

## *A Model of Rhetorical Moves and Hedging Phrases for Writing Research Projects*

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Un modelo de movidas retóricas y matizadores discursivos para la redacción de proyectos de investigación

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The aim of this study is to analyze the rhetorical moves and the most recurrent hedging phrases that characterize the writing of research projects. Understanding how to structure research projects and express caution or uncertainty is essential for improving academic writing and fostering clearer, more effective communication in research contexts.

**Methods:** By adopting a mixed-method approach, the authors compiled and analyzed seventeen research projects. These projects were selected due to their relevance to the research objectives, as well as their alignment with predetermined criteria for data selection: completeness, date of publication, authorship, language and adherence to academic writing conventions. Both qualitative and quantitative techniques were employed to identify rhetorical patterns and classify hedging devices according to established taxonomies in the literature.

**Results:** The findings showed that three main rhetorical moves, each comprising specific steps, along with a variety of hedging expressions, were consistently employed across the projects analyzed. Move 1: Establishing the territory, introduced the general research area and contextual background. Move 2: Establishing a niche, identified gaps or problems in existing knowledge. Move 3: Occupying the niche, proposed solutions or presented the objectives of the study.

**Conclusions:** The results provided valuable insights for improving the writing of research projects. Thus, the findings could contribute to enhancing the awareness of utilizing moves and steps, as well as hedging phrases when writing well-structured and coherent research projects.

**KEYWORDS:** Academic Writing; Hedging Phrases; Research Projects; Rhetorical Moves

## RESUMEN

**Introducción:** El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las movidas retóricas y las frases de atenuación más recurrentes que caracterizan la redacción de proyectos de investigación. Comprender cómo estructurar proyectos investigativos y expresar cautela o incertidumbre resulta esencial para mejorar la redacción académica y fomentar una comunicación más clara y efectiva en contextos de investigación.

**Métodos:** Mediante el empleo de un enfoque mixto, se recopilaron y analizaron diecisiete proyectos de investigación. Los proyectos se seleccionaron teniendo en cuenta su pertinencia para los objetivos de la investigación y en conformidad con criterios predefinidos: integridad, fecha, autoría, idioma y adhesión a las convenciones de escritura académica. Se utilizaron técnicas cualitativas y cuantitativas para identificar patrones retóricos y clasificar los mecanismos de atenuación según taxonomías especializadas.

**Resultados:** Los resultados mostraron que tres movidas retóricas principales, cada una compuesta por pasos específicos, junto con una variedad de expresiones de atenuación, fueron empleadas consistentemente en los proyectos analizados. La Movida 1: Establecer el territorio, introducía el área general de investigación y los antecedentes contextuales. La Movida 2: Establecer un nicho, identificaba vacíos o problemas en el conocimiento existente. La Movida 3: Ocupar el nicho, proponía soluciones o presentaba los objetivos del estudio.

**Conclusiones:** Los resultados proporcionaron información valiosa para redactar proyectos más estructurados y coherentes, al visibilizar el uso estratégico de movidas, pasos y atenuaciones en la escritura académica.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** matizadores discursivos; movidas retóricas; proyectos de investigación; redacción académica

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## INTRODUCTION

Writing has been regarded as a conventional system of symbols or signs which represents the expressions of a language; it has been crucial in a better understanding of culture, in the preservation of history, and in the dissemination of knowledge. In fact, writing is a means of communication that involves representing language and emotion through written signs and symbols.

Flower and Hayes (1981), two well-known scholars who have conducted extensive research on the writing process, define writing as a cognitive activity that involves using language to convey meaning (Flower & Hayes, 1981). It is broadly recognized that writing is, together with speaking, listening and reading, one of the four skills in language learning. Through the system of written symbols, it is possible to represent the sounds, syllables or words of language, with mechanisms such as capitalization, spelling, punctuation, word form and function. Moreover, through writing people can convey thoughts, ideas, and facts in easy and plain language. Hence, learning to write properly is essential for people to be academically and professionally successful.

Both native and non-native speakers may struggle to become proficient writers if they lack the necessary skills. Without these skills, writers may struggle to convey their ideas effectively. According to Tribble (1996), developing writing skills is essential for individuals to effectively organize their thoughts and ideas and to express them in a clear and compelling manner. This ability is crucial not only for everyday communication but also for presenting and defending arguments in academic and professional contexts. Therefore, writing involves basic knowledge of grammar, lexis and vocabulary, as well as the skill to express ideas in an appropriate English language unaffected by the mother tongue (Tribble, 1996).

Academic writing has a particular way of presenting ideas, with specific rules and practices. These guidelines help writers present their ideas and support them by citing other authors. Though some people think that academic writing is just about stating facts, especially in the sciences, academic writing is more of a conversation between the writer and the reader because any written text implies an interaction between writers and readers. In this interaction, readers anticipate the writers' lines of thought, question them, and evaluate the piece of writing for its usefulness and importance to their own research (Hyland, 1994).

In academic settings, writing has continued to be a predominant challenge because academic writing is related to the specific rules that must be followed while writing academic texts. It has its own features: it is structured, evidenced, critical, balanced, precise, objective, and formal (Cardiff Metropolitan University, 2022). Therefore, all written works at tertiary level require meticulous attention to these aforementioned features which will be described below.

**Structured:** Academic writing should have a clear structure. The structure will often derive from the text type. For example, a report will have an introduction (including the aim or aims), a method section, a discussion section and so on, while an essay will

have an introduction (including a thesis statement), clear body paragraphs with topic sentences, and a conclusion. Likewise, the writing should be coherent, with logical progression throughout, and cohesive, with the different parts of the writing clearly connected. Careful planning before writing is essential to ensure that the final product will be well structured, with a clear focus and logical progression of ideas.

**Evidenced:** Opinions and arguments in academic writing should be supported by evidence. Since the piece of writing will be frequently based on information from experts in the field, it will be important to reference the information appropriately, by using either in-text citations or a reference section.

**Critical:** Being critical in academic writing implies that it is necessary to analyze and evaluate the information that is taken into account before deciding how to integrate it into the academic writing, which is known as critical writing. Thus, critical writing requires a great deal of research so that the writer develops deep enough understanding of the topic to be truly critical about it.

**Balanced:** Academic writing should be balanced. This means considering all sides of the issue and avoiding bias. Thus, all research, evidence and arguments can be challenged, and it is important for academic writers to show their stance on a particular topic; in other words, how strong their claims are.

**Precise:** Academic writing should use clear and precise language to ensure the reader understands the meaning. This includes the use of technical vocabulary, which should be used when it conveys the meaning more precisely than a similar non-technical term. Sometimes such technical vocabulary may need defining, though only if the term is not commonly used by others in the same discipline and will, therefore, not be readily understood by the reader.

**Objective:** Academic writing is objective because the emphasis is placed on the arguments and information, rather than on the writer. As a result, academic writing tends to use nouns and noun phrases more than verbs and adverbs; it also tends to use more passive structures, rather than active voice.

**Formal:** Academic writing is more formal than everyday writing. It tends to use longer words and more complex sentences, while avoiding contractions and colloquial or informal words or expressions that might be common in spoken English. There are words and collocations which are used in academic writing more frequently than in non-academic writing, and researchers have developed lists of these words and phrases to help students of academic English.

Moreover, in academic writing, it is prudent to be cautious in one's statements so as to distinguish between facts and claims. This cautiousness is commonly known as "hedging". Hedging is a type of language used to protect authors' claims. Using language with a

suitable amount of caution can protect their claims from being easily dismissed. It also helps to indicate the level of certainty they have in relation to the evidence or support. In the linguistic subfields of applied linguistics and pragmatics, a hedge is a word or phrase used in a sentence to express ambiguity, probability, caution, or indecisiveness about the remainder of the sentence (Lakoff, 1972).

Hedging is also viewed as a strategy for avoiding the negative consequences of making overly strong claims that may later be proven false. Hedges are commonly used to express ideas that are based on plausible reasoning, rather than certain knowledge, and to allow readers the freedom to challenge their claims (Hyland, 1996, 1998; Salager-Meyer, 1994). In other words, hedges are a way to acknowledge the limitations of one's own knowledge and to invite others to engage in a dialogue or debate. They signal that the writer is aware of the potential weaknesses of their argument and is open to considering alternative perspectives. By using hedges, writers can demonstrate their commitment to intellectual honesty and can help to build a more collaborative and respectful academic community.

According to Hyland (1996), hedges are any linguistic means used to indicate a lack of complete commitment to the truth of a proposition or a desire not to express that commitment categorically (Hyland, 1996). In other words, hedges are a way for writers to present an idea as an opinion rather than a fact. By using hedges, writers can signal that they are aware of the limitations of their own knowledge and are open to alternative perspectives. Hedges also allow writers to be more cautious and nuanced in their language, which can make their arguments more convincing to readers.

As can be noted, hedging is a technique used in academic writing to soften criticism of other authors' work. For instance, writers may use hedging to suggest that a particular author has not fully considered all the aspects of a topic or that their claims may have limitations. This can be done by using phrases like *it could be argued*, *it is possible that*, or *some evidence suggests*, which imply that the writer is not making a conclusive statement but rather presenting an alternative viewpoint. By using hedging in this way, writers can present their critique in a more diplomatic and respectful manner, which can help to foster constructive dialogue and collaboration in the academic community.

Various classifications of hedges have been addressed by several authors. Among these, Salager-Meyer's (1997) and Hyland's (1996) taxonomies are commonly used in a variety of studies on account of their sufficiency and usefulness. These two taxonomies are based on their formal realization in the text (Holtz, 2011).

Salager-Meyer (1997) proposes the following strategic stereotypes through which, in her opinion, hedges are typically expressed in scientific English:

- **Modal auxiliary verbs:** The most straightforward and widely used means of expressing modality in English academic writing; e.g., *may*, *might*, *can*, *could*, *would*, *should*, etc.
- **Modal lexical verbs:** So-called *speech acts verbs* used to perform acts such as doubting and evaluating; e.g., *to seem*, *to appear*, *to believe*, *to suggest*, *to assume*, *to indicate*, etc.

- **Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases:** probability adjectives: e.g., *possible, probable, un/likely, etc.*; nouns: e.g., *assumption, claim, possibility, estimate, etc.*; adverbs: e.g., *perhaps, possibly, probably, likely, presumably, etc.*
- **Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time:** e.g., *approximately, roughly, about, often, generally, usually, etc.*
- **Introductory phrases:** They present the author's personal doubt and direct involvement; e.g., *I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, we feel that, etc.*
- **If clauses:** e.g., *If true, if anything, etc.*
- **Compound hedges:** These are phrases made up of several hedges. Salager-Meyer (1997) distinguishes three types: double hedges (*it may suggest*); treble hedges (*it seems reasonable to assume that*); quadruple hedges (*it would seem somewhat unlikely that*).

Hyland (1996), in turn, puts forward an alternative categorization of hedges. He suggests two main categories as principal realizations of hedges: lexical hedges and strategic hedges/non-lexical hedges. Both are explained below.

1. **Lexical hedges:** These hedges refer to the lexico-grammatical analysis of the most common realization of modality. They include five types of hedges:
  - *modal verbs* (e.g. *would, may, could, etc.*): Modal auxiliary verbs associated with the notion of modality, and modality associated with hedging, especially in the kind of epistemic modality which refers to the opinion and attitude of the author and express about the level of certainty or uncertainty (*Researchers **may** have found a cure for influenza*).
  - *lexical verbs* (e.g. *indicate, suggest, appear, propose, etc.*): These verbs express mitigation, and the author uses this type for reasons to avoid pressure because the information presented may not be accurate (*Our findings suggest that...*).
  - *modal adjectives* (e.g. *likely, possible, apparent, etc.*): This kind of adjectives marks the information presented as uncertainty, tentative, or not quite precise. They are used to express a degree of variation (adjective of an indefinite degree) (*It is apparent that...*).
  - *adverbial constructions* (e.g. *apparently, probably, relatively, generally, etc.*): These adverbs hedge the actual situation or hedge the accuracy (*This result probably indicates that...*).
  - *modal nouns* (e.g. *possibility, assumption, estimate, and tendency, etc.*): This type of nouns is characterized by tentative component or indefinite meaning making them useful for hedging purposes (*There has been a tendency to consider...*).

2. **Strategic hedges/ non-lexical hedges:** These are other means of expressing reservation. They often include questions, conditional clauses and contrast markers, as well as a limited range of formulaic phrases. They are divided with regard to the origin of their tentativeness and their functions into three groups. This type of hedges indicates:
- *Admission to a lack of knowledge:* This category conditionally distinguishes between true statements and speculative possibilities. It refers to judging claims to know how much confident is the author by knowing knowledge such as the use of the word know and do not know. (e.g. *It is not known, whether...*).
  - *Limitations of a model, theory or method:* This category refers to limiting the full responsibility of the imperfections in the model of research, theory and methods (e.g. *In spite of its shortcomings, the method has been widely employed to evidence this type of..., We did not succeed and it is difficult to conclude...*).
  - *Doubts about experimental conditions:* This type of hedging expresses uncertainty about the context of research (e.g. *Under these conditions phosphorylation of PEPc by..., If this scheme is correct, viewed in this way and according to our method...*).

As Hyland (1996) highlights, this division between lexical hedging and non-lexical ones helps to distinguish lexical signals from other commonly used grammatical patterns and other expressions to indicate reservation (Hyland, 1996). According to him, the other means of expressing reservation in the scientific articles might be questions, conditional clauses and contrast markers, as well as a limited range of formulaic phrases. He refers to these non-lexical elements as strategic hedges and groups them according to the origin of their tentativeness and their functions.

In general, hedges are a linguistic tool that can help writers to express uncertainty, tentativeness, or caution in their claims, and to signal their openness to alternative viewpoints. There are several categories of hedges that writers can use to achieve these goals, each with its own strengths and limitations. The linguistic forms of hedges indicate reservation, avoidance of commitment, and uncertainty regarding what is being said. The effects of hedging are typically those of modifying truth value, commenting on the accuracy of a given conceptualization, and or influencing the truthfulness and force of propositions.

Additionally, the concepts of genre and genre analysis are crucial in academic writing. The notion of genre is essential to many academic disciplines such as linguistics, literary studies, and communication studies, among others (Swales & Feak, 2012). In its simplest sense, genre refers to a category or type of discourse that exhibits distinctive characteristics in terms of form, content, and purpose. Examples of genres in various domains include academic research articles, news reports, movie reviews, and legal contracts (Bhatia, 1993).

Several scholars have defined the concept of genre in an array of different fields such as rhetoric, literary theory, media theory, and linguistics to refer to a distinctive type of text

(Chandler, 1997). For example, Swales (1990) sees genre as a category of communicative events that share a set of communicative purposes recognized by expert members of a discourse community. This author adds that these purposes serve as the basis for the genre's underlying rationale, which in turn shapes the discourse schematic structure and influences the writer's content and style choices. The communicative purpose is a crucial criterion that focuses the genre scope and aims to achieve comparable rhetorical action. In addition to purpose, genres exhibit similarities in terms of structure, style, content, and intended audience. When these expectations are met, the exemplar is viewed as prototypical by the discourse community. Genre names inherited and produced by discourse communities serve as valuable ethnographic communication, but usually require further validation (Swales, 1990).

In turn, Bathia (1993) asserts that the experts who work with a genre and within it in a specific field are the ones who design a specific genre. Thus, someone who is unfamiliar with a particular field could never contribute to communication within a professional community without knowing and following the already existing principles; otherwise, communication would fail. Therefore, Bathia (1993) suggests that: "each genre is an instance of a successful achievement of a specific communicative purpose using conventionalized knowledge of linguistic and discursal resources" (Bathia, 1993, p. 15).

As stated above, another concept that deserves attention when dealing with academic writing is genre analysis. This is a field of study that examines language use in specific institutionalized academic or professional settings, with a focus on achieving communicative goals. It is driven by applied linguistic concerns, particularly in language teaching, and is narrow in scope but broad in vision, as it aims to differentiate language use at various levels of generality (Bhatia, 2002).

In addition, genre analysis takes a broader view of language use, which includes not only how a text is constructed but also how it is likely to be interpreted, used, and exploited in specific contexts to achieve particular goals (Bhatia, 2004). In fact, genre analysis provides a valuable framework for investigating how language is used in different contexts and for different purposes, and for understanding the expectations and conventions that shape communication within and across genres (Miller, 1984).

In general, genre can be understood as a collection of texts that share the same communicative purpose or function, whereas genre analysis could be seen as a descriptive tool which combines grammatical insights with socio-cognitive and cultural explanations to determine the rhetorical structures and semantic characteristics of texts in a given context, all with the aim of achieving communicative goals (Sánchez Jiménez, 2011).

Since the term genre is a conventionalization of textual patterns and lexical-grammatical patterns, which depend on the communication objective or purpose of a particular community, it is used in a given rhetorical situation. Therefore, any conventional and culturally determined textual typology could be considered a genre; this implies that

academic and research genres are elements of identity of specific discursive communities (Martin, 2000; Swales, 1990, 2004; Parodi *et al.*, 2010).

In the academic world, the production of new knowledge and its communication through the use of writing is mandatory. At the university level, students devote great efforts to learn new genres, such as the research paper, the report, the monograph, etc., which will serve as evaluation for the different subjects (Sánchez Jiménez, 2011). Moreover, research projects play an important part in academic writing at tertiary level since they require systematic inquiry, investigation, and analysis of a problem using scientific methods (Booth, Colomb, and Williams, 2016).

A research project is an extended scholarly endeavor that involves collecting and analyzing data to provide new knowledge or insights to a particular field or discipline (Creswell, 2018). The research project is characterized by its methodological rigor, empirical inquiry, and logical progression. It requires a clear and well-defined research question, a review of relevant literature, a methodology for data collection and analysis, and a clear presentation of the findings and conclusions (Walliman, 2017).

The research project is an essential tool for advancing knowledge and understanding in various disciplines, including social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences (Swales & Feak, 2012). It provides a framework for investigating complex phenomena, testing hypotheses, and generating new theories. A well-executed research project also contributes to the development of critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, and effective communication.

The research project as a genre has specific conventions and requirements that differentiate it from other types of writing (Booth, Colomb & Williams, 2016). It is typically written in a formal style, using specialized terminology and citation conventions that reflect the particular discipline or field. The research project also has a clear structure, including an introduction, literature review, methodology section, results, and conclusion. It adheres to strict ethical guidelines for data collection, analysis, and reporting (Creswell, 2018).

Generally speaking, writing a research project serves a variety of purposes; that is, it will help researchers in clarifying their objectives and key ideas about their proposed research. In fact, it is a crucial step in the research process because it allows researchers to clearly articulate their research goals, demonstrate the significance of their work, and outline a well-thought-out plan for conducting the study.

When approaching various genres, like a research project, it is crucial to consider what kind of information should be included and how. Thus, rhetorical moves analysis, a type of genre analysis, offers a useful, practical approach to understand how writers achieve their goals in a genre through various writing strategies. Therefore, it is necessary to adhere to a widely used organizational rhetorical pattern when writing so that readers can follow and understand ideas easily (Swales & Feak, 2004).

Despite being a relatively recent development in the field of discourse and communication studies, genre analysis has become extremely popular in the last few years.

It examines language use in specific institutionalized academic or professional settings, with a focus on achieving communicative goals; it is driven by applied linguistic concerns, particularly in language teaching, and is narrow in scope but broad in vision, as it aims to differentiate language use at various levels of generality (Bhatia, 2002). Genre analysis takes a broader view of language use, which includes not only how a text is constructed but also how it is likely to be interpreted, used, and exploited in specific contexts to achieve particular goals (Bhatia, 2004). Therefore, genre analysis is crucial to determine the rhetorical structures of any type of text in a given context and their semantic characteristics, in order to achieve a communicative goal.

In the present paper, the authors report a study conducted at the Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas (UCLV) whose purpose was to design a model describing the rhetorical moves and the most recurrent hedging phrases characterizing research projects. In the study herein reported, the genre analysis approach was used because it was intended to understand the rhetorical structure of research projects and some of the most recurrent hedging phrases used; particularly, it outlined the moves and steps involved in writing the research projects so that each move and step could take shape in the texts.

## METHODOLOGY

The authors adopted a mixed-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. This approach was chosen because it provides a more comprehensive understanding of research problems compared to the use of either method separately. By combining these methods, it was possible to achieve a more accurate analysis and interpretation of the research data (Creswell, 2018).

The whole research process consisted of three main stages:

**Stage One:** A bibliographic review for establishing the theoretical framework to systematize the main concepts related with the topic of research and their relationships. Accordingly, concepts such as writing, academic writing, genre and genre analysis, and hedging were analyzed.

**Stage Two:** A diagnosis of the current situation related to both students’ and professors’ perceptions about students’ writing research projects, particularly in the degree course English Language with a Second Foreign Language at UCLV.

**Stage Three:** The design of a model describing the rhetorical moves and the most recurrent hedging phrases characterizing the research projects in the aforementioned degree course.

In the study herein reported some methods and techniques were applied:

**Theoretical methods:** historical and logical, analysis and synthesis, inductive and deductive, structured and systemic. These methods contributed to the systematization of the main concepts associated with the topic of research and their relationships.

**Empirical methods:** these methods included traditional document analysis, content analysis, survey, corpus linguistics, and participant observation. A detailed textual and document analysis of written material was performed, considering both their historical context and background. The content analysis allowed to determine the characteristics of the research projects and to identify the moves and the most recurrent hedging phrases in them.

**Statistical and mathematical methods:** the percentage analysis was used to process the data obtained from the questionnaires and from the analysis of the corpus.

Two questionnaires were applied during the second stage of the research process. One questionnaire was given to thirty students of the academic years 2022 and 2023 of the aforementioned degree course and seven professors of the English Language Department, School of Humanities at UCLV in order to determine their perceptions about the design and the writing of a research project.

The questionnaires comprised two dimensions with descriptors: 1) academic writing skills and 2) language skills. The first dimension dealt with skills associated with the design and elaboration of a research project, whereas the other dimension was related with the style and mechanics of writing. The respondents had to indicate the level of difficulty of the skills in both dimensions on a scale from 1 to 5, being 1 the easiest and 5 the most difficult. These questionnaires were applied by means of Google Forms, because this web-based survey offers the tools for getting fast and reliable insights from real people across the web, allowing to take more informed decisions.

Another questionnaire was applied in the third stage of the research in order to assess the model proposed by the authors of this article. To this end, the authors selected 5 specialists of the English Language Department, School of Humanities at UCLV. Among the selected specialists 20 % held a PhD and 80 % were masters; 20 % of the respondents were Full Professors, 60 % Associate Professors and 20 % had more than one year of teaching experience.

This questionnaire for assessing the model was also applied through Google Forms, with some indicators and a corresponding scale. The indicators were: purpose (if the model fulfills the objective for which it has been created); applicability (if the model can contribute to improve students' academic writing skills, particularly the writing of the Introduction section of term papers); reliability (if the phrases that were selected for the model were taken from reliable sources); coverage (if the model contains comprehensive information, if the number of phrases for each move and step is sufficient and varied); format and presentation (if the model is presented in such a format in which the information can be easily accessed); and originality (if the model has a design which is appealing to users). The scale ranged from 1 to 5 (being 1 the minimum value and 5 the maximum).

Corpus linguistics, another empirical method used in the study, allowed to determine the moves and hedging phrases included in the model that was designed and proposed. The participant observation provided a closer insight into practices regarding research projects.

The sample chosen for the current research comprised a corpus of 17 research projects written by students of the English Language Degree Course with a Second Foreign Language at UCLV between 2019 and 2023. Also, 30 students (24 from third year and 6 from fourth year) of the academic years 2022 and 2023 were included in the sample, as well as 7 professors of the English Language Department, School of Humanities at UCLV.

The criteria for choosing the sample are given below:

For the corpus:

- *Text type*: research projects
- *Date of publication*: projects presented between 2019 and 2023
- *Size*: a corpus of 17 research projects
- *Authorship*: all texts were written by non-native second-year students of the English Language with a Second Foreign Language Degree Course at UCLV
- *Language*: English
- *Transmission mode*: written transformed into .txt format.

For students:

- *Academic year*: third and fourth-year students, because in their second academic year they had been required to write and present their research projects as the final evaluation on the subject Metodología de la Investigación and they should have demonstrated they had become skillful in academic writing.
- *Willingness*: all students were willing to collaborate regarding the possible benefits for enhancing the writing of research projects.

For professors:

- *Academic and scientific degree of professors*: professors who had published scientific articles in English as authors and as co-authors. Most of them held scientific degrees of PhD and MSc, and academic degrees of Assistant Professor, Associate Professor or Full Professor.
- *Willingness*: all professors included in the sample were willing to collaborate.

For designing a model describing the rhetorical structure and the most recurrent hedging phrases characterizing the research projects, four stages were followed: (1) corpus compilation, (2) corpus tagging, (3) corpus processing, and (4) move analysis of research projects and most recurrent hedging phrases. These stages are explained subsequently.

### **Corpus compilation**

The compiled corpus for the present study consisted of seventeen second-year research projects written in English by non-native English Language students. Also, the research

projects had been submitted from 2019 to 2023. Once the corpus was compiled, all pdf documents were converted into Word documents for the subsequent stage.

### **Corpus tagging**

Some issues concerning move and move analysis discussed in the Introduction became key tools when examining texts as they offer communicative purposes characterizing a genre. Swales' CARS (Create-a-Research-Space) Model was used for conducting the present research, involving tagging textual fragments in the corpus to identify rhetorical moves within the research projects, even though Swales created this model by studying the Introduction section of research articles.

This author proposed the following three-move schema along with a group of steps:

#### *Move 1 – Establishing a Territory*

*Step 1: Claiming Centrality (the writer highlights the interest of their work) and/or*

*Step 2: Making topic generalization (s) (the writer describes what is known about their research topic) and/or*

*Step 3: Reviewing items of previous literature (the writer cites other authors to reinforce the importance of their research)*

#### *Move 2 – Establishing a Niche*

*Step 1 a: Counter –claiming (criticism of the weak points of any previous work) or*

*Step 1 b: Indicating a gap (indication of possible gaps regarding previous work) or*

*Step 1 c: Question –raising (asking direct or indirect questions) or*

*Step 1 d: Continuing a tradition (the writer presents his/her work as a continuation of previous research topic)*

#### *Move 3- Occupying a Niche*

*Step 1 a (obligatory): Outlining purposes (Indication of the main purpose if the study) or*

*Step 1 b (obligatory): Announcing present research (Description of the main features of the study)*

*Step 2: Announcing principal findings (Presentation of main results)*

*Step 3: Indicating the research article structure (Description of the content of the rest of the article)*

After selecting the rhetorical model, each text sample was assigned a code. Thereafter, the process of corpus tagging helped to identify the rhetorical structure and most recurrent hedging phrases characterizing the research projects under analysis.

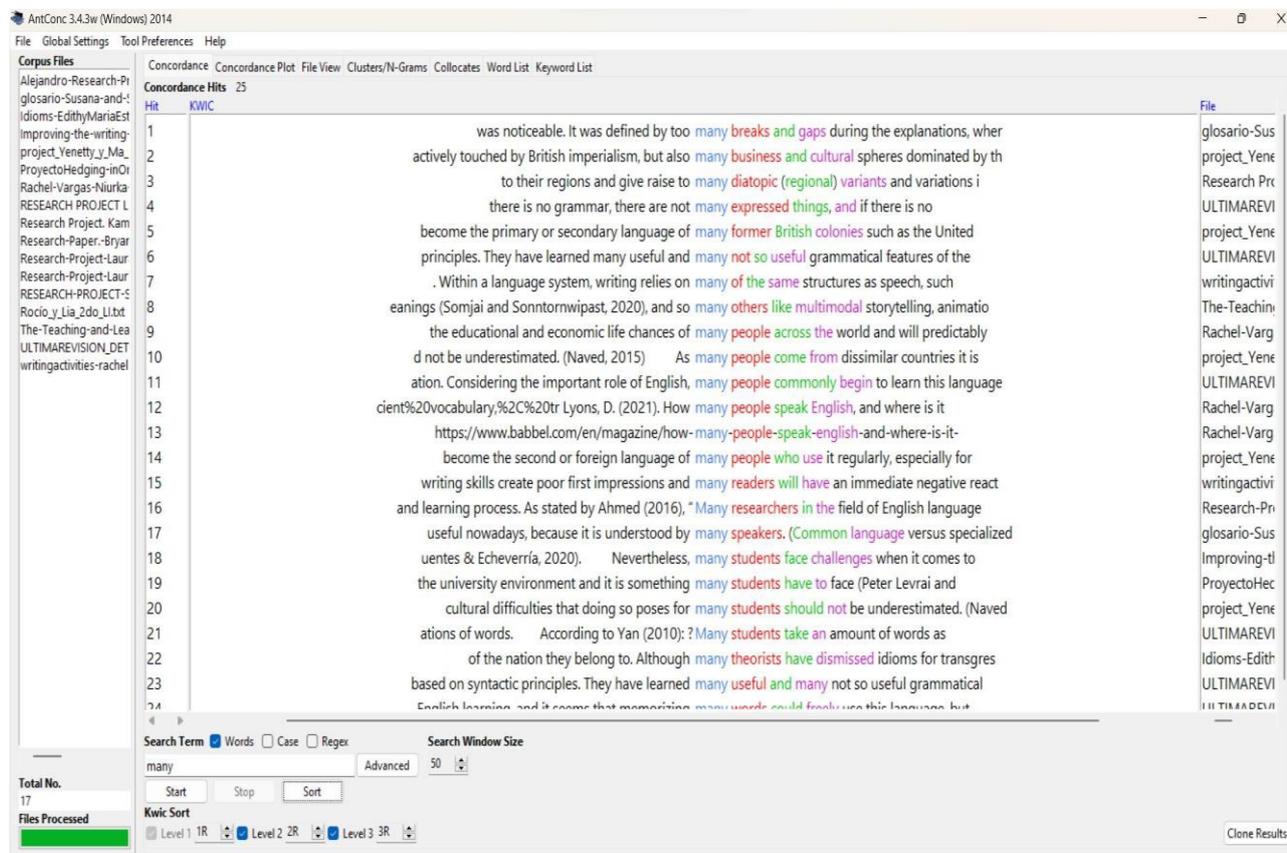
One of the most challenging processes was tagging the corpus. This process aimed to identify the rhetorical structure of the research projects. It was particularly difficult as not all moves were found in the texts, some fragments contained multiple moves, making demanding to differentiate them, and the order and frequency of moves varied.

### Corpus processing

After tagging and coding the texts, they were saved as \*.txt files in order to be processed with AntConc 3.4.3 w 2014 to examine the frequency of hedging phrases. This software was used since it has a freeware license and includes an easy-to-use, intuitive graphical user. It also offers a powerful concordance, word and keyword frequency generators along with tools for cluster and lexical bundle analysis and a word distributing plot (Anthony, L., 2005).

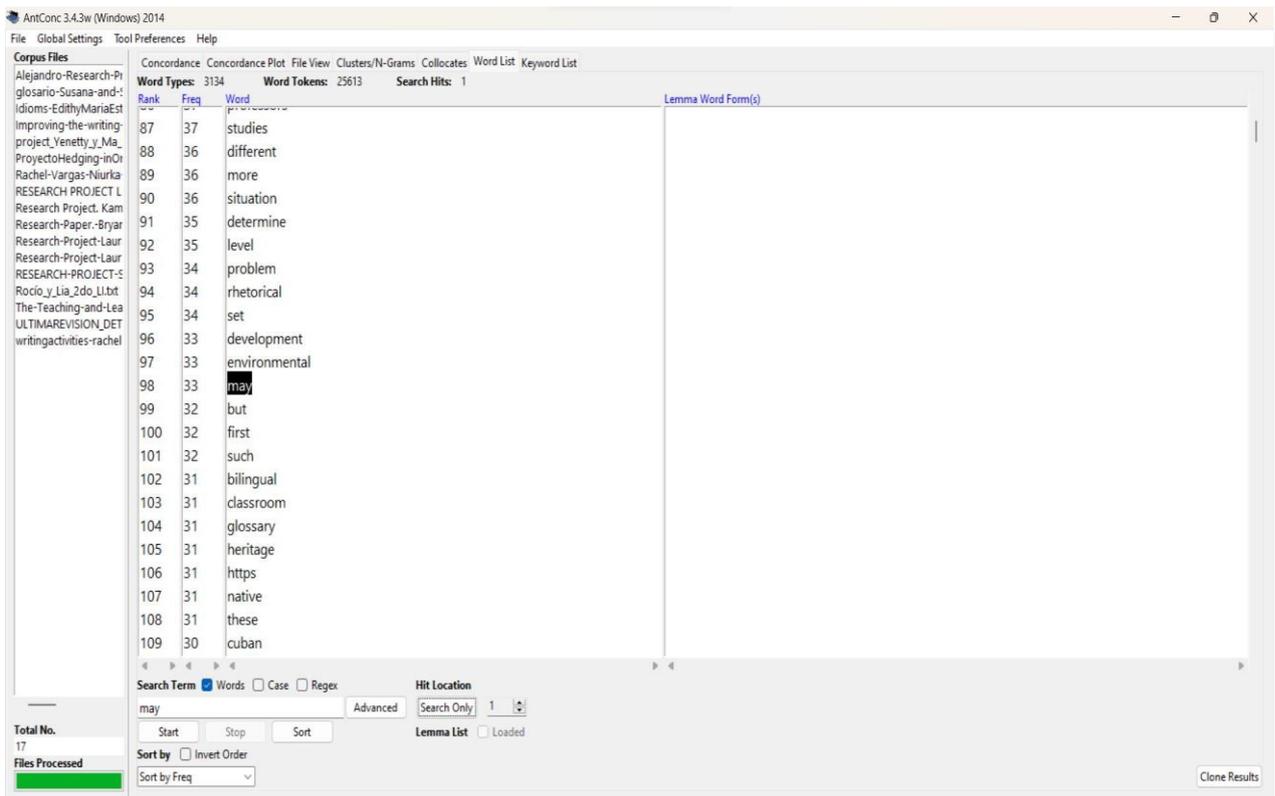
The *Concordance tool* (Figure 1) of the software was very useful for identifying the most recurrent hedging phrases of the identified moves in the coded research projects, as it provided groups of words that surrounded a specific term, in order of frequency. Moreover, the *Word List* (Figure 2) showed the words that appeared more frequently in the analyzed sections. Furthermore, the *Word Clusters/NGrams* (Figure 3) presented the words that appeared together with more frequency.

Figure 1. Concordance tool applied to a recurrent linguistic element



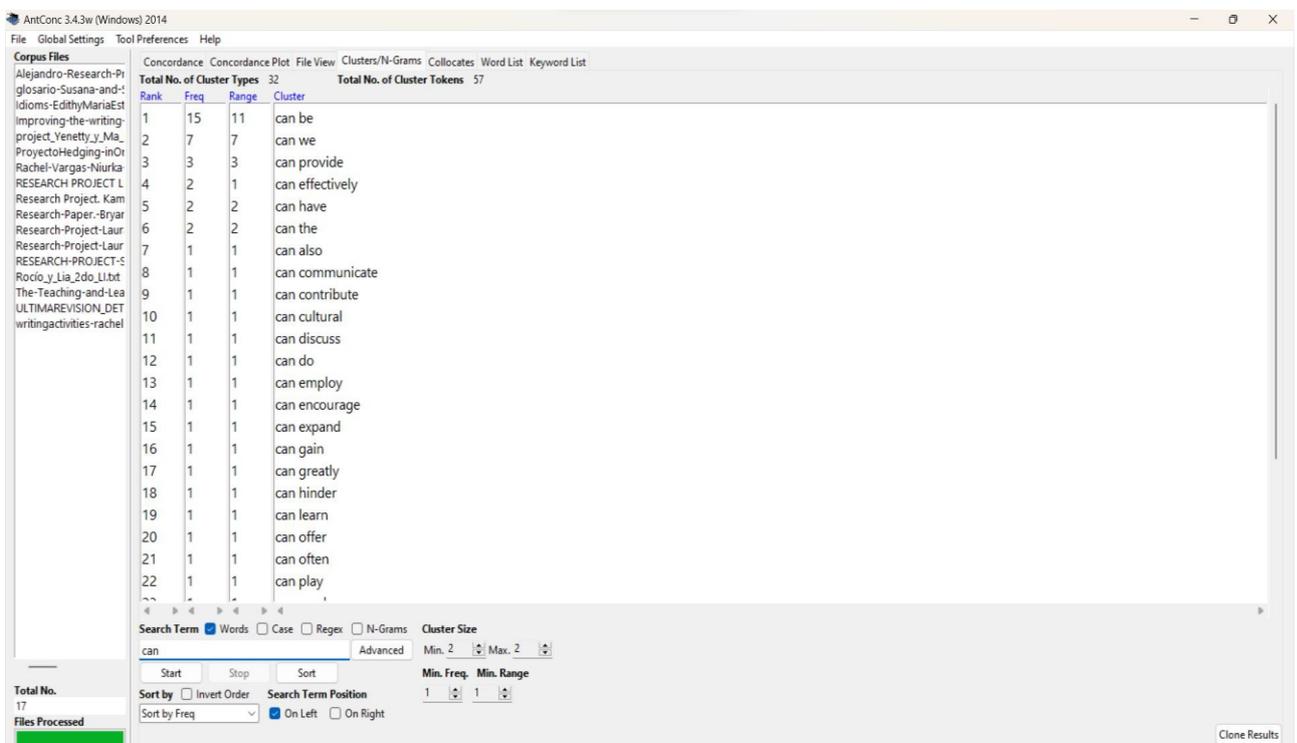
Source: NGrams tool

Figure 2. Word List



Source: NGrams tool

Figure 3. Word Clusters



Source: NGrams tool

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study focused on the design of a model describing the rhetorical moves and the most recurrent hedging phrases characterizing research projects. Three main stages were involved in the whole research process: 1) bibliographic review for establishing the theoretical framework to systematize the main concepts related with the topic of research, 2) diagnosis of the current situation concerning the writing of research projects based on both students' and professors' perceptions about the issue, and 3) design of a model describing the rhetorical moves and the most recurrent hedging devices characterizing the research projects. Details about each stage are provided below.

### **Bibliographic review**

The bibliographic review covered a range of topics to establish the theoretical foundations of the research. It delved into fundamental concepts such as writing, academic writing, and other core features. Additionally, it discussed the concept of genre, the term paper as a genre, genre analysis and its role in linguistic studies, as well as the criteria for constructing a corpus. Furthermore, it addressed issues related to the concepts and models of moves and steps as integral components of the genre's rhetorical analysis.

### **Diagnosis of the current situation concerning the of writing research projects**

In the diagnostic phase, thirty students of the academic years 2022 and 2023 of the degree course English Language with a Second Foreign Language and seven professors of the English Language Department at UCLV were provided with a questionnaire via Google Forms to determine their perceptions about the design and the writing of research projects. The questionnaires focused on two dimensions: academic writing skills and language skills. The former dimension centered around skills associated with the actual design and elaboration of a research project, while the latter was concerned with the style and mechanics of writing. For both dimensions, the participants were asked to specify the level of difficulty of the skills on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 as the easiest and 5 as the most difficult). The results of questionnaires are described below.

Based on the findings from the students' questionnaire, six items related with the first dimension (academic writing skills) were considered relatively difficult by a significant number of students:

- Searching for appropriate literature/bibliography using databases and other resources (42.1 %)
- Writing references to other published studies (citations/in-text citations) (57.9 %)
- Revising and evaluating previous research or studies related with topic of research and formulating a research problem/gap (31.6 %)
- Determining methodology and research methods (36.8 %)

- Choosing population and sample of research (36.8 %)
- Writing references/bibliography using appropriate citation method (36.8 %)

As for the other dimension (language skills), results seemed to be more favorable because only two of the items exhibited a relatively high level of difficulty:

- Understanding the specific language features of a research project as an academic genre (36.8 %)
- Summarizing/paraphrasing information from different sources (31.6 %)

Regarding the results of professors' questionnaire, it was found that five items related with the first dimension (academic writing skills) were considered as relatively difficult or difficult:

- Searching for appropriate literature/bibliography using databases and other resources (42.9 %).
- Writing references to other published studies (citations/in-text citations) (42.9 %)
- Establishing overall aim/objective and specific objectives of research project (57.1 %)
- Determining methodology and research methods (57.1 %)
- Writing references/bibliography using appropriate citation method (57.1 %)

It was somewhat surprising that regarding the language skill dimension, professors evaluated almost all items as either difficult or relatively difficult for the students.

In general, when evaluating the dimension associated with the academic writing skills, both students and professors considered as most difficult these items:

- Searching for appropriate literature/bibliography using databases and other resources (40 % of students and 42.9 % of professors)
- Writing references to other published studies (citations/in-text citations) (53.3% of students and 42.9 % of professors)
- Determining methodology and research methods (43.3 % of students and 57.1 % of professors)
- Writing references/bibliography using appropriate citation method (33.3 % of students and 57.1 % of professors)

However, for the language skill dimension, it was found that students evaluated as most difficult only two items (understanding the specific language features of a research project as an academic genre and summarizing/paraphrasing information from different sources (36.7 % for both), whereas professors labelled almost all items in this dimension as either difficult or relatively difficult.

These findings suggested that it was necessary to implement some actions so as to enhance the academic writing skills for designing and writing research projects. Therefore, the authors of the present article believed that a model describing the rhetorical structure and the most recurrent hedging phrases characterizing the research projects could be a valuable solution to satisfy this necessity.

### **Designing a model describing the rhetorical structure and most recurrent hedging phrases characterizing students' research projects**

As stated above, the move analysis of 17 research projects under study was conducted based on Swales' (1990) framework for the analysis of the Introduction section of research articles. Therefore, the conclusion drawn was that the analyzed research projects comprised three moves with some corresponding steps and hedging phrases as shown below:

#### *Move 1: Establishing the territory (the situation)*

In this move, the researcher sets the contexts and provides necessary background for the topic to be discussed.

- Step 1: Explaining the importance, interest and relevance of the research.

*To convey a fluent interpretation of cultural heritage, communication among people is essential in today's globalized world, and so is the learning of foreign languages, particularly English as the international language. (RP10)*

*...in the area of interlinguistic equivalences of PUs it seems appropriate to approach the learning of the phraseological equivalents of Cuban Spanish and American English. (RP6)*

- Step 2: Expressing generalities about the topic.

*Tourists come from different parts of the world, therefore, English is generally used as a language of communication, due to its status as an international language. (RP11)*

*...assessment may be seen from other perspectives and have as a consequence other different purposes. (RP4)*

- Step 3: Presenting foundational background.

*According to Yan (2010): Many students take a number of words as the main standard to measure the ability of English learning, and it seems that memorizing many words could... (RP1)*

*Advanced English proficiency has potentially determined the educational and economic life chances of many people across the world and will predictably remain prominent throughout the twenty first century (Lyons, 2021). (RP7)*

*Move 2: Establishing a niche (the problem)*

In this move, the author argues that there exists an uncovered “niche” within the current research, a void that must be addressed through further study.

- Step 1: Indicating the gap in previous writings.

*Therefore, while the status of English as a “world language” makes it highly desirable to earn a higher degree in that language, the linguistic and cultural difficulties that doing so poses for many students should not be underestimated. (RP5)*

- Step 2: Identifying a problem or need

*...because of the insufficient bilingual references sources dealing with idioms; students of the degree course English Language with French as A Second Foreign Language, from the Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas stumble upon some difficulties when trying to understand the general meaning of certain idioms, when trying to place those expressions in specific contexts or simply when trying to find their equivalents in Spanish. (RP2)*

*Second - year students of the degree course English Language with A Second Foreign Language (French) at Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas (UCLV) claim to have difficulties when using modal verbs in English accurately. (RP3)*

*Move 3: Occupying the niche (the solution)*

In this move, the author turns the niche, previously established in Move 2, into a space designed for research that she or he will fill. This means that she or he will propose the answer to the problem that was stated as existent.

- Step 1: Specifying the research question to be investigated

*How can students of the English Language Degree Course with second Foreign Language be taught about the correct use of hedging? (RP9)*

*How can we contribute to diminish the difficulties students of the degree course English Language with French as A Second Foreign Language, from Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas, face when translating English idioms into Spanish, when trying to understand their meanings and when placing them in different contexts? (RP2)*

- Step 2: Outlining the objective of the research.

*To elaborate a set of learning tasks for the independent study of phraseological equivalences of Cuban Spanish and American English. (RP6)*

*To propose a set of activities that will help first year students of the degree course English Language with A Second Foreign Language (French) to enhance their writing skills using phrasal verbs. (RP8)*

– Step 3: Describing the methodology

*For the accomplishment of the objectives previously mentioned, several methods will be used. (RP9)*

*The research holds to a general dialectical - materialist method from which the theoretical, empirical and statistical and mathematical methods are derived. (RP8)*

Once the moves and steps in the research projects were identified, proposing a model to help writers in organizing their ideas and selecting hedging phrases that align more effectively with their purposes in the future was the next step. This model has within its steps, in the third move, two final steps that are used, but infrequently. The purpose of adding them to the proposed model is to stimulate its use because of its importance for the projects’ organization and future advantages for upcoming research derived from it.

The table below shows a sample of the model of the rhetorical structure of the research projects and the most recurrent hedging phrases used.

**Table 1.** Sample of the model of the rhetorical structure of research projects and most recurrent hedging phrases

| MOVES   | PURPOSES   | STEPS   | HEDGING PHRASES   |
|---|--|---|---|
| <b>MOVE 1:<br/>ESTABLISHING<br/>THE TERRITORY<br/>(THE SITUATION)</b> | To set the context and provide necessary background for the topic to be discussed. | <b>Step 1:</b> Explaining the importance, interest and relevance of the research. | <i>“...it seems appropriate to approach the learning of the phraseological equivalents...”</i>  |
|   |  | <b>Step 2:</b> Expressing generalities about the topic.                           | <i>“...assessment may be seen from other perspectives...”</i>   |
|   |  | <b>Step 3:</b> Presenting foundational background.                                | <i>“Many students take a number of words as the main standard...”</i>   |
| <b>MOVE 2:<br/>ESTABLISHING A<br/>NICHE (THE<br/>PROBLEM)</b>         | To identify the existence of a gap or problem.                                     | <b>Step 1:</b> Indicating the gap in previous writings.                           | -----   |
|   |  | <b>Step 2:</b> Identifying a problem or need                                      | <i>“Second-year students... claim to have difficulties when using modal verbs in English accurately”</i>  |
| <b>MOVE 3:<br/>OCCUPYING THE<br/>NICHE (THE<br/>SOLUTION)</b>         | To state purpose and offer a solution.   | <b>Step 1:</b> Specifying the research question to be investigated.               | -----   |
|   |  | <b>Step 2:</b> Outlining the objective of the research                            | -----   |
|   |  | <b>Step 3:</b> Describing the methodology   | -----   |
|   |  | <b>Step 4:</b> Indicating the research project structure                          | -----   |
|   |  | <b>Step 5:</b> Expressing the contribution of the presented research project.     | <i>“The present research will considerably contribute to reduce the difficulties third-year students...”</i><br><i>“The study herein presented could be a valuable contribution to improve the academic writing skills of students”</i><br><i>“The present research may assist students’ translation competence with respect to...”</i> |

Source: Own elaboration

The designed model was given to some specialists for its assessment. Considering expertise, scientific degree and academic degree of specialists, the authors selected 5 professors of the

English Language Department, School of Humanities at Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas. Among the selected professors, 20 % held a PhD and 80 % were masters (MSc); 20 % of the respondents were Full Professors, 60 % Associate Professors and 20 % had more than one year of teaching experience. The five professors were given a questionnaire, applied online through Google Forms, WhatsApp and email, with indicators and a scale for its assessment. As previously specified, the indicators for the assessment were purpose, applicability, reliability, coverage, format and presentation, and originality. In the assessment scale, the lowest value was 1 and 5 the highest.

The results from the questionnaire are shown below:

- 100 % of professors considered that the model fulfills the objective for which it was created.
- 100 % of professors considered that the model is a very adequate tool to improve students’ academic writing skills.
- 100 % of professors considered the model as accurate and reliable.
- 80 % of professors considered that the model contains comprehensive information.
- 100 % of professors considered that the model is presented in such a format in which the information can be effortlessly accessed.
- 80 % of professors considered that the model has a design which is appealing to users.

In general, the specialists assessed the model as a valuable tool for improving the academic writing skills, particularly for the writing of research projects. Their suggestions were exhaustively analyzed and considered for the final edition of the proposed model of the rhetorical structure with the most recurrent hedging phrases for the research projects. Thus, the model will be a more resourceful and suitable tool for enhancing academic writing skills.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study provides a model describing the rhetorical moves and most recurrent hedging phrases characterizing research projects. The findings reveal that three moves with corresponding steps are consistently employed in research projects. These include Move 1: Establishing the territory (the situation); Move 2: Establishing a niche (the problem); and Move 3: Occupying the niche (the solution).

The present research may have some limitations that should not be disregarded. Firstly, the focus is limited to only students of the degree course English Language with a Second Foreign Language at UCLV, so that the findings may not be directly applicable to another population in other contexts. Secondly, disparities in writing styles and research project structure can influence the research results, because each individual has unique writing preferences and styles and follow some pre-established guidelines to write their projects.

The final limitation pertains to the number of research projects analyzed; only seventeen projects were analyzed, which can limit the relevant data to these specific projects.

Despite these possible limitations, the model has the potential to serve as a useful tool for enhancing the design and writing of research projects. The findings regarding the rhetorical organization and most recurrent hedging phrases of research projects offer significant implications for the enhancement of academic writing in different contexts, including the drafting of term papers, diploma papers, and even master's thesis. The insights gained from analyzing the rhetorical structure employed in the projects included in the sample can serve as valuable resources, providing a concrete understanding of effective research project organization. This will empower the university population to compose their research projects more clearly and systematically, so that their essential academic writing skills can be fostered.

The findings emphasize the importance of genre awareness in academic writing, as the use of rhetorical conventions reflects the authors' comprehension of the expectations of their academic community. Moreover, these findings underline the necessity to focus on both the core moves of research projects and the use of optional steps and hedging phrases that may contribute to the overall rhetorical effectiveness of academic writing skills. Incorporating genre-based approaches to writing can therefore help the academic community to better recognize the expectations of academic writing in their disciplines and their ability to produce coherent and effective research projects that align with academic writing conventions.

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