A Comparative Study of Politeness and Hedges Used in Corporate Emails Written by Business English Majors, AI and Native Speakers

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Abstract: As economic growth serves as a key factor driving social development, the demand for talents in multinationals is currently high and the needs for professionalized graduates in Business English are increasing. Therefore, enhancing students' ability to competently handle daily corporate communication is quite essential. This study initially focused on updating classroom teaching methods and exploring the way to improve students' skills, and then investigated students' corporate email writing tasks, mainly discovered the usage of shields (hedges) and politeness used in their emails. To fully develop students' ability to better use hedges, this study also compared the politeness and hedges of their work with those from AI and native speakers. Meanwhile, a questionnaire was also analyzed to discover students' attitudes towards using hedges. The results of this study revealed the great importance of learning how to properly use hedges and show politeness in emails, which is an essential skill for graduates to cope with daily corporate communication. And the suggested teaching practices could better support the findings of this study.

Keywords: Business English Major, Hedges, Shield, Politeness, Production-Oriented Learning

1. Introduction

1.1 Business English Major

Business English is a language skill widely used in the business environment, characterized by professionalism, formality, and practicality. Mastering Business English can enhance personal career competitiveness, facilitate international exchanges, and broaden career horizons. A Business English Major typically includes courses such as Comprehensive Business English, Business English: Viewing, Listening and Speaking, Business English Reading, Business English Writing, English Speech and Debate, Business Translation, Cross-cultural Business Communication, Introduction to International Business, Introduction to Management, and Introduction to Economics, etc. These courses aim to cultivate students' English application abilities as well as their knowledge of international business.

With the deepening of globalization and the rapid development of China's economy, there is increasing demand of graduates in Business English in marketing, business development, and international exchange work in fields such as international trade, cross-border e-commerce, finance, and education. Particularly in multinationals and foreign trade enterprises, Business English graduates possess unique advantages.

As one of the key pilot universities for Business English majors established by the Ministry of Education, Heilongjiang University holds a particularly prominent position and makes significant contributions in the field of Business English education. School of Foreign Languages and Literature (School of Region and Country Studies) at Heilongjiang University has its roots in the Heilongjiang University Foreign Language Teaching and Research Department established in 1985. This historical background has laid a solid foundation for the school's development. The school serves as the chairman unit of the International Business English Research Association, reflecting its authoritative status in the field of Business English.

1.2 Problems and Updated Teaching Methods

Problems facing by current college students majored in Business English include: 1. The classroom teaching is totally void from real-life working atmospheres; 2. The teaching methods can hardly keep pace with current technology development because teachers are reluctant to change the past teaching system; 3. Students are losing confidence in learning Business English because of the fierce competition between them and other related majors including Economics majors and English majors; 4. Students are not quite competent in gaining a position in the job market.

In order to cope with those challenges, there are numerous researchers developing their teaching methods towards efficiency and effectiveness of classroom teaching which can benefit Business English classes. Ellis et al. (2020) mention task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an approach that differs from traditional approaches by emphasizing the importance of engaging learners' natural abilities for acquiring language incidentally through the performance of tasks that draw learners' attention to form. [1] And because of this, students can be motivated to gain more skills and learn more from authentic situations. Moreover, through TBLT researchers can investigate learners' use of their first language (L1) when they are doing tasks and treat L1 as a tool to facilitate the performance of the task and second language (L2) learning. Besides task-based language teaching, production-oriented approach (POA) as the core also influences the classroom teaching in Comprehensive Business English course. The current situation was that university freshman's usual abilities in English do not satisfy employers. [2] Production-oriented approach meets the need of learners who typically have a relatively large amount of receptive knowledge but limited experience using English for communication. On the basis of improving language fluency, extending students' knowledge base, language system and discourse patterns can be realized as well. Table 1 illustrates the similarities and differences of TBLT and POA, which can be a reference for teachers to apply both methods well.

Table 1: Comparison on TBLT and POA

Layers	Similarity	Differences	
		Task-based approach	Production-oriented approach
Teaching Concept	"Whole-person education" and "learning by doing"	Student-Centered	Learning-Centered
Teaching hypothesis	The role of "input" and "output"	Practice over learning	Combination of learning and practice
Teaching process	The basis of language application in classroom teaching	Separation of assessment and learning	Learning through assessment

2. The Classroom Teaching Design

The classroom teaching of Comprehensive Business English Course based on POA for the Business English Majors in Heilongjiang University contain three phases mediated by the teacher, including motivating by case study, enabling by input, and assessing by output. POA starts teaching with language production and ends with production while input serves as an enabler to help accomplish productive activities.[3] For Business English major students who are young adult learners and passed the China's College Entrance Examination with intermediate level proficiency in English have already finished learning basic English grammar and have about 3500 or more high-frequency words reaching A2 level in English. POA can be quite effective and direct to help students to improve learning ability, basic knowledge and practical skills. Because of the limited experience of students using English for communication, this study has a significant meaning to change the situation and students are expected to be able to cope with genuine communicative activities in business field.

This research takes unit 1 case study writing task in the course book (*Market Leader-Intermediate Business English Course Book 3*) published by Higher Education Press as an example to explore how to improve students' internal communication skills in writing emails. To accomplish this task, students need to thoroughly understand the background information of the case study, the main problems faced by the company and the decision of the company. There are several kinds of information covered in the task, including basic information of the company, current issues, research methods and results of sales, and listening material of managers' discussions, possible solutions and specialist's interviews. Students can

also use smart devices to explore more with the instruction and help of the course teacher. After leading students to fully understand the main task and the appropriate way to clue it, teachers would give them the role to play and arrange specific tasks according to their specific roles. The second stage is to offer sufficient resources for them to cope with the problems faced by Hudson on entering the European market and also evoke desires of students to learn more about marketing strategies which enables them to find more proven solutions by themselves. With enough input, it is highly likely that the production will be done in an appropriate way. Besides, the course teacher takes the leading role to instruct students to deliver their findings with care. They should focus on the content, language use and well-organized structure to reach the final goal of the task. The final outcome is a writing task in the form of an email from the CEO of Hudson Corporation to the head of European Marketing Associates. Then the outcome is analyzed to evaluate the whole process before giving feedback, which help students to improve their skills and learn to develop their learning strategies. And the assessment and feedback can be quite effective to find any problems for future teaching. The focus of this study is on hedges and expressions for showing politeness used by students.

3. Focusing on Pragmatic Functions

3.1 The Benefits of Analyzing the Pragmatic Functions of Students' Work

"The study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication." defined by Crystal (1997). Pragmatics can be seen as "the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context" summarized by Kasper (1997). These definitions enlightened the features of pragmatics: the mediating effect of the sociocultural context and the (linguistic) choices of the language users. However, when teachers evaluate students' writing work, the focus will only lie into task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource and grammar. They seldom pay attention to the tone of their language. Nevertheless, in business communication the pragmatic functions should not be ignored.

This paper mainly covers the analysis of the pragmatic use of their emails. The email to the head of European Marketing Associates considering the actions taken to expand sales in European markets is under persuasive communication within an organization. By persuading colleagues to support our ideas or proposals, students could foster a collaborative and innovative work environment. This, in turn, can lead to increased productivity, employee satisfaction, and overall success for the organization. In business communication, persuasion allows us to influence decision making, build strong relationships, and achieve desired outcomes. By understanding the psychology behind persuasion and employing effective techniques, we can enhance our communication abilities and drive positive change in the business world. And analyzing and teaching the use of pragmatics in emails should become an important aspect.

3.2 The Importance of Using Hedges

The original focus of writing for Chinese business English learners lies in foreign trade and does not cover frequent corporate email exchanges. The learning of Business English majors should not be limited solely in international trade, and communication among colleagues and cooperators via email can be a necessity in future working environment of multinationals. However, there are seldom studies on this field, especially regarding the tone used in emails. For a long-time teaching, we have noticed that students' email writing is strongly influenced by their mother tongue. Chinese Business English majors often show politeness and tone without considering the lingua-cultural background, extralinguistic factors and the email senders' power position within the corporate hierarchy. Therefore, it is vital to discover the use of hedges, a crucial element for managing uncertainty, building rapport, and softening statements in professional communication. The use of hedges in business communication is part of broader politeness strategies, particularly used in workplace interactions.[4] Hedges are used in many aspects of business communication, and they can help to express caution and openness in business reports, proposals and presentations.[5] Also, Trosborg (1995) addresses how hedges help manage cross-cultural communication in international business settings. McCarthy and Carter (2007) explore the pragmatic aspects of hedges in Business English, focusing on how it is employed in negotiation, marketing and corporate discourse. Furthermore, the *Cambridge handbook of English for Specific Purposes (2012)*, edited by Paltridge and Starfield, specifically addresses hedging in professional settings in business emails, meetings and presentations. These collectively highlight the importance of hedges used in professional field.

According to Lakoff (1973), hedges have different pragmatic functions and can be divided into two kinds: approximator and shield. The former are those expressions which can change the words, while the latter do not change the words, form and structure of meaning, they just let the original sentence meaning more easing. [6] Xu and He (2012) illustrates hedge is the linguistic manifestation of the speakers' meta-pragmatic awareness contributing to the efficiency of communication between speaker and audience on a higher level. [7] Shields are fuzzy words or phrases that affect the degree of the speaker's commitment to the true condition of proposition. They cannot change the original meaning of language, but make the tone more indirect. He (1988) classified two types of shields-plausible shield and attributing shield. Plausible shields are achieved with modal verbs which can soften the tone and hesitation words which can express a reserved and prudent attitude. Attributing shield is manifested in expressions of the third person viewpoint, which means opinions are expressed through a third person.

Using shields is a way of showing politeness and shields are often used to reduce directness and enhance politeness to foster a harmonious communication atmosphere. In writing emails, politeness has been widely explored in linguistic and pragmatic studies. Brown and Levinson (1987) laid the groundwork for understanding politeness strategies, including the concepts of positive and negative face, which are crucial for analyzing email interactions. [8] Brown and Levinson's work consists of two parts: their fundamental theory of the nature of 'politeness' and how it functions in interactions and a list of 'politeness' strategies with examples from three languages including English. Holmes (2013) further expands on the sociolinguistic and implicature aspects of politeness. Pragmatic studies, on the other hand, have investigated how politeness is perceived and interpreted in different cultural and social contexts. This includes understanding the norms and expectations for politeness in email communication across various cultures and industries, as well as the potential impact of politeness on the receiver's perception of the message and their willingness to engage in further communication.

For the purpose of evaluating the final outcomes properly and offering feedback towards language use, the analysis including pragmatic functions exploration focusing on politeness and shields analysis which influence the tone of the email.

4. Analysis of Students' Work

4.1 Participants and Data Collection

The research covers 51 students' writing work related to the topic mentioned, and all of them handed in their work through pigai.org which is well-known online system that uses computer algorithms to automatically mark English essays, following the principle of comparing the distance between a student's essay and a standard corpus, and then mapping this distance onto a score and feedback through a specific algorithm. By November 2023, Pigai.org has graded nearly 1 billion essays and is used as a necessary tool for most universities in English assessment. As in our school, the resource is qualified as a main way to assess students work and the marks of their works contribute to their final score in compulsory English courses. For this study, the writing task was posted onto the website and students should submit their final version within a limited time. But before the deadline of the task, they can rewrite their pieces as many times as they desire to reach their target score. Therefore, the final scores can best reflect their full ability to reach the target marks which represent their best performance and English level.

Besides analysis within students' works, the comparison among students' work, AI production and native speakers' writing is also vital in study of showing politeness and using hedges to realize pragmatic functions. AI produced writing work is from ChatGPT and the writing sample from a native speaker is provided in the teacher's book.

4.2 Data Analysis

4.2.1 Analysis of Shields Use

The language use was analyzed by coding through NVIVO14. Firstly, we tested students' work on shields use, and to avoid bias in coding, all the coding processes based on the lists of shields and after automatic coding, the author thoroughly review the context and find out any incorrectness. The final marks from Pigai.org are grouped into three levels (lower, medium, and higher). The evaluation of writing works on Pigai.org depends on a variety of factors, including the clarity, accuracy, and relevance of the content, as well as the appropriate use of expressions; however, the tone of writing is not included as one aspect of this complex evaluation process, which could definitely affect communication. For

instance, a writer who frequently uses plausible shields might be seen as less confident in their assertions, while the use of attributing shields might suggest a reliance on external sources or a more cautious approach to making claims.

Here's a breakdown of the two types of shields mentioned:

▪ Plausible Shields: are modal verbs or phrases that express personal opinion, uncertainty, or possibility. Include: "I think," "I hope," "probably," "maybe," "would," "possibly," "likely," "perhaps," "as far as I can tell," "seem," "wonder," "hard to say," "I believe," "I assume," "I suppose," "I'm afraid."

Using these phrases can make a statement sound more tentative or open to interpretation, which might be appropriate in certain contexts (e.g., when discussing a hypothesis or an unconfirmed fact).

▪ Attributing Shields: are phrases that attributing information or opinions to external sources or general knowledge. Include: "according to," "presumably," "someone says that," "as is well known," "the possibility would be," "the probability is."

Using these phrases can distance the writer from the information being presented, suggesting that it comes from an external source or is generally accepted knowledge.

When evaluating writings, the use of these shields should be considered in conjunction with other factors to determine the overall quality and accuracy of the content. For example: Writings that overly rely on plausible shields might be seen as lacking in confidence or clarity, while those that use attributing shields excessively might be viewed as lacking original thought or critical analysis. Also, the lack of using shields is also considered to be less competent to complete the task. A balanced use of both types of shields could indicate a thoughtful and nuanced approach to presenting information, acknowledging both personal opinions and external sources. Writings that effectively combine factual statements with appropriate use of shields to express uncertainty or opinion might be rated higher, as they demonstrate a mature and nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

Table 2: The differences in shields use by attributing type and plausible type in lower level, medium level and higher level. (by hits)

	A: shields in total	B: plausible shields	C: attributing shields
1: lower level	55	44	11
2: medium level	46	36	11
3: higher level	45	38	7

According to Table 2, despite the original consumption of lack of hedges in writing emails, the lower-level group gained the highest amount of shields use (55 hits), comparing with higher level (46 hits) and medium level (45 hits). It seems that the lower-level students tend to use shields more frequently without considering the appropriateness. The medium level tended to use the least plausible shields and the higher level used the least of attributing shields. For comparing with attributing shields and plausible shields in different levels, the hits of plausible shields are much higher (more than three times) than that of attributing shields. However, there are almost no difference in the use of attributing shields among three different levels.

For better understanding of the language use in shields, we use word cloud to find out the preference of Chinese students' choice of word in hedges shown in Figure 1. It is obvious that to use verb is in the dominant role in their expressions. For most cases, students would choose I or we as the main subject for the sentence. However, the use of adverb is not so obvious showing the lack of lexical resources. In Figure 2, the most commonly used word is "according" and instead of using I or We, students used you or people to start their own sentences. However, the language use is still limited and, in a way, shows the lack of grammatical range.

Figure 1: Word Cloud of Plausible Shields in 51 Students' Emails.

Figure 2: Word Cloud of Attributing Shields in 51 Students' Emails.

The coding result of sample email written by native speaker only include hedges "as you know" and "would". In the sample email, it is apparent to draw a conclusion that plausive shields are seldom used. Meanwhile, the email produced by AI used "I would like to" to mediate the request and "As we discussed" as an attributing shield. Consequently, we could draw a conclusion that the uses of hedges by Chinese Business English Majors, the native speakers and their AI tools are quite different.

In order to find out more about students' understanding of hedges, a questionnaire was designed and one of the questions is: whether you know hedges and list some you have used before. The results of students' responses are not quite positive, and from 51 students, only 22 said yes and 29 denied. Additionally, among those 22 students, part of them said they could not remember whether they had used that before.

From these findings, Business English students should be taught how to use the hedges properly. This should be arranged as one part of classroom teaching and teachers should offer more authentic examples as reference for students to correct their work.

4.2.2 Analysis of Showing Politeness

The email created by AI use two sentences to show politeness: "I hope this email finds you well." and "Thank you for your time and attention to these matters." The position of those sentences lies in the opening part of the email and the closing part. Nevertheless, the standard example offered by the teacher's book only use "Looking forward to hearing from you." at the end of the email and with no extra sentences to show politeness. Turn to students' work, in Table 3, it is worth noticing that for Chinese English majors, they tended to show courtesy and politeness more in all three levels (ranging from 12 hits to 18 hits). Both the higher-level and medium-level students prefer to use politeness at the beginning with the figures almost doubled than that in the ending part, while lower-level students show politeness with no differences in the opening part and the ending part.

Table 3: The differences in showing courtesy and politeness in lower level, medium level and higher level. (by hits)

	Showing Courtesy and Politeness (in total)	A: In the opening part	B: In the ending part
1: lower level	18	9	9
2: medium level	12	8	4
3: higher level	16	10	6

5. Conclusion

5.1 Problems

The study involves several considerations towards this result: firstly, it is much easier for students to use the first-person pronouns, and therefore, the plausible shields are quite common in these emails. Hedges are used to express uncertainty, show politeness or avoid making strong claims, allowing the speaker to be more cautious in their statements. Our Business English majors remain unfamiliar with the pragmatic features of internal company communication. Students unconsciously use hedges and lack of understanding and assessment of their language use. To some extent, they ignore the pragmatic functions of their choices of expressions. Secondly, for some students, they do not know how to use attributing shields, resulting in a lack of use. Properly using different types of hedges (such as modal verbs, qualifying adverbs or adjectives, phrases that indicate uncertainty, evasive language, conditionals, and tag questions) in emails can help students to avoid confrontation. Thirdly, for this topic, students failed

to identify that this task was a kind of persuasive communication; therefore, attributing shields are more acceptable because they keep a distance from the conclusion and the writer.

The above conclusions can better serve teaching and learning process in preparing course material and teaching focus towards proper email writing. Additionally, within companies, there exists a hierarchical system that leads to asymmetrical power relationships, thereby influencing work communication. According to Scollon et al. (2011), there are significant differences in the pragmatic strategies employed by lower-level employees and higher-level employees when communicating (emphasizing the importance of hierarchical differences over gender differences), and company status and situational context truly influence pragmatics. [9] This should also be discovered and learned before writing.

5.2 Solutions

In classroom teaching, teachers should prepare engaging and hands-on activities to help students to identify, use and reflect on hedges in various contexts. The tasks should be arranged based on real-life situations. There are a few practical processes: Firstly, to raise students' awareness of hedges in real language use, teachers should provide reading materials or speaking transcript, and by collaboratively identifying hedges and their pragmatic functions, students can identify hedges and their pragmatic functions and discuss their findings within a group. Subsequently, teachers can ask students to categorize the hedges under different pragmatic functions, which can foster a deeper understanding of how hedges are used; Secondly, teachers should guide students to compare statements with hedges and without hedges, and let students to summarize the necessity of using them based on different situations. This can help students consider the impact of hedging on the clarity, politeness, and persuasiveness of their communication; Thirdly, through role play and simulation activities, teachers can simulate conversations and discussions to encourage students to use hedges. Students need to accomplish tasks like showing disagreement politely or maintaining a tone of professionalism under the designed scenarios. By participating in these activities, students can develop their ability to use hedges flexibly and effectively in real-life situations; Fourthly, in writing tasks, teachers should provide specific prompts to require students to show caution, avoid overgeneralization and maintain a formal tone. Moreover, finding more samples through online resources will be an effective way for students to verify the correctness of their work; Finally, assessment and feedback are essential components of the learning process. After completing all those tasks, students' work should be evaluated not only by their teacher but also by their peers. This peer evaluation process can better help students learn from each other.

By following these processes, students will develop a comprehensive understanding of how to use hedges and achieve their pragmatic functions in communication. This, in turn, will equip them with the skills necessary to navigate real-life communication with confidence and effectiveness.

Acknowledgements

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