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Investigating Hedging Awareness and Usage in MA Applied Linguistics Dissertations: A Corpus-Based Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate hedging awareness and use among Libyan MA students of Applied Linguistics in their dissertation writing. The study examines the frequency and effectiveness of hedging, the extent of students' awareness of the strategy, and the factors that shape their understanding and application of it. The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design that combined a corpus analysis of the General Recommendations sections of 55 MA dissertations (12,395 words, 2014–2024) with a validated 37-item questionnaire completed by 72 postgraduate students, and a qualitative analysis of open-ended responses. The corpus results show that hedging was frequent, reaching 46.07 hedges per 1,000 words (571 tokens in total), yet narrowly realized. Modal and semi-modal verbs accounted for 73.9% of all hedges, and the single modal should alone have occurred 225 times, representing 53.3% of modal use, while epistemic adverbs (0.5%) and framing phrases (2.6%) were almost entirely absent. The questionnaire findings corresponded with this pattern. A large majority of participants (83.3%) recognized the importance of hedging for credible academic writing, and the corpus itself showed hedging to be sharply uneven: when the 55 dissertations were divided into equal thirds by density, the highest-density third contained roughly 43.5% of all hedge tokens, about three times the share (14.6%) held by the lowest-density third, although reported awareness rarely translated into rhetorical variety. Participants attributed this gap to the absence of explicit instruction (M = 2.78 on a five-point scale), to Arabic first-language norms that favour directness, and to an ethical reluctance to soften claims they considered deserving plain statement. The study concludes that awareness without explicit teaching produces habitual rather than strategic hedging, and recommends corpus-informed, culturally responsive instruction that widens the hedging repertoire of postgraduate writers and strengthens the credibility of their academic voice.

Keywords: academic writing, corpus linguistics, hedging, Libyan context, MA dissertations

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التحقيق من الوعي بالتحوط اللغوي واستخدامه في رسائل الماجستير في اللغويات التطبيقية: دراسة مختلطة قائمة على تحليل النصوص

وليد محمد بلق

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة الزاوية، الزاوية، ليبيا

الملخص

هَدفت هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق من الوعي بالتحوط اللغوي واستخدامه في كتابات طلبة الماجستير في اللسانيات التطبيقية بليبيا، ودراسة مدى تكرار هذا الأسلوب وفعاليته، ودرجة وعي الطلبة به، والعوامل المؤثّرة في فهمهم له وتطبيقهم له. واعتمدت الدراسة تصميما مختلطا متقاربا جمع بين تحليل نصوص أقسام التوصيات العامة في 55 رسالة ماجستير (12,395 كلمةً، للفترة 2014–2024)، واستبيان مكوّن من 37 فقرة طُبّق على 72 طالباً، إضافة إلى التحليل النوعي للإجابات المفتوحة. وأظهر تحليل النصوص أن التحوط كان شائعا بمعدل 46.07 لكل ألف كلمة (571 حالة إجماليا)، غير أن استخدامه بقي محدود النطاق، فمثّلت الأفعال الناقصة وشبه الناقصة 73.9% من إجمالي أدوات التحوط، وجاء الفعل should في المقدمة بواقع 225 تكرارا بنسبة 53.3% من الأفعال الناقصة، بينما لم تكد تظهر الظروف الابستمية (0.5%) والعبارات التمهيدية (2.6%). وتوافقت نتائج الاستبيان مع هذا النمط، إذ أكّد 83.3% من المشاركين أهمية التحوط في الكتابة الأكاديمية الموثوقة، وكشفت النصوص ذاتها أن التحوط موزع بدرجة شديدة من التفاوت بين الرسائل: فحين قُسِّمت الرسائل إلى أثلاث متساوية بحسب الكثافة، احتوى الثلث الأعلى كثافة نحو 43.5% من إجمالي أدوات التحوط، أي ما يناهز ثلاثة أضعاف حصة الثلث الأدنى (14.6%)، مع أن الوعي المُعلَن لم يُترجم إلى تنويع بلاغي ملموس. ويعزو المشاركون هذه الفجوة إلى غياب التعليم الصريح (بمتوسط 2.78 من خمس)، وتأثير معايير اللغة العربية الأم التي تفضّل المباشرة، وتحفّظ أخلاقي على تخفيف القول فيما يرونه يستلزم البيان الواضح. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الوعي دون تعليم صريح يُنتج تحوطا اعتياديا لا استراتيجيا، وتوصي بتعليم قائم على تحليل النصوص ومراعٍ للسياق الثقافي يُوسّع المخزون البلاغي للطلبة ويقوي مصداقية صوتهم الأكاديمي.

الكلمات الدالة: التحوط اللغوي، رسائل الماجستير، السياق الليبي، الكتابة الأكاديمية، اللسانيات التطبيقية

Introduction

Academic writing requires writers to present claims with precision and to signal their degree of commitment to what they assert. Hedging is the rhetorical resource that allows this: it tempers categorical statements, opens space for alternative readings, and helps writers protect themselves against the risk of overstatement (Hyland, 1998; Crompton, 1997). In disciplines such as Applied Linguistics, where language itself is the object of study, hedging carries particular weight because authors must position their claims carefully within ongoing scholarly debate (Hyland & Milton, 1997).

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For postgraduate students, however, hedging is difficult to master. Novice L2 writers often overuse a small set of devices, misjudge how much caution a given claim requires, or avoid hedging altogether, producing prose that reads as overly assertive or, conversely, as evasive (Hinkel, 2005; Hyland & Milton, 1997). This difficulty is compounded in non-Anglophone settings, where students may have received little explicit instruction in the rhetorical conventions of English academic writing and where first-language norms around directness can pull against the tentativeness that English scholarship typically expects (Hu & Cao, 2011).

The present study is situated in Libya, a context that remains under-represented in research on academic writing. Libyan MA programmes in Applied Linguistics include academic writing coursework, yet it is not clear whether rhetorical features such as hedging receive focused attention (Elabbar, 2011). A recent study found that while established Libyan scholars deploy hedging deliberately, these practices do not automatically transfer to student writers (Farhat, 2024). There is therefore a clear gap: limited empirical work has examined both the actual hedging behaviour of Libyan MA students and their reported awareness of the strategy within the high-stakes genre of the dissertation.

This study addresses that gap through a convergent mixed-methods design. It asked three questions: (1) How frequently and effectively did MA Applied Linguistics students incorporate hedging in their dissertation writing? (2) To what extent were these students aware of hedging as an academic strategy? (3) What factors affected their understanding and application of hedging, or contributed to their difficulties in doing so? By combining a corpus analysis of actual student writing with survey and qualitative data, the study connects what students do with what they believe they know, and it draws pedagogical implications for strengthening rhetorical competence in postgraduate L2 writing. The remainder of the paper proceeds from the theoretical framework and prior literature to the methodology, then reports and discusses the findings before closing with the conclusion, pedagogical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Background and Problem Statement

The problem of this study is not that Libyan MA students refuse to hedge. On the contrary, hedging forms appear frequently in their writing. The difficulty is that this frequency masks a narrow and

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partly inappropriate repertoire. When the majority of hedging is carried by a single modal verb, and when the epistemic adverbs and framing phrases that give academic prose its characteristic caution are almost absent, the writing may appear assertive rather than measured. This matters because readers, including examiners and journal reviewers, interpret overconfidence as a lack of scholarly maturity. A writer who asserts recommendations as categorical obligations may come across as less credible than one who signals, through careful hedging, that the recommendations are reasoned and provisional.

The problem is compounded by the pedagogical context. Academic writing courses in Libyan MA programmes may mention hedging only in passing, or not at all, and Libyan EFL research has documented how teachers' own approaches to English-medium instruction are shaped by this same educational context (Elabbar, 2011). Students are expected to absorb the conventions of scholarly caution by reading and imitation, but without explicit instruction they may reproduce surface patterns without understanding their function. When supervisors themselves differ in how much hedging they expect, students receive inconsistent guidance, a pattern also reported in earlier work on Libyan academic writing (Farhat, 2024). The result is a rhetorical practice that is frequent in form but uncertain in function, which is precisely the gap this study sets out to examine.

The Libyan postgraduate context

Postgraduate education in Libya, particularly in the humanities, has expanded in recent decades, but the infrastructure for research training remains uneven, and Libyan EFL research indicates that teachers' own teaching approaches in this environment are similarly shaped by variable exposure to English-medium academic conventions (Elabbar, 2011). English is the medium of instruction for many linguistics courses, yet most students have been educated in Arabic in earlier stages, and their familiarity with the conventions of English academic writing is accordingly variable. Library resources, supervisor training, and writing support differ across institutions, and recent research on Libyan academic discourse indicates that the effective use of rhetorical devices such as hedging is present among experienced scholars but not consistently transferred to student writing (Farhat, 2024). These conditions mean that the development of rhetorical skills such as hedging is neither uniform nor guaranteed, and they make the Libyan context a particularly informative setting for studying how postgraduate L2 writers acquire and use epistemic devices.

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The concept and functions of hedging

Hedging has been theorized as the linguistic expression of caution and uncertainty in academic prose. Hyland's (1998) account frames hedges as devices that communicate the writer's epistemic stance, signal what is asserted rather than taken for granted, and manage the interpersonal relationship between writer and reader. Hedges allow authors to soften claims, acknowledge alternative interpretations, and protect themselves from the criticism that categorical assertions invite (Crompton, 1997; Hyland, 2005; Myers, 1989).

The functions of hedging extend beyond simple politeness. In academic discourse, hedging supports three overlapping goals. First, it expresses epistemic caution, indicating how confident a writer is in a proposition. Second, it serves an interpersonal function, allowing writers to acknowledge the positions of others and to keep a discussion open. Third, it is a politeness strategy, softening the potential face-threatening act of disagreeing with or correcting others (Myers, 1989; Salager-Meyer, 1994). Each of these functions contributes to the credibility that readers associate with careful, well-reasoned scholarship.

Taxonomies of hedging devices

Several scholars have proposed ways of classifying hedging devices. Hyland (1998) distinguishes modal verbs, epistemic lexical verbs, adverbs, nouns, and framing phrases. Modal verbs such as may, might, and could indicate possibility; epistemic verbs such as suggest, seem, and appear qualify the strength of a claim; adverbs such as possibly and arguably modify whole clauses; nouns such as possibility and likelihood nominalize uncertainty; and framing phrases such as it is possible that introduce tentative claims. This taxonomy provided the analytical categories used in the present study.

Closely related to modality is the notion of evidentiality, or the linguistic encoding of information sources. Modal auxiliaries, adverbs, and cognition-related verbs can all serve as evidential markers, and they frequently function as hedges when they introduce vagueness or signal a reluctance to present claims categorically (Chen & Zhang, 2016). The functional variety of hedging is therefore mirrored in the diversity of grammatical structures that realize it, which is one reason novice writers find it difficult to master.

Hedging in L2 postgraduate writing

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A consistent finding across corpus studies is that L2 postgraduate writers rely heavily on modal verbs at the expense of other hedging resources. Ifga and Pratiwi (2021), analysing Indonesian undergraduate theses, found that modal verbs dominated hedging use, accounting for roughly 79.6% of instances. Tran and Le (2024) reported a similar over-reliance on a narrow range of modals among Vietnamese postgraduates, and Adrian and Fajri (2023) observed comparable dependence among Indonesian soft-science authors. This pattern matters because, as Myers (1989) and Salager-Meyer (1994) argue, effective hedging draws on a broad repertoire of forms that allow writers to calibrate assertiveness and caution with nuance.

Disciplinary and developmental factors also shape hedging. Studies report that hedging appears more frequently in certain sections of academic writing, such as discussions, and that it varies with discipline and with the writer's level of experience (Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2016). For postgraduate writers in particular, the ability to hedge appropriately is closely tied to genre awareness and to an understanding of the rhetorical expectations of their field (Swales & Feak, 2012).

Cross-cultural and L1 influences

Cross-cultural work highlights the influence of the first language on hedging behaviour. Comparative studies report that writers from rhetorical traditions that privilege directness tend to hedge less or to rely on stronger modals (Hu & Cao, 2011; Loi & Lim, 2019; Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2016). For Arabic-speaking learners, whose academic register commonly values assertion, English's preference for epistemic caution can feel counter-intuitive, a tension documented in Arab EFL writing (Ahmed & Maros, 2017; AlGhamdi & Alyousef, 2022). These findings suggest that hedging is not merely a linguistic skill but a culturally embedded practice that learners acquire unevenly.

Pedagogical approaches to teaching hedging

The pedagogical literature argues that hedging improves most when it is taught explicitly and with authentic disciplinary texts (Hinkel, 2004). Corpus-informed instruction exposes learners to how expert writers hedge in context (Hyland, 2004), and experimental work shows that process-based teaching of hedging can improve L2 performance (Firoozjahantigh et al., 2021). Yet many writing courses still treat hedging as implicit knowledge (Gherdan, 2019), and learners may be expected to

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acquire it without direct support. The present study contributes to this literature by examining a Libyan postgraduate population and by integrating corpus, survey, and qualitative evidence.

The study's contribution

Three considerations distinguish the present study from prior work. First, it focuses on a population and context that remain under-represented: Libyan MA students writing in a foreign language within a higher-education system where rhetorical instruction is uneven. Second, it combines a corpus analysis of authentic student writing with self-report and qualitative data, which allows a comparison between what students produce and what they believe they know. Third, it centres on the dissertation, a high-stakes genre that matters directly to students' academic success. These features position the study to speak to both the research literature on hedging and the practical needs of writing instruction in comparable EFL settings.

Materials and Methods

Research design

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), combining a corpus-based analysis, a quantitative questionnaire, and qualitative analysis of open-ended responses. The design permitted triangulation between observable linguistic behaviour and self-reported awareness, and it allowed the researcher to compare what students actually produce with what they report believing they know. Convergent designs are well suited to applied linguistics because language is simultaneously a textual artefact and a construct of learner knowledge; combining strands makes it possible to ask what students write and, equally, why they write that way (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Three strands were integrated. The first was the corpus analysis, which addressed the frequency and effectiveness of hedging in actual student writing. The second was the questionnaire, which measured self-reported awareness, attitudes, and usage. The third was the qualitative analysis of open-ended comments, which explored the factors and difficulties that the closed items could not capture. Triangulation across these strands allowed the study to identify convergence, where findings agreed; complementarity, where one strand deepened another; and divergence, where a discrepancy itself became analytically informative.

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This integration was managed deliberately. When the corpus revealed low lexical diversity in hedging while the questionnaire suggested high self-reported awareness, the open-ended responses were prioritized to explain the discrepancy. In this way, divergence between strands was treated not as a threat to validity but as a source of insight, consistent with a triangulation logic that values methodological complementarity.

Corpus compilation

A specialised corpus of 55 General Recommendations sections was compiled from MA dissertations in Applied Linguistics submitted between 2014 and 2024 at the University of Zawia and the Libyan Academy of Janzour. These two institutions were selected based on their prominence in postgraduate Applied Linguistics education and the availability of full-text dissertations containing a General Recommendations section within the study period, which makes the corpus a purposive sample limited by availability rather than a random sample of Libyan MA writing. The section itself was chosen for its evaluative and forward-looking function, where hedging is frequent (Hyland, 1998; Swales & Feak, 2012), since it typically contains evaluative claims, proposals for future action, and generalized conclusions, all of which are discourse environments in which writers are expected to moderate their assertions; restricting the corpus to a single, clearly delimited section also improved comparability across the 55 dissertations and reduced the influence of topic-related variation. Documents were digitized with OCR, manually cleaned, and saved as UTF-8 plain text. The corpus contained 12,395 tokens and 1,894 types. The compiled corpus was analysed using two widely accepted tools in corpus linguistics research: AntConc (Anthony, 2024), which enabled the generation of keyword lists, frequency counts, concordance lines, and collocation analyses, providing detailed insights into the linguistic realisation of hedging devices; and Voyant Tools (Sinclair & Rockwell, 2016), which allowed for the exploration of broader textual trends and distributions through visualization and interactive querying. Together, these tools offered complementary strengths in corpus analysis, enabling a robust investigation of lexical and rhetorical patterns. The analysis was guided by Hyland's (1998, 2019) widely accepted taxonomy of hedging, which categorizes hedges by function and grammatical form, thus offering both theoretical consistency and analytical depth.

The corpus was treated as a single unified dataset rather than being disaggregated by institution. This decision reflected the study's focus on generalized student practice within the Libyan higher-

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education context rather than on institutional comparison, although institutional differences were later examined and are reported in the discussion.

Questionnaire

A 37-item Likert questionnaire (N = 72) measured six dimensions: awareness of hedging, knowledge of techniques, usage, influencing factors and attitudes, perceived significance, and application in dissertations. Item construction drew on established frameworks in hedging research (Hyland, 1996, 2005; Swales, 1990; Wishnoff, 2000). Content validity was established through review by three applied linguistics specialists, and the instrument was pilot-tested with a small group of respondents before full deployment; the pilot led to the revision of ambiguous items, the removal of redundancy, and the reorganisation of thematic groupings. Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the upper and lower 27% of scorers on the total score ($M = 154.74$, $SD = 6.84$ vs $M = 115.21$, $SD = 11.87$), $t = 12.58$, $p < .001$, with significance below .001 obtained for every dimension, and this confirmed that the instrument could distinguish students with higher and lower hedging awareness. The questionnaire was administered to 72 MA students and recent graduates from six Libyan institutions in the western and eastern regions (the University of Zawia, the West Coast Graduate Studies Academy, the Libyan Academy in Janzour, and its branches in Gharyan, Zintan and Benghazi). The wider institutional coverage, compared with the two institutions represented in the corpus, was possible because the survey did not depend on the availability of complete dissertation texts, and it was intended to capture the range of awareness among postgraduate students beyond the institutions whose dissertations could be analysed. Reliability was high, with excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91). Responses were analysed with SPSS version 27, using descriptive statistics and independent-samples t-tests.

Participants were recruited through institutional networks and academic social media, and all participation was voluntary and anonymous. Eligibility required participants to have taken academic writing coursework or to have engaged in dissertation writing, ensuring that respondents had some exposure to the practices under investigation.

Qualitative component

The questionnaire ended with an optional open-ended prompt inviting elaboration on participants' understanding, instruction, and difficulties. Responses (11 participants offered substantive

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comments) were analysed thematically using an adapted version of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. The analysis was iterative, with initial coding refined against the emerging themes.

Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained electronically. The dissertations used in the corpus were anonymized and treated as archival artefacts. Institutional consent for data collection was secured from the University of Zawia.

Results

Hedging frequency and range in the corpus (RQ1)

The corpus contained 571 hedging instances in 12,395 tokens, a normalized frequency of 46.07 per 1,000 words (M = 46.07, SD = 12.10). Hedging was therefore common in this genre. Its realization, however, was markedly uneven. Table 1 presents the distribution across the six hedging categories.

Table 1. Overall distribution of hedging types (N = 55 dissertations)

Hedge type	Frequency	% of total	Mean/1,000 w	SD
Modal and semi-modal verbs	422	73.9	34.05	—
Lexical verbs	73	12.8	5.89	—
Nouns	36	6.3	2.90	—
Adjectives & adverbs	22	3.9	1.77	—
Introductory phrases	15	2.6	1.21	—
Frequency adverbs	3	0.5	0.24	—
Total	571	100.0	46.07	12.10

Note. N = 55 dissertations (12,395 words). Percentages computed out of the 571 hedge tokens identified in the corpus. Mean/1,000 w is the normalized frequency for each category, computed from its total token count relative to the 12,395-word corpus; per-category standard deviations across dissertations are not reported here and only the corpus-wide SD is given for the total row.

Modal and semi-modal verbs together accounted for 422 of 571 hedges (73.9%). Within this category the distribution was itself concentrated: the verb should appeared 225 times, more than

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half of all modal instances (53.3%), and can accounted for a further 73 (17.3%). Table 2 reports the full modal distribution, and Figure 1 visualizes the overall composition of hedging in the corpus.

Table 2. Distribution of modal and semi-modal verbs in the corpus

Modal verb	Frequency	% of modals	Modal verb	Frequency	% of modals
should	225	53.3	need to	15	3.6
can	73	17.3	would	14	3.3
will	23	5.5	might	10	2.4
must	23	5.5	be able to	2	0.5
could	18	4.3	supposed to	1	0.2
may	16	3.8	likely	2	0.5

Note. Percentages computed within modal and semi-modal verbs (n = 422). The verb should alone accounts for 53.3% of all modal hedges.

The remaining hedging resources were used sparingly. Lexical verbs such as suggest, indicate, and seem formed the second-largest category (12.8%), while epistemic nouns (6.3%), adjectives and adverbs (3.9%), introductory phrases (2.6%), and frequency adverbs (0.5%) were all marginal. This asymmetry indicates that students' hedging repertoire was narrow, centred on a single modal verb and leaving most epistemic devices untapped.

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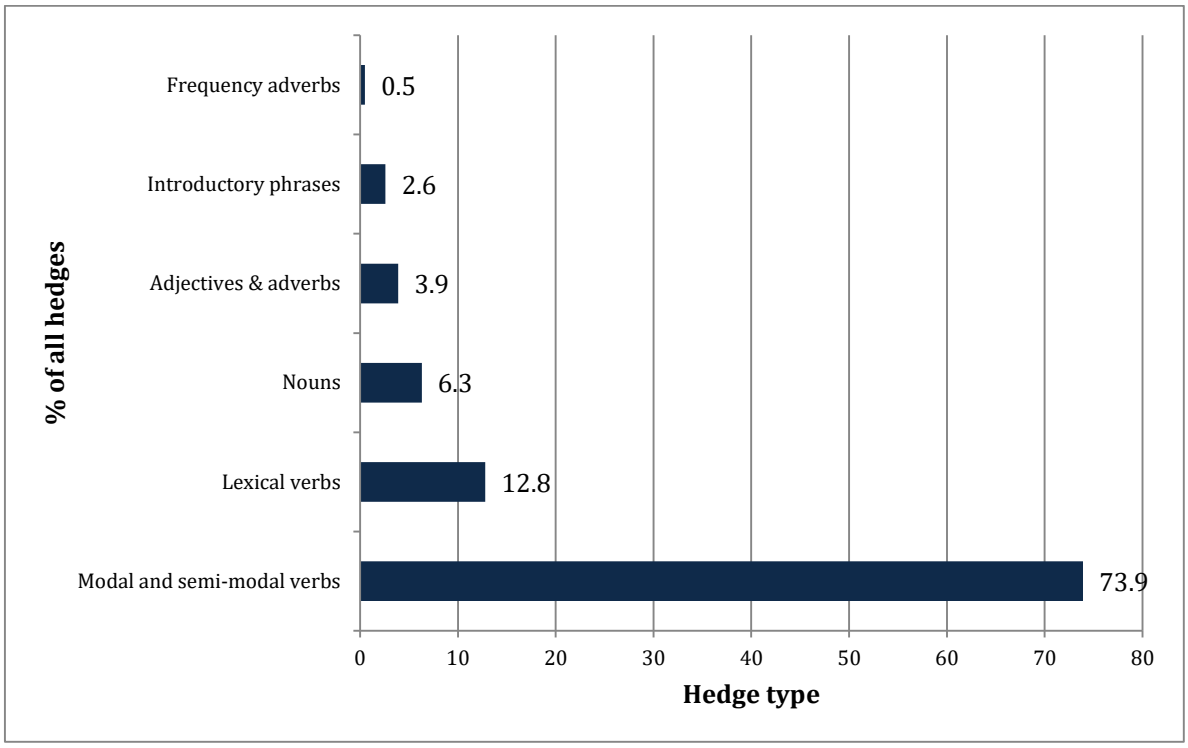
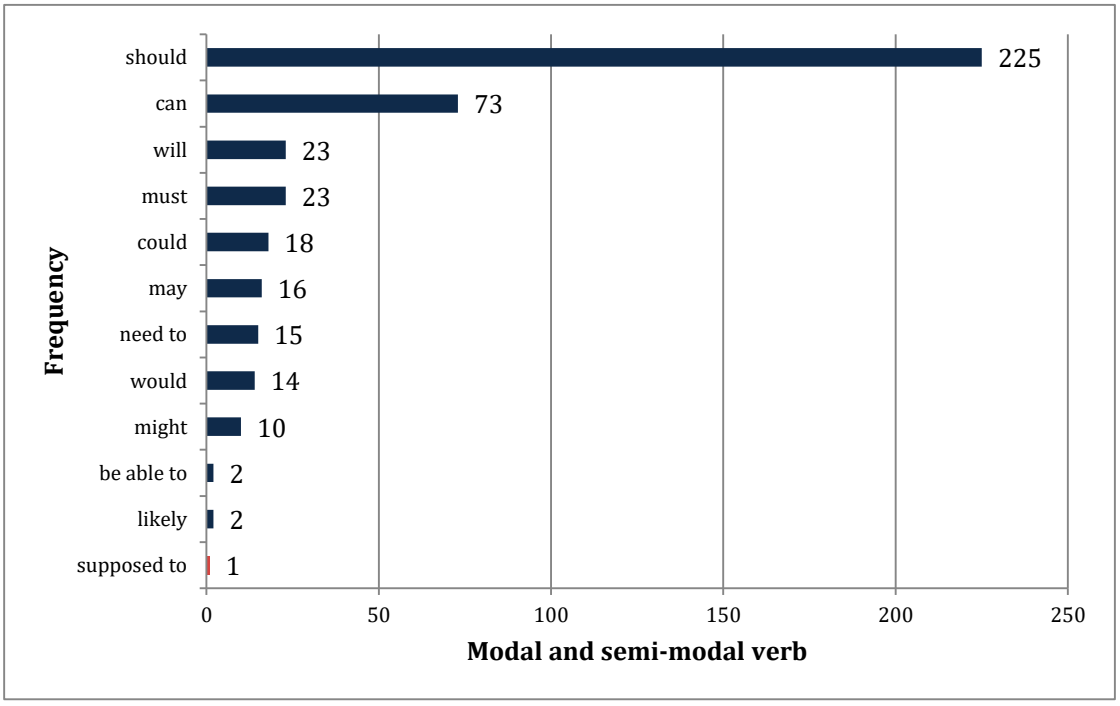


Figure 1: Composition of hedging in the corpus. Modal and semi-modal verbs dominate, with epistemic adverbs and framing phrases rarely used.



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Figure 2: Distribution of modal and semi-modal verbs. The verb should accounts for over half of the instances in this category.

Distribution of modal and semi-modal verbs

Within the dominant modal and semi-modal category, the distribution was sharply skewed toward a small number of forms. The verb should appeared 225 times, more than half of the instances in this category (53.3%), and it was heavily concentrated in particular dissertations while absent from others. The verb can appeared 73 times (17.3%). Will and must each occurred 23 times (5.5%), could 18 times (4.3%), may 16 times (3.8%), need to 15 times (3.6%), would 14 times (3.3%), and might 10 times (2.4%). At the periphery, be able to (2), supposed to (1), and likely (2) were almost unused. Likely is counted in this category because it functions as a modal expression of probability, even though it is grammatically an adjective rather than a verb. This concentration suggests that students drew on a very narrow core of modal resources, with should functioning almost as a default recommendation marker. The uneven distribution across texts is also telling. In some dissertations, should accounted for a large share of all hedging; in others it did not appear at all. This document-level variation points to the influence of individual supervisors or local conventions rather than a uniform disciplinary norm. It also suggests that some writers were essentially not hedging in the epistemic sense at all, even where modal forms were present, because the modals they used carried a prescriptive rather than a cautious function.

Distribution of other hedging categories

The remaining categories were used sparingly and unevenly. Lexical verbs, the second-largest category at 12.8%, were themselves dominated by understand, which accounted for a large share of instances, alongside suggest, think, feel, indicate, and seem. The presence of understand is striking because it is less an epistemic hedge than an explanatory verb; its high frequency may reflect students' tendency to frame comprehension rather than to moderate claims. Among the adverbs and adjectives, the forms only and enough together accounted for most instances, while epistemically central adverbs such as possibly and theoretically were rare. Epistemic nouns such as suggestion and belief appeared more often than possibility and claim, and introductory phrases such as it is possible that and it seems that were almost entirely absent.

Taken together, these patterns reveal a hedging repertoire that is narrow and partly misaligned with the epistemic functions that hedging is usually expected to serve. Students did use modal forms

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frequently, but the forms they favoured expressed obligation and ability more often than genuine uncertainty. The underuse of epistemic adverbs, epistemic nouns, and framing phrases meant that the subtler tools of caution, the ones that most clearly signal a calibrated stance, were largely missing from the corpus.

Self-reported awareness and attitudes (RQ2)

Survey responses indicated a generally positive orientation towards hedging across all six dimensions, with mean scores ranging from 3.58 to 3.97 on the five-point scale. Table 3 reports the dimension means and their standard deviations.

Table 3. Questionnaire dimension means (N = 72)

Dimension	Mean	SD
Awareness of hedging	3.68	0.63
Hedging techniques	3.81	0.45
Usage of hedging	3.58	0.67
Factors & attitudes	3.59	0.52
Perceived significance	3.97	0.57
Application in dissertations	3.77	0.55

Note. N = 72; responses on a 1-5 scale; Cronbach's alpha = 0.91. Statement-level agreement is detailed in Table 4.

Perceived significance was rated highest (M = 3.97, 83.3% positive consensus), while 80.6% of respondents agreed on the importance of specific hedging techniques. Awareness of hedging recorded a lower mean (M = 3.68), while practical application in dissertations drew a weaker mean (M = 3.77). These figures hint at a gap between valuing hedging and commanding it, a point developed below.

Table 4. Statement-level agreement on key questionnaire items (N = 72)

Dimension	Statement	Agree/Strongly agree (%)
Awareness	I know what hedging means	65.2
	I understand its role in signalling caution in writing	76.4
	I had heard of hedging before this study	69.5
	I feel confident using hedging devices	59.7

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Techniques	Hedging helps convey appropriate levels of uncertainty	80.6
	Hedging prevents overgeneralization of findings	77.8
	Hedging encourages respectful scholarly debate	80.6
	Hedging helps avoid an overly confident tone	62.5
Usage	I integrate hedging devices into my writing	52.7
	Hedging lets me convey precise, nuanced arguments	59.7
	I actively enhance my skills in using hedging strategies	68.1
	I use hedging to balance certainty with caution	59.8
	I consider hedging when composing research papers	57.0
Factors	Supervisor feedback improved my understanding of hedging	58.4
	My personal writing style affects how often I hedge	72.2
	Access to resources on hedging would be beneficial	90.3
	My MA programme provided instruction on hedging	32.0
	Reading academic papers influenced how I use hedging	83.3
	My cultural background plays a role in how I apply hedging	56.9
Significance	Hedging is a vital skill within Applied Linguistics	83.3
	Effective hedging improves the quality of academic writing	79.2
	Developing hedging skills is essential for persuasive writing	77.8
	Mastering hedging enhances my academic writing abilities	84.7
Application	I plan to apply hedging in my MA dissertation	63.9
	I want to learn best practices for hedging in literature reviews	86.1
	Excessive hedging might make me appear less confident	50.0
	I intend to explore how hedging affects perceived objectivity	80.6

Note. Percentages are the sum of agree + strongly agree responses in the SPSS v27 output (N = 72). Statements are grouped by questionnaire dimension.

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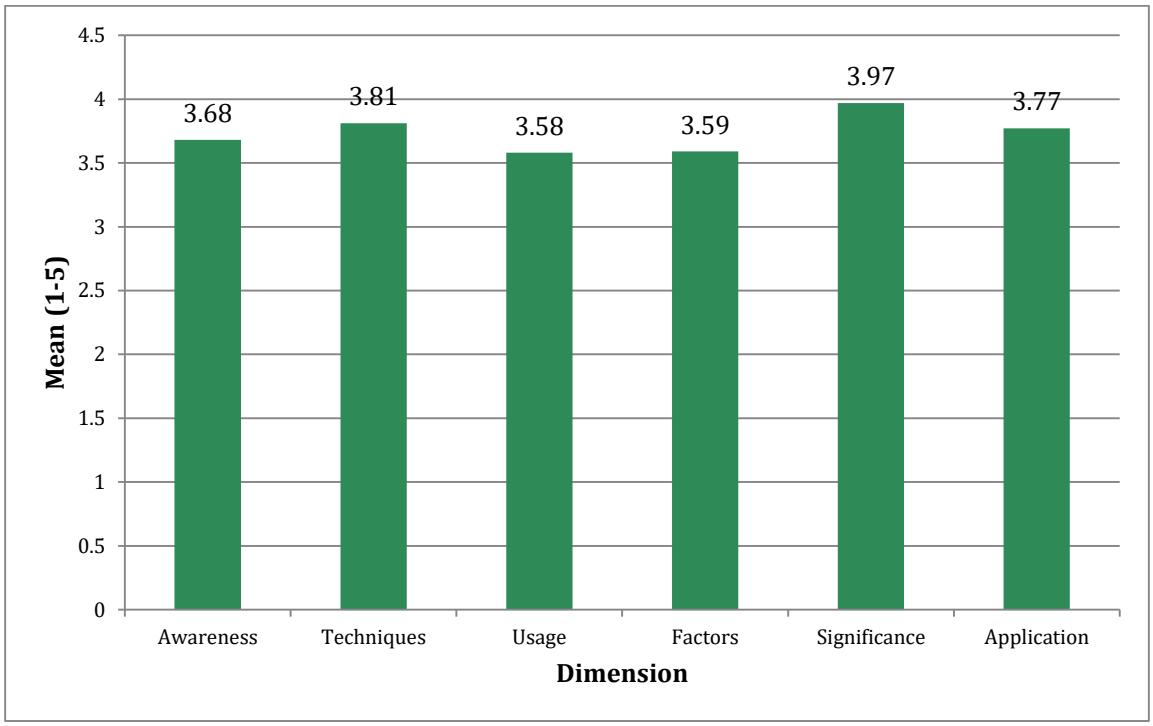


Figure 3: Questionnaire dimension means. Significance scores highest while practical awareness and application lag behind.

Factors influencing hedging (RQ3)

Several factors shaped hedging practice. Formal instruction appeared limited: the item "My MA programme has provided instruction on hedging" received a mean of only 2.78, the lowest in the instrument, while access to hedging resources was strongly desired (M = 4.24). Participants also attributed their rhetorical choices to writing style (M = 3.81) and to cultural background (M = 3.56). A central finding concerns the distribution of hedging within the corpus itself: hedging is markedly uneven across the 55 dissertations. To describe this unevenness, the corpus was divided into equal thirds by per-text hedging density; Table 5 and Figure 4 report the resulting distribution.

Table 5. Hedging density across the corpus: highest, middle, and lowest thirds (tertiles of the 55 dissertations by per-text hedging density)

Group	N	Mean hedges/1,000 w	SD
Highest-density third	18	64.15	12.35

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Middle third	19	44.08	3.79
Lowest-density third	18	22.47	12.29

Note. Tiers are tertiles of per-text hedging density across the 55 dissertations. Densities were computed per dissertation over the full corpus (12,395 words; device taxonomy as in the Taxonomies of hedging devices section). Because the tiers are defined by the same density metric they summarise, the comparison is descriptive rather than inferential. The highest-, middle-, and lowest-density tiers together account for roughly 43.5%, 41.9%, and 14.6% of all hedge tokens.

Hedging density was markedly uneven across the corpus. Dividing the 55 dissertations into equal thirds by per-text density, the highest-density third averaged 64.15 hedges per 1,000 words (SD = 12.35), the middle third 44.08 (SD = 3.79), and the lowest-density third 22.47 (SD = 12.29). The three tiers accounted for roughly 43.5%, 41.9%, and 14.6% of all hedge tokens respectively, indicating that hedging, already narrow in range, is also heavily concentrated in a minority of texts. Table 5 and Figure 4 report this distribution. Because the tiers are defined by the same density metric they summarise, the comparison is descriptive rather than inferential; it documents the uneven distribution of hedging across the analysed dissertations and does not, in itself, speak to the self-reported awareness of the individual writers, whose questionnaire responses were collected as a separate and anonymous strand.

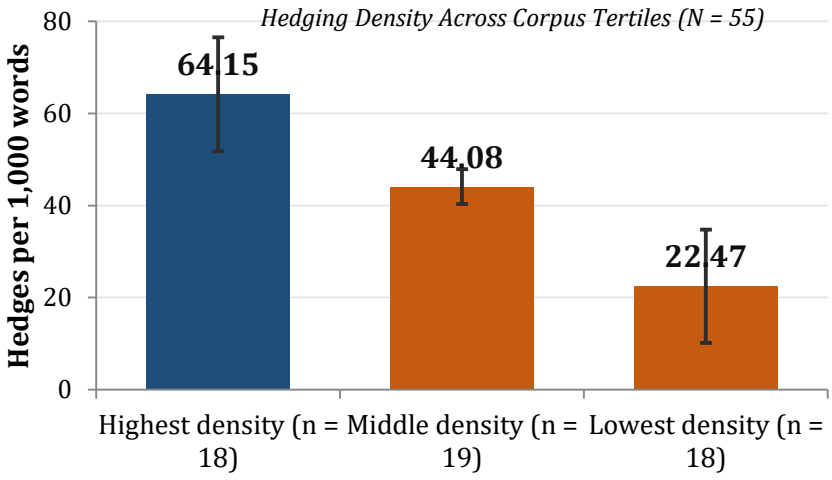


Figure 4: Hedging density across the corpus by third. Bars show mean hedges per 1,000 words for the highest- (n = 18), middle- (n = 19), and lowest-density (n = 18) thirds of the corpus; error bars show the standard deviation.

Qualitative findings

Open-ended comments revealed a spectrum of conceptual awareness. At one end, participants articulated a precise understanding of hedging as an epistemic device, one explaining that it "can

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be manifested through auxiliary verbs like may and can, or phrases expressing the probability of results." Others understood it more loosely, treating it as a marker of academic formality rather than as a strategic tool for managing claims. At the other end, several participants were unfamiliar with the term altogether; one admitted, "I had never heard of hedging until now," and another, who identified as a researcher, had never encountered it. This range suggests that exposure to hedging is uneven and that many students use the devices implicitly without a conscious model of what they are doing, which limits their ability to revise and refine their practice.

Three themes were identified through the thematic procedure of Braun and Clarke's (2006) model. Absence of formal instruction and reliance on imitation: Formal instruction was largely absent, and what participants knew often came from imitation; one observed that students "apply it without knowing or having any background… it's just following their professors' directions." Influence of Arabic first-language norms of directness: Cultural norms mattered, as participants linked their direct style to Arabic first-language conventions that favour assertiveness. The ethical dimension of hedging: An ethical dimension surfaced when one participant noted that hedging "sometimes becomes immoral when the necessity to call out wrongful actions surpasses," illustrating the tension between rhetorical caution and moral clarity in sensitive contexts.

Discussion

The findings confirm that hedging is a frequent but narrowly realized feature of Libyan MA dissertations. At 46.07 hedges per 1,000 words, hedging density was high, but the overwhelming dependence on modal and semi-modal verbs, and on should in particular, indicates a limited rhetorical repertoire rather than deliberate stylistic control. This pattern is consistent with prior work on L2 writers in other settings (Ifga & Pratiwi, 2021; Tran & Le, 2024; Adrian & Fajri, 2023) and suggests a cross-contextual tendency among novice writers to fall back on the most accessible hedging device.

The dominance of should is notable. Hyland (1998) links modal verbs to the signalling of epistemic stance, but a single directive modal used across half of all modal instances does not reflect the nuanced calibration that expert academic prose requires. Expressions such as "the findings should indicate" carry a prescriptive force that differs sharply from the tentative "the findings seem to suggest that further research may be needed." The narrow range observed therefore points to

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underdeveloped rhetorical flexibility, echoing the concern that students hedge without fully internalizing the strategic breadth of the device (Myers, 1989).

Awareness was high in a surface sense, with 83.3% recognizing hedging as important, yet the weakest self-ratings concerned reported usage and the factors shaping practice, and several participants openly reported never having encountered the term. This awareness-practice gap aligns with earlier findings that novice writers often overestimate their rhetorical competence (Widiawati, 2018; Chen & Zhang, 2016). The within-corpus polarisation points in the same direction: hedging is both broadly recognised and thinly exercised, which is consistent with the pedagogical argument that enhancing conceptual knowledge can improve written performance (Hyland, 2004) and strengthens the case for teaching hedging explicitly rather than leaving it to be absorbed. Because the respondents and the corpus authors are separate and anonymous groups, no claim is made about individual writers; the joint findings are better described as a macro-institutional alignment, in which cohorts whose members report greater awareness of hedging are also the cohorts whose dissertations show denser hedging, an alignment that is better explained by shared institutional conditions and academic-literacy support than by the choices of identifiable writers. The narrowness of the repertoire, even in the highest-density texts, also cautions against assuming that awareness alone is sufficient: what matters is not just knowing about hedging but having a broad set of devices available and knowing when each is appropriate.

The absence of explicit instruction emerged as the most actionable finding. The low mean for programme-provided instruction ($M = 2.78$), together with participants' requests for teaching and their reliance on imitation, indicates a systemic gap. Cultural and L1 factors compounded this: Arabic academic norms that privilege directness may make the caution of English hedging counter-intuitive, and some participants felt that hedged language could even be ethically problematic when a claim demanded direct condemnation. Hedging, in other words, is as much a cultural and ethical choice as a linguistic one, and instruction must address it as such (Anh, 2018; Loi & Lim, 2019).

The heavy use of should suggests a deontic orientation, in which students frame recommendations as obligations. In the General Recommendations section, this orientation is understandable, since the genre invites writers to propose what ought to be done. Yet deontic modality differs from the epistemic caution that hedging classically signals (Hyland, 1998). The findings therefore indicate

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that students may be hedging in a broad sense while not always deploying the epistemic functions that most closely correspond to cautious knowledge claims.

The ethical dimension that surfaced in the qualitative data deserves particular attention because it is rarely addressed in writing instruction (Gherdan, 2019). One participant argued that hedging can become inappropriate when a situation demands clear moral judgment, illustrating that the decision to hedge is never purely technical. This view is important because it complicates any simple prescription to hedge more. Students need to learn how to hedge and when caution serves scholarship and when it risks evasiveness. Pedagogy that ignores this tension may train students to sound cautious without helping them reason about stance, audience, and responsibility. The present findings suggest that these ethical questions are live ones for Libyan postgraduate writers and should be part of how hedging is taught.

Students value hedging and believe it matters for academic credibility; they use it often; but their repertoire is narrow, their awareness is uneven, and the instruction available to them is limited. These findings are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory. A student who has heard that hedging is important, but who has never been taught a range of devices or shown how experts deploy them, is likely to produce exactly the pattern observed here: frequent, formulaic, and dominated by a single form. The implication is that improving hedging in Libyan postgraduate writing is primarily a pedagogical task, and that this task is best met by explicit, corpus-informed, and culturally responsive instruction.

Conclusion and Implications

This study shows that Libyan MA students in Applied Linguistics recognize the value of hedging yet deploy it within a narrow range, centred on modal and semi-modal verbs and dominated by the single form should. Within the corpus, hedging is sharply polarised across dissertations, and in the survey awareness is broad yet shallowly realised; together these patterns support the pedagogical value of strengthening conceptual knowledge. The key barrier is not motivation but instruction: students want to hedge well but have rarely been taught how, and they are influenced by L1 and cultural norms that push toward directness.

For teachers, the practical implication is to move beyond identifying hedges toward building rhetorical flexibility. Instruction should broaden the repertoire students can draw on, introducing

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epistemic verbs (suggest, appear), adverbs (possibly, arguably), and framing phrases (it seems that), and should prioritize function over form. Corpus-based materials drawn from disciplinary writing can show students how expert writers calibrate claims (Hyland, 2004; Firoozjahantigh et al., 2021), and contrastive attention to Arabic and English conventions can help bridge the directness gap. Ethical reflection should be part of this work so that students learn when caution serves scholarly integrity and when directness is more appropriate. For curriculum developers and institutions, the findings argue for embedding hedging instruction explicitly in academic writing modules rather than assuming it is absorbed incidentally, for training teachers to give specific rather than vague feedback on hedging, and for evaluating the effect of such interventions. For researchers, longitudinal and cross-disciplinary studies, and work on how students negotiate hedging in ethically sensitive topics, would extend the picture presented here.

Hedging is ultimately about precision, responsibility, and voice. For postgraduate L2 writers, learning to hedge is not a stylistic luxury but a precondition for participating credibly in their academic communities.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations qualify these results. The corpus was restricted to a single dissertation section from two institutions that were selected for availability, so it cannot represent the full range of Libyan MA writing, while the questionnaire reached students from six institutions and therefore covers a wider population. Because the two samples are separate and anonymous, the comparison between reported awareness and corpus frequency is an association between groups rather than a link between individual students and their own texts. The survey also relied on self-report, which can diverge from actual behaviour. Institutional differences approached but did not reach significance ($p = 0.056$), so inferences about institutional effects should be drawn cautiously. The study does not directly measure cognitive reasoning behind hedging choices, which remains open to interpretation.

Future research could examine the development of hedging competence over time through longitudinal designs, compare hedging across disciplines and across different dissertation sections, and evaluate the effectiveness of targeted instructional interventions. Work on how students negotiate the tension between rhetorical caution and moral clarity, particularly in politically

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sensitive writing, would also enrich the field. Given the growth of digital and multimodal academic genres, examining hedging in blogs, student journals, and online discussion platforms offers a further avenue for study.

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- Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.
- Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency.
- Ethical approval: Institutional consent for data collection was obtained from the University of Zawia; participation was voluntary and anonymous.
- Data availability: The corpus metadata and questionnaire data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.
- Licensing: Upon acceptance, the article will be published open-access under the journal's license (CC BY-NC 4.0).
- Correspondence: Waleed Mohamed Ballag, University of Zawia. Email: mr.waleed.ballag@gmail.com.

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