Hedging in Academic Text in English

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Overview

- The importance of hedges in academic text.
- Expanding the hedging repertoire.
- Various types of hedges and options.
- Developing stock vocabulary and hedges.
- Overstatements and learning to avoid them.

In the past several decades, much research has been devoted to hedging in academic prose, among other types of discourse. Analyses of large English-language corpora continue to underscore the importance and prevalence of various types of hedging devices in academic prose (Hinkel, 1997, 1999, 2003a, 2003b, 2005a; Hoye, 1997; Hyland, 1998, 2008, 2018; Hunston & Francis, 2000; Hyland & Milton, 1997). The lists of hedging devices differ among research findings, and only the most frequent are discussed in this chapter.

> Definition**: Hedges** and **hedging** are linguistic devices, e.g. words, phrases, clauses, and other constructions, that are used to limit or qualify a statement, reduce the degree of certainty and commitment, and project politeness.

Here are a few examples.

– *The rain in Spain stays **mainly** in the plain.*

- *When the dog bites, when the bee stings, when I'm feeling sad, I **simply** remember my favorite things, and then I **don't** feel **so** bad.*
- *It's Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious! **Even though** the sound of it is **something quite** atrocious.*

In academic writing, hedging has numerous social and rhetorical purposes, and it can take many linguistic forms, including adverbs, adjectives, modal verbs, and conjunctions. In linguistics research, various definitions and classifications of hedging devices have been constructed to account for their complex and culturally bound, contextual uses (Hinkel, 2011, 2015; Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008; van Dijk, 2010).

The Functions of Hedging in Academic Writing

- In academic writing, the purpose of hedging is to reduce the writer's commitment to the truthfulness of a statement, e.g. ***Many types of fruit can be pickled***.
- Hedging represents the uses of linguistic devices to show hesitation, politeness, and indirectness, e.g. ***Historical sources claim that pickles have long been considered a beauty aid.***
- In Anglo-American formal written text, hedges are used extensively with the general goal of projecting "honesty, modesty, proper caution," and diplomacy (Swales, 1990, p. 174), e.g. ***Archeologists suspect that pickling and preserving food has been around for thousands of years.***

The uses of hedges are highly conventionalized in academic writing and practically requisite in expressions of personal positions or points of view.

Corpus analyses of published academic prose demonstrate clearly that hedges are by far the most frequent features of presenting writers' perspectives because they serve to distinguish facts from opinions (Hyland, 1998).

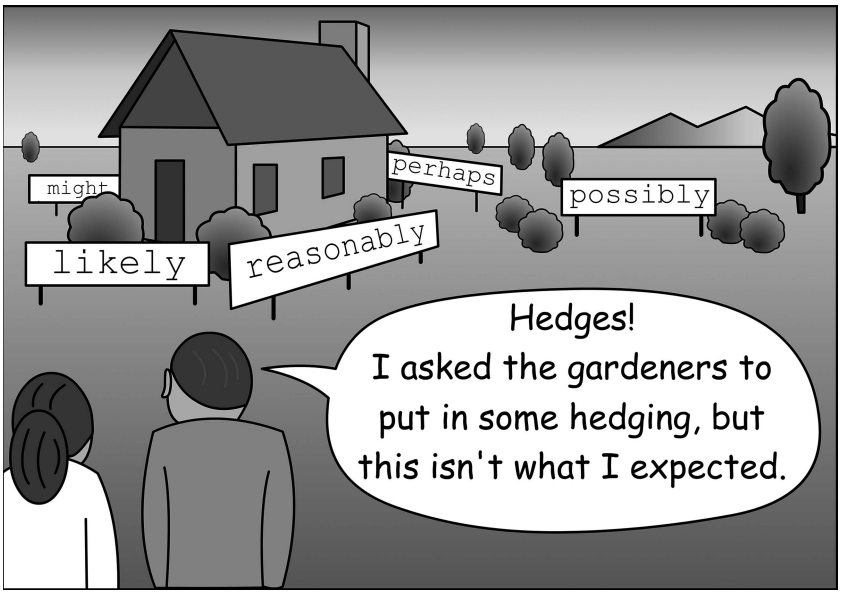
In composition textbooks and writing guides for basic writers, hedging is not discussed in detail. Despite the prevalence and importance of hedges in written academic prose, textbooks for teaching academic and second

language writing rarely focus on hedges of any kind, with the exception of modal verbs, e.g. ***can***, ***may***, ***might*** (Hinkel, 2003a, 2003b, 2005b, 2011).

Numerous other studies have found that L2 academic texts frequently contain overstatements, exaggerations, and authoritative assertions and that hedging is a critically important skill that needs to be taught (Hinkel, 2002, 2015; Hyland, 2008, 2018).

- In writing instruction, a key focus is to demonstrate how hedging assertions and claims reflects politeness and caution almost always requisite in English-language academic prose.
- In reading, insights into the functions of hedges in context can explain how politeness strategies are used in academic text and language.

In L2 writing, there may be a variety of reasons for the high frequency of overstatements and strong claims. But one important consideration is that rhetorical uncertainty and the uses of hedges are valued greatly in the Anglo-American but not necessarily in other rhetorical traditions (Dong, 1998; Hu & Cao, 2011; van Dijk, 2009, 2010). Furthermore, research has established that many L2 writers have a restricted lexical repertoire that



often leads to a "shortage" of hedging devices employed in academic prose (Hinkel, 2003a, 2003b, 2005b, 2015; Hyland, 2008, 2018; Jordan, 1997). Therefore, focused instruction in appropriate uses of varied hedging is urgently needed.

The discussion of various types of hedging devices presented in this chapter is organized to begin with the lexically and grammatically simple devices and then to move on to those of greater complexity. (For additional information about the hedging properties of conditional, concessive, and time (***if***, ***although***, ***though***, ***when***) clauses, see chapter 10; the passive voice as hedging, see chapter 7; and indefinite pronouns as hedges, chapter 6).

Why Hedging Needs to Be Taught

In various non-Anglo-American rhetorical traditions, rhetorical persuasion does not necessarily call for hedging, and the desirability of hedging statements, generalizations, and claims is not an obvious consideration for many L2 writers (Dong, 1998; Hinkel, 2005a, 2015; Hu & Cao, 2011; Hyland, 2008; Taylor & Chen, 1991). In teaching, the need for hedging in academic prose has to be explicitly addressed. Noting the distinctions in uses of hedges in informal conversations (***basically***, ***sort of***) and formal writing (***apparently***, ***periodically***) is a good place to start.

In casual conversations, English speakers often say ***I always forget to xxx!***, ***You always do yyy!***, or ***Everything is falling apart today***. Speakers of other languages say these things, too, in both English and their L1s. However, in all languages, informal conversations with friends require a different type of discourse and language features than, for instance, writing a petition to the dean. In fact, if someone talks to his or her friends and uses language similar to that in the petition, within a short time, this individual would not have many friends left.

> The language features employed in formal academic writing are almost always substantially and markedly different from those used in conversations.

In many discourse traditions, overstatements and exaggerations can be so common that practically no one notices them. Also, in English, some conversational exaggerations are not likely to get much attention, e.g. ***I have a***

thousand things to do today or ***Every time I get in the shower, the phone rings***. On the other hand, in formal writing, these sentences may become ***I am busy today*** or ***The phone often rings when I am in the shower***.

In casual interactions, exaggerations are usually assumed to be innocent hyperboles that are used to make a point, and both speakers and hearers are aware that the actual state of affairs is inflated. On the other hand, the information in formal written discourse is expected to be far more precise and cautiously hedged. In various types of formal prose, such as professional correspondence, memos, or reports, exaggerations and overstatements can be precarious and appear to be inflated.

- With conversational hyperboles, the speaker's and the hearer's shared and mutual assumptions apply to overstatements and exaggerations to allow them to understand the intended meaning.
- Apart from the shared and mutual assumptions that exist in the Anglo-American discourse tradition, there is little objective reason to believe that these assumptions should apply only to casual conversations, but not formal written prose.

It may not be very difficult to imagine that in non-Anglo-American rhetorical traditions, hyperboles can be perfectly acceptable in persuasion when both the writer and the reader assume that the actual value of the information in a statement is smaller than the stated. For example, in ***Students always study hard***, the writer simply assumes that the reader knows that the intended meaning is **not** that ***all (100%) students study hard at all times***.

The shared and mutual assumptions prevalent in various discourse types and traditions allow the reader to understand that the writer knows that 100% of students do not work hard 100% of the time. In this case, the reader does not necessarily think that the writer's text is overstated, and "reality" hedging is assumed by both the writer and the reader.

Talking Shop

The concept of **hedges** was originally proposed by George Lakoff in 1972 and defined as "**words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy**" (p. 195). Lakoff's list of hedges was relatively short and included around 50 words and phrases, e.g.

more or less, one might say that, sort of, let us say that, kind of, might as well be, in a sense, to all intents and purposes, in one sense, for all practical purposes

Since then, the work on hedges has been taken up in pragmatics, discourse and text studies, corpus research, semantics, logic, and philosophy. In each of these areas, however, the definition of hedges differs to various extents, but these are largely immaterial in language teaching and learning.

The pragmatic – practical – functions of hedges are to qualify, limit, and soften statements, opinions, and claims, as well as to express a degree of vagueness, indirectness, and politeness.

The functions of hedges are relatively easy to notice when contrasting sentences are presented and discussed. Here are a few examples.

Example #1

- *Pickles are the best food, and everybody loves pickles.*
- ***In my opinion**, pickles are **delicious**, and **many** people **like** them.*

Example #2

- *Apple juice is the most widely consumed drink.* [A note: This is actually not true.]
- *Apple juice is **one** of the most widely consumed drinks **in North America**.*
- *Apple juice is a (very) **popular** drink **among children** **in North America**.*

[This is likely to be true in most cases – two hedges are included here, ***likely*** and ***in most cases***.]

The Snowball Effect to Expand Hedging Repertoire

In L2 instruction, the uses and functions of hedging often require persistent explanation and review because in many discourse traditions other than Anglo-American, hedging is not considered to be an important feature of academic prose. Teaching L2 writers to hedge their claims also has

an attendant objective of helping them to expand their vocabulary base and advance their awareness of the important differences between academic writing and conversational language (Hinkel, 2015; Hyland, 2018; Jordan, 1997).

- In many cases, L2 writers have a restricted lexical range of accessible hedging devices.
- If a small number of hedges are used repeatedly, the L2 text may be appear to be repetitious.

Examples of Conversational and Academic Hedge Words and Phrases

Conversational Hedges	*Formal Academic Hedges*
anyway(s), anyhow, at any rate	*possible(-ly), potential(-ly), somewhat*
a bunch of (books, cars, money, people)	*approximate(-ly), apparent(-ly), close to, rough(-ly), seeming(-ly)*
pretty (good, bad)	*reasonable(-ly), fair(-ly), general(-ly), acceptable*
lots, tons, loads	*relative(-ly) (high/good number/ quantity)*
for sure, absolutely, completely, totally	*likely, perhaps, probable(-ly), reliable(-ly)*

- Instruction can begin with lexically and grammatically simple types of hedges, e.g. frequency adverbs (***usually***, ***often***, ***occasionally***) and quantifiers (***most***, ***much***, ***many***, ***several***).
- Ubiquitous frequency adverbs and a few (this is a hedge) essential quantifiers can be used by L2 learners even at the low-intermediate level of proficiency.

> Building on this base, teaching the meanings and hedging functions of modal verbs, e.g. ***can*** and ***may***, can further help students increase their lexical range at a relatively low cost in terms of work and time.

Adjective and adverb hedges are by far the most numerous in English, and they include a wide variety of lexically simple items, such as ***possible*** and ***usual***, to more complex, e.g. ***apparently*** and ***relative to***. However, because adjective and adverb hedges are very numerous, L2 writers certainly do not

need to become fluent users of the entire group. In fact, in combination with frequency adverbs, quantifiers, and modal verbs covered earlier, a relatively good range of hedges can become accessible for use in essays and assignments if only a portion of adjective and adverb hedges are addressed in instruction.

- An important ingredient in teaching L2 writers to construct academic text entails examining the constructions that **should be avoided**.
- These include informal hedging that is rarely encountered in academic prose, e.g. ***kind of***, ***lots***, and ***to be supposed to***.
- A prevalence of informal hedges can make students' academic writing appear conversational and informal.

In addition, overstatements and exaggerations are identified not only by an absence of hedging, but also by explicit markers, as ***absolutely***, ***completely***, ***extremely***, ***strongly***, and ***totally***, e.g. ***I completely agree***, ***The city was totally flooded***, or ***My brother is extremely smart***. Conversational hedges and exaggeratives are also dealt with in this chapter.

Frequency Adverbs and Possibility Hedges

Frequency adverbs, such as ***frequently***, ***often***, ***usually***, ***occasionally***, represent one of the most common and simple hedging devices, with the exception of ***always*** and ***never*** at the extremes of the frequency continuum.

- Because frequency adverbs are lexically and syntactically simple, they can be accessible to most L2 learners with intermediate to advanced proficiency.
- Due to their ubiquity, frequency hedges can be used with verbs or whole sentences, and they are easier to apply in editing than other more complex types of hedges.

For instance, ***sometimes***, ***often***, ***usually***, and ***generally*** are more common in academic prose than, for example, ***ever*** or ***never***, which are particularly rare (Biber, et al., 1999; Leech, Rayson, & Wilson, 2001; Quirk, et al., 1985).

Although frequency adverbs can be definite (e.g. ***hourly***, ***daily***, ***weekly***, ***monthly***), the indefinite frequency adverbs have the function of hedges when used in appropriate contexts.

The Most Prevalent Frequency Adverbs as Hedges (in declining order)

- *frequently, often*
- *generally/in general, usually, ordinarily*
- *occasionally/on occasion, sometimes, at times, from time to time, every so often*
- *most of the time, on many/numerous occasions*
- *almost never, rarely, seldom, hardly ever* (negative meanings)
- *almost/nearly always, invariably*

Adverb phrases of frequency, such as ***on many occasions*** or ***at times***, can be placed at the beginnings of long sentences or at the ends of short sentences. For example, a student's sentence can be relatively easy to hedge by means of adverb phrases of frequency, depending on the intended meaning.

The Original Sentence without Hedging
Cracks propagate when loads are applied to structural components.

The Hedged Sentence
[In general/almost always/usually/on occasion/once in a while], *cracks propagate when loads are applied to structural components.*

Single-word Adverbs Follow the General Rules of Adverb Placement

- In front of the main verb, if the main sentence verb is **not *<u>be</u>*** (all examples are from student texts).
  - *Scientists **[generally/usually/often]** think that by conducting research on human cloning, they will make a better quality human kind in the future.*
  - *The definition of workplace competence has **[frequently/seldom/occasionally]** included learning new knowledge and skills.*

- After ***be***, if the main sentence verb is ***be***.
  - *This definition is **[frequently/usually/sometimes]** too broad.*
  - *The reasons for the change are **[generally/often]** not outside education, but they are connected to it.*
- Most uses of frequency adverbs are accompanied by the present simple tense.

Possibility hedges can be used as adjectives with nouns (***a probable/possible cause/reason***) and as adverbs in practically all other constructions, that is, with verbs, adjectives, whole sentences, and other adverbs. Adverb hedges such as ***probably***, ***perhaps***, ***possibly***, and ***in (this/that) case*** are particularly common in formal academic writing (Cutting, 2007; Hyland, 1998). Similar to frequency adverbs, they are lexically and syntactically easy to use. Their placement rules follow those for frequency adverbs.

Other types of possibility hedges are more characteristic of **conversational** discourse (and clichés) than formal writing, e.g.

- *by (some/any) chance, hopefully, maybe*
- *if you know/understand what I mean (to say)*
- *if you catch/get my meaning/drift*
- *as everyone/the reader knows*

As with adverbs of frequency, possibility hedges are not particularly complicated to teach. For instance, formal possibility hedges can be added to a student's sentences, and conversational hedges and conversational overstatements deleted.

- *Statistics is **[perhaps]** the newest science of mathematics.*
- *In our society, it is **[probably]** used [~~everywhere~~] **[in many places/for many purposes]**.*
- *[~~As everyone knows,~~] **[Good/careful]** judgment is **[possibly/probably]** the most important characteristic of a professional engineer.*

In the context of academic prose, instruction should explicitly address the extent of the writer's knowledge expressed in overstatements.

As the next step, the defensive stance and the power-reducing function of possibility hedges can be demonstrated and emphasized.

Quantifiers as Hedges

Quantifiers refer to definite (***a half***, ***a quarter***) and indefinite quantities and modify nouns. **Indefinite quantifiers** can function as hedges and include the following:

- *all, many/much*
- *some, a few/a little*
- *a number of* + noun/noun phrase
- *a good/great deal of* + noun/noun phrase
- *a bit (of)*

Clearly, the quantifier ***all*** would not make a very good hedging device, and its uses can make writers' claims appear somewhat overstated, e.g.

- *? **All** teachers worry about how their pupils learn.*
- *? Farmers collect **all** the rain water because they need it for irrigation.*
- *? The worst of **all** is when you lose your temperature records.*

On the other hand, an addition of, for instance, ***many/a few*** and ***much/a little*** with countable and uncountable nouns, respectively, can help reduce the effect of broad generalizations, as in these examples from an L2 essay about technological innovations.

- *[**Many/Most**] [P]eople have heard the concepts of facts, data, and knowledge.*
- *[**Many/Some/A few**] [S]cientists around the world seem to compete with each other for inventing new technology.*
- *[**Many/Most/A number of**] [P]eople believe that technology cannot be limited, and it will keep going forever.*

Negative quantifiers, such as ***few/fewer*** with countable nouns and ***little/less*** with uncountable nouns, can hedge the somewhat extreme position implicit in the uses of the indefinite pronouns ***no one*** and ***nobody***, as in the following L2 excerpt on fossil fuel consumption and passenger cars.

- *[**Few consumers/drivers/car owners**] [~~No one~~] want[~~s~~] to return to the energy crisis and oil shortages.*
- *In the early days, low fuel prices allowed consumers to focus on vehicle prices, performance, and comfort, and **[few individuals/drivers/engineers]** [~~nobody~~] cared about the fuel economy in passenger cars.*

– *[~~Totally,~~] [T]he cheap oil period can be divided into three small periods for analysis.*

Investigations of student and university essays have shown that L2 texts include significantly greater frequencies of ***every***- and ***no***- words (***everybody***, ***everything***, ***nothing***, ***no one***) than the prose of novice L1 writers (for additional discussion see chapter 6 on pronouns) (Cotterall & Cohen, 2003; Hinkel, 2002, 2005a; Hyland & Milton, 1997).

Research in formal academic prose shows that the quantifier ***none*** occurs at the rate of 0.01% and indefinite pronouns with ***every-*** 0.04%, as opposed to, for example, the quantifiers ***many*** and ***some*** with rates of 0.1% and 0.28%, respectively. ***No-*** words are rarer still (Biber, et al., 1999).

Modal Verbs as Hedges

In formal writing, the meanings and functions of modal verbs can be divided into three classes (Hoye, 1997; Quirk, et al., 1985; Palmer, 2001).

Meanings and Functions of Modal Verbs

(1)	Ability and possibility:	*can*, *may*, *might*, *could*, *be able to*.
(2)	Obligation and necessity:	*must*, *have to*, *should*, *ought*, *need to*, *to be to* (dated), *to be supposed to* (highly informal).
(3)	Prediction:	*will*, *would*.

Although most grammar textbooks state that the primary purposes of modal verbs are to express meanings of ability (***can***, ***could***), possibility (***may***, ***might***), and obligation (***have to***, ***must***), in academic writing, the main function of modals is hedging.

Here are a few examples.

- *Mobile farmers markets **can be** effective in delivering vegetables to urban centers.*
- *Product promotions **may encourage** consumers to respond.*
- *The history of baseball in North America **can be** followed back to the 19th century.*
- *Packing a compact umbrella for travel **might provide** a flexible option.*

In addition to the meanings of obligation, ***must (not)*** can also express prohibition, and it is seldom employed in academic writing.

Will vs. *Can* and *May*

- The meaning differences among modals largely deal with **the degree** of certainty, probability, and/or possibility.

  For instance, ***will*** refers to the future with a high degree of certainty, and ***may*** indicates a possibility.
- The function of ***will*** is to predict the future. Unless the writer can assure the reader of the outcome certainty, the uses of the future tense in academic texts can appear to be somewhat overstated.

Studies have shown that the future tense occurs significantly more frequently in L2 academic prose than in L1 text (see also chapter 7, the Future Tense). Here's an example from a student assignment on the parental role in child development.

- *When parents take care of their children's social skills, their offspring **will** be far more successful than in families where children are ignored.*
- *Children from caring families **will** get along with their peer group and have a friendly environment.*

In this example, the uses of the future tense create an impression of definiteness and a direct relationship between the parental care and children's peer interactions. In such cases, the discourse appears to contain over-confident claims about definite outcomes. However, teaching appropriate structures in academic text in this case may be relatively simple when the future auxiliary ***will*** can be simply replaced with ***may***.

In academic prose, modal verbs of possibility can have the function of hedges, and necessity modals can refer to reasoning and making conclusions

(Chafe, 1994; Cotterall & Cohen, 2003; Hinkel, 1999, 2015). For example, the modal ***may*** expresses a possibility and ***should*** to a reasoned conclusion (from a student paper).

> *Ecological studies **may** give an answer to environmental problems in many countries. Our world **should** be healthier if pollution is controlled.*

In teaching, the meanings of ***may*** and ***should*** can be contrasted with those of ***will***, which projects a great deal of certainty, and ***must***, which conveys a high degree of obligation or probability.

An example of definitive predictions of future events demonstrates somewhat ambitious uses of ***will*** in a student paper on medical experiments on animals.

> *For very sick patients with heart or lung diseases, doctors **will** use organs to help humans. The organs **will** be used as a "bridge" until doctors can find another human organ. However, animal rights activists **will** break into hospitals and laboratories where the operation takes place. The doctors and the surgeons **must** practice their skills on animals before they do any surgery on humans.*

- The main distinction: ***may*** refers to a **possibility** and ***can*** to an **ability**.
- In academic prose, both ***may*** and ***can*** are rarely used with the meaning of permission, as is indicated in many grammar textbooks.
- Although ***can*** is very common in conversations, in formal writing ***may*** is typically more suitable, particularly so in humanities and social sciences.
- In formal discourse, ***can*** rarely refers to abilities but rather to possibilities and implications.

The negative modal ***cannot*** occurs in academic texts that have to do with **denials**, **refutations**, **or counter-examples**. The weak meanings of possibility in ***could*** and ***might*** do not project great confidence in an outcome, action, or event.

Would

The predictive modal ***would*** in English may also have the function of a hedge in formal and informal academic writing when it reduces the writer's responsibility for the truth-value and accuracy of evidence (from the same assignment), e.g.

> *This **would** really help saving human lives, but there are also people who disagree with this.*

However, because ***would*** conveys hypothetical and presuppositional meanings, it is often difficult for learners to use in context.[1]

- In L2 academic writing, modal verbs can be used effectively to moderate claims and to avoid strong predictions and implications of certainty (Swales & Feak, 2012).
- Analyses of academic corpora have shown that ***can*** and ***may*** are by far the most common modals, while ***must***, ***should***, and ***have to*** are less frequent, as are ***will*** and ***would*** (Biber, et al., 1999; Collins, 2009).
- When teaching modal verbs as hedges, it is important to address the contextual meanings of some, but not necessarily all, modal verbs.

> Teach the uses of ***may***, ***can***, and ***could***. Teaching the hedging uses of the other modal verbs is probably not worth the time and effort.

Adjective and Adverb Hedges

Adjective hedges modify nouns, and adverb hedges qualify verbs and whole sentences. In English, the number of adjective and adverb hedges is large.

- Adjective hedges work to limit noun meanings, e.g. ***an approximate weight***, ***a slight increase***, ***a careful selection***.
- Adverb hedges have a similar effect on verb or sentence meanings, e.g. ***according to the data***, ***overall***, ***generally***, ***as above***.
- In academic prose, many adverb hedges function as markers of probability, e.g. ***almost***, ***nearly***, ***practically***.

- Adjective and adverb hedges can be single-word adjectives or more complex constructions:
  - *apparent, approximate, essential, fair, slight*
  - *according to* + noun, *based on* + noun, *most* + adjective (*most advantageous*), *relative to* + noun

Adjective and adverb hedges differ in the degree of their formality, meaning complexity, and frequencies. Formal hedges are predominant in academic written discourse. In teaching, these can be contrasted with informal conversational hedges to bring writers' attention to distinctions between formal and academic writing and informal language uses.

> For L2 writers, it is important to note the crucial differences among various and varied levels of language formality, and focusing on hedges represents only one means of instructional practice.

It is not necessary, however, that L2 writers undertake to use a large number of hedges. Students simply need to have ready access to a stock of these words and phrases that can be used interchangeably throughout their essays and assignments, as discussed earlier.[2] For instance, with practice, ***generally***, ***nearly***, and ***slightly*** can be accessible to writers who know how to use ***basically***, ***almost***, and ***a little bit***.

Formal Hedges for Academic Writing

about	*according to* (+noun)	*actually*	*apparent(-ly)*
approximate(-ly)	*broad(-ly)*	*clear(-ly)*	*comparative(-ly)*
essential(-ly)	*fairly*	*likely*	*merely*
most (+ adjective)	*nearly*	*normal(-ly)*	*partially*
partly	*potential(-ly)*	*presumably*	*relative(-ly)*
relative to	*slightly*	*somehow*	*somewhat*
sufficiently	*theoretically*	*unlikely*	

On the other hand, informal hedges are prevalent in conversational discourse, and their frequent uses in academic prose can mark the text as unacademically casual, colloquial, and less than carefully prepared (Carter & McCarthy, 2006).

Common Informal and Conversational Hedges

almost	*at all*	*at least*	*basically*	*dead (+ adjective)*
(a) few	*enough*	*hardly*	*just*	*(a) little/bit*
only	*quite*	*pretty*		

Conversational and Informal Hedges

Lexical hedges represent a simpler variety prevalent in conversational and informal exchanges that are often characterized by vagueness and not found in written academic corpora (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Channell, 1994; Cutting, 2007).

Informal Lexical Hedges Not Found in Academic Prose

actually	*anyway*	*in a way*	*kind of*
like (that)	*maybe*	*more*	*more or less*
pretty	*something like*	*sort of*	*whatever*

Informal lexical hedges are often considered to be unsuitable in formal academic writing. Lexical hedges that include modifiers of nouns, verbs, and whole sentences are particularly vague and mark a shortage of factual information or knowledge. Here are a few examples from a student paper on the history of industrial production.

- *Before this turning point [in the history of industrial production], everything was **sort of** undefined and sporadic.*
- *They **just** ran production using their own intuitions with a **more or less** successful manufacturing.*
- *As a result, **lots** of creations could not be accomplished.*
- *This **kind of** working didn't hurt companies because there were not many competitors to share the market.*

The uses of such hedges as ***sort of***, ***kind of***, or ***lots*** in a formal academic assignment may actually create an impression of a vague familiarity with the subject matter without references to specific information to make the text credible. (See also Strategies and Tactics for Teaching at the end of the chapter.)

References to Assumed Common Knowledge

Vague references to common and popular knowledge (e.g. ***as we know***, ***as people say***) function as hedges in informal conversations, and partly for this reason they often find their way into L2 students' academic text (Hinkel, 2002; Shaw, 2009). This type of colloquial hedging has the goal of distancing the writer from the information by attributing it to an external source, such as assumed common knowledge. Their frequent uses in student academic writing, particularly when it comes to unsupported statements or claims, may create an impression of broad generalization-making and a high degree of certainty without a factual foundation.

Informal "Common Knowledge" Hedges

(as) we all know	*as far as we/I know*
as is (well) known	*as you/everyone/the reader know(s)*
as the saying goes	*(as) everyone/people/they say(s)*
from what I hear/know/see/understand	

For instance, references to assumed knowledge and sayings are not likely to warrant high praise in the context of academic assignments. A number of studies have shown, however, that these hedges are significantly more frequent in L2 than L1 academic prose (Hinkel, 2002; Shaw, 2009). The examples below are from student texts.

- *Technology, **as most people know**, is a very important thing in this decade.*
- ***As readers know**, studying history is necessary for us to understand our past.*
- *People always seek happiness, money, and excitement, **as of course everyone knows**.*
- ***As they say**, no pain, no gain. When deciding how to invest capital, investors have to be prepared to take risks.*

> Usually, referring to common knowledge and general truths that "everyone knows" is considered to be unsuitable in practically any type of student academic prose, with the possible exception of personal journals.

In the case of references to common knowledge such as ***as of course everyone knows***, informal and conversational hedges may simply not be acceptable in lieu of factual rhetorical support, according to the norms of the academic discourse community (Swales, 1990).

Action Point

In writing instruction, comparing two or three different types of written prose, such as blogs, editorials, letters, or opinion pieces, as well as published academic articles, can prove very fruitful. In addition to hedges, other differences between more formal or more informal types of language can be addressed and discussed.

Text #1

In this restaurant, the best hamburger ever! My family and I went to get some burgers for lunch, we were greeted by the nicest and friendliest employees ever. We sat down, and our food came out fast, hot, and amazingly delicious. We had one of the nicest servers without question. She was very attentive to all of our needs and great conversation. My young daughter loved the burgers so much she ate two which she never does, and their burgers are fantastic.

The fries are great – both the regular fries and the sweet potato fries. Their grilled onions are so, so good, and their salads are amazing and super-fresh. And really, for the quality of their food, it's priced right. My absolutely favorite burger is the barbeque bacon cheeseburger. This place is definitely the best for a delicious burger and fries, hands down. This is totally a must go to place.

Text #2

Possibly the best burger restaurant that I have been to in this area. The food is tasty and satisfying with homemade burgers and fries. They have many topping options including grilled onions and bacon. The cheeseburger is a nicely seasoned half-pound of meat with a good slice of cheese, and the fries are fresh-cut, sprinkled with sea salt, and delicious. Rotating burger specials change each day of the week. Flavorful patties pair well with house-made pickles, fresh lettuce, and locally-harvested tomatoes.

Adventurous burger creations include applewood-smoked barbeque, hot peppers, roasted green chilies, and honey-fried onions. Simple and direct, you won't find avocado or other strange ingredients on these burgers. Word of mouth has long drawn people from far and wide to try the burgers, and they are worth the trip. All burgers are served with thick fries, fresh salad greens, or spicy coleslaw made daily.

Avoiding Overstatements, Exaggerations, and Emphatic Claims

A large class of adjectives and adverbs have the function of marking strong claims and overstatements by inflating the value or the importance of information:

- The adjectives usually modify nouns (***a major work***, ***a huge achievement***).
- The adverbs intensify adjectives, other adverbs, and whole sentences (***I definitely/totally agree with this statement***).

For instance, in academic writing in English, extreme frequency adverbs such as ***always*** and ***never*** are often seen as inflated, and their inclusion in essays is not recommended, e.g. ***Managers always think that if employees are paid well, they will do their best on the job***.

Intensifiers and emphatic adjectives and adverbs are prevalent in the conversational rather than formal written register and are often considered to be informal (Brazil, 1995; Chang & Swales, 1999). On the other hand, Hyland's (1998) corpus analysis of published academic articles shows that the use of emphatics is comparatively more frequent in such diverse disciplines as philosophy, sociology, marketing, applied linguistics, physics, or mechanical engineering than biology and electrical engineering.

Emphatics and overstatements often include numerous adjectives and adverbs, commonly found in L2 writers' texts (Hinkel, 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Shaw & Liu, 1998; Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008).

Conversational Intensifiers and Emphatics Frequent in L2 Academic Writing

absolute(-ly)	*a lot/lots*	*always*	*amazing(-ly)*
awful(-ly)	*bad (-ly)*	*by all means*	*certain(-ly)*
clear(-ly)	*complete(-ly)*	*deep(-ly)*	*definite(-ly)*

forever	*enormous(-ly)*	*entirely*	*ever*
exact(-ly)	*extreme(-ly)*	*far* (+ comparative adjective)	*for sure*
fully	*great(-ly)*	*high(-ly)*	*huge(-ly)*
in all ways/in every way	*never*	*no way*	*perfect(-ly)*
positive(-ly)	*pure(-ly)*	*severe(-ly)*	*so*
strong(-ly)	*sure(-ly)*	*terrible(-ly)*	*too*
total(-ly)	*unbelievable (-ly)*	*very*	

In many rhetorical traditions other than Anglo-American, strong statements and claims are often intended to convey the writer's degree of conviction or rhetorical emphasis (Dong, 1998; Hu & Cao, 2011; van Dijk, 2009, 2010). In academic prose in English, however, rhetorical persuasiveness can be conveyed by linguistic components other than strong assertions and emphatics. Here's an example from a student assignment on the necessary qualities of corporate managers.

- *Besides the skills leaders need to develop **strongly**, corporate culture nurturing leadership **every** day is **extremely** important.*
- *Cultivating a leadership-centered organization is **definitely** the **most** important goal of leadership.*
- *Today, some large companies have tens of thousands of employees, and they produce an **enormous** number of products and have millions of customers.*
- *These changes in the business environment create **great** pressure and **high** uncertainty.*
- *In business textbooks, leadership and management are **very** well defined and the definitions are **well** accepted by **everyone**.*

This example shows that a high degree of the writer's conviction can lead to increased frequencies of exaggeratives and emphatics in students' writing. The overstated tone of the text may not be difficult to correct by omitting or replacing several modifying adjectives and adverbs that combine to create rhetorically inflated prose.

In L2 writing, developing vocabulary alternatives can help reduce the frequency of overstatements and strong claims.

Chapter Summary

In general, the purpose of hedging in academic text is to project hesitation, politeness, and caution. However, in L2 writing instruction, the uses of hedging devices are often not addressed in sufficient detail.

> In addition to the direct benefits of using hedging which are essential in academic text, focused instruction on hedges and their rhetorical functions can help learners identify distinctions between formal and informal discourse, be it spoken or written.
>
> Although overstatements and strong assertions are often acceptable in informal conversations in English, they are typically avoided in formal academic writing.

To provide L2 writers access to lexical and grammatical means of hedging, instruction can begin with simple hedging devices and advance to the more linguistically complex.

> A cumulative effect of learning to use various types of hedges can lead to a noticeable reduction in frequencies of overstatements and exaggerations in L2 academic prose.

- Frequency and possibility adverbs, as well as noun quantifiers, represent one of the simplest and most readily accessible hedges.
- Modal verbs as hedges can also increase the students' repertoire of essential and relatively simple hedging devices for use in L2 writing.
- Although a large number of advanced adjective and adverb hedges in English has been identified in research, L2 writers should not be expected to employ all of them in their text with equal degrees of fluency.
- Adding just a few accessible complex hedges to an established base of simpler ones can provide learners a sufficient range of hedges for uses in formal academic writing.
- Being familiar with conversational and informal hedges, as well as language elements in overstatements and strong assertions, allows L2 writers the option of avoiding them in formal writing.

Hedging statements, generalizations, and claims are not universal characteristics of formal written discourse, and in rhetorical traditions other than Anglo-American, hedging is not employed with the same functions as it is in English. Furthermore, because typically L2 learners are exposed to conversational and informal discourse to a far greater extent than they are to formal writing, instruction on the functions and uses of hedging in English requires persistence and focused attention. On the whole, learning to hedge academic prose appropriately is unlikely to take place in informal conversations or by means of fluency activities.

Strategies and Tactics for Teaching and Teaching Activities

Teaching Activities

As with much other work on vocabulary and grammar, a practical approach can begin with helping L2 writers notice that hedging is common in formal prose in English, but not in conversations. Then learning to distinguish between formal and informal hedges and other language elements is the next instructional objective. In addition to giving attention to academic hedges, it is also important to notice those that are not.

The teaching suggestions and activities are designed to progress from the simpler to the more complex.

- Noticing the functions and uses of hedges in written text.
- Distinguishing between the characteristics of formal and informal language.
- Developing editing skills to hedge academic writing and avoid overstatements.
- The cumulative effect of teaching and using hedging devices to increase vocabulary and grammar range.

"Growing" hedges represents one of the most effective and least work- and time-consuming strategies.

Diverse types of hedges are useful and usable in teaching because many hedges are actually lexically or grammatically uncomplicated.

Teaching activities can be based on written texts easily obtainable from students' own writing, textbooks, and other sources, such as science, business, and society reports.

For learning to notice the functions and uses of hedges, a good place to start can be simplified formal prose, usually found in teaching or school materials on the environment, geography, wildlife, plants, science, nutrition, sports, and other non-fiction.

Noticing Hedges in Academic or News Media Texts

Students can be asked to bring samples of written materials from their disciplines or the teacher can supply excerpts on health issues, science, or current news. Then a series of leading questions can focus on the analysis of the function and types of hedges in the text.

- *What hedging – softening, politeness, or limiting – devices can the students identify?*
- *Why did the author use these hedges?*
- *In general, what is the author's responsibility for the accuracy of his or her statements? In English? In students' L1s?*
- *Do writers in students' L1s also use various words and phrases to limit their responsibility for the accuracy or strength of their statements/generalizations?*
- *Do broad statements need to be limited? What are some of the examples of such softening/limiting words and phrases?*
- *In this particular text or sentence, what is the extent of authors' responsibility for the accuracy of their text?*
- *Why did the author use this particular type of hedge in this particular sentence?*
- *What is the difference in the "power" of the statement/sentence with the hedge or without the hedge? If the sentence is used without the hedge, can its meaning be seen as "too strong" or "too certain"? What can be possible meanings for various individual readers if the sentence is used without a hedge?*
- *Can students think of other ways to hedge this particular sentence or several sentences in a paragraph?*

A few examples of sentences and text excerpts illustrate this activity.

(1) What are the differences in "strength" in the three sentences? Why are there differences in the meanings of these sentences? Can you identify the reasons for these differences?

- *People are totally against genetic engineering, but it provides benefits for humankind.*
- *Some people are totally against genetic engineering, but it can provide benefits for humankind.*
- *Some people are against genetic engineering, but it can provide many benefits for humankind.*

(2) In your opinion, which sentence is more "accurate" and can be applicable in more cases?

- *Genetic engineering improves the taste of food and the nutritional value of food products.*
- *Genetic engineering can improve the taste of some types of food and the nutritional value of many food products.*

(3) The excerpt below presents an author's opinion on a particular topic. Do you think the author accurately describes the situation? Why or why not?

What particular words and phrases make the author's opinion appear very strong? Can this excerpt be made to describe the situation more accurately and the author's opinion less strong?

- *We really need the information on the Internet to be free.*
- *We must not pay money for all the advertising companies put online.*
- *Information about smoking and alcohol leads to bad effects and will encourage people to become involved with them.*
- *It is also totally wrong to say that advertising is the main factor that causes these problems.*
- *People have to have all the information they need to make their decisions about their health.*
- *Therefore, advertisers have to reveal all the information about the products they sell.*

Hedges in Different Types of Writing

Non-academic, commercial prose, such as promotional fliers or company, product, and services advertisements, or beauty and fashion descriptions, can provide a useful venue for contrasting various types of written genres. That is, texts intended to inflate rather than hedge the virtues of their products. Promotional materials can be also analyzed, and their uses of intensifiers and emphatics can be effectively compared to those in academic prose.

- *What are the goals of the promotional materials?*
- *On the other hand, what is the purpose of academic texts?*
- *Why do promotions employ inflated language features, such as adjectives, adverbs, or nouns?*
- *Why are there fewer exaggeratives and overstatements in academic prose than in promotional materials?*

- In pairs or small groups, students can be assigned to write short texts, say, 100 to 200 words, for a promotional flier to advertise travel to their hometowns or their favorite travel destinations, e.g. cities, beaches, resorts, or hotels.
    - Advertisements and fliers can promote shopping in students' favorite stores or food and service in favorite restaurants.
    - Other popular advertisements can include beauty products, fashions and brand names, e.g. clothing, shoes, backpacks, handbags, athletic gear, as well as cars, phones, computer games, music, TV shows, movies, magazines, or celebrities, e.g. singers, movie stars, media personalities, or sports figures.
    - These "promotional materials" can be presented and described to other groups or the entire class in mock commercials or skits.
- In a follow-up exercise, to contrast inflated or hedged prose, students can also write up "academic" descriptions of similar or different places, items, or people. In "academic" texts, writers need to scrupulously stay away from exaggerations and provide real or invented facts to support their claims.

Formal and Informal Language in Speaking and Writing

In addition to written promotional materials, audio- and videotaped commercials, infomercials, and/or casual conversation clips from movies, soap

operas, talk shows, or situational comedies can be used to help learners identify important and numerous differences between formal and informal language elements. Distinguishing features of informal conversational and formal written texts can also be highlighted, that is, academic essays cannot be written as if the writer is talking to his or her friends.

Editing and Adding Appropriate Hedges and Weeding Out Emphatics

> This is a very important exercise that can be used in stages throughout a course on learning to write academic prose.

The learning goal of this practice is to focus students' attention on various hedge types, e.g.

- Quantifiers to limit the noun power.
- Adverbs of frequency and modal verbs to limit the verb power.
- Predicting the future and modal verbs.
- Identifying and replacing conversational hedges.
- Avoiding intensifiers and emphatics.

Students can work in pairs, small groups, or individually to edit their own text or texts supplied by the teacher. The practice can be varied between work on "stripped down" prose without any hedges or emphatics and text excerpts with added conversational hedges or emphatics that students need to find and correct.

(1) Here's an example of a "stripped down" text where hedges need to be added (but not too many!).

- *These days, students plagiarize their papers by using the Internet.*
- *They do not write their own papers or do their own homework.*
- *Students easily access the companies that sell various course papers online.*
- *These students go to a website that sells papers and buy them.*
- *Plagiarized papers get excellent grades.*
- *In other cases, students get caught and expelled from the university.*
- *Educators feel that students need to fulfill their responsibilities in studying, and they say that students cheat by buying their papers.*

Another version of the same text with a few hedges added. A few advanced-level hedges are underlined:

- *These days, [**some/many**] students [**occasionally**] plagiarize their papers by using the Internet.*
- *They do not write [**some of**] their own papers or do [**much of**] their own homework.*
- *Students [**can**] easily access the [**many/<u>numerous</u>**] companies that sell various course papers online.*
- *These students [**can**] [**usually/often**] go to a website that sells papers and buy them.*
- *[**Sometimes/<u>In some cases,</u>**] [**Some/Many/Most**] [**<u>Perhaps,</u>**] Plagiarized papers [**can/may**] get excellent grades.*
- *In other cases, students [**may**] get caught and [**possibly/<u>potentially</u>**] expelled from the university.*
- *[**Some/Many/Most**] [**Typically,**] Educators [**usually/may**] feel that students need to fulfill their responsibilities in studying, and they say that students [**may/possibly**] cheat by [**<u>evidently/apparently</u>**] buying [**some of/many of**] their papers.*

(2) Editing text with conversational hedges and emphatics (underlined) (from a student term paper in art history). Overstated examples, such as this text, can be easily edited by correcting and replacing some of the emphatic and conversational features. Other editing practice can come from shorter excerpts or sentence-level contexts.

- *There are **<u>lots</u>** of books written about the Four Great masters, and **<u>everyone really</u>** admires their paintings.*
- *The Four Great masters are well known **<u>all over</u>** China; **<u>all</u>** of them played a very important role in the history of Ming painting.*
- *Wen Cheng-ming came from a **<u>very</u>** rich and educated family.*
- *Therefore, he **<u>never</u>** had to worry about **<u>any</u>** financial problems and could **<u>definitely</u>** receive **<u>great</u>** education.*
- *He was one of Shen Choi's students; therefore, we can **<u>clearly</u>** recognize that his works were **<u>totally</u>** influenced by Shen Chou.*
- *But it was not Shen Chou but Wen Cheng-ming who was the **<u>most</u>** influential and the **<u>most</u>** widely copied among the local group of scholar-painters in the 16th century.*
- *In his early period, the structure of his painting is **<u>sort of</u>** similar to the style of Shen Chou, and both of them used the **<u>world</u>**-famous green-and-color style that presented **<u>kind of</u>** a tranquil feeling.*

(3) Sentence-level editing practice (all examples are from student texts).

- *Companies are really dealing with all kinds of businesses.*
- *Phones and tablets are the most popular equipment because they absolutely make our work easier and faster.*
- *A lot of students just stream videos instead of watching TV all day.*
- *Nobody wants any trouble in their life, and risk management is the best course of action for all investors.*
- *We have a lot of social media to give us a lot of information about everything, so that we know what's going on in the world every day.*

Endnotes

1 Palmer (1990) specifies that the predictive conditional ***would*** refers to future events that are contingent on a particular proposition that may be unreal or counter-factual. The predictive conditional with real or unreal meanings refers to the future in complex ways and depends on particular mixed time relations that preclude the use of the future tense maker ***will***.

2 Teaching semantic differences between such hedges as ***essentially*** and ***basically*** is not worth the time it takes for both the teacher and the student, save for identifying their divergent levels of formality.

Further Reading

Hinkel, E. (2005). Hedging, inflating, and persuading in L2 academic writing. *Applied Language Learning*, *15*(1), 529–532.

This empirical study analyzes the types and frequencies of hedges and intensifiers employed in L1 and L2 academic essays included in a corpus of student academic texts (745 essays/220,747 words). A comparison of median frequency rates of hedges and intensifiers in student academic essays points to the fact that L2 writers employ a limited range of hedging devices, largely associated with conversational discourse and casual spoken interactions. These findings are further supported by a prevalence of conversational intensifiers and overstatements that are ubiquitous in informal speech but are rare in formal written prose.

Hinkel, E. (2011). What research on second language writing tells us and what it doesn't. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning, Volume 2* (pp. 523–538). New York, NY: Routledge.

An overview of a large number of studies highlights important and significant differences among the discourse and language properties of L1 and L2 text in similar or proximate written genres. Research on prominent patterns in L2 writing has led to a greater understanding of many issues that have and continue to confound L2 writing instruction. To make sense of the enormous number of studies, the chapter provides a

brief overview of L2 writing research and its findings to point out what is known and what still requires further investigation, as well as a few prevailing trends in the curriculum design and teaching approaches in L2 writing pedagogy.

Hyland, K. & Milton, J. (1997). Qualification and certainty in L1 and L2 students' writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *6*(2), 183–205.

A data-based investigation of L2 academic essays with a focus on expressions of doubt and certainty. In a large corpus, this study compares the expression of doubt and certainty in the L2 written examinations of 900 Cantonese-speaking school graduates with the texts of 770 British students of similar age and educational level. Based on the findings, L2 prose differs significantly from that of L1 writers and relies on a more limited range of hedging devices with stronger commitments and greater problems in conveying a precise degree of certainty. The authors make a few pedagogical suggestions for developing L2 writers' competence in this important area.

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