# Language of Caution and Certainty: Writing Proficiency in Hedges and Boosters in Student Essays

**Rizza Mae C. Lopez (Faculty)[1], Jefferson A. Pedida[2], Leizl Joy A. Alzate[3], Ma. Theresa L. Eustaquio[4]**

**Department of Languages and Literature, College of Arts and Sciences, Isabela State University**

## ABSTRACT

The expression of certainty and doubt is crucial in academic writing. Writers and readers must be able to distinguish between subjective evaluation and objective information presented in academic texts. Hedges and boosters primarily serve this function. Despite the evident importance of these devices, there are no apparent studies that measure students' proficiency in using them. Therefore, this study investigates the proficiency level of students regarding hedges and boosters and examines the two most common grammatical classifications within these features. It further analyzes how students epistemically express their degree of doubt and certainty in their argumentative essays. A corpus of 50 argumentative essays written by students majoring in English Language Studies at a state university in the northern Philippines was analyzed. Overall, the findings suggest that the general proficiency level of the students is in the developing stage, and epistemic modal verbs occur most frequently across all proficiency levels in both classifications of hedges and boosters.

**Keywords:** Hedges, Boosters, Epistemic Hedges, Epistemic Boosters, Writing Proficiency

## INTRODUCTION

The expression of doubt and certainty plays a crucial role in academic writing. These metadiscourse devices indicate the relationship between a writer's claims and their degree of certainty or uncertainty, allowing readers to engage with, acknowledge, or oppose the claims being made. These lexical devices are generally known as hedges and boosters (Holmes, 1990).

Hedging language, or the language of caution, is evasive. Writers use qualifying words (e.g., seem, tend, may) to assert caution and uncertainty toward their claims. It is a way for writers to communicate their degree of commitment or confidence in the reliability of the claims they make. According to Lakoff (1973), hedging "is used to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy." Furthermore, hedging in academic discourse can act as a defense or protection of a writer from criticism by acknowledging that there could be flaws in their claim, which can engage academic readers' involvement. However, the overuse of hedges can signal cowardice, and a writer may appear to lack conviction. Thus, it is imperative that academic writers know how to use both hedges and boosters, which are the opposite of hedges.

Boosters in academic discourse play a pivotal role. Boosters, or the language of certainty in academic texts, emphasize the degree of confidence writers have toward their claims. It is their way of conveying to readers that there is a strong relationship between the presented evidence and the claim. Thompson (2016) characterized boosters as a linguistic way of demonstrating newsworthiness and rhetorical assertiveness.

According to Hyland (1998) and Lee & Deakin (2016), the precise expression of doubt and certainty is recognized as a central convention in argumentative/academic writing. However, Thompson (2001) has claimed that novice writers lack knowledge of these metadiscourse markers. Hyland (2005) states that indifference towards these markers can be harmful to learners' academic performance. In other words, hedges and boosters prove to be significant in academic discourse as they convey and communicate a writer's attitude towards a statement.

While hedges and boosters have received attention as contrasting features of academic writing, they have garnered a substantial number of studies. However, the researchers found that most studies investigated the frequency distribution, identified the occurrences of hedges and boosters in different academic fields, explored their epistemic meaning, and compared native and non-native writers of English. No studies examined students' proficiency in using hedges and boosters in their writing, which makes this study unique. Unlike previous studies that compared writer groups from different academic disciplines and their second language proficiency levels, this study specifically examines the English language proficiency of students majoring in English Language Studies at a state university in the northern Philippines. It seeks to discover the students' attitudes towards their arguments and whether they can use these interactional devices to express their degree of doubt and certainty in their claims within their argumentative essays.

## Research Questions

This study aims to determine the proficiency level of students majoring in English Language Studies at a state university in the northern Philippines in using hedges and boosters.

Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. Determine the participants' level of proficiency towards hedges and boosters in terms of writing.

2. Determine how the participants differ in their proficiency level towards hedges and boosters in terms of writing.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Conceptual Literature

**Metadiscourse** In recent years, linguists' interest has shifted from examining the ideational function of texts to how texts function interpersonally. This shift has brought attention to metadiscourse, a linguistic category that signals speakers' or writers' attitudes, organizes texts, and fosters interaction between speakers and listeners or writers and readers.

A debate exists, however, about whether metadiscourse functions only interpersonally or also textually. This means it acts as a conveyor of speakers' and writers' perspectives and engages readers as part of the discourse community, but also expands or adds information to propositional content. Kopple (1985) argued that metadiscourse acts on two levels. On one level, it adds information to propositional content. On another level, it does not add information but helps readers organize and interpret the text's propositional content. Based on this, Kopple (1985) proposed a classification of metadiscourse with two divisions: Textual metadiscourse and Interpersonal metadiscourse.

Hyland (2005) rejected this classification, believing that all metadiscourse is interpersonal. He proposed a classification currently used in recent research. Hyland and Tse (2004) state three principles of metadiscourse: First, metadiscourse is distinct from the propositional content of a text; it's a means to articulate and organize that content in a discourse. Second, metadiscourse refers to readers' and writers' interaction. Third, metadiscourse is distinct in that it functions internally in a text, while there's a strong connection between context and its meaning. These three principles guided Hyland's (2005) classification of metadiscourse. He proposed two divisions: Interactive and Interactional. The Interactive dimension focuses on organizing the text according to the speakers' or writers' assessment of their audiences. It concerns the audience's background knowledge, comprehension abilities, and probable interest. The Interactive dimension has five general subcategories: Transitional Markers, Frame Markers, Endophoric Markers, Evidentials, and Code Glosses.

The present study focuses on the Interactional dimension, where writers use metadiscourse markers to interact with readers through intrusion and commentary. This is also referred to by linguists as the 'voice' of the writer

or speaker in a discourse. Hyland (2005) classified metadiscourse into five broad subcategories, the main focus of which is Hedges and Boosters, along with Attitude Markers, Self-Mentions, and Engagement Markers.

The concept of metadiscourse not only assists writers in conveying their attitudes, personalities, and assumptions but also helps readers organize, interpret, and evaluate information in a text. Metadiscourse, therefore, is a social act that promotes social engagement in writing between writers and readers in academic discourse.

This concept is important in this study because metadiscourse in academic writing plays a crucial role in communicating coherence, the writer's intended message, and the meaning of a text to readers. Furthermore, understanding how the concept of hedges and boosters emerges as one of the key elements in research is important. Proficiency in these linguistic features contributes to the successful acceptance of written academic texts within the strict academic discourse community.

**Hedges** Since the coinage of "metadiscourse" by Zellig Harris several decades ago, hedges have become a central focus of research studies. Hedges are lexical devices that withhold the writer's full commitment to their propositions, conveying uncertainty or lack of confidence and suggesting that the presented information is an opinion rather than a fact. They give readers room to evaluate and interpret the communicated propositional content, deciding whether to agree or disagree.

Hedges are a complex linguistic feature important in academic writing, and various definitions have been attached to them. Beyer (2015) suggested that any linguistic item expressing certainty or doubt to some degree could be considered a hedge. The term was popularized by Lakoff (1973), who described hedges as "words whose job is to make things fuzzy or less fuzzy." On the other hand, Hyland defines hedges as indicating a writer's hesitation about the certainty of a claim or a lack of absolute commitment to its truth value, turning the information into an opinion rather than a fact.

Brown and Levinson (1978) introduced the Politeness Theory to linguistics, perceiving hedges as face-saving acts or signs of politeness. This means writers use hedging devices to avoid sounding demanding or overly assertive. They employ hedges to reduce their authority and emphasize modesty in their propositions, following academic conventions and seeking acceptance within the strict academic discourse community. Jabbar (2019) provided detailed characteristics of hedges, including displaying hesitation, uncertainty, indirectness, and politeness. Therefore, hedges are not only a modification of words within propositions that indicate attitudes and degrees of doubt, but also a way for writers to demonstrate politeness and seek acceptance in the discourse community.

Epistemic modality is concerned with a writer's attitude towards the truth value or factual status of their proposition. Palmer (2007) proposed three types of epistemic modality judgments: one that communicates uncertainty, one derived from what is generally known, and lastly, an inference from observable evidence. The characteristics of epistemic modality coincide with the purpose of hedges and boosters. Both concepts concern the writer's or speaker's attitude towards the truth value of their proposition. For example, "Jasmine might not come to the meeting" uses "might" as a hedge that displays epistemic modality.

However, there is significant overlap between epistemic modality in relation to speculation, assumption, and deduction, and hedges that display the writer's attitudes in their academic text. Therefore, epistemic hedges will be the primary focus of this study. The table below presents Hyland's (2005) classification of epistemic hedges derived from the study of Taymaz (2021). Table 1. Hyland's (2005) classification of hedges

|  | HEDGES |
| --- | --- |
| Epistemic Modal Verbs | May<br>Might |
|  | Could<br>Would<br>Should |

| Epistemic Lexical Verbs | Suggest<br>Assume<br>Believe<br>Think<br>Guess<br>Estimate<br>Feel<br>Appear<br>Seem<br>Indicate<br>Imply |
|---|---|
| Epistemic Adverbs | Perhaps<br>Possibly<br>Probably<br>Likely |
| Epistemic Adjectives | Possible<br>Probable<br>Un/likely |
| Epistemic Nouns | Assumption<br>Possibility<br>Suggestion |

The concept of hedges is relevant to this study because they play a crucial role in linguistics. Hedges, linguistic devices used in both written and spoken academic discourse, contribute to the overall meaning by engaging readers with the writer's or speaker's attitude towards the truth value of their propositions.

**Boosters**

Boosters in academic writing signal certainty and importance. Often referred to as the language of certainty, boosters emphasize the writer's strong confidence in their propositions.

Boosters exhibit contrasting characteristics to hedges. Hyland (1998) defined them as a way for writers to establish solidarity with readers while limiting their interpretation, offering little room for negotiation.

Holmes (1982) further argues that boosters reflect a writer's strong conviction and clear confidence in the persuasiveness of their writing. According to Vasquez and Ginger (2009), gaining acceptance for new knowledge within the discourse community is challenging. To persuade readers and ensure their acceptance, propositional content must be emphasized and highlighted. Boosters provide this opportunity, enhancing the writer's credibility.

However, overuse of boosters can convey a strong, authoritative presence that can be detrimental to the overall writing quality of an academic paper. The same applies to hedges; overuse can cast doubt on the writer's presence and knowledge of the subject.

Similar to hedges, boosters have a close connection with epistemic modality, which refers to the writer's attitude towards the truth value or factual status of their proposition. Takimoto (2015) also claimed that boosters relate to the writer's attitude towards the propositional content. Taymaz (2021) states that boosters support epistemic

stance-making in academic texts. For example, "Angel will certainly go home after seeing this" uses "certainly" as a booster device that shows epistemic modality. Therefore, this study focuses on boosters with epistemic meaning. The table below presents Hyland's (2005) classification of boosters.

Table 2. Hyland's (2005) classification of boosters.

|  | BOOSTERS |
| --- | --- |
| Epistemic Modal Verbs | Will<br><br>Must |
| Epistemic Lexical Verbs | Demonstrate<br><br>Know<br><br>Prove |
| Epistemic Adverbs | Certainly<br><br>Obviously<br><br>Clearly<br><br>Undoubtedly |
| Epistemic Adjectives | Certain<br><br>Obvious<br><br>Clear |
| Epistemic Nouns | The fact<br><br>Claim |

This concept is relevant to the present study because it contributes to the overall writing quality of academic texts. Boosters can demonstrate newsworthiness, strengthen the warrant of the paper, and add value to the research. Exploring how boosters are used can provide insights into how writers employ boosting strategies within their propositions, allowing readers to understand these strategies better.

**Related Studies**

In a study by Alonzo et al. (2019), researchers investigated lexical hedges, boosters, and Low's (1996) Lexical Invisibility Hypothesis on political blog articles. This hypothesis suggests that learners struggle to recognize hedges and boosters in academic texts, impacting the intended message of the writer. The study's framework followed Ken Hyland's (2000) work, examining Low's hypothesis. The results provided evidence, both direct and indirect, that learners can understand lexical hedges and boosters.]

Farrokhi & Emami (2008) also examined twenty research articles in Electrical Engineering and Applied Linguistics, written by both native and non-native English writers. Their aim was to investigate how hedge and booster usage varied across disciplines and genres. The analysis focused on four rhetorical sections: Abstract, Introduction, Discussion, and Conclusion. The study found that Applied Linguistics articles used more hedges and boosters compared to Electrical Engineering articles. Additionally, significant differences emerged in the usage patterns between native and non-native writers.

Metadiscourse has been recognized as crucial in academic writing. Park & Oh (2018) examined the correlation between L2 writing proficiency and the use of metadiscourse markers (hedges and boosters) in two corpora: Korean EFL learners' argumentative essays and essays written by native learners, categorized into three proficiency groups. Their results suggest that as proficiency develops, learners demonstrate a more balanced use of hedges and boosters, with a declining reliance on interactive metadiscourse markers.

Furthermore, Min et al. (2020) analyzed how hedges and stance-making devices relate to the overall writing quality of non-native English learners. Their study used 28 argumentative essays written by advanced Korean EFL writers. The findings suggest a general correlation between hedges and stance devices and overall writing quality. Notably, hedges significantly influence the content quality aspect of writing, while stance devices play a positive role in the formal quality aspect. Building on the findings of Min et al. (2020), this present study aims to assess the proficiency level of students towards hedges and boosters.

In addition, Utara et al. (2012) also conducted a crucial study that elegantly emphasized the importance of explicit instruction on learners' use of hedges and boosters. They analyzed a series of persuasive essays written by forty-third year undergraduate students majoring in English. The study employed a pretest and posttest design. Based on the data gathered, they concluded that prior instruction helps learners produce higher quality papers.

As Seskauskiene (2008) conducted a case study on hedging used by undergraduate Lithuanian learners majoring in English. The findings revealed that more advanced and proficient learners of English are able to produce texts with hedging comparable to those produced by experienced academics. While there have been studies assessing hedging strategies and advocating for explicit instruction, less attention has been paid to measuring students' proficiency in using these markers.

Existing research often compares writer groups based on their second language proficiency. Therefore, this study aims to assess students' proficiency towards hedges and boosters through argumentative essays, analyzing their usage of these markers.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative design. The use of AntConc for lexical analysis adds a quantitative component to its largely qualitative approach. Following the writing task, the software program AntConc was used to analyze the participants' essays for the classification of hedges and boosters.

This paper examines the participants' proficiency in using hedges and boosters in their writing. The study also investigates which classifications of hedges and boosters participants employ and their attitudes towards the propositions presented in their essays. The participants of the study involved students majoring in English Language Studies at a state university in the northern Philippines. The participants were selected through random sampling from students enrolled in the first semester of the 2023-2024 school year. To gather data, the researchers conducted a writing test. Participants were asked to write an argumentative essay using a writing prompt adapted with minimal modifications from Min et al. (2019)'s study titled "Exploring the Use of Hedges and Stance Devices in Relation to Korean EFL Learners' Argumentative Essay." Argumentative essays typically aim to convey a personal stance, encompassing feelings, attitudes, judgments, or assessments (Min, 2019). Among all types of essays, this is the most effective to use.

Table 1. Rubrics in Evaluating the Essay of the Participants

| | Beginning | Developing | Proficiency | Mastery |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Thesis/Claim** <br><br> 10 Points | Reader cannot determine the thesis and purpose OR the thesis has no arguable claim. | Thesis may be obvious or unimaginative. Thesis and purpose are somewhat vague. | Contains an arguable claim that is somewhat original. Thesis and purpose are fairly clear. | Contains an arguable claim that develops fresh insight and challenges the reader's thinking. |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Support/ Reasoning**<br><br>10 Points | The writer focuses on own thoughts and beliefs about the topic; neglects the rhetorical elements. Offers simplistic, undeveloped, or cryptic support for the ideas. | The writer includes 1 rhetorical element in the development of ideas. Offers somewhat obvious support that may be too broad. Details are too general, not interpreted, irrelevant to thesis, or inappropriately Repetitive. | The writer includes 2 rhetorical elements in the development of ideas.<br><br>Offers solid but less original reasoning. Assumptions are not always recognized or made explicit. | The writer includes all 3 rhetorical elements (logos, pathos, ethos) in the development of ideas.<br><br>Assumptions are made explicit. Details are relevant, original, and convincingly interpreted. |
| **Opposing Viewpoints**<br><br>10 Points | Refutation missing or vague. Obvious lack of sound, logical argument throughout. | Refutation paragraph missing and/or vague. There are one or two examples that are not sound, logical argument. | Author acknowledges the opposing view, but does not present a sound counterpoint. | Author acknowledges the opposing view and argues it logically. |
| **Structure and Organization**<br><br>10 Points | Work lacks structure; lacks a clear thesis or conclusion, body seems haphazard; transitions are not present. | Body lacks a clear direction; supporting evidence loosely tied to thesis; transitions missing; conclusion has no sense of closure. | Body mostly flows from the thesis; transitions are awkward at times; appropriate conclusion. | Body flows from thesis; transitions guide the reader smoothly through the text;<br><br>conclusion effectively wraps up the essay, |
| **Sources/** | Neglects important sources. | Uses relevant sources but lacks a variety of sources | Uses sources to support, extend, and inform, but | Uses sources to support, extend, and inform, but not substitute writer's own |
| **Documentation**<br><br>5 Points | Overuse of quotations or paraphrases to substitute writer's own ideas. (Probably uses source material without acknowledgement.) | and/or the skillful combination of sources. Quotations and paraphrases may be too long and/or inconsistently referenced. | not substitute writer's own development of ideas.<br><br>Doesn't overuse quotes, but<br><br>may not always conform to MLA format. | development of ideas. Source material is announced by a signal phrase and ended with in-text citations. |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Grammar/ Mechanics**<br><br>5 Points | Errors so numerous they distract the reader and skew the writer's meaning. | Repeated weaknesses in mechanics and usage. Pattern of flaws. Meaning is still clear. | Occasional minor errors do not distract the reader or interfere with meaning. | Essentially free from mechanical, grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors. |
| **Total** | | | | |

The researchers personally invited participants to write an argumentative essay. They were given 30 minutes to complete the writing prompt. The participants' essays were then collected and evaluated for their overall quality using the Saint Paul College Argumentative Grading Rubric. In order to address the study's research question, participants were tasked with writing argumentative essays. These essays were then graded by multiple inter-raters in the Department of Languages and Literature for their overall quality. In terms of the reliability of the inter-raters, they have been teaching the English language for several years at one of the state universities in the region. They have also received several training certifications, such as TESOL and EPT, and possess a C1 to C2 proficiency level based on the CEFR. These qualifications ensure a smooth rating and evaluation process, especially when using the rubric adapted from the Saint Paul College Argumentative Grading Rubric. Following this, the researchers conducted a detailed analysis of the participants' usage of hedges and boosters.

To answer the second question regarding how participant proficiency levels influence their use of hedges and boosters, the researchers employed the concordance software program AntConc 4.2.4 to examine the two most frequently occurring epistemic hedges and boosters within the participants' essays.

To ensure methodological clarity and validity, the analysis of hedges and boosters using AntConc followed a systematic approach. First, classification criteria were based on Hyland's (1998) framework, categorizing hedges as linguistic elements that express uncertainty (e.g., perhaps, might, suggest) and boosters as those that convey certainty or emphasis (e.g., clearly, undoubtedly, definitely). A predefined keyword list guided the initial identification of these markers. To enhance accuracy, non-epistemic expressions—such as instances where hedging or boosting words served non-modal functions (e.g., really in "I really like this" vs. "This really proves the point")—were manually excluded. This step was crucial to ensuring that only epistemic markers influencing the strength of claims were retained. Furthermore, consistency checks were conducted to enhance reliability. A second researcher independently reviewed a subset of the data, and discrepancies in classification were resolved through discussion. Additionally, inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa to quantify agreement between raters, ensuring the robustness of the classification process. These measures collectively reinforced the validity and transparency of the analysis.

The essays were categorized and analyzed separately based on the assigned proficiency levels: advanced, proficient, advancing proficiency, developing, and beginning. Clemen (1997) notes that hedges and boosters are context-dependent. This means there is no definitive list; a word can function as a hedge in one context but a booster in another. Therefore, the researchers manually analyzed the function of these devices, specifically focusing on those with epistemic modality. Words with non-epistemic or deontic functions were excluded. Following this analysis, the frequencies of epistemic modal verbs (can, should, may, etc.), epistemic lexical verbs (prove, show, believe, etc.), epistemic adverbs (greatly, around, maybe, etc.), epistemic adjectives (inevitable, likely, possible, etc.), and epistemic nouns (claim, the fact, idea, etc.) were examined to determine their function and ultimately arrive at a conclusion about how writers use these devices to express their attitudes towards their propositions.

The argumentative essays were analyzed by an experienced interrater independently. The participants' raw scores were then calculated and converted using the table below. This table also served as the basis for determining the

participants' proficiency level in using hedges and boosters in their writing. Table 2. Levels of Writing Proficiency

| SCORE | DESCRIPTIVE RATING |
|---|---|
| 45-50 | Advanced |
| 40-44 35-39 | Proficient |
| 24-34 | Approaching Proficiency |
| 23 and below | Developing |
| | Beginning |

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## The Participants Level of Proficiency Towards Hedges and Boosters

The researchers used the AntConc software tool to efficiently identify hedges and boosters in student essays. Additionally, in the initial analytical phase, multiple raters assessed the participants' proficiency level using the Saint Paul College Argumentative Grading Rubric. The raw scores of the participants were calculated and transmuted. This table summarizes the participants' essay proficiency in using hedges and boosters. Additionally, the explicit usage of hedges and boosters will be further analyzed.

Table 3. Students' Level of Proficiency towards hedges and boosters

| Score | Descriptive Rating | Frequency (n=50) | Percentage (100%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 45-50 | Advanced | 0 | 0 |
| 40-44 | Proficient | 2 | 4 |
| 35-39 | Approaching Proficiency | 5 | 10 |
| 24-34 | Developing | 40 | 80 |
| 23 and below | Beginning | 3 | 6 |

Table 3 presents the frequency and percentage distribution of the participant's scores on their argumentative writing, providing insight into their proficiency level towards hedges and boosters. Specifically, out of the total participants, none of the participants, or 0% received the Advanced rating with a score of 45 to 50. The findings clearly show that the participants have yet to reach an advanced level in their writing performance which indicates that the participants have difficulties in mastering the usage of hedges and boosters. According to Hyland & Milton (1997), for L2 writers, comprehending the proper usage of boosters and hedges is not an easy task. L2 writers are affected by their native language and the transfer of knowledge to a foreign language shows traces of their own culture (Chesterman, 1998). Cultural factors are considered to interfere with achieving native-like written academic papers in several previous studies.

Meanwhile, 2 participants, or 4% obtained a Proficient rating with scores of 40 to 44. This finding shows that only few of the participants can expert-like use hedges and boosters. The findings coincide with the result of the study of Waluyo (2019) where there is a limited number of Thai students who possess equal abilities to English writers. Weigle (2005) states that proficient writers can recognize challenges in academic writing thus, they

consider different factors such as which rhetorical strategies to use and allowing readers to engage, understand, and evaluate the information.

On the other hand, 5 participants, or 10% acquired an Advancing Proficiency rating which corresponds to scores of 35 to 39. The findings demonstrate that a minority are only able to attain near proficiency. Freedman et al. (1983) argued that writers without full proficiency in the second language, in the case of the present study proficiency in the English language, can threaten the ability to conceptualize the intended ideational information and maintain the coherence of their written texts. There will be a decline in persuasiveness and the quality of the paper.

Notably, 40 participants, or 80% achieved a descriptive rating of Developing which corresponds to a score between 24 to 34. The data suggest that most of the participants are novice writers and indicate a lack of knowledge on the appropriate usage of hedges and boosters. The findings coincide with the results of Park & Oh (2018) where inexperienced writers are less competent in communicating their ideas and arguments suggesting a lack of knowledge and competence on metadiscourse markers. Moreover, Hyland (1996) also concludes in his study that ESL or non-native writers, in an English-dominated research world, find themselves facing difficulties in participating and learning the appropriate usage of hedges and boosters. The ability of a writer to articulate the propositional information and establish social engagement with the readers is a criterion of what can be considered an excellent article which can be done with the use of hedges and boosters (Hyland 1994).

Lastly, 3 participants, or 6% acquired a Beginning rating with a score of 23 below. The findings suggest a minority of the participants are inexperienced writers and faced strong difficulties in presenting their arguments as well as communicating their intended meanings to the readers. Park & Oh (2018) pointed out in their study that novice writers are unable to consider readers during their writing process. Additionally, they pointed out that writing is an involved conversation between authors and readers, and that producing subpar work results from failing to recognize the readers.

In a nutshell, the findings suggest none of the participants received advanced ratings and that the general performance of the participants is at the developing stage which indicates that most of the participants were unable to use hedges and boosters appropriately. According to Oh & Kang (2013) and Holmes (1982), writers in context must be able to communicate their arguments on diverse controversial social issues or speculative topics, therefore, mastering the ability of expression of doubt and certainty – hedges and boosters, is significant as pragmatic skill.

**Participants with Advanced Level**

It is evident that none of the participants achieved an advanced rating, therefore, a lack of data existed to analyze how they strategically used hedges and boosters, understanding the limitations of their claims and why they are labeled as advanced.

**Participants with Proficient Level**

Participants under the proficient level have a unique way of strategizing their use of hedges and boosters. Generally, they tend to make their claims convey affective meanings and acknowledge readers' presence for the ratification of the claim. They made use of personal attribution to convey a professional attitude. This strategy according to Hyland (1996) is called reader-motivation hedges where a writer proficiently selects appropriate hedges to convey his proposition. Widiawati (2018) states that reader-motivation hedges evoke tentativeness. Moreover, participants under the proficient level tend to also use faceless or agentless objects such as "it" on their claims that limit their presence. This is their way to avoid criticism or negative consequences reducing the writer's presence and weight of responsibility. Another characteristic of the usage of hedges that can be observed in the participants under proficiency level was the usage of accuracy-based hedges. It allows the participants to differentiate the inference from facts, communicating to the readers that the claim was rather a logical inference instead of reliable facts. These strategies found on participants under proficiency level proved that they comprehend the usage of certain hedges and appropriately convey it according to their purpose. On the other

hand, their usage of boosters tends to focus on evidential boosters that indicate their propositions are true which strengthens their claims and emphasizes evidence.

In sum, participants under proficient level use hedging and boosting strategies such as reader-motivation, accuracy-based, writer-based hedges, and evidential truth to skillfully communicate their claims and reasoning. According to Vebriyanto et al. (2019) despite the opposing nature of hedges and boosters, these markers create harmony in an academic paper. Hyland (1996) argues that a lack of knowledge about using hedges appropriately hinders a writer's participation in the research community. The same principle applies to boosters. However, participants under proficient level used hedges skillfully that granted their intended meaning to be conveyed properly.

## Participants with Advancing Proficiency Level

In their essays, participants with advancing proficiency levels employed creative ways to use hedges and boosters. They are inclined to use impersonal expressions to detach themselves from their propositions. Hyland (1996) identifies this as writer-based hedges, which use empty subjects, passive constructions, and abstract rhetors. This strategy is commonly found in participants with advancing proficiency levels, shielding them from the negative consequences of their claims. Furthermore, they also tended to use hedges that distinguish between facts and opinions and rarely used reader-motivation hedges that engage the reader in the discourse. They focused more on conveying referential meanings, in contrast to participants at the proficient level, who balanced affective and referential meanings. The strategies found in participants with advancing proficiency indicate their experience in establishing their claims and awareness of opposition. However, there is a lack of reader-motivated hedges, which allow the reader to negotiate and engage in the discourse.

On the other hand, participants with advancing proficiency levels tended to use boosters that function as accepted truths, using modal verbs such as "will" to indicate that their claims are widely known, thus increasing the persuasive aspect of their propositions. They demonstrated an awareness of boosters that strengthen their claims.

In summary, participants with advancing proficiency levels focused more on the accepted truth function of boosters and on referential meanings, neglecting the reader's engagement, which is crucial for acceptance in the discourse community. Wang et al. (2016) state that reader-motivated hedges allow writers to create a good rapport and establish effective communication between writer and reader.

## Participants with Developing Level

A notable number of participants received a developing rating on their essays, indicating a lack of knowledge regarding the appropriate use of certain hedges and boosters. They tended to use the three strategies noted by Hyland (1996), namely writer-based, accuracy-based, and reader-motivated hedges. However, ungrammatical usage hindered the proper reception of their messages. In passive constructions, some participants neglected the "be" before modal verbs, while others omitted necessary modal verbs from their claims. Moreover, excessive use of personal attribution, such as "I believe," weakened their claims and reasoning, indicating a lack of data to support their stance. Their use of strategies in presenting their claims tended to be imbalanced. Hyland (1996) states that proficiency in these strategies, especially in a strict discourse community, increases the success of claim acceptance. Conversely, participants with a developing level tended to use fewer evidential boosters, which Jabbar (2019) reiterates as the most powerful rhetorical strategy. This indicates that participants exhibited high tentativeness in their essays.

Nevertheless, participants with a developing level used a variety of strategies in presenting their claims. However, improper use of features led to ungrammatical constructions and heavily affected their claims. It is also important to note other factors, such as punctuation, vocabulary, and structure, that might have affected the holistic scores of their essays.

## Participants with Beginning Level

Beginning participants have fewer strategies for using hedges and boosters. Generally, their claims tend to convey more affective meanings and fail to acknowledge limitations due to substantial use of personal attribution, which clearly presents the writer's presence in their claims. They rarely use impersonal expressions that would shield them from negative consequences. Additionally, there was less variety in the hedges used effectively. Participants often used incorrect grammatical forms; for example, the modal verb "will" was used instead of "can." Furthermore, their use of boosters was limited, making their claims lack confidence. Similar to participants with developing proficiency, they used fewer evidential boosters, which indicate the degree of truth in their claims.

Overall, participants at the beginning level are novices in using hedges and boosters, leading to poor writing quality. Jabbar (2019) states that it is significant in expressing a claim to practice caution, as overemphasis on a claim is detrimental to writing performance.

## The Differences of the Participants in their Proficiency Level Towards Hedges and Boosters

This section discusses the different proficiency levels of the participants and their usage of boosters and hedges aiming to depict the participants' two preferred classifications based on the compiled classifications of hedges and boosters by Hyland (2005) and Taymaz (2021).

Table 4 below shows the percentage distribution of the participants' scores on their argumentative writing, providing results into their proficiency levels with regard to hedges and boosters. Furthermore, the researchers aim to comprehend the participants' attitudes, opinions, and knowledge, shifting focus from just the facts. This includes understanding how they use hedges and boosters epistemically and arriving at a conclusion that might provide insights into how participants at different levels employ hedges and boosters in their argumentative essays.

Table 4. Students' Level of Proficiency towards hedges and boosters

| Score | Descriptive Rating | Percentage (100%) |
|---|---|---|
| 45-50 | Advanced | 0 |
| 40-44 | Proficient | 4 |
| 35-39 | Approaching Proficiency | 10 |
| 24-34 | Developing | 80 |
| 23 and below | Beginning | 6 |

## Participants with Advanced Level

Participants at the advanced level are those who received scores of 45 to 50. Notably, none of the participants, or 0%, reached the advanced level, providing the researchers with a lack of data for analyzing their use of epistemic hedges and boosters. These findings closely align with Manzolim and Dela Cruz's (2024) study, where only one respondent obtained an advanced rating on the overall writing quality of their essays. Park and Oh (2018), however, noted that experienced or advanced writers used a wide variety of hedges and boosters, and as proficiency increases, a greater number of interactional devices are used.

## Participants with Proficient Level

Participants at the proficient level constitute 4% of the total sample, achieving scores of 40 to 44. The most frequently occurring classifications of hedges in the essays of participants at the proficient level were epistemic

modal verbs (e.g., "can") and epistemic nouns (e.g., "claim"). The following extracts demonstrate the writers' attitudes towards the truth value of their propositions.

1. How <u>can</u> we handle this situation giving both sides an equal satisfaction? (Participant 23)

2. We cannot stop people from using tabacos but we <u>can</u> do something to prevent it from getting worst. (Participant 30)

3. The main reason of my <u>claim</u> is that everyone deserves to breath fresh air inside and out of their house. (Participant 30)

The modal verb "can" tends to convey different meanings in certain contexts. Coates (1983), Carter and McCarthy (2006), and Zugno (2018) discussed three meanings: permission, possibility, and ability. According to Ardhianti et al. (2023), epistemic hedges are considered communicative strategies that weaken statements containing value and convey the writer's certainty or degree of confidence in the truth value of the proposition. Therefore, in contexts where the modal verb "can" does not reflect epistemic meaning—possibility—it was removed, and similar analysis was done with other modal verbs within the categories of hedges and boosters.

Nevertheless, the use of the word "can" in extracts (1) and (2) both indicate logical possibilities, where the writers are asking for engagement and acknowledgment from the reader. Both statements use the inclusive pronoun "we." In extract (1), it is used to mitigate the writer's presence while sharing a context that draws on presumed beliefs of the readers (Hyland, 1998; Takimoto, 2015). In extract (2), it seeks solidarity with the readers (Alward et al., 2012), aiming to draw agreement with its claim about the existence of possible solutions to prevent the widespread use of tobacco.

The second most occurring classification of hedges in proficient essays is epistemic nouns. The epistemic noun "claim" was used by the participant in extract (3) to indicate an assertion that invites readers to evaluate the soundness of the proposition. Using hedging strategies allows readers to participate in the discourse as reliable interlocutors (Donadio, 2022). Participants at the proficient level preferred to employ epistemic modal verbs (e.g., "cannot") and epistemic adverbs (e.g., "in fact") as boosters to emphasize their statements.

4. We <u>cannot</u> stop people from using tabaccos but we can do something to prevent it from getting worst. (Participant 30)

5. <u>In fact</u>, a law was even implemented years ago about the restriction of using electric cigarettes in public places, yet, <u>huge quantity</u> of people are still disobeying. (Participant 23)

The writer used the epistemic modal verb "cannot" to indicate a strong conviction that tobacco users will continue to use tobacco. According to Varsanis (2020), this demonstrates a restriction on negotiation and seeks to persuade readers through the logical force of the argument. It draws on a general observable phenomenon in society, based on readers' assumed knowledge that smokers are unable to stop their addiction, thus creating a context that supports the writer's argument. However, in extract (5), the writer displays a strong degree of confidence in their statement. The use of the epistemic adverb "in fact" indicates the writer's strong commitment to the truth value of the statement, thus building strong authority and credibility. This builds personal responsibility toward the credibility of the argument (Hyland, 2004; Varsanis, 2020). However, the hedging phrase "huge quantity" indicates a change in the degree of confidence. The employment of ambiguous and indirect arguments allows the writer to avoid possible criticism from readers who might have different experiences.

Overall, participants at the proficient level employ an almost balanced number of hedges and boosters. The findings imply that participants at the proficient level are strategic in balancing hedges and boosters in their arguments. This supports the findings of Park and Oh (2018), where higher-level writers appear to comprehend the appropriate usage of hedges and boosters. It also concludes that they balance assertiveness and tentativeness in the expression of their propositions. However, it is important to note that there is a scarcity of participants who received a proficient rating, thus affecting the data collection of hedges and boosters.

## Participants with Advancing Proficiency Level

Participants with advancing proficiency levels are those who obtained scores of 35 to 39, comprising 10% of the total sample. Participants with advancing proficiency levels used hedges more than boosters in their essays. The most frequently occurring grammatical categories were epistemic modal verbs (e.g., "may") and epistemic adverbs (e.g., "usually").

1. Discarded match sticks and cigarette butts also pose fine hazard in public since it is highly combustible. This may potentially lead to property damage. (Participant 27)

2. For everyone's sanity and comfort smoking must be prohibited in public places. As this places usually consits of young souls that are still deserving of a long life ahead of them. (Participant 31)

Similar to other epistemic modal verbs, the meaning of "may" varies depending on context. Therefore, a close analysis of each context where it occurs was conducted. Participant 27 employs the epistemic modal verb "may" to hedge their argument. This indicates a lack of commitment, weakening the claim's force. According to Zugno (2018), epistemic "may" is used by a writer to avoid committing themselves to the credibility of the proposition. In this extract, however, the writer employs the epistemic "may" as a prediction or indication of epistemic possibility, suggesting that smoking in public might lead to property damage—an obvious phenomenon such as a fire break. This is an inference from what is generally known as the cause of fire breaks.

On the other hand, the purpose of the epistemic adverb "usually" in extract (2) is to indicate an assumption— an inference from what is generally known (Ardhianti et al., 2023). The writer draws on norms in public places and conveys their lack of confidence, seeking judgment from the readers concerning the status of what was stated.

Boosters found in participants with advancing proficiency levels were greatly diverse compared to participants at the proficient level. The most frequently occurring grammatical categories of boosters were epistemic modal verbs (e.g., "must") and epistemic lexical verbs (e.g., "prove").

3. Smoking doesn't only make Somone look older For their age but also it has became the root of a lot deseases that in most cases leads to death. That is why smoking <u>must</u> be only allowed in places where no one can be at risk. (Participant 31)

4. <u>Some</u> studies also <u>prove</u> that the difficulties in breathing and asthma sometimes observed when we touch or use something that has been used by the smoker. (Participants 15)

The function of the epistemic modal verb "must" in extract (3) is logical inference (Zugno, 2018). It is a deduction based on observable evidence, leading to an inference about the limitations of smoke-free areas. The participant presents their argument with an authoritative stance, positioning themselves firmly behind their words (Varsanis, 2020). Furthermore, the usage of "must" indicates the writer's conviction towards their arguments.

In contrast, extract (4) presents an interesting way of both mitigating and empowering propositions. The writer seems to lack confidence or seeks to reduce the risk of their claims by hedging with the use of the epistemic "some." They then empower the proposition by employing the epistemic lexical verb "prove," allowing readers to engage and arrive at similar conclusions. According to Donadio (2022), writers apply boosting strategies in their compositions to infuse trust and confidence, thus persuading readers to believe in their claims.

Overall, participants with advancing proficiency levels inclined to use epistemic modal verbs and epistemic adverbs. However, there is a disparity in how frequently they employ hedges and boosters in their argumentative essays. Unlike participants at the proficient level, participants with advancing proficiency levels tend to favor hedges more than boosters. This indicates evident tentativeness in their tone and attitudes towards their propositions. Despite the increased number of participants at this level of proficiency, outnumbering those at the

proficient level, the data might not be enough to fully elucidate the differences in the distribution of hedges and boosters in their argumentative essays.

**Participants with Developing Level**

Participants at the developing level comprise 80% of the total sample, with scores ranging from 24 to 34. After a close analysis of the argumentative essays of participants at the developing level, it is evident that the two most frequently occurring classifications of hedges were epistemic modal verbs (e.g., "should") and epistemic lexical verbs (e.g., "guess").

1. We <u>should</u> know that smoking in public places should be prohibited for its contagious effects – influence children to smoke.... (Participant 32)

2. Smoking in the public <u>should</u> be a disturbance to others that can lead war or misunderstanding between those people. (Participants 21)

3. We <u>should</u> have an advocacy that promotes people to stop smoking in public spaces. Help them realize that this undisciplined beahaviour <u>should</u> be stop not just for our welfare and also for the innocent youth. (Participants 32)

4. So in my opinion well, I <u>guess</u> that "smoking" is prohibited because many people are aware and using it,.. (Participants 9)

In extracts (1) and (2), both display epistemic meaning. According to Zugno (2018), the modal verb "should," when expressed epistemically, communicates a tentative assumption—a probability assessment constructed from the known facts of the writer. In extracts (1) and (2), the writer uses "should" as an assumption based on the general knowledge that smoking has detrimental effects. The writer assumes that readers understand its prohibition and that smoking might interfere with others. This hedging reduces the risk of the claim, indicating tentativeness and ambiguity towards the proposition. It relies on observable phenomena that readers might have experienced themselves.

In extract (3), the usage of the modal verb "should" functions differently. This prominence across different proficiency levels in this study might be because the question they responded to contained the modal verb "should." Nevertheless, it was included in this study to understand its difference and how important it is to identify hedges pragmatically. The modal verb "should" has a function of moral obligation and, at its weakest, offers advice (Zugno, 2018). In extract (3), it functions as offering advice to the readers on what should be done regarding smoking. Such a function was not considered hedging. Therefore, modal verbs reporting such a function were excluded from the list.

Conversely, the epistemic lexical verb "guess" in extract (4) was used by the writer to hedge the statement. Takimoto (2015) discussed in his study that when a writer constitutes personal attribution to a statement, it indicates a subjective explicit orientation, suggesting that the writer presumes personal responsibility and knows only to themselves the evidence and deduces a conclusion from it. The usage of the epistemic "guess" above coincides with the report of Hyland (2002) and Takimoto (2015), where the writer links themselves to their ideas with increased personal responsibility and honesty.

On the other hand, the two prominent categories of boosters in the argumentative essays of participants at the developing level were epistemic modal verbs (e.g., "must") and epistemic lexical verbs (e.g., "show").

5. As most people believe that there is always room for improvement we <u>must</u> also acknowledge too that there is a room for privacy. Meaning to say if we... (Participant 19)

6. research <u>shows</u> that through inhaling smoke can cause many serious problems especially in our health.

(Participant 26)

Extract (5) suggests that the writer was seeking acceptance and persuading readers through belief in the logical force of the argument. The writer employs the epistemic "must" in their propositions for logical inference and expression of certainty (Coates, 1983; Zugno, 2018). This indicates strong assertiveness in their tone, reflecting an authorial presence. On the other hand, Hyland (2012) and Takimoto (2015) argue that writers use boosters such as "show" in extract (6) to highlight the efficacy and strength of the connection between claim and data. Takimoto (2015) further argued that through the use of impersonal strategies such as faceless subjects, agentless passive constructions, and abstract subjects, objectivity is more emphasized. Extract (6) uses the epistemic "show," which suggests an emphasis on the force of the proposition, further strengthened by the usage of impersonal strategies.

Participants at the developing level comprise the most substantial number among different levels of proficiency, providing a considerable amount of data that assists in understanding their usage of hedges and boosters. It can be concluded that participants at the developing level tend to employ grammatical categories such as epistemic modal verbs and epistemic lexical verbs for both hedges and boosters. Furthermore, upon close analysis, it is found that they tend to use hedges more frequently than boosters. The number of hedges occurred twice as often as the number of boosters. This generally suggests that participants at the developing level expressed their propositions tentatively or with great ambiguity or honesty, indicating a lack of balance in the usage of hedges and boosters.

**Participants with Beginning Level**

Participants at the beginning level are those who obtained scores of 23 and below, comprising 6% of the total sample. Regarding the classification of hedges, it was noted that the most commonly used features in the essays of participants at the beginning level were epistemic modal verbs (e.g., "would") and epistemic lexical verbs (e.g., "believe"). The extracts below illustrate how the participants express their propositions.

1. If you cannot overthrow your smoking habits, think about how it would affect the people around you. (Participants 5)

2. Smoking is addiction but I believe everthing is good but in moderation. (Participant 39)

The modal verb "would" has sparked debate among researchers regarding its discourse function. Various studies on modality have failed to accurately determine the epistemic effect of "would" (Birner, Kaplan, & Ward, 2001; Algi, 2012). Coates (1983) characterizes it as indicating some predictability of action from the past, while Palmer (1990) and Perkins (1983) describe it as expressing tentativeness. On the other hand, Zugno (2018) claims it possesses a hypothetical meaning, which supports Coates' characterization. Coates (1983) and Zugno (2018) seem to coincide with the writer's use in extract (1), where the modal verb "would" functions as a general hypothetical marker. Zugno (2018) further claims that the hypothetical "would" communicates politeness or tentativeness instead of an authentic hypothesis when used pragmatically. This indicates that the writer of extract (1) expresses hesitancy and mitigates the force of the proposition.

On the other hand, Panther (1981), as cited by Varsanis (2020), suggests that writers tend to steer clear of expressing claims that include personal beliefs and opinions. This contradicts extract (2), where the writer seems to reject the immunization strategy that aids in lessening negative criticism and transferring responsibility to faceless objects. When the epistemic lexical verb "believe" is used, it appears to indicate that the writer lacks confidence in the proposition and is compelling readers to engage in an open discussion regarding the writer's perspective and the nature of the proposition (Takimoto, 2015).

A closer analysis revealed that participants at the beginning level preferred to use epistemic modal verbs (e.g., "will") and epistemic adjectives (e.g., "always") when boosting their propositions in their argumentative essays.

1. Maybe a place on public places where smokers will allowed to smoke <u>will</u> resolved this problem. (Participant 39)

2. ...usually he smoke after we eat. It was his daily routine. But he <u>always</u> make sure that when he smokes, nobody around him,... (Participant 39)

3. ...the second degree smoker inhale more smoke than the one holding the cigarette and a place where it <u>alway</u> happen are in public places like Plaza, mall... (Participant 34)

Note: it was assumed that the writer of extract (5) meant the term 'always' when the researchers pragmatically analyzed the context.

The epistemic modal verb "will" specifies a writer's confidence about the truth value of the proposition (Zugno, 2018). According to Lakoff (1970), it proposes the highest form of degree of certainty. In Extract (3), the epistemic "will" suggests the decisiveness of the writer, and as Zugno (2018) explained, it communicates a confident statement. Nonetheless, Extract (3) includes both hedges and boosters, creating a balance of detachment and commitment. The use of the epistemic "maybe" suggests a probability, but a resolute usage of "will" clearly demonstrates confidence and restriction for negotiation. The epistemic adjectives "always," however, in Extracts (4) and (5), were used inferring from observable evidence. Ardhianti et al. (2023) state that observable evidence is formed through deduction. Furthermore, the writer deliberately expressed a higher degree of certainty or signaled strong conviction to emphasize his or her perspective. In these circumstances, according to Akbas (2018), the writer has the willingness to accept full responsibility for the content of their propositions.

Generally, participants at the beginning level reinforce epistemic modal verbs and epistemic lexical verbs more frequently among the other grammatical classifications of hedges. On the other hand, they use epistemic modal verbs and epistemic adjectives for boosters. A similar inference on advancing proficiency regarding the frequency usage of hedges and boosters can be seen in participants at the beginning level. They are inclined to use more hedges than boosters in their argumentative essays, suggesting a tentative attitude.

In summary, participants under the proficient level tend to employ a balanced distribution between hedges and boosters in their compositions, while participants at the advancing proficiency, developing, and beginning levels present a similar manner where they are inclined to use more hedges than boosters. As the proficiency level decreases, they use more hedges compared to boosters. This coincides with the findings of previous studies by Allison (1995), Hyland and Milton (1997), and Oh and Kang (2013), where novice writers display an unbalanced use of hedges and boosters. However, in their study, hedges were underused, while expert writers demonstrate a strategic balance in their usage of the two features, which is the focus of this study. A study by Oh and Park (2018) also opposed this, where the findings indicate that as proficiency rises, a greater number of hedges occurred, while the opposite was true for the boosters. However, it is important to take into account the disproportionate number of participants for each level, which could have affected the findings.

## CONCLUSION

The findings imply that the general performance of the participants is at a developing level, and none attained an advanced level of proficiency towards hedges and boosters, suggesting that most of the participants were unable to use these markers properly.

The study also implies that almost all the participants received lower scores, which leads to the conclusion that they are novices in communicating their ideas in modest and negotiable ways. As participants specialized in English Language Studies, a program likely to encounter diverse research, it is imperative to have knowledge of

these devices. Hedges and boosters depict the attitude of the writer towards his or her propositions, and the inability to recognize their presence can affect the understanding of the communicated ideas.

Therefore, the lack of knowledge of these features results in poor writing quality, yet good writing is a skill

significant for English students. However, it is also important to consider other factors that can affect the participants' writing performance. The participants may have lack of information about argumentative essays and the topics they had to discuss. Time constraints can also affect their performance, leading to poor writing quality. Moreover, the findings also imply that English students have weak knowledge of these markers, but it is not clear whether the tendency in this study is also notable for other programs such as engineering or social sciences.

The study further implies that modal verbs were the most occurring in all different proficiency levels mentioned in this study in both classifications of hedges and boosters, which provides information on the most common use of features that can be a focus on explicit teaching and future research. In addition, modal verbs acted differently in each context, marking them as having unstable meaning when correlated to context.

Nevertheless, in terms of hedges and boosters in general, it is necessary to have a balance in the use of these features; an imbalance can result in damaging the writer's credibility and coherence of the academic texts, which is evident in this present study.

The present study revealed that students have low proficiency in hedges and boosters, which act as an indicator of properly received messages by readers. Based on the results, the researchers proposed several recommendations. Firstly, conduct an explicit study on how students pragmatically employ hedges and boosters, considering their proficiency level and L1 background. Secondly, conduct a comparative study between programs to identify their proficiency levels and attitudes towards their stance by analyzing their use of hedges and boosters. Thirdly, include explicit teaching of the usage of these metadiscourse markers in the curriculum, as they are important in conveying the writer's message and engaging the readers. Additionally, incorporate grammar classes with various authentic activities that focus on the proper use of metadiscourse markers. Given that epistemic modal verbs are the most frequently occurring hedges and boosters, this could be one of the primary focuses of explicit teaching and future research. Finally, investigate how modal verbs act differently depending on context and determine which students employ them the most, whether for epistemic meaning or deontic meaning.

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