



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.2. Issue 3., 2015 (July-Sept.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

USAGE OF HEDGING AS MODERATION DEVICE BY BABYLON UNIVERSITY LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Hedges are words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy. Truth and falsity are a matter of degree, and hedges make natural language sentences more/less true or more/less false. The purpose of the study is to investigate hedging devices in Iranian spoken language. The aim is to know how hedging devices are used in Iranian spoken discourse. Also the researchers are willing to know whether Iranian speakers use hedging devices to indicate a lack of complete commitment to the truth of the proposition, and a desire not to express the commitment categorically, or to lessen the impact of an utterance. The data needed for the study was collected through observation and interviews. The research showed that hedging as a mitigating device is extensively employed in different conversations. It is a kind of expression which transfers the indeterminacy in message and through which; academicians present their claims and arguments cautiously and politely. This article aimed at investigating the types and frequency of hedges used by Iranian students in the academic research articles in the field of English Language Teaching. The findings of this study could be applied in genre based academic writing instruction focusing on rhetorical structures.

Keywords: Hedging devices, mitigating device, Rhetorical structures.

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INTRODUCTION

Hedging is the process whereby speakers tone down their statements in order to reduce the risk of opposition and minimize the threat to face that lurks behind every act of communication (Myers, 2000:3). This position associates hedges with scientific imprecision and defines them as linguistic cues of bias which avoid personal accountability for statements. In our daily interactions, we feel the need to modulate our messages to guarantee a certain level of acceptability and possibility of existence (Myers 1995:141)

Myers (1989:12) argues that hedges are better understood as positive or negative strategies. Banks (1994:6) argues that a certain degree of hedging has become conventionalized, i.e., that the function of hedges is to conform to an established writing style. The appropriate use of hedging strategies is a significant

communicative resource for student writers at any proficiency level. The problem is that proficiency in the pragmatic area appears to be notoriously difficult to achieve in a foreign language.

Hyland (1994:240) remarks that the use of modality presents considerable problems for linguistically unsophisticated writers of academic texts. Hedges may be expressed by different constructions: - modal auxiliary verbs, modal lexical verbs, auxiliary verbs, adjectival and nominal modal phrases, if clauses, compound hedge, introductory phrases, and approximators of degree.

Modal expressions are complex because they are poly pragmatic, that is, they can simultaneously convey a range of different meanings. It is difficult to relate particular forms to specific functions on a one to one basis because a single linguistic form such as could, for example, can express ability and permission as well as possibility (Coates, 1987:110). Particular items can therefore only be understood as expressions of doubt and certainty by attending to the context in which they occur. Meanings do not reside in the items themselves but are assigned to utterances which contain them. This conveys the idea that the concept of hedging is vague in itself and therefore it is not easy to limit it within certain boundaries.

Hedging appears to be an area which L2 students find problematic (Hyland 1996, 2000) and often a neglected area in teaching. Darian (1995:101) also comes to the conclusion that "hedges, probably the clearest indicators of hypotheses". Hedging devices are complex for foreign learners for two reasons: First, hedging devices can simultaneously convey a range of different meanings. Another difficulty is that, epistemic meanings can be signaled in many different ways, and with a variety of devices and expressions.

The problem lies in that Babylon University students may hardly use the hedging devices appropriately in academic discourse due to the constraints of language competence or cultural background.

Aim of the Study:

- To identify the level of Babylon University students in recognizing hedges in English
- To identify the level of Babylon University students in producing hedges in English.
- To find out the differences Babylon University students recognizing and producing hedging devices.

It is hypothesized that:

- The level of Babylon University students in recognizing hedges is below the average.
- The level of Babylon University students in producing hedges is below the average.
- Most Iranian Babylon University students show greater tendency towards using particular hedging devices such as modals auxiliary, lexical verbs and they neglect other devices.
- Iranian Babylon University students face difficulty in mastering hedging devices at recognition and production.

The Steps Adopted to fulfill the aim of the Study is as follows:

The following are the steps adopted for study:

- Selecting a sample of Iranian Babylon University students as subjects for conducting a test to investigate their recognition and production of hedging devices.
- Administering a diagnostic test to find out the level and difficulties they may face in using the various devices.
- Analyzing the results of the test in order to reveal the difficulties Babylon University students face and the sources of their errors.

The sample of the study is confined to Babylon University students at fourth stage in the Department of English.

Aspects of Hedging

Hedging can be broadly defined as a genre-specific, interactional, Multi-functional phenomenon which integrates semantic, pragmatic, social and cognitive factors. To understand the pragmatic aspects of hedging, it seems better to start with its semantic aspects. Thus the researcher begins from a closer scrutiny of the semantics of hedges in order to lay the foundation for a discussion of how hedging has been characterized in pragmatic terms.

Hedging as a Semantic Phenomenon

Lakoff's semantic characterization of hedging portrays hedges as words that may realize two seemingly contradictory functions, namely these of making things fuzzier or less fuzzy. In fact it appears that most scholars have approached hedges as devices with the primary function of making things semantically fuzzier. It is possible to illustrate at the semantic level two dimensions.

Hedging as Pragmatic Phenomenon

In most of the recent work relating to hedging, hedging has been analyzed with an eye on the communication situation, particularly the effect of the strategy on the relationship between sender and addressee in face - to- face communication. Furthermore, in a cross- linguistic treatment of hedges in philosophical text, Markkanen and Schroder (1998:48) define hedging as a strategy of "saying less than one means", the functions of strategy being to modify the writer's responsibility for the truthfulness of utterance, and to modify the definiteness of an utterance or its information.

Among the main pragmatic features which shape the research article as the principle vehicle for knowledge and which distinguish it from other forms of academic discourse are hedges (Hyland, 2000:245). Crystal (1997:182) declares that a hedge is an application in pragmatics and discourse analysis of a general sense of the word". In the same talk, Brown and Levinson (1987:50) state that "hedge is a particle word, phrase that modifies the degree of membership that is private or true than perhaps might be expected". However, Holmes (1984:4) demonstrates that there are a variety of linguistic means by which a speaker can signal a wish not to impose, (i .e) hedges reduce the strength of the utterance.

Since hedging is closely related to the attitude a speaker has towards the proposition expressed and inferring the speaker's propositional attitude is in fact a pragmatic process: the speaker's attitude is set down entirely encoded in utterance and even if it is encoded as 'I suppose' used in (3) the teacher does not believe or even suppose that the capital of U.K. is Paris (Krifka, 1999:3):

A pupil to his teacher

Pupil: I **suppose** the capital of USA is Hong Kong, am I right?

Teacher: I **suppose** the capital of U.K. is Paris, am I right?

By this we say that hedging is a pragmatic phenomenon. This is right way to view hedging since pragmatics can accommodate social factors as contextual assumptions and implications on particular occasions of utterance. Crismore and Kopple(1988:185), in turn, see hedges as items that "signal a tentative or cautious assessment of the truth of referential information".

Hubler (1983:10) starts from the presumption that in language use "there is opposition to all sentences," and the use of hedging phenomenon provides an opportunity to prepare for possible opposition. This illustrates that Hubler takes the reasons underlying the use of hedges to be pragmatic by nature in so far as he emphasizes the interactional aspects underlying hedging.

The most thorough treatment of pragmatic features of hedging so far is to be found in literature related to politeness theories, mainly in work originating from Brown and Levinson's (1978,1987) well- known study of politeness phenomenon.

It seems that the earlier pragmatic portrayals of hedging may in one way or another be associated with the expression of linguistic politeness. Watts et al. (1992:1) explain that the notion of linguistic politeness has to do with the way in which human beings "successfully manage interpersonal relationships to achieve both individual and group goals".

The back bone of Brown and Levinson's (1987:13) modal is thus the idea that interlocutors are aware of two basic kinds of desire regarding their face, namely, " the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions (negative face) and the desire to be approved of (positive face)". Brown and Levinson attempt to account for politeness as a systematic feature of linguistic interaction.

Hedging as a politeness device

Holmes (1988:2) says that hedging can be expressed through epistemic device. Also he speaks about epistemic modality as a politeness device which reflects deference rather than uncertainty .Similarly, many writers (e.g. Myers1989; Hinkel 1997) consider hedging as one of the negative politeness strategies which

implies distancing oneself and avoiding imposition on others, as a sign of politeness by Brown and Levinson (1987) in their unified model of politeness in spoken context.

Negative politeness, according to Brown and Levinson (1987:116), refers to addressee's "want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded. It performs the function of minimizing the particular imposition that the face threatening act unavoidably effects."

e.g.: I **wonder** if you could help me with lifting this box.

Positive politeness is "redress directed to the addressee's positive face, his perennial desire that his wants (or the actions, acquisitions /values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable"(Brown 1987:101).

e.g.: **You really should sort of study harder.**

Myers (1989:14) believes that hedging can be a requirement when naming something as well as when proposing something .He disagrees that all hedging expressions have the role of expressing probability, for these are the ones that show the relation between the writer and reader in scientific articles can be interpreted as the politeness marker.

Hedging and politeness are not synonymous, however. As Myers points out hedging is a politeness strategy when it marks a claim, or any other statement, as being provisional, pending acceptance in the literature, acceptance by the community – in other words, acceptance by the readers (1989: 12).

Classification of Hedging Devices

Hedging in academic learning can be expressed by means of various lexical, grammatical and syntactic devices depending on how broadly we understand the term. However, due to the fact that hedging is primarily viewed as a socio-pragmatic phenomenon there is little agreement among linguists about what linguistic devices should and should not be considered as hedges. There are some functionally-based approaches, such as Crompton's(1997, 271) that consider hedge as a concept reserved for expressions of epistemic modality with the sole function of avoiding commitment.

The taxonomy of hedges is based on Meyer classification (1997:152): Typically hedging is expressed through the use of the following strategic stereotypes:-

1. Modal auxiliary verbs: the most tentative ones being: may, might, can, could, would, should,

For example:

Such a measure might be more sensitive to changes in health after specialist treatment. Concerns that naturally low cholesterol level could lead to increased mortality from other causes may well be unfounded.

2. Modal lexical verbs (or the so - called speech act verbs used to perform acts such as doubting and evaluating rather than merely describing) of varying degree of illocutionary force: to seem, to appear (epistemic verbs), to believe, to assume, to suggest, estimate, tend, think, to argue, indicate, propose, speculate. Although a wide range of verbs can be used in this way, there tends to be a heavy reliance on the above mentioned verbs especially in academic writing.

For example:

Our analyses **suggest** that a high dose of the drug can lead to relevant blood pressure reduction. In spite of its limitations, the study **appears** to have a number of important strategies. Without specific training, medical students' communication skills **seem** to decline during medical training.

3. Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases:

- Probability adjectives such as possible, probable, un/likely.
e.g. Septicemia is **likely** to result, which might threaten his life,
- Nouns such as assumption, claim, possibility, estimate, suggestion.
e.g. **Possibly** the setting of the neural mechanisms responsible for this sensation is altered in patients with Chronic Fatigue syndrome.
- Adverbs (which could be considered as non-verbal modals) such as perhaps, possibly, probably, practically, likely, presumably, virtually, apparently.
e.g. This is **probably** due to the fact that Greenland Eskimos consume diets with a high content of fish.

4.Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time

Some of the words related to approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time are approximately, roughly, about, often, occasionally, generally, usually, somewhat, somehow, a lot of.

For example:

e.g.: Fever is present in **about** a third of cases and sometimes there is neutropenia.

e.g.: Persistent subjective fatigue **generally** occurs in relative isolation.

5.Introductory phrases such as believe, to our knowledge; it is our view that, we feel that, which express the author's personal doubt and direct involvement. For example:

e.g.: We **believe** that the chronic fatigue reflects a complex interaction of several factors.

6. If clauses such as if true, if anything.

For example:

If true, then, the study contradicts the myth that fishing attracts the bravest and strongest men.

7. Compound hedges: These are phrases made up of several hedges, the commonest forms being:

a) A modal auxiliary combined with a lexical verb with a hedging content eg. :it would appear.

b) A lexical verb followed by a hedging adverb or adjective where the adverb (or adjective) reinforces the hedge already inherent in the lexical verb.

e.g.: it seems reasonable, probably.

Hedging in Academic Writing

Hedging has received some attention in the **literature** as a feature of spoken discourse mostly in casual conversation as a way of “qualifying categorical commitment and facilitating discussion” (Hyland, 1996:433)

Hyland (1998, 1994) has recently analyzed the adequacy of a range ESP and EAP

Textbooks in providing students with information on hedging and arrange that there is a neglect in covering this topic. Hyland (1998: 230) comments: Generally the presentation of hedges in published texts is poor, with information scattered, explanations inadequate, practice material limited, and alternatives to modal verbs are omitted. This failure adequately represents hedges therefore gives misleading information to students concerning both the importance of the concept and frequency of different devices.

Hedging appears to be an area which the students find problematic because often it is neglected area in teaching. **Literature** has also analyzed how hedging could be used pedagogically for teaching academic writing .Hedging is seen as an important way of modulating the propositional content and expressing the writer-reader relationship it seems useful to raise learners awareness of its presence in academic texts. A feature of academic writing is the need to be contains in one's claims or statements (Jordan, 1997: 240). In academic writing, hedging is most appropriately described as

(a) lack of complete commitment to the truth value of an accompanying Proposition,

(b)A desire not to express that commitment categorically. (Hyland, 1998:1)

Hyland (2000:193) comments “A clear awareness of the pragmatic impact of hedges and an ability to recognize them in texts, is crucial – the acquisition of rhetorical competence in any discipline”

Proficiency and Cultural Influences on Hedging

Foreign students find the expression of commitment and detachment to their propositions notoriously problematic and a failure to hedge statements adequately is a common feature of second language writers, even those who have a good control of English grammar and lexis. This can seriously hamper a student's participation in their academic study.

Non – native speakers may hardly use the hedging device appropriately in academic discourse due to the constraints of language competence or cultural background. According to Hinkel (2004:314), “research has shown that non –native speakers have a restricted lexical repertoire that often leads to a shortage of hedging devices employed in L2 written text”. So Hyland (1996a:433) claims that adopting the authentic data on the high frequency use of hedging can be feasible and instrumental for non –native speakers writers.

Thus, hedging represents a major “rhetorical gap” that second language students have to cross before they can gain membership of a discourse community and pursue their careers. But being non – native speaker does not necessarily mean that you will be unable to hedge effectively in a foreign language.

Test for study

The main test has been administrated at the 10th of May during the academic year (2012-2013) .The final version of the test has been conducted on fifty of the learners of the English Department, Babylon University Iranian students. The researcher explained the hedging devices and defined the concept of hedging. The subjects were asked to answer without writing their names since the test is purely devoted to research purposes.

Objectives of the test

Testing is intended to provide the tester with information about the learner's ability to perform in the target language .Davies (1968:5) states that “the good test is an obedient servant since it follows and apes the teaching .“Alan(1990:30) points that a good test helps the teacher to diagnose his learners' difficulty. Language testing is used to test hypotheses in relation to our understanding of language and language learning. Also the goals of this testing is to explore the nature of the difficulty faced by Iranian Babylon University students , and to find out the causes that lie behind committing such errors so that adequate remedial recommendations can be proposed. The test measures the learners' performance in using hedging devices at both the recognition and the production levels. It is important mentioning that the learners have not study these devices as a separated one; rather they study these devices inclusively during the four- year period of Babylon University Students learning linguistics.

Data Analysis

Data analysis requires organization of information and data reduction. Thus, the researcher is required to reorganize and select related information from disordered, unorganized and discursive data. After all, analysis is a process of successive approximation toward an accurate description and interpretation of the phenomena (Wiersma, 1995: 216cited in AbiSamra, 2003:5).

This means data analysis is not a simple description of the data collected but a process by which we can bring interpretation to the data. Due to this, we discuss the results of the test through the data collected. Additionally, it gives the survey of the responses of the subjects to each question as well as showing the analysis of the errors made by the subject.

This section is devoted to show the results of the subjects' performance on each question of the test in particular and on the whole test in general. The types of the errors and their actual reasons will be shown.

Subjects' Performance

The questionnaire has been constructed to measure the subjects' performance at the recognition level. It tests the subjects' ability to identify hedges expressions that are used as a hedge in each item. Table (1) summaries the results as follows:-

The total number and the percentage of the correct responses are (505, 50.5%) whereas the total number and the percentage of the incorrect responses are (495, 49.5%)

Table (1): Subjects' Performance

No. of item	No. of correct Responses	%	No. of incorrect Responses	%
1.Auxiliary verbs	52	52	48	48
2.Lexical verbs	64	64	36	36
3.Compoud hedges	70	70	30	30
4.If clauses	60	60	40	40
5.Approximatorsof degree	66	66	34	34
6.Itroductory phrases	58	58	42	42
7.Adjectival ,Adverbial	30	30	70	70

8.Quantity , Frequency	20	20	80	80
9.Nominal modal phrases	30	30	70	70
10.Frequency and time	55	55	45	45
Total	505	50.5	495	49.5

Source: Data collected

It has been noticed that the subjects' performance is considered to be accepted since most of the subjects are able to identify most of the hedging devices in each sentence. Incorrect responses which have been identified according to their types are ordered from the commonest type to the least one.

Suggestive Remarks: The study has come up with some significant. The analysis of the data is Babylon University undergraduates' performance in using hedging devices at recognition and production levels. These are as follows:

A- Recognition level

The majority of Iranian Babylon University College Students in the fourth year have been found to face difficulties in identifying hedging devices at the recognition level. This can be confirmed by the low rate of their correct responses throughout the test (1105, 22.1%), which are quite unsatisfactory, in comparison with the total rate of their incorrect ones (1395, 27.9 %.) This reflects the fact that the achievement of most Iranian Babylon University College Students in the fourth year throughout a four-year period is not satisfactory enough to make them attain the advanced level they are supposed to and they encounter difficulties in recognizing hedging devices. This verifies the first hypothesis of the study that reads "The level of Babylon University college students in recognizing hedges is below the average".

Furthermore (184) of the correct responses at the recognition level have been expressed by modal and lexical verbs. This validates the third hypothesis which reads:

"Iranian Babylon University learners show greater tendency towards using particular devices such as modal and lexical verbs and they neglect other devices".

B- Production Level

The subjects' performance at the production level has revealed that Babylon University College students face difficulties in producing hedging devices. Learners violate norms and rules of writing by using norms of their native language. In general, learners' performance of this level is very poor or weak since the frequency and the rate of the incorrect responses (2050, 41%) whereas the correct ones (450, 9%). This confirms the second hypothesis which says that the level of Babylon University college students in producing hedges is below the average.

Furthermore (90) of the correct responses at the production level have been expressed by modal and lexical verbs. This validates the third hypothesis which reads:

"Iranian Babylon University learners show greater tendency towards using particular devices such as modal and lexical verbs and they neglect other devices".

The highest rate of the subjects' incorrect responses is (2050) i.e., (41%) at the production level whereas the total number of the incorrect responses is (1395), i.e., (27.9%) at the recognition one.

The results of the test at the recognition and production levels denote that the subjects' performance at both levels is poor or weak. This validates the fourth hypothesis which reads:

"Iranian Babylon University college students face difficulty in mastering hedging devices at both levels." The reason behind such an unsatisfactory achievement can be attributed to the fact that textbooks studied during the four-year period do not tackle the subject 'hedging' directly; i.e., as a separate topic.

The subjects' poor performance may be attributed to the following errors sources arranged according to the frequency and rate of each:

1. The major error source in using hedging devices is the intra-lingual transfer since it constitutes (1350, 39.19%) of total errors. The subject's reliance on the prior knowledge of the target language rules to recognize or produce hedging devices regardless of their acceptability is due to the incomplete

understanding of such devices which encourages overgeneralization, simplification, incomplete application of a rule and false hypothesis.

2. Communication strategies which the subjects resort to in their attempt to structure what they mean. The rate of pertaining to such factors is (33.05%) of all the subjects' errors.
3. **3.**Context of learning is the cause behind (900, 26.13%) of the incorrect responses. Such errors reveal the unfamiliarity of the subjects with hedging devices. The reason behind making such errors is that hedging devices may not be given due attention in the textbooks nor by the teachers themselves.
4. Inter-lingual transfer whereby the subjects use the rules of their native language in the production of hedging devices. The reliance on direct translation from Arabic into English is the main reason behind making such error. The rate of errors can be attributed to inter-lingual transfer (56, 1.63%).

Conclusions

Everyone agrees that "hedging" is the part and parcel of academic writing, there is no consensus among scholars about its functions, this being reflected in different definitions and taxonomies presented for hedging Cross-linguistic studies indicate the differences between languages with regard to using hedge words are- most of the time -significant. This represents that Usage of Hedging devices at recognition and production level are below the average. By that we say that hedging as Moderation Device by Babylon University Learners.

Hedge words have been taught in regular basis. The factors that may impede second language learners to use hedge words appropriately are: --

- a) Non-native speakers are not successful in expressing precise degree of certainty and most of the time they convey strong claims.
- b) Students do not pay much attention to hedges and reading a hedged text is not different from reading a text.

This study on hedging is not at the incipient stages, but there still remain many issues to be investigated, for example, regarding the effect of instructional intervention, norms of appropriateness, attitude and cultural background.

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