


# Understanding Chinese MA Students' Interpersonal Stance of Anticipatory "It" Patterns: Using Corpus Results to Guide Questionnaire and Discourse-Based Interview

SAGE Open  
January-March 2025: 1–15  
© The Author(s) 2025  
DOI: 10.1177/21582440251313953  
journals.sagepub.com/home/sgo  


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## Abstract

Anticipatory "it" pattern, which encodes interpersonal stance, plays a crucial role in academic writing. While previous studies have been explored the overuse and the underuse of this pattern among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and published writers, there has been limited exploration of how EFL learners use the anticipatory "it" pattern to express interpersonal stance in their academic writing. This study examines the relationship between Chinese MA students' perceptions of interpersonal stance and their use of anticipatory "it" patterns in academic writing. Utilizing a self-compiled corpus of Chinese MA theses corpus, supplemented by a questionnaire and discourse-based interviews, this research aims to identify factors influencing students' motivations to employ this pattern. Applying Hewings and Hewings' functional typology of interpersonal functions of the "it" clause, the results reveal varying correlations across four categories of interpersonal functions in Chinese MA theses. These findings offer valuable insights into the nuanced relationship between students' perceptions of interpersonal stance and their use of anticipatory "it" pattern, with implications for teaching and learning academic English writing.

## Plain language summary

### MA students' interpersonal stance of "it" patterns

This study focuses on a specific aspect of academic writing called the anticipatory "it" pattern, which helps writers express their interpersonal stance. While previous research has looked at how often English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and published writers use or misuse this pattern, there hasn't been much exploration into how EFL learners express their interpersonal stance through this pattern in academic writing. This study uses data from a collection of Chinese MA theses as a starting point, followed by a questionnaire and interviews, to investigate how Chinese MA students perceive interpersonal stances and use the anticipatory "it" pattern in their academic writing. The goal is to understand factors influencing students' decisions to use this pattern. By applying a typology of interpersonal functions of the "it" clause, the study finds correlations between students' perceptions and using the anticipatory "it" pattern in different categories of interpersonal functions. These findings provide valuable insights into how students' perceptions affect their use of this pattern in academic writing. Additionally, the study suggests implications for teaching and learning academic English writing.

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## Keywords

anticipatory “it” pattern, interpersonal stance, Chinese MA students, corpus, academic English writing

In the past decades, studies (e.g., Cortes, 2013; Groom, 2005; Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Kim, 2020; Larsson 2017; Li & Liu, 2016; Mao, 2020; Römer, 2009; Zhou & Liu, 2015) have been done to look for the linguistic mechanisms of stance applied by speakers or writers to present their opinions and evaluations in different registers and genres. Researchers (Hyland & Guinda, 2012) have uncovered that speakers or writers employ various ways to express their opinions and attitudes in speech and writing, thus achieving their communicative purposes. Hyland (2008) revealed that stance features are important to show writers’ claims and evaluations, and realize community conventions and personal preferences. However, scarce research is found on EFL learners’ interpersonal stance in academic writing through anticipatory “it” pattern.

What is referred to as the anticipatory “it” pattern (Ädel, 2014) is also commonly referred to as subject extraposition (Biber et al., 1999). The anticipatory “it” pattern is defined as a pattern that involves a type of extraposition, a “postponement which involves the replacement of the postponed element by a substitute form” of a subject (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1391). Two examples (i.e., E\_1; and E\_2) are provided with the two subjects italicized in each sentence.

E\_1 ...*it* is important to note that there are no strict “rules” for doing a move analysis. (U1-18)

E\_2 *It* is possible that the decrease may be... (U1-17)

The anticipatory “it” does not carry much information in itself. It only supplies “the structural requirement for an initial subject” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 89), however, it has a cataphoric reference to the clause subject. Thus, the anticipatory “it” studied in the present study differs from “it” used with anaphoric reference as in E\_3, and *it*-clefts as in E\_4, where “it” is empty of meaning.

E\_3 *It* aims to find out whether gender... (U1-02)

E\_4 *It* is a command that must be taken. (U3-05)

With the “it” subject, the “it” pattern can be used in academic writing in line with the principle that the long and sophisticated information slides to the end of the sentence, which is called end-focus or extraposition (Hyland & Tse, 2005; Quirk et al., 1985).

The “it” pattern has been studied in academic writing specifically (e.g., Ädel, 2014; Groom, 2005; Güngör, 2019; Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Kim, 2020; Larsson, 2017;

Mao, 2020; Römer, 2009). It is “a feature of academic writing that functions to express opinions and to comment on and evaluate propositions” (Hewings & Hewings, 2002, p. 102) while enabling writers to remain in the background and adding to the impression that they claim objectively and impersonally. Since the previous findings show that EFL learners’ writings tend to be overly informal (Gilquin & Paquot, 2008), it seems useful for EFL learners to adopt the “it” pattern (Ädel, 2014).

As one of the major registers, academic discourse (both written and spoken) has long been regarded as being objective (Jalali, 2017). However, studies (Hyland, 2008) have revealed that persuasion and assessment are more integrated in academic writings, so they can hardly be regarded as absolutely objective and depersonalized. Anticipatory “it” pattern constitutes an interesting phenomenon frequently used in academic writings compared to other genres (Biber et al., 1999). This pattern allows the writer to depersonalize opinions (Hewings & Hewings, 2002) and makes writing impersonal (Collins, 1994; G. Zhang, 2015).

These studies above have merely considered the notions of the overuse and the underuse of anticipatory “it” patterns in terms of frequency, without taking the relevant contexts and writers’ perceptions of interpersonal stance into consideration, to examine EFL learners’ deployment of these patterns in their academic writings. Though instances of anticipatory “it” patterns by EFL learners indeed show differences with published writers, the justification of possible causes of learners’ motivations to deploy these patterns is perhaps not quite as apparent in the earlier studies.

Yet the primary objective of the present study extends beyond circumventing the presumption that learners excessively or inadequately utilize anticipatory “it” patterns, leading to misconceptions. Instead, the focus is directed toward a more nuanced examination of the correlations between Chinese MA students’ interpersonal stance and their deployment of selected target anticipatory “it” patterns (four-word anticipatory “it” pattern occurring in five different texts and at least 10 times). This investigation employs a more comprehensive approach, integrating corpus-based analysis, a questionnaire and discourse-based interviews. To accomplish the aforementioned goal, we establish three objectives:

- (1) How is the distribution of anticipatory “it” patterns, encoding four categories of interpersonal

functions, observed in Chinese MA students' academic writing?

- (2) What correlations exist between Chinese MA students' perceptions of interpersonal stance and the deployment of selected anticipatory "it" patterns in their academic writing?
- (3) What are the potential causes behind Chinese MA students' motivations to use these selected anticipatory "it" patterns in their academic writing?

## Literature Review

### *Semantic and Functional Classification of Anticipatory "It" Pattern*

From the semantic perspective, Groom (2005) divided anticipatory "it" patterns into six different types: adequacy, desirability, difficulty, expectation, importance, and validity. In addition, he found "clear associations" (p. 159) between certain meaning groups and certain subpatterns, which was later supported by Römer (2009). For example, the meaning groups of validity and difficulty are the most frequently occurring subpatterns for *it is ADJ that/to* in both Groom (2005) and Römer (2009).

From the functional perspective, Hewings & Hewings (2002) put forward that there are four interpersonal roles of clauses starting with an anticipatory "it" (Table 1): hedges (withholding the writers' full commitment to the content of the extraposed subject), attitude markers (expressing the writers' attitude or evaluation toward the content), emphatics (amplifying what author claim in the extraposed subject), and attribution (convincing the readers to accept their claims through the reference). Larsson (2017) excluded the attribution category from further analyses, while he added the observation category to the classification of Hewings and Hewings (2002). According to Larsson (2017, p. 60), "observations are used to make effectively neutral observations presenting propositional content."

One thing that needs to be noted is that there is no clear-cut division in the classification of anticipatory "it" patterns, therefore they are classified according to their most common use in the present study.

### *Anticipatory "It" Pattern in Learners' Academic Writing*

From the EAP perspective, a large portion of researchers (i.e., Ädel, 2014; Güngör, 2019; Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Larsson, 2016, 2017; Jalali, 2017) highlighted the significance of anticipatory "it" pattern in academic discourse analysis. Although it is common in academic writings (Biber et al., 1999; Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Hyland, 2008; Larsson, 2016; G. Zhang, 2015), some

**Table 1.** Classification of Anticipatory "It" Pattern (Adapted from Hewings & Hewings, 2002, p. 372).

1 Hedges	
1a the writer expresses uncertainty toward the issues he or she proposes	<i>it is likely</i> <i>it is possible that</i>
1b the writer indicates what he or she thinks to be the case	<i>it can be argued</i>
2 Attitude markers	
2a the writer thinks that the following thing is worthy of note	<i>it is worth noting</i>
2b the writer's evaluation	<i>it is easy to</i>
3 Emphatics	
3a the writer indicates the truth of a proposition or a conclusion	<i>it is evident</i> <i>it is apparent</i>
3b the writer tends to guide the reader to focus on a point	
3c the writer strongly believes in what is possible/important, etc.	<i>it should be noted</i> <i>it is obvious</i>
4 Attribution	
4a specific attribution (with a reference to the literature)	<i>it is pointed out</i> ( + reference)
4b general attribution (no referencing)	<i>it is estimated</i> ( + no reference)

studies (Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Kim, 2020; Mao, 2020) proved that non-native students may have difficulty in using anticipatory "it" pattern since many languages have no counterpart to this pattern. M. Q. Liu (1985) put forward that the anticipatory "it," which is specific in English, does not conform to any expression in Chinese.

Previous studies (Cortes, 2013; Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Hyland & Guinda, 2012; Jalali, 2017; Larsson, 2017; L. Zhang & Zhang, 2021) have shown that there are variations in the use of anticipatory "it" patterns across different degrees of writing expertise. Other studies have also uncovered that the use of the "it" pattern tends to rely on different genres, for example, research articles versus master theses (Jalali et al., 2009), and different academic disciplines, for example, history versus biology (Peacock, 2011). Since the focus of the present study is on EFL learners' writings specifically, the related literature review gives an overview of studies that concerns the overall use of anticipatory "it" patterns by learners' writings compared to published writings.

The finding that EFL learners use the "it" pattern less than published writers is supported by Jalali (2017), who found that Iranian L1 Persian postgraduate students relied on this pattern serving as hedging and emphatic devices less than research article writers had done. Jiang (2010) also found that Chinese EFL learners tended to inadequately use this pattern which can increase the

stylistic objectivity, academic rigor, and persuasiveness of research articles. However, the opposite results were found in seven other studies of research articles in the EFL context (Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Ju, 2016; Larsson, 2016; Y. Liu & Zhou, 2014; Pan & Liu, 2019; L. Zhang and Zhang, 2021). The finding in the Hewings and Hewings' (2002) study was that non-native EFL learners tended to apply this pattern to "make a much greater and more overt effort to persuade readers of the truth of their statements than do the published writers" (Hewings & Hewings, 2002, p. 367), which is a conscious choice the writers make to select "the most persuasive way to establish credibility and seek recognition and agreement" (Y. Liu & Zhou, 2014, p. 492). It was especially *it*-clause emphatics and attitude markers in students' writings that were used much more frequently compared with those in published writings. One potential explanation for the more extensive use of the pattern by the EFL learners (Hewings & Hewings, 2002) is that Chinese postgraduates tried to use these patterns more to increase the objectivity of their research (Ju, 2016). It was also supported by L. Zhang & Zhang, (2021) that L2 learners were aware of this pattern which could be used to foreground "the writer's evaluation or claims without explicitly identifying its source" (Hyland, 2008, p. 53). Pan & Liu (2019) argued that EFL learners preferred to use this pattern to display their claims in a depersonalized strategy. Jiang (2010) and Ju (2016) further discovered that the most frequent pattern adopted by Chinese learners was, that is, *it is clear that, it can be seen that*, which "signal unsustainable, strong language or even impoliteness" (Jalali, 2017, p. 38). An analysis of this pattern in L2 students' writings and published research articles in the same discipline of Applied Linguistics was carried out in Larsson's study (2016), which showed clear differences between L2 learner's writings and published research articles; for example, EFL students' more frequent use of this pattern (e.g., *it is possible that*) to hedge claims. Interestingly, there was also a clear and significant difference between the EFL learners and published writers for the most frequent predicate subpattern, *it V possible to-inf*. It suggests that "learners have a tendency to cling to certain high-frequency structures and overuse them in their own writing" (Larsson, 2016, p. 75), something that has been referred to as writers' tendency to use "lexical teddy bears" (Hasselgren, 1994, p. 256).

Though certain tendencies were noted in the above-mentioned studies that led to the present study, these studies did not sufficiently explore how student writers perceive interpersonal stances in their academic writings. Besides, the existing corpus-based analysis is not ideal for eliciting the perceptions of student writers for the interpersonal stance of anticipatory "it" pattern in their academic writing, because the further discussion should

be mainly based on authors' assumptions and speculations. Moreover, the related literature shows that few studies examine possible causes of EFL learners' motivations to use these patterns (Jalali, 2013).

## Methodology

To address the identified issues, the study will follow a multi-method research approach that includes a corpus-based analysis, a questionnaire, and discourse-based interviews. The research will be guided by Hewings and Hewings' functional typology of interpersonal roles of anticipatory "it" clauses, which is commonly used in analyzing stance deployment (Güngör, 2019; Jalali, 2017). The first step will involve conducting a corpus-based analysis to identify patterns of anticipatory "it" clauses in the academic writing of Chinese MA students. Following this, a questionnaire will be administered to gather students' perceptions of interpersonal stance and their motivations for using these specific "it" clauses. Finally, discourse-based interviews will be conducted to explore in-depth the possible causes behind their choices. This combined approach aims to enhance the understanding of how Chinese EFL learners express interpersonal stances in their academic writing.

## Corpus Building

The research data is one electronic corpus: Chinese MA theses corpus (CMATC) in applied linguistics. CMATC consists of 80 MA theses written by Chinese postgraduates of Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics from four universities in China, coded as U1, U2, U3, and U4, with 20 theses chosen from each respectively. The reasons for selecting these four universities are listed as follows: Firstly, these universities cover the north, middle, and south parts of China. Secondly, the students of these four universities possess different levels of English language proficiency and can comprehensively represent the general situation of master's thesis writing in China. Thirdly, some authors of the last university can be tracked down to finish the questionnaire and the interview, which will be used to detect Chinese MA students' perceptions of interpersonal stances in their academic writings. Meanwhile, all the theses are written in a decade ranging from 2012 to 2021, so the development of EFL learners' writing skills is relatively distinct, which can be observed through research.

## Procedure of Analysis on Corpus

There are four steps to carry out the analysis.

The first step involves data transformation. All the writings in CMATC downloaded in PDF format are

transformed into TXT format with diagrams, tables, footnotes, and references, with the appendix removed. The basic information is presented in Appendix A below.

The second step includes data identification. The corpus is explored to identify anticipatory “it” patterns by AntConc. In this study, the pattern of interest has to occur in five texts and at least ten times (Biber et al., 1999). Only four-word anticipatory “it” pattern is analyzed since it is more frequently used than five-word clusters and its functions are more varied than three-word bundles. More details about the retrieval of the target anticipatory “it” patterns in the corpus are described further below.

One tool, i.e., clusters, in AntConc, identifies word combinations in the corpus. With the keyword “it” and the number of minimum optimal frequencies (10), the minimum range (5), and the required number of words in the patterns (4), this tool helps find and show the actual frequencies of all word patterns in the corpus. Then all these patterns are subsequently examined manually to remove all instances including the constructions like E\_1 and E\_2 described earlier. Anticipatory “it” patterns identified in this way are regarded as target patterns.

The third step requires data classification. Based on the selected target anticipatory “it” patterns in the corpus, they are classified into different groups using the taxonomy developed by Hewings & Hewings (2002).

The fourth step consists of frequency calculation. The corpus results are reported with the actual raw frequency of each pattern, the normalized frequency of each pattern, and the total frequency of patterns in each category in CMATC (Table 2). It must be noted that this procedure had already been used in some previous corpus-based studies of lexical bundles (e.g., Biber, 2006; Cortes, 2013; Hyland, 2008; Jalali, 2013)

One point that needs mentioning in this step is that this study excludes the attribution category from further analysis due to the retrieval of no target patterns in the attribution category in CMATC while adding the category of observation to this typology since a variety of patterns belonging to this category is observed in MA theses.

### A Corpus-Based Questionnaire

The first part of the questionnaire in the present study is to detect Chinese MA students’ perceptions of hedging and emphatic stances in their academic writings. It is largely acknowledged that hedges are used to show “possibility rather than certainty” (Hyland, 1996, p. 251) while emphatics are used to “strengthen the force of the utterance” (Hewings & Hewings, 2002, p. 373). The frequent use of emphatics while rare use of hedges by

**Table 2.** Comparison of Distribution Frequencies of Anticipatory “It” Patterns in CMATC.

Subcategories	Anticipatory “it” patterns	Frequency	Total
Hedges	<i>it is impossible to</i>	15(11)	46(34)
	<i>it is possible that</i>	15(11)	
	<i>it is possible to</i>	12(9)	
	<i>it is likely that</i>	4(3)	
Attitude markers	<i>it is important to</i>	24(17)	174(125)
	<i>it is easy to</i>	24(17)	
	<i>it is hoped that</i>	22(16)	
	<i>it is worth noting</i>	21(15)	
	<i>it is believed that</i>	19(14)	
	<i>it is difficult to</i>	18(13)	
	<i>it is worth mentioning</i>	15(11)	
	<i>it is hard to</i>	13(9)	
	<i>it is reasonable to</i>	11(8)	
	<i>it is interesting to</i>	7(5)	
Emphatics	<i>it is necessary to</i>	91(66)	191(138)
	<i>it is clear that</i>	26(19)	
	<i>it should be noted</i>	24(17)	
	<i>it is obvious that</i>	23(17)	
	<i>it is necessary for</i>	16(12)	
Observation	<i>It should be noticed</i>	11(8)	309(223)
	<i>it can be seen</i>	105(76)	
	<i>it is found that</i>	72(52)	
	<i>it can be concluded</i>	29(21)	
	<i>it can be found</i>	25(18)	
	<i>it can be inferred</i>	22(16)	
	<i>it was found that</i>	20(14)	
	<i>it is noted that</i>	14(10)	
	<i>it is suggested that</i>	12(9)	
	<i>it can be observed</i>	10(7)	

Chinese MA students seems to be inconsistent with their cultural and rhetorical features of writing.

The second part of the questionnaire in the present study is to detect Chinese MA students’ perceptions of attitudinal and observational stances in their academic writings. As for perceptions of attitudinal and observational stances, attitude markers are to express the writers’ attitude or evaluation toward the content while observations are to “make affectively neutral observations presenting propositional contents” (Larsson, 2017, p. 60). An interesting finding is that Chinese MA students frequently use both anticipatory “it” patterns encoding attitudinal stance and observational stances though these two perceptions seem to be opposite. After the process of the questionnaire, discourse-based interviews, which “compares participants’ statements of writing with discursive strategies they use in texts” (Olinger, 2014), are conducted to let Chinese MA students elaborate their perceptions of interpersonal stances. It is hoped that the discourse-based interviews can uncover some possible causes of students’ deployment of selected anticipatory “it” patterns in academic writing.

## Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire (Appendix B) *Perceptions of Stance in English Academic Writing Questionnaire (PSEAWQ)* is developed according to the psychometric scale development (DeVellis, 2016; Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). The understanding of hedging, emphatic, attitudinal, and observational stances in academic writing generates the questionnaire, including nineteen items in the initial list.

For the content validity, an expert in applied linguistics was invited to scrutinize the initial items. Iteration of the initial list resulted according to her suggestion that it was more appropriate to remove three items (“A strong stance shows that the writer is aggressive,” “A weak stance makes me feel that the writer is humble and cautious” and “Rather than expressing my own attitudes, I prefer to “report” my observation by using *it is found that, it can be seen, it can be concluded, etc.*”). Three graduate students who majored in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics in Foreign Languages in their second year were then invited to check for the readability of the items. The final PSEAWQ, including sixteen items, is a five-point Likert scale.

**Participants.** A total of 152 volunteers were recruited from U4. Twelve participants were postgraduate students who majored in Applied Linguistics in their first or second year (first year,  $n = 5$ ; second year,  $n = 7$ ). A total of 140 participants were English-major undergraduates in their second year. At the time of data collection, all participants had been studying English for at least 5 years since their high school, including at least 2 years of intensive study of English as their major.

**Procedure of the Questionnaire.** The authors invited 152 volunteers to finish the questionnaire, that is, PSEAWQ. Considering all participants were high-level English-major graduate students, we adopted the English version with an explanation for some keywords (e.g., assertive stance, tentative stance, attitudinal stance, observational stance) that participants might not be familiar with. We informed the participants of the purpose of the present study. It should be noted that all participants are anonymous. Each participant spent about 15 minutes finishing the questionnaire.

## Discourse-Based Interviews

A discourse-based interview (DBI) is a powerful research method used to intervene in the tacit judgments and performances of writing (Lancaster, 2016). It helps researchers tap into participants’ practical consciousness by asking about their choices and decisions. In the current study, we try to use this method to compare Chinese MA students’ stated interpersonal stance about academic

writing with its actual expression through anticipatory “it” patterns in their MA theses. Specifically, the exploratory study at issue examines how Chinese MA students in Applied Linguistics, who are four writers of the MA theses in CMATC, express their interpersonal stances in academic writings, as well as how they account retrospectively for their interpersonal-stance-related choices.

The interview procedure is similar to Odell et al’s (1983). We first collected samples according to the corpus-based results from these four participants’ writings. Second, four participants were presented with two options for each sample. To be clear, the “a” options were their original sentences with their anticipatory “it” patterns included; the “b” options were our revisions, where we replaced anticipatory “it” patterns with others (the revised parts are italicized; see Appendix C). Participants were given the relative context of these selected sentences. Lastly, we asked the four participants about the reasons for their choices, and their responses were shown in the right-hand column in the appendix.

## Results

### Data Results of the Corpus

Table 2 shows the target anticipatory “it” patterns found in CMATC and different functional categories with patterns belonging to each one. Table 2 provides a comprehensive understanding of the distribution and frequency of anticipatory “it” patterns within the specified subcategories, shedding light on the linguistic nuances employed in the text. The corpus results are reported with the actual raw frequency of each pattern, and the total frequency of patterns in each category in CMATC, with the normalized frequency of the above two in the brackets. For example, *it is possible to* occurs fifteen times, contributing to a total of 46 occurrences in the text, with a normalized frequency of 11 instances in a total of 34. All the other statistics in the table are listed in the same way.

Table 3 shows different functional categories with the target anticipatory “it” patterns found in CMATC. In the subcategory of hedges, four types of expressions are used to convey a degree of uncertainty or caution. These phrases are employed judiciously, contributing to 6.39% of the text. The subcategory of attitude markers encompasses a variety of expressions, totaling 10 types, which constitute a substantial 24.17% of the text. They serve to communicate the author’s perspective, beliefs, and the importance or difficulty associated with certain concepts. Emphatics play a prominent role in the text, with six types, and hold a significant share of 26.53% in the overall composition. Emphatics are employed to emphasize key points and underscore the importance of clarity of certain statements. The observation subcategory

**Table 3.** Overall Functional Description of Target Anticipatory “It” Patterns in CMATC.

Subcategories	Type	Frequency	Percentage %
Hedges: <i>it is impossible to, it is possible that, it is possible to, it is like that</i>	4	46	6.39
Attitude markers: <i>it is important to, it is easy to, it is hoped that, it is worth noting, it is believed that, it is difficult to, it is worth mentioning, it is hard to, it is reasonable to, it is interesting to</i>	10	174	24.17
Emphatics: <i>it is necessary to, it is clear that, it is obvious that, it should be noted, it is necessary for, it should be noticed</i>	6	191	26.53
Observation: <i>it can be seen, it is found that, it can be concluded, it can be found, it can be inferred, it was found that, it is noted that, it is suggested, it can be observed</i>	9	309	42.92
Total	28	720	100

dominates the text, constituting 42.92% with a total of nine types. Those expressions are to present findings, draw inferences, and provide a nuanced perspective. This subcategory contributes substantially to the overall descriptive and analytical nature of the text.

To compare Chinese MA students’ interpersonal stance about academic writing with its actual expression through anticipatory “it” patterns and figure out possible causes of Chinese MA students’ motivations to use these selected anticipatory “it” patterns in their academic writing, a combination of a questionnaire and discourse-based interviews based on the corpus-based results is adopted in this study, which helps throw light on Chinese students’ perceptions of interpersonal stance in academic writing, thus improving the reliability of the further analysis of different interpersonal functions between anticipatory “it” patterns and encoding stance expressions used in academic writing by Chinese MA students.

**Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of the Questionnaire.** EFA is a statistical technique used to explore the latent structure among the variables in the data (Field, 2013). It helps to understand how the variables group together and whether they can be explained by a smaller number of latent factors. For the first half of the questionnaire, through the descriptive statistical analyses with SPSS Statistics 26 (O’Connor, 2000), the mean scores ranged from 3.06 (item 6) to 3.82 (Item 9) and the standard deviation ranged from 0.790 (Item 9) to 1.044 (item 6) (Table 4). The calculation of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling is  $KMO = 0.688$ , indicating the

**Table 4.** Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Hedging and Emphatic Stances on Nine Items.

Item No.	Mean	Std. Deviation	n
Item 1	3.51	0.970	152
Item 2	3.49	0.942	152
Item 3	3.70	0.955	152
Item 4	3.68	0.945	152
Item 5	3.61	0.991	152
Item 6	3.06	1.044	152
Item 7	3.57	0.967	152
Item 8	3.31	0.998	152
Item 9	3.82	0.790	152

adequacy of the sample size (Hutcheson & Sofroniou, 1999).

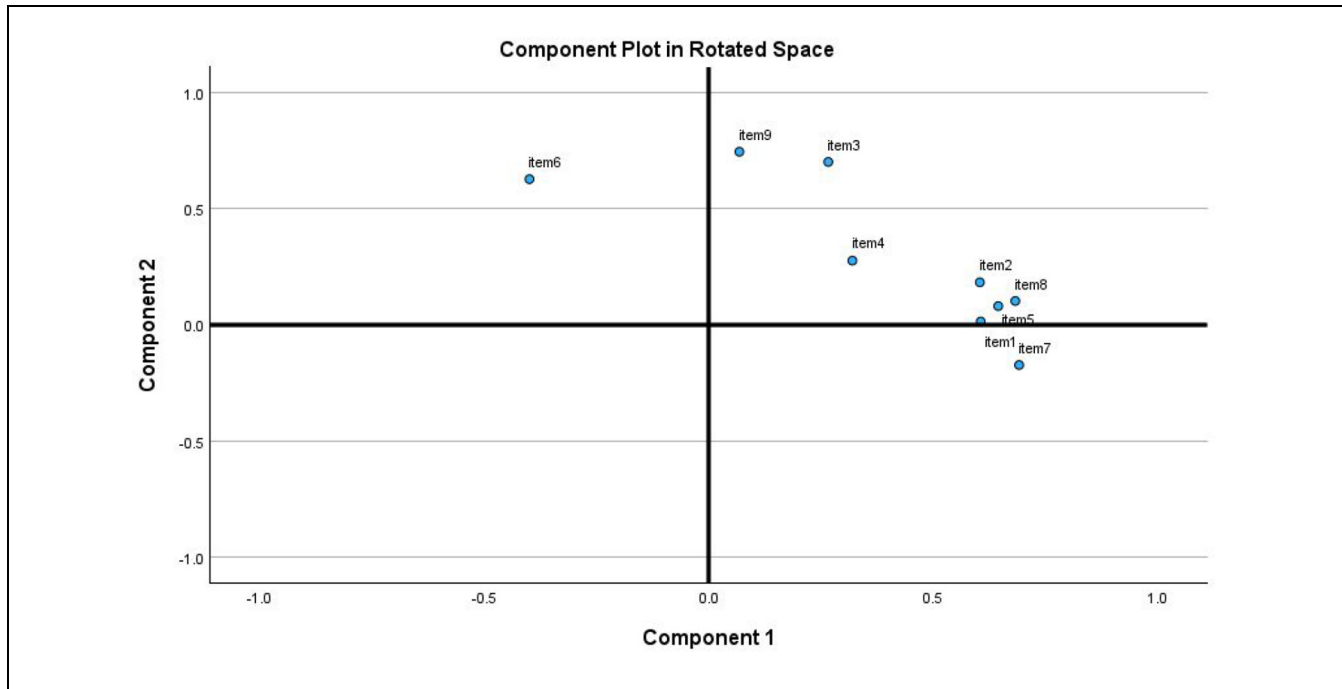
With the help of dimension reduction, two underlying factors are extracted from maximum likelihood estimation with direct rotation on the nine items (Figure 1).

From the above, these two components can be concluded as Factor 1 emphatic stance and Factor 2 hedging stance. The results of EFA in hedging and emphatic stances have been calculated below (Table 5).

Considering the sample size, the items with a factor loading over 0.38 are retained. As a result, Item 4 with a factor loading of 0.326 is removed. The eight retained items explain 49.12% of the total variance (Table 6).

What emerges from the questionnaire shows that Factor 1, labeled as emphatic stance, referring to the fact that Chinese MA students prefer assertive stances to tentative stances in their academic writings, indicates that Chinese MA students consider assertive stance as good value-laden formulations to show certainty (e.g., Item 2: A strong stance sounds more certain, therefore it can make academic writing more academic and serious). The findings reveal that there is a positive correlation between Chinese MA students’ perception of assertive stance and the actual use of anticipatory “it” pattern encoding emphatic stance in academic writing as well as the discourse-based interview, which supports the previous statement that EFL learners’ stance deployment plays an important role in their perceptions of stance (Chang, 2012).

The results of the questionnaire show that Factor 2, labeled as hedging stance, indicates Chinese MA students’ preference for a tentative stance or less preference for an assertive stance in their academic writings. This factor indicates that Chinese MA students consider that using a tentative stance is more appropriate (e.g., Item 3: Since I can not be 100% sure, I tend to use a tentative stance which is more precise.). However, it is strange to find that Chinese MA students rarely use anticipatory “it” pattern encoding hedging stance in their academic writings, so it seems that there is no significant



**Figure 1.** Component plot hedging and emphatic stances in rotated space.

**Table 5.** Results of EFA in Hedging and Emphatic Stances ( $n = 152$ ).

Factor	Items	Factor loadings	
		1	2
Emphatic stance	Item 1	0.604	
	Item 2	0.609	
	Item 4	0.326	
	Item 5	0.650	
	item 7	0.688	
	item 8	0.685	
Hedging stance	Item 3		0.705
	item 6		0.637
	Item 9		0.746

correlation between students' perception of hedging stance and the actual use of anticipatory "it" pattern in expressing tentativeness in academic writing. That means they might prefer to use assertive stances in their

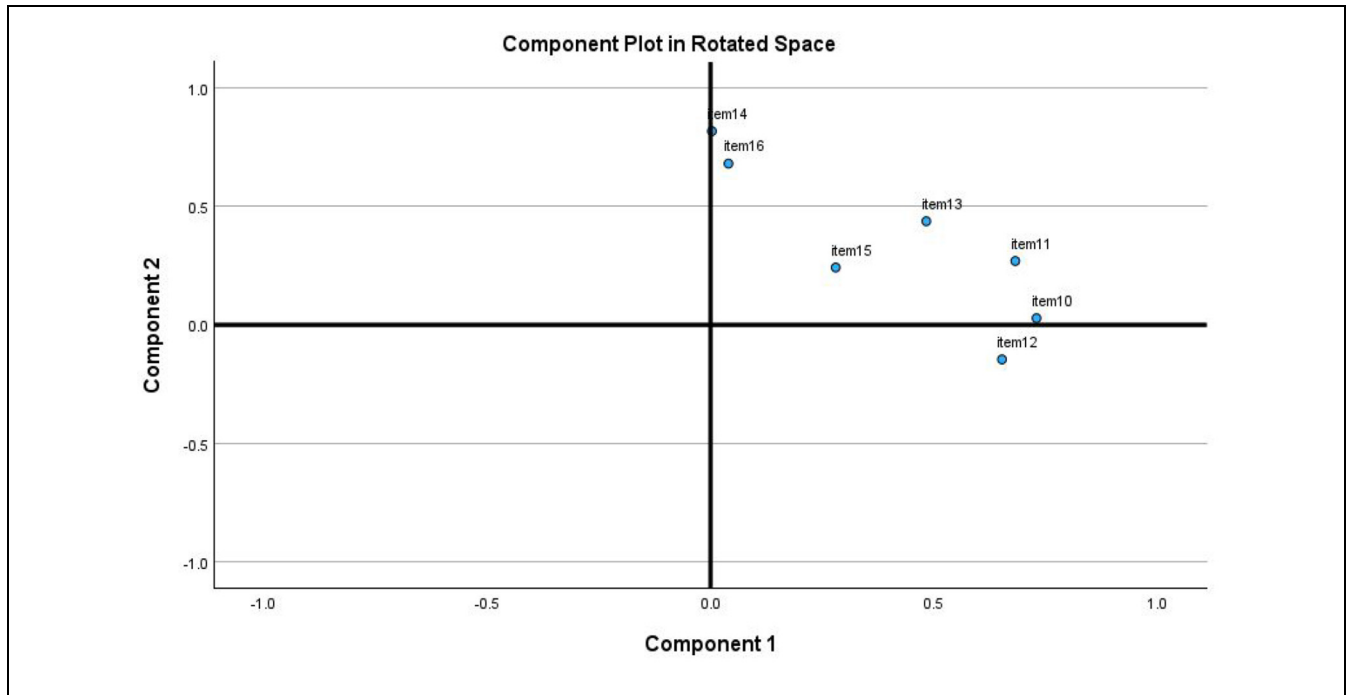
academic writings, or they might intentionally avoid using tentative stances despite their expression of preference for tentative claims. The questionnaire results show this contradiction: though Chinese MA students regard tentative stance as more academic and precise (mean value of Item 3 = 3.70) and leave some space for other views (mean value of Item 9 = 3.82), they do believe that they have to be assertive in their academic writings since they have done the research (mean value of Item 1 = 3.51). The discourse-based interview further confirms this contradiction between Chinese MA students' perception of hedging stance and the actual use of anticipatory "it" pattern serving as hedging devices in their academic writings: Student B's response to Sentence 2 reveals his intention to expand discursive space for readers by using *it is possible that*, however, he still chose (a) (Appendix C) since he aimed to persuade the readers to accept his opinions.

For the second half of the questionnaire, the descriptive statistical analyses of attitudinal and observational

**Table 6.** Total Variance Explained for Hedging and Emphatic Stances.

Component	Initial eigenvalues			Extraction sums of squared loadings		
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %
1	2.392	29.897	29.897	2.392	29.897	29.897
2	1.538	19.226	49.122	1.538	19.226	49.122





**Figure 2.** Component plot of attitudinal and observational stances in rotated space.

**Table 7.** Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Attitudinal and Observational Stances on Seven Items.

Item No.	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Item 10	3.69	0.783	152
Item 11	3.77	0.776	152
Item 12	3.51	0.797	152
Item 13	3.58	0.818	152
Item 14	3.64	0.849	152
Item 15	3.54	0.876	152
Item 16	3.34	0.969	152

stances are shown below. It can be seen in Table 7 that the mean scores range from 3.34 (Item 16) to 3.77 (Item 11) and the standard deviation ranges from 0.776 (Item 11) to 0.969 (Item 16). The calculation of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling is  $KMO = 0.664$ , indicating the sample size is adequate for exploratory factor analysis (Hutcheson & Sofroniou, 1999).

With the help of dimension reduction, two underlying factors are extracted. In Figure 2, these two components can be concluded as Factor 1 attitudinal stance and Factor 2 observational stance.

The results of EFA in attitudinal and observational stances have been calculated below (Table 8). Table 8 shows the results of EFA. The six items whose factor

loading is over 0.38 (Stevens, 2009) are retained while Item 15 whose factor loading is 0.360 is removed.

In Table 9, the six retained items explain 52.04% of the total variance.

The results of the second part of the questionnaire show that Factor 1, labeled as attitudinal stance, indicates Chinese MA students' preference to express their attitude or evaluation toward the content. This factor indicates that Chinese MA students consider that using an attitudinal stance is more appropriate (e.g., Item 10: I prefer to use *it*-patterns encoding attitudinal stance (e.g., *it is difficult to*, *it is important to*, *it is interesting to*) to indicate my affective attitude to propositions, conveying surprise, importance, frustration, and so on). The findings reveal a positive correlation between Chinese MA students' perception of attitudinal stance and the actual use of anticipatory "it" pattern encoding attitudinal stance in academic writing.

The results of the second part of the questionnaire show that Factor 2, labeled as observational stance, indicates Chinese MA students' preference to make affectively neutral observations presenting propositional contents. This factor indicates that Chinese MA students consider that using an observational stance is more appropriate (e.g., Item 15: I prefer to use impersonal patterns *it is (was) + passive verb* (e.g., *it was found that*) and *it can be + passive verb* (e.g., *it can be seen*) to narrate the results more objectively and show the reliability

**Table 8.** Results of EFA in Attitudinal and Observational Stances ( $n = 152$ ).

Factor	Items	Factor loading	
		1	2
Attitudinal stance	Item 10	0.702	
	Item 11	0.703	
	Item 12	0.632	
	Item 13	0.521	
	Item 15	0.360	
Observational stance	Item 14		0.813
	Item 16		0.700

of my observation). The findings reveal a positive correlation between Chinese MA students' perception of observational stance and the actual use of anticipatory "it" patterns encoding observational stance in academic writing.

## Discussion

In Table 2, our analysis reveals that Chinese MA theses exhibit maximum utilization of the anticipatory "it" pattern in observation (43.58%) and minimal use of the hedges (5.92%). An intriguing finding emerges as anticipatory "it" patterns of hedges, signaling writers' tentative stance, are seldom employed by Chinese MA students ( $n = 34$ ), while patterns serving as emphatics are used frequently by Chinese MA students ( $n = 138$ ) (Table 2). The infrequent use of hedges (e.g., *it is possible that*) by Chinese MA students appears inconsistent with their cultural and rhetorical writing features.

Our investigation, involving a questionnaire and discourse-based interviews, identifies positive correlations between interpersonal stances (specifically, emphatic stance, attitudinal stance, and observational stance) and the overall frequency of anticipatory "it" patterns encoding these stances. However, it is noteworthy that no statistically significant correlation is found between hedging stance and the total frequency of anticipatory "it" patterns encoding tentativeness.

As posited by Scollon and Scollon (1995), Asians' inclination toward rhetorical strategies of indirectness is often attributed to interpersonal face politeness and

cultural structuring of situations and participant roles. However, our findings indicate that Chinese MA students prefer assertive stances in academic writing or intentionally avoid tentative stances, despite expressing a preference for tentative claims. Two primary reasons account for this inconsistency.

Firstly, the previous learning experiences seems evident. Rote learning for English exam preparation places significant emphasis on presenting works directly and confidently to persuade examiners to accept opinions. Despite Chinese MA students regard tentative stance as more academic and precise (mean value of Item 3 = 3.70 and mean value of Item 9 = 3.82), questionnaire results show this mismatch between this perception and their belief in the necessity of assertiveness in academic writing (mean value of Item 1 = 3.51). Discourse-based interview further confirms this mismatch between Chinese MA students' perception of hedging stance and the actual use of anticipatory "it" patterns serving as hedging devices in academic writing: Student B's response to Sentence 2 reveals his intention to expand discursive space for readers by using *it is possible that*, however, he still chose (a) (Appendix C) since he aimed to persuade the readers.

The second reason suggests a lack of comprehensive understanding of the hedging stance. EFL learners statistically underuse introductory "it" patterns to hedge claims in the previous studies (e.g., Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Larsson, 2017). They are unaware of the pragmatic functions of hedges, such as moderating imposition, reducing possible opposition, and creating space for the coexistence of diverse positions, which can be shown in Student B's interview (Appendix C). Anticipatory "it" patterns in expressing tentativeness do not diminish the persuasiveness of an argument, but rather "reveals the author's confidence in the proposition he or she is making and in the appropriateness of what he or she is saying" (Crompton, 1997, p. 281), gaining more support from potential readers and establishing a consistent position with them. The findings confirm Hu and Cao's (2011) research finding that Chinese academic writers are less inclined to hedge their positions or qualify their intellectual assertions but more often find it necessary to adopt an affirmative tone to assert their authority and credibility. Chinese MA students, on the one hand, consider tentative stances more convincing, which can show

**Table 9.** Total Variance Explained for Attitudinal and Observational Stances.

Component	Initial eigenvalues			Extraction sums of squared loading		
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %
1	1.937	32.279	32.279	1.937	32.279	32.279
2	1.186	19.760	52.040	1.186	19.760	52.040

their politeness and objectivity (Factor loading of Item 6 = 0.637). On the other, they are worried about losing the value of their research and failing to persuade the readers (Factor loading of Item 8 = 0.685). Consequently, they are reluctant to create space for the coexistence of diverse positions in which the readers can have a debate and argumentation. They are less inclined to use anticipatory “it” patterns serving as hedges.

Another notable finding is that almost half target anticipatory “it” patterns (43.58%) in CMATC fall under the observation category. This addition to Hewings and Hewings’ (2002) classification of it-Clauses (Larsson 2017) aligns with the overuse of the SVpass type by Chinese MA learners. Its most frequent realization in syntactic sub-pattern is *it be V-ed that* and its most frequent functional subcategory is observation (e.g., *it is found that*). It has been discovered in previous research comparing learner writing to expert writing (Hyland, 2002). The overuse of *it be V-ed that* by Chinese MA learners may stem from a preference for making neutral observations that present propositional contents.

The second part of the questionnaire reveals a positive correlation between Chinese MA students’ perception of observational stance and the actual use of anticipatory “it” patterns encoding this stance. Chinese MA students implicitly express their intention for readers to believe their judgments based on research practices, interpretive practices, or reporting practices by using anticipatory “it” patterns encoding observational stance. Generally, they prefer reporting verbs (Francis et al., 1996), particularly *see, find, infer, conclude, and observe*. Besides, there is an abstract subject “it” for those verbs as Chinese MA students avoid the use of a personal subject which they regard as intrusive and interpersonally perilous. The selected target anticipatory “it” patterns with the observation function in CMATC are found to be used to “signal inferences and conclusions from the data” (Güngör, 2019, p. 486). Meanwhile, almost all of them are inferential patterns signaling the forthcoming data results. In the discourse-based interview, Student D’s choice *it can be seen* but not *we can see* is in line with the corpus result (Appendix C). It turns out that she used anticipatory “it” patterns serving as observation mostly in the interest of showing intellectual autonomy and authority. She avoided laying her comments in the text, which she thought was a risky strategy. To show authority in academic writing, Chinese MA students believe that they should use the impersonal pattern *it be V-ed that* to narrate the results more objectively (Wu, 2010).

Besides, Chinese MA students also tend to reduce their responsibility for the results and try to appear credible, which has always been emphasized by academic writing in China, supported by Item 16 in the

questionnaire (I prefer to use *it*-patterns encoding observational stance to reduce my responsibility, because by using these patterns (e.g., *it can be seen, it is found that*), I seem to describe an actual truth without my own attitudes). It can also be demonstrated by Student D’s response (see Appendix C). While choosing ‘I’ as the subject of reports, writers have a high level of commitment to take full responsibility for the credibility of what they are presenting (Y. Liu & Zhou, 2014, p. 489). It is evident in the case of English scholars (Ju, 2016, p. 933) that the vast majority of first-person pronouns used by English scholars are singular first-person pronoun “I,” which helps to maximize self-involvement and reinforce the writer’s role. It is the most typical way for writers to express their attitudes, highlight their integral and important role in the research process, and demonstrate their identity and contribution as professional researchers. Chinese MA students, however, tend to use anticipatory “it” rather than “I” or “we” to construct an abstract identity. They seem to prefer not to highlight their own academic identity as an individual researcher. This may have something to do with the Chinese tradition of concealing individual identities, which can be seen in Chinese MA students’ academic writing in which their author identity is not fully constructed. That is to say, their author identity is separated from their interpersonal stance.

We can also attribute Chinese MA students’ overuse of these anticipatory “it” patterns with observation function to the frequent exposure to them in EFL learners’ academic English writing classes, which indicates that EFL learners, to some degree, rely on lexico-grammatical teddy bears (Hasselgren, 1994). This can be demonstrated by the interview of Student D (Appendix C).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, both the quantitative and qualitative analyses converge to reveal that Chinese MA students tend to express a high degree of objectivity and certainty, showcasing intellectual autonomy and authority in their academic writings. The correlations between perceptions of interpersonal stance and the deployment of anticipatory “it” patterns exhibit variations across the four categories of interpersonal functions in the present study.

The questionnaire and discourse-based interviews unveil positive correlations between interpersonal stances (emphatic stance, attitudinal stance, observational stance) and the total frequency of anticipatory “it” patterns encoding them. Notably, no significant correlation emerges between hedging stance and the total frequency of anticipatory “it” patterns encoding tentativeness. Further qualitative analysis suggested that potential causes for Chinese MA students’ use of anticipatory “it”

patterns include weaker audience awareness and authorial identity, along with teachers' emphasis on authority and objectivity in academic writing. These differences may stem from underlying cultural-linguistic factors, such as tension between traditional thinking modes of being modest and assertive writing skills, as well as distinct syntactic constructions in the two languages.

The study proposes practical implications for students, emphasizing the need to deepen their understanding of audience awareness and receive teachers' consistent feedback about students' stance-taking attempts. Additionally, teachers of academic English writing play a role in guiding students to construct authorial identity through appropriate self-mentions. These insights are not only beneficial for Chinese

students but also for scholars, educators, and students from diverse backgrounds seeking to comprehend different thinking modes and the current state of teaching academic English writing in China.

While this study provides valuable observations and explanations regarding Chinese MA students' interpersonal stance in anticipatory "it" patterns within applied linguistics, it is not without limitations. The intricacies of academic writing warrant consideration of other factors, such as writing beliefs and genre knowledge, to more comprehensively illustrate students' perceptions and the deployment of the interpersonal stance of anticipatory "it" patterns. Additionally, the study's focus on applied linguistics raises the question of whether the findings can be extrapolated to other disciplines, necessitating further validation.

## Appendix

### Appendix A. Basic Information of CMATC.

Corpus	No. of sample articles	Word tokens
U1	20	378099
U2	20	315495
U3	20	352732
U4	20	340784
CMATC (Total)	80	1387208

**Appendix B. Perceptions of Stance in English Academic Writing Questionnaire.** In this questionnaire, we would like you to help us finish the following questionnaire consisting of two parts. First, we provide some explanations of some concepts that will help you answer the questions: **Stance** refers to your opinions or evaluations toward the issues you propose. An **assertive stance** inclines to express attitudes or opinions certainly and definitely, while a **tentative stance** inclines to express attitudes or opinions not definitely. An **attitudinal stance** expresses the writers' attitude or evaluation toward the content, while an **observational stance** is used to make affectively neutral observations presenting propositional content. Here are some examples:

Assertive stance	Tentative stance
(1) <i>It is clear that</i> Chinese English majors use more... (see Table 2).	(1) However, as the authors have admitted, <i>it is possible that</i> this result was a reflection of general problem-solving rather than natural language learning.
(2) <i>It should be noted that</i> considering the sample size in this dataset, there is a lack of variance within clusters	
Attitudinal stance	Observational stance
(1) <i>...it is important to</i> consider the status quo of our country's Internet companies and data industry.	(1) <i>...it can be seen from</i> Table 4.1a and 4.1b that the biggest difference lies in the number of contronyms with two pairs of opposite senses.

**Part 1:** Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about assertive stance and tentative stance toward academic writing by simply ticking (✓) the corresponding number from 1 to 5. Please give your answers sincerely and do not leave out any of the items. Thank you very much for your help.

	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	Agree	strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5
1. I have to be assertive in my academic writing since I have done the research.	1	2	3	4	5
2. A strong stance sounds more certain, therefore it can make academic writing more academic and serious.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Since I can not be 100% sure, I tend to use a tentative stance which is more precise.					
4. I will use some expressions of certainty and emphasis to show the value of my research and persuade the teachers to accept my opinions.					
5. A strong stance is more convincing.					
6. A tentative stance can show my politeness and objectivity, so it is more convincing.					
7. I tend to use a strong stance when I express my claims or attitudes.					
8. I tend to use a strong stance to persuade the reader.					
9. A tentative stance can give writers more room to argue for a point.					

**Part 2:** Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about attitudinal stance and observational stance toward academic writing.

	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5
10. I prefer to use <i>it</i> -patterns encoding attitudinal stance (e.g., <i>it is difficult to, it is important to, it is interesting to</i> ) to indicate my affective attitude to propositions, conveying surprise, importance, frustration, and so on.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I prefer to establish my claims by using explicit evaluation, such as attitude markers (e.g., <i>important, difficult, easy, hard</i> ).	1	2	3	4	5
12. While I am often reluctant to name myself as the source of my evaluation, the use of <i>it</i> -patterns encoding attitudinal stance (i.e. <i>it is important to, it is difficult to</i> ) nevertheless allow me to thematize this evaluation and foreground my attitude toward the proposition.					
13. I prefer to use <i>it</i> -patterns encoding attitudinal stance to comment on specific findings, especially on my own data analysis, in order to create a more accessible and persuasive text.					
14. I prefer to use <i>it</i> -patterns encoding observational stance (e.g., <i>it can be seen, it can be found that</i> ) to signal my observation from the data, thus avoiding my own attitudes presented in academic writings.					
15. I prefer to use impersonal patterns <i>it is (was) + passive verb</i> (e.g., <i>it was found that</i> ) and <i>it can be + passive verb</i> (e.g., <i>it can be seen</i> ) to narrate the results more objectively and show the reliability of my observation.					
16. I prefer to use <i>it</i> -patterns encoding observational stance to reduce my responsibility, because by using these patterns (e.g., <i>it can be seen, it is found that</i> ), I seem to describe an actual truth without my own attitudes.					

### Appendix C. Chinese MA Students' Explanations of Select Anticipatory "It" Pattern.

Original sentences	Revised sentences	Choice	Explanations
(1a) ... <i>it is found</i> that many student writers express their preferences for direct quotations...	(1b) ... <i>we find</i> that many student writers express their preferences for direct quotations...	a	Student A: "I chose (a) because <i>it is found</i> here can make my writing seem to be more objective and academic. The use of <i>we</i> in (b) sounds a little subjective. I tend to use <i>it can be...</i> rather than <i>we</i> or <i>I</i> do something in my academic writings."
(2a) <i>It is clear that</i> Chinese English majors use more basic words...	(2b) <i>It is possible that</i> Chinese English majors use more basic words...	a	Student B: "I chose (a) but not (b) because I want to use <i>it is clear that</i> to persuade the readers to accept my opinions. And in my earlier writing experience such as writing the compositions of CET-4, CET-6, TEM-4, and TEM-8, I would use some expressions of certainty and emphasis to persuade the teachers correcting my papers to accept my opinions."
(3a) <i>It is hoped that</i> it will be helpful for junior high school English teachers to ...	(3b) <i>It will be helpful</i> for junior high school English teachers to...	a	Student C: " <i>It is hoped that</i> in (a) can show my positive attitude toward my research and positive expectation of it, thus presenting the value of my study. I prefer to express my positive attitude of my study in my academic writings."
(4a) <i>It can be seen from</i> the above figure that English native authors spread...	(4b) <i>We can see from</i> the above figure that English native authors spread...	a	Student D: "I have taken academic writing classes where the teacher often emphasized we should avoid the subjective expression, so I chose a. And using this pattern seems to become one of my writing habits because my previous English teachers often used <i>it can be seen</i> in writing classes."


### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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### Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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