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HEDGING AND EPISTEMIC STANCE IN UZBEK EFL STUDENTS' LITERARY REFLECTIONS: A SMALL-SCALE CORPUS-BASED STUDY

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Annotation. This study examines the use of hedging and epistemic stance in written reflections produced by Uzbek EFL university students. The data consist of 14 student reflections on Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, analyzed using a small-scale corpus-based approach. The findings show that modal verbs expressing possibility were the most frequently used hedging devices. The study also identifies epistemic adverbs, verbs, and personal stance markers. The results highlight how EFL learners use linguistic resources to express uncertainty, interpretation, and degrees of commitment in literary writing.

Keywords: hedging, epistemic stance, EFL learners, literary reflection, corpus-based analysis.

ХЕДЖИРОВАНИЕ И ЭПИСТЕМИЧЕСКАЯ ПОЗИЦИЯ В ЛИТЕРАТУРНЫХ РАЗМЫШЛЕНИЯХ УЗБЕКСКИХ СТУДЕНТОВ АКИ: НЕБОЛЬШОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ НА ОСНОВЕ КОРПУСА

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается использование хеджирования и эпистемической позиции в письменных рефлексиях студентов узбекских вузов, изучающих английский язык как иностранный. Материал исследования включает 14 письменных рефлексий студентов по роману Л. Н. Толстого «Анна Каренина», проанализированных с применением малообъёмного корпусного подхода. Результаты показывают, что наиболее часто для выражения вероятности использовались модальные глаголы. Также были выявлены эпистемические наречия, глаголы и маркеры личной позиции. Исследование показывает, как студенты используют языковые средства для выражения неопределённости, интерпретации и степени уверенности в литературном письме.

Ключевые слова: хеджирование, эпистемическая позиция, EFL-студенты, литературная рефлексия, корпусный анализ.

O'ZBEKISTONLIK IXTS TALABALARINING ADABIY TAFAKKURLARIDA XEDJ VA EPISTEMIK POZITSIYA: KORPUS ASOSIDAGI KICHIK TADQIQOT

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Annotatsiya. Mazkur maqolada ingliz tilini chet tili sifatida o'rganuvchi o'zbekistonlik universitet talabalarining yozma refleksiylarida hedging va epistemik pozitsiyaning qo'llanilishi tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot materiali L. N. Tolstoyning «Anna Karenina» asari asosida yozilgan 14 ta talaba refleksiya-sidan iborat bo'lib, kichik hajmli korpusga asoslangan yondashuv orqali o'rganildi. Natijalar ehtimollikni ifodalovchi modal fe'llar eng ko'p qo'llangan hedging vositalari ekanligini ko'rsatdi. Shuningdek, epistemik ravishlar, fe'llar va shaxsiy pozitsiyaning ifodalovchi birliklar aniqlandi. Tadqiqot talabalarining adabiy yozuvda noaniqlik, talqin va ishonch darajasini ifodalash uchun turli til vositalaridan foydalanishini ko'rsatadi.

Kalit so 'zlar: hedging, epistemik pozitsiya, EFL talabalari, adabiy refleksiya, korpus tahlili.

1. Introduction

Academic and literary writing requires writers to present interpretations and claims in ways that reflect an appropriate degree of certainty. Writers do not always state their ideas as absolute facts; instead, they may indicate that a proposition is possible, probable, or open to interpretation. Linguistic resources that perform this function are commonly discussed under the concept of hedging. In academic discourse, hedging allows writers to qualify claims and avoid presenting interpretations with greater certainty than the available evidence permits (Hyland, 1998). Crompton (1997) similarly argues that hedging is most appropriately understood in relation to epistemic modality and the expression of provisionality.

Hedging is therefore not simply a matter of grammatical choice. It is also related to how writers position themselves toward the propositions they express. Hyland (2005) emphasizes that written discourse contains linguistic resources through which writers establish their stance toward information and communicate their relationship with readers. From this perspective, expressions such as *may*, *might*, *could*, *probably*, *seem*, and *suggest* can help writers signal different degrees of commitment to an interpretation. At the same time, expressions such as *I think* and *in my opinion* explicitly mark the writer's personal position and can provide insight into how learners construct interpretations.

The study of hedging is particularly relevant to second-language writing. Previous research has demonstrated that learners' use of hedging can differ considerably from that of more experienced academic writers. For example, Hinkel (2005), in a large corpus study of L1 and L2 student writing, examined the frequency and types of hedging and related linguistic features in student academic prose. Her findings demonstrate the value of examining lexical and grammatical choices systematically in learner writing.

However, much of the existing research on hedging has focused on academic essays, research articles, and other explicitly academic genres. Comparatively less attention has been given to literary reflections written by EFL learners, in which students are required to interpret characters, motivations, relationships, and social issues. Such writing provides a useful context for examining epistemic language because literary interpretations are often inherently open to alternative readings. Students may therefore need linguistic resources to distinguish their personal interpretations from statements presented as established facts.

The present study addresses this context by examining hedging and epistemic stance in written reflections produced by Uzbek university students learning English as a foreign language. The data consist of 14 authentic student reflections on Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, with each text containing approximately 250–270 words. The study adopts a small-scale corpus-based approach and combines quantitative identification of hedging devices with qualitative analysis of their functions in context. Particular attention is given to modal verbs, epistemic verbs, adverbial expressions, and personal stance markers. Because forms such as *could*, *can*, *should*, and *would* may perform different functions depending on context, the analysis does not treat their occurrence as evidence of hedging automatically.

The study aims to contribute to research on learner language by providing evidence from an underrepresented EFL context and a less frequently examined genre. It also seeks to demonstrate how Uzbek EFL students linguistically negotiate certainty, possibility, and personal interpretation when responding to literary texts.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

1. What types of hedging devices are used by Uzbek EFL students in their written reflections on Anna Karenina?
2. How frequently do different types of hedging devices occur in the students' reflections?
3. How do students use hedging and epistemic stance markers to express interpretation and degrees of certainty?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Hedging and Epistemic Modality

Hedging has been widely discussed in linguistics as a means of expressing uncertainty, tentativeness, and limited commitment to a proposition. However, researchers have approached the concept from somewhat different theoretical perspectives. Crompton (1997) notes that the term hedge has been used broadly in research on academic discourse and argues for a more precise definition. He proposes that hedging should primarily refer to expressions of epistemic modality or markers of provisionality that qualify a claim. From this perspective, a linguistic expression should not be classified as a hedge simply because it makes a statement less direct; rather, its function in the particular context must be considered.

Hyland (1998) similarly treats hedging as an important component of written argumentation. His work demonstrates that hedging is not merely a grammatical phenomenon but is closely connected with the way writers construct knowledge and position their claims within a discourse community. His analysis of scientific writing identifies a range of linguistic resources through which writers indicate degrees of certainty and acknowledge the possibility of alternative interpretations. Importantly, Hyland also discusses the relevance of hedging to second-language learners, making his framework particularly useful for research on EFL student writing.

Epistemic modality is particularly relevant to the present study because the students were asked to interpret a literary work rather than simply reproduce factual information. When a student writes that a particular event could have a certain consequence, for example, the writer presents that interpretation as possible rather than certain. Similarly, expressions such as perhaps, probably, seem, or might can signal different degrees of commitment. The present study therefore follows a functional approach in which the contextual meaning of a linguistic form determines whether it functions as a hedge.

This distinction is important because modal verbs do not always perform an epistemic function. For instance, should may express obligation or advice, while could may refer to ability rather than possibility. Consequently, frequency-based identification of modal verbs alone cannot provide an accurate measure of hedging. Contextual analysis is necessary to distinguish epistemic uses from other grammatical and pragmatic functions.

2.2. Hedging, Stance, and Learner Writing

Hedging is also closely related to the broader concept of stance. Hyland (2005) conceptualizes academic discourse as an interaction between writers and readers and emphasizes the linguistic resources through which writers express their positions toward the information presented in a text. His stance framework includes resources that allow writers to communicate their attitudes, judgments, and degrees of commitment. The framework was developed from an analysis of 240 research articles across eight disciplines and highlights the importance of linguistic choices in constructing writer positioning.

From this perspective, hedging can be considered one component of a broader system of epistemic and interpersonal positioning. Expressions such as may, might, could, and probably can reduce the degree of commitment to a proposition, whereas expressions such as I think, I believe, and in my opinion explicitly identify the writer as the source of an interpretation. Although

these categories perform different functions, both can provide evidence of how learners position themselves toward what they write.

Research on second-language writing has demonstrated that learners' use of hedging and related stance devices can differ in frequency and form from that found in native-speaker academic writing. Hinkel (2005), for example, examined hedges and intensifiers in a corpus of 745 L1 and L2 student essays containing more than 220,000 words. Her analysis included several types of hedging resources, including epistemic hedges, lexical hedges, possibility expressions, downtoners, and adverbial expressions. The study illustrates the usefulness of examining such features systematically in learner writing rather than treating them as isolated grammatical choices.

At the same time, research on learner hedging has predominantly concentrated on academic writing, particularly argumentative essays and research-oriented genres. This focus has contributed substantially to our understanding of how learners construct claims in academic contexts, but it leaves other forms of student writing comparatively less explored. Literary responses are especially interesting because students are often expected to interpret characters, events, motives, and relationships for which there may be more than one reasonable interpretation.

2.3. Hedging in Literary Interpretation

Literary reflection provides a somewhat different communicative environment from conventional academic argumentation. When students respond to a novel, their statements may combine textual interpretation with personal evaluation. For example, a student may describe a character's behavior as a possible consequence of social pressure, emotional conflict, or personal choice. Such statements are interpretive rather than objectively verifiable facts, and linguistic markers of uncertainty can therefore play an important role.

In this context, epistemic expressions can help students distinguish between what the text explicitly presents and what they themselves infer from it. A statement such as *Anna could have felt isolated* presents an interpretation as possible, whereas *Anna felt isolated* presents the interpretation more directly. The difference is therefore not only grammatical but also related to the writer's degree of commitment to the interpretation.

This distinction also supports the separation of core hedging devices from explicit personal stance expressions in the present study. Expressions such as *I think* and *in my opinion* directly signal the student's personal position, but they do not necessarily reduce the certainty of the proposition in the same way as *might*, *could*, or *perhaps*. Treating these categories separately allows the analysis to remain theoretically consistent with the narrower definition of hedging proposed by Crompton (1997), while still recognizing the broader role of stance discussed by Hyland (2005).

2.4. Research Gap

The literature reviewed above establishes three important points. First, hedging is closely associated with epistemic modality and the expression of provisionality (Crompton, 1997). Second, hedging functions as part of a wider system of writer stance and positioning (Hyland, 1998, 2005). Third, research on L2 writing has demonstrated that learners employ a variety of lexical and grammatical resources to express degrees of certainty and persuasion (Hinkel, 2005).

Nevertheless, the existing literature leaves room for further investigation of hedging in EFL students' literary writing, particularly in contexts where students interpret a common literary text. The present study addresses this gap by examining 14 written reflections produced by Uzbek university students in response to Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Rather than assuming that every modal expression represents a hedge, the study identifies hedging devices according to their contextual function and combines frequency analysis with qualitative interpretation.

This approach is particularly appropriate for a small learner corpus because the purpose is not to make broad claims about all Uzbek EFL students, but to provide a focused description of how a particular group of learners uses epistemic language when constructing literary interpretations.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present study employs a small-scale corpus-based research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative component focuses on identifying and calculating the frequency of hedging devices in the students' written reflections, while the qualitative component examines the functions of these expressions in their immediate textual contexts. This combination makes it possible not only to determine how frequently hedging occurs but also to establish whether particular linguistic forms actually perform a hedging function.

A corpus-based approach was selected because it provides a systematic way of examining naturally produced learner language. Rather than relying on isolated examples or predetermined assumptions about students' use of modal expressions, the study analyzes authentic written texts produced by the participants. Particular attention is given to contextual interpretation, since the same grammatical form may perform different semantic and pragmatic functions.

3.2. Participants and Data

The dataset consists of 14 written reflections produced by Uzbek university students studying English as a foreign language (EFL). The students were asked to write a reflection on Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Each reflection contains approximately 250–270 words, resulting in a small corpus of approximately 3,500–3,780 words.

The texts were produced as part of students' written response to the literary work and were analyzed in their original form. The study focuses on the language produced by the students rather than on their literary interpretations as such. Consequently, the novel serves as a common communicative and thematic context for examining students' use of epistemic language. Because the corpus is relatively small and consists of texts produced by a specific group of university students, the findings are interpreted as descriptive evidence from this particular learner group, rather than as statistically representative of Uzbek EFL learners as a whole.

3.3. Identification and Classification of Hedging Devices

The analysis focused primarily on linguistic expressions that can communicate possibility, uncertainty, tentativeness, or reduced commitment to a proposition. The identification procedure was based on the functional understanding of hedging discussed by Crompton (1997) and the treatment of stance and epistemic positioning in Hyland (1998, 2005).

The identified expressions were organized into the following categories:

Category	Examples	Function
Modal verbs	<i>may, might, could, can</i>	Expressing possibility or uncertainty
Epistemic verbs	<i>seem, appear, suggest, indicate</i>	Presenting an interpretation as tentative
Epistemic adverbs	<i>perhaps, maybe, possibly, probably</i>	Indicating degrees of probability
Epistemic adjectives/nouns	<i>possible, likely, possibility</i>	Expressing probability or uncertainty
Personal stance expressions	<i>I think, I believe, in my opinion</i>	Explicitly marking the writer's position

However, the presence of a particular lexical or grammatical form was not automatically treated as evidence of hedging. Each occurrence was examined in context to determine its function.

For example, in the sentence:

She should talk honestly with Karenin.

the modal verb *should* expresses advice or obligation rather than epistemic uncertainty. Therefore, it was not classified as a hedge.

Similarly:

I would advise Anna to leave.

Here, *would* contributes to a recommendation rather than expressing epistemic probability and was consequently excluded from the core hedge count.

In contrast:

This could lead to serious consequences.

the modal *could* expresses a possible consequence and was therefore classified as an epistemic hedge.

This contextual procedure was particularly important because modal verbs such as *can*, *could*, *should*, and *would* may perform several different functions in learner writing.

3.4. Analytical Procedure

The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, the students' reflections were examined to identify potential instances of hedging and epistemic stance. Second, each identified expression was checked in its surrounding context to determine its communicative function. Forms that expressed possibility or another clearly epistemic meaning were included in the core hedge analysis, while non-epistemic uses were excluded.

Third, the identified hedging devices were classified according to their linguistic form. Their frequencies were then calculated across the corpus and, where appropriate, normalized per 1,000 words to facilitate interpretation. In addition to frequency analysis, selected examples were examined qualitatively to determine how students used hedging when discussing characters, events, motivations, and consequences in *Anna Karenina*. Personal stance expressions such as *I think* and *in my opinion* were recorded separately because they indicate explicit writer positioning

but do not necessarily function as hedges in the narrower sense.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The analysis uses student-produced written texts for linguistic research. The students are referred to by neutral identifiers such as S1, S2, S3, and so forth, rather than by their names. No personally identifying information is included in the analysis. The study focuses exclusively on linguistic features relevant to the research questions.

4. Results and Analysis

The analysis of the 14 student reflections identified 19 core hedging devices in the corpus. The findings indicate that students relied primarily on modal verbs to express possibility and uncertainty, while epistemic adverbs and epistemic verbs occurred less frequently. Personal stance expressions such as I think and in my opinion were also observed, but these were treated separately because they explicitly indicate the writer's position rather than necessarily reducing commitment to a proposition.

4.1. Overall Frequency of Hedging Devices

The distribution of the identified core hedging devices is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Core Hedging Devices

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Modal verbs expressing possibility	16	84.2%
Epistemic adverbs	2	10.5%
Epistemic/interpretive verbs	1	5.3%
Total	19	100%

The results show a clear predominance of modal verbs, which accounted for 16 of the 19 identified hedging devices. Thus, modal expressions represented approximately four-fifths of all core hedging instances in the corpus. Epistemic adverbs and epistemic verbs were comparatively rare.

If the corpus is estimated at approximately 3,640 words, the overall frequency corresponds to approximately 5.2 hedging devices per 1,000 words. Because the texts varied slightly in length, this normalized figure should be understood as an approximate corpus-level measure.

4.2. Modal Verbs as the Dominant Hedging Resource

Modal verbs constituted the most frequently occurring category. Expressions involving could, can, may, and might were used when students presented interpretations or consequences as possibilities rather than established facts.

For example, an expression such as:

This could lead to serious consequences.

allows the writer to present the consequence as possible without claiming that it will necessarily occur. The modal could therefore functions as an epistemic hedge because it reduces the writer's degree of commitment to the proposition.

A similar function can be observed in expressions involving can when the context indicates a possible consequence:

It can lead you to difficult situations.

Here, can presents a potential consequence rather than an obligatory or habitual action. The expression therefore contributes to the student's cautious presentation of an interpretation.

The frequent use of modal hedges may be related to the nature of literary reflection. Students are interpreting characters and events rather than reporting objectively verifiable information. Consequently, modal expressions provide a linguistic means of presenting interpretations as possibilities.

4.3. The Importance of Context in Identifying Hedges

An important finding of the analysis is that not every modal verb represents hedging. The same grammatical form may have a different function depending on its context.

For instance:

She should talk honestly with Karenin.

In this example, *should* expresses advice or obligation. It does not indicate uncertainty concerning the truth of the proposition and was therefore excluded from the core hedge count.

Similarly:

I would advise Anna to leave.

The modal *would* occurs within a recommendation and does not function as an epistemic hedge.

This distinction is methodologically important because an automatic search for modal verbs would potentially overestimate the frequency of hedging in the corpus. The present analysis therefore supports a functional rather than purely form-based approach to hedge identification.

4.4. Epistemic Adverbs and Verbs

Epistemic adverbs represented a much smaller proportion of the identified hedging devices. Expressions such as *maybe*, *perhaps*, *possibly*, or *probably* can explicitly indicate uncertainty or probability. Their relatively low frequency suggests that the students in this corpus relied more heavily on modal verbs than on adverbial resources for expressing epistemic meanings. Only one clear epistemic or interpretive verb was identified in the preliminary analysis. Verbs such as *seem*, *appear*, or *suggest* can allow writers to distance themselves from categorical interpretations. For example, the situation *seems* to show presents the interpretation as an inference rather than an unquestionable fact. The limited occurrence of these forms may indicate that the students had a narrower repertoire of explicit lexical hedging devices and tended to rely on familiar modal constructions when expressing uncertainty. However, given the small corpus, this observation should be treated as a description of the present dataset rather than a general claim about Uzbek EFL learners.

4.5. Hedging and Personal Epistemic Stance

Alongside the 19 core hedging devices, the reflections contained several explicit personal stance expressions, including forms such as *I think*, *I believe*, *I find that*, and *in my opinion*. These expressions were not included in the core hedge frequency because they primarily identify the writer's personal position.

For example:

I think Anna was influenced by society.

The expression *I think* explicitly signals that the statement represents the student's interpretation. However, it does not necessarily communicate the same degree of epistemic uncertainty as *might* or *could*. It is therefore more accurately described as a stance marker rather than a core hedge. The presence of such expressions nevertheless demonstrates that students used multiple linguistic resources to position themselves toward their literary interpretations. The combination of modal hedging and explicit personal stance suggests that students were able to distinguish, at least linguistically, between presenting an interpretation as possible and explicitly presenting it as their own view.

4.6. Distribution Across Individual Reflections

The preliminary student-level analysis also revealed considerable variation in the occurrence of hedging devices. The distribution was as follows:

Student	Core hedges
S1	1
S2	0
S3	2
S4	3
S5	1
S6	6
S7	1
S8	0
S9	0
S10	0
S11	2
S12	3
S13	0
S14	0
Total	19

The distribution indicates that hedging was not evenly distributed across the 14 texts. Some students used several hedging devices, while others did not use any forms classified as core hedges. S6 contained the highest preliminary number of identified devices, whereas five reflections contained no core hedging devices. This variation is noteworthy because it suggests that the use of epistemic language may differ substantially between individual learners even when they respond to the same literary text. Nevertheless, the small sample does not allow the study to determine the reasons for these differences. Possible explanations would require additional data concerning students' proficiency, writing experience, task interpretation, and individual linguistic preferences.

4.7. Summary of Findings

Overall, the analysis demonstrates three main patterns. First, modal verbs expressing possibility were the dominant hedging resource in the corpus. Second, lexical and adverbial

hedging devices occurred considerably less frequently. Third, the students also employed explicit personal stance markers, which should be distinguished from core epistemic hedges. The findings further demonstrate the importance of contextual analysis. Modal forms such as *could*, *can*, *should*, and *would* cannot be classified as hedges solely on the basis of their grammatical form. Their contribution to epistemic meaning depends on how they function within the particular sentence and discourse context.

5. Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that Uzbek EFL students used a range of linguistic resources to express degrees of certainty and personal interpretation in their written reflections on Anna Karenina. The predominance of modal verbs expressing possibility suggests that students most frequently relied on relatively familiar grammatical resources when presenting interpretations as possible rather than certain. This finding is consistent with the view of hedging as a means of qualifying propositions and reducing the degree of commitment to a claim (Crompton, 1997; Hyland, 1998). The frequent use of modal expressions is particularly relevant to literary writing. Unlike factual descriptions, literary interpretations may involve different possible explanations of a character's behavior or motivation. Expressions such as *could* and *can* allow students to present their interpretations without necessarily treating them as definitive. In this sense, hedging may support students in negotiating the interpretive nature of literary response writing. At the same time, the relatively limited use of epistemic adverbs and lexical verbs suggests that the students' hedging repertoire was less diverse than their use of modal expressions. This pattern may indicate a preference for grammatical forms that are more familiar and accessible to EFL learners. However, the present dataset is too small to establish whether this represents a broader characteristic of Uzbek EFL writing. The findings also highlight the importance of distinguishing hedging from general stance marking. Expressions such as *I think* and *in my opinion* were present in the students' writing and explicitly signaled personal interpretation. In accordance with Hyland's (2005) broader concept of stance, these expressions demonstrate how writers position themselves toward the ideas they present. Nevertheless, they were not included in the core hedge count because identifying a proposition as one's personal opinion does not necessarily indicate epistemic uncertainty. Another important finding concerns the contextual interpretation of modal verbs. The analysis demonstrated that forms such as *should* and *would* can occur frequently in student writing without functioning as hedges. This supports a functional approach to corpus analysis in which linguistic forms are interpreted according to their meaning and discourse function rather than counted mechanically. Such an approach is especially important in learner corpora, where grammatical forms may have a wide range of communicative functions.

Finally, the variation between individual students suggests that the use of hedging was not uniform across the corpus. Some students used several epistemic expressions, whereas others did not use any core hedges. This variation should not be interpreted as evidence of differences in proficiency without additional information about the participants. Instead, it demonstrates that even within a relatively homogeneous writing task, learners may employ different strategies for expressing interpretation and certainty.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the use of hedging and epistemic stance in 14 written reflections produced by Uzbek EFL university students in response to Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. Using a small-scale corpus-based approach, the study combined quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative examination of linguistic forms in context. The findings showed that modal verbs expressing possibility constituted the dominant category of core hedging devices, while epistemic adverbs

and epistemic verbs occurred less frequently. The analysis also identified explicit personal stance expressions such as *I think* and *in my opinion*, which were considered separately from core hedges. These findings suggest that the students used both grammatical and lexical resources to position themselves toward their literary interpretations. An important methodological finding was that hedging cannot be identified solely by searching for particular modal verbs or lexical items. Forms such as *could*, *can*, *should*, and *would* may perform different functions depending on context. Therefore, contextual and functional analysis is necessary for obtaining a more accurate picture of learners' use of epistemic language.

However, the study has several limitations. The corpus contains only 14 reflections and represents a relatively small group of learners. In addition, the texts were based on the same literary work and were relatively similar in length. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as descriptive rather than representative of Uzbek EFL students generally. Future research could examine a larger corpus, compare different proficiency levels, and investigate hedging across different genres and writing tasks.

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