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A REVIEW OF THE USE OF INTERACTIONAL METADISOURSE MARKERS OF HEDGES AND BOOSTERS IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract:

In academic writing, managing authorial stance is crucial in developing authority and engaging readers. However, undergraduates as novice writers are not aware that metadiscourse markers may help them to manage stance in writing. As a result, they tend to misuse these linguistic features and generate imprecise assertive claims which affect the tone and precision. This paper examines the use of interactional metadiscourse markers of hedges and boosters in academic writing by exploring the gaps in the literature, challenges, and future recommendations. Hedges, such as *might*, *possible*, and boosters, such as *definitely*, *in fact*, are crucial rhetorical tools for expressing degrees of certainty. Although Hyland's Interpersonal Model (2005) has provided insights into metadiscourse use across genres, the use of metadiscourse in academic writing class instruction remains limited. Hence, this narrative review aims to examine the use of hedges and boosters in academic writing, focusing on their distribution and rhetorical functions, and explores their pedagogical implications for academic writing instruction, particularly in tertiary education contexts. The review presents findings on discourse analysis to highlight how these features contribute to stance-taking, argumentation, and reader engagement. Finally, this review highlights the need to integrate explicit instruction on hedges and boosters in writing pedagogy to maintain rhetorical competence and academic literacy among student writers.

Keywords:

Academic Writing, Boosters, Hedges, Interactive, Interactional, Metadiscourse Markers.

Introduction

This paper is highly significant in drawing attention among undergraduate communities in academic writing using interactional metadiscourse markers, focusing on the use of hedges and boosters. It is also viewed as critical nowadays that university students and academics are to be proficient and skilful when reporting and writing academic papers, especially when there is a need to distinguish between opinions and facts (Nisa, Ramadhan & Thahar, 2023).

In academic writing, the ability to convey authorial stance plays an essential role in shaping argumentation and engaging academic readers (Naimmah Hamdan & Ahmad, 2023). Among the linguistic strategies available to writers, interactional metadiscourse markers, particularly using hedges and boosters, serve as essential tools for managing commitment and demonstrating politeness and constructing a stance including whether to be more assertive or less assertive (Radovanović, 2024). For instance, hedges such as *might*, *possibly*, and *perhaps* allow authors to express caution or uncertainty, whereas boosters like *definitely*, *in fact*, and *possible* reinforce certainty and assertiveness (Nariansyah, 2020). Furthermore, the appropriate use of these rhetorical features is crucial, especially in academic writing contexts, such as Final-Year Project (FYP) reports, theses, and journal articles.

However, studies have found that there were several challenges among the undergraduate students to perform well in academic writing. They were mainly because of less exposure to academic writing, limited guidance in completing the writing task, lack of chances for writing exercises in class and interference of the first language since they are not the native speaker (Eng & Anne, 2024). Besides, another study by Nisa, Ramadhan and Thahar (2023), added that students were lacking of writing skills, often struggle with writing academic papers especially to generate ideas for the final project or scientific papers and having poor or inadequate structure of academic writing.

Thus, this paper highlights the continuous engagement with undergraduate academic writing, which has revealed a recurring pattern of either underuse or misuse of these linguistic features, indicating a pedagogical gap in rhetorical awareness and metadiscourse competence. In Malaysia, where English functions as both a medium of instruction and a symbol of academic achievement, a good command and understanding of these interactional resources is mainly crucial (Yea, Othman & Wei, 2020). Although many studies on the use of metadiscourse markers have been explored by global research, however analysis on the use of interactional metadiscourse and pedagogical perspectives in academic writing remains underdeveloped in the local context.

Thus, this narrative review aims to examine the use of hedges and boosters in academic writing, focusing on the distribution, functions, and exploring the pedagogical implications of these markers for academic writing in undergraduate contexts.

By consolidating existing findings and highlighting pedagogical insights, this review seeks to enlighten future research and syllabus design, particularly within Malaysian higher education institutions. Considering the growing emphasis on research writing competence, particularly in submitting reports or theses for university graduation as well as research publication quality among academics in Malaysia, understanding how stance and statement are linguistically negotiated through hedges and boosters is demanding and necessary.

Literature Review

Metadiscourse Markers

Metadiscourse incorporates an extensive use of language markers that are used to express how authors establish their discourse and foster relations with their readers. In language and applied linguistics, metadiscourse is “the numerous linguistic signs employed to guide or direct a reader through a text so both the text and the writer’s stance is understood” (Hyland, 2005: 18; Livingstone, 2019). With regards to the use of language in written form, “Metadiscourse is the cover term for the self-reflexive expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to deliver a standpoint and engage with readers and members of a particular community” (Hyland, 2005: 37; Livingstone, 2019). This given definition is vital as it stresses the three-way relationship or association among the writer, the readership, and the interactive and interactional markers used to communicate information (Gai & Wang, 2022; Livingstone, 2019). Thus, metadiscourse plays an essential role in academic writing instruction to help both native and non-native writers in the effective transmission of information (Hyland, 2005; Jahangir & Zahra, 2025).

Metadiscourse markers in writing are divided into two categories which are interactive and interactional (Ajaz, Rubab & Ajaz, 2023; Hyland, 2005). The interactive markers: transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials and code glosses, are used to assist the readers to go through the written text while the interactional markers: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers, self-mentions, are used to get readers involved in the text. These linguistic markers of interactive and interactional “serve a valuable purpose in the writing process” (Ajaz et al., 2023). Table 1 displays Hyland’s (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse of interactive and interactional markers, with the functions and examples for each category.

Table 1: Hyland’s (2005) Interpersonal Model of Metadiscourse

Category	Function	Example
Interactive resources	Help to guide the reader through the text	
Transitions	Express relations between main clauses	In addition, but, thus, and
Frame markers	Refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages	finally, to conclude, my purpose is
Endophoric markers	Refer to information in other parts of the text	Noted above, see Fig, in section 2
Evidentials	Refer to information from other texts	According to X, Z states
Code glosses	Elaborate propositional meanings	Namely, e.g., such as, in other words
Interactional resources	Involve the reader in the text	
Hedges	Withhold commitment and open dialogue	Might, perhaps, possible, about
Boosters	Emphasize certainty and close dialogue	in fact, definitely, it is clear that
Attitude markers	Express writer’s attitude to proposition	Unfortunately, I agree, surprisingly

Engagement markers	Explicitly build relationship with reader	Consider, note, you can see that
Self-mentions	Explicit reference to author (s)	I, we, my, me, our

Hedges and Boosters in Academic Writing

One of the essential skills for effective communication among writers is to be competent in expressing doubt and certainty in academic writing. In relation to this, hedges and boosters are the linguistic terms that concerned with how speakers or writers communicate their doubts, certainties, and predictions (Akman & Karahan, 2023). The expression of doubt and certainty cannot be separated in academic writing since the character between interactive and interactional in the writing process is dynamic (Livingstone, 2019). Hence, it is critical for the writers to be proficient in these writing strategies. This helps increase acceptance by the scholarly community when they balance conviction with caution in the claims or statements that they make in their research writing (Varsanis & Tsangalidis, 2020).

Furthermore, academic writers should be able to implement acceptable language to express their ideas in a certain area by considering the pragmatic, cognitive, and rhetorical value to obtain the inclusive meaning of the written discourse (Marta, 2018; Unger, 2024). Whether they present statements supported by reliable knowledge to reflect certainty, or they produce information with a certain degree of apprehension to reflect uncertainty, these writing strategies of expressing doubt and certainty are called hedges and boosters (Ardhianti, Susilo, Nurjamin, and Prawoto, 2023; Livingstone, 2019).

Previous literature on academic writing offers practical evidence of the use of hedges and boosters in academic writing (Farrokhi and Emami, 2008; Herminingsih & Isro'iyah, 2023; Hryniuk, 2018; Serholt, 2012; Takimoto, 2015; Taymaz, 2021). These writing strategies are expected in the writing process, as it is the academic writers accountability to ensure they are incorporated. The use of both hedges and boosters is required in order to produce a convincing argument in academic writing.

Hedging and boosting devices play a vital role in academic writing (Demir, 2018; Hyland, 1994; Jabbar, 2019; Radojčić, S., & Novakov, 2022). These linguistic devices address the presence or absence of the author's confidence in the truth of propositional information (Hyland, 2000). Ardhianti et al. (2023) asserted that hedges and boosters play a significant part in academic writing, allowing the writers to adjust their level of certainty and suit their language as expected by scholarly communication. Thus, there is a dire need for writers to utilise hedges and boosters in their writing in all academic disciplines.

Core Themes/Thematic Discussions

The selected studies were thematically synthesised into three interrelated strands to structure the review: (1) Distribution of Hedges and Boosters in Academic Writing, (2) Functions of Hedges and Boosters in Academic Writing, and (3) Pedagogical Implications for Undergraduate Academic Writing. The core themes mentioned are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis: Narrative Review on Hedges and Boosters

Core Themes	Key Concepts	Related Studies	Summary of Contributions	Gaps/Critical Observations	Relevance to Review
Distribution of Hedges and Boosters	Differences in terms of discipline, genre and culture; Differences between postgraduates and undergraduates	Hyland and Tse (2004); Mifdal and Lewis (2023); Güçlü (2024); Farrokhi and Emami (2008); Taymaz (2021); Vassileva (2001)	Showed how hedges/boosters differ across soft/hard sciences and between cultural norms in English, Bulgarian, Turkish academic writing	Limited research on undergraduates, especially Malaysian FYP reports	Highlights underexplored context; supports need for pedagogical intervention at undergraduate level
Functions of Hedges and Boosters	Stance-taking; rhetorical positioning; persuasive effect	Escalona (2025); Wang and Jiang (2018); Hyland (2005); Ardhiyanti, Susilo, Nurjain and Prawoto (2023); Wang and Zeng (2021); Salager-Meyer (1994); Lo and Lim (2021); Vázquez Orta and Giner (2009); Caudill (2018); Merlinda, Hartono and Masduki (2025)	Defined strategic use of markers in managing certainty; connected stance with persuasion and credibility	Students misuse or neglect markers; tend to avoid hedging or misuse boosting	Establishes rhetorical function as essential yet often misunderstood in student writing
Pedagogical Implications	ESL learner challenges; classroom intervention; explicit instruction	Hajimia (2020); Tan and Dumanig (2014); Salamah and Harun (2020); Petchkij (2019); Escalona	Showed ESL students' struggles and positive effects of direct instruction in SE Asian contexts	Academic writing instruction lacks focus on metadiscourse; overemphasis on grammar	Supports integration of metadiscourse instruction into English Academic Purpose

(2024);
Mukundan,
Mahvelati, Din
and
Nimehchisale
m (2013)

curriculum
to improve
academic
voice

Distribution of Hedges and Boosters in Academic Writing

In academic writing, the distribution of hedges and boosters is generally formed by discipline, genre, and writers' linguistic backgrounds. Hyland and Tse (2004) discovered that soft sciences tend to use more hedges to express caution and directness, whereas hard sciences tend to use more boosters to demonstrate certainty. Mifdal and Lewis (2023) supported this pattern in Moroccan Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) scientific research articles, examining the students' use of hedges and boosters in semantic and pragmatic meanings with regard to the established linguistic conventions. Farrokhi and Emami (2008) asserted that the distribution of hedges and boosters in Applied Linguistics articles is higher than Electrical Engineering articles and there are significant differences between native and non-native writers in the use of hedges and boosters. Taymaz (2021) claimed that the frequency of using boosters was higher among Turkish EFL students in PhD dissertations than in Master of Arts (MA) theses, whereas more hedges were used in MA theses than in PhD dissertations.

Cross-cultural studies on hedges and boosters also disclose disparity. Vassileva (2001) stated that academic texts in English contain more hedges than those in Bulgarian, which reflects the differences in politeness strategies and reader orientation. Dontcheva-Navratilova (2016) confirmed that cross-cultural studies in interpersonal metadiscourse is a critical aspect for academic persuasion where different degrees of commitment in their assertions were identified among the Anglophone and Czech writers. Likewise, Güçlü (2024) discovered that Turkish Master theses in social sciences and humanities balanced both linguistic features, which confidently uncertain language use, with hedging embedded in native grammatical structures more often.

Though many studies appeared to focus on the postgraduate level of writing, the distribution of hedges and boosters in undergraduate writing, especially in Malaysian theses or FYP reports, remains underexplored. This gap is essential for understanding students' awareness of language-specific lexicogrammatical realizations and supporting pedagogy with actual writing needs.

Functions of Hedges and Boosters in Academic Writing

Hedges and boosters are the key rhetorical devices for expressing stance and managing authorial presence in academic texts (Escalona, 2024; Wang & Jiang, 2018). Hedges such as *might*, *possible*, *perhaps*, signal tentativeness and openness to alternative interpretations, while boosters such as *definitely*, *in fact*, *it is clear that* assert certainty and strengthen claims. Hyland (2005) stated that these markers are essential tools for negotiating authority, politeness, and alignment with disciplinary expectations.

The functions of hedges and boosters are viewed as strategic to assist academic writers to balance the author's belief, reflected in propositions, at the appropriate level of certainty or the appropriate level of tentativeness to express uncertainty (Ardhianti et al., 2023). A study by

Wang and Zeng (2021) noted that Chinese PhD students inclined to overuse hedging with self-mentions (we suggest). At the same time, they underused boosting, which weakened their rhetorical authority in comparison to journal article writers from four disciplines in hard applied and hard pure science. Similarly, hedging devices help academic writers maintain objectivity, especially when addressing interpretive claims (Laghari, 2022; Salager-Meyer, 1994). On the other hand, boosting devices serve the key aspect of rhetorical persuasion in academic writing (Lo & Lim, 2021; Vázquez Orta & Giner, 2009).

Despite their significance, these functions are often misunderstood or inconsistently applied by student writers that can lead to improper utilization in their writing (Caudill, 2018; Merlinda, Hartono & Masduki, 2025). In other words, many students may avoid hedging, leading to overgeneralised statements or failing to use boosting to support claims, when necessary, which weakens the strength of their argument.

Pedagogical Implications for Undergraduate Academic Writing

Regardless of the rhetorical significance of hedges and boosters, many undergraduate students still struggle to implement these markers effectively. A study conducted by Hajimia (2020) revealed that English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Malaysia lack competencies in writing, as it is one of the daunting skills for ESL students to become proficient. Malaysian ESL learners are generally less proficient, as they often struggle to accomplish the written tasks in satisfactory ways (Hajimia, 2020; Mukundan et al., 2013). This is possibly due to writing being a complex, challenging, and complicated process that embraces multiple skills (Ardiasih, Emzir & Rasyid, 2018; Callinan, van der Zee & Wilson, 2018; Hajimia, 2020; Yunus & Chien, 2016; Zaki & Md Yunus, 2015). Studies by Tan and Dumanig (2014) and Salamah and Harun (2020) highlighted frequent misuse in Malaysian student writing, in terms of a lack of use of hedges and overusing of boosters. This reflects a wider gap in rhetorical awareness, possibly since they lack explicit instructions to apply a stance in academic texts.

The application of classroom intervention may support the effectiveness of educating the undergraduates on the use of hedges and boosters markers. A study by Petchkij (2019) mentioned that direct instruction significantly improved students' ability to express appropriate levels of certainty and engagement among Thailand English as a Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduates. A study by Escalona (2024) supported that the integration of rhetorical strategies of hedges and boosters into classroom instruction is vital for developing language skills among Philippine university students that can be useful in various academic contexts. However, in many Malaysian undergraduate contexts, academic writing instruction tends to overlook the linguistic tools that strengthen academic writing and focuses more on grammar and sentence structure in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (Bhowmik, 2020; Mohd Basari, 2018). As a result, students would produce grammatically correct texts yet lack precision in voice, tone and stance.

Thus, the related studies discussed above could be a basis for this study to explore on the use of hedges and boosters in academic writing and it is critical to integrate awareness of language devices into EAP and academic writing syllabi. Correspondingly, explicit teaching of hedges and boosters can enhance students' skills to produce a more reliable, authorial tone and voice, particularly when writing for undergraduates' FYP reports.

Methodology

To critically explore the role of interactional metadiscourse markers of hedges and boosters in academic writing, a systematic search of thirty-one peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2024 were analysed for the narrative review. This review paper thematically grouped three important elements: distribution of hedges and boosters, functions of hedges and boosters and pedagogical implications. Relevant literature was recognised using various academic databases, including Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The search terms used included combinations such as: “hedges” AND “boosters” AND “academic writing,” “interactional metadiscourse” AND “student writing,” and “EAP instruction” AND “stance markers.” The initial yielded a total of 194 articles, which were screened based on their relevance to the research objectives. Reading the article's abstract, introduction, and conclusion were involved in the screening process to meet the inclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria for this study were included if they (1) investigated hedges or boosters in academic writing, (2) employed a recognised metadiscourse framework (primarily Hyland's), and (3) offered empirical or pedagogical insights. Meanwhile, non-English sources, studies unrelated to written academic discourse, or those lacking empirical evidence were excluded. After screening, thirty-one articles were selected for further review. These articles were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, which comprised of identifying patterns and themes in the data. The data analysed covered the articles' introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion sections. The narrative review methodology used in this study is demonstrated by Figure 1 below.

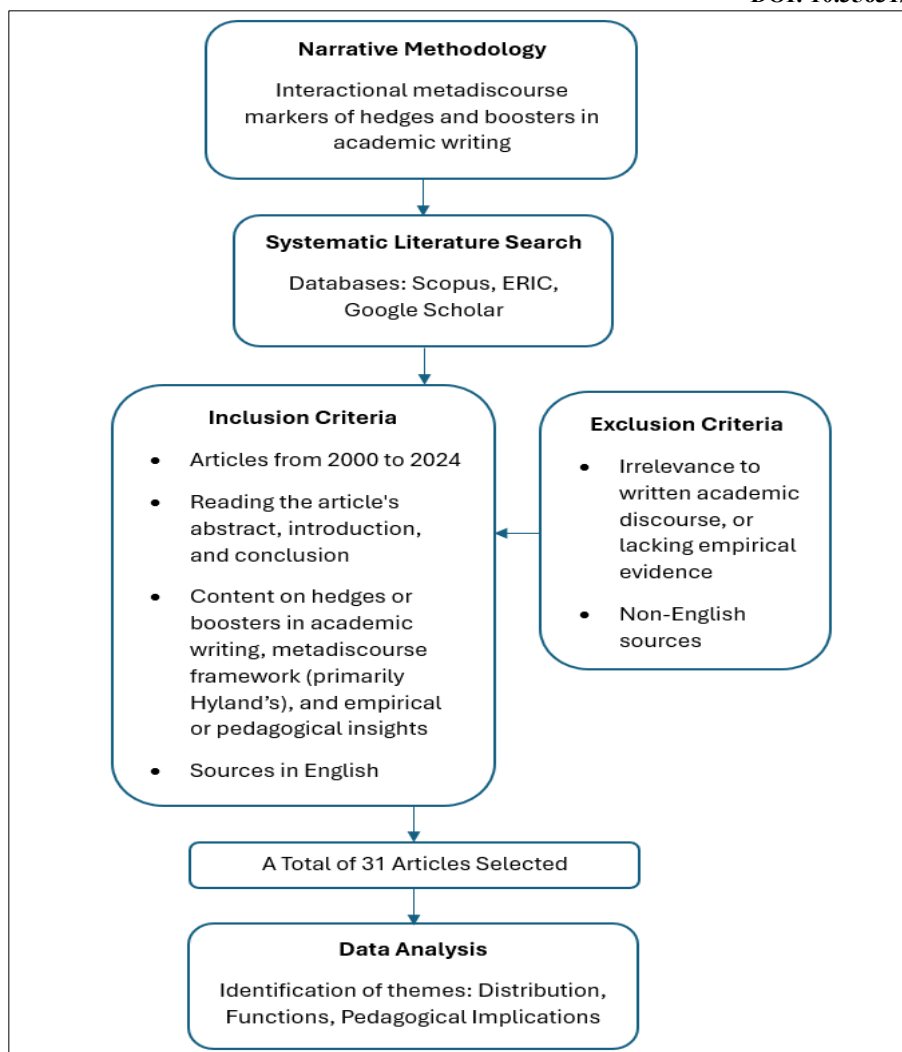


Figure 1: Flowchart of Narrative Review Process

Findings

This review highlights the significance of using hedges and boosters as key components of academic writing, particularly for undergraduate students developing their academic discourse in multilingual education contexts. The findings suggest that writing instruction should extend beyond grammar and cohesion, focusing on the explicit teaching of how to manage stance through the use of interactional metadiscourse. Simultaneously, lecturers and supervisors can benefit from rhetorical awareness activities that help students make appropriate language choices according to their discipline, genre, and writing purpose.

From a research perspective, this study opens up space to explore undergraduate student writing in Southeast Asia, especially in under-researched genres such as FYP reports. The implementation of class intervention research is also needed to assess the effectiveness of the instructions of linguistic markers in improving undergraduates' rhetorical competence.

At the policy and curriculum levels, integrating language instruction into academic literacy frameworks can help undergraduates develop more persuasive and contextually appropriate writing styles. This study provides benefits to students, educators, and curriculum planners by offering guidance to support the development of writing skills that are more robust, persuasive,

and penetrating to academic audiences. The main findings of this study are displayed in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Main Findings of Using Hedges and Boosters in Academic Writing

Domain	Key Findings / Insights	Implications / Recommendations	Target Audience
Writing Instruction	Hedges and boosters are crucial for academic stance, especially for undergraduates in multilingual contexts.	Go beyond grammar: teach how to express stance using interactional metadiscourse.	Undergraduate students
Teaching Practice	Lecturers/supervisors can guide students in making effective rhetorical choices suited to discipline and genre.	Incorporate rhetorical awareness activities in writing classes or supervision.	Educators, writing instructors
Research	Limited studies focus on hedges/boosters in Southeast Asian undergraduate writing, especially in FYP reports.	Conduct corpus-based or classroom-intervention studies to explore actual student writing and assess the effect of explicit instruction.	Academic researchers
Curriculum & Policy	Language support in academic writing is often focused on grammar, not stance or persuasion.	Embed metadiscourse instruction (like hedges and boosters) into EAP and academic literacy frameworks.	Curriculum developers, policymakers
Overall Contribution	Hedges and boosters support academic voice and rhetorical strength. Their strategic use can enhance clarity, credibility, and engagement in student writing.	Encourage institutions to recognise the rhetorical dimension of academic writing and provide targeted support through curriculum reforms.	Students, educators, institutions

Conclusion

In conclusion, this narrative study has examined the role of hedges and boosters as interactional metadiscourse markers in academic writing, focusing on their distribution, rhetorical function, and pedagogical implications. The literature review illustrates the use of these markers is not uniform. Their frequency and function depend on the discipline, genre, and linguistic background of the writer. For undergraduate students, especially those in ESL, the use of hedges and boosters is often inconsistent, either overused, underused, or inaccurate due to a lack of rhetorical awareness.

Although many previous studies have focused on published academic texts and postgraduate writing, minimal attention has been paid to how these markers are used in undergraduate students' writing, mainly in genres such as FYP reports. This gap highlights the need for more in-depth empirical research and the implementation of effective instructional interventions.

By integrating the explicit instruction of metadiscourse into academic writing syllabi, lecturers can help undergraduates develop a more persuasive academic expression that is appropriate to the various disciplinary contexts. Language awareness of the role of hedges and boosters improves the quality of writing and allows undergraduates to communicate more effectively in academic discourse across disciplines.

Therefore, this paper emphasizes the importance of using hedges and boosters in shaping undergraduates' style of writing academic papers, especially in the context of multilingual education in Malaysia. The objectives of the study to examine the distribution, function, and pedagogical implications of these metadiscourse features are relevant and achievable, given that undergraduate students writing particularly in genres such as Final Year Project (FYP) reports is still underexplored. Through a synthesis of theory and empirical research, this review contributes to academic discourse by identifying rhetorical awareness gaps and proposing for explicit teaching of metadiscourse features.

The findings suggest that writing teaching should not only focus on grammar but also to include stance-making strategies through genre-based pedagogical approaches and training for lecturers. For curriculum planners and educators, the integration of metadiscourse instruction into EAP and academic literacy courses can strengthen students' ability to produce more persuasive and contextually appropriate texts.

Future studies are recommended to explore classroom intervention approaches and corpus analyses to better understand how these rhetorical elements are used in undergraduates' writing and the effectiveness of explicit instruction on their academic writing performance.

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