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Construal of the Contemporary: A Lexico-Grammatical Analysis of Stance and Voice in EFL Student Teacher Reflections on Language Teaching

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Abstract

Amid the abundance of teacher cognition scholarship, how student teachers linguistically construct their understanding of contemporary language teaching remains largely overlooked. Drawing on a lexico-grammatical profiling approach, this study explored stance, modality, and attribution as linguistic indicators of professional voice from the perspective of corpus-assisted discourse analysis. The research employed LancsBox X on a corpus of reflective essays written by 52 Ukrainian EFL student teachers to analyze keywords, functional stance markers, 3-grams, collocation patterns, and concordance lines. The findings epitomize a discourse of epistemic modesty, positive affect, and a balance of self-attribution and generalized attribution. Hedges predominated over boosters, commensurate with cautious engagement with professional knowledge, while "should" emerged as a principal marker of acceptance of disciplinary norms. Collocational networks further illustrate participants' identification with learner-centered and context-sensitive language pedagogy, evincing an orientation toward principled eclecticism. Ultimately, this study shows that language not only reflects teacher cognitions but also provides a lens through which they can be examined.

Keywords*:* lexico-grammatical profiling, stance, corpus-assisted discourse analysis, EFL, contemporary language teaching, reflective writing

Becoming a language teacher invariably goes hand in hand with the development of a professional voice. While a sizeable body of scholarship has examined language teachers' beliefs about language teaching approaches (Alsowat, 2020; Bhandari & Bhandari, 2025; Lőrincz, 2023; Wesely et al., 2021), comparatively fewer studies have explored the lexico-grammatical patterns through which such beliefs are encoded. The choice of linguistic forms by aspiring teachers may signal more than they explicitly state, revealing the oftentimes subconscious construal of their own relationship and stance toward established pedagogical practices (Zhang, 2017). In this respect, writing produced by student teachers can serve as a window into the concepts they value and, crucially, reveal how they position themselves in relation to established theories.

Amid ever-changing interpretations of contemporary language teaching (Bastidas, 2022; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Littlewood, 2022), coming to grips with its principles, let alone internalizing them, is not a straightforward undertaking. For decades, the field of language teaching pursued rigid prescriptions associated with specific methods, later superseded by more abstract ideas of post-method pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), which aimed to emancipate teachers from such constraints. Although the latter held high promises of autonomy, existing scholarship suggests that it may have left practitioners in a state of limbo, uncertain about the legacy accrued from the search for effective methodologies (Hekmatshoar Tabari & Hekmatshoar Tabari, 2020). Current overtures toward principled eclecticism (Curtis, 2017; Hashim, 2025) advocate that teachers select their own approaches in consideration of broader socio-cultural and instructional contexts and objectives, while balancing traditional focus-on-form and meaning-making imperatives. Gaining a sound grasp of a professional knowledge base is only one facet of expertise. It also requires critical thinking and a professional stance, including readiness to evaluate, select, and implement practices as prompted by classroom exigencies.

While tensions between global methodology and local practices have repeatedly been noted in critical pedagogy research (Curtis, 2017; Sun, 2021), scholarship on the cognitive and linguistic development of EFL student teachers in Ukraine has been described by Kharlay et al. (2025) as a "terra incognita" (albeit somewhat exaggerated). Against the backdrop of major educational reforms that the Ukrainian system is undergoing in an attempt to align with the highest quality standards, and particularly under adverse conditions, the need for more data-driven research into how aspiring language teachers linguistically construe recent methodological debates becomes pronounced. Furthermore, mainstream qualitative studies on teacher cognition and reflection tend to target content or themes while paying less attention to form or linguistic expression (Lőrincz, 2025).

However, academic and reflective writing is fundamentally interactional. A barely noticeable difference between "I believe explicit grammar instruction is useful" and "Grammar should be taught explicitly" goes beyond lexical preference and may embody varying degrees of epistemic certainty. Grounded in Biber's (2021) and Hyland's (2005) dimensions of stance, this study prioritizes a closer look at the linguistic make-up of student teachers' voices. Specifically, it applies a lexico-grammatical profiling approach to a corpus of reflective essays produced by 52 Ukrainian EFL student teachers. It proceeds from the premise that the construal of contemporary language teaching, being simultaneously a cognitive act and a linguistic performance, can be made visible in the lexical and grammatical choices writers make.

Literature Review

Discussions of language teaching methods have traditionally oscillated between innovation and reconceptualization, described as a "spiral of constant reconfiguration"

(Vargas, 2015, p. 197). The field's recurring quest for an optimal method, as a rule, has culminated in cycles of enthusiasm and disillusionment (Bell, 2007; Thornbury, 2017). As a corollary, the post-method turn articulated by Kumaravadivelu (2003), with the best intentions of setting teachers free from prescriptive methodologies, positioned teachers as context-sensitive decision-makers.

However, a profound discrepancy was subsequently uncovered between these intentions, under the guise of emancipation, and classroom reality, in that without adequate theoretical grounding, autonomy resulted in doubt and disorientation rather than empowerment (Hekmatshoar Tabari & Hekmatshoar Tabari, 2020; Sun, 2021). Meanwhile, criticism followed against disparaging teachers as incapable of informed, critical adaptation, taking the form of principled eclecticism that foregrounds multiple pedagogical perspectives.

That said, a solid knowledge of established methods and approaches remains crucial for novice teachers (Levrints, 2022), who must reconcile it with personal beliefs and institutional expectations. This negotiation is not merely cognitive but discursive, gaining visibility in the way teachers linguistically construct authority, uncertainty, and evaluation in their writing. Ultimately, what contemporary language teaching entails for prospective teachers is no less than articulating a pedagogical stance alongside mastering techniques, a task that presupposes commitment and effort, reflective practice, and linguistic self-awareness.

While teacher cognition research is replete with data on what language teachers believe concerning traditional and contemporary methodological debates (e.g., Lőrincz, 2023; Wesely et al., 2021), it has largely overlooked how these beliefs are linguistically encoded. Given that teachers are intellectually discerning, using Bell's (2007) terms, it is high time to ask how this discernment is embodied in their discourse. Following James Paul Gee (2025), we should be mindful that beliefs are not static mental states lodged solely in the mind, but are identity kits, that is, socially situated ways of thinking continually performed and instantiated through language. In the context of initial teacher preparation, reflective writing is rightfully considered one of the principal sites for such performative cognition (Bham, 2025).

How writers position themselves epistemically and interpersonally is evidenced in their lexical preferences, modality, and hedging (Hyland et al., 2022), which can serve as a lens through which student teachers convey their degree of certainty and identification with specific pedagogical thinking. Following Ken Hyland (2012), stance is conceptualized as the writer's rhetorical expression of attitude toward the proposition, while voice is the writer's orientation to a given discourse community. This distinction is critical for novice teachers seeking to balance personal beliefs and professional alignment. Since cognitions are constructed in discourse, analyzing this process requires an analytical model to map the linguistic choices writers make. A promising tool for this purpose is Biber et al.'s (2021) conception of lexico-grammatical stance. In addition to imparting factual information, writers arguably

often reveal personal emotions, attitudes, evaluations, or judgments through recurrent lexical items and grammatical constructions. Being more than an abstract rhetorical intention, stance is analyzed as an observable linguistic phenomenon realized through forms such as stance adverbs, modal verbs, evaluative adjectives, and complement clauses; in a nutshell, writers express their positioning toward the presented information (p. 958).

While stance is often treated as a peripheral feature of style, it is actually central to the function of writing. Being interactional in nature, writing serves as a venue where authors create representations of themselves and negotiate social relations with their audience through the use of stance markers (Hyland, 2005). For student teachers, this negotiation appears consequential as they walk a tightrope between student and teacher roles, or between absorbing knowledge and authoritatively implementing it. To capture this process of teacher-becoming linguistically, this study adopts the following domains of the Biberian framework: epistemic stance, attitudinal stance, deontic modality, and attribution.

The domain of epistemic stance "can mark certainty (or doubt), actuality, precision, or limitation" (Biber et al., 2021, p. 964). In reflective writing, such markers signal a writer's degree of confidence and authority. Hedges (e.g., I think, perhaps, probably) serve to signal tentativeness or openness, offering space for alternative views (Aull, 2019), but at the same time, they can project self-effacement common among novices. Boosters (e.g., know, prove), on the other hand, signal the voice of an authoritative knower (Bal-Gezegin, 2016). Studies of L2 writing demonstrate that novices tend to overuse boosters to emulate an authority they may not yet possess, revealing the inherent tensions between the ambitions and doubts of evolving expertise (Chintalapalli & Bahl, 2025; Hyland, 2012; Kurt & Kafes, 2025).

Attitudinal markers (e.g., prefer, like, important, useful, challenging, problematic) index evaluative orientation toward methodological principles (Biber et al., 2021). With respect to modern language teaching, attitudinal markers may help identify which specific principles prospective teachers value enough to internalize into their personal belief system.

Finally, deontic modality encompasses markers of obligation and necessity, realized mainly through modal verbs (e.g., should, must, need, have to). In Chrisman's (2015) view, deontic modals encode normative meanings by linguistically expressing what should be done rather than what currently is. Returning to student teacher cognition, deontic modality may evidence a move away from personal preference (e.g., I like this activity) to the articulation of a professional stance (e.g., Teachers must consider learners' needs). As such, a shift from affective to normative statements can serve as tangible evidence of an emerging professional voice and the capacity for theorizing from reflection.

Recent years have witnessed a proliferation of corpus-based studies providing profiles of how academic writers, and L2 majors in particular, employ stance to

negotiate positions. Yet, such studies tend to apply corpus methodology to linguistic means of expression primarily in academic argumentation, treating stance-taking as a marker of advanced academic literacy. One such study comparing upper-level student writing by Aull (2019) demonstrated that stance is highly sensitive to genre. She found that specific lexico-grammatical patterns, such as the use of hedges and code glosses, clearly differentiated argumentative writing from explanatory writing. Interestingly, hedges and boosters were used in roughly comparable proportions. At the same time, contrastive connectors were more frequent in argumentative writing as a means of foregrounding the writer's authority.

Building on this, Chintalapalli and Bahl (2025) utilized Hyland's interactional model in EFL essays, finding that novice writers struggled to convey epistemic certainty. In attempting to sound authoritative, they overused boosters and underused attitudinal markers that serve to establish academic field solidarity. Similarly, Chung and Crosthwaite (2024) applied the Appraisal framework to Vietnamese L2 writing to compare how expert and L2 writers expressed attitudinal stance and whether this correlated with assessment results. Overall, non-native speaker writers produced fewer Appraisal markers and preferred explicit personal feelings (affect) rather than judgmental evaluations more frequent in high-rated texts.

A related strand of inquiry, albeit underexplored in teacher cognition, is found in Zhang's (2017) case study of a novice EFL teacher. Employing the Appraisal framework within Systemic Functional Linguistics, Zhang documented how a writing teacher's beliefs were linguistically enacted through interpersonal resources. The study revealed that these beliefs were not merely cognitive representations but linguistically instantiated negotiations between experience, pedagogical principles, and contextual constraints. Notably, Zhang's findings demonstrate the utility of a discourse-analytic approach in uncovering the linguistic realization of teacher cognition.

To date, however, research on EFL student teachers' reflections tends to rely on qualitative analysis, leaving open the question of how student teachers "take sides" in contemporary language teaching or construe their relationship to the field through lexico-grammatical resources. While most existing scholarship analyzes stance as a measure of academic writing proficiency, the aim of this paper is to examine stance as a window into professional voice. In doing so, it interprets the linguistic means utilized by EFL student teachers to navigate present-day methodological thinking. Accordingly, the following research questions guide the study:

1. What are the salient lexico-grammatical characteristics of the construal of current EFL pedagogy in the reflective discourse of Ukrainian EFL student teachers?

2. How do student teachers linguistically encode their epistemic, deontic, and attitudinal stances toward contemporary pedagogical practices?

3. To what extent does student teachers' voice reflect self-attribution (novice) or generalized attribution (professional) in the articulation of pedagogical claims?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a lexico-grammatical profiling approach within corpus linguistics to explore how stance, modality, and attribution instantiate EFL majors' construal of contemporary language teaching. The approach integrated quantitative corpus methods with qualitative discourse interpretation to examine how stance encoded their epistemic reasoning. The design was selected on the premise that beliefs are not only cognitive constructs but are also linguistically instantiated (Gee, 2017, 2025; Hyland et al., 2022; van Dijk, 2014).

Operationalizing Stance

To provide a window into student teachers' construal of contemporary language teaching, stance was operationalized in this study, building on lexico-grammatical frameworks elaborated by Biber et al. (2021) and Hyland (2005). As previously mentioned, this study conceptualizes stance as lexico-grammatical resources encoding epistemic reasoning, obligation, necessity, recommendation, and attitudinal aspects. Serving to bridge both propositional and interpersonal dimensions, stance may reflect how student teachers position themselves relative to their own statements and broader disciplinary discussions.

To facilitate the corpus-based identification of such markers, epistemic stance, attitudinal stance, and deontic modality were selected, as each of these categories is readily identifiable through specific linguistic forms via corpus analysis in LancsBox X (Brezina & Platt, 2024). Within the domain of epistemic stance, representative linguistic forms for hedges, marking uncertainty, and boosters, marking confidence, include epistemic lexical verbs and modal verbs (e.g., *think, believe, know, seem, appear*; *can, may, might, could, will*), adverbs (e.g., *maybe, probably, perhaps, certainly, obviously, clearly*), adjectives (e.g., *certain, sure, challenging, possible*), and complement clauses (e.g., *It seems that…, I think that…*). The use of these resources may indicate student teachers' degree of confidence or openness to the reconstruction of their professional views. Deontic modality, expressing obligation or necessity, serves as an indicator of authority (Chrisman, 2015). The search list encompassed core and semi-modals (e.g., *should, must, have to, need to, ought to*). Attitudinal stance signals the writer's evaluative and affective orientation, thus revealing participants' personal preferences or professional judgments. The search nodes encompassed adverbs (e.g., *luckily, fortunately*), adjectives and adjectives + *to*-clause or *that*-clause (e.g., *effective, useful, difficult, challenging, important to, glad that, afraid that*), and verbs (e.g., *prefer, like, enjoy*).

Participants

The corpus was compiled from reflective essays produced by 52 EFL majors enrolled in a teacher education program at a university in western Ukraine. All participants

were in their final year of their degree studies and had recently completed a six-week intensive teaching practicum in primary and secondary schools. The participants were instructed to write an essay approximately 500–700 words in length reflecting on their teaching experience. Specifically, students were prompted to articulate their understanding of contemporary language teaching and relate how they implemented it in the classroom, what they based their decisions on when choosing instructional approaches and interventions, and to support their reflections with examples from classroom experiences. Students had prior experience of reflective writing as part of their core preparation, including practicum observation reports and reflective journals during the practicum. They were accustomed to being evaluated on the depth of reflection and commitment, rather than on linguistic choices or accuracy. The task did not specify any preferred language or outcomes, so there were no right or wrong answers, and it was not grade-bearing in order to ensure authentic representation. Of the 52 essays, 31 were written at home, while 21 were produced in class, one week after completion of the practicum. Handwritten submissions were transcribed for the purposes of corpus analysis.

All participants were informed that their essays would be used for research purposes and that their decision to include their work in the corpus was voluntary and would not impact their grades for the teaching practicum. A rigorous anonymization process was applied during corpus compilation. All identifying information was removed; for instance, proper names were replaced with anonymized labels (e.g., *School A* for specific schools and *T1* for mentor teachers), and participants were assigned codes such as *S1*, *S2*, etc.

Corpus Compilation

The resulting target corpus contained 28,750 tokens, with individual essays averaging 553 words. The Reflective Essay Corpus (REC-Ukraine) represents a homogeneous sample of mainly advanced-level writing by EFL students with comparable exposure to university coursework and teaching practicum, enhancing internal representativeness. The corpus was formatted into plain text (.txt) and processed in LancsBox X (Brezina & Platt, 2024). While the corpus is specialized and genre-bound, corpus adequacy in discourse-analytic research is determined less by sheer size than by analytical purpose and internal homogeneity (Egbert et al., 2022). Existing corpus-assisted investigations of stance in student writing have similarly relied on small-to-moderate, genre-specific datasets to observe recurrent lexico-grammatical tendencies (e.g., Afzaal et al., 2025; Lőrincz, 2025; Setyaningsih & Larassati, 2025).

For comparative analysis, a reference corpus of about 1,301,108 tokens was sourced from ten textbooks (Brandl, 2021; Curtis, 2017; Hall, 2025; Harmer, 2015; Nunan, 2015; Pujiani et al., 2024; Renandya & Widodo, 2016; Richards, 2015; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Thornbury, 2017) on language teaching methodology, as many of them have gained canonical status, providing a baseline for expert

disciplinary discourse. The target and reference corpora were tokenized and lemmatized. Word frequencies were normalized to a denominator of one million words.

Analytical Procedures

The analysis moved from a broad statistical to a functional analysis of stance. First, a top-down keyness analysis was performed using the Word tool. The target corpus was compared with the reference corpus to identify items significantly overused by student teachers. Keywords were calculated using three statistical measures. Simple maths provided a direct frequency comparison between the two corpora. Log-likelihood was used to determine whether frequency differences were statistically significant, while log-ratio statistics measured effect size, indicating how strongly a lexical item was overrepresented in the target corpus relative to the reference corpus. The salient items were selected based on their ranking among the top 50 keywords, with no minimum frequency cut-off applied to enable the inclusion of specialized pedagogical lexis. For functional accuracy, only content words were retained, with the exception of pronouns, as they are essential markers of student voice. These items then underwent a deeper functional stance analysis.

Once potential markers were identified, a functional stance analysis was performed using Wizard functionality. The stance markers were grouped into epistemic (hedges and boosters), deontic (obligation and necessity), and attitudinal (affect and evaluation). To ensure accurate and comprehensive retrieval of stance markers, lemma-based smart searches using the headword tag [hw = "..."] were utilized via Wizard. This allows the software to search by the base lemma, retrieving all inflected forms of a node (e.g., [hw = "have"] retrieves *have, has, had,* and *having*). For instance, the query [hw = "have|need"] was used to identify every occurrence of these verbs irrespective of their grammatical form. Simultaneously, all retrieved tokens were inspected via the KWIC concordance tool to ensure functional accuracy. Manual filtering was necessary to distinguish between different grammatical functions of the same lexical form. Thus, the auxiliary *have* was removed if it was not used deontically, and the noun *needs* was omitted, with only the deontic verb *need to* included for further analysis. Out of 272 instances of "have" and "need," only 74 deontic cases of obligation or necessity were retained. The KWIC output was then used for subsequent qualitative analysis of stance.

To further investigate the framing of stance, a 3-gram analysis was conducted. The top twenty 3-grams were analyzed to determine the attribution of stance following Biber et al.'s (2021) framework. In addition, generalized frames, defined as depersonalized formulaic sequences (e.g., *communicative language teaching*) that reflect the voice of the disciplinary community, were identified and treated as signposts of disciplinary construal. The final stage utilized GraphColl, a module in LancsBox X, which identifies and visualizes collocations as graphical networks, to reveal the semantic relations between key agents (i.e., *teacher, student,* and *learner*). It served to display the attributes participants linked to themselves, their learners, or

external authority. The Mutual Information (MI) statistic was set to a threshold of 5.0 to isolate strong semantic associations while filtering out accidental co-occurrences. A window span of five words to the right and left (L5–R5) was applied as standard practice to provide the immediate context of the node.

All quantitative findings were qualitatively close-read through concordance lines to contextualize stance markers and voice. The procedures were largely computational and rule-based. Manual filtering was limited to functional disambiguation of stance markers (e.g., auxiliaries from deontic use), guided by Biber et al.'s (2021) criteria. The concordance lines were checked to ensure consistency of interpretation. Given the transparency of search strings, lemma-based retrieval, and replicable analytical procedures, the reliability of the inquiry rests on methodological transparency rather than thematic coding. The triangulated lexico-grammatical profiling yielded a more rounded picture of EFL student teachers' articulation of beliefs, obligations, emotions, and construal of the conceptual knowledge base within the discourse of current methodological thinking.

Results

To understand how student teachers position themselves relative to expert discourse and to identify the underlying lexico-grammatical characteristics of their reflective writing, a keyword analysis was first performed (Table 1). The top 50 keywords were organized into three themes: (1) methodological positioning, (2) self-referential stance, and (3) evaluative and practical aspects of the language classroom.

Table 1
Keyword Analysis Findings

	Focus rel. freq. (target corpus)	Reference rel. freq. (reference corpus)	Simple maths	Log likelihood	% difference	Log ratio
1. contemporary	6 622.98	59.95	42.03	1 137.94	10 947.71	6.79
2. traditional	5 333.24	193.68	18.50	647.90	2 653.62	4.78
3. grammar-translation	1 777.75	75.32	10.71	204.10	2 260.25	4.56
4. opinion	1 080.59	46.11	8.08	123.72	2 243.28	4.55
5. methods	9 376.74	1 122.89	7.75	632.53	735.06	3.06
6. approaches	6 936.70	842.36	7.47	463.49	723.48	3.04
7. drills	1 254.88	83.01	7.40	118.97	1 411.79	3.92
8. my	6 832.12	842.36	7.36	451.75	711.07	3.02
9. i	20 112.94	2 763.03	7.06	1 230.69	627.93	2.86
10. audiolingual	1 429.17	136.04	6.48	111.53	950.57	3.39
11. accuracy	1 742.89	185.23	6.46	127.14	840.95	3.23
12. believe	1 289.74	115.29	6.46	104.39	1 018.73	3.48

Table 1
Keyword Analysis Findings

	Focus rel. freq. (target corpus)	Reference rel. freq. (reference corpus)	Simple maths	Log likelihood	% difference	Log ratio
13. meaningful	1 603.46	173.70	6.22	115.56	823.13	3.21
14. feel	2 265.76	282.84	6.18	148.53	701.09	3.00
15. flexible	732.01	36.12	6.11	79.11	1 926.44	4.34
16. modern	2 335.47	306.72	5.99	147.71	661.58	2.93
17. pupils	697.16	35.35	5.89	74.49	1 871.90	4.30
18. real-world	976.02	91.46	5.62	76.87	967.15	3.42
19. me	2 440.04	359.69	5.53	141.52	578.37	2.76
20. task-based	2 370.33	349.70	5.49	137.39	577.81	2.76
21. diverse	732.01	53.80	5.41	65.86	1 260.61	3.77
22. games	1 289,74	160.63	5.33	84.68	702.91	3.01
23. exercises	1 220.02	151.41	5.25	80.30	705.78	3.01
24. memorization	697.16	52.26	5.24	62.09	1 233.93	3.74
25. flexibility	557.72	29.97	5.06	58.14	1 760.67	4.22
26. communicative	5 368.10	1 026.05	4.86	249.50	423.18	2.39
27. confidence	732.01	72.25	4.83	55.90	913.22	3.34
28. tried	627.44	51.49	4.80	53.26	1 118.46	3.61
29. engaging	766.87	81.47	4.78	55.96	841.30	3.23
30. depends	766.87	81.47	4.78	55.96	841.30	3.23
31. challenging	836.59	96.84	4.76	57.74	763.88	3.11
32. rules	1 777.75	307.43	4.61	90.42	478.26	2.53
33. balancing	383.44	7.69	4.49	55.77	4 888.91	5.64
34. method	5 019.52	1 040.65	4.49	215.71	382.34	2.27
35. interactive	1 150,31	179,85	4,47	63,67	539,60	2,68
36. tbl	418,29	16,14	4,46	49,73	2 491,64	4,70
37. fluency	1 359,45	238,26	4,31	68,35	470,58	2,51
38. effective	2 161,18	428,87	4,28	96,94	403,93	2,33
39. like	3 869.21	828,52	4,27	160,94	367,00	2,22
40. creativity	592,58	62,25	4,27	43,54	851,87	3,25
41. student-centered	383.44	14.60	4.22	45.80	2 525.74	4.71
42. motivated	662.30	81.47	4.20	43.86	712.94	3.02
43. translation	1 115.45	194.45	4.13	56.34	473.64	2.52
44. technology	2 021.75	437.32	3.95	83.23	362.31	2.21
45. interesting	801.73	138.34	3.78	40.86	479.52	2.53
46. communication	3 520.64	866.95	3.74	125.91	306.09	2.02
47. videos	557.72	76.09	3.74	34.30	632.99	2.87
48. apps	418.29	39.20	3.72	32.94	967.15	3.42
49. multimedia	383.44	30.74	3.70	32.96	1 147.23	3.64
50. clt	1 638.32	378.14	3.64	62.98	333.26	2.12

Among the most salient features of student writing were the lemmas "contemporary" (log ratio = 6.79) and "traditional" (log ratio = 4.78), confirming that participants framed their reflections through a contrast between modern and inherited approaches. This binary construal was further evidenced by the overrepresentation of method labels such as "grammar-translation" (4.56), "audiolingual" (3.39), "task-based" (2.76), "communicative" (2.39), and "CLT" (2.12). The prominence of "balancing" (5.64) and "flexibility" (4.22) may indicate students' readiness to synthesize approaches rather than rigidly align with one side. Highly salient features of student writing were first-person singular pronouns (*I* – 2.86, *my* – 3.02, and *me* – 2.76), pointing to a persistently writer-centered discourse filtered through personal experience. This tendency is corroborated by the salience of the epistemic and affective markers of "opinion" (4.55), "believe" (3.48), and "feel" (3.00), which foreground theorizing from practical experience rather than depersonalized abstraction. Furthermore, participants frequently used evaluative lexis to describe and assess their pedagogical orientation, as shown by the lemmas "meaningful" (3.21), "engaging" (3.23), "effective" (2.33), "motivated" (3.02), and "interesting" (2.53). At the same time, the traditional distinction between form-focused and meaning-focused aspects remains visible through keywords such as "drills" (3.92), "accuracy" (3.23), "rules" (2.53), "memorization" (3.74), "fluency" (2.51), "communicative" (2.39), and "interactive" (2.68). Particularly lexically rich was the domain of technology, represented by "multimedia" (3.64), "technology" (2.21), "videos" (2.87), and "apps" (3.42). Sparsely represented in the reference corpus, the ubiquity of technology in participants' essays may indicate their readiness to implement it in practice.

To understand how student teachers linguistically encode their professional stance, further analysis was performed using the Wizard tool and KWIC within it.

Table 2

Frequency and Distribution of Epistemic Stance Markers

Category	Sub-category	Lemma	N	Rel. Freq. (Per 1 M)	Function
Hedges	modal hedges	may, might, could	114	3,900.64	softening claims
	lexical hedges	think, believe, seem, appear, maybe, perhaps, possibly, probably, likely, opinion	137	4,687.6	personalizing claims; self-attribution; doubt
Boosters	certainty markers	clearly, definitely, certainly, obviously	25	889.62	asserting facts; expert voice
	high-intensity adverbs	very, strongly, extremely, absolutely, completely	55	1,881.9	intensifying views and evaluative judgement
Total			331	11,359.76	

As shown in Table 2, among the most frequent epistemic markers of stance were modal and lexical hedges, signaling a high degree of tentativeness, as evidenced by a roughly 3:1 ratio of hedges to boosters (251 instances vs. 80). The pervasive use of hedges indicates participants' prioritization of modesty and a cautious voice. Rather than presenting their views on methods as undeniable facts, participants frame their claims as personal interpretations. Thus, pedagogical judgments were frequently softened with markers of subjectivity, as in "I think that a good teacher has …" or "I believe it is possible to address …," worded as personal reflection rather than established truths.

Nevertheless, while hedges prevail, participants rely on a relatively small set of formulaic sequences (Wray, 2002), such as "I believe" and "I think," as illustrated in the following excerpts from KWIC (Table 3).

Table 3
Concordance Excerpts of Epistemic Stance Markers

Left Context	Node	Right Context
… intonation. By combining methods, I	believe	it is possible to address…
… the Internet, so I basically	believe	that modern technology-centred language…
… the older ones. However, I	think	that a good teacher has …
… for collaborative problem-solving. I	believe	traditional methods, such as grammar-…
… children. In my work, I	believe	that I use modern methods…
… the two methods would most	probably	bring more structure and activity…
… also be difficult, in my	opinion	since students may find it…

Boosters (80 instances), on the other hand, are used less frequently and primarily serve to amplify commitment to specific practices. In stance theory, boosters strengthen the writer's epistemic alignment with a proposition, signaling certainty (Hyland, 2005). By amplifying evaluative statements (e.g., "very useful," "very important"), participants attempt to project decisiveness and endorsement of pedagogical principles, thereby enacting a more assertive voice, as shown in the following examples.

> *We should not let anyone feel left out. For this reason, the incorporation of group work, or pair work is very useful, as some students feel themselves more comfortable when working in groups or pairs (S43).*
>
> *It's very important to differentiate and to never give up, because even if someone is not that smart, they can learn at least something. We should never lose hope (S35).*
>
> *As teachers we have to be very flexible and we also have to learn new things to make a lesson effective and useful for students (S33).*

While epistemic stance markers reveal the participants' certainty levels, the use of deontic modality may document their internalization of professional expectations (Table 4).

Table 4
Frequency and Distribution of Deontic Modality Markers

Category	Lemma	N	Rel. Freq. (Per 1 M)	Function
core modals	should	51	1.745.02	professional norms and obligation
	must	2	68.43	obligation
semi-modals	need	14	479.02	necessity, requirements
	have to	40	1.368.64	mandatory task, classroom constraint
Total		107	3.671.12	

Among the deontic markers, students showed a strong preference for "should," accounting for over 47.7% of the total. Coupled with the relative rarity of "must," this reinforces the epistemic modesty demonstrated in the previous analysis (Table 4). Further qualitative analysis of the KWIC output showed that participants used modals to articulate their ideas of effective teaching rather than their current practice, as illustrated below:

Table 5
Concordance Excerpts of Deontic Modals

Left Context	Node	Right Context
… in the classroom a teacher	should	always take into consideration the…
… every student, but a teacher	should	do their best to make …
… key; as a teacher, I	must	be responsive to the needs …
… environment. In any case, I	should	take into account the syllabus, …
… my belief that language learning	should	be practical and engaging. Activities
… to be used, the teacher	should	consider the age, the level, …
… with my belief that language	should	be learned through use, not…

Out of 272 total occurrences of "have to" and "need," 54 were identified as deontic, while the remainder functioned as nouns (e.g., "learners' needs") or as perfective auxiliaries. A qualitative examination of "have to" revealed that it was frequently associated with the challenges of the teaching practicum, such as curriculum obligations, classroom management issues, and time constraints. In modality research, "have to" typically encodes an imposed obligation rather than an internally endorsed necessity. In the target corpus, such uses emphasized situational pressures (e.g., "has to change

techniques accordingly," "we have to implement technology and gamification"), construing teaching as responsive to external requirements. This projection of regulated actions resonates with novice positioning as described in teacher development research. In contrast, "need to" appeared in generalized statements about ideal conditions for learning (e.g., "we need to find the balance between"), thus representing an attempt to articulate professional standards (Table 6).

Table 6
Concordance Excerpts of Deontic Semi-Modals

Left Context	Node	Right Context
… pupils is shorter, the teacher	has	to change techniques accordingly. I
… were unique individuals and I	had	to approach them with interesting
… Language Teaching means, that we	have	to keep the students motivation…
… Language Teaching is, that we	have	to implement technology and gamification…
… to forget traditional ones. We	need	to prepare for different situations…
… aspects for them. Also, we	need	to find the balance between…
… believe a good language teacher	needs	to be flexible and sensitive…
… drills might benefit beginners who	need	to internalize basic language patterns…
… stay focused, they are also	need	to be guided sometimes and…

Even so, seven instances of "need" were related to learners' experiences, such as, "beginners who need to internalize" or "need to be guided," reflecting a learner-centered approach taken by the participants.

The analysis of attitudinal stance, yielding a total of 204 instances, reflects the participants' emotional and value-based orientation towards language teaching (Table 7).

Table 7
Frequency and Distribution of Attitudinal Stance Markers

Category	Subcategory	Lemma	N	Rel. Freq. (Per 1 M)
Affect	positive affect	like, prefer, enjoy, happy, excited	114	3.900.64
	negative affect	afraid, nervous, concerned, overwhelmed	25	855.4
Evaluation	utility	important, effective, useful, vital, appropriate	43	1.471.29
	task difficulty	difficult, challenging, problematic	13	444.81
	evaluative adverbs	luckily, fortunately, unfortunately, successfully	9	307.95
Total			204	6.980.09

The results indicated the predominance of positive affect, with the most frequent markers relating to personal enjoyment of teaching and interaction with learners. Participants appeared to assess the effectiveness of a contemporary method by how much their students, as well as they themselves, "liked" or "enjoyed" the instructional process. Despite the salience of affect, student teachers also frequently employed evaluative adjectives (e.g., *effective, important, useful*) to justify their choice of approaches and methods. Markers of challenge (e.g., *challenging, difficult*) frequently appeared in the context of tensions between the expectations of modern pedagogy and the classroom realities student teachers faced (Table 8).

Table 8
Concordance Excerpts of Attitudinal Stance Markers

Left Context	Node	Right Context
… really wanted them to start	enjoying	English language learning…
… learn the language but also	enjoy	the process. S25 The task…
… use are games - pupils really	enjoyed	them. I always ask to…
… of the modern approaches, I	like	Communicative Language Teaching the most…
… and very motivated students they	liked	games, for instance "Crocodile". This…
… that my teaching methods remain	effective	and learner-centered. …
… While modern methods are extremely	effective	, traditional methods might be more…
… platforms like Kahoot! make learning	enjoyable	and help students internalize language…
… there are aspects I find	challenging	For instance, implementing these methods…
… learners. However, I find differentiation	challenging	because it demands significant preparation…

As seen in Tables 2, 4, and 7, participants encoded their stance through a high volume of epistemic hedges (N = 251) compared to 80 boosters, indicating a predominance of cautious stance-taking. Within attitudinal stance, positive affect markers (N = 114) outnumbered evaluative and difficulty markers (N = 47). Among deontic forms, "should" (N = 51) was the most frequent modal expressing normative alignment.

Next, the analysis identified stance attribution, specifically whether the claims participants made in the essays were attributed to themselves or to a generalized expert. The distribution of 3-grams (Table 9) maps their professional positioning, framed through both self and generalized attributions. A significant number of 3-grams were dedicated to personal framing (e.g., "my understanding of," "in my opinion," "I believe that," "I feel most"). Hence, participants presented their writing as subjective reflection rather than established theory. At the same time, 3-grams

such as "contemporary language teaching" and "language teaching is" may demonstrate student teachers' attempts to speak from the perspective of the language teaching community, indicating a shift toward generalized attribution derived from a professional knowledge base, such as in the following examples.

> *Contemporary language teaching went beyond learning strict grammar rules. It focuses on Communicative Language Teaching using real life communication, emphasizing skills (speaking, reading, listening, writing) in context (S7).*
>
> *I believe that contemporary language teaching is based on adaptability, communication and how the teacher responds to the students (S45).*
>
> *Contemporary language teaching is a crucial part of education. It focuses on personalization, authentic language teaching and technology integration (S49).*

Table 9

Top 3-Grams in Student Reflections

Rank	1	2	3	Frequency
1	contemporary	language	teaching	81
2	communicative	language	teaching	43
3	language	teaching	is	37
4	the	grammar	translation	33
5	task	based	language	32
6	language	teaching	approaches	30
7	the	audiolingual	method	27
8	my	understanding	of	27
9	in	my	opinion	23
10	traditional	language	teaching	22
11	language	teaching	methods	22
12	task	based	learning	19
13	in	real	life	17
14	the	target	language	16
15	i	believe	that	16
16	the	most	important	15
17	the	communicative	approach	12
18	real	life	situations	12
19	i	try	to	12
20	i	feel	most	11

In addition, the high frequency of 3-grams specifying language teaching approaches and methods (e.g., "communicative language teaching" – Rank 2, "the grammar translation" – Rank 4, "task-based language" – Rank 5, "the audiolingual method" – Rank 7) documents strong awareness of diverse methodological perspectives. The observable linguistic behavior aligns with the principles underlying post-method thinking and eclecticism. By drawing on the discourses of contemporary and traditional language teaching and using markers of evaluation (e.g., "the most important" – Rank 16, "I feel most" – Rank 20), students demonstrate that they actively select elements (e.g., "I try to" – Rank 19) from both paradigms to meet the expectations of "real-life situations" (Ranks 13, 18).

Finally, the collocation analysis reinforces the eclecticism present in student teachers' writing (Figures 1, 2). Thus, among the closest collocates of the node "teacher" were "role" (MI = 6.84) and "student" (MI = 5.1). In turn, the latter was strongly associated with "needs" (MI = 7.39), "communication" (MI = 10.2), "communicative" (MI = 9.8), "learning" (MI = 9.3), and "flexible" (MI = 11). Thus, participants envisaged their professional roles through flexible decision-making grounded in students' needs and communication, as shown in the following examples.

> *My understanding of contemporary language teaching is that it is flexible and student-centered. Also, it focuses on communication, real-life tasks, and students' needs. I try to use different methods to help students learn English (S8).*
>
> *During the six week practice I mainly used learner-centered and communication focused approaches. I wanted the students to feel involved and feel themselves motivated to speak (S37).*
>
> *Another important idea of modern language teaching is a learner-centered approach. This means that the teacher should think about students' needs, interests, and level. From my classroom experience, I learned that lessons become more successful when tasks are connected to students' real lives (S14).*

Figure 1

Collocation networks for "teacher" and "student"

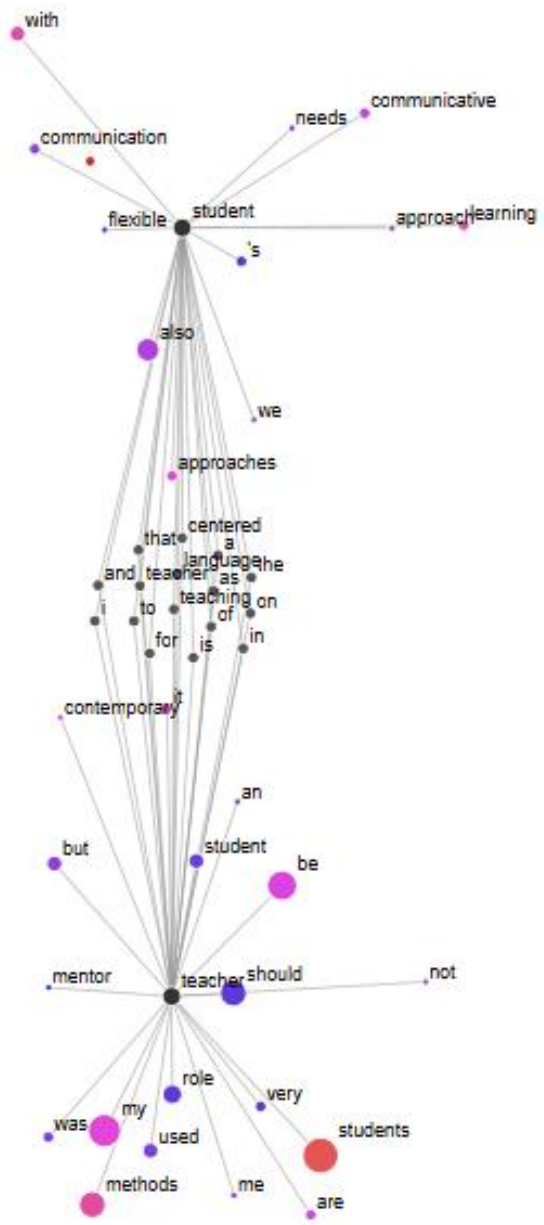
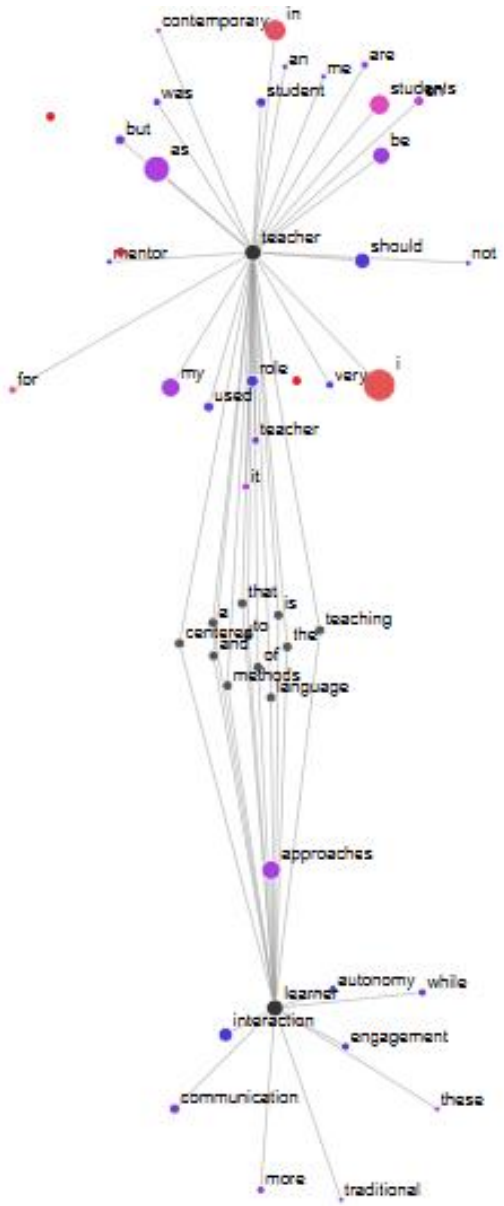


Figure 2
Collocation networks for "teacher" and "learner"



Discussion

The present study employed a corpus-based lexico-grammatical profiling approach to examine how Ukrainian EFL student teachers construe contemporary language teaching through reflective discourse. By analyzing keywords, stance markers, and

formulaic clusters, it revealed that student teachers' conceptualizations of modern pedagogy were expressed through a discourse pointing to epistemic modesty, affective engagement, and evolving professional authority. The study documented a process of "writing oneself into teaching" (Bham, 2025, p. 1), in which "I" served to filter professional knowledge. While the high frequency of first-person markers is a recognized genre characteristic of reflective writing, deriving from personal perception, its salience in the target corpus is partly attributable to the nature of the task, as participants were prompted to relate theoretical concepts to their own classroom experiences. Consequently, they can be seen as acting as an interface where disciplinary propositions are personalized within instructional reality.

Consistent with the view of discourse as identity enactment (Gee, 2025), the writing produced by student teachers may be interpreted as a site of teacher-becoming. Their linguistic preferences, enacted through hedging, modal verbs, evaluative, and affective lexis, suggest that cognition and stance are mutually constitutive, in that linguistic expression gives visibility to the ways student teachers make sense of emerging professional norms (Hyland et al., 2022). Given this, the results offer an additional perspective within teacher cognition research (Kharlay et al., 2025) by showing that beliefs can also be examined through corpus evidence.

The data also suggest that student teachers were engaging with the tensions of the post-method era (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Hashim, 2025), where uncertainty and teachers' autonomous voices coexist. While participants were conversant with diverse methodologies (e.g., "communicative language teaching," "task-based language learning"), their discourse oscillated between self-centeredness (e.g., "I believe," "I think") and generalized professional claims (e.g., "should," "have to"), indicative of a transitional epistemic stance.

Findings of RQ1, which sought to identify the lexico-grammatical features of student teachers' discourse, revealed a binary conceptualization of language pedagogy framed around contemporary versus traditional approaches, a high degree of personalization (first-person reference *I, my, me*), and affective and evaluative language related to aspects of language instruction (e.g., *engaging, effective, challenging*). Hence, the process of meaning-making appears to lean toward personal experience and affective engagement rather than theorization. This finding is congruent with observations in previous research concerning the emotional dimension of teacher learning (Richards, 2022).

In terms of linguistic stance, high personalization may indicate that participants constructed their professional understanding through lived experience rather than disciplinary discourse. The frequency of "I believe that," "I think," "in my opinion," and "I feel" echoes existing scholarship showing that novice writers tend to rely on explicit stance markers to mitigate uncertainty in interpreting the professional knowledge base (Aull, 2019). The overreliance on epistemic hedges may therefore imply a cautious professional positioning, typical of student teachers situated at the crossroads between learner and teacher roles.

Meanwhile, the juxtaposition of contemporary and traditional approaches appears to reflect an ongoing negotiation between inherited and newly internalized principles of communicative and task-based learning. This binary can be interpreted in light of the methodological continuum (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), where language instruction balances flexibility (fluency, meaning-making, interaction) and structure (grammar, rules). The essay characteristics further suggest that the construal and internalization of contemporary approaches remained evaluative (e.g., *important, effective, difficult, N* = 64) and emotionally charged (e.g., affective markers *like, enjoy, afraid, nervous, N* = 135), which may resonate with the notion of eclecticism by emphasizing context-bound decision-making rather than one-sided methodological allegiance (Curtis, 2017). Interestingly, the high salience of lexical items associated with technology suggests that participants tended to equate the modern language classroom with digitalization. Overall, despite the subjective nature of reflections, the presence of 3-grams corresponding to language teaching approaches and methods signals that participants were drawing on disciplinary terminology to discuss their lived experiences.

With reference to Research Question 2, the analysis revealed that student teachers enacted their professional voice through a blend of epistemic caution, deontic prescription, and affective evaluation. A significant preference for hedging was documented, with hedges appearing three times more frequently than boosters, dominated by lexical and modal hedges such as "think," "believe," "seem," "maybe," and "perhaps." These findings may reflect the epistemic modesty of Ukrainian student teachers (Lőrincz & Csernicskó, 2026), possibly indicating awareness of the relativity of pedagogical dogmas in a post-method era.

For one thing, the prevalence of hedges runs counter to research by Chintalapalli and Bahl (2025), in which EFL writers overused boosters. Similarly, Aull (2019) noted that undergraduate students used more boosters, while more advanced writers tended to increase the use of hedges to manage claims. In this corpus, such hedging may align with observations that the practicum phase is marked by provisionality, as beliefs are negotiated between theory and experience (Lőrincz & Komar, 2023). However, participants also used boosters and amplifiers (e.g., *very, strongly, extremely*) to express conviction, primarily when their statements aligned with mainstream professional norms, such as the value of communicative or task-based learning. This pattern echoes Hyland and Jiang's (2018) description of stance markers as tools for building solidarity with the disciplinary community. By using high-intensity language, student teachers may have been attempting to lend their voice an authoritative tone even when lacking extensive practical evidence.

The distribution of deontic markers expressed through modals such as "should," "have to," "need," and "must" yielded a complementary picture. With the modal "should" featuring most frequently, student teachers appeared to be articulating internalized professional norms and constructing an effective teacher persona consistent with expert discourse. In contrast, the salience of "have to" often referred to the situational pressures of the teaching practicum. Moreover, "should"

overwhelmingly outnumbered "must," which may indicate that student teachers preferred recommendation over prescription. Thus, while displaying awareness of professional standards, participants generally avoided strong expressions of authority. Overall, despite epistemic modesty, student teachers showed some linguistic indications of normative confidence through the use of obligation markers (Chrisman, 2015).

The corpus was likewise pervaded by attitudinal stance markers, revealing the emotional and value-laden nature of student teacher reflections. While positive affect markers such as "like," "prefer," and "enjoy" prevailed (N = 114), the substantial use of professional evaluative lexis (e.g., *important, effective, useful*, N = 43) suggests the presence of evaluative reasoning. These data support Gkonou and Miller's (2021) claim that teacher reflection intertwines cognition and emotion. In the target corpus, positive evaluations co-occurred with notions of communication, games, technology, interaction, and student-centeredness. Nevertheless, negative evaluation (lemmas *difficult, challenging, afraid, nervous*) was also present in students' accounts of expectations of contemporary pedagogy, particularly in relation to differentiation, authentic communication, and lack of learner motivation, echoing previous research (Lőrincz, 2024; Lőrincz & Komar, 2023). What emerges is a dual schema of enthusiasm for student-centered communicative instruction and apprehension about its implementation. This tension between traditional and contemporary teaching paradigms bears resemblance to the state of pedagogical limbo described by Hekmatshoar Tabari and Hekmatshoar Tabari (2020).

RQ3 examined the extent to which student teachers' voices reflected self-attribution or generalized attribution in their writing. Findings drawn from 3-grams, collocation networks, and concordance lines indicate a shift from self-referential reflection to generalized, disciplinary attribution. The reliance on first-person pronouns makes reflection a site for testing theory against one's own experience (Bham, 2025). This is supported by the high frequency of 3-grams such as "in my opinion," "I believe that," "I try to," and "I feel most," confirming that the novice voice remains anchored in personal interpretation. At the same time, attribution frames such as "contemporary language teaching," "language teaching is," "teachers should," and "it is important to" indicate a degree of depersonalization. Thus, student teachers may be beginning to position themselves not merely as individuals but in relation to a broader professional community (Feryok, 2024). By projecting authority onto the field of language instruction rather than themselves, this pattern can be interpreted as aligning student essays with the concept of disciplinary voice (Hyland et al., 2022).

The presence of numerous methodological 3-grams (e.g., "communicative language teaching," "the grammar translation," "task-based language"), supported by qualitative KWIC analysis, may point toward a principled eclecticism orientation (Curtis, 2017). The strong collocational tie between "teacher" and "flexible" further supports this interpretation. Participants tended to represent the teacher as adaptable to context and learner exigencies, echoing the notion of post-method professionalism (Hashim, 2025).

Collocational networks of "student" and "learner," especially with first-order collocates such as "needs," "engage," "interaction," "engagement," and "communication," highlight attention to learner-centered values. By explicitly foregrounding these aspects, participants appear to orient their discourse toward relational professionalism. The adoption of relational and evaluative stance markers may indicate professional maturation (Chintalapalli & Bahl, 2024). In essence, participants defined themselves not only through a disciplinary knowledge base but also through how they relate to learners, a hallmark of the reflective practitioner (Gkonou & Miller, 2021).

Taken together, the stance attribution patterns suggest that self-attribution is increasingly complemented by experiential reflection and disciplinary authority. Through partial depersonalization of stance, integration of pedagogical content knowledge, and the foregrounding of learner-centeredness, participants appear to be linguistically enacting the process of becoming teachers.

Conclusions

The present study investigated how Ukrainian EFL student teachers linguistically construe their understanding of contemporary language teaching in reflective discourse. Utilizing lexico-grammatical profiling, it combined corpus-based quantitative analysis with qualitative discourse interpretation to examine how stance, modality, and attribution contribute to the expression of emerging professional thinking.

Across all analyses, student teachers' discourse was characterized by epistemic modesty, positive affect, and a gradual orientation toward professional authority. Concerning RQ1, the keyword analysis revealed a strongly writer-centered discourse marked by first-person singular pronouns and affective lexis. At the same time, participants frequently used technical terminology to discuss the modern language classroom.

For RQ2, the stance analysis documented a high use of hedging, signaling a cautious voice. The prevalence of deontic "should" over "must" illustrated acceptance of professional norms. The salience of positive affect markers further indicated that language teaching was emotionally charged (Gkonou & Miller, 2021). Consequently, participants' reasoning was linguistically represented through tentativeness, evaluation, and obligation, mirroring their process of initiation into teaching.

As for RQ3, the results from 3-grams and collocations revealed a partial shift from self-attribution to generalized attribution. While frequent chunks (e.g., *I believe that, in my opinion*) pointed to personal reflection, more depersonalized collocations (e.g., *contemporary language teaching, language teaching is, teachers should*) signaled a disciplinary voice. The collocational networks associating "teacher" with "flexible" and "student" with "needs" may serve as linguistic signals of participants' development into context-sensitive professionals, embracing the principles of eclecticism and post-method thinking.

Methodologically, these findings highlight the value of reflection as a bridge linking the professional knowledge base to classroom realities. Analytically, the study illustrates the utility of lexico-grammatical profiling as an additional lens to qualitative approaches traditionally used in teacher cognition research, providing evidence of stance patterns in teacher discourse.

While the target corpus of 52 essays offers rich insights into the construal of modern methodological practices, it represents a single institutional and cultural context and genre. Future research could analyze other genres of teacher discourse, such as lesson plans or classroom interactions, and compare stance across cultural backgrounds. Longitudinal corpus analysis could further reveal how stance evolves over the course of teacher preparation and professional development.

Biodata

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