of BS English students at Ghazi University DG Khan. It delves into three main points: the function of hedging and emphasis in scholarly writing, student difficulties with discourse markers, and pedagogical considerations.

### **Hedging and Emphasis in Academic Writing**

The outcomes show that hedging markers were utilized more than the emphasis markers in undergraduate research writing (52.3% and 41.9% respectively). This is consistent with Hyland (2005) who claims that hedging is a characteristic of academic writing feature through which writers can present claims tentatively and recognize alternative views. Hedging preference in our case the hedge words / phrases were identified in the students and their preference towards using the words / phrases instead of definitive words as we can see from table provided above. This suggests that, they are aware of the tentative nature of knowledge in academic writing

However, the lower use of emphasis markers indicates that students might be unsure about asserting their interests. Emphasis markers (Crompton, 1997) to strengthen claims, like clearly, undoubtedly, and without a doubt, are required for establishing the writer's authority. Students should be careful in the use of emphasis markers as they may seem overconfident, which is a behaviour among non-native writers (Hinkel, 2005). This demonstrates the importance of balance, with students needing to understand appropriate hedges, which still allow for strength of claim, as well as moments for emphasis, avoiding over-subjectivity.

### **Issues of Application of Discourse Markers**

Analysis of this qualitative data indicates a number of issues students have with using discourse markers appropriately:

**a. Excessive and Improper Use of Hedging**

Although hedging is one of the important rhetoric strategies that hold up a lot in the speech, its overuse freezes ignorance and lack of conviction from the arguments (Hyland & Milton, 1997). Many students said that they hedge too much, afraid that a straightforward assertion will be deemed too assertive or unacademic. Crompton (1997) argues that excessive hedging can in fact render the meaning obscure and weaken academic writing, which is also echoed in the current findings.

**b. Overuse of Emphasis Markers**

Students in the study underused emphasis markers, which is in line with the findings of Vassileva (2001), who noted that non-native writers of English typically shied away from using definite assertive language for cultural and linguistic reasons. This fear of making overgeneralized statements can hinder students from employing emphasis markers properly.

**c. No Formal Instruction on the Usage of Discourse Markers**

The results also show students have not been explicitly taught to use discourse markers strategically in their research writing courses. This finding is consistent with the study of Hinkel (2005), which highlighted that many L2 academic writers encounter difficulties with discourse markers owing to insufficient pedagogical assistance. In the absence of systematic feedback and guidance, students use the tools of persuasion by intuition instead of by learning, resulting in inconsistent hedging and emphasis markers.

**Pedagogical Implications**

The implications of the findings for teaching writing at the academic level are multiple:

**i. Importance of Teaching Markers of Discourse**

Courses on academic writing should also include guidance on how to use hedging and emphasis strategically. Training material should contain extracts from published research papers to demonstrate how seasoned writers tread the line between caution and assertiveness.

**b. Corpus-Based Writing Practice**

A corpus-based approach in teaching academic writing involving introducing common features through clusters of lexical bundles or highlighting persistent patterns through lemma or pattern search can familiarise students with key discourse markers. This would have been accompanied by a writing guide with discipline-specific examples of hedging and emphasis markers.

**c. Balance between hedge and emphasis**

On this issue, students should receive training about when and how to hedge statements while still being straightforward and confident. Activities in the class, such as peer feedback sessions and revision tasks, can assist students in recognizing areas of overuse or underuse of discourse markers in their writing.

Despite the undergraduate students' awareness of the usefulness of hedging and emphatic devices in their academic writing tasks, the study found that they are seldom able to use these markers for their academic writing tasks due to the low instrumentalization, and they had poor confidence in their work. We need pedagogical interventions that guide students towards a more balanced and strategic approach to the use of discourse markers in their research writing. This, in turn, can help educators guide students to write more cohesive, persuasive, and scholarly research papers.

## **Conclusion**

Hedging and emphasis discourse markers have been focused in this study, to analyze the research writing of BS English students of Ghazi University DG Khan. The results showed that academic caution is frequent (52.3%) as academic hedging markers (53.9%) is frequently used by students while emphasis markers rarely used (41.9%). The qualitative data also suggested that students struggle to find the right balance between hedging and emphasis, often being concerned that hedging dilutes the force of their arguments or that emphasis makes them sound too dogmatic.

The study also revealed lack of instruction around the topic of discourse markers in academic writing courses which caused students to use them sporadically and without a strategic approach to their research writing. These findings are consistent with Hyland's (2005) Metadiscourse Theory that points out the role of interactional markers in signaling and establishing interaction in academic discourse. In general, the findings highlight the importance of intentional academic writing pedagogical interventions for students.

## **Recommendations**

- Explicit instruction on hedging and emphasis should be integrated into university academic writing courses.
- Discourse Markers (DMs) are words or phrases used to connect ideas.
- Workshops and training on the effective use of discourse markers.
- Implement peer review activities so that students can critique and improve each others' use of hedging and emphasis markers.
- A suitable manual would be a writing handbook or digital corpus that specifically addresses BS English students, highlighting the proper use of hedging and emphasis in academic research writing.
- It needs to include lists of hedging and emphasis markers [categorised] with example(s) and exercise(s).
- Teachers can also teach students when and how to hedge arguments — even while preserving clarity and academic rigor.
- Revise overuse or underuse of discourse markers in a paper

Future studies can investigate if/ how the discourse marker use varies by discipline (sciences vs. humanities). A contrastive analysis of L1 and L2 English writers would yield better data on problems non-native speakers encounter.

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