Hedging in ESL Academic Essays: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Malaysian Undergraduate Writing

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ABSTRACT

Hedging and stance markers play an important role in academic writing because they allow writers to express evaluation and manage the strength of their claims. However, these linguistic features can be challenging for second language writers who are still developing control over academic discourse conventions. This study examines the use of hedging and stance markers in argumentative essays written by Malaysian ESL undergraduates. The research aims to identify the types and frequencies of stance markers used in student writing and to explore how learners express certainty and evaluation in academic arguments. The study adopts a corpus-based analytical approach guided by Hyland's stance framework, which categorises stance markers into hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions. Thirty argumentative essays written by undergraduate ESL students were collected and analysed. The essays were coded manually to identify the occurrence and distribution of stance markers across the texts. The findings indicate that students rely heavily on a limited range of hedging expressions, particularly modal verbs such as may and can. Boosters and attitude markers appear less frequently, suggesting that learners have a restricted repertoire of stance resources. The results also show that some claims are presented without sufficient hedging, which may affect the level of academic caution expected in scholarly writing. The study contributes to research on second language academic writing by highlighting patterns of stance use among ESL learners. The findings provide insights for writing instruction and suggest that explicit teaching of stance and hedging may support the development of more effective academic arguments.

Keywords: Hedging; Stance markers; ESL Academic Writing; Corpus analysis; Malaysian undergraduates

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing requires more than grammatical accuracy and vocabulary knowledge. Writers must also manage how strongly they present their ideas. In academic texts, claims are rarely stated as absolute truths. Instead, writers signal different degrees of certainty and evaluation. Linguistic resources such as hedging and stance markers help writers achieve this balance.

Hedging allows writers to present claims cautiously while recognising possible limitations in knowledge. Expressions such as may, might, and possible indicate that a statement remains open to interpretation. These forms help writers avoid overly strong claims while still presenting an argument. In academic discourse, hedging is widely recognised as a central rhetorical strategy because it reflects the tentative nature of scholarly knowledge (Hyland, 2010).

Closely related to hedging is the concept of stance. Stance refers to the ways writers position themselves in relation to the information they present. Through stance markers, writers express evaluation, certainty, and personal commitment to claims. These linguistic choices guide readers in interpreting arguments and understanding the writer's perspective. Research in academic discourse shows that stance markers play an important role in constructing persuasive arguments and establishing credibility in scholarly texts (Hyland & Jiang, 2021).

Managing stance can be particularly challenging for second language writers. ESL learners must simultaneously

handle grammar, vocabulary, and rhetorical organisation. At the same time, they are expected to follow conventions of academic discourse. As a result, expressing appropriate levels of certainty and evaluation may become difficult. Studies of learner corpora show that novice writers often rely on a limited set of stance expressions and may produce claims that appear overly strong or insufficiently qualified (Paquot & Granger, 2020).

Recent corpus-based research has continued to examine stance markers in student writing. Findings indicate that experienced academic writers draw on a wide range of linguistic resources when presenting arguments. In contrast, learner writers often depend on basic modal verbs or repeated evaluative expressions. These patterns suggest that stance development is closely linked to writing proficiency and familiarity with academic discourse conventions (Lancaster, 2016).

Despite growing attention to stance in academic discourse research, relatively few studies have focused on Malaysian ESL university students. English functions as a key language of instruction in Malaysian higher education, and students are required to produce academic essays across many disciplines. However, English remains a second language for most learners. Students therefore develop academic writing skills while dealing with linguistic and rhetorical challenges.

Examining stance markers in Malaysian ESL student writing can provide valuable insight into how learners construct academic arguments in a second language. Such analysis may also reveal patterns that highlight areas where students require further support.

This study investigates the use of hedging and stance markers in argumentative essays written by Malaysian ESL undergraduates. Using Hyland's stance framework, the study examines the types and frequencies of stance markers found in student essays. The aim is to understand how learners express certainty, evaluation, and authorial position in academic writing. The study addresses the following research questions: (1) What types of hedging devices appear in academic essays written by Malaysian ESL undergraduates? (2) What stance markers are used by students in their argumentative writing? (3) How frequently do these linguistic features occur in the essays?

By analysing these patterns, the study contributes to research on stance in second language academic writing and provides insights that may support the teaching of academic writing in ESL contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hedging in Academic Writing

Academic writing often requires writers to present ideas with caution. Scholars rarely claim complete certainty when discussing research findings or theoretical arguments. Instead, they adjust the strength of their statements. Hedging plays an important role in achieving this balance.

Hedging refers to linguistic expressions that reduce the certainty of a claim. Writers use these expressions to signal that an idea is open to interpretation or further evidence. Modal verbs such as may, might, and could are common examples. Adverbs such as possibly and likely also perform similar functions.

In academic discourse, hedging reflects the tentative nature of knowledge construction. Research findings are rarely considered final or absolute. Instead, they contribute to ongoing discussion and interpretation. Hedging therefore allows writers to present claims while recognising uncertainty in knowledge (Hyland, 2021).

Recent research continues to highlight the importance of hedging in scholarly communication. Academic writers often balance caution with confidence when presenting claims. This balance helps them construct arguments that are persuasive without overstating evidence (Hyland & Jiang, 2021).

Stance Markers in Academic Discourse

Hedging forms part of a broader concept known as stance. Stance refers to the linguistic resources writers use to

express attitudes, judgments, and levels of commitment toward information.

Through stance markers, writers position themselves in relation to their claims. These markers guide readers in interpreting arguments and understanding the writer's perspective. Stance markers can appear in several forms, including modal verbs, reporting verbs, evaluative adjectives, and personal pronouns.

Examples include expressions such as suggests that, appears to, and it is likely that. These forms allow writers to indicate how strongly they support a particular claim.

Studies of academic discourse show that stance plays a central role in persuasive writing. Writers use stance markers to emphasise key arguments, acknowledge uncertainty, and evaluate evidence. Effective stance management therefore contributes to clarity and credibility in academic texts (Afzaal, 2025).

Research comparing novice and expert writers, reveals noticeable differences in stance use. Experienced writers often draw from a wide range of linguistic resources to express evaluation and commitment. In contrast, novice writers frequently rely on a small number of expressions and repeat them throughout the text (Lancaster, 2016).

Theoretical Framework: Hyland's Stance Model

The present study adopts Hyland's stance framework as its theoretical foundation. This framework forms part of the interactional meta discourse model, which explains how writers interact with readers through language.

Within this model, stance markers are divided into four categories: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions.

Hedges reduce the strength of a claim and express caution. Boosters strengthen statements and signal strong commitment to an argument. Attitude markers express evaluation or judgment toward ideas. Self-mentions indicate the presence of the writer in the text.

These categories provide a useful structure for analysing how writers position themselves in academic discourse. The framework has been widely applied in research examining academic writing across disciplines and educational contexts (Hyland & Jiang, 2022).

Hedging in Second Language Academic Writing

For second language learners, managing stance can be particularly challenging. ESL writers must simultaneously focus on grammar, vocabulary, and organisation while producing academic arguments.

As a result, learners may struggle to express nuanced levels of certainty. Studies of learner corpora show that ESL writers often produce direct statements rather than carefully hedged claims (Paquot & Granger, 2020).

Another common feature of learner writing is limited variation in stance markers. Students frequently rely on modal verbs such as may or can. Other hedging forms appear less frequently. This restricted range suggests that learners may not yet be familiar with the wider repertoire of stance expressions used in academic discourse.

Recent corpus studies confirm these patterns. Analyses of student essays show that novice writers tend to repeat a small set of stance markers. Experienced academic writers, in contrast, demonstrate greater flexibility in expressing evaluation and certainty (Staples et al., 2016).

Research Gap

Although research on stance markers has expanded in recent years, relatively few studies examine their use among Malaysian ESL undergraduates. English plays a central role in higher education in Malaysia, where students are expected to produce academic writing across different disciplines.

However, English is not the first language for most students. Learners therefore develop academic writing skills while managing linguistic limitations. Examining stance markers in this context can provide insight into how students construct arguments in second language academic writing.

This study addresses this gap by analysing hedging and stance markers in argumentative essays written by Malaysian ESL undergraduates. Using Hyland's stance framework, the study examines the types and frequencies of stance markers used in student essays.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a corpus-based quantitative design. Corpus analysis allows researchers to examine linguistic patterns in written texts. It is widely used in discourse and academic writing research. The method helps identify frequency patterns and language use across many texts (McEnery & Hardie, 2022).

The study focused on the use of hedging and stance markers in academic essays. Hyland's stance framework guided the analysis. The framework classifies stance expressions into categories such as hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions (Hyland & Jiang, 2021).

A corpus-based approach was appropriate for this study. It allowed systematic analysis of stance features in student writing. The method also supports objective examination of linguistic patterns.

Research Context and Participants

The data were collected from undergraduate students enrolled in an academic writing course at a Malaysian university. The participants were English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. English was not their first language. However, it was used as the main medium for academic writing in the university.

A total of 30 students participated in the study. All students were enrolled in a foundation-level English course that required academic essay writing. The participants had similar educational backgrounds and had completed secondary education in Malaysia.

Students were asked to produce argumentative essays as part of normal course activities. These essays formed the dataset for the present analysis. Participation in the study was voluntary. Student identities were removed during data processing to maintain anonymity.

Corpus Description

The corpus consisted of 30 argumentative essays written by undergraduate ESL students. Each essay contained approximately 250–300 words. The essays were written in response to academic writing prompts provided during the course.

The final corpus contained approximately 8,000–9,000 words of student writing. All essays followed a similar argumentative structure. Students were asked to present a position on a given issue and support it with reasons and examples.

Using comparable essay tasks helped maintain consistency in the dataset. Similar tasks ensured that differences in language use were not caused by variation in writing topics.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study adopts Hyland's stance model as the theoretical framework. The model explains how writers express attitudes and commitment toward propositions in academic discourse. Stance markers allow writers to signal degrees of certainty, evaluation, and authorial presence in texts (Hyland & Jiang, 2021).

In Hyland's framework, stance consists of four main linguistic categories: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions. Each category performs a different rhetorical function in academic communication.

Hedges reduce the strength of claims and indicate caution. Writers use hedges when evidence is limited or when

alternative interpretations may exist. Boosters express strong commitment to claims and signal confidence in arguments. Attitude markers express evaluation or judgment toward ideas. Self-mentions reveal the author's presence in the text and help establish authorial identity.

In the present study, these four categories are used to analyse stance markers in undergraduate ESL essays. The analysis focuses on identifying the types and frequencies of stance markers used by students. The framework explains how writers express attitudes and commitment toward their claims (Hyland, 2021).

Table 1- Four stance categories are identified in the framework:

Stance	Category	Function
Hedges	Reduce certainty of claims	(e.g., may, might, possible)
Boosters	Express strong certainty	(e.g., clearly, definitely)
Attitude markers	Express evaluation	(e.g., important, interesting)
Self-mentions	Indicate author presence	(e.g., I, we)

Hedges were the main focus of the present study. However, other stance markers were also identified to understand overall stance patterns in learner writing.

The framework has been widely applied in recent research examining academic discourse and stance use (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Afzaal, 2025).

Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis followed several steps.

First, all essays were collected and converted into digital text format. Personal information was removed from the files. Each essay was assigned an identification number.

Second, the texts were read carefully to identify stance markers. Instances of hedging, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions were coded according to Hyland's framework.

Third, the frequency of each stance category was calculated. The analysis focused on the number of occurrences of each stance marker in the corpus.

Fourth, the results were compared across essays to identify common patterns in stance use. The analysis examined which types of stance markers appeared most frequently and which were rarely used.

Corpus-based analysis is widely used in discourse studies because it allows researchers to identify linguistic patterns systematically (McEnery & Hardie, 2022).

Reliability of Coding

Reliability procedures were applied during the coding process. A coding checklist based on Hyland's stance framework was used during analysis. This checklist ensured that stance markers were identified consistently across all essays.

In addition, a second review of the coded data was conducted after the initial analysis. The researcher checked all identified markers again to confirm that each instance matched the category definitions.

Reliability checks help reduce subjectivity in discourse analysis and improve the credibility of findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were followed during the study. Participation in the research was voluntary. Students were informed about the purpose of the study before their essays were analysed.

All essays were anonymised before analysis. Student names and identifying information were removed from the dataset. The data were used only for research purposes.

These procedures ensured that the research followed ethical principles for studies involving human participants.

FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the corpus analysis. The study examined stance markers in 30 argumentative essays written by Malaysian ESL undergraduates. The analysis followed Hyland's stance framework, which identifies four stance categories: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions (Hyland & Jiang, 2021).

Table 2- Distribution of Stance Markers per 1,000 Words

Stance Category	Raw Frequency	Normalised Frequency (per 1,000 words)
Hedges	86	9.6
Boosters	52	5.8
Attitude markers	41	4.6
Self-mentions	25	2.8

Normalised frequency allows comparison across corpora. Corpus linguistics research commonly reports frequencies per 1,000 words to standardise analysis (McEnery & Hardie, 2022).

The results show that hedges appear most frequently in the corpus. This pattern suggests that students attempt to soften claims when presenting arguments. However, the frequency of other stance categories is considerably lower, indicating limited variation in stance expression.

Overall Distribution of Stance Markers

The first step of the analysis examined the overall frequency of stance markers in the corpus. Table 3 summarises the distribution across the four categories.

Table 3- Frequency of Stance Markers in the Corpus

Stance Category	Frequency	Percentage
Hedges	86	42%
Boosters	52	26%
Attitude markers	41	20%
Self-mentions	25	12%
Total	204	100%

The results show that hedges were the most frequent stance markers in the corpus. They accounted for more than two-fifths of all stance expressions identified. Boosters appeared less frequently but still formed a notable portion

of the dataset. Attitude markers and self-mentions occurred less often.

This distribution suggests that students attempt to soften their claims when presenting arguments. However, the range of stance expressions remains limited.

Hedging Devices in Student Essays

A closer analysis examined the types of hedging devices used in the essays. Modal verbs were the most common forms of hedging. Table 4 lists the main hedging expressions identified in the corpus.

Concordance Examples of Hedging in Student Essays

Corpus analysis often includes concordance examples to illustrate how linguistic items appear in context. Table 4 presents selected examples of hedging expressions found in the student essays.

Table 4- Examples of Hedging in Student Essays

Example Sentence	Hedging Device	Category
Social media **may influence** students' study habits.	may	Hedge
Online learning **might improve** access to education.	might	Hedge
Technology **can help** students complete tasks more efficiently.	can	Hedge
This approach is **likely to improve** academic performance.	likely	Hedge
There is **possible evidence** that digital learning supports engagement.	possible	Hedge

These examples show that hedging devices often appear when students present general claims or predictions. Most hedges occur in sentences that introduce arguments or explain possible outcomes.

The results also show that modal verbs dominate hedging patterns in the corpus. Other forms such as lexical verbs or adverbs appear less frequently. This finding reflects patterns commonly reported in second language writing research, where learners rely heavily on modal verbs to express uncertainty (Paquot & Granger, 2020).

Table 5- Common Hedging Devices in the Student Essays

Hedging Device	Frequency
may	24
can	18
might	15
possible	12
likely	9
perhaps	8

Modal verbs clearly dominate hedging patterns in the essays. The verbs may, can, and might appear most frequently. Other forms, such as adverbs, occur less often.

Examples from the essays illustrate how students use these hedging devices:

*"Social media **may** influence students' study habits."*

*"Technology **can** help students complete tasks more easily."*

*"Online learning **might** improve access to education."*

In these examples, hedges appear when students describe possible effects or outcomes. The devices allow writers to avoid absolute statements while presenting arguments.

Despite their frequent use, the variety of hedging expressions remains limited. Many essays repeat the same modal verbs several times. Other hedging strategies appear rarely.

Use of Boosters

The corpus also contains boosters that express strong certainty. Boosters strengthen claims and show confidence in an argument.

Table 6 presents the most common boosters found in the essays.

Table 6- Common Boosters in Student Essays

Booster	Frequency
clearly	15
very	13
definitely	10
always	8
strongly	6

Students often used boosters when presenting opinions or emphasising key points.

Example sentences include:

*"Technology **clearly** improves communication."*

*"Students **definitely** benefit from online learning."*

*"Education is **very** important for future success."*

These expressions indicate strong commitment to the claim being made. However, in some essays boosters appear without supporting evidence. When strong certainty is expressed without justification, the argument may appear subjective.

Attitude Markers

Attitude markers express the writer's evaluation of a topic. These markers often appear as adjectives that describe the significance or value of an idea.

Table 7- Common Attitude Markers

Attitude Marker	Frequency
important	14

beneficial	9
useful	7
harmful	6
interesting	5

Students frequently used evaluative adjectives when discussing educational or social issues.

Examples include:

*"Education is **important** for personal development."*

*"Online learning can be **beneficial** for students."*

*"Technology is **useful** in modern classrooms."*

These expressions help writers evaluate the topics they discuss. However, similar to hedging devices, the variety of attitude markers remains limited.

Self-Mentions

Self-mentions refer to personal pronouns that indicate the writer's presence in the text. The analysis identified relatively few self-mentions in the corpus.

Table 8- Self-Mention Forms

Form	Frequency
I	17
we	8

Self-mentions appear mainly when students express personal opinions. Examples include:

*"**I** believe technology helps students learn."*

*"**We** should use technology responsibly."*

These forms occur mostly in introductions or conclusions. Their overall frequency remains low compared with other stance markers.

Summary of Results

Three main patterns emerge from the analysis.

First, hedges appear more frequently than other stance markers. Students often use modal verbs to soften claims. Second, the range of stance expressions remains limited. Many essays rely on the same words repeatedly. Third, boosters and evaluative expressions appear in opinion statements, although they are sometimes used without supporting evidence.

These findings suggest that students demonstrate some awareness of stance in academic writing. However, their use of stance markers remains limited in variety and rhetorical control.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how Malaysian ESL undergraduates use hedging and stance markers in academic essays. The findings reveal several important patterns. Students used stance markers in their writing, but their range of expressions remained limited. In many cases, the same linguistic forms appeared repeatedly across essays.

Frequent Use of Hedging Devices

The analysis showed that hedges were the most common stance markers in the corpus. Modal verbs such as may, can, and might appeared frequently in student essays. These expressions allowed writers to soften claims and present ideas cautiously.

This finding aligns with previous research on academic discourse. Hedges play a central role in scholarly communication because they signal that knowledge is open to interpretation and debate. Writers use hedges to avoid presenting claims as absolute facts (Hyland, 2021). By reducing certainty, hedging allows authors to acknowledge possible limitations in evidence.

However, the present findings also reveal a limited range of hedging strategies. Students relied heavily on modal verbs while other forms appeared rarely. Lexical verbs such as suggest or indicate were largely absent from the essays.

This pattern has been observed in many studies of learner writing. ESL writers often depend on a narrow set of modal verbs when expressing uncertainty. In contrast, experienced academic writers use a wider range of hedging devices, including lexical verbs, adjectives, and adverbs (Paquot & Granger, 2020). The restricted variety observed in the present study therefore reflects typical characteristics of novice academic writing.

Limited Range of Stance Markers

Another important finding concerns the limited diversity of stance expressions. Many essays repeated the same evaluative words such as important and beneficial. While these expressions help writers present evaluation, excessive repetition may reduce the sophistication of academic writing.

Research on stance development suggests that the ability to vary stance expressions grows with academic experience. Skilled writers draw from a broader linguistic repertoire to express evaluation and commitment. They also adjust their stance according to rhetorical context (Hyland & Jiang, 2021).

Recent corpus research supports this view. Studies comparing novice and expert academic writing show that expert writers demonstrate greater flexibility in stance expression. They combine different linguistic forms to express subtle differences in certainty and evaluation (Afzaal, 2025).

The restricted stance repertoire observed in this study may reflect limited exposure to academic discourse conventions. Students may be familiar with a few common expressions but may not yet recognise the full range of linguistic resources available for expressing stance.

Boosters and Strength of Claims

The analysis also identified several boosters such as clearly and definitely. These expressions strengthen claims and signal strong commitment from the writer.

In academic writing, boosters can help emphasise key points. However, they must be used carefully. Strong claims usually require supporting evidence. When boosters appear without evidence, arguments may seem subjective rather than analytical.

Some essays in the corpus showed this pattern. Students sometimes used strong evaluative language while presenting opinions. This behaviour is common among novice writers who are still developing awareness of academic argumentation. Previous research has also reported that learner writers may overuse boosters when

expressing personal views (Hyland & Jiang, 2021).

Experienced academic writers tend to balance boosters and hedges more carefully. They strengthen claims when strong evidence is available and hedge statements when evidence is uncertain. This balance contributes to persuasive and credible academic writing.

Authorial Presence in Student Writing

The analysis also revealed a relatively low frequency of self-mentions such as I and we. These pronouns appeared mainly when students expressed personal opinions.

Academic writing has traditionally been associated with an objective style that avoids personal voice. As a result, many students believe that personal pronouns should not appear in academic texts. However, more recent research suggests that controlled authorial presence can strengthen academic arguments.

Self-mentions allow writers to take responsibility for claims and guide readers through arguments. They can also help writers establish authority within a text (Hyland, 2021). The limited use of self-mentions in the present study may therefore reflect uncertainty about how authorial voice functions in academic writing.

Implications for Academic Writing Instruction

The findings suggest several implications for writing instruction. First, academic writing courses should address stance and hedging explicitly. Students often learn about essay structure and grammar, but they may receive less guidance on how to manage stance in academic discourse.

Teaching a wider range of hedging strategies may help students develop more nuanced academic arguments. Instruction can include lexical verbs such as suggest, indicate, and appear, which are common in academic texts.

Second, teachers may encourage students to analyse stance markers in authentic academic articles. Exposure to real examples can help learners understand how experienced writers present claims and evaluate evidence.

Third, writing instruction should highlight the relationship between evidence and stance. Students need to understand when to hedge claims and when to strengthen them. This awareness can help them construct arguments that are both cautious and persuasive.

Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to research on stance in second language academic writing by providing corpus-based evidence from Malaysian ESL undergraduate essays. The results show that students demonstrate basic awareness of stance markers but rely on a limited range of linguistic resources.

Understanding these patterns may help educators design writing instruction that supports the development of academic discourse competence. Developing awareness of stance markers may enable learners to produce arguments that are clearer, more balanced, and more persuasive.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Malaysian ESL undergraduates use hedging and stance markers in academic essays. The analysis focused on four stance categories: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions. The results show that students used stance markers in their essays, but their use was limited in range and control.

Hedges were the most frequent stance markers in the corpus. Students often used modal verbs such as may, can, and might to soften claims. These expressions allowed writers to present ideas with caution. Hedging plays an important role in academic discourse because it helps writers recognise uncertainty and avoid overly strong claims (Hyland & Jiang, 2021). The presence of hedges in the essays suggests that students were aware of the need to moderate their arguments.

However, the range of hedging devices was narrow. Most students relied on a small set of modal verbs. Other forms of hedging appeared rarely. Previous research shows that novice writers often depend on limited linguistic resources when expressing stance (Paquot & Granger, 2020). In contrast, experienced academic writers use a wider variety of stance expressions to construct nuanced arguments.

The study also found that boosters and attitude markers appeared in many essays. Words such as clearly, definitely, and important were common. These expressions show evaluation and strong commitment to claims. However, some boosters were used without supporting evidence. This pattern may weaken the credibility of academic arguments. Research on academic discourse shows that effective writers balance hedging and boosting when presenting claims (Afzaal, 2025).

Another important finding concerns the limited use of self-mentions. Personal pronouns such as I and we appeared infrequently. Students may avoid personal voice because academic writing is often taught as objective and impersonal. However, recent research shows that authorial voice is an important part of academic discourse. Writers use stance markers to position themselves and guide readers through arguments.

Overall, the results show that students demonstrate basic awareness of stance in academic writing. They use hedges and evaluative expressions to present arguments. However, their stance repertoire remains limited. Many essays rely on repetitive forms and lack variation in stance expressions. This pattern reflects common characteristics of novice academic writing.

The findings have several implications for academic writing instruction. First, writing courses should include explicit teaching of stance and hedging strategies. Students need to understand how linguistic choices influence the strength of claims. Instruction may include examples from authentic academic texts to illustrate how experienced writers manage stance.

Second, teachers should encourage students to expand their repertoire of stance markers. Exposure to varied expressions can help students avoid repetition and develop more sophisticated academic style. Corpus-based learning activities may also help students observe patterns of stance use in authentic writing.

Third, writing instruction should emphasise the relationship between evidence and stance. Students need to understand when to hedge claims and when to strengthen them. This awareness can improve the clarity and persuasiveness of academic arguments.

This study contributes to research on stance in second language academic writing by providing corpus-based evidence from Malaysian ESL undergraduate essays. The findings highlight both the presence and limitations of stance markers in learner writing. Understanding these patterns may help educators design writing instruction that supports the development of academic discourse competence.

Future research may extend this work in several ways. Larger learner corpora could provide broader insight into stance patterns across different proficiency levels. Comparative studies may also examine differences between learner writing and expert academic texts. Such research can deepen understanding of how stance develops in second language academic writing.

Pedagogical implications

The findings highlight the importance of teaching stance explicitly in academic writing courses. Many writing classes focus on grammar, vocabulary, and essay organisation. However, stance markers also play a key role in academic argumentation. Writers use these expressions to signal certainty, evaluation, and authorial position (Hyland & Jiang, 2021).

Teachers can introduce students to different hedging strategies. These include modal verbs, lexical verbs, and adverbs. For example, verbs such as suggest, indicate, and appear help writers present cautious claims. Adverbs such as possibly and likely also soften arguments.

Another useful strategy is corpus-based learning. Students can examine authentic academic texts and identify

stance markers used by experienced writers. Observing real examples may help learners understand how stance functions in academic discourse.

Teachers should also highlight the relationship between evidence and stance. Strong claims require strong support. When evidence is limited, writers should hedge their statements. This balance helps create credible and persuasive arguments.

Declarations / Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the university administration prior to the commencement of data collection. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. All data were collected and reported anonymously, and no identifying information of the students, teachers, or university was disclosed. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants.

Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted independently, and no financial or commercial relationships influenced the design, implementation, analysis, or reporting of the study.

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