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Research in Corpus Linguistics

Hedging expressions used in academic written feedback: a study on the use of modal verbs

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Abstract – This paper sets out to answer a fundamental question: 'How do tutors hedge their comments using modal verbs?' A total of 126 feedback reports comprising 35,941 words were collected from two Humanities departments in a UK higher education institution. Although this is a relatively small corpus, it is a specialised corpus. The research focuses on a specific genre – written feedback –, thus the findings should be justifiable in relation to the hedging expressions used in giving feedback through the use of modal verbs.

A wordlist search of the nine core modal verbs (*can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *shall*, *should*, *will* and *would*) was carried out with WordSmith Tools 5. The results show that *could*, *might* and *would* are the top three modal verbs, followed by *can*, *may*, *must*, *should* and *will*, all of which are used as hedging, although some level of certainties are higher than others. *Shall* was not found in the written feedback, since it is more commonly used in legal texts. The modal verbs *could*, *might* and *would* were used most often because of their lower levels of certainty. *Must*, *should* and *will* indicate the higher certainty level, more direct and less opted for.

The concordances for each modal verb were also further examined for their functions. The modal verbs were used to indicate criticism (*can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *will* and *would*), suggestions (*could*, *may*, *might* and *would*), possibility (*may*, *might* and *can*) and necessity (*must* and *should*). Other functions included permission (*can*), certainty (*will*) and advice (*would*), all of which were of very low frequency. The results show that tutors tend to be more assertive or direct when commenting on mechanical aspects of writing (through *must* and *should*) and to use more hedging in criticising or offering suggestions.

The findings of this research aim to provide a feedback framework as a reference guide to teacher training programmes.

Keywords – academic English, hedging, modal verbs, written feedback

1. INTRODUCTION

This study developed from an initial exploration of genre patterns in written feedback. The findings from genre analysis revealed that a prevalent feature of feedback was the use of modals. Therefore, the general aim of this paper is to explore how modal verbs are used in the written feedback to express hedging. There are two types of modals, core modals and semi-modals (Biber 2006: 483–484; Carter and McCarthy 2006: 420, 922). The former include *can*, *could*,

may, *might*, *must*, *shall*, *should*, *will* and *would*, and the latter, also called 'marginal modal verbs', include *dare*, *need*, *ought to* and *used to* (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 420, 922). Modals often embed a "degree of certainty and necessity" within them, whether something said or written is "real or true" or merely an assumption (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 638). This study only explores how hedging is expressed in written feedback through the use of core modal verbs (*can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *shall*, *should*, *will* and *would*).

2. A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Written feedback is one of the main fundamental activities in universities for teachers (Parboteeah and Anwar 2009: 753). Giving feedback is also one of the important daily tasks tutors have to do (Ziv 1982: 2, F. Hyland 1998: 255; K. Hyland 2006: 103; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006: 200). It is part of "an educator's life" (Jackson 1995: 1). Keh (1990: 294) defines feedback as "input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision". It consists of statements specifying the strengths and weaknesses of individual students, while offering ways in which students can improve in subsequent writings (Jackson 1995: 7; Harmer 2001: 99; Rust 2002: 152). Feedback is also one of the effective methods in enhancing writing competency (Ziv 1982: 2; K. Hyland 2006: 102–103). Feedback gives students information on their development an accomplishment as opposed to a summative form where students only learn whether they have passed or failed the task (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006: 212). Research by Lee (2003: 220) and others (see Jackson 1995: 2; Gibbs and Simpson 2004: 17; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006: 203) provide summaries on the main purposes of feedback, among which are helping students to improve writing competency, to become reflective learners and to recognise their errors by indicating to them their strengths and weaknesses in writing. This is summarised in Figure 1.
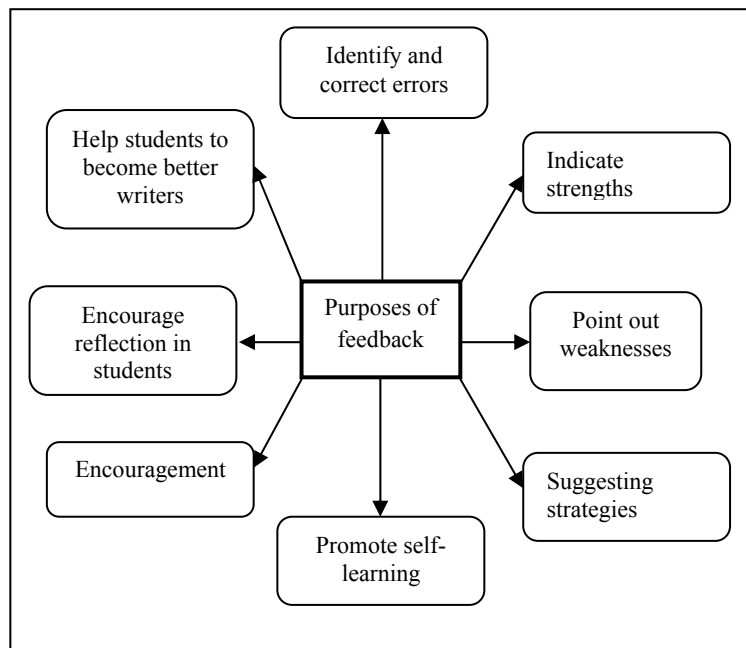

Figure 1. Purposes of feedback (adapted from Jackson 1995; Lee 2003; Gibbs and Simpson 2004)

Abundant research has been carried out on the area of feedback, either in native English language classrooms or in foreign classroom settings with native and non-native tutors and students. However, much of this research has looked into the effectiveness of feedback practices, the ways to deliver effective feedback, the common misperceptions of feedback among the tutors and students or the impact of feedback on students. This research does provide a good insight into understanding feedback and the extent to which feedback is useful and acted upon by students. Another type of research into feedback has also been carried out in higher education settings, focusing on undergraduates' (see Glover and Brown 2006; Stern and Solomon 2006) and postgraduates' level of study, including both master level (see Mirador 2000; Hyatt 2005) and doctoral level (see Kumar and Stracke 2007; Nkemleke 2011), or student-teacher training courses (see Farr 2011), some of which have explored the use of hedging expressions in the feedback reports (Farr 2011; Nkemleke 2011).

Likewise, much research into academic writing has been carried out in the area of hedging since its first introduction by Lakoff (1973: 175), who defines *hedging* as "words whose job is to make things more or less fuzzy". Swales (1990:

175) defines hedging as linguistic devices which express "honesty, modesty and proper caution in self-reports". Other researchers have also defined it as a linguistic strategy used by writers or speakers to express tentativeness and possibility with respect to the truth of propositions (Crismore and Vande Kopple 1988: 185; K. Hyland 1996a: 477; 1996b: 433; 1998a: 350; 1998b: 1). The term *hedging* itself is broad and multi-functional and often overlaps with other aspects such as modality, politeness, indirectness and vagueness (K. Hyland 1995: 34; Farr and O'Keeffe 2002: 26; Nkemleke 2011: 19; Salager-Meyer 2011: 36). Salager-Meyer (1994), in her study on medical English written discourse, has proposed five classifications of hedging which are used to represent the subcategories of hedging. Firstly, 'shields', which comprise modal auxiliaries or modals (*can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *will* and *would*), epistemic verbs (*seem*, *appear*, *believe* or *suggest*), adverbs (*possibly* or *probably*) and their *related* adjectives. Secondly, 'approximators', which refer to quantity, degree, frequency and time (*approximately*, *usually*, *generally*, *somehow* or *somewhat*). Thirdly, phrases which express authors' personal doubt and involvement (*I believe* or *as far as I know*). Fourthly, 'emotionally-charged intensifiers', which express the writer's reactions (*extremely interesting*, *surprisingly* or *particularly encouraging*). Lastly, 'compound hedges' or 'strings of hedges', which could be double hedges (*it may suggest that*), treble hedges (*it would seem likely that*) or quadruple hedges (*it would seem somewhat unlikely that*) (Salager-Meyer 1994: 154, 155).

Arguably the classifications proposed by Salager-Meyer (1994) can be seen as rather stereotypical. However, they do provide a summary of the hedging strategies used by writers across disciplines. For example, Crismore and Vande Kopple (1988) found that hedging in the science and social-studies texts for ninth-graders is expressed through personal voice (*it seems to me* or *I suppose that*) and impersonal voice (*it seems that* or *it is supposed that*). K. Hyland has also done ample research on hedging in scientific research articles examining its functions and the grammatical features used to convey tentativeness. He looks at the use of lexical verbs, adverbials, adjectives, modal verbs and nouns in scientific research articles (1995; 1996a; 1996b; 1998b; 2000), and at the use of directives in various genres (K. Hyland 2002, 2005b). These taxonomies provide a good start-off point to understand hedging and its strategies. For this purpose, it is important to study the context in which the texts are produced. Hyland believes that a person's use of language is influenced by the discourse community (K. Hyland 1998a: 373; 1998b: 35). An author will write according to the expectations or 'norms' within his/her community (K. Hyland 1998b: 35) and in order to have a better understanding on the language use within a specific community, it is important to examine the contextual situation in which the texts are produced.

Hedging is also considered as a softening feature which mitigates a proposition by making it sound more tentative and less forceful (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 923) and which is expressed through modal and semi-modal verbs (*can*, *could*, *may*), lexical verbs (*wonder*, *think*, *hope*) (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 923) or stance adverbs (*perhaps*, *possibly*, *generally*) (Biber 2006: 101). Modals are generally used to express "degree of certainty" or "degree of obligation" (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 898). They are often used by writers (in this case, the tutors) to distance themselves from the reader (students) or, as Stubbs (1986: 1) has stated, to be "vague, indirect, and unclear about just what we are committed to". Modals are used to express various meanings in speech or writing. Coates (1983) has provided a detailed list of the range of meanings that modals convey, a summary of which is shown in Table 1 (see also Carter and McCarthy 2006: 642–656).

Modals	Meanings
can	ability, root possibility, permission
could	root possibility, epistemic possibility, ability, hypothesis
may	root possibility, epistemic possibility, permission
might	root possibility, epistemic possibility, permission, hypothesis
must	strong obligation, confident inference
shall	strong obligation, volition prediction, determination
should	weak obligation, tentative inference, hypothesis, necessity
will	volition, prediction
would	prediction, hypothesis, volition

Table 1. Summary of the meanings of modals by Coates (1983)

According to Nkemleke (2011: 20), "academic language is a world of indirectness and non-finality". Indirectness is regarded as a politeness strategy whereby the writer or speaker show respect to their reader or hearer (Upton and Connor 2001: 321). Myers (1989: 5) indicates that hedging is a politeness strategy in academic writing which forms an interaction between the writers and readers. Salager-Meyer (1994: 150) claims that writers or speakers use hedges to "convey (purposive) vagueness and tentativeness and to make sentences more acceptable to the hearer/reader, thus increasing the chance of ratification". In other words, hedges allows them to remain uncommitted (K. Hyland 1998b: 1; Downing and Locke 2006: 184), and at the same time gives them the opportunity to defend their status as academics (Lafuente Millán 2008: 68). With respect to written feedback, it is a strategy for tutors to be less assertive, or not "sounding too authoritative or direct" (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 906). Hedging is used as a softening feature, a mitigation strategy, to downtone negativity (Hyland and Hyland 2001), or to weaken a proposition to make it "more polite" (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 923).

3. DATA AND METHOD

3.1. Data for this study

The research data for the present study is a compilation of 126 feedback reports from two Humanities departments in a UK higher education institution (Departments A and B henceforth). The feedback reports were given by tutors to English degree undergraduates on their summative essays. The sum total of words was 35,941 (a small specialised corpus that will referred to as the *EdEng Corpus* henceforth). Students' names in Department A were all deleted when the 42 feedback reports were manually transcribed. Optical software was not used because all of the reports were relatively short (an average of 108 words per report, as shown in Table 2). Students in Department B used their student card's numbers, which were all deleted as well. The tutors' names were also deleted, after the number of participating tutors had been counted. No criteria were used for the collection of feedback reports. All feedback reports were used and analysed, and each report was assigned a number for cross-referencing (Text 1–Text 126). Table 2 shows the research participants and data for this study.

	No. of tutors	No. of students	Modules	No. of essays	Total no. of words	Average no. of words per report
Department A	10	6	12	42	4,527	108
Department B	1	42	6	84	31,414	374
Total	11	48	18	126	35,941	285

Table 2. Distribution of participants and data

It is open to argument when it comes to combining Department A and Department B feedback reports into one corpus instead of separating them into two corpora. However, these reports constitute a single genre—academic written feedback—and, therefore, I think it is unnecessary to discern both sets of reports. Nevertheless, when a particular feature is found to have been used only in Department B, since it only came from one tutor and is therefore an indication of idiosyncrasy, this will be mentioned in the results and discussion sections.

3.2. Method

The methodology for this study is based solely on text and corpus analysis. No follow-up study was carried out with the participants as they were hesitant to be interviewed, although they were aware that it would be an anonymous process. There were also very limited responses to the online questionnaire, which was discarded because no significant findings could be obtained from the results. This study started as a top-down approach (Biber, Connor and Upton 2007: 12), whereby hedging is set as the main linguistic function to explore.

This paper will therefore study the use of modals as hedging in feedback. *Wordsmith Tools*, a corpus programme on text analysis (Scott 2010), was used to search for the nine core modals (*can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will* and *would*). Quantitative analysis showing the frequencies of occurrences was carried out to show the usage of these modal verbs in both departments. Alongside this, a study of the modals used in each department was also carried out to show if there were any discrepancies between the two departments as one corpus is slightly larger than the other. The main part of this study consists in identifying how hedging was used by means of the core modals (*can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will* and *would*) and in implementing co-text analysis in order to derive the functions of each modal rather than interpreting them intuitively. Quantitative analysis was not carried out for every function of the modals as the main focus of this study is to explore how hedging was expressed through modals. Co-text analysis involves looking at the context of the word, that is to say, words that occur on either side of the word (Sinclair 1991: 172). The *Concord* Tool in *WordSmith 5* (Scott 2010) was used to retrieve the concordances for each of the modals. This has allowed us to see all the instances of the specified item in the corpus which can then be sorted left or right to identify significant textual patterns (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 241). The contracted negation modals (for instance, *can't* or *shouldn't*) were also searched for. Instances containing non-hedging features were extracted manually for each of the modals.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1. Quantitative results

The quantitative results demonstrate the frequencies of the use of modals as hedging in feedback, with an average of 3.5 occurrences per paper, about one every 81 words. Although both departments seemed to use modals equally (12.6 words per 1,000 in Department A and 12.2 words per 1,000 in Department B), as shown in Table 3, the use of modals in Department B (nearly 5 modals in every feedback report) is higher than in Department A (approximately 1 modal in every paper). This is mainly due to the amount of feedback given by the tutor in Department B (an average of 374 words per report as compared with Department A's feedback, an average of 108 words per report, as shown in Table 2 earlier).

	Total (Departments A + B)			Department A			Department B		
	Raw freq.	Modals per 1,000	Modals per paper	Raw freq.	Modals per 1,000	Modals per paper	Raw freq.	Modals per 1,000	Modals per paper
Modals	441	11.5	3.5	57	12.6	1.4	384	12.2	4.6

Table 3. Frequencies of occurrences of the core modals in Department A and Department B

Table 4 shows the frequencies of the nine core modal verbs. The most frequent modals in both departments were *could* and *would*, accounting for nearly 59% of all modals in the corpus (illustrated in Figure 2). *Should* and *must* had a similar frequency in both departments. Although the occurrences of *might*, *will* and *may* in the entire *EdEng Corpus* were very minimal (16%, 9% and 2%, respectively), they were found more often in Department B than in Department A. On the other hand, *can* was found more often in Department A (10% as compared with 3% in Department B, also shown in Figure 3). The modal *shall* was used in neither department.

	Total (Departments A + B)		Department A		Department B	
	Raw freq.	Words per 1,000	Raw freq.	Words per 1,000	Raw freq.	Words per 1,000
could	158	4.4	19	4.2	139	4.4
would	102	2.8	17	3.8	85	2.7
might	70	1.9	3	0.7	67	2.1
will	40	1.1	3	0.7	37	1.2
should	33	0.9	4	0.9	29	0.9
can	20	0.6	6	1.3	14	0.4
may	12	0.3	4	0.9	8	0.3
must	6	0.2	1	0.2	5	0.2
shall	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 4. Frequencies of occurrences of the core modals in Department A and Department B
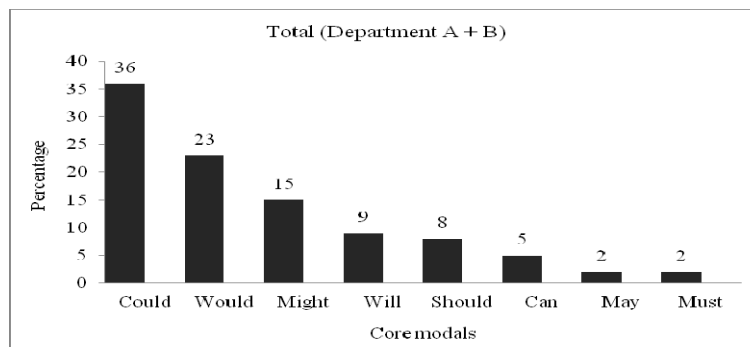

Figure 3. Percentage of occurrences on the use of modals in both departments
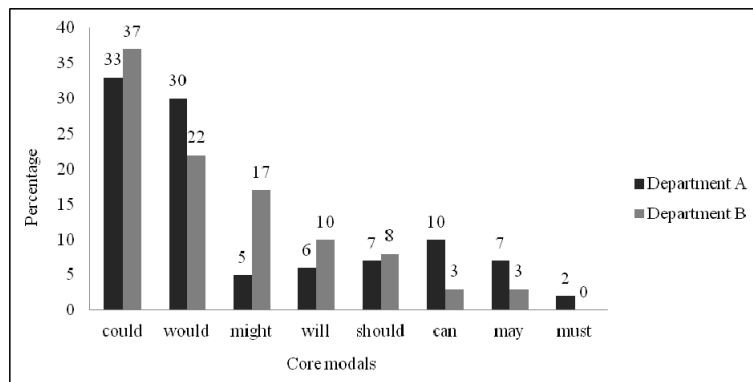
Figure 4. Percentages differences on the use of modals in Department A and Department B

4.2. Functions of modals

4.2.1. Introduction

Each concordance of the modals was thoroughly examined and identified for their respective functions. Seven functions were found to be associated with the modals in this study, as shown in Table 5. Categorising these modals into their respective function posed problems in some cases. There was a degree of fuzziness in the categorisations insofar as one modal could be classified as 'criticism', but at the same time, there was also an implicit suggestion. In this respect, K. Hyland (1996b: 437–438) states that the hedging devices can be rather 'polypragmatic', that is, they may have various meanings and it would therefore be impractical to group them categorically.

Functions	Modals
Criticism	*can, could, may, might, will, would*
Suggestion	*could, may, might, would*
Possibility	*can, may, might*
Necessity	*must, should*
Certainty	*will*
Permission	*can*
Advice	*would*

Table 5. Functions of modals

4.2.2. Modals as criticism (*can, could, may, might, will, would*)

It is worth mentioning that the modals do not imply criticism by themselves. Rather, it is the co-texts of the modals where the criticism is expressed. The examples shown below illustrate the co-texts of the modals expressing criticism, 'overly-reliant' in example 1, 'colloquial (chatty)' in example 2, 'overstating' in example 3, 'not clearly explained' in example 4, 'punctuation not needed' in example 5 and 'clarity problems' in example 6:

(1)   Your style of writing <u>can</u> be rather colloquial (chatty) and you sometimes mix the present and past tenses. (Text 17)
(2)   Most of the basic concepts in the essay appear to have been understood although they are not always explained as clearly as they <u>could</u> be (see next section). (Text 71)
(3)   You tend to use a semi-colon when you <u>may</u> not have needed any kind of punctuation. (Text 82)
(4)   There is a concern that you <u>might</u> be overstating some of your points. (Text 58)
(5)   It is also not very clear in your introduction how you <u>will</u> approach and discuss the issue of language modification in the classroom. (Text 110)
(6)   My only criticism <u>would</u> be that you are occasionally overly-reliant on your secondary sources—if you could integrate these more smoothly, while privileging your own, very promising, critical voice, this could be even stronger. (Text 10)

*4.2.3. Modals as suggestions (*could*, may*, might*, would*)*

In addition to criticism, tutors also offer suggestions to students, often advising them to being cautious or maintaining solidarity:

(7)   I think you <u>could</u> have developed this a little as it is an extremely good point especially since the colour and the message are working together to achieve an effect on the audience. (Text 78)

(8)   Your structure is a little unusual—a more traditional introduction to ease the reader into your argument <u>may</u> have helped, for instance, and although the introduction of ideas of the semiotic versus the symbolic is fascinating, I don't think you elaborate on this in enough depth. (Text 3)

(9)   One point I wish to make is that it <u>might</u> have been useful for you to have placed the information in the Appendix into the main body of your essay as this information was particularly useful for comparison purposes. (Text 89)

(10)   I think it <u>would</u> have been useful to have mentioned the points on 'competency' vs 'fluency' at some point in the essay with reference to the use/learning of grammatical rules. (Text 58)

*4.2.4. Modals as possibility (*can*, may*, might*)*

The findings also show that tutors expressed possibilities, generally mitigating the feedback by being tentative and not committed to the feedback.

(11)   Here are a few examples of language use that need revision: Page 3: <u>can</u> a parameter setting be 'uttered'? (Text 58)

(12)   I think you could have developed on the 'symbolism of the apple' more in your discussion of advertisement 1 (page 5). There <u>may</u> be something to be said about the apple, the seductive appeal of the perfume and the colour green. (Text 78)

(13)   Your essay indicates a well developed and quite detailed understanding of the progress of education in England and Wales, although, as you also indicate, 'progress' <u>might</u> not be entirely the right word. (Text 33)

Example 11 above shows an instance where its category adscription can be subjective due to the overlapping categories. "*Can a parameter setting be 'uttered'?*" can be classified as a criticism, but at the same time it might also be seen as indicating uncertainty, and may therefore be rephrased as "Is it possible for a parameter setting to be uttered?".

*4.2.5. Modals as necessity (*must*, should*)*

Apart from tentativeness, there are instances where tutors were more forceful. These cases were normally found when feedback was on mechanical aspects of writing, such as referencing. Hedging is very minimal in these cases.

(14)   You <u>must</u> pursue one line of reasoning, and signpost that throughout. (Text 31)

(15)   The essay largely adheres to the guidelines stipulated in the Style Guide. However, you do need to note that the bibliography <u>should</u> be presented in alphabetical order. (Text 55)

*4.2.6. Modal as certainties (*will*)*

Another very minimal hedging sense lies in the function 'certainty' and is found to be used with *will* (example 17). Example (16) is more tentative, as it is initiated by another hedging marker, *I think* (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 223).

(16)   I think your work <u>will</u> be enhanced by more research and advise you to develop this dimension of essay construction, especially given the positive qualities you display in other aspects of your writing. (Text 40)

(17)   An alphabetical list with surnames first <u>will</u> be sufficient. (Text 120)

Will in these cases is still considered hedging, as it is slightly less assertive than *is/are*, which would be more forceful, as in "an alphabetical list is sufficient", which was also found in the feedback, all from Department B. Other forms which were found are listed below, ranging from the most tentative to simply assertive.

(18)   An alphabetical list <u>would</u> suffice. (Text 115)

(19)   Your Bibliography does not need to be bulleted; an alphabetical list <u>would</u> be sufficient. (Text 116)

(20)   Just to point out that it <u>would</u> be sufficient for you to list your references alphabetically without the use of bullets. (Text 117)

(21)   You do not need to bullet your Bibliography as an alphabetical list <u>is</u> sufficient. (Texts 120, 121, 122)

*4.2.7. Modal as permissions (*can*)*

The instances of *can* used in order to give permission were minimal (only 2 occurrences) and found only in Department B. There is very little hedging in this sense, as shown below:

(22)   When you refer to sources, you only need to use their surnames and you <u>can</u> omit initials. (Text 63)
(23)   You <u>can</u> replace 'a so' with 'an' for it to be accurate. (Text 64)

*4.2.8. Modal as advice (*would*)*

This is found only once in the *EdEng Corpus*, and was used in Department B.

(24)   Your essay is well documented and adheres to the requirements in the Style Guide. I <u>would</u> only check the use of punctuation before a quotation. (Text 82)

4.2.9. Non-hedging instances

There were occurrences of modals which were not used for hedging purposes, such as expressing future intentions (example 25), and meta-statements (example 26). However, all of these non-hedging instances were only found in Department B.

(25)   Please do take up my offer of discussing assignment 2 before you begin writing it as I think it <u>will</u> be helpful for us to meet. (Text 60)
(26)   a. Here are a few points you <u>could</u> note. (Text 43)
         b. There are a couple of points I <u>would</u> like to highlight. (Text 58)

Although examples in (26) express some form of hedging, these occurrences were not taken into account. Both these utterances were directing students to subsequent comments presented in bullet form, which is where the main area of investigation was in this study. This is one feature of feedback writing practices implemented by Department B's tutor.

4.3. Patterns of feedback

We have also investigated into the feedback patterns. Feedback was often given by highlighting the positive aspects (POS), indicating the problems or negativity (NEG) or giving suggestions (SUG). In these cases, either all the feedback instances were used alternately or else one or the other was omitted (for instance, POS + NEG + SUG; POS + SUG; NEG + POS, or NEG + SUG), as shown in the examples below.

(27)   POS + NEG + SUG
         [POS] You write fluently, [NEG] although a few grammatical errors creep in, [SUG] which perhaps a more stringent proofreading process <u>would</u> catch. (Text 6)
(28)   POS + SUG
         [POS] The move structure analysis is fairly well done [SUG] although it <u>might</u> have been more useful to have shown the analysis diagrammatically rather than through a discussion. (Text 114)
(29)   NEG + POS (negativity does not lie in *could*, but in the co-text, as *could* actually mitigates the negativity)
         [NEG] This essay has not answered the question as successfully as it <u>could</u> have [POS] although there is evidence of sufficient reading and an attempt at dealing with mostly relevant issues. (Text 80)
(30)   NEG + SUG
         [NEG] Your essay does not fully adhere to the guidelines stipulated in the Style Guide for in-text referencing. [SUG] In terms of presentation, you need to double space your essay and it <u>might</u> have also been better for you to have retyped some aspects of your appendix (for e.g. the models) than to have just put in the seminar handouts. (Text 101)

It is apparent from these examples that tutors tend to highlight the positive aspect in students' writing. Suggestions were hedged to make them less assertive. Negative comments were mitigated either through positive comments or by offering suggestions. The use of *although* is another salient feature, shown in examples 27–20 above. It generally followed a positive or negative comment, and involved an indication of politeness, mitigating the negativity either way.

5. DISCUSSION

This study has shown that, although tutors from Departments A and B used different templates to write their feedback, they generally hedged their comments by using modals and thus being more tentative. The corpus analysis shows that *could* and *would* were the two most frequent modals used in giving feedback, although *would* was slightly more frequent in Department A (12.3% more). Our findings confirm Farr's research on teaching practice feedback and also shows a high frequency of *could* and *would* in the spoken post-observation feedback. This is mainly due to the tentativeness of these modals and to the fact that they prove to be more polite as compared with the use of *should* or *must*, which are more direct (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 650, 652; Farr 2011: 120). Carter and McCarthy (2006: 640) imply that, by using the past form of the modals (*could* or *would*), they "express greater tentativeness, distance and politeness" between the writer and the reader or speaker and listener. This is the difference between, for example, *it will help your essay* and *it would have helped your essay*. The first utterance expresses a greater degree of certainty than the second utterance, which is more polite and less authoritative. Apart from being used for criticism and suggestion, *would* was also used to give advice, although it only appeared once in the entire corpus. Nevertheless, it showed another feature of hedging.

Another more apparent use of modals in Department A includes *can* (8.9% more than Department B) and *may* (6.2% more). From the analysis, we can see that *can* has more than one function (for instance, criticism and permission). *Can* as 'criticism' was found in both departments, whereas *can* as 'permission' was found only in Department B, which could imply idiosyncrasy. The occurrences were too few for us to provide any further explanations. On the other hand, the co-text analysis of our study has helped us categorise the modals into their respective functions. The function of 'criticism' does not lie within the modal itself, but it can be retrieved by looking at the co-text in which the modal occurs. Although *may* is also tentative, it is less frequent in the *EdEng Corpus* (2.7% in the entire corpus). This is possibly due to the extensive use of *could, would* and *might*, all of which are more tentative than *may*.

Might and *will* were more frequently used by Department B (12.5% and 4% more, respectively). Nevertheless, *might* was the third most frequent modal in the *EdEng Corpus*, as it is more tentative than *may* (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 647). Although both *might* and *could* express tentativeness (Leech 1987: 128), Gresset (2003: 96) stresses that *might* and *could* cannot be used interchangeably, as they are "not strictly synonymous". *Will* was found in the *EdEng Corpus* performing two functions, 'criticism' and 'certainty'. These functions were more definite or certain, thus hedging is very limited. It shows that tutors generally tend to be more direct when referring to the mechanical aspects of writing, such as references or presentation style indicated in the Style Guide or referencing booklet that students are expected to use.

The same holds for *must* and *should*, which are used to express necessity or obligation. Very little hedging was found as these convey a sense of confidence. Tutors seemed to display a higher level of confidence when they were commenting on the mechanical aspects of writing. Arguably, the uses of *should* (as shown in the results section) may be perceived as suggestions as they were proposing ways of improving. Since *should* is at the higher level end of certainty (see Figure 4), it is therefore an indication of necessity or obligation. The occurrences of *must* as necessity or obligation were limited in the *EdEng Corpus*, due to its high level of certainty and confidence (see Figure 4). In fact, tutors seemed to avoid using it, unless the proposition has been made very clear, such as the referencing style. Figure 4 shows the level of certainty and confidence of the modals. The scale of intensity is based largely on the findings of this research, as shown in the examples in the final column.

CONFIDENT ↕ DOUBTFUL	*must* *should* *can* *will* *may* *might* *would* *could*	CERTAIN ↕ UNCERTAIN	which must be avoided which should be avoided which can be avoided which will be beneficial which may be beneficial which might be beneficial which would be beneficial which could be beneficial

Figure 5. Levels of certainty and confidence

We have not examined the use of other modals, such as *will*, to express future intentions, intentions and meta-statements in the feedback, since they were not means of hedging. In addition to this, these non-hedging expressions were all found within Department B's feedback reports, indicating the tutor's idiosyncrasy. The categorisation of modals into their respective functions can be fuzzy as they are often multi-functional, overlapping with other functions (K. Hyland 1996b: 437–438). The teachers' true intention when using each modal in a specific context is hard to be determined unless a follow-up study by means of interviews to tutors is carried out. Unlike Nkemleke's (2011) findings on the pre-defence reports of doctoral students, we have found that *could* and *might* were completely omitted by supervisor. *Can* was the most frequently modal used by supervisors to avoid ambiguity in the pre-defence reports. This

can also be seen in the use of *should*, the second most frequent. This seems to show that supervisors tend to be less ambiguous in their pre-defence reports. Tutors, on the other hand, are more cautious with their feedback.

Shall was completely omitted in giving feedback. The decline in usage of *shall* is highly evident in contemporary English, if compared to the Old, Middle and Early Modern English periods (Gotti 2003: 269). Gotti (2003: 268–269) shows that shall in is the least frequent of all modals (3.5% per 10,000 words). Leech (1987: 87) too has mentioned the decline of *shall* for prediction, expressing intention and volition, and its use only in "restricted linguistic contexts". These contexts are found more frequently in spoken and fictional registers (Gotti 2003: 269–271). Carter and McCarthy (2006: 650) also confirm that *shall* is more frequent in spoken than written texts, mainly because *shall* is used to "make suggestions or to seek advice", such as "*shall I/we…?*". *Shall* is considered to be very formal (Leech 1987: 87; CollinsCOBUILD 1990: 230, 233; Carter and McCarthy 2006: 650) and this is the reason why it is avoided in the feedback, since tutors tend to be constructive and tentative. (For the rarity of *shall*, see Coates 1983: 25; Biber, Conrad and Leech 2003: 486; Leech 2003.)

Based on our analysis, the patterns of feedback seem to be well-defined. Feedback was generally very positive (POS), although there were also some negatives comments (NEG) and suggestions (SUG). These three features were used at the same time or they were used alternately. One or the other feature could be omitted as well (for instance, POS + NEG + SUG; POS + SUG; NEG + POS; or NEG + SUG, also shown earlier in Section 4.3, examples 27–30). Explicit criticism was very rare in the feedback. Even when found, it was often heavily mitigated either with subsequent positive comments, or initiated with a positive comment before the problems were presented. As shown in this study, one way of hedging is through the use of modals. Nkemleke's (2011) study also reveals similar findings, whereby negative comments were rarely used in pre-defence reports and were also mitigated by positive comments when they were used. In addition to the uses of modals in their respective functions, they were also found in clusters in the feedback, or as "strings of hedges", as Salager-Meyer (1994) proposed. Examples from the *EdEng Corpus* include, *perhaps you could…* (Text 62), or *I think you could have said a lot more…* (Text 77). This further reaffirms the tutor's determination to remain as tentative as possible in giving feedback.

Although explicit criticism was rarely found, a thorough reading of all the feedback reports revealed one case in Department A in which all the feedback was negative. There was not a single positive comment or suggestion in the entire feedback report (extract 1 below). This was found only in the feedback report of weak essays which either failed or had a considerably low passing mark. As for Department B, since feedback was given on individual criteria, there were two failed essays, but the tutor did suggest a few recommendations for improvement (extract 2 below, suggestion underlined). There was also one occurrence where a negative comment was found in the criterion *'Overall'* in Department B (extract 3 below). Apart from these few occurrences of explicit criticisms, most feedback reports were generally positive. Negative comments would often be mitigated (as illustrated in extract 4, mitigation underlined).

Extract 1:
This is a very short piece of work and you do not seem to have put much effort into it. You do not answer the question—this is a very general essay without structure or focus. You do not provide supporting quotations from your chosen novels and much of your essay is spent retelling the narratives rather than analysing them. You speculate a great deal about the responses of child readers, but this is not part of literary criticism. The few critical quotations you include are general and you didn't engage with them. Your research has been ineffective. There are many critical works on Harry Potter but you haven't consulted any of them. Furthermore, at no point do you discuss the fantasy genre – particularly the position of these texts within the genre and the techniques they employ. (Text 37, Department A)

Extract 2:
The essay does not show a sufficient reading of a range of sources. The two books you have referred to are the core textbooks for the course but <u>you needed to have read more widely to achieve a better understanding of the theories taught on the course</u>. Only some of the information here is relevant and accurately interpreted. (Text 68, under the criterion 'Acquisition of knowledge', Department B)

Extract 3:
An essay that has not fully achieved the aims of the assignment. (Text 96, under the criterion 'Overall', Department B)

Extract 4:
The essay does not construct a convincing argument <u>although you do show some indication of having understood some of the material</u>. (Text 80, under the criterion 'Interpretation, analysis, construction of argument and relevance', Department B)

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has looked at the hedging expressions in academic written feedback through a study of the modal verbs. Hedging is used to make a proposition more tentative and indicate a sense of possibility (Salager-Meyer 2011: 35). By implementing a top-down approach and combining it with a quantitative corpus approach, this study has set out to explore how hedging expressions operate within the nine core modal verbs (*can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *shall*, *should*, *will* and *would*). Our analysis and findings show that tutors implemented substantial hedging devices through modals in giving feedback, in order to sound less assertive and soften their recommendations (Upton and Connor 2001: 319). Although the corpus is relatively small, it does show that tutors are on the whole very positive, except for a few occurrences of explicit criticisms in the case of weak essays. It is hoped that this paper has succeeded in showing how modals are used as hedging in giving feedback and how effective feedback-writing practices may be developed for teacher training programmes.

Although this study has tried to categorise the functions of modals in hedging, it is evident from the analysis that there remain some unsolved problems. Hedging is a broad area of investigation and modal verbs are but one part if. In our case, they were only a minor part of the entire feedback report. An investigation into other forms of hedging, such as stance adverbs, submodifiers and vague language, should also be examined thoroughly to see if there are other means by which tutors hedged their comments. Although the idea of investigating co-texts has led to a better understanding of each modal, this strategy is feasible only with a small corpus of samples. Random sampling could perhaps be carried out when dealing with a larger corpus to examine if the modals performed the same function, particularly in modals denoting criticism. Although modals do not denote criticism by themselves, looking at the left or right co-text of the modal may actually reveal their actual hedging function. Further research is needed in order to extend this study, for example by incorporating written feedback from other disciplines and institutional settings as these could possibly have an effect on the frequency of modals and on their hedging potential (Salager-Meyer 2011: 37). Examination of a larger scale corpus and of more instances of feedback would allow a better understanding of the hedging features tutors use when giving feedback, including the functions of modals.

Alongside this, a follow-up study is also needed to clarify the subjectivity problem as experienced in the present study. In addition, it is also possible to replicate previous research (Ziv 1982; Norton 1990; Norton and Norton, 2001; Lee 2003; Glover and Brown 2006) to the present study by investigating the extent to which students have found the feedback effective, or whether the students have taken into account the feedback in their subsequent writing. In fact, since it has shown that students do not necessarily understand the modals used in medical journals (Adams Smith 1984), it would be interesting to show if the same is true for other students. To take even a step further, the tutors' status, age and gender could also be investigated. Salager-Meyer (2011: 37) states that, apart from the discipline itself, these other variables may also contribute to the hedging practices of individuals. Writing is also largely affected by the "cultural contexts" that the writing is intended for (Upton and Connor 2001). Since hedging is a but minor part of writing, it could be affected by cultural issues as well (Salager-Meyer 2011: 37). Future research might take all these variables into account to broaden our understanding of feedback writing practice, hedging and the use of modals.

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