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Research Paper

Hedges and Boosters in the Writing of Advanced Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

This quantitative corpus-based study investigated the use of hedges and boosters in the writing of Iranian advanced EFL learners, with particular attention to potential gender differences. Forty EFL learners (20 males and 20 females, aged 15-20) were purposively selected from private language institutes in Yasouj, Iran, based on their performance on the Quick Oxford Placement Test (QOPT). A corpus of 40 essays (12,464 words total) was analyzed using Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse framework to identify and categorize hedges and boosters. Manual coding by two raters achieved substantial inter-rater reliability (r = .79). Frequency counts were normalized per 1,000 words, and chi-square tests were employed to examine gender differences. Results revealed that learners employed various types of hedges and boosters, with epistemic modal verbs being the most frequent category for both marker types, while epistemic nouns were rare or absent. Epistemic adjectives were the least frequent hedges, and epistemic nouns were the least frequent boosters. Notably, chi-square tests indicated no statistically significant gender differences in the use of either hedges or boosters, suggesting that male and female learners employed these markers with similar frequency and variety. The findings highlight the predominance of basic, frequently taught metadiscourse forms and suggest a need for explicit instruction to expand learners' repertoire of hedging and boosting strategies. Pedagogical implications emphasize the importance of genre-based, corpus-informed instruction and teacher professional development in metadiscourse awareness.

Keywords: Hedges, Boosters, Iranian Learners, Writing, Gender.

Writing serves as a primary medium of communication in English language learning and enables students to share their experience and knowledge effectively (Jabbar, 2019). Beyond grammatical and lexical competence, successful writing requires awareness of metadiscourse markers—linguistic devices that help writers organize discourse and engage with readers (Hyland, 2005). Among these markers, hedges and boosters have gained considerable attention in academic writing research, as they play a crucial role in shaping the writer-reader relationship

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and establishing the credibility of written discourse. Writers strategically employ these markers to express their stance and position themselves in relation to their claims and their audience.

It is important to note that the present study examines metadiscourse in argumentative classroom essays, which falls within the English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) domain. EGAP focuses on transferable academic literacy skills applicable across disciplines, distinguishing it from English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP), which addresses specialized discourse conventions in particular fields such as research article writing (Hyland, 2004). Argumentative essays represent a foundational EGAP genre in Iranian EFL instruction, requiring students to construct reasoned claims, engage with counterarguments, and position themselves rhetorically—all processes in which hedges and boosters play crucial interpersonal functions. Understanding metadiscourse deployment in this genre provides insights directly relevant to improving classroom writing instruction.

Hedges are linguistic devices used to express uncertainty or tentativeness about a proposition. First identified by Lakoff (1975) as words that make meaning less precise, hedges allow writers to present opinions rather than facts (Hyland, 1998) and signal adherence to Grice's principle of cooperation (Yule, 2007). Brown and Levinson (1987) further note that hedges function as politeness markers in both spoken and written communication. Conversely, boosters are metadiscourse markers that create certainty and confidence (Mallaki et al., 2022). Hyland (1998) defines them as intensifiers that strengthen the writer's position by limiting alternative interpretations. Although representing opposing poles of certainty, hedges and boosters function as complementary tools. Hyland (2005, p. 53) emphasizes that the "balance of hedges and boosters in a text" indicates the author's openness to alternative viewpoints and their "commitment to the text's content and respect for readers." The skillful use of these markers substantially enhances students' writing abilities (Batool et al., 2019; Herminingsih & Al-Isro'iyah, 2023).

Extensive research has examined metadiscourse markers across academic genres, including research articles (Hyland, 1998), dissertations (Charles, 2006), and textbooks (Hyland, 1999b). Cross-cultural studies reveal significant variations between native and non-native English writers (Hinkel, 2005), suggesting that cultural and linguistic backgrounds influence marker deployment. In EFL contexts, research demonstrates that explicit instruction can enhance learners' awareness and appropriate use of hedges and boosters (Abdi, 2002). However, several gaps remain. First, while considerable research has focused on expert writers, fewer studies have investigated these markers in EFL learners' writing, particularly at intermediate proficiency levels (Herminingsih & Al-Isro'iyah, 2023; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015). Second, the Iranian EFL context remains under-explored, with limited empirical evidence on how Iranian learners employ metadiscourse markers (Dafouz-Milne, 2008). Third, gender as a potentially influential variable has received scant attention in EFL writing research. Although sociolinguistic research suggests that male and female speakers exhibit distinct linguistic patterns—with women using more hedging devices reflecting tentative communication

(Lakoff, 1975) and men employing more assertive language (Coates, 2015)—these findings, primarily from spoken Western discourse, may not apply to written academic discourse in collectivist cultures such as Iran. The intersection of gender, culture, and second language writing remains under-researched (Hyland, 2002).

Addressing these gaps has become increasingly important for English language teachers in Iran, as improving students' writing skills remains a pressing pedagogical challenge (Ghasedi et al., 2023). Understanding metadiscourse marker usage can enhance writing quality (Loi & Lim, 2019), and raising learners' awareness of hedges and boosters increases the likelihood of their appropriate deployment. One effective approach to developing this awareness is analyzing learners' actual writing patterns. This study therefore examines the frequency and patterns of hedge and booster usage in Iranian EFL learners' writing, with particular attention to gender-related differences. By investigating these linguistic markers in learners' written outputs, the study aims to contribute to both theoretical understanding and pedagogical practice in EFL writing instruction.

To achieve these aims, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. Which hedges are most frequently used by Iranian EFL learners in their writing?
2. Which boosters are most frequently employed by Iranian EFL learners in their writing?
3. Does gender have a significant effect on the use of hedges in writing?
4. Does gender have a significant effect on the use of boosters in writing?

Literature Review

Metadiscourse research in second language writing operates within two distinct domains: English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). EGAP encompasses transferable academic skills applicable across disciplines, including classroom essay writing, while ESAP addresses specialized discourse conventions of specific academic fields, such as research article writing (Hyland, 2004). The present study focuses on the EGAP domain, specifically examining argumentative classroom essays—a foundational genre in EFL instruction that develops learners' general academic literacy. This distinction is critical, as metadiscourse patterns and conventions differ substantially between classroom writing and disciplinary research writing (Charles, 2006).

Metadiscourse is recognized as an effective technique for improving writing and making texts more reader-friendly. Hyland (2005) defines metadiscourse as the range of linguistic devices that help readers process text and grasp the writer's position. These markers express the writer's communication with the audience by revealing their perspective on content and their relationship with readers (Hyland & Tse, 2004; Batool et al., 2019). The effective use of metadiscourse signals improves the quality of academic texts and increases readability (Güçlü, 2024), enabling authors to shape readers' understanding and their perspective on the subject matter (Ningrum et al., 2024; Dehghayedi, 2023).

The quality of academic texts can be improved through the effective use of metadiscourse signals. In other words, these markers show how writers are aware of their self-representation and their research (Hyland, 2000). Considering the important role of these markers in facilitating interpersonal interactions between the text producer and the audience, Nizigama and Mahdavirad (2021) believe that writing a high-quality text for publication requires the effective use of these markers. Also, the construction of persuasive writings that adhere to people's expectations and norms has been greatly influenced by metadiscourse, as suggested by Amiryousefi and Eslami Rasekh (2010).

Hedges and Boosters

Hedges and boosters represent opposing poles on the certainty continuum. Hedges are linguistic devices that express tentativeness and allow writers to present information as opinion rather than confirmed fact (Hyland, 2005, p. 178). Lakoff (1975, p. 471) first defined hedges as expressions that "make things less certain." Boosters, conversely, indicate certainty and enable writers to narrow down options and express confidence (Hyland, 2005, p. 179). Both marker types are realized through various linguistic forms: modal verbs (may, might, could for hedging; must, will for boosting), lexical verbs (suggest, assume vs. confirm, demonstrate), adverbs (perhaps, probably vs. certainly, clearly), adjectives (possible, probable vs. obvious, undeniable), and nouns (assumption, possibility vs. certainty, truth) (Hyland, 2005). These markers play crucial interpersonal functions, with hedges mitigating statements and facilitating dialogue, while boosters demonstrate solidarity and establish academic voice.

Metadiscourse in EFL Classroom Writing: The EGAP Domain

Research on metadiscourse in EFL classroom writing—the EGAP context most relevant to this study—remains limited compared to the extensive body of work examining research articles and disciplinary writing. The few studies addressing hedges and boosters in learner essays reveal patterns distinct from those in expert academic writing.

Mallaki et al. (2022) examined hedges and boosters in 96 university students' classroom essays from language education and psychology programs. Using Abdollahzadeh's (2019) framework, they found that students used hedges more frequently than boosters across both disciplines. This pattern suggests that EFL learners in classroom contexts may adopt tentative stances, possibly reflecting pedagogical practices that emphasize critical thinking and avoiding overgeneralization. However, their study did not include comparison with native speaker writing or investigate whether observed patterns represent appropriate or deficient use.

Similarly, Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2015) examined hedging devices in argumentative essays written by Vietnamese EFL learners. Their analysis of 60 student essays revealed limited hedging repertoire, with learners relying heavily on a narrow range of modal verbs (mainly "may" and "might") while underutilizing lexical and adverbial hedges. The researchers attributed this restricted range to insufficient exposure to varied hedging strategies in EFL

instruction, highlighting the need for explicit teaching of metadiscourse in classroom writing contexts.

Recent work by Batool et al. (2019) investigated metadiscourse awareness among Pakistani undergraduate students writing academic essays. Their findings indicated that while advanced learners demonstrated greater frequency of hedge and booster use, appropriateness remained problematic. Students often employed boosters in contexts requiring tentative claims, suggesting that frequency alone does not indicate pragmatic competence. This finding underscores the importance of examining not only the quantity but also the contextual appropriateness of metadiscourse markers in learner writing.

Saleh et al. (2023) conducted a comparative study to examine the metadiscursive markers used by Iranian and Chinese students. Hence, the authors investigated the interference of the first language in the use of rhetorical patterns in two different cultural environments. The required data were collected from 80 English language learners in Iran and China. Hyland's (2005) model was used to analyze the collected data. The results of their research showed that there was a significant difference between Iranian and Chinese learners in the use of hedges and boosters, with Iranian learners employing significantly more hedges, possibly reflecting Persian rhetorical conventions that favor indirectness and politeness. However, the study did not control for proficiency level or writing task type, limiting the generalizability of its findings.

Ningrum et al. (2024) examined these metadiscourse devices in the writings of language learners. They collected data from language learners in different Asian countries. They used the Lextutor software to analyze the texts written by the language learners. Their results showed that language learners were more inclined to use boosters. Boosters such as *completely, really*, and *always* had the highest frequency in their writing. On the other hand, hedges such as *usually, often,* and *perhaps* had the highest frequency. In their view, this tendency shows that English language learners are confident in expressing their views. They concluded that boosters are used as a tool to enhance certainty, emphasize importance, persuade, increase coherence, and establish academic voice. Additionally, hedges are used to soften criticism and acknowledge limitations. This interpretation, however, appears problematic as it conflates frequency with appropriateness.

Gender Differences in EFL Classroom Writing

Despite documented gender differences in spoken language use (Lakoff, 1975; Holmes, 1990), systematic investigation of gender effects on metadiscourse marker deployment in EFL classroom writing remains scarce. The limited research in this area presents mixed findings.

Petch-Tyson (1998) analyzed learner corpora of argumentative essays and found that female learners used more hedges and fewer boosters than male counterparts, suggesting that gendered linguistic patterns may transfer from spoken to written academic discourse. However, this study focused exclusively on European learners, and its findings may not generalize to contexts where gender roles and educational practices differ substantially.

In the Iranian EFL context specifically, research on gender and language has produced inconsistent results. Ghazanfari et al. (2019) examined pragmatic competence in Iranian EFL learners' writing and found that while female learners demonstrated greater use of politeness markers overall, these differences diminished at advanced proficiency levels, suggesting that educational exposure may mediate gender effects. However, their study did not specifically examine hedges and boosters as discrete metadiscourse categories.

Furthermore, Eslami-Rasekh (2005) investigated gender differences in Iranian learners' pragmatic awareness and found that female learners showed greater sensitivity to contextual appropriateness in written communication. Yet, whether this translates to differential use of hedges and boosters in classroom essay writing—particularly in argumentative genres where assertiveness is valued—remains unexplored.

Critically, no previous study has systematically examined gender differences in hedge and booster usage specifically within Iranian EFL classroom essay writing. Existing gender-focused research has either addressed spoken discourse, examined other pragmatic features, or investigated contexts outside Iran. This represents a significant gap, particularly given that argumentative classroom essays—requiring writers to take and defend positions—may elicit different metadiscourse patterns across genders than other academic genres.

The review reveals three critical gaps in current research. First, while substantial investigation has examined metadiscourse in published academic writing (ESAP), significantly fewer studies have addressed classroom essay writing (EGAP), particularly in the Iranian context. Second, existing EGAP-focused studies demonstrate methodological limitations, including small sample sizes, lack of native speaker comparisons, and insufficient attention to contextual appropriateness. Third, and most critically for the present study, gender remains a largely neglected variable in metadiscourse research on EFL classroom writing. The few existing studies examining gender effects have been conducted in Western or East Asian contexts, where cultural norms surrounding gender and communication differ markedly from those in Iran. The present study addresses these gaps by investigating hedge and booster usage in Iranian advanced EFL learners' argumentative essays—a prototypical EGAP genre—with explicit attention to potential gender differences in metadiscourse deployment.

Method

This study employed a quantitative research design, specifically corpus-based content analysis, to investigate the usage of hedging and boosting markers in the writings of male and female Iranian EFL learners. Content analysis was selected as the methodological approach because it enables systematic and objective identification, quantification, and comparison of specific linguistic features across textual data (Neuendorf, 2017). Given that the present study aimed to identify the types and frequencies of metadiscourse markers and to compare their usage patterns between gender groups, a quantitative approach with statistical analysis (frequency counting, normalization, and chi-square tests) was considered most appropriate.

This methodological choice aligns with previous corpus-based studies of metadiscourse markers that have successfully employed quantitative content analysis to reveal patterns in academic writing (Hyland, 2005).

Participants

Forty English language learners (20 females and 20 males) participated in this study. They were advanced-level learners randomly selected from two private language institutes in Yasouj: Sadra English Language Institute and Padideh Foreign Languages Institute. The participants ranged in age from 15 to 20 years (M = 17.5, SD = 1.3) and were all non-native speakers of English with Persian as their first language. All participants were enrolled in advanced-level courses. Selection was based on the Quick Oxford Placement Test (QOPT), with all participants scoring between 45-54 out of 60, corresponding to the advanced proficiency level. This proficiency threshold ensured that participants possessed sufficient linguistic competence to employ a range of hedging and boosting markers in their writing.

Instruments

Quick Oxford Placement Test (QOPT)

This test was employed to measure the participants' proficiency level. It has been used to "measure global language abilities" (Brown, 2005, p. 2). It has 60 multiple choice questions and is regarded as a reliable and valid test to measure students' grammatical and lexical knowledge (Brown, 2005; Ghasedi et al. 2023). The participants had 30 minutes to answer the QOPT, which was administered in a controlled classroom setting under standardized conditions.

Writing samples

The primary data for this study consisted of argumentative essay samples produced by the 40 selected participants. Argumentative essays were selected as the target genre because they represent a foundational EGAP writing task that requires learners to construct claims, counterarguments, and take clear positions—the functions that are aligned with the interpersonal purposes of hedges and boosters (Hyland, 2005). All essays responded to a **standardized prompt** administered during midterm examinations: *"Some people believe that internet has more positive effects on students, while others argue it has more negative effects. Discuss both views and give your own opinion."* This prompt that requires discussion and also stance-taking may elicit the use of metadiscourse.

These samples were collected from the participants' midterm writing examinations, which were administered as part of their regular coursework at the language institutes. To ensure comparability, all writing samples adhered to a word count range of 300-350 words (M = 311.6, SD = 18.7). Essays significantly outside this range were excluded during the initial screening process. To ensure that only essays demonstrating adequate writing quality were included in

the analysis, a quality threshold was established. Each essay was evaluated by the participant's instructor using a holistic scoring rubric (scale of 0-20, commonly used in Iranian educational contexts) that assessed overall writing quality including content, organization, language use, and mechanics. To establish reliability of this quality assessment, 25% of essays (n = 10) were independently scored by a second rater. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa (κ = .82), indicating strong agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Only essays that received scores between 17 and 20 out of 20 were selected for analysis. Essays scoring below 17 were excluded as they typically contained numerous basic linguistic errors that might obscure or confound the analysis of metadiscourse markers. This selection criterion resulted in the final corpus of 40 essays used in the study. Twenty writing samples containing 6,123 words were collected from male learners and twenty writing samples containing 6,341 words were collected from female learners, resulting in a total corpus of 12,464 words.

Data Collection Procedure

The present study examined the hedging and booster usage in the English writing of Iranian EFL learners. The required data were collected and analyzed over a period of 4 months. To examine the markers of doubt and emphasis in the English writing of Iranian learners, 40 advanced EFL learners were selected based on the results of QOPT from Yasouj city.

The writing samples were analyzed using a model designed by Hyland (2005) for analyzing markers of hedging and boosters. Hyland's (2005) taxonomy has been widely adopted in metadiscourse research and has demonstrated reliability and validity across diverse linguistic contexts, including studies conducted in Iran (Abdi, 2002; Dafouz-Milne, 2008). Therefore, the types of metadiscourse markers used in these writings and the number of times they were repeated were analyzed by two experts in the field.

Data Analysis

The analysis of hedges and boosters was conducted manually due to the context-dependent nature of these markers. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how the markers function within the specific context of each essay. To ensure the validity of the analysis, hedges and boosters were identified and classified based on Hyland's (2005) well-established framework for analyzing stance features in academic writing. Hyland's framework categorizes hedges into several types including modal auxiliaries (might, could, would), lexical verbs (seem, appear, suggest), adverbs (perhaps, possibly, probably), adjectives (possible, probable, unlikely), and nouns (assumption, possibility, suggestion). Boosters include modal auxiliaries (must, will, should), lexical verbs (show, prove, demonstrate), adverbs (clearly, obviously, definitely), adjectives (clear, certain, obvious), and emphatic particles (actually, in fact, indeed). The analysis process involved the following steps:

1. Identification: The researcher and a trained co-rater independently examined each essay to identify instances of hedges and boosters based on Hyland's (2005) comprehensive taxonomy

of 165 metadiscourse markers. To ensure that only genuine instances of hedges and boosters were coded, the raters considered the pragmatic function of each identified marker within its specific context. For example, the modal verb "may" was coded as a hedge only when it expressed epistemic uncertainty (e.g., "This may suggest...") rather than permission (e.g., "Students may use dictionaries"). This context-sensitive approach is essential because many words can function as hedges or boosters in some contexts but serve other grammatical or semantic functions elsewhere (Hyland, 1998). The reliability of the coding process was established through inter-rater agreement. A subset of the corpus, comprising 20% of the total data, (8 randomly selected essays, 4 from each gender group, totaling approximately 2,500 words), was independently coded by two raters. Discrepancies in coding between the two raters were discussed and resolved through consensus. Following this phase, the remaining 80% of the corpus was coded by the primary researcher.

2. Highlighting: Identified markers were highlighted within the text to facilitate subsequent analysis.

3. Counting: The frequency of each type of hedge and booster was counted separately for male and female student groups using a coding sheet developed specifically for this study.

4. Normalization: To account for differences in essay length, the occurrence of each hedge and booster was normalized per 1,000 words. This normalization procedure allowed for a more accurate comparison of marker usage between the two groups and is standard practice in corpus-based research (Biber et al., 1998).

5. Statistical Analysis: Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the frequency of different hedging and boosting types within and across the male and female student groups. The data analysis focused on identifying both the most frequently used hedges and boosters and comparing their usage patterns between male and female students using chi-square tests. Chi-square tests of independence were employed to determine whether the observed differences in hedge and booster frequencies between male and female learners were statistically significant. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26.0.

Inter-Rater Reliability

Following quality-based selection, the writing samples were analyzed for metadiscourse markers. The writing samples collected from 40 language learners were examined word by word by the researchers and analyzed based on Hyland's (2005) framework. To ensure consistency, raters independently coded all 40 essays, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Table 1 shows the results of inter-rater reliability of the two raters, calculated using Pearson's correlation coefficient.

Table 1.

Inter-Rater Reliability of the Two Raters

Test	Rater 1	
1	Sig (2-tailed)	R
Rater 2	·00*	.79

According to Table 1, there is a strong positive correlation between the two raters in their assessments (r = .79, p < .001), indicating substantial inter-rater reliability. This correlation coefficient exceeds the minimum threshold of .70 typically recommended for content analysis studies (Neuendorf, 2017). This reliability index demonstrates that the coding scheme was applied consistently by both raters, supporting the validity of the subsequent analyses.

Results

The first research question examined the hedges that English language learners used in their writing. As Table 2 shows, language learners used various types of hedges in their writing samples, the most frequent of which are presented in the table.

Table 2.

Hedges Used in Language Learners' Writing

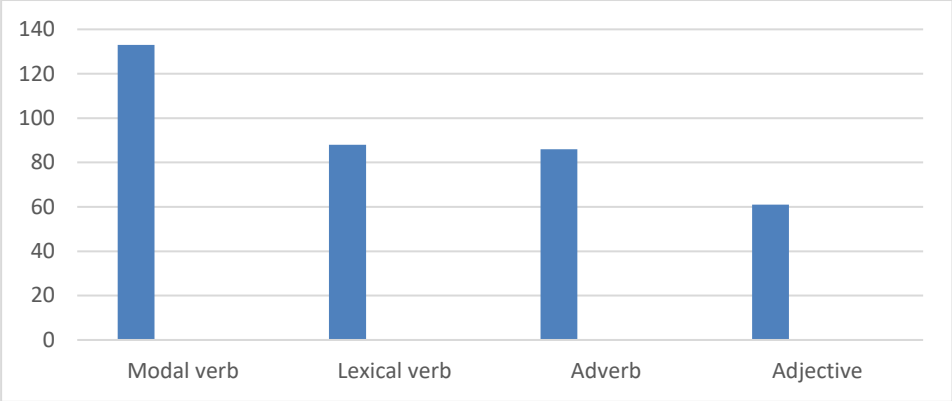
Type	Word count	Example
Epistemic Modal Verbs	133	may - can
Lexical Verbs	88	think- believe- guess -seem
Epistemic Adverbs	86	perhaps- undoubtedly
Epistemic Adjectives	61	probable- unlikely

As Table 2 indicates, an analysis of hedging devices in student writing revealed the following patterns. *Epistemic modal verbs* were the most frequently found hedging device (n=133), with *may* and *can* appearing as common examples, suggesting a tendency to express possibility or tentativeness. *Lexical verbs* were also frequently observed (n=88), with *think*, *believe*, *guess*, and *seem* as typical examples, indicating an inclination to express opinions or assumptions rather than definitive facts. *Epistemic adverbs* were used with a frequency of 86, with *perhaps* and *undoubtedly* as common examples. *Epistemic adjectives* were less frequent (n=61), with *probable* and *unlikely* as representative examples. A noteworthy point is that language learners did not use epistemic nouns in their writing samples. Furthermore, although language learners used various types of hedges in their writing, they used a limited number of types from each group.

Figure 1 visually represents the data presented in Table 1, highlighting the relative frequency of each hedging category.

Figure 1.

Frequency of Hedging Devices



To provide a more detailed overview of the hedging strategies used by the learners, descriptive statistics were calculated. The following table presents these statistics, offering insights into the frequency and distribution of different hedge types within the learner writing samples.

Table 3.

Descriptive Statistics of Hedges Use in Learner Writing

Hedges	**Mean (per 1000 words)**	**Standard Deviation**	**Standard Error**
Epistemic Modal Verbs	10.67	1.53	0.44
Lexical Verbs	7.06	1.21	0.41
Epistemic Adverbs	6.90	1.29	0.33
Epistemic Adjectives	4.89	1.1	0.21

As shown in Table 3, epistemic modal verbs (Mean = 10.67, SD = 1.53) were the most frequently employed type of hedging device in the learners' writing, followed by lexical verbs (Mean = 7.06, SD = 1.21). Epistemic adverbs and adjectives were used less frequently (Mean= 6.90 and 4.89respectively). Examples of hedges used in language learners' writing are provided below.

1. *It **could** be said that the use of internet has significant effects on every aspects of student life.*

The modal verb *could* soften the claim, suggesting a possibility rather than a definite fact. This type of hedging is common in situations where the writer wants to avoid making an overly strong or definitive statement. *This shows the writer is starting to move beyond simple statements and consider different perspectives.*

2. *I **think** that internet has positive and negative effects.*

The epistemic lexical verbs *think* indicates the writer's personal opinion. *While direct, it's a clear way for these learners to express their viewpoint.* By explicitly stating that this is their own thought, the writer acknowledges the subjective nature of the statement. This type of hedge is often used to signal that the writer is presenting an his belief, rather than an objective

fact. *As they develop, they might learn more sophisticated ways to express opinions in a less direct manner, but this is a solid starting point.*

3. ***Perhaps*** *one of the main advantages of using it is facilitating interaction among learners.*

The use of epistemic adverb *perhaps* signals uncertainty or possibility. This type of hedging is useful for softening claims and avoiding overgeneralizations *and suggests the writer is thinking critically and not presenting ideas as absolute truths.*

4. *It is* ***likely*** *that its implementation changes the role of teachers.*

The adjective *likely* expresses a degree of probability, but not certainty. These adjectives express a degree of likelihood without making a definitive assertion. This type of hedging is often employed when the writer wants to express a prediction or expectation, but cannot guarantee the outcome. *This demonstrates an understanding that there can be different influencing factors.*

The second research question explored the boosters that language learners used in their writing. After examining the writing samples and analyzing them based on Hyland's (2005) model, the results obtained are shown in Table 4.

Table 4.

Boosters Used in Language Learners' Writing

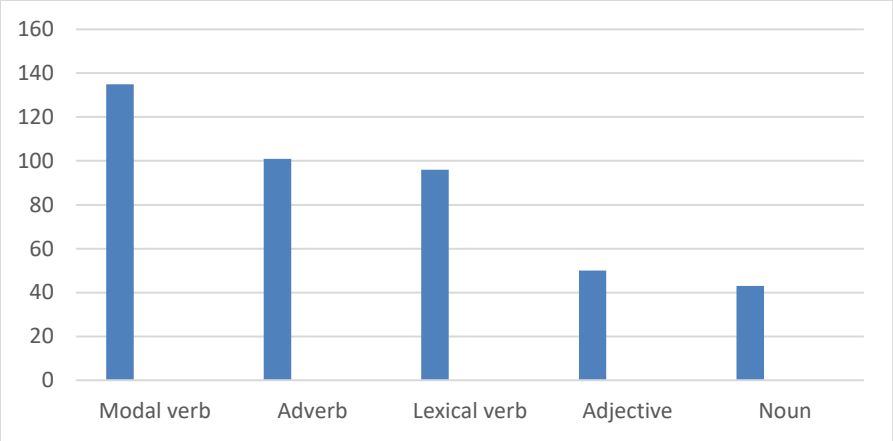
Type	Wordcount	Example
Epistemic Modal Verbs	135	must- will
Epistemic Adverbs	101	certainly –clearly - obviously -absolutely
Lexical Verbs	96	show – know- indicate
Epistemic Adjectives	50	clear -obvious
Epistemic nouns	43	truth – *claim- fact - certainty*

Analysis of the data revealed a varied use of epistemic boosting devices in student writing. *Epistemic modal verbs* were the most frequently employed category (n=135), with *must* and *will* appearing as a common example, suggesting a tendency to express strong convictions directly. *Epistemic adverbs* were also frequently observed (n=101), *certainly*, *clearly*, and *obviously* being a typical example, indicating an attempt to eliminate doubt and emphasize certainty. *Epistemic lexical verbs* were used with a frequency of 96, with *show* and *know* as a common example, showing learners aim to present claims as proven facts. *Epistemic adjectives* were less frequent (n=50), with *clear* and *obvious* as a representative example, suggesting learners sometimes present information as self-evident. Finally, *epistemic nouns* were the least frequently employed (n=43), *truth* and *fact* being a notable example, which may indicate a hesitancy to frame information as definitively factual."

Figure 2 visually represents the distribution of booster categories, as detailed in Table 2. It highlights the relative frequency of each booster category.

Figure 2.

Frequency of Boosting Devices



To provide a more detailed overview of the hedging strategies applied by the learners, descriptive statistics were calculated. In order to provide a quantitative summary of the booster strategies usage in the learner writing samples, descriptive statistics were calculated and presented in Table 5. The table offers a more precise understanding of how frequently and to what extent learners utilized different types of boosting devices.

Table 5.

Descriptive Statistics of Booster Use in Learner Writing

Boosters	Mean (per 1000 words)	Standard Deviation	Standard Error
Epistemic Modal Verbs	10.83	1.67	.38
Epistemic Adverbs	8.10	1.7	.35
Lexical Verbs	7.70	1.43	.36
Epistemic Adjectives	4.01	1.11	.29
Epistemic Nouns	3.44	1.34	.19

As shown in Table 5, epistemic modal verbs (M = 10.83, SD = 1.67) were the most frequently used type of boosting device in the learners' writing, followed by epistemic adverbs (M = 8.10, SD = 1.7) and epistemic lexical verbs (M = 7.70, SD = 1.43). Epistemic adjectives and nouns were used less frequently (M = 4.01 and 1.34 respectively).

Examples of boosters used in language learners' writing are provided below.

1. *It **will** damage students' social skills.*

The modal verb *will* expresses a strong prediction about a negative outcome, presenting it as highly certain. This exemplifies boosting through modality, where a modal verb is used to indicate a high degree of certainty or conviction, strengthening the statement. While learners often start by expressing uncertainty, this shows an attempt to take a firm stance, however, overusing such strong statements can make writing seem less nuanced

2. *This **demonstrates** that internet has made the access to information easier.*

The verb *demonstrates* presents a claim as if it were an undeniable fact. This is an example of boosting through assertive verbs. The writer isn't just saying they *think* something is true; they're claiming it's proven and this can be effective, learners should be aware that using such verbs requires strong evidence.

3. ***Certainly****, its use distracts students' attentions.*

The epistemic adverb *certainly* is used to eliminate any doubt about the statement's validity. It's a way to emphasize a point and discourage disagreement. While it can be effective, overuse can make the writing sound dogmatic or close-minded and it shows the learner is experimenting with expressing strong opinions.

4. *I believe that it is* ***clear*** *that students spend more time on internet.*

The adjective *clear* is used to suggest that something is obvious and undeniable. The writer is not just stating their belief but also implying that the belief is self-evident and using such language, as what seems "clear" to one person may not be clear to another shows the learner is experimenting with expressing strong opinions.

5. *The* ***truth*** *is that students' social skills should be increased.*

The epistemic noun *truth* is presents the following statement as an undeniable fact, leaving no room for doubt or alternative interpretations. This is an example of *boosting through factuality phrases*. The writer is signaling that they are not presenting an opinion, but rather an objective reality. This type of boosting can be effective for emphasizing a point, but it can also come across as overly assertive if not used carefully. It may also signal the learner is trying to sound confident, but it is better to avoid in academic writing.

The third research question tries to examine the possible effect of gender on the use of hedges. To answer this question, the chi-square test was used. The results obtained are presented in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6.

Descriptive Statistics: Gender and Hedging Marker Use.

	Gender	No.	Mean (per 1000 words)	Standard Deviation
Hedging Markers	Male	20	29.638	2.11
	Female	20	29.238	1.95

As Table 6 shows, the average use of hedges in men's writing was 29.638 per 1000 words, and for women, it was 29.238.

Table 7.
Chi-Square Test: Gender and Hedging Marker Use.

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.00[a]	20	0.15
Likelihood Ratio	2.77	20	0.09
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.00	1	.31
N of Valid Cases	40		
a. 42 cells (100.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .50.			

The results of the chi-square test in Table 7 show that the gender of language learners did not significantly affect the use of hedges in their writing (df = 20, p = 0.15). Therefore, it can be claimed that the learners' gender is not a determining factor in the use of hedges.

The forth research question examines the effect of gender on the use of boosters. To answer the question, the chi-square test was used. Table 8 and Table 9 show the results.

Table 8.
Descriptive Statistics: Gender and Boosting Marker Use.

	Gender	No.	Mean (per 1000 words)	Standard Deviation
Booster Markers	Male	20	34.19	1.19
	Female	20	33.77	0.98

Table 8 indicates that the average use of boosters in writing was 34.19 for male participants and 33.77for female participants. It is worth mentioning that this average is based on their use of boosters in 1000 words.

Table 9.
Chi-Square Test: Gender and Boosting Marker Use.

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.00[a]	20	0.16
Likelihood Ratio	2.77	18	0.10
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.00	1	0.32
N of Valid Cases	40		
a. 58 cells (100.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .50.			

Based on the information in Table 9, there is no significant difference between male and female writers in the use of boosters (df = 20, p = 0.16). Overall, based on the information obtained, it can be claimed that the gender of language learners does not have a significant effect on the use of boosters.

Discussion

This study is theoretically grounded in Hyland's (2005) model of metadiscourse, which conceptualizes hedges and boosters as key interpersonal resources through which writers manage their epistemic stance and engage readers. According to this framework, hedges allow writers to withhold full commitment to propositions, signaling uncertainty or acknowledging alternative viewpoints, while boosters emphasize certainty and close down alternative interpretations (Hyland, 2005). For EFL learners, mastery of these devices represents a sophisticated aspect of pragmatic competence that extends beyond grammatical accuracy to construct social relationships through text (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hyland & Tse, 2004).

From a second language acquisition perspective, the findings can be interpreted through the lens of input frequency and form-function mapping theories (Ellis, 2002; Tomasello, 2003). The predominance of epistemic modal verbs in our data aligns with this theoretical prediction, as these forms appear with high frequency in English input and receive explicit instructional attention. Conversely, the limited deployment of less frequent hedging and boosting devices reflects learners' incomplete acquisition of the full range of metadiscourse markers. This phenomenon is consistent with research on learners' development of pragmatic competence (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

The results of the first research question indicate that EFL learners used various types of hedges, such as epistemic modal verbs, lexical verbs, epistemic adverbs, and epistemic adjectives, in their writing. The results showed that epistemic modal verbs were the most frequent and epistemic adjectives were the least frequent in the writings of Iranian language learners. However, epistemic nouns were not used in their writings. The results were consistent with the findings of Demir (2018) who similarly found modal auxiliaries to be the predominant hedging device in non-native academic writing. His results showed that writers used the auxiliary verbs *can*, *could*, and *should* as hedges more often. In this regard, the results of Ghia et al. (2022) showed that the hedge *could* was the most frequently used in the abstracts of students' theses. Furthermore, the results of Kamyabi and Jamaleddin (2021) support the findings of this study. They found that language learners use auxiliary verbs more as hedge markers to express their intended concepts. In addition, the results of Malaki et al. (2023) showed that the frequency of cognitive epistemic verbs in language learners' writing is higher than other hedge markers. Such findings are consistent with the results of Donadio and Passariello (2022).

One of the reasons that could explain the results of this study regarding the greater use of epistemic modal verbs as hedges by Iranian EFL learners is the simplicity of using these verbs in sentences. In fact, using these verbs to construct sentences is one of the simplest grammatical points that most language learners can easily learn and use in their sentence construction. On the other hand, given the widespread use of these verbs in sentence construction, it can be expected that these words will be more frequently used in language learners' writing. Another reason that could explain the repetition of such words in writing is the frequent use of these

verbs in English classes. Learners use these words repeatedly to convey their concepts and thoughts in other language skills such as speaking and listening. As a result, this possibility increases their repetition in their writing. On the other hand, learners often encounter examples in their classes that show the use of these words. In addition, the material related to these verbs has been repeated many times in both school textbooks and institute books. The increased repetition of such words in learners' input information leads to an increase in their use in the created outputs (which are mostly in the form of writing and speaking).

These pedagogical patterns can be understood within the broader context of Iranian EFL education. English instruction in Iran typically emphasizes grammatical accuracy, particularly in public schools while private language institutes, where the present study's participants were enrolled, generally adopt more communicative approaches but still maintain strong emphasis on grammatical foundations. Modal verbs are introduced early and are extensively practiced due to their high functional load in English. In contrast, more sophisticated hedging devices such as epistemic nouns or complex adverbial phrases receive less explicit attention, resulting in limited exposure and restricted use by learners.

Furthermore, cognitive processing demands may contribute to modal verb predominance. Producing written text involves simultaneous management of multiple cognitive demands (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Under such cognitive load, learners may choose simpler linguistic forms rather than less automatized structures like epistemic nouns or complex hedging phrases. This explanation aligns with Skehan's (1998) limited attentional capacity model, which predicts that learners pay more attention to fluency and accuracy over complexity.

On the other hand, the reasons that can be mentioned for not using epistemic nouns and the limited use of other hedge markers include the learners' lack of awareness of their meaning and concept, lack of familiarity with their use in sentences, lack of receiving appropriate training, lack of frequent repetition of them in the course books, and the learners' reluctance to use them. However, transfer effects from Persian may be considered as an additional factor. While Persian possesses hedging devices, their formal realization and discourse functions differ from English (Alemi & Tayebi, 2011).

The results of the second research question indicated that EFL learners used epistemic modal verbs, epistemic adverbs, lexical verbs, epistemic adjectives, and epistemic nouns as booster markers in their writings. Epistemic modal verbs were the most frequently employed category and epistemic nouns were the least frequently employed one. The results of this study are not consistent with the findings of Donadio and Passarello (2022). They found that cognitive adverbs are used more as booster markers. From their point of view, words such as *definitely*/*certainly*/*clearly* have the highest frequency in students' writing. In this regard, Ghia et al. (2022) found that writers prefer to use cognitive adverbs more frequently. Therefore, words such as really and definitely have the highest frequency as booster markers in learners' writing.

On the other hand, the results of Batool et al. (2019) support the findings of this study. They found that the words '*should* and *will'* have the highest frequency as epistemic modal verbs in writing. In addition, the findings of Hu and Cao (2011) showed that the epistemic modal verb '*will'* has the highest frequency in the learners' writings. In this regard, Yagiz and Demir (2015) reported that learners tend to use the words 'will' and 'should' more frequently as emphatic markers. They also claimed that epistemic adverbs had the lowest frequency among booster markers.

The reasons for the results concerning the second question are similar to those for the first. Language learners used epistemic modal verbs more frequently because they are familiar with these forms and have used them previously. On the other hand, these words have been constantly repeated in school textbooks and language classes. Therefore, language learners are familiar with their types and their uses. As a result, the likelihood of repeating these words in writing increases. The greater use of epistemic modal verbs and the concurrent lower use of epistemic nouns as boosters may reflect individual differences among learners. These differences could manifest as a greater propensity to employ epistemic verbs, potentially rooted in factors such as education level (Khazaee et al., 2020), and cultural or L1 influences (Al-Mudhaffari, 2020). While these explanations are plausible, they warrant further investigation with targeted data to establish causal links.

An important theoretical consideration regarding booster usage concerns the potential for overuse or inappropriate usage. Hyland (1998) cautions that excessive boosting can undermine rather than enhance credibility. Whether Iranian EFL learners in this study used boosters appropriately or excessively remains a question for future research employing qualitative analysis of marker functions in context.

The third and fourth questions examined the role of gender in the use of hedge and booster markers in Iranian learners' writing. The results of descriptive statistics showed that both groups had almost the same mean. However, the chi-square test was used to examine the significance of the difference between them. The results showed that gender did not have a significant effect on the use of hedge and booster markers in writing. The findings of this study indicated that similar words were used to express doubt and certainty in the writing of male and female learners.

These results are consistent with the findings of Hassani and Dastjani (2014), who found that gender did not have a significant effect on the use of hedge and booster markers. Furthermore, Argina and Ijabah's (2022) results showed that male and female learners used similar markers of doubt and emphasis in writing. Furthermore, the results of Pan and Zheng (2017) showed no significant difference between males and females in the use of hedge and booster markers. Contrary to such findings, Lakoff (1975) believes that the use of hedge markers is a linguistic characteristic of women. He stated that women use hedges more and men use boosters more. Furthermore, Yeganeh and Ghoreyshi (2015) found that gender has a significant effect on the use of hedge and booster markers. Their results showed that Iranian

female writers tend to be more cautious in their writing, which increases the use of hedges in their writing. In contrast, Iranian male writers tend to make stronger commitments to the information presented in their writing, which increases the use of boosters. They concluded that men generally intend to be more emphatic in their statements and use a more confident writing style.

This discrepancy in findings across studies suggests that the influence of gender on metadiscourse use may be more complex than initially assumed, potentially mediated by factors such as cultural context, proficiency level, specific writing task requirements, or changes in language norms over time. Further research employing different methodologies and participant groups is needed to fully understand the role of gender in this area.

Conclusion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the usage patterns of hedging and boosting markers by Iranian language learners, contributing to our understanding of metadiscourse in second language writing. Consistent with a substantial body of research (e.g., Batool et al., 2019; Kamyabi & Jamaleddin, 2021), the results underscore the predominant role of epistemic modal verbs as both hedges and boosters. This prevalence can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the grammatical structure and application of core modal verbs (*can*, *may*, *must*, *will*) are typically introduced early in English language curricula and are reinforced throughout learners' educational journeys. Their relative simplicity compared to other hedging and boosting strategies, such as complex adverbial phrases or noun clauses, likely facilitates their acquisition and use. Secondly, the high frequency of these modal verbs in English input and their consistent inclusion in textbooks and classroom instruction may contribute to their greater salience and accessibility for learners when producing written output. Learners are likely to draw upon the linguistic resources they are most familiar with and have encountered most frequently.

However, the limited use of other hedging and boosting devices, particularly epistemic nouns and less common adverbs and adjectives, warrants further discussion. This restricted repertoire suggests a potential gap in learners' metadiscourse competence beyond the most basic and frequently encountered forms. Possible reasons for this observation include insufficient exposure to a wider range of hedging and boosting strategies in educational materials, a lack of explicit instruction on their nuances and functions, or a perceived difficulty in accurately deploying less frequent forms. While learners may intuitively grasp the concept of expressing doubt or certainty, they may lack the specific linguistic tools to do so with variety and sophistication. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting challenges faced by L2 learners in mastering the subtle and varied functions of metadiscourse markers (e.g., Ningrum et al., 2024). Importantly, the absence of significant gender effects in metadiscourse marker usage suggests that, at least within this specific population and context, male and female

learners exhibit similar patterns in deploying hedges and boosters. These findings challenge simplistic applications of gender and language theories to EFL writing contexts.

The observed over-reliance on a limited set of hedging and boosting markers, primarily modals, highlights a potential area for pedagogical intervention. To equip learners with a richer and more varied repertoire of metadiscourse markers, explicit and systematic instruction is essential. Language curricula should move beyond merely introducing these forms grammatically and incorporate activities that focus on their functional significance in different contexts and genres. Learners need opportunities to analyze authentic texts to understand how experienced writers employ a range of hedges and boosters to achieve specific rhetorical effects. Furthermore, incorporating targeted practice exercises where learners are encouraged to experiment with different metadiscourse strategies can foster their confidence and proficiency.

Crucially, the effective implementation of such instruction hinges on the linguistic and pedagogical preparedness of English language teachers. Teachers need not only a solid understanding of the form and function of various stance markers but also the knowledge and skills to effectively teach them to learners. Therefore, investing in pre-service and in-service professional development programs for teachers, through workshops, webinars, and collaborative learning communities, is paramount. By enhancing teachers' metadiscourse competence, we can ensure that learners receive the necessary guidance to develop their own skills in this vital aspect of writing.

While this study contributes to our understanding of metadiscourse use by Iranian language learners, it is subject to certain limitations. The main limitation concerns our genre analysis approach. Although we identified argumentative essays as a distinct EGAP genre, we analyzed each essay as a whole without distinguishing between rhetorical moves—introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion. By treating essays as unified texts, we may have missed important patterns in how learners use hedges and boosters across different sections. Move-based analysis in future research would provide valuable insights for teaching genre-specific metadiscourse strategies. Also, the findings are based on a specific group of learners and a particular writing task, and thus may not be generalizable to all Iranian language learners or all writing contexts. Future research could explore metadiscourse use across different proficiency levels, genres, and educational settings. Longitudinal studies would also provide insights into the development of metadiscourse competence over time. Additionally, mixed-methods research combining frequency analysis with qualitative examination of marker appropriateness and functional deployment would provide richer understanding of learners' metadiscourse competence. Despite these limitations, the study's findings provide a clear rationale for prioritizing explicit instruction in metadiscourse markers to empower language learners to become more sophisticated and effective writers.

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