

Exploring the Use of Hedges and Boosters in the Independent Study (IS) Manuscripts of Thai EFL University Students

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Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 17 Jan 2025 Last revised: 10 May 2026 Accepted: 11 May 2026 Available online: 18 May 2026	<i>This study investigates the use of hedges and boosters in 20 Independent Study (IS) manuscripts written by English for International Communication (EIC) undergraduate students of a university. The analysis identifies and categorizes these linguistic elements, exploring their role in shaping students' academic writing style. A total of 288 hedges and 53 boosters were found, with hedges appearing significantly more frequently, accounting for 2.24% per 1,000 words, compared to boosters at 0.41%. The most commonly used hedges included modal auxiliaries and verbs such as may, might, would, and seem, reflecting the students' tendency to express uncertainty, caution, and approximation. In contrast, verb and adverb boosters like show, always, and clearly were used more sparingly, indicating a lower level of confidence in their assertions. The distribution of these elements varied across different sections of the manuscripts, with the Introduction containing the highest frequency of both hedges and boosters, while the Methodology section showed the least use. These findings suggest that students rely heavily on hedging strategies to create a more measured academic tone, indicating their awareness of the complexities of their topics. The study recommends targeted instruction and peer review to help Thai EFL students develop more rigorous and confident academic writing.</i>
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INTRODUCTION

Writing an independent study is a crucial aspect of academic work, especially for students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). A significant challenge for these students is effectively expressing both certainty and caution in their writing, which is essential for producing credible and compelling academic papers. Mastery of hedges and boosters—linguistic tools that modulate the strength of claims—is key in this process.

Hedges and boosters are rhetorical devices used to adjust the strength of academic claims. Akman and Karahan (2023) define them as strategies that either diminish or intensify the force of a proposition. Hedges introduce uncertainty, signaling tentativeness or caution, whereas boosters convey confidence and assertiveness (Hyland, 1998a). According to Lakoff (1972), hedges reduce the certainty of claims by making statements less absolute. In contrast, boosters

are used to strengthen propositions and emphasize the writer's stance (Coates, 1995; Holmes, 1984). These devices are widely observed in academic writing across disciplines, including in studies of EFL learners' writing practices (Incharoensak & Gampper, 2019).

Hedges and boosters are specific linguistic devices that fall under the broader concept of modality, which refers to a speaker's perspective on the truth or reality of a statement (Lyons, 1977). Modality expresses meanings such as necessity, possibility, and permission. It is commonly divided into two types: epistemic modality, which reflects a speaker's judgment about the truth of a proposition, and deontic modality, which relates to obligation, permission, and socially grounded rules or duties (Depraetere & Reed, 2006; Zhang, 2019). Epistemic modality is particularly important in academic writing because it allows authors to manage the degree of certainty in their claims.

The effective use of epistemic hedges and boosters remains a persistent challenge for many EFL students. Hyland and Milton (1997) note that the difficulty in achieving a balance between caution and assertiveness often leads to writing that is either overly tentative or overly confident. Among Thai university students, these challenges are particularly noticeable. Petchkij (2019) observed that, despite an awareness of modality, the appropriate use of hedges and boosters still presents a considerable challenge.

Recognizing the critical role that epistemic hedges and boosters play in academic writing, this study focuses on the epistemic modality as realized through hedges and boosters in IS manuscripts submitted by Thai university EFL students. By analyzing the frequency, category, and contextual application of these linguistic tools, the research seeks to identify common patterns and areas for pedagogical improvement. The findings would provide valuable insights for educators, aiding in the development of more effective strategies for teaching hedges and boosters, ultimately enhancing the students' academic writing skills.

In this regard, this research seeks to address the following questions:

1. What are the prevalent hedging and boosting strategies utilized by EIC students in their IS manuscripts?
2. What grammatical categories (e.g., adjectives, adverbs, modal auxiliaries, nouns, verbs) are most commonly used as hedges and boosters in the students' IS manuscripts?
3. How do the frequencies of hedges and boosters differ across various sections of the IS manuscripts (e.g., Introduction, Methodology, Results, Discussion, Abstract, Conclusion)?
4. How do the use of hedges and boosters reflect students' attitudes toward uncertainty and confidence in their academic arguments?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic writing and Independent Study manuscripts in EFL context

Academic writing is a formal and structured form of communication that emphasizes clarity, critical thinking, and is often supported by evidence and discipline-specific conventions

(Bailey, 2017). One form of academic writing is the Independent Study (IS) manuscript, which requires students to complete a paper with minimal supervision (Bicknell, 2009). These manuscripts, classified alongside essays, reports, and articles, enable students to explore topics beyond the standard curriculum (Ramírez, 2014). For EFL learners, developing academic writing skills is essential for academic success and meaningful engagement in scholarly discourse (Ratnawati et al., 2018).

However, previous studies consistently highlight the challenges faced by EFL learners, particularly in contexts where English is not the medium of instruction (Daoud, 1998). Common difficulties include limited proficiency and low motivation (Doushaq, 1986). In addition, academic writing requires coherence, argumentation, and lexical accuracy, all of which can be challenging for EFL students to achieve (Campbell, 2019; Lee, 2017).

To address these challenges, scholars emphasize the importance of appropriate instruction and targeted support. Effective strategies include guided use of academic language, practical application of theoretical knowledge, and focused instruction on grammar, content, and structure supported by regular writing practice and feedback (Balle & Olsen, 2024; Pongpuehee et al., 2020; Rodliyah et al., 2017). Samad et al. (2025) further note that guided teaching can improve EFL students' academic writing skills. In addition, effective academic writing, particularly in IS manuscripts, requires careful use of hedges and boosters alongside other academic conventions.

Hedges and boosters in academic writing

Hedges and boosters help academic writers express stance, manage authorial voice, and follow disciplinary conventions. Hedges convey caution and limit generalizations, whereas boosters express confidence and strengthen commitment to claims (Hyland, 1998a, 2005). Together, they shape how arguments are perceived and support reader engagement. Salager-Meyer (1994) further highlights the pedagogical importance of hedging, emphasizing its role in maintaining objectivity and avoiding overstatement. She also recommends explicit instruction in hedging to improve students' academic writing.

Disciplinary variation also influences the use of these features. Takimoto (2015) found that hedges and boosters occur more frequently in the humanities and social sciences than in the natural sciences, reflecting differences in epistemological orientation. While the former often values interpretation and subjectivity, the latter tends to emphasize precision and objectivity. Overall, the strategic use of hedges and boosters enhances clarity, credibility, and persuasiveness in academic discourse while reflecting varying degrees of epistemic certainty.

Epistemic modality of hedges and boosters

Epistemic modality refers to a speaker's or writer's evaluation of possibility and degree of certainty toward a proposition. Coates (1995) defines it as the expression of certainty and uncertainty, often realized through hedges and boosters. Expanding this view, Palmer (2007) classifies epistemic judgments into speculation, deduction, and assumption, all of which

relate closely to hedging and boosting functions. Together, these frameworks show how epistemic modality enables academic writers to present knowledge claims with both precision and caution.

Disciplinary conventions also influence the use of epistemic modality. Sepehri et al. (2019) found that medical research tends to employ more hedges to reflect uncertainty, whereas engineering texts use more boosters to express stronger certainty. Similarly, Markkanen and Schroeder (1997) argued that hedging may also obscure a writer's precise stance, influencing readers' interpretations. Hyland (1998b) further emphasized that hedges and boosters help writers balance accuracy with persuasion in negotiating knowledge claims.

Within academic discourse, these devices also support formality, accessibility, and effective communication across genres (Mallaki et al., 2023). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that hedges and boosters are essential for expressing epistemic modality and managing stance in academic writing. However, research on Thai EFL learners suggests persistent difficulties in using these features effectively.

Academic writing of Thai EFL students

Research on Thai EFL students' academic writing consistently reveals persistent challenges, particularly in mastering nuanced expression and the effective use of linguistic devices in academic discourse. Foundational issues such as second language (L2) writing errors, assessment difficulties, and limitations in corpus-based instruction have been widely documented (Chuanpipatpong, 2025; Prapobratnakul, 2024; Tongsukkaeng & Fangsaken, 2026).

Recent studies indicate that barriers to academic writing proficiency remain, highlighting the need for instructional frameworks that support both performance and learner attitudes (Sawetsiri & Wudthayagorn, 2025). Mana (2024) further reports that students respond positively to peer feedback, particularly on coherence, with notable improvements in grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics.

More focused research shows gaps in the use of hedges and boosters, key resources for stance and epistemic modality. Khunasathitchai et al. (2025) found heavy reliance on modal verbs and limited use of other epistemic devices in research abstracts, while Seekhem et al. (2024) reported variation in hedging use among undergraduates, with lower-level writers using hedges more frequently in scientific reports.

Overall, these studies highlight the complex challenges faced by Thai EFL learners and the need for integrated instruction, strategic support, and formative feedback. However, research on the use of hedges and boosters in extended academic texts such as Independent Studies remains limited.

METHODOLOGY

Corpus

This corpus-based study analyzes quantitative data from 20 IS manuscripts written by fourth-year undergraduate students majoring in English for International Communication (EIC) as part of the BOAEC 115—Independent Studies course requirement. Before this course, the students completed BOAEC 109—Research Methodology in Language Studies in their third year. As these students were still developing their academic writing abilities, they are referred to in this study as novice academic writers. Previous studies describe novice academic writers as learners with limited experience in scholarly publication who are still developing competence in academic discourse and often encounter challenges in producing publishable work (Nur et al., 2022; Tribble, 2019; Wiboonwachara & Rungrojsuwan, 2021).

The manuscripts, developed under supervisory guidance and archived in the university library and EIC department, comprise a corpus of 128,526 words. The texts were randomly selected from exemplary submissions produced between Academic Years 2019 and 2023, with four manuscripts representing each year. All manuscripts were drawn from a single academic program and focused on English language and culture to maintain genre and topical consistency. Although the sample size is relatively small, focused corpora of this scale may still achieve sufficient data saturation for identifying recurrent lexico-grammatical patterns (Guest et al., 2013). Therefore, the corpus provides a suitable basis for examining the use of hedges and boosters among novice academic writers.

Data collection and analyses

This study is grounded in stance theory and complemented by metadiscourse and genre perspectives to examine how novice academic writers express attitude, certainty, and evaluation in IS manuscripts. It adopts a multi-framework approach, integrating Farrokhi and Emami's (2008) taxonomy of stance markers with the grammatical classifications of epistemic modality by Holmes (1988) and Takimoto (2015). Farrokhi and Emami provide lexical identification, while Holmes and Takimoto offer grammatical categorization of epistemic stance, allowing for a more systematic analysis of hedges and boosters in terms of both form and function. The process thus includes:

Identification of hedges and boosters

Hedges and boosters in the IS manuscripts were initially identified both manually and with the assistance of AntConc (Anthony, 2024), a text analysis tool that detects specific linguistic features. To ensure reliability and reduce subjectivity, two linguists independently identified the linguistic devices. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion to reach full agreement. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa, showing substantial agreement ($K = 0.82$), confirming the consistency and robustness of the coding process (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Frequency of hedges and boosters

After identification, the occurrences of hedges and boosters were counted, and the most common ones were analyzed. This quantitative analysis provided an overview of their usage across the manuscripts.

Categorization of hedges and boosters by epistemic modality

The identified and counted hedges and boosters were categorized grammatically based on their epistemic modality. The classification reflects the devices' role in expressing certainty, uncertainty, probability, and other nuanced representations. In this study, the categorization of hedges and boosters includes epistemic modality in adjectives, adverbial modal auxiliaries, nouns, and verbs.

Each of these categories was analyzed to determine its frequency and contextual usage within the IS manuscripts. To address instances of ambiguity, a contextual analysis approach was adopted. Each occurrence of potentially indeterminate markers (e.g., *clearly, feel, should*) was analyzed in relation to its immediate sentence and broader paragraph-level context to determine whether it functioned epistemically—signaling the writer's degree of certainty, judgment, or stance—or descriptively, referring to observable or factual information. This distinction was made to ensure accurate and consistent categorization of stance markers within the corpus.

Categorization of hedges and boosters in sections of the IS manuscripts

The study also aimed to identify which among the sections of the IS manuscripts contained the highest number of hedges and boosters. This spatial analysis provided insight into the distribution of these linguistic devices throughout the texts. The sections analyzed followed the IMRaD structure—comprising Introduction, Methodology, Results, and Discussion—providing a comprehensive and coherent presentation of the IS manuscripts (Todorović, 2003). Additionally, the Abstract and Conclusion were combined into a single section, as both provide overall summaries of the IS and typically contain hedges and boosters. This approach follows Serholt (2012) and is further supported by Shrivastava (2016), who argues that the two sections can be jointly analyzed due to their shared summarizing function.

Contextual evaluation

Finally, hedges and boosters were analyzed in terms of their contextual use, focusing on how they functioned within IS manuscripts to convey meaning and manage levels of certainty or uncertainty. This comprehensive approach enabled a systematic examination of their distribution and use in the writing of fourth-year English majors.

RESULTS, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION

Identification of hedges and boosters

The following hedges and boosters were identified in the IS manuscripts of the EIC students:

Table 1
List of hedges found in the corpus of the study

almost	believe	likely	presumably	speculate
apparently	claim	mainly	probably	suggest
appear	could	may	quite	tend
approximately	feel	might	seem	think
argue	generally	most	should	typically
around	indicate	ought	slightly	usually
assume	infer	possible	sometimes	

Table 1 presents a detailed list of 1 hedges in the IS manuscripts. A total of 34 hedging lexical items were documented, spanning various grammatical categories such as adjectives, adverbs, modal auxiliaries, and verbs.

Table 2
List of boosters found in the corpus of the study

absolutely	clear	find	obvious	really
actually	clearly	in fact	obviously	show
always	exactly	indeed	of course	(the) fact

Table 2 shows that 15 boosters were found in the corpus, consisting of adjectives, adverbs, nouns, and verbs.

A wide range of lexical items was observed in the IS manuscripts of novice academic writers to express epistemic modality through hedges and boosters. This diversity suggests that the students possess a basic awareness of how to convey varying degrees of certainty and assertiveness in academic writing. It also reflects a developing ability to manage non-absolutism and adopt an appropriate authorial stance. However, Somsakoon et al. (2023) note that L2 learners are often encouraged to adopt a straightforward writing style. As Hinkel (2005) argues, such pedagogical emphasis may discourage the use of hedging and reduce expressions of uncertainty or tentativeness in academic writing.

The presence of diverse epistemic markers—modal verbs, adverbs, adjectives, reporting verbs, and nouns—further suggests that students have likely encountered these features through reading and formal instruction in writing courses as well as other related subjects. This contrasts with findings from other studies reporting that novice academic writers often lack awareness of their over-assertiveness and tend to overuse certain hedging markers (Seekhem et al., 2024; Wiboonwachara & Rungrojsuwan, 2021).

It is important to note that a common challenge for novice academic writers, particularly non-native English speakers, is an incomplete understanding of the ideas or tasks they are addressing. This often leads to an overreliance on memorized phrases rather than a nuanced comprehension of the rhetorical functions of hedges and boosters. Similar patterns have been observed in prior research, where novice academic writers frequently use these linguistic devices without fully appreciating their persuasive and interactional roles within academic discourse (Coffin et al., 2003; Flowerdew, 1999; Mauranen, 1993).

Another probable factor influencing students' use of stance markers is source-text borrowing. Novice academic writers often model their writing on published research articles or existing manuscripts that are readily available and accessible to them, adopting the rhetorical structures and linguistic features found in these texts. While this practice may help students learn academic conventions, it can also hinder the development of a distinct authorial voice and the effective integration of source material, particularly among non-native English writers (Zhang & Wang, 2024). Previous research has shown that novice academic writers frequently replicate language from existing studies, sometimes relying heavily on original phrasing without fully integrating their own linguistic resources (Weigle & Parker, 2012). This reliance highlights the need for explicit instruction that promotes critical engagement and supports the development of original contributions in academic writing.

Frequency of hedges and boosters

In the manuscripts, a total of 341 instances of epistemic modality markers—hedges and boosters—were identified, as shown in Table 3. Hedges appeared markedly more often, with 288 occurrences (2.24 per 1,000 words), while boosters were used less frequently, with 53 instances (0.41 per 1,000 words). Combined, these markers accounted for 2.65 occurrences per 1,000 words. Presenting frequency per 1,000 words allows for standardized comparison across manuscripts of varying lengths.

Table 3
Frequency of hedges and boosters in the corpus of the study

Linguistic Tool	Frequency	% per 1000 words
Hedges	288	2.24%
Boosters	53	0.41%
TOTAL	341	2.65%

The present study reveals that novice academic writers tend to rely heavily on hedges, a finding consistent with Somsakoon et al. (2023), who also observed frequent hedging among lower-level writers. However, this result contrasts with the findings of Wiboonwachara and Rungrojsuwan (2021), who reported that Thai undergraduate academic writers used relatively fewer hedging markers, possibly due to limited proficiency in expressing nuanced degrees of certainty. This discrepancy may suggest variation in students' exposure to academic writing conventions or differences in instructional contexts. Hyland (1996) further noted that non-expert EFL writers often struggle to balance assertiveness with caution in academic writing. Similarly, the effective use of hedging requires subtle linguistic and critical thinking skills, which are often

challenging for non-native speakers, including Thai EFL students (Petchkij, 2019). Together, these findings highlight the importance of strengthening students' understanding of hedging strategies to support appropriate epistemic stance-taking. Raising awareness of hedging conventions is essential for improving students' participation in academic discourse (Chaisiri et al., 2025).

The preference for hedging among novice academic writers, particularly Thai EFL students, may reflect instruction in pragmatic and academic writing conventions that encourage cautious and context-sensitive expression. Such instruction helps learners understand how hedges function to soften claims, express caution, and maintain an appropriate academic tone. As Rose (2005) notes, pragmatics instruction can improve second language performance, potentially increasing students' awareness and use of hedging strategies in academic writing. The strong presence of hedges may also stem from students' reliance on formulaic expressions and fixed phrases that soften claims and present arguments more cautiously (Wishnoff, 2000; Yagız & Demir, 2014), reflecting a developing awareness of stance-taking in academic discourse.

The low frequency of boosters observed in this study aligns with Luyun's (2024) findings, suggesting that novice academic writers may be less inclined to express certainty and reinforce claims because they are still developing the rhetorical competence needed to balance confidence and caution in academic discourse. Limited use of boosters may also reflect developing authorial confidence and limited familiarity with adopting a more assertive academic stance. Since boosters contribute to clarity, cohesion, and the projection of academic authority (Ningrum et al., 2024), their infrequent use may indicate an emerging academic voice.

Overall, the findings suggest that Thai EFL learners' use of stance markers is shaped by interacting factors related to instruction, rhetorical conventions, and writing experience. The study demonstrates how novice academic writers negotiate caution and certainty through hedging and boosting devices, reflecting their developing rhetorical competence in academic discourse. Consequently, explicit instruction in both hedging and boosting strategies may help students develop a more balanced and effective academic stance in English academic writing. As Alward et al. (2012) suggest, such pedagogical support can foster learners' ability to adopt more nuanced academic voices and strengthen their confidence in academic communication.

Table 4
The 5 most frequently used hedges and boosters in the corpus of the study

Hedges	Frequency	Booster	Frequency
may	52	show	11
might	27	always	9
would	22	clearly	7
seem	16	find	5
could	15	really	4

The dominant hedge as seen in Table 4, *may*, alongside *might*, *would*, *seem*, and *could*, emphasizes a pronounced inclination toward expressing possibility and uncertainty. In contrast, boosters were markedly less frequent, with *show*, *always*, *clearly*, *find*, and *really* representing the most common forms. This pattern is prevalent in academic writing across

proficiency levels, with modal auxiliaries being the most frequently used hedging devices, while verbs and adverbs commonly serve as boosters among both novice and experienced non-native English writers, as demonstrated in several studies (Mahdavi-rad, 2021; Sukhanindr, 2009).

Classification of hedges and boosters

After manually identifying the hedges and boosters in the manuscripts, they were categorized according to their grammatical functions, based on their epistemic modality. Figure 1 presents a comprehensive frequency list of hedges and boosters found in the manuscripts, organized by category.

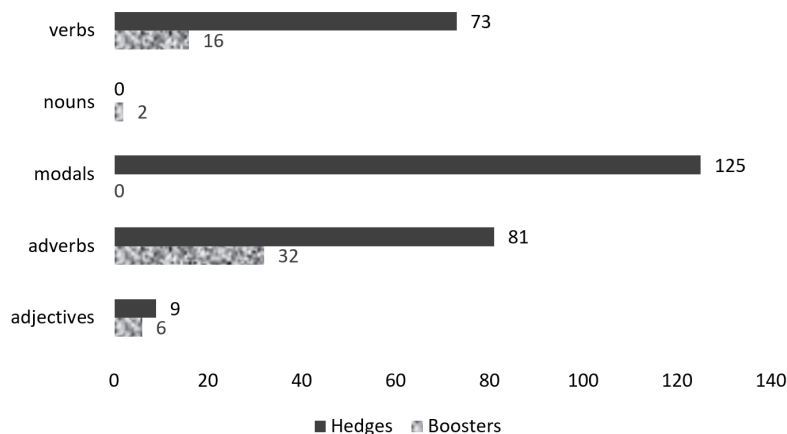


Figure 1 Frequency of hedges and boosters in the IS manuscripts

Hedges accounted for the majority, with 288 instances, and modal auxiliaries were the most frequent, followed by adverbs and verbs. In contrast, boosters appeared 53 times, with adverbs being the most common, followed by verbs. Adjectives made a minimal contribution to both hedges and boosters. Nouns were almost entirely absent, appearing only twice as boosters and not at all as hedges.

Modal auxiliary hedges and boosters used in epistemic modality

The results show that modal auxiliaries function mainly as hedging devices rather than boosters, expressing tentativeness, probability, and epistemic caution. No instances of modal auxiliaries used for strong certainty were found, indicating that novice academic writers rarely use them for assertive claims. This reinforces their role as key markers of mitigation in academic writing and aligns with studies showing their frequent use as hedges in Thai university students' writing (Seekhem et al., 2024; Somsakoon et al., 2023; Wiboonwachara & Rungrojsuwan, 2021).

Moreover, genre differences further explain this pattern. Hashim (2023) notes that modal hedges are common in academic writing, while modal boosters are more frequent in journalistic texts, reflecting contrasting communicative goals: caution in academic discourse versus

assertiveness in journalism. Accordingly, the absence of modal boosters in the manuscripts aligns with academic conventions that prioritize precision and restraint over strong assertion.

Table 5
Modal auxiliaries that function as hedges and boosters with their frequencies

Hedge	Frequency
may	52
might	27
would	22
could	15
should	9
TOTAL	125

Specifically, *may* appeared most frequently as shown in Table 5. Likewise, Demir (2018), Hardjanto (2016), and Varttala (2001) identified *may* as one of the most commonly used modal auxiliaries for hedging in academic articles, including among non-native English writers. As a grammatically simple and widely taught modal verb, *may* is typically introduced early in English language instruction. It serves as a typical example of a hedging expression, as described by Hyland (1998a). Its simplicity and accessibility make it especially appealing to learners who may not yet feel confident using more complex or nuanced hedging strategies.

- (1) Metaphors *may* also help to understand language learning. —IS-2023-1
- (2) Learners *may* have different learning strategies. —IS-2021-3

May functions as a hedge in both sentences (1) and (2), expressing uncertainty or possibility rather than certainty about metaphors' impact and learners' strategies. After *might*, *would* also appeared relatively frequently, although in some instances it expressed non-epistemic modality in this study.

- (3) The result of the present study *would* provide important pedagogical benefits. —IS-2021-2
- (4) This study *would* like to test the students' ability to differentiate between British and American English. —IS-2019-2

In sentence (3), *would* acts as a hedge, expressing uncertainty or potentiality about the study's outcome, softening the claim. In sentence (4), *would* is used politely with *like to*, showing intention rather than uncertainty.

Other modals like *could* and *should* also function as hedges, expressing possibility and caution in the students' propositions.

- (5) It *could* be said that students seem to believe that practice in speaking in English can help them get a job in the future as well as English speaking *could* help them when they go abroad. —IS-2021-4
- (6) In different settings, people *could* choose to speak English to connect with others. —IS-2022-3

Sentence (5) contains *two* instances of *could*. *It could be said* signals modesty, while *could help* expresses possibility rather than certainty, making the statements tentative. In contrast, sentence (6) uses *could* to indicate ability or potential, not uncertainty, reflecting a conditional meaning rather than epistemic modality. Additionally, out of 50 occurrences of *should* in the corpus, only nine (9) convey epistemic modality.

(7) Students *should* find that metaphors enhance their creative thinking, although results may differ among individuals. —IS-2023-1

(8) The next research *should* focus on increasing the scope within the same group. —IS-2021-3

(9) Actually, motivation *should* be understood as a process of action. —IS-2021-4

Sentence (7) effectively uses *should* as a hedge, indicating an expectation while acknowledging possible variation among individuals. However, in (8) and (9), *should* expresses recommendation or advice rather than epistemic uncertainty.

Adverb hedges and boosters used in epistemic modality

Adverbs play a key role in expressing epistemic modality in the manuscripts, appearing 113 times as hedges and boosters (Table 6). This aligns with Incahroensak and Gammper (2019), who found adverbs to be the most frequently used devices by Thai students in academic writing. They help novice academic writers adjust levels of certainty and express attitudes (Hyland & Milton, 1997), reflecting their ability to moderate claims with relative ease.

Among hedging adverbs, *usually* is the most frequent, followed by *slightly*. In English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing, *usually* is often used to soften generalizations and reduce full commitment (Crompton, 1997).

Table 6
Adverbs that function as hedges and boosters with their frequencies

Hedge	Frequency	Booster	Frequency
usually	14	always	9
slightly	12	clearly	7
likely	11	really	4
almost	9	<i>others</i>	12
approximately	9		
<i>others</i>	26		
TOTAL	81	TOTAL	32

(10) Therefore, people that study the English language *usually* have a reason related to an increase in opportunities. —IS-2021-4

In sentence (10), the word *usually* suggests that while many people study English for reasons related to increased opportunities, this is not universally true. The hedge softens the claim, leaving room for exceptions.

The adverb *likely* appeared eleven times, while *almost* and *approximately* were each used nine times. The remaining adverbs in Table 6 occurred between six and one time, reflecting minimal frequency of use.

(11) The population of this study was *approximately* 70 EFL 1st year undergraduate students. —IS-2022-3

In sentence (11), *approximately* functions as an epistemic hedge, indicating that the figure (70 students) is an estimate rather than an exact count. It reflects uncertainty and aligns with epistemic modality.

Among boosters, the adverb *always* is noteworthy, though less frequent than common hedges. As Biber et al. (1999) note, *always* occurs relatively often in academic texts, typically with the present simple tense to convey general truths or recurring phenomena.

(12) Accents that *always* get recognized are standard British or US accents because they dominate a big part of many commercial teaching materials and the media. —IS-2019-1

In sentence (12), *always* functions as a booster, emphasizing a consistent and certain recognition of British or US accents. It conveys strong, unchanging certainty rather than occasional occurrence.

Similarly, *clearly* is a frequently used booster, reflecting a tendency among non-native writers to rely on adverbs to express strong stance. It functions as an evidential adverb indicating support from observable evidence (Erns, 2009; Rozumko, 2017) and has also been identified as a dominant booster in academic writing of L2 students (Lo et al., 2021).

However, *clearly* may also serve discourse functions such as enhancing coherence and guiding interpretation, depending on context and writer intent (Hyland & Jiang, 2016).

(13) It *clearly* showed that students of X university are highly motivated to practice speaking in English. —IS-2021-4

(14) It is undeniable that collocations are one of the tools that help people to communicate with each other *clearly*. —IS-2023-2

In sentence (13), *clearly* functions as an epistemic booster, emphasizing strong certainty about students' motivation. In sentence (14), it serves as an adverb of manner, describing how communication occurs. When *clearly* modifies the entire proposition to express certainty, it is classified as a booster; when it describes how an action is done, it is an adverb of manner. In ambiguous cases, context was carefully analyzed to determine its function.

Other adverb boosters were also present in the study's corpus, appearing with low frequency, typically only once, twice, or thrice.

Verb hedges and boosters used in epistemic modality

Verb-based hedges and boosters were moderately used across the manuscripts as seen in Table 7, appearing less frequently than modals and adverbs. This finding aligns with Ardianti et al. (2023), who reported that verb hedges and boosters were relatively scarce in academic writing. Among the verbs, *seem* occurred most often, followed by *indicate* and *feel*, primarily functioning to express tentative evaluations or subjective stances.

Table 7
Verbs that functions as hedges and boosters with their frequencies

Hedge	Frequency	Booster	Frequency
seem	16	show	11
indicate	13	find	5
feel	11		
suggest	8		
assume	7		
tend	7		
others	20		
TOTAL	73	TOTAL	16

Lexical verbs generally carry more fixed meanings than modals or adverbs, making it more challenging for novice writers to subtly adjust their stance without altering the core proposition (Schleppegrell, 2004). This semantic rigidity may explain why Thai EFL students tend to prefer modals and adverbs, which provide greater flexibility in calibrating certainty and are easier to manipulate during the early stages of academic writing development.

Despite their lower frequency, the use of perceptual and cognitive verbs such as *seem*, *suggest*, and *appear* reflects an emerging awareness among students of academic stance-taking. These verbs enable writers to balance commitment and caution, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and credible academic voice. However, their relatively limited use may reflect students' insufficient exposure to varied academic writing models or limited proficiency in employing more sophisticated stance expressions appropriately in context. This trend is consistent with findings by Serholt (2012) and Shrivastava (2016), who identified *seem* as one of the most frequently used hedges among Thai EFL students.

The occasional use of these verbs may indicate limited instruction or confidence in employing more complex syntactic structures. Nevertheless, their presence in the corpus underscores their ongoing importance in signaling epistemic judgment and shaping the rhetorical tone of academic texts.

(15) Most of the students *seem* to have a difficulty identifying whether the sport rugby belongs to British or American sports. —IS-2019-2

(16) Some learners *feel* that native speakers pronounce words more clearly than others. —IS-2022-4

(17) This can make learners *feel* stressed. —IS-2021-4

In (15), *seem* functions as a hedge, indicating uncertainty, while *feel* in (16) expresses a subjective perception. However, in (17), *feel* refers only to emotion without hedging.

Suggest (8) and *assume* (7) are also notable, as they propose possibilities or recommendations. Other verbs occur less frequently, showing limited use of these hedging forms.

(18) The findings of this research *suggest* that the vocabulary size needs to be developed among the students. —IS- 2021-1

(19) This can be *assumed* that they may encounter English learning difficulties. —IS-2022-1

The word *suggest* in sentence (18) functions as a hedge, indicating that the findings point to a possibility or recommendation rather than a definite conclusion, thus it softens its claim. Similarly, *assume* in sentence (19) expresses uncertainty about the learners' experiences.

In contrast, boosters are less frequent but notable, with *show* appearing 11 times and *find* 5 times, both used to strengthen certainty in the students' arguments.

(20) These factors *show* that using English correctly is still relevant in the modern world. —IS-2023-2

(21) Table 1 *shows* the 26 types of grammatical errors committed by the students. —IS-2020-1

The reporting verb *show* can express different levels of epistemic modality depending on context. In sentence (20), *show* acts as a booster, strongly asserting that the factors clearly support the importance of using English correctly, indicating high certainty. In contrast, in sentence (21), *show* functions as a neutral reporting verb, objectively presenting information from the table without implying certainty or emphasis, making it a straightforward, neutral statement rather than a booster.

Adjective and noun hedges and boosters used in epistemic modality

Adjectival stance markers were rare in the corpus, all using possible (Table 8). This aligns with previous research (Hyland, 1998b; Lagerqvist, 2023), which shows that adjectives are less commonly used for epistemic stance, as writers—especially novice academic writers—prefer more accessible forms such as modals and adverbs. These markers may be more manageable for learners while still enabling nuanced stance expression.

Table 8
Adjectives that function as hedges and boosters with their frequencies

Hedge	Frequency	Booster	Frequency
possible	9	clear	3
		obvious	3
TOTAL	9	TOTAL	6

(22) It makes it *possible* for students to be more interested in reading. —IS-2019-4

(23) The most *possible* cause of errors could be the participants' carelessness. —IS-2020-1

In (22), it suggests a potential but not certain result, while in (23) it presents one plausible explanation among others, thereby functioning as an epistemic hedge.

In contrast, the boosting adjectives *clear* and *obvious* appear less frequently in the manuscripts.

(24) It is *clear* that the increased use of GT significantly enhances language acquisition among EFL students. —IS-2020-3

In sentence (24), *clear* emphasizes the certainty or strong belief that interactive teaching methods significantly impact language learning, thereby functioning as an epistemic booster.

(25) It is *obvious* that students use Google Translate (GT) to look for English words and translate them into Thai. —IS-2020-3

(26) English, in this manner, has held its exceptional status in these nations, prompting the development of *obvious* varieties of English. —IS-2019-1

In (25), *obvious* functions as a booster, expressing strong certainty about the evident use of GT by students. In (26), however, it is used descriptively to indicate easily identifiable varieties of English, without conveying epistemic stance.

Only two noun boosters (*fact*) were found in the corpus, and no noun hedges appeared. This suggests that noun-based stance markers are rarely used in academic writing due to their limited flexibility and more complex structures.

Table 9
Noun that functions as hedges and boosters with their frequencies

Booster	Frequency
(the) fact	2
TOTAL	2

(27) *The fact* that English serves as a common language among ASEAN member states highlights its crucial role in fostering regional collaboration. —IS-2019-1

In sentence (27), *fact* acts as a booster, emphasizing the certainty and importance of the statement about English in ASEAN. It reinforces the claim, signaling confidence to the reader, a key function of boosters.

Frequency of hedges and boosters in the sections of the IS manuscripts

The analysis of stance markers in the manuscripts discovered distinct patterns across sections.

Notably, the Introduction contained the highest frequency of both devices as seen in Figure 2, making it the most rhetorically marked part of the manuscripts. Traditionally, the Introduction

is expected to present background information, identify gaps in existing research, define the problem, and highlight the significance of the study clearly and neutrally (Paltridge & Starfield, 2016), with minimal use of hedges or boosters. However, the findings of this present study suggest that novice academic writers strategically balance cautious and assertive language to manage their claims in this section. This challenges the common assumption of a less rhetorically marked Introduction and supports Farrokhi and Emami's (2008) and Hryniuk's (2018) observations of frequent hedging and boosting in this section.

In contrast, Mahdavi-rad (2021) found that non-native writers tend to employ more stance markers in the Discussion, a difference that may be related to proficiency of the academic writers. The relatively short and brief Discussion section written by these novice academic students in this study likely limited opportunities for extended stance expression.

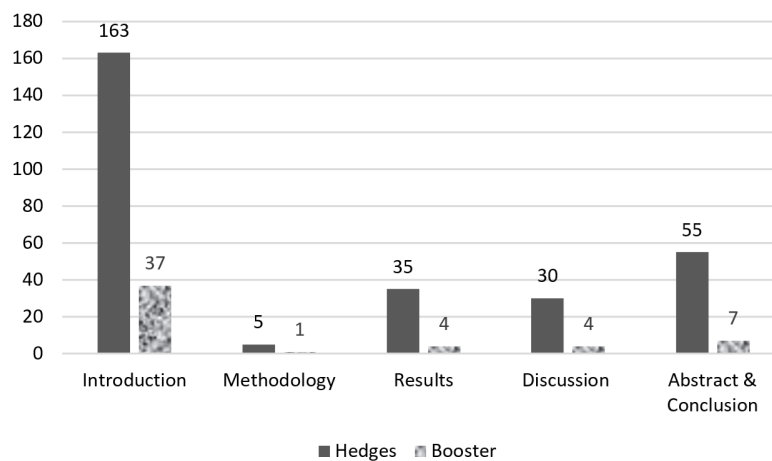


Figure 2 Distribution of hedges and boosters in the sections of the corpus

The Abstract and Conclusion featured a higher frequency of hedges than boosters, consistent with Brown's (1988) view that these sections summarize the research and encourage cautious language. This pattern aligns with Donadio and Passariello's (2022) findings, which highlight the Abstract as one of the most heavily hedged and boosted parts of academic texts.

The Results and Discussion sections demonstrated moderate use of hedges and boosters, diverging from Ranjbar et al. (2023) and Tun et al. (2021), who identified these sections as the most stance-rich among non-native writers. This discrepancy may be attributed to contextual differences: the referenced studies analyzed published academic papers by experienced non-native English writers, whereas the present study investigated IS manuscripts produced by less experienced university-level EFL students.

Conversely, the Methodology section exhibited the lowest frequency of hedges and boosters, reflecting its conventional role in delivering objective, precise descriptions of research procedures. This corresponds with Ranjbar et al.'s (2023) and Salager-Meyer's (1994) characterization of the Methodology as typically the least hedged or boosted section.

The corpus demonstrated a clear preference for hedging over boosting. These patterns suggest that even novice EFL student writers are gradually mastering the rhetorical conventions of academic texts by tailoring their use of hedges and boosters to suit the communicative goals and expectations of each manuscript section, demonstrating their growing proficiency as guided by instruction in the classroom.

LIMITATIONS

While the corpus is balanced across five academic years, the relatively small number of manuscripts ($n = 20$) should be considered when interpreting the findings. Nevertheless, the overall corpus size (128,526 words) enables the identification of recurring lexico-grammatical patterns within this dataset. It should also be noted that the focus on exemplary manuscripts, while supporting textual consistency and analytical comparability, may not fully capture the full range of variability in EFL student writing. Future research may build on the present study by incorporating a larger and more diverse corpus across proficiency levels and institutional contexts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study of undergraduate students' IS manuscripts revealed a notable imbalance between hedges and boosters, reflecting key linguistic tendencies in their academic writing. The dominance of hedges—particularly modals and adverbs—suggests a preference for caution and indirectness.

The distribution of hedges and boosters across manuscript sections further illustrates students' cautious stance, especially in the Introduction, where more assertive language is typically expected, and in the Abstract and Conclusion when summarizing findings. This pattern may reflect students' sensitivity to academic complexity or a developing sense of confidence. The relatively low use of stance markers in the Discussion section may result from students' limited engagement with this part, reducing opportunities to apply these devices.

The study reveals a stronger reliance on hedging than boosting, indicating an emerging academic voice characterized by caution and tentative rhetorical control. This tendency may also vary according to writing purpose and genre, which shape how stance is negotiated in texts.

Although research on hedges and boosters is well-established, this study contributes new insights by focusing on undergraduate IS manuscripts written by Thai EFL students—a relatively underexplored genre and learner group. The findings highlight a developing awareness of stance-taking, with hedges and boosters serving as tools for shaping an emerging academic voice.

To support this development, pedagogical interventions should help students balance caution and assertiveness. Effective strategies include genre-based tasks, corpus-informed instruction,

and materials that contrast appropriate hedging with over-caution, along with peer review and revision focused on stance.

Creating an academic environment that values clarity can better prepare Thai EFL students for scholarly discourse. With targeted support, they can produce more confident and academically appropriate writing and participate more effectively in global academic communication.

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