

Interpersonal Analysis of Hedging in Theses and Dissertations of ESL Postgraduate Students in North-Central Universities in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examined the use of hedging as an interpersonal linguistic resource in postgraduate theses and dissertations written by English as Second Language (ESL) Postgraduate students in North-central Nigerian universities. Grounded in the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework, the research adopted a qualitative textual analysis design to explore how hedging devices particularly modal verbs, adverbs, and projection clauses were employed to express modality, stance, and interpersonal meaning. A total of 18 theses were purposively selected across three disciplines including Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences from University of Ilorin, Federal University of Education Kontagora and Nassarawa State University Keffi. Findings revealed that while students demonstrated awareness of hedging as a rhetorical device, many encountered challenges in its appropriate use. Common errors included overuse, underuse, and misuse of modal verbs such as 'must', 'may', and 'might', often resulting in either overly assertive or excessively tentative claims. Linguistic transfer from local languages and limited instruction in academic discourse conventions were also identified as key factors affecting their use of hedging. The study further showed that SFL provides valuable insights into how interpersonal meanings are realized through hedging, particularly in expressing probability, obligation, and evaluative stance across disciplines. The study concluded that effective use of hedging enhances clarity, scholarly tone, and communicative competence in academic writing. It recommended the incorporation of SFL-based pedagogical approaches in postgraduate writing instruction, emphasizing modality and interpersonal meaning to strengthen ESL students' ability to participate effectively in global academic discourse.

Introduction

The linguistic experience is increasingly ascertaining the implication of hedging as a dynamic linguistic strategy used by postgraduate students in the perspective of English as a second language (ESL). The paper intends to identify the common errors and challenges ESL students face in employing hedging devices in their academic writing, as well as investigate the influence of Systemic Functional Linguistics on the use and effectiveness of hedging in academic discourse. By engaging the Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) framework, the study seeks to expose how these students traverse the intricacies of academic discourse through hedging.

Academic Writing

Academic writing competence represents a fundamental component of postgraduate education, especially for English as Second Language (ESL) Postgraduate students whose scholarly development depends heavily on their ability to produce research that meets international academic standards. For postgraduate students in Nigerian universities, mastery of academic discourse conventions, including clarity, coherence, and appropriate expression of stance, is critical to demonstrating disciplinary knowledge and engaging with the global research community (Hyland, 2019; Paltridge & Starfield, 2020). Academic writing

in English requires not only linguistic accuracy but also rhetorical sophistication, particularly the ability to express opinions, judgments, and claims in ways that are persuasive yet cautious. Among the various rhetorical strategies available to writers, hedging has emerged as one of the most significant tools for managing the level of certainty or tentativeness in scholarly communication (Martínez, 2005; Hyland, 2017).

Hedging serves as a vital linguistic and rhetorical device through which academic writers express epistemic stance, qualify their arguments, and maintain scholarly modesty. It enables authors to balance assertiveness and caution, presenting claims as provisional rather than absolute, thereby aligning their writing with the norms of academic humility and critical inquiry (Salager-Meyer, 1994; Hyland, 1998). In research writing, hedging often manifests through linguistic choices such as modal verbs (e.g., *might*, *could*), epistemic adverbs (e.g., *possibly*, *likely*), and reporting structures (e.g., *it appears that*, *the findings suggest*), all of which help the writer acknowledge uncertainty and invite further dialogue within the academic community (Basturkmen & Elder, 2004; Ädel, 2021). However, for ESL postgraduate students, especially those in multilingual contexts like Nigeria, mastering hedging can be challenging due to linguistic transfer from the first language, limited exposure to disciplinary writing conventions, and inadequate instructional emphasis on pragmatic competence in academic writing (Mba, 2015; Ogunleye, 2016).

In many Nigerian universities, the challenges of effective hedging use among ESL students are linked to broader institutional and pedagogical issues. Students are often taught to prioritize factual accuracy and grammatical correctness, with less attention paid to rhetorical and interpersonal aspects of writing that convey authorial stance (Ajayi, 2022). Consequently, many postgraduate theses and dissertations produced by Nigerian ESL students tend to exhibit over-assertiveness, lack of modality, or inappropriate use of hedging devices, all of which can undermine the credibility and scholarly tone of their work (Abdullahi, 2023). These difficulties highlight the need for a more linguistically informed pedagogical approach that can account for the functional roles of language in constructing meaning, positioning the writer, and engaging with readers.

Against this backdrop, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides a robust theoretical framework for examining how ESL students use

language to perform interpersonal functions in academic writing. Rooted in Halliday's (1994) model of language as a social semiotic system, SFL views language as a resource for making meaning across three meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The interpersonal meta-function, which this study focuses on, deals with how writers express attitude, judgment, and degrees of certainty through linguistic choices such as mood, modality, and evaluative stance (Eggins, 2004; Martin & White, 2005). This meta-function offers a powerful analytical lens for investigating hedging because it captures how writers negotiate relationships with their readers and manage epistemic commitment in discourse (Matthiessen, 2015; Hyland, 2019). Through applying the SFL framework, this study seeks to uncover the extent to which ESL postgraduate students in North-western Nigerian universities employ hedging to convey appropriate interpersonal meanings and how their linguistic choices reflect their pragmatic awareness of academic conventions.

The present study is guided by two specific objectives:

1. to identify common errors and challenges ESL students face in employing hedging devices in their academic writing, and
2. to investigate the influence of Systemic Functional Linguistics on the use and effectiveness of hedging in academic discourse.

The study focuses exclusively on the interpersonal meta-function, examining how modality and evaluative stance are realized in the theses and dissertations of ESL postgraduate students across three academic disciplines including Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences. This focus allows for a nuanced understanding of the linguistic and functional dimensions of hedging within the Nigerian ESL context.

Ultimately, this study is significant for advancing the pedagogy of academic writing in Nigerian universities. Through highlighting the common errors and functional limitations in students' use of hedging, it aims to provide linguistically grounded insights for curriculum design and writing instruction. The findings are expected to inform more effective teaching strategies that emphasize not only grammatical accuracy but also discourse-level competence and interpersonal sensitivity, thereby enabling Nigerian ESL students to participate more confidently and credibly in global academic discourse (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Ajayi, 2022).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This section establishes the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of the study by linking the phenomenon of hedging in academic writing to the Interpersonal Meta-function of language within the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework. The framework provides the foundation for understanding how linguistic choices, particularly modality and stance expressions, function to mediate relationships between writers and readers in academic discourse.

Concept of Hedging in Academic Writing

Hedging is a rhetorical and linguistic strategy that allows writers to express tentativeness, uncertainty, and politeness in their claims, particularly in academic discourse. Hyland (1996) defines hedging as a device that enables writers to present statements with caution and flexibility, acknowledging that knowledge is often partial or provisional. Similarly, Salager-Meyer (1994) views hedging as a communicative strategy for indicating a lack of full commitment to the truth value of a proposition, thus creating space for alternative interpretations and scholarly dialogue. In recent years, Wu and Paltridge (2021) have emphasized that hedging is a marker of authorial stance and an essential component of academic credibility, as it demonstrates the writer's awareness of disciplinary norms and epistemic humility.

The primary function of hedging in academic writing is to balance assertion with caution. It enables writers to present arguments that are persuasive yet respectful of differing viewpoints, reflecting both politeness and scholarly integrity (Hyland, 2005). Through hedging, writers can express various degrees of certainty, probability, and obligation, thus signaling their epistemic stance toward their propositions. Common forms of hedging include modal verbs such as *may*, *might*, and *could*; epistemic adverbs like *probably*, *possibly*, and *apparently*; and projection clauses such as *it seems that* or *it is likely that* (Salager-Meyer, 1994; Martínez, 2005). These devices function to moderate the strength of claims and to position the writer within the ongoing scholarly conversation.

In academic discourse, particularly in research writing, hedging plays a critical role in achieving rhetorical balance. Without hedging, arguments may appear overly assertive or dogmatic, which can undermine the writer's credibility and scholarly tone (Hyland, 2017). Conversely, overuse of hedging can make a text appear weak or uncertain. Effective academic writers, therefore, employ hedging

strategically to express modesty, invite engagement, and enhance persuasiveness. This rhetorical skill is particularly important for ESL postgraduate students, who often struggle to navigate between confidences and caution due to limited exposure to academic discourse conventions (Wu & Paltridge, 2021; Mba, 2015).

Overview of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday (1985) and further expanded by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), provides a functional approach to the study of language, viewing it as a social semiotic system, a resource for making meaning in specific contexts. Unlike structural or formalist theories that focus on syntax or isolated linguistic forms, SFL emphasizes how language choices reflect social purposes and contextual meanings. In SFL, language is seen as performing three meta-functions simultaneously: ideational, interpersonal, and textual.

The ideational meta-function represents human experience and constructs knowledge of the world; it is concerned with how language encodes processes, participants, and circumstances. The textual meta-function organizes discourse and enables the flow of information through cohesion and thematic progression. The interpersonal meta-function, which is the focus of this study, is concerned with enacting social relationships, attitudes, and evaluations through linguistic resources such as mood, modality, and appraisal (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Eggins, 2004). This meta-function deals with how speakers and writers use language to express commitment, judgment, and stance, making it especially relevant to the study of hedging in academic writing.

SFL provides a powerful theoretical lens for analysing how linguistic resources function in context to achieve communicative goals. It helps explain how writers use specific grammatical structures to manage interpersonal meanings, negotiate relationships with readers, and construct identities as credible academic authors. This study applies the SFL framework to analyse the interpersonal meta-functional features of hedging in postgraduate theses and dissertations written by ESL students in North-western Nigerian universities.

Interpersonal Meta-function and Hedging

The interpersonal meta-function in SFL refers to the linguistic resources used by writers or speakers to express attitudes, judgments, and degrees of certainty in social interaction. It encompasses features such as

mood (declarative, interrogative, imperative), modality (expressing probability, obligation, or inclination), and appraisal (evaluative stance). These elements are crucial for understanding how authors position themselves and their readers within the communicative act (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin & White, 2005). In academic writing, modality is particularly important because it encodes degrees of certainty or obligation, allowing writers to express opinions and findings tentatively rather than absolutely.

Hedging, therefore, functions as a central realization of the interpersonal meta-function. It enables writers to use modality to signal their epistemic stance, manage interpersonal relationships, and negotiate meaning with their readers (Hyland, 2005; Martínez, 2005). For instance, when a writer uses expressions like *the findings suggest that* or *it is possible that*, they are engaging in a subtle act of negotiation acknowledging the limits of their claims while maintaining authorial credibility. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), modality operates along a continuum of certainty and obligation, and the careful selection of modal expressions reflects the writer's awareness of disciplinary expectations and communicative purposes.

Previous studies have demonstrated that the appropriate use of modality and hedging supports effective interpersonal meaning-making in academic discourse. Hyland (2005), notes that hedging is a means of achieving a balance between asserting one's authority and showing respect for the views of others. Martínez (2005) similarly found that modality contributes to establishing a credible academic persona, especially among ESL writers. These studies collectively suggest that hedging is not merely a stylistic choice but a functional tool for negotiating stance and aligning with disciplinary norms. Within the Nigerian ESL context, understanding the interpersonal meta-functional role of hedging can shed light on how students navigate epistemic uncertainty and scholarly identity construction in their theses and dissertations.

Empirical Review

Several studies have investigated hedging from linguistic, rhetorical, and systemic functional perspectives, highlighting its significance in academic writing and the challenges faced by second-language writers. Wu and Paltridge (2021) examined hedging in Chinese postgraduate students' English academic writing and found that many students underused modal expressions and stance markers, which made their writing appear overly assertive. Similarly, Choi (2020)

analyses the use of interpersonal resources in Korean academic writing and concluded that ESL writers often lack pragmatic awareness of the rhetorical purposes of hedging, leading to misuse or omission of crucial linguistic devices.

Earlier studies by Salager-Meyer (1994) on medical research articles demonstrated that hedging serves multiple communicative functions, including the mitigation of claims and the invitation of scholarly dialogue. Neff-van Aertselaer and Ljungholm (2006) further explored hedging across academic disciplines, noting that its frequency and form vary depending on disciplinary conventions and authorial experience. These findings emphasize the complexity of hedging as a rhetorical strategy that requires both linguistic proficiency and awareness of disciplinary norms.

Despite these contributions, most existing studies have focused on ESL contexts in Asia and Europe, with limited attention to the African academic landscape. Research on hedging among Nigerian postgraduate students remains scarce, particularly within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Moreover, while previous studies have examined hedging from a discourse-pragmatic or corpus-based perspective, few have analysed it through the lens of the Interpersonal Meta-function, which foregrounds the social and relational meanings encoded in language use. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by investigating how ESL postgraduate students in North-western Nigerian universities employ hedging as a realization of interpersonal meaning in their theses and dissertations, identifying their common challenges and evaluating how SFL principles can inform more effective academic writing pedagogy.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative textual analysis design rooted in the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework. The design enabled a detailed and interpretive examination of how hedging devices were employed in postgraduate academic writing by ESL students in North-western Nigerian universities. Through focusing on the interpersonal meta-function of language, the study examined how linguistic resources such as mood, modality, and projection structures were used to express epistemic stance, politeness, and scholarly caution. The qualitative design was particularly suitable because it allowed for an in-depth analysis of textual features within authentic academic contexts, revealing the functional and rhetorical patterns of hedging as well as

the students' pragmatic competence in managing academic discourse. The SFL perspective provided a systematic way of analysing how writers used language to negotiate interpersonal meanings and align their claims with disciplinary expectations.

The population of the study comprised postgraduate theses and dissertations written by ESL students from three major universities in North-central Nigeria: University of Ilorin, Federal University of Education Kontagora and Nassarawa State University Keffi. These institutions were selected because they represent some of the leading centres of postgraduate education in the region and attract a diverse population of second-language English users. Using purposive sampling, a total of 18 theses were selected to ensure a balanced representation across academic disciplines. The sample included six theses each from the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences. This approach allowed for cross-disciplinary comparison of hedging practices and facilitated a nuanced understanding of how disciplinary conventions influenced the use of interpersonal resources in academic writing.

Data were collected from both electronic and printed copies of postgraduate theses retrieved from institutional repositories and university libraries. From each thesis, the Introduction, Discussion, and Conclusion chapters were selected for analysis, as these sections typically contained high concentrations of argumentation, evaluation, and epistemic positioning. During analysis, hedging devices were identified and categorized according to their linguistic form—modal verbs (e.g., *may*, *might*, *could*), adverbs (e.g., *probably*, *possibly*), epistemic expressions, and projection clauses (e.g., *it seems that*, *it is likely that*). Each instance of hedging was analysed based on its modality type (probability, usuality, obligation), orientation (subjective or objective), and value (high, medium, or low intensity). Attention was also given to errors and challenges such as misuse, overuse, underuse, or

omission of hedging devices. The analysis followed SFL principles for interpreting interpersonal meanings, linking linguistic choices to the writers' stance, discipline, and communicative intent. Representative excerpts from student texts were used to illustrate findings and support interpretations, allowing the study to highlight both the linguistic and pedagogical implications of hedging use in ESL academic writing.

Results and Discussion

The results and discussion of this study were organized according to the two major research objectives. The findings provided insight into the common errors and challenges encountered by ESL postgraduate students in employing hedging devices, and how Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) informed their use and effectiveness in academic writing. The qualitative textual analysis of 18 postgraduate theses across the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences revealed distinct linguistic patterns that reflected the students' epistemic stance and interpersonal engagement in scholarly discourse.

Common Errors and Challenges in Employing Hedging

The analysis revealed that ESL postgraduate students frequently misused, underused, and occasionally overused hedging devices, resulting in inconsistencies in their expression of academic caution and stance. Many theses contained modality choices that were either too strong or too weak for the intended rhetorical purpose. For instance, students often used "must" or "is evident that" to make claims that required tentative interpretation, while in other cases, they over-softened their stance using "might," "perhaps," or "it seems that," even when evidence was conclusive. Table 1 presents typical examples of hedging misuse observed in the data.

Table 1: Types of Hedging Errors

Type of Hedging Error	Example from Student Text	Comment
Overuse of strong modality	"This result must show that the theory is correct."	The use of <i>must</i> expresses undue certainty, reducing academic caution.
Underuse of hedging	"The data prove that social media causes poor performance."	The claim is too categorical; should use <i>suggest</i> or <i>indicate</i> .
Inappropriate hedging	"It seems possibly that the sample might show variation."	Redundant and awkward layering of hedging expressions.
Direct translation influence	"It is by force that the result is like this."	Reflects literal transfer from local languages lacking modal gradience.

The findings indicated that many students exhibited linguistic transfer from their first languages (particularly Hausa and Yoruba), which tend to express certainty more directly than English. This led to an inclination toward categorical statements without epistemic mitigation. Also, the limited explicit instruction on hedging in academic writing courses in Nigerian universities contributed to students' inability to appropriately calibrate certainty or probability in their claims. The results aligned with Hyland (1996), who emphasized that hedging reflects disciplinary knowledge and rhetorical competence, and with Lee (2006), who found that Asian ESL writers similarly struggled with the pragmatic deployment of modality. More recently, Wu and Paltridge (2021) also observed that hedging remains a key difficulty for non-native English postgraduate students, especially those from linguistically distant backgrounds, due to a lack of metalinguistic awareness of epistemic stance. Overall, these findings underscored that inadequate mastery of hedging led to reduced persuasiveness, rhetorical imbalance, and diminished authorial voice in students' theses.

Influence of SFL on the Use and Effectiveness of Hedging

The use of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as an analytical framework revealed how hedging devices functioned interpersonally in expressing the students' stance, caution, and authorial alignment. Through SFL's interpersonal meta-function, the analysis showed that hedging was mainly realized through the mood system (indicative vs. declarative structures), modality (probability, usuality, and obligation), and projection clauses (e.g., *it is believed that, the study suggests that*). Students' texts displayed varying levels of modality use across disciplines. In the Humanities, writers employed a relatively balanced use of epistemic modality, often using expressions like *may indicate, seems to suggest, or it is likely that*, which conveyed both authority and scholarly modesty. In contrast, Social Science and Natural Science theses leaned toward high-value modality (*must, definitely, proves*), reflecting an assumption of empirical certainty rather than interpretive caution.

Table 2 illustrates the distribution of modality types and values across disciplines.

Discipline	Modality Type	Typical Expressions	Modal Value	Interpretation
Humanities	Probability	<i>may suggest, it seems that</i>	Low–Medium	Balanced expression of uncertainty
Social Sciences	Usuality	<i>always shows, is often the case</i>	Medium–High	Suggests habitual generalizations
Natural Sciences	Obligation/Probability	<i>must prove, clearly indicates</i>	High	Overly assertive claims

The SFL analysis also revealed that most students demonstrated a limited understanding of interpersonal meaning, leading to rhetorical imbalances

between assertiveness and caution. Those who consciously applied modality markers tended to achieve greater academic credibility and reader engagement,

while others failed to convey the expected scholarly humility. The study found that effective hedging was associated with a strategic interplay between modality type (probability and usuality) and orientation (subjective or objective). For example, objective expressions such as ‘*the evidence suggests that*’ were more rhetorically effective than subjective ones like ‘*I think that*’.

Therefore, the SFL framework illuminated how interpersonal meta-function guided the interpretation of hedging as a resource for meaning negotiation in academic discourse. Students who demonstrated an implicit grasp of SFL principles were better able to modulate their stance, align with disciplinary norms, and sustain an appropriate academic tone. Conversely, those who lacked this awareness displayed unbalanced modality structures, affecting coherence and persuasiveness. These findings emphasized that integrating Systemic Functional Linguistics-based pedagogy into postgraduate writing instruction could significantly enhance students’ ability to construct academically credible and rhetorically nuanced arguments in English.

Conclusion

This study concluded that hedging serves as a vital interpersonal resource in academic writing, allowing writers to express caution, negotiate meaning, and maintain scholarly modesty. The analysis of postgraduate theses revealed that many ESL students in North-western Nigerian universities struggled with the effective use of hedging devices, often misusing or underusing modal verbs and adverbs due to limited awareness of their epistemic and rhetorical functions. The findings also showed that students demonstrated a shallow understanding of how Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) principles, particularly those within the interpersonal meta-function, influence meaning-making in academic discourse.

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