

I THINK AND MAYBE AS MITIGATION TOOLS AMONG STUDENTS OF POLYTECHNICS (EFL LEARNERS)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of hedges in the speech of learners of polytechnics at any proficiency levels of English. Most students have 400-450 for their TOEFL score. As English is used as a foreign language (EFL), it is treated as a minor subject in Politeknik Negeri Jakarta, Depok. They get only 2 hours per week, so they have only limited time to learn English. During English classes, students like to use hedges when answering questions. Hedges are used to mitigate their statements which might cause an insult to other persons. Hedges are used to moderate the force of an utterance or the uncertainty of its content and therefore play an important role in interpersonal communication. The data is taken by observing 100 students of Industrial Electronics Engineering Department which are separated in 4 classes. This study ignores the genders of the students although most students of polytechnics are men. The observations are conducted by observing their habits of using English when English subject is being taught in the class. The results of this study show that students generally use hedges 'I think' (27%) and 'maybe' (15%) to show their doubts and sometimes to show their appreciation to listeners or others. They use hedges to avoid insulting other people.

Key words: *hedges, English as a Foreign Language, utterances, mitigate*

INTRODUCTION

It is known that learning a foreign language for most Indonesian people is difficult. As EFL learners, Indonesian learners sometimes have doubts to answer questions in English. They are not sure whether they make correct answers or not. They usually 'hide' behind their answers to prevent them from making mistakes. To reach this goal, the use of hedges will be important. Hedges can be used to protect and prevent speakers from mistakes (Banks, 1996).

It was Weinrich (1966) who was first introduced the word "hedge". He called these devices as "metalinguistic operators". Few years later, Lakoff (1972) in his article entitled *Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts* made this concept more popular and had the greatest initial impact. Lakoff defined this concept as "words whose functions is to make meanings fuzzier or less fuzzy". He said that "sort of" as an example of hedge. The following year, Fraser (1975) introduced the hedged performative. He discussed hedged performative is based on the use of modality, such as: *will, can, must* or semimodality like *want to, would like to, wish to*.

Hedges are pragmatic features that the speakers use to seek the assertions that they make, toning down uncertain or potentially risky claims, emphasizing what they believe to be correct and conveying appropriately collegial attitudes to listeners (Hyland, 1996). Myers also (1989) says that hedges can be used to mitigate propositions. Hedges will help to reach "the optimal relevance" (Sperber and Wilson, 2001) between speaker and listener or writer and reader. The writer should make some choices in strategy and linguistic forms in order to adapt with his or her intention. Hedges are often chosen to achieve the goal. According to Brown and Levinson, the definition of hedges is particles that are used to mitigate proposition become weak. Indonesian people are well known as friendly people and have low-profile characters. Most of them can easily make friends with others, both local and foreign people. They show intimacy and warmth to the surrounding (Maryanto, 1998)

Furthermore, Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1987) states an FTA is a violation of the speakers' or writers' privacy and freedom of action, for which hedges provide a possible compensation. Hence the negative politeness enables the speaker to go on-record, but with the redress which means that the speaker makes an effort to minimize the imposition of his/her claims. An increasing number of research studies on a variety of disciplines (for example: Hyland, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000; Salager-Meyer, 1991, 1994, 1998; Skelton, 1997; Meyer, 1997). Furthermore, Myers (1998) examined corpus of biology research articles.

Hedging is an important interactional strategy which is used in communication. This strategy can make the communication go smoothly. Therefore, to become an effective communicator, speaker should be able know how and when using hedging devices in different process of communication. Hedging devices here mean that verbal propositions which are employed by participants of communication (both

speaker and hearer) to prevent the conflict, to stay away from being blunt, weaken or strengthen the illocutionary force and protect the face (Brown and Levinson 1987; Stenstorm 1994, Salager-Meyer 1994).

Leech (1983) proposes the six maxims of Politeness Principle (PP). Those are tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, sympathy. The tact maxim regulates the operation of the directive speech acts and addresses the dominant type of politeness which can be measured on the cost-benefit scale, the more costly an action, the less polite it is. Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that in any social interaction participants devote much of the time to face-work. They argue that “face” is something which concerns human beings universally and it is divided into negative face and positive face. The first one deals with negative politeness strategy which gives the freedom of individual action and a desire to be unimpeded. Another words, it is called strategies of independence or *deference politeness strategy*. Meanwhile the positive face deals with positive politeness strategy which attempt to save hearer’s face. This strategy is also called strategy of involvement or *solidarity politeness strategy*. Look at this example: *I really sort of think/hope/wonder....* (Brown and Levinson, 1987:116).

Being polite means to be considerate conversational partner. In terms of negative politeness, being polite means to choose the right words to express communicative message which might be felt as face-threatening for the addressee such as refusal, criticism or claim in order to prevent conflicts. In written communication, researchers present their own findings or claims by using pragmatics markers. Those markers are called hedges. Hedging devices are the critical tool to prevent potential arguments and save FTA. Look at the example: *close the window if you can* (Brown and Levinson, 1987:162). So by using “if”, this sentence of command can be weakened or hedged. Hedging devices are mostly used to mitigate propositions or claims. As Hyland (1996) states in his article *Nurturing Hedges in the ESP Curriculum*: “Hedges therefore have an important role in a form of discourse characterised by uncertainty and frequent reinterpretation of how natural phenomena is understood” (Hyland, 1996:478).

Students of polytechnics most of the time like to use *I think* or *maybe* when they are presenting their topics and answering questions from their friends in front of the class. They use those hedges to mitigate their statements. By doing this, speakers feel comfortable from being blamed by listeners. The use of *I think* will prevent speakers from conflicts which may arise from listeners.

METHODOLOGY

The corpora for this data were taken from students’ final presentations and made by polytechnics students who were studying at Electrical and electronics Engineering Department at Politeknik Negeri Jakarta.

Along with the argument of being vague, Joanna Channel (1994) states that the language system permits speakers to produce utterances without having decided whether certain facts are “excluded or allowed by” them. Hedges, however, are sometimes required to capture the probabilistic nature of reality and the limits of statements (Toulmin, 2013). In fact, the use of hedges is typical of professional writing to make absolute statements more accurate (Hyland, 1998). Moreover hedges play critical role in academics’ presentations of their own work (Hyland, 1998).

The research methodology used is the descriptive qualitative. I employ this method because my intention was to obtain insights as to the strategies utilized by polytechnics students. There were 100 students who spread in 4 classes. This is in accordance with the main characteristics and spirit of the qualitative approach which says that what stands out in a qualitative study is the depth and breadth of the analysis, not the number of the subjects studied.

ANALYSIS

I was interested in investigating students’ presentations and when they were answering questions in front of the class. When making claims, students try to persuade listeners who come from their academic community. In scientific environment, hedges are effective and propositional functions work in rhetorical partnership to persuade listeners to accept knowledge claims (Myers, 1985).

I was taking data by listening students’ presentations and noting down their hedges used by them. Actually there were other hedges used such as: passive and active constructions, modals, if, abstract rhetors, et cetera but I focused only on two hedges: *I think* and *Maybe*. Based on my observation, it was found that *I think* showed higher percentages (27%) than *Maybe* (15%). It can be seen from this table below:

Hedges	Percentages (%)
Can	8
I think	27
Must	6
Maybe	15
Passive constructions	22
Active constructions	18
Will/would	4
Total	100

CONCLUSION

Hedging devices are often utilized by Indonesian student writers because these help them conceptualise the claims that they are going to convey. Moreover, these devices will assist the students to communicate with the listeners. It can be said that hedges are communicative tools to negotiate with the potential readers. In conclusion, the use of *I think* and *Maybe* are more preferable because the students do not need to say much about it if there are arguments from listeners. Furthermore, it could also be the habit of Indonesian speakers to use these hedges in order to look more polite and prevent from making mistakes. By using *I think* implies that the opinion is really coming from speakers not others. So listeners can not argue his/her answers. Meanwhile the use of *Maybe* implies that speakers are not really having doubts but merely just habit to mitigate their statements.

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