



## Algerian EFL Supervisors' Attitudes towards Hedging in Master's Dissertations

توجهات المشرفين الجزائريين تجاه التحوط اللغوي في رسائل الماجستير الخاصة  
باللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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### ملخص

يعدّ التحوُّط اللُّغوي ميزة بارزة في الكتابة الأكاديمية، حيث يُمكن من التعبير عن الادعاءات العلمية بحذر ودقّة واحترام ومراعاة للقارئ. وتهدف دراستنا هذه إلى الكشف عن تصوّرات المشرفين حول استخدام التحوُّط اللغوي في رسائل الماجستير لمتعلّمي اللُّغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وعليه، قمنا بدراسة استكشافية بتصميم يجمع المنهجين الكمي والكيفي أجريت على أربعة وأربعين مشرفا جزائريا والذين شاركونا تصوراتهم حول أهمية التحوُّط اللُّغوي في رسائل الماجستير واستخدام طلبتهم فعليا لهذا الأسلوب اللغوي وكذلك مساعدتهم الإشرافية لهم في استعماله. وقد أظهر التحليل الكمي والكيفي لبيانات الاستبيان المعتمد إجماعا كبيرا حول أهمية التحوُّط اللُّغوي في الحفاظ على الدقّة والتعقيد العلمي والإقرار بما يعتري الدراسة من قصور والحماية من النقد وكذلك حفظ ماء وجه القارئ. ومع ذلك، أبدى المشرفون إماما جزئيا بالمفهوم، في حين أظهرت الدراسة عدم استعمال الطلبة لهذا الأسلوب اللغوي إلا استعمالا نادرا أو غير دقيق. كما لم تكن ملاحظات المشرفين لطلبهم كافية أيضا.

الكلمات الدالة: التحوُّط اللغوي؛ دراسة استكشافية؛ الكتابة الأكاديمية؛ اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ رسائل الماجستير؛ الأساتذة المشرفون.

### Abstract

Hedging is a prominent aspect of academic writing that enables expressing claims with caution, precision, deference, and consideration of the reader. This study aims to unveil supervisors' perceptions of the use of hedging in EFL Master's dissertations. To this end, an exploratory study involving a mixed-methods design

was undertaken with forty-four Algerian supervisors who shared their perspectives regarding the importance of hedging in dissertations, the students' actual application of hedging, and their supervisory hedging assistance. The quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data emerging from the questionnaire administered revealed a major agreement on the significance of hedges in maintaining precision and complexity, acknowledging study weaknesses, protecting oneself from criticism, and saving the reader's face. Nonetheless, supervisors showed only partial familiarity with the concept, and the students' realisation was reported to be infrequent and flawed. In turn, the supervisors' hedging feedback did not seem sufficient either.

**Keywords:** Hedging; Exploratory Study; Academic Writing; EFL; Dissertations; Supervisors.

## Introduction

Producing an academic text requires mastery of a number of skills strongly interwoven in the same discourse. Given the nature of academic writing, there arises the urge to go beyond the discourse itself, to the so-called metadiscourse, either to guide the readers through the text or involve them in the text. Through these language aspects, academic writing is no longer objective and impersonal; instead, it becomes a context where interaction between writers and readers takes place (Myers, 1989; Hyland, 1994). Amongst the tools that contribute to this writer-reader relationship is the use of hedging. The latter is a strategy used by writers to demonstrate their cautiousness, confess their doubts, indicate precision, and open dialogue.

Despite the significance of hedging in academic writing, there is limited research on its use in English Master's dissertations in the Algerian context. Hence, the study aims to gain insights into supervisors' views on hedge use in English Master 's dissertations. To address the aforementioned research gap, the following main question is posed:

What are Algerian supervisors' attitudes towards the use of hedging in Master's dissertations?

Accordingly, the following sub-questions are formulated:

- How do supervisors perceive hedging in dissertation writing?
- How do EFL students use hedging in their Master's dissertations?
- To what extent do supervisors provide guidance on hedging in the supervision process?

Addressing these concerns is significant as it offers a foundational understanding of how hedging is currently perceived and practised in Algerian higher education. It further provides supervisors with valuable

information for diagnosing their students' hedging strengths and weaknesses and for reflecting on their own supervisory practices, thereby contributing to the production of dissertations that satisfy academic requirements.

## **1. Theoretical Background**

Language is frequently imbued with cautious expressions, aptly termed hedges, and a thorough investigation of their use first requires examining the definition of hedging, its types, and the body of research conducted on the phenomenon.

### **1.1 Hedging defined**

Hedging existed prior to the 1970s, yet it was not until 1973 that Lakoff (1973) coined the term to describe words or phrases "whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy" (p. 471). While Lakoff (1973) associated them with vagueness, later scholars have offered broader views. Hedging has ever since been conceived as encompassing rhetorical devices used to show politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Myers, 1989), soften claims (Salager-Meyer, 1994), express caution and precision (Hyland, 1996), open dialogue and engage the reader in the discussion (Hyland, 1996), or even conceal a knowledge deficit (Coates, 1987).

In essence, a definition of hedging remains incomplete without looking at its various functions and types.

### **1.2 Hedging types**

Scholars' attempts to investigate hedging functions led to the emergence of numerous classifications. Among these are the taxonomies proposed by Prince et al. (1982), Salager-Meyer (1994), Hyland (1996), and Martín-Martín (2008). Although these frameworks have provided valuable bases for categorising hedging, each has also been subject to criticism. The first three taxonomies disregarded the role of hedging in interacting with the reader, and Prince et al.'s (1982) model was further criticised for being overly theoretical and overlapping. Salager-Meyer's (1994) classification as well appeared to alienate the protection-from-criticism aspect, and Martín-Martín's (2008) model seemed to focus more on the linguistic forms of hedging rather than the functions. Though Hyland's (1996) framework also contains some overlap between categories, it appears to encompass all the functional aspects relevant to this study, from precision and protection from criticism to reader involvement. It will be used to inform the first and second sub-research questions by first delineating supervisors' attitudes towards the significance of the various hedging types in a dissertation (as specified in the taxonomy), and second, by

quantifying the frequencies of students' use of these types in their dissertations, which in turn offer an indication of students' rhetorical intentions.

Hyland's (1996) model is primarily associated with hedging in academic writing and comprises four types of hedges. Hyland (1996) called reader-oriented hedges all words which show politeness and consideration of reader judgments (e.g., "it is our view that") while he referred to those which showcase accuracy and precision as attribute hedges (e.g., "around") and reliability hedges (e.g., "the possibility"); these two either present exact information or acknowledge the writer's level of confidence in what they say, respectively. Writer-oriented hedges, however, refer to words used by the writer to avoid taking responsibility for claims (as in: "the results suggest").

After describing the model to be used, attention now shifts to key pertinent research.

### **1.3 Research insights on hedging in academic writing**

There exists an abundance of research on hedging in academic writing, mostly devoted to its use in research articles (Salager-Meyer, 1994; Myers, 1989; Hyland, 1996), underexploring its investigation in Master 's dissertations and completely side-lining supervisors' attitudes towards it. Of the very few studies on the issue, Atmaka's (2016) analysis of PhD theses and M.A. dissertations discovered that hedges in doctoral theses were nearly twice as frequent as those in Master's dissertations, and that modals and passivisation were the most dominant hedges. In addition, Shafkat et al. (2021) scrutinised the discussion sections of PhD theses and noticed the supremacy of native English theses as regards hedge frequencies, whereas the hedging categories applied were quite similar. Furthermore, Musa (2014) and Yasmin et al. (2020) examined the issue solely in Master's dissertations. Musa's (2014) investigation concluded that Chemistry students employed hedges for precision and modesty, and their English counterparts used them to avoid criticism, whereas Yasmin et al.'s (2020) findings suggested that social sciences dissertations incorporated a more varied use of cautious expressions than their hard sciences counterparts.

This study, thus, seeks to contribute to this body of knowledge by adopting the methodology to be described in the section that follows.



## 2. Methodology

This investigation is an exploratory case study, which looks into Algerian supervisors' attitudes towards the use of hedging in Master's dissertations of English. The mixed-methods approach was adopted because the aim goes beyond identifying supervisors' attitudes in measurable terms to uncovering several underlying reasons and nuances. To elicit the data, an online questionnaire was administered to a number of forty-four supervisors selected through convenience cluster sampling, which was resorted to due to the difficulty of accessing and randomly selecting informants from all Algerian universities. As a result, a large number of supervisors accessible to the researcher were sent the questionnaire, but only the ones who agreed to take part were involved.

### 2.1 Research tool description

The questionnaire comprised two open-ended and thirteen closed-ended questions, which were classified under two sections. The first section included five closed-ended items which gathered personal information on supervisors' affiliation (Q1), specialism (Q2), and years of experience at university (Q3), years teaching academic writing (Q4) and supervising Master's dissertations (Q5). The second section encompassed ten questions, two of which were open-ended (Q8 + Q13). The former revolved around hedging in dissertation writing. It inquired about supervisors' hedging familiarity (Q6), their views on the importance of hedging in general (Q7 + Q8), and the significance of its different types (Q9) according to Hyland's (1996) model. The following questions tackled the students' realisation of hedging in their dissertations, starting with an estimation of their hedging occurrence (Q10), hedge type frequencies (Q11), challenges (Q12 + Q13) and errors (Q14). Then, the last question (Q15) investigated the kind and the intensity of supervisory hedging guidance.

### 2.2 Participants

The sample comprised 44 supervisors of Master's dissertations of English belonging to 24 Algerian universities, who have varying English specialisms (Didactics and AL: 56%, Literature and Civilization: 23%, TEFL, Didactics of Languages, DA and Literary Stylistics, ESP, American Studies, Cultural Studies and Sociology, General and Comparative Literature, AL and New Technologies, Translation: 2.3 % each). Their experience in tertiary education ranged from one to 15 years, while most of them had limited



expertise in academic writing instruction, and their supervisory experience fluctuated between one and 10 years.

### 2.3. Data analysis procedure

The quantitative data gathered were analysed using mean scores and percentages. Making meaning of Likert scale data required adapting value ranges suggested by Linder and Linder (2024) (see Table 1), which enabled associating numerical mean scores with their qualitative interpretations. For instance, a value falling between 1.00 and 1.50 is denoted “unimportant” on a question about hedging importance. As for the remaining closed-ended questions, only percentages were calculated. Regarding the analysis of qualitative data, a qualitative approach of coding and thematic analysis was adopted, along with the quantitative calculation of percentages, to organise and streamline the analysis.

**Table 1: Scales and Mean Values**

Scales A	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Mean values	4.51-5	3.51-4.50	2.51-3.50	1.51-2.50	1-1.50
Scales B	Very important	Important	Somewhat important	Unimportant	
Mean Values	3.51-4.50	2.51-3.50	1.51-2.50	1-1.50	

*Note. Adapted from Linder and Linder (2024).*

Based on the methodology described, the next section details the results of this inquiry.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Supervisors' familiarity with hedging

Supervisors' answers to this question varied along a spectrum. A combined percentage of positive responses equalled 52.2 %, with 25% of the respondents reporting being very familiar and 27.2% of them being familiar. The remaining substantial portion (47.8%) combined those who were either somewhat familiar (27.3%) or unfamiliar (20.5%).

### 3.2 The Importance of hedging in dissertation writing

When defining the term in Hyland's words and asking teachers to share their views on the importance of hedging in dissertation writing, the strong majority of respondents, equal to 79.5%, held positive attitudes towards the

issue, with one-fourth of them (25%) agreeing that it was very important, and a large number of them (54.5%) suggesting that it was important. Nevertheless, a small number of informants, 20.5% considered it only somewhat important, with none claiming that it was unimportant.

Respondents highlighted three major benefits of hedging in a dissertation, centred mainly around managing claims, upholding scholarly and ethical values, and building writer-reader relationships. According to them, hedges allow writers to present claims with caution, as perceived by 47.8% of them, and protecting novice researchers from criticism, as highlighted by 13.79% of them. One supervisor noted, "Because Master's students are novice researchers who are likely to misinterpret data, they need to use hedging to protect themselves from criticism". Also, informants asserted that claims could be managed by establishing uncertainties in the work, either by acknowledging study limitations and the ambiguities of findings (10.34%), introducing uncertain or unproven claims (34.48%) or by expressing possibilities (3.45%). As one supervisor clarified, "hedging allows recognising the limitations and the inherent ambiguities of the study findings and expressing tentativeness".

The second benefit of hedging in a dissertation was ensuring that the work meets scholarly standards. First, respondents believed that hedges improve the quality of a dissertation by fostering critical thinking (3.45%) and by contributing to clarity (17.24%), objectivity (10.34%), and coherence (3.45%). For instance, one participant observed that hedging "improves the dissertation in terms of argumentation and clarity". Second, hedges were conceived to add precision and complexity to the dissertation, as respondents believed that hedges allow writers to: attend to fine nuances (13.79%), reflect a deeper understanding of the work (3.45%), distinguish claims from facts (3.45%), indicate the writer's awareness of the source of information and value (3.45%), and showcase the student's presence in the work (3.45%). In a supervisor's terms, "the use of hedging makes it clear when the student knows what they are writing about: whether it is a fact or a claim, etc."

Third, several respondents spelt out the ethical functions of hedges in a dissertation, namely: humility (10.34%), credibility (3.45%), integrity (3.45%), and unbiasedness (3.45%). A supervisor observed that "It is best to use hedging for academic and ethical purposes". Finally, respondents asserted that hedging in a dissertation would foster the writer-reader

relationship by opening dialogue (10.34%), considering readers' attitudes (6.9%), and facilitating writer-reader communication (6.9%). One of the informants stated that "it is important for a researcher to use language cautiously, minding the readers' background, so as not to make hasty generalisations".

Concerning the importance of each type of hedging, supervisors admitted that all types were important, with the slight superiority of writer-oriented hedges over the others and reader-oriented hedges coming last in the list: Writer-oriented hedges ( $M=3.54$ ), Reliability hedges ( $M=3.45$ ), Attribute hedges ( $M=3.20$ ), and Reader-oriented hedges ( $M=2.89$ ).

### **3.3 Frequency of hedge-use in dissertations**

A large proportion of participants (47.7%) viewed that students sometimes used hedging in their dissertations, while one-fourth of them 25% articulated that their students rarely used them, 22.7% of the participants claimed that students often employed them, and quite a small part of them (4.5%) believed that they always did.

Regarding the frequency of the students' use of the hedging types in dissertations, respondents estimated that students often used writer-oriented hedges ( $M=3.60$ ), while they sometimes used the other types, namely reliability hedges ( $M=3.33$ ), attribute hedges ( $M=3.19$ ), and reader-oriented hedges ( $M=3.12$ ).

### **3.4 Students' hedging competence**

The vast majority of respondents (74.3%) believed that students were somewhat successful at applying hedging to the construction of their dissertations, while 20% of them reported that students were successful, and a minority of them (5.7%) expressed the opposite view. In addition, most of the informants (83.7%) claimed that students encountered hedging challenges, while 16.3% of them did not. Supervisors identified three major hedging challenges related to knowledge, linguistic expression, and application. Concerning knowledge issues, they reported the students' unfamiliarity with hedging (19.35%), unawareness of its usefulness (25.81%), and lack of hedging knowledge (16.12%), while their linguistic issues included a shortage of hedging vocabulary (9.68%). In a supervisor's opinion, students "lack awareness and training for using hedges, that's why they don't give them importance while writing". Furthermore, these deficiencies were considered to lead to certain application challenges, such as recognizing situations that need hedging (9.68%), finding appropriate

expressions (16.12%), and distinguishing claims from facts (6.45%) and their own opinions from others' (3.22%), as well as hedge usage (19.35%) and hedge balance issues (3.22%). As expressed by a supervisor, it "can be challenging for students to know when to hedge and [to choose] relevant language".

Respondents were then asked to estimate the extent to which students committed hedging errors in their dissertations. They reported that students often underused hedges ( $M=3.74$ ), misplaced them ( $M=3.63$ ), and used them in an ungrammatical way ( $M=3.63$ ) or in a limited way ( $M=3.60$ ). Moreover, respondents postulated that students sometimes misinterpreted hedging meanings ( $M=3.49$ ), improperly punctuated ( $M=3.47$ ), misspelt ( $M=3.26$ ), or even overused hedging devices at times ( $M=2.77$ ).

### **3.5. Supervisory feedback to students' hedging errors**

When encountering students' hedging errors, informants often advised their students to read academic texts ( $M=4.33$ ) or identified hedging-related errors and asked supervisees to correct them ( $M=4.13$ ). They sometimes corrected the errors themselves and sent their students the correction ( $M=3.49$ ); they also sometimes opened discussions on hedging in supervision sessions ( $M=3.35$ ), provided external sources on hedging ( $M=3.23$ ), or corrected the errors themselves but in the students' presence ( $M=3.12$ ).

Having described the findings, the following section discusses them in light of the existing literature and the established study objectives.

## **4. Discussion**

By way of answering the main research question, the discussion is broken down into answers to the three sub-research questions posed.

### **4.1 Supervisors' views on hedging importance in dissertation writing**

In response to the first sub-research question, inquiries were raised into supervisors' familiarity with hedging and its importance in a dissertation. The results revealed that, regardless of hedging prominence in the literature, not all supervisors have a solid understanding of it —a finding which is both concerning and unexpected. This lack of understanding could result from limited exposure to hedging in their academic or professional experiences, and this could be expected to impact the students' use of hedging and the quality of supervisors' feedback. Still, when introduced to hedging, most of

the supervisors agreed on its vital role in a Master's dissertation, reporting its significance in indicating caution and tentativeness in the claims students propose. This finding seems to confirm Hyland's (1994) association of hedging with due prudence in language use. Moreover, hedging was believed to enhance precision, complexity, and clarity by attending to fine nuances, acknowledging certainty levels and mirroring the students' proficiency and understanding. Musa (2014) and Hyland (1996) similarly highlighted the accuracy-oriented hedges' role in maintaining thoroughness.

Furthermore, novice researchers were deemed likely to misinterpret data and to use hedging in their dissertations as a self-defence against criticism. This finding appears to support Coates' (1987) view that hedges serve as cover-up tactics for inadequate knowledge or vocabulary. In this vein, supervisors highlighted that Master's research often involves some imperfections and ambiguities, which students may signal through hedges to prevent criticism —a finding that aligns with Musa's (2014) conclusion that criticism avoidance and readers' claim ratification were the pragmatic drives behind hedging in Master's dissertations.

Additionally, it was concluded that hedging fosters ethical and scholarly values by reflecting humbleness of the researcher (as supported by Musa, 2014; Hyland, 1994), trustworthiness and honesty (Hyland, 1994), and politeness and objectivity (Myers, 1989; Salager-Meyer, 1994; Hyland, 1996). Furthermore, hedges were considered by supervisors to help maintain writer-reader communication (Hyland, 1996) by highlighting that hedging claims entail their openness to discussion. Similarly, Hyland (1996) and Myers (1989) believed in the role of hedging in opening dialogue and softening claims in order to gain acceptance within the research community.

#### **4.2 Students' use of hedging in their master's dissertations**

The second sub-research question was examined through the investigation of students' use of hedges in their dissertations by considering their overall hedging frequency, hedge-type frequencies, competence, challenges, and errors. In essence, participants reported students' deficiency and incompetence in using hedging in dissertations. Algerian Master's students often applied writer-oriented hedges and only sometimes used the remaining types. Given hedging functions in Hyland's model (1996), students used hedges that distanced them from their claims, and protected them against criticism, but did not give as much importance to precision or to reader-involvement aspects accomplished through the other types.



Moreover, Algerian Master's students of English demonstrated flawed hedging competence, characterised by many challenges stemming from their unfamiliarity, unawareness of the logic behind hedging, inadequate knowledge, and lack of effective practice. Evidently, they often underused hedges and incorrectly, ungrammatically, or restrictedly employed them. Also, they occasionally misinterpreted, mispunctuated, misspelt, or overused hedges. Correspondingly, Hyland (1996), Hinkel (2005) and Demir (2018) reported the non-native writers' flawed use of hedges. Particularly, Hinkel (2005) and Demir (2018) pointed to non-native students' limited use of hedging, and Hinkel (2005) associated this with hedging being a typical feature of the Anglo-American tradition. This could be a factor behind students' poor hedging proficiency; however, the level of instruction and guidance on hedge use may also contribute. Based on supervisors' partial awareness of hedging and students' flawed realisations, it seems that the concept is not receiving adequate attention in Algerian tertiary education.

### **4.3 Supervisors' feedback on hedging**

Addressing the last sub-research question, supervisors provided varied guidance on hedge use through both immediate and delayed feedback, as they assisted in correcting the errors either in the students' presence or in their absence. However, the most dominant practices were indirect. On the one hand, they frequently pushed their students to read authentic academic texts to familiarise themselves with academic style and its corresponding features, including hedging. This indicates their belief in the role of exposure to authentic materials in teaching students' writing. Moreover, the second most frequent supervisory technique applied by supervisors was identifying errors and asking students to correct them: a practice which encourages autonomous learning of hedging. On the other hand, more direct instruction was less frequent: supervisors only sometimes corrected the errors themselves, either in students' presence or absence, and they explained hedging in supervision sessions or through external sources. This is perhaps due to the load of supervisory commitments and the inadequate time allotted to supervision. In short, though supervisors offer varied feedback on hedging errors, their role remains rather complementary and more or less indirect.

### **4.4 Limitations**

All in all, this study explored supervisors' attitudes towards hedging in Master's dissertations of English, underscoring hedging importance, use, and supervisory support. However, the sample is relatively small, and the



results cannot be generalised to the whole population. Furthermore, an examination of Master's dissertations would be more accurate and reliable in describing how students use hedging.

## Conclusion

Master's students are novice researchers taking their first steps into research through the dissertation, and addressing the academic audience requires them to demonstrate a good command of hedging. Therefore, this mixed-methods study sought to gain insights into supervisors' attitudes towards the use of hedging in Master's dissertations of English in Algeria. The online questionnaire elicited information from forty-four participants on how they regarded hedging in dissertations, on how students used hedging in their dissertations, and the level of supervisory hedging guidance provided. Despite the limited awareness of hedging in Algerian Higher Education, the study revealed a consensus among supervisors on its prominence in dissertations due to its vital role in acknowledging uncertainties, presenting claims with due caution, precision and complexity, involving the reader, and maintaining ethical and scholarly values. Nonetheless, students exhibited a limited and frequently inaccurate use of hedging, which required the supervisors to provide their feedback. The latter was rather varied but mostly indirect, hinting at the supervisors' complementary and somewhat insufficient roles. Hence, this study recommends further research to investigate the impact of explicit instruction of hedging on the quality of a Master's dissertation in English and to explore students' attitudes towards its use in their dissertations.

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