A General Analysis of Hedges in Writing and Its Implications on Teaching Writing

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to depict a general picture of hedging devices by looking into related research. To be more specific, it will focus on three main dimensions: 1) an overview of the definition and different classifications of hedging devices; and 2) applications of hedging devices in different cultural contexts. By examining critical aspects of hedges, suggestions relating to teaching writing with hedges will be given at the end of this paper.*

Keywords: *hedging devices, intercultural differences, teaching writing*

1. Introduction

Hedging devices, as one of the most essential metadiscourse markers, serve the function of "emphasizing the subjectivity of a position by allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than a fact and therefore open that position to negotiation (Hyland, 2005, p52)". These inherent properties that hedging devices possess seem to be crucial to second language learning (L2 learning). L2 learners who have a good command of hedging devices could find it easier to be accepted by the English community as they understand the norms of it. For example, by using more hedges such as "could you" or "would you" in the conversations, a higher degree of politeness will be perceived; by employing more hedging devices in academic writing, a less compelling tone can be achieved.

Nevertheless, it seems that hedging devices do not gain enough attention from English education in China. Take my teaching experience for example, most of the students do not understand what hedging devices are, let alone the importance of using them in writing. Considering the significance of hedging devices and the neglect of hedging devices in English education in China, this paper will examine main theories of hedges and provide feasible suggestions on teaching writing[1-3].

2. Brief introduction of hedges

2.1 Definition of hedges

As research on hedging devices has gained more attention, the exploration of defining what a hedge is no longer only about the modification of words or phrases within a proposition but should also involve its function of modifying the writer's commitment to the propositional content. To combine these two notions, Hyland (1996) further points out that hedges are used to indicate a lack of complete commitment to the truth of the proposition, and a desire not to express the commitment categorically, which "plays a critical role in gaining ratification for claims from a powerful peer group by allowing writers to present statements with appropriate accuracy, caution, and humility (Hyland, 1996, p434)". Put another way, hedging devices are defined as discourse markers that can be utilized as tools to modify the qualification of argumentation. This qualification of a claim can be divided into three main way: 1) showing the writer's wariness of dealing with quantitative and qualitative information; 2) indicating the writers' uncertain and doubtful concerns considering opposite propositions or less well-prepared evidence and 3) presenting the writer's modesty when talking about notions they come up with.

2.2 Classifications of hedges

As hedging devices have been transmitted from a marginal topic to a central topic in the field of linguistics with the help of Lakoff (1972), various taxonomies of hedging devices have been suggested. Salager-Meyer (1994, p155) puts forward a classification which divides hedging devices into five types:

(1) "shield", which indicates the possibility of the authors' claim; (2) "approximators", which shows the authors' carefulness of presenting quantitative and qualitative information (3) "expression of authors" personal doubt and direct involvement' (Salager-Meyer,1994, p155), which refers to phrases such as "I believe," and "to our knowledge"; (4) "emotionally-charged intensifiers", which refer to evaluative words used to project the authors' reactions and (5) "compound hedges", which refers to expressions constituted by more than one hedging device, for example, "It would seem likely that...".

Although this taxonomy has been applied in some research (Rezanejad and Lari and Mosalli, 2015), it lacks the consistency of grouping hedging devices with the same criteria. In terms of type one to four, hedging devices are grouped together based on their similar functions they serve in academic writing; while hedging devices in type five are grouped together due to the multiple amount of hedging in one sentence. Besides, there are possibilities that such inconsistency may cause overlap. For example, in the sentence "This finding may suggest that, as students progressed to a higher grade, their writing efficacy declined." (Lee and Yu and Liu, 2017), hedging devices in this sentence can be categorized into type one and type three. This overlap may result in confusion and inaccuracy when it comes to analyzing the different purposes of using hedging devices.

Taxonomies mentioned above are related to how hedging devices are used in academic writing, whose main concern is about how these devices can modify information writers present and claims they bring up. However, these classifications show little concern about writers' attitudes towards their orientations of using hedging devices, which is regarded as one of the most significant elements that should be provided for readers to fully understand scientific articles (Hyland, 1996).

Under such circumstances, Hyland (1996) puts forward a taxonomy which divides hedging devices into two main categories: content-oriented hedges and reader-oriented hedges. Content-oriented hedging devices refer to discourse markers that enable writers and readers to negotiate the meaning of what the writer try to convey. To be more specific, this category can be subdivided into accuracy-oriented hedges and writer-oriented hedges[4-6].

In terms of accuracy-oriented hedging devices, they mainly deal with the situation when writers need to precisely present uncertain propositions with proper caution (Skelton, 1988). Writer-oriented hedging devices will be applied when writers want to present propositions with more possibilities while at the same time create some space to step back and distance themselves from making inappropriate claims. Reader-oriented hedging devices refer to hedges that can increase readers' acceptability towards hypothesis brought up by writers. This kind of hedging device can be realized through using various forms of reader-oriented hedges, such as reader pronouns (your, we, etc.), directives (consider, imagine, should, etc.), questions (Is it, in fact, necessary to choose between nurture and nature?) (Hyland, 1996).

2.3 Hedging devices in cross-cultural contexts

Apart from paying attention to how hedges can be put into different classifications, researchers also focus on topics that relate to comparison between writers who come from different cultures. This kind of research is crucial, as Hyland and Milton (1997) point out that, there are certain drawbacks regarding using hedging devices in academic writing for L2 English writers. Specifically, they use less complicated hedging devices and a more limited range of hedges than L1 English writers do. Furthermore, Skelton (1988) points out that even for advanced L2 writers, they still find it difficult and challenging to use proper expressions to present commitment and detachment in propositions. This could be accounted for the reasons that they might lack of the comprehensive understandings of characteristics of hedges. Hence, in this section, research about comparing the differences between L2 writers and L1 writers considering the usage of hedging devices will be discussed[7-10].

What also arouses researchers' interests is that to what extent that different people differ in terms of using hedging devices. Vassileva (2001) suggests that, compared with L1 writers, Bulgarian writers show a higher degree of commitment. In other words, Bulgarian writers tend to use fewer hedging devices, which leads to the phenomenon that their research articles (RAs) are less defensible. One possible reason that Bulgarian writers fail to construct text with more tentativeness is explained by Vassileva (2001) as follows. Due to the education tradition in Bulgaria, Bulgarian focuses more on the education of speech rather than writing, which obstructs them to cultivate the ability to compose writing with more delicate details, which, in this case, refers to pragmatic competence.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon mentioned above is not exclusive to Bulgaria. Research which has been done on similar topics also shows that the neglect of education in writing can be a great disadvantage for L2 writers. This disables L2 writers to show the appropriate degree of commitment or detachment

to their propositions, which results in the consequence that their RAs appear to be less persuasive (Clyne, 1987; Cmejrkova, 1996).

However, as the focus of this research will be the difference in using hedging devices between Chinese English writers and native English writers, more research concerning these two target groups will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

By looking at abstracts published respectively in English-medium and Chinese-medium journals, Hu and Cao (2011) points out that Chinese English writers follow the norm of Chinese writing when it comes to rhetorical style. This can be specifically seen in the way they use hedging devices in RAs. In contrast to native English writers, in view of these rhetorical practices, Chinese English writers who publish RAs in Chinese-medium journals find it less necessary to hedge their positions or qualify their knowledge claims. Instead, they hold the view that the propositions they hold should convey a sense of certainty to their readers, making their claims sound more authoritative and credible.

Similarly, Cheng and Zhang (2017) examine 60 RAs selected from Chinese- and English-medium journals in the field of applied linguistics. They suggest that Chinese academic writers are more likely to summarize their arguments in the conclusions by adopting a more confident and authoritative stance. While Anglophone scholars tend to show more appropriate discretion and tentativeness in the production of arguments.

These two researches both indicate that there are cultural factors which impact the way that Chinese English writers use hedging devices in RAs. According to Tweed and Lehman (2002), Chinese people tend to respect authoritative knowledge. This can be attributable to the immersion of and respect for Confucian and Taoist traditions (Tweed and Lehman, 2002). Chinese English writers are said to have an unique writing style which is deep-rooted in the sociocognitive belief that "verbal debate and argumentation are not meaningful tools for understanding truth and reality" (Peng and Nisbett, 1999, p747). By virtue of this thinking pattern, researchers of the studies mentioned above hold the view that Chinese English writers use fewer hedging devices in RAs than their counterparts[11-15].

Apart from analyzing the different overall frequency of using hedging devices by Chinese English writers and native English writers, research has also been done on finding out if there are any similarities or differences when it comes to the most frequently used hedging devices. From a macro perspective, based on the taxonomy brought up by Hyland (1998), Yang (2013) indicates that the frequency rank of using different types of hedging devices is similar between Chinese and native English writers. Specifically, in terms of native English writers, the highest incidence of the hedging type is epistemic adjectives and the lowest incidence of hedging type is phraseological expressions. When it comes to Chinese English writers, the trend is similar, but they tend to use much fewer epistemic adjectives, nouns, and adverbs than authors of English-medium journal articles.

From a micro perspective, research has also been done on finding out if there are any similarities or differences when it comes to the most and least frequently used hedging devices for L1 and L2 writers. Hu and Li (2015) points out that in examination of 92 argumentative compositions, the most frequently used hedge for both L1 and L2 writers is will. While the least frequently used hedge is could for L2 writers and probably for L1 writers.

3. Conclusion

Based on the findings mentioned above, it is not difficult to realize that Chinese English writers tend to pay less attention to hedges in writings. This could lead to less favorable results in terms of publishing papers in an international context. To improve this kind of situation, relevant solutions have been suggested in this part.

3.1 Cultivate the awareness of using hedging devices

Teachers should ensure that students understand the significance of applying hedges in their academic writings. It is not uncommon for students to neglect the necessity since there are cultural differences regarding different rhetorical styles in different cultures. That is to say, when writing in Chinese, students are more likely to express their viewpoint in a relatively direct way. And it is easy for students to transfer this kind of writing habit when they need to write in English. Therefore, it is necessary to cultivate students' awareness of applying hedges in writing. One thing that teachers can do is to stress more importance on hedges when giving feedback on students' writings. Traditionally, teachers tend to give

more feedback on grammar and vocabulary, while less attention has been paid to hedging devices[16-18].

3.2 Apply diverse writing activities

Teachers should provide students with different tasks of writing in class. For example, instead of asking students to write a whole piece of writing, teachers can require students to write a sentence or a paragraph, imitating different hedging styles based on different classifications of hedging devices. Moreover, teachers can also divide students into different groups, where students could have peer review sections, which are specifically designed to examine different hedging classifications and applications. Last but not least, it is always helpful for teachers to analyze discourse from different countries with students. In this practice, it is more apparent and clear for students to realize the differences among writers from different countries when it comes to hedging usages in writing.

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