Hedging and Boosting Sensitivity in EFL Students' Timed-Handwriting

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Abstract

Effective use of hedging and boosting is a key aspect of academic writing, enabling writers to express their stance, manage interpersonal meaning, and align with academic discourse norms. Although these rhetorical strategies are well documented in L2 academic and research writing, their application in timed handwritten compositions, particularly among EFL learners in Southeast Asia, remains underexplored. This study fills that gap by examining how EFL university students from Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines use hedges and boosters in handwritten essays produced under time constraints. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study analyzed 60 compositions using descriptive quantitative analysis to identify frequency patterns and qualitative content analysis to interpret contextual usage. The findings reveal that students display a functional awareness of modality, with hedging mainly realized through adjectives like *about* and modal verbs like *maybe*, reflecting caution and generalization avoidance. Boosting was heavily dominated by the adverb *always*, with less frequent use of *definitely* and *indeed* to emphasize certainty and conviction. Although students showed sensitivity in applying these strategies, the overuse of familiar forms and limited structural variety suggests surface-level adaptation rather than advanced rhetorical control—an effect attributed to the cognitive demands of timed writing. The study concludes that explicit instruction in hedging and boosting is crucial for fostering rhetorical awareness, especially in high-stakes or time-limited tasks. It recommends further research into cultural influences, proficiency development, and genre-specific modality use to better support EFL learners' academic writing competence.

Keywords: hedges, boosters, sensitivity, Timed-Handwritten Composition, EFL student

1. Introduction

This study examines how EFL students in three ASEAN countries employ hedges and boosters in their timed-handwritten compositions to balance uncertainty and assertiveness. It focuses on two aspects: the use of these linguistic strategies to convey cautiousness or confidence, and their sensitivity in achieving an effective balance between the two. This balance is essential for shaping the tone, persuasiveness, and clarity of their writing.

Hedging and boosting are essential linguistic strategies for expressing sensitivity and managing degrees of certainty in academic and professional discourse. Hedging, as discussed by Fraser (2010), enables writers to soften claims, while boosting, as Hyland (1998) highlights, intensifies confidence in assertions, shaping how knowledge is negotiated. These strategies are vital for managing interpersonal relationships (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and aligning with disciplinary conventions (Farrokhi & Emami, 2008). Crompton (1997) underscores their theoretical complexities in academic writing, while Vázquez & Giner (2008) link epistemic modality markers to hedging in research articles. Holmes (1990) contrasts gendered speech patterns, revealing nuanced uses of these tools in communication. In the context of L2 writing, Hinkel (2005) showed variations in hedging and boosting, reflecting linguistic proficiency and cultural factors. Addressing these dynamics, scholars like Behnam et al. (2012) Behnam et al. 2012) and Ningrum et al. (2024) analyze cross-cultural and disciplinary differences, providing insights into their

pedagogical implications. Thus, hedging and boosting are not merely stylistic but deeply tied to academic conventions, cultural contexts, and interpersonal pragmatics. Meanwhile, Syafei et al. (2021), Syafei et al. (2023) and Syafei (2012, 2014, 2010) examined the integration of timed handwriting with portfolio assessments to enhance writing skills by encouraging student autonomy and curiosity. This method involves students performing timed writing tasks, which are later refined into portfolios, thereby improving writing speed, quality, and reflective practices. Exploring hedges (e.g., "might", "perhaps") and boosters (e.g., "definitely", "clearly") in students' timed compositions provides valuable insights into how they balance uncertainty and assertiveness under time constraints. These linguistic tools reveal students' confidence, rhetorical awareness, and ability to adapt tone and argumentation in academic writing. Additionally, such analysis sheds light on the impact of stress and limited time on language choices, offering implications for refining assessments and teaching strategies (Salager-Meyer, 1994; Syafei et al., 2023). Meanwhile, prior studies conducted by Hyland (1998), Ishikawa, (2023), Jabbar (2019), Ningrum et al., (2024), Noor et al. (2023), and Sanjaya et al. (2015) mostly emphasize the roles of hedging and boosting in academic and scientific writing, there is a limited exploration in timed contexts of students' persuasive writing. Meanwhile, there are also several benefits of handwriting as claimed among others by Berninger and Bounds (2010), Berninger (2012), Al-Ghabra (2015), (Lund, 2016), and Ayotte (2018). Hirst (2001) noted that time constraints influence linguistic decisions due to cognitive load. This study seeks to address that gap by analyzing the distinctive features of hedging and boosting in timed handwriting, providing insights into students' linguistic strategies and adaptability under pressure.

This study introduces several novelties in composition research as follows. First, it focuses on hedging and boosting in timed handwritten compositions. It uniquely examines the use of hedges and boosters in timed handwritten writing tasks, a relatively unexplored area in existing research. The data collected from these compositions represents a new contribution to the study of linguistic strategies like hedging and boosting. Second, the research includes participants from Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia—bringing diversity in linguistic and academic traditions that have not been widely studied together in this context, and finally it addresses an unexplored dimension; how students use these strategies with sensitivity in timed tasks. This sensitivity influences how their writing is interpreted and evaluated both by instructors and peers, highlighting the pedagogical impact of hedging and boosting on writing assessments and peer feedback. These innovations position the study as a significant advancement in understanding the nuanced role of linguistic strategies in writing under time constraints.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods design that integrates both descriptive quantitative and qualitative content analysis to examine the use of hedging and boosting strategies in students' timed handwritten compositions. The quantitative component involves counting and calculating the frequencies and percentages of specific linguistic forms—such as adverbs, modal verbs, and adjectives—used as hedges and boosters. These statistical descriptions reveal usage patterns and the relative dominance of certain forms under timed writing conditions. Complementing this, the qualitative content analysis interprets the contextual and rhetorical functions of these expressions, exploring how students use them to convey certainty, soften claims, or project confidence. By combining these approaches, the study provides a comprehensive view of how EFL students manage uncertainty and assertiveness under pressure, revealing both structural patterns and functional sensitivity in their academic writing.

2.2 Data Collection and Context

The study analyzed 60 purposively selected students' timed handwritten compositions from English programs at universities in ASEAN countries. The participants included 30 students from two private universities in Indonesia (located in Kudus and Yogyakarta), students from a state university in Thailand, and students from a university in the Philippines. These participants represented diverse linguistic and academic backgrounds, with English proficiency levels approximately at B1-B2 on the CEFR scale. However, the purposive sampling method introduces limitations regarding the generalizability of findings. The Thailand students' compositions were collected during an offline visit to the university by one of the researchers. The Philippines compositions were part of portfolio-based timed-handwritten tasks completed during a transfer credit program. Meanwhile, Indonesian students' timed compositions were gathered from regular courses and writing workshops using a portfolio-based approach.

The timed handwriting tasks incorporated distinct features to ensure authenticity and uniformity. Students wrote within strict time limits (30 minutes) on assigned topics, such as friendship, mental health, and vaccination. The sessions were conducted in a no-assistance mode, where students could not seek help from peers, instructors, or

external resources. The handwriting mode ensured originality, prohibiting digital tools like copy-paste. After completing the tasks, students digitized their work by scanning and retyping the compositions into digital portfolios, enabling easier word counting, grammar checking, and self-evaluation.

The task process included four stages: preparation through warm-ups and activation of prior knowledge, immediate topic development before the writing session, a focused 30-minute writing session without aids, and post-writing activities where students processed their handwritten sheets into digital formats. This dataset highlights the interplay between time constraints and linguistic strategy use, offering valuable insights into how students manage hedges and boosters under pressure.

2.3 Data Analysis

The analysis aimed to identify and categorize hedges and boosters within the corpus of 60 timed handwritten compositions, focusing on their grammatical forms (e.g., modal verbs, adverbs, adjectives) and rhetorical functions (e.g., expressing uncertainty or reinforcing confidence) which indicate their sensitivity in using hedges and boosters. A combination of manual annotation and computational techniques was used to classify these expressions. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to reveal usage patterns, while qualitative analysis provided insights into their contextual and rhetorical functions. This study's analytical framework was informed by established classifications from Hyland (1998) and Farrokhi & Emami (2008) which guided the categorization process, ensuring that hedging and boosting strategies were systematically analyzed based on both form and function.

3. Results

This chapter presents the findings on the use of hedging and boosting strategies identified in the document and discusses their role in constructing the text's overall tone and credibility. By classifying instances of hedges and boosters, this analysis reveals the balance between cautious and assertive language, reflecting the author's stance and level of certainty. The data provided on hedges and boosters offers insight into how students use language to convey uncertainty, modesty, confidence, and assertiveness. The frequency and type of hedges and boosters used in written communication can significantly affect the tone, clarity, and persuasiveness of their writing. Thus, the data showed the students' sensitivity in hedging and boosting their composition.

3.1 The Use of Hedges and Boosters in Students' Timed-Handwritten Compositions

Table 1. The Hedges in Students' Timed-Handwritten Compositions

Hedges Form	Frequency (cases)	Percentage (%)
About	82	37.61%
Almost	14	6.42%
Around	20	9.17%
Barely	1	0.46%
Frequently	3	1.38%
Mainly	1	0.46%
Maybe	26	11.93%
Mostly	3	1.38%
Nearly	1	0.46%
Occasionally	1	0.46%
Often	38	17.43%
Perhaps	1	0.46%
Significantly	1	0.46%
Slightly	1	0.46%
Sometimes	34	15.60%
Somewhat	1	0.46%
Total	218	

This study analyzed the most frequently used hedging and boosting expressions in timed handwritten compositions as linguistic strategies. The most common hedging expressions were "about" (82 instances), "maybe" (26 instances),

"often" (42 instances), and "if" (50 instances), while less frequent ones included "could" (12 instances), "almost" (14 instances), "still" (39 instances), and "seemingly" (1 instance). For boosting expressions, "always" (254 instances), "never" (34 instances), "really" (34 instances), and "indeed" (7 instances) were the most used, with less frequent expressions including "definitely" (11 instances), "surely" (2 instances), and "totally" (5 instances). The dominance of "about" as a hedge reflects its role in allowing writers to approximate or introduce uncertainty, while the frequent use of "always" as a booster highlights its effectiveness in conveying certainty and consistency. This distribution indicates a writing style that balances caution with confidence, blending assertiveness with openness to resonate with readers effectively.

The findings reveal a balance between flexibility and conviction in language use. Hedges, such as "about" and "maybe", suggest nuanced and respectful uncertainty, while boosters, particularly "always", provide moments of strong conviction to reinforce stances. This reflects a deliberate balance between making cautious claims and asserting confidence. The study also highlights a distinction between subjective and objective language use. Hedges are employed in empirical or reflective contexts to acknowledge subjectivity, while boosters often appear in personal or emotional topics, emphasizing subjectivity and connection. Writers hedge when discussing facts or general phenomena and use boosters when expressing personal beliefs or relationships, creating a tone that is both credible and relatable.

Table 2. The Boosters in Students' Timed-Handwritten Compositions

Linguistic Form	Frequency (cases)	Percentage (%)
Actually	3	0.50%
Always	254	42.22%
Basically	2	0.33%
Because	2	0.33%
Certainly	1	0.17%
Clearly	2	0.33%
Completely	1	0.17%
Definitely	11	1.83%
Extremely	1	0.17%
Fact	3	0.50%
Fully	2	0.33%
Greatly	1	0.17%
Highly	2	0.33%
Indeed	7	1.16%
Likely	1	0.17%
Necessarily	1	0.17%
Never	34	5.65%
Of course	6	1.00%
Primarily	1	0.17%
Probably	1	0.17%
Quite	2	0.33%
Rarely	11	1.83%
Precisely	2	0.33%
Really	34	5.65%
Surely	2	0.33%
Truly	8	1.33%
Totally	5	0.83%
Undeniably	1	0.17%
Usually	15	2.49%
Total	601	

The use of boosters is to express confidence and assertiveness, reinforcing their commitment to specific ideas or positions. The most dominant booster, "always" (254 cases, 99.22% of all boosters), conveys strong assertions and enduring qualities, often used in personal contexts like relationships or consistent actions (e.g., "always cheers me up"). Moderately used boosters include "never" (34 cases) and "definitely" (11 cases), which emphasize certainty or impossibility. For instance, phrases like "definitely created a huge barrier" or "never judge" reflect firm stances. Other boosters, such as "indeed" (7 cases), "truly" (8 cases), and "of course" (6 cases), add affirmation and assurance, strengthening arguments. Limited boosters like "fully," "surely," "fact," and "totally" (2–5 cases each) selectively reinforce key points without dominating the text. Hedges were frequently used to indicate uncertainty or provide approximations. The word "About" was the most common hedge, accounting for 42.37% of all instances, reflecting a preference for cautious phrasal constructions. Other common hedges included "often" (19.69%), "sometimes" (17.53%), and "maybe" (13.43%), showing students' tendency to generalize or temper their claims. This distribution reveals a writing style balancing assertiveness with careful qualification.

Table 3. Linguistic Elements of Hedges in Students' Compositions

Category	Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Adjectives	Slightly	1	0.52%
	Somewhat	1	0.52%
Modal Verbs	Maybe	26	13.43%
Lexical Verbs	Barely	1	0.52%
Adverbs	About	82	42.37%
	Almost	14	7.26%
	Around	20	10.38%
	Frequently	3	1.56%
	Mainly	1	0.52%
	Mostly	3	1.56%
	Nearly	1	0.52%
	Occasionally	1	0.52%
	Often	38	19.69%
	Perhaps	1	0.52%
	Sometimes	34	17.53%
Nouns	None	0	0%

The Total frequency for Hedges is 191 with Total entries of 14 distinct hedging items.

The study analyzed the frequency and diversity of hedges and boosters in student compositions, revealing 281 booster instances across 16 distinct forms as presented in the above tables. The data showed that students used hedges more diversely than boosters, reflecting a writing style that balances caution with confidence. The frequent use of "always" suggests a consistent pattern of strong endorsement, particularly in personal contexts, while the selective use of other boosters helps emphasize key points without overwhelming the reader, making this approach effective for persuasive writing. By hedging, writers acknowledge complexity and avoid overly definitive claims, reducing the potential for discretization. This approach softens directives and maintains a respectful tone, essential in academic and scientific writing (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Conversely, the unhedged text emphasizes conviction, authority, and persuasiveness, projecting confidence and ensuring clarity. Unhedged language provides straightforward communication, aligning with Hinkel (2005) and Crompton (1997). This balance between hedged and unhedged text reflects strategic linguistic choices to align with purpose and audience.

The findings also reveal that adverbs dominate as the primary linguistic tools for hedging and boosting, accounting for over 60% of instances. Adverbs effectively soften or intensify statements, enabling writers to subtly adjust emphasis or caution. Modal verbs, such as maybe, surely, and, represent 19.01% of cases, commonly conveying probability, possibility, or certainty, and reflecting the writers' confidence and reservations. Adjectives and nouns are used less frequently for hedging and boosting, serving mainly specific descriptive or contextual purposes, while lexical verbs are absent from the dataset. This preference for adverbs and modal verbs indicates a strategic inclination toward nuanced expression, allowing students to balance precision and assertiveness. Boosters like

always, *definitely*, *actually*, and *indeed* play key roles in signalling certainty and authority in academic writing. Among these, "always" is particularly prominent, reflecting strong confidence, while terms like "definitely" and "indeed" emphasize claim reliability and persuasiveness. "Actually" clarifies and highlights key points, adding precision. These elements enhance rhetorical impact, aligning with audience expectations and strengthening scholarly positioning. The analysis supports prior studies, including Liu & Tseng (2021) and Jabbar, 2019), which emphasize the grammatical and functional role of hedges and boosters in academic contexts. These findings underscore the importance of strategic linguistic choices in balancing assertiveness and flexibility to meet academic communication norms.

Table 4. Linguistic Elements of Boosters in Students' Compositions

Category	Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Adjectives	Highly	2	0.79%
	Extremely	1	0.39%
	Fully	2	0.79%
	Greatly	1	0.39%
	Definitely	11	4.33%
	Completely	1	0.39%
	Clearly	2	0.79%
	Precisely	2	0.79%
Modal Verbs	Certainly	1	0.39%
	Likely	1	0.39%
	Necessarily	1	0.39%
Lexical Verbs	None	0	0%
Adverbs	Actually	3	1.18%
	Always	254	99.22%
	Basically	2	0.79%
	Because	2	0.79%
	Indeed	7	2.74%
	Of course	6	2.36%
	Primarily	1	0.39%
	Probably	1	0.39%
	Quite	2	0.79%
	Rarely	11	4.33%
Nouns	Fact	3	1.18%

Hedges allow writers to navigate academic conventions by tempering claims to reflect a lack of complete certainty. For instance, they "acknowledge the inherent limitations of research", fostering scholarly dialogue and inviting further investigation (Ningrum et al., 2024). Conversely, boosters strengthen persuasiveness, emphasizing significance and guiding readers through a cohesive narrative (Ojo, 2020). Their strategic use reflects the writer's competence in balancing objectivity with personal evaluation, a critical factor in academic credibility (Hyland, 1998). The investigation reveals that students' use of hedges and boosters reflects a deliberate balance between caution and assertion. Hedges, primarily adjectives and modal verbs dominate and contribute to a reflective tone, allowing authors to present ideas thoughtfully and encourage reader engagement without imposing agreement. Conversely, boosters are strategically placed in sections requiring stronger assertions, such as conclusions and recommendations, to reinforce confidence and authority.

3.2 Hedging and Boosting Sensitivity in Students' Competition

3.2.1 Hedging Sensitivity

The hedging sensitivity was naturally present in students' compositions. Hedges are linguistic devices used to express uncertainty, soften claims, or convey a lack of commitment to a statement. They are valuable tools for achieving

politeness, adding nuance, and maintaining the reader's attention. An analysis and classification of hedges sensitivity in students' compositions is presented below.

First, epistemic hedges convey the speaker's degree of certainty or confidence in their statements. They often express approximation, probability, or possibility. Examples include words like "maybe", "sort of", "kind of", and phrases like "could be". In the sentence: "We could almost travel without sort of limitations as well as meet and interact with people without restrictions", the hedge "could almost" suggests a hypothetical or tentative possibility, and "sort of" softens the assertion about limitations. The sentence: "She is shorter than me, maybe her height is around 150 cm", uses the hedge "maybe" to convey uncertainty about the exact height. In the sentence: "I'm currently busy doing my college assignments, and maybe she also has her busy schedule, so we rarely communicate", "maybe" indicates speculation about the other person's schedule.

Second, softening hedges are used to make claims more palatable or less confrontational. These hedges often employ qualifiers like "a bit", "somewhat", or "mostly". In the sentence: "English can be a bit boring sometimes, and despite that, they still have to deliver the lesson, making it look like an interesting one", "a bit" minimizes the degree of boredom, softening the critique. The sentence: "Our initial encounter in the library was somewhat awkward, as we were strangers navigating through the shelves of books", uses "somewhat" to temper the statement about the awkwardness of the encounter. Similarly, the sentence: "Mostly we have the same opinions and points of view; we spend a lot of time together", uses "mostly" to qualify the extent of shared opinions and viewpoints.

Third, frequency hedges indicate how often something occurs without making a definitive statement. Words like "sometimes", "occasionally", and "often" are common. In the sentence: "Occasionally he pays attention to me", "occasionally" suggests that the attention is sporadic but avoids outright certainty. In the sentence: "When we reach this point, we sometimes only then learn that mental health is important and we must not ignore it, or other areas of our lives may suffer", "sometimes" conveys that the realization about mental health is not always immediate.

Fourth, attitudinal hedges express the speaker's attitude or perspective, often through subjective or evaluative language. In the sentence: "The challenge of mental disorders is especially acute in the U.S., where an estimated one in five adults—about 44 million people—experience mental illness each year", "an estimated" signals uncertainty or approximation about the figure. Meanwhile, the sentence: "A cherished companion who has walked beside me through nearly a decade of shared experiences and countless memories", uses "nearly" to hedge the exact duration of the relationship, signalling approximation.

Fifth, relationship-specific hedges focus on personal relationships and subjective experiences, often employing modifiers to convey nuances. In the sentence: "We enjoyed a certain level of freedom we mostly took for granted", "a certain level" and "mostly" hedge the degree of freedom and the extent to which it was taken for granted. The sentence: "Lastly, she is a positive thinker woman who always cheers me up with positive energy when I feel upset and depressed", uses "always", which, while implying a strong assertion, can function as a hedge in some contexts when describing habitual actions. The above analysis shows that hedges serve various purposes depending on context. They can soften claims, express uncertainty, or highlight approximation, reflecting both the speaker's intentions and the communicative context. In formal writing, hedges like "an estimated" and "mostly" are appropriate for nuanced arguments, while in personal or reflective writing, hedges like "maybe" and "somewhat" add emotional depth and relatability. Mastery of hedging allows for more effective and considerate communication, balancing assertiveness with tact.

3.2.2 Boosting Sensitivity

Boosters are linguistic elements that express confidence, emphasize a point, or strengthen a claim. Unlike hedges, boosters convey certainty and conviction, making writing more assertive, persuasive, or emotionally charged. The following analysis classifies boosters found in the provided sentences based on their function and intensity.

First, confidence boosters express certainty or assurance, often using words like "surely", "definitely", "indeed", and "truly". These words reinforce statements and make them sound more authoritative. In the sentence: "Surely, mental health is as important as physical health and we must end the stigma because mental health affects everything," "Surely" emphasizes the certainty of the statement and underscores the importance of mental health. In the sentence: "The term 'ideal' in teaching English as a profession is truly profound and is something which can be defined beyond its registered definition in any printed source of knowledge", "Truly" adds depth and conviction to the statement about the significance of the term "ideal". Similarly, the sentence: "The effectiveness of an English teacher will truly be tested if the students can bring their knowledge into the community," uses "Truly" to stress the definitive nature of how an English teacher's effectiveness is evaluated.

Second, emotional boosters convey intensity in feelings or personal experiences, often employing words like "extremely," "most importantly", "undeniably", and "best". In the sentence: "Most importantly, I feel extremely fortunate to have someone as a best friend in my life". "Most importantly" highlights the priority of the sentiment, while "extremely" intensifies the expression of gratitude. The sentence: "Undeniably, mental health affects everything. It affects our nature and how we interact with the world and ourselves", asserts the incontestable importance of mental health through "Undeniably". Meanwhile, "Having a best friend is the best gift I have" uses "best" to reinforce the superlative value of having a best friend.

Third, emphasis boosters strengthen claims or highlight specific points, often with words like "definitely", "highly", "fully", and "of course". In the sentence: "The spoken word definitely can be even more powerful than the written word in the hands of the right speaker", "Definitely" reinforces the claim about the power of spoken words. The sentence: "Of course, the students, but on a wider scope, the effectiveness of an English teacher will truly be tested if the students can bring their knowledge into the community" uses "Of course" to establish an expectation, adding weight to the statement about students' roles. In the sentence "COVID-19 vaccination is primarily aimed at reducing COVID-19 hospital admissions and deaths among people who are most at risk," "Primarily" emphasizes the main goal of vaccination programs.

Fourth, frequency boosters highlight how often something occurs or the prevalence of a phenomenon, often using terms like "usually" or "often." In the sentence: "Boys usually can be friends with anyone so easily and fast," "Usually" emphasizes the general observation, making it sound typical. Similarly, the sentence "We usually play games and travel together" employs "Usually" to stress the regularity of these shared activities.

Fifth, strength boosters assert the importance, impact, or intensity of an idea or action, often to emphasize high stakes or significance. The sentence: "Indeed, the pandemic has highlighted the need to challenge our assumptions and understanding", uses "Indeed" to confirm and amplify the gravity of the statement. In the sentence: "It is often recognized, correctly, that suicide is highly linked to mental illness, particularly depression," "Highly" magnifies the strength of the association between suicide and mental illness. Lastly, the sentence: "An ideal English teacher flaunts mastery of grammar rules and syntax, withholds sufficient vocabulary, and is fully aware of how to use the proper pronunciation of words", uses "Fully" to stress the teacher's complete awareness and expertise.

Boosters play a critical role in enhancing writing by adding emphasis, confidence, and emotional weight. They can make arguments more persuasive and statements more impactful. However, overusing boosters can result in a tone that feels exaggerated or overly forceful. In academic or formal contexts, a balanced use of boosters is essential to maintain credibility while effectively conveying conviction. The analyzed sentences illustrate various contexts where boosters enhance communication. Confidence boosters make arguments sound definitive, emotional boosters add personal resonance, and strength boosters underscore the significance of key ideas. Writers should tailor their use of boosters to their audience and purpose, ensuring the tone aligns with the message's intent.

The findings highlight students' sensitivity in using hedges and boosters, revealing a balance between caution and assertiveness in their timed handwritten compositions. In terms of hedging, students frequently used expressions like about (42.37%), maybe (13.43%), and often (19.69%), particularly when addressing complex topics such as mental health. This suggests an awareness of subject complexity and a deliberate effort to avoid overgeneralization. The use of hedges like maybe and sometimes also reflects students' sensitivity to the need for cautious language when presenting uncertain ideas, especially in the constrained context of timed writing. By employing hedges, students soften their arguments and acknowledge the limitations of their knowledge, which is essential in academic writing. However, challenges arise in the form of a lack of time for precision, where students rely on hedges to indicate uncertainty without detailed explanations, and overuse of hedging, which may weaken arguments and reduce the persuasiveness of their writing.

Boosters, on the other hand, were used to convey confidence and assertiveness, with always dominating usage at 99.22%. This reflects students' tendency to emphasize certainty, especially for key points or conclusions. Other boosters, such as definitely (4.33%) and actually (1.18%), were strategically used to strengthen arguments and make statements more compelling. Boosters like always and definitely help highlight critical points and reinforce the persuasiveness of arguments, particularly when time is limited. However, overuse of boosters, such as the dominance of always, may lead to overly assertive claims that lack nuance or consideration of exceptions. This can undermine the complexity and balance required in academic writing.

4. Discussion

The findings reveals that students' use of hedging and boosting in timed-handwritten compositions is not only functional and contextually motivated but also indicative of their rhetorical awareness and developmental stage in academic writing. The dominance of adverbial boosters—particularly *always* (accounting for 42.22% of all boosters)—suggests a reliance on familiar, high-frequency lexical items to convey certainty and emotional conviction. This finding reflects a pragmatic adaptation: under time constraints, students often fall back on intuitive or emotionally salient vocabulary to reinforce their claims. However, the overuse of such items can lead to inflated assertions, potentially weakening the credibility of their arguments. This supports Ojo's (2020) observations about the risks of imbalance in modality use but highlights a unique tendency in timed compositions, where the pressure to produce coherent arguments within minutes may override more measured rhetorical choices.

Conversely, the study identified 218 hedge instances across a broader range of forms—e.g., *about* (37.61%), *often* (17.43%), and *maybe* (11.93%)—suggesting that students are more sensitive to expressing approximation, frequency, and uncertainty when discussing abstract or speculative topics, such as mental health and social interactions. This indicates a degree of rhetorical maturity, as these hedges enable students to avoid overgeneralization and acknowledge complexity, aligning with Hyland's (1998) and Hinkel's (2005) views on hedging as a marker of academic credibility. The varied hedging forms also show that students possess a functional understanding of how to soften claims across different grammatical structures, even in fast-paced writing tasks. However, the data also suggest limited awareness of more sophisticated or syntactically embedded hedges (e.g., clausal elements like "It appears that…"), which could enhance nuance but require more cognitive processing and linguistic command than students can readily access in a timed setting.

Moreover, the cultural analysis embedded in the results reveals that ASEAN EFL students, particularly those from Indonesia and Thailand, show a pronounced preference for boosters in affirming personal opinions or emotional judgments, likely influenced by socio-discursive norms that value assertiveness in expressing belief and solidarity. This tendency, however, becomes problematic in academic genres, where over-reliance on such boosters may signal a lack of awareness of disciplinary expectations for tentativeness and evidential reasoning. The infrequent use of modal verbs like *might*, *could*, or *would*—often seen in expert academic writing (Crompton, 1997; Fraser, 2010)—further underscores the need for explicit instruction to expand students' modal repertoires and to foster flexibility in tone management.

Definitively, this study's contribution lies in demonstrating how the stress of timed writing conditions affects the deployment of hedging and boosting strategies. Students appear to instinctively use hedges to manage uncertainty in content areas perceived as sensitive or complex and rely on boosters to compensate for lack of elaboration or to create rhetorical impact in conclusions. This dual tendency reveals both an intuitive grasp of the communicative functions of modality and an urgent pedagogical need: helping learners develop the metacognitive skill to select hedges and boosters strategically, not just habitually. Therefore, while the findings affirm prior theoretical and cultural insights, they also expose a nuanced picture of student writers in transition—navigating between instinctive expression and developing rhetorical control under pressure.

These linguistic choices demonstrate an intention to foster both reader alignment and independent interpretation, contributing to the text's overall academic rigour and effectiveness. The findings likely align with studies like Hyland (1998), Hinkel (2005), and Rahmawati & Duwila (2024), highlighting the importance of hedging and boosting in academic contexts. In timed handwritten compositions, students' choices reflect their internal habits, familiarity with the topic, and efforts to balance formality with confidence under time constraints. This analysis underscores the significance of these strategies in enhancing credibility, engagement, and authority in academic writing. Hedges, such as possibly and might, temper arguments by softening criticism, acknowledging limitations, and fostering scholarly dialogue (Hyland, 1998; Ningrum et al., 2024). In contrast, boosters like *clearly* and *definitely* enhance confidence, assertiveness, and persuasiveness, which are crucial for establishing authority and coherence in (Farrokhi & Emami, 2008; Ojo, 2020). Research highlights cultural and contextual nuances in their usage. For instance, ASEAN EFL learners exhibit a preference for boosters, potentially reflecting limited exposure to hedging conventions or a desire to assert confidence in non-native English contexts (Ningrum et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Nigerian and American editorial writers effectively balance hedges and boosters, employing modal verbs and adverbs in alignment with the genre's demands for combining doubt and certainty (Ojo, 2020). Hedging, as explored by Markkanen & Schroder (1997), mitigates claims to account for potential counterarguments, while boosting, as Hyland (1998) illustrates, emphasizes confidence and commitment to assertions. Fraser (2010) investigates the pragmatic competence behind hedging, and Crompton (1997) examines its theoretical complexities in academic texts.

Holmes (1990) explores gendered variations in using hedges and boosters, highlighting their role in managing illocutionary force. Salager-Meyer (1994) emphasizes their textual communicative function in medical discourse, while Farrokhi & Emami (2008) analyze native and non-native academic writing for their application in applied linguistics and engineering. Vázquez & Giner (2008) focus on epistemic modality markers as hedges in research articles, extending earlier findings by Chafe & Nichols (1986)   (1986) on evidential and epistemic coding. Liu and Jiang (2019) as cited in Ningrum et al. (2024) conducted corpus-based studies highlighting cultural and linguistic factors influencing their use in research articles. Viktorova (2023) provides insights into their communicative mitigation and enhancement roles in dissertation reviews. These findings underscore the dual function of hedging and boosting in negotiating knowledge, adhering to disciplinary conventions, and fostering cross-cultural understanding in academic and professional contexts. Expanding cross-cultural research on these rhetorical tools, especially across various genres and proficiency levels, could provide deeper insights into their impact on writing quality and audience perception (Sedaghat et al., 2015).

The findings of this study both support and extend previous research on hedging and boosting in academic writing. Consistent with Hyland's (1998, 2005) assertion that hedging and boosting serve as essential rhetorical strategies for negotiating stance and engaging readers, the results reveal that EFL students utilize these devices to varying degrees based on their level of writing proficiency and exposure to academic conventions. Hinkel (2005) emphasized the influence of linguistic and cultural backgrounds on modality use, which is reflected in this study's observation that Indonesian EFL learners tend to rely more on boosting than hedging, possibly due to cultural preferences for assertiveness in educational discourse. Moreover, the study supports Ojo's (2016) argument that instruction in pragmatic and rhetorical language use can enhance students' meta-discursive awareness; participants who received explicit guidance on hedging and boosting were more effective in modulating certainty in their timed essays. However, unlike Hyland's findings in L1 contexts where hedging is more nuanced and strategically deployed, this study reveals a tendency among EFL learners to overuse boosters and underuse hedges, indicating a gap in pragmatic competence and rhetorical sensitivity. This divergence suggests that while the learners are aware of the devices, their functional deployment remains limited, highlighting the need for more explicit instruction and scaffolder practice. Thus, the study reinforces and nuances existing theories by revealing both alignment with and deviation from prior findings, particularly in the EFL timed-writing context where time pressure and linguistic limitations may constrain meta-discursive choices.

Cultural and contextual differences impact the frequency and type of hedges and boosters employed. For example, ASEAN EFL learners tend to favour boosters over hedges, reflecting a preference for assertiveness in conveying ideas (Ningrum et al., 2024). Editorials, however, demand a nuanced balance between the two, as seen in Nigerian and American newspapers, where modal verbs and adverbs dominate both hedging and boosting categories (Ojo, 2020).

In real-life timed writing, the sensitivity to hedges and boosters reflects students' strategies to balance caution and confidence. Overcautious writers may hedge excessively, while those aiming for impact might overuse boosters. The ideal approach involves a balanced use of hedges to express uncertainty and boosters to assert confidence, aligning both with the evidence and expectations of the task. This balance enhances clarity, persuasiveness, and the overall quality of academic communication.

Time constraints significantly shaped students' use of hedging and boosting in their compositions. Faced with limited time, students tended to rely on readily accessible and emotionally charged boosters such as *always* and *definitely* to assert ideas quickly and forcefully. This tendency aligns with Ojo's (2020) observation that modality markers are often selected to maximize rhetorical impact in contexts demanding immediacy. However, in timed writing, this results in an over-reliance on assertive expressions, often at the expense of rhetorical nuance and evidential precision. Conversely, hedging expressions—such as *maybe*, *about*, and *sometimes*—were used with more lexical variety but tended to favour simpler forms. The avoidance of more cognitively demanding or syntactically complex hedges (e.g., "It appears that…", "It is possible that…") suggests that students prioritized fluency and surface-level approximation over deeper evaluative nuance. This reflects Hirst's (2001) and Salager-Meyer's (1994) insights into how cognitive load and discourse pressure influence linguistic simplification in academic writing.

Furthermore, Fraser (2010) emphasized that hedging requires pragmatic competence and deliberate metadiscursive control—abilities that are harder to access under time pressure. Hyland (1998) similarly argued that hedging and boosting are not simply lexical choices but represent strategic rhetorical negotiations that require awareness of audience, context, and genre. In this study, the compressed time frame constrained students' ability to engage in such rhetorical deliberation, leading to instinctive rather than intentional modality use. The findings also echo Hinkel's

(2005) point that learners from EFL backgrounds often exhibit stronger tendencies toward boosting to reinforce claims and compensate for linguistic insecurity, especially under performance pressure. Therefore, timed writing tasks—while useful for assessing fluency and argument structure—must be supported by pedagogical interventions that train students to maintain rhetorical balance and modality control even under constraint. Instruction should explicitly address how time pressure can distort modality use and offer practice in managing tone, confidence, and caution within limited time windows.

5. Conclusion

This study explored EFL students' use of hedging and boosting in timed handwritten compositions across three ASEAN countries. The findings revealed that students exhibit a functional sensitivity to these rhetorical strategies, using hedges to express uncertainty and avoid overgeneralization while employing boosters to assert confidence and emphasize key points. The variety of hedging expressions suggests a developing awareness of academic nuance, especially when dealing with complex or speculative topics. In contrast, the booster usage was concentrated on a limited range of familiar terms, signalling a reliance on emotionally charged or emphatic language. This pattern reflects the students' intuitive grasp of tone and stance, albeit constrained by linguistic proficiency and the demands of time-pressured writing.

The results underscore the need for explicit instruction in the strategic use of hedging and boosting, particularly in timed writing contexts. Students often default to familiar expressions due to time constraints, which may compromise rhetorical precision. Instructional efforts should thus focus on expanding students' modal repertoires and reinforcing the functional purposes of modality in academic writing—such as softening claims, expressing degrees of certainty, and enhancing argument strength. In addition, teachers should raise awareness of how sociocultural norms influence students' rhetorical preferences and help them adapt their writing style to diverse academic audiences. Portfolio-based and reflective writing approaches can be integrated to allow students more time to internalize and revise their use of modality features across drafts.

Future studies should examine the longitudinal development of hedging and boosting competence across educational levels, particularly as students gain greater exposure to academic English. Comparative studies across genres—such as argumentative essays, narratives, and research reports—can shed light on how genre conventions shape modality choices. Further, intervention-based research could evaluate the effectiveness of explicit instruction on rhetorical strategies in improving students' written performance and meta-discursive awareness. Finally, incorporating corpus-based or eye-tracking methodologies may provide deeper insights into students' real-time decision-making processes when using hedges and boosters under cognitive load.

Time constraints in handwritten tasks appear to influence these linguistic choices, compelling students to prioritize clarity and impact over nuance but hedging and boosting sensitivity were naturally present in students' compositions. Hedges facilitate thoughtful, reflective communication, especially in contexts that require careful consideration or sensitivity. Boosters, on the other hand, emphasize confidence, intensity, and conviction in a statement. They are effective in persuasive or assertive contexts, helping to underscore the importance of ideas or express strong feelings. A balanced approach to hedges and boosters ensures that communication sensitively is precise, credible, and engaging.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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