A Corpus-based Study on the Use of Hedges in Writings of Chinese English Majors

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Abstract. Hedge serves as a key component of pragmatic competence. This paper reports a corpus-based contrastive study of hedges used in argumentative essays by Chinese English majors and native university students. The results show no statistically significant difference in the amount of hedges used in two corpus, but generally Chinese learners tend to apply a rather limited range of hedge items to convey their meanings than the counterparts, especially in the use of epistemic modal auxiliaries, and adverbs. Part of the compositions by Chinese learners were examined manually from pragmatic perspectives and a large number of incorrect uses of hedges are identified. The findings of the paper are expected to facilitate Chinese learners’ writing of English papers as well as to provide some implications for related teaching practice.

Introduction

As a key component of pragmatic competence introduced by G. Lakoff (1972), hedge has been heavily studied in all disciplines both in and abroad since the 1970s. Some researchers in China explored the differences and similarities of the use of hedge in English writing for college students, but none of them conduct a contrastive study between Chinese learners and native speakers. This study investigated the use of hedges in two different corpus, aiming to raise language teachers’ awareness of the complexities of hedges’ use in EFL and help teachers develop sensitivity towards different stereotypes of students, namely, students of different level of proficiency. Meanwhile, the author hopes to give some enlightenment to the EFL students with helpful directions to practical language and communicative competence.

Classification of Hedge

G. Lakoff defined hedges as “words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy”. Early studies following Lakoff in linguistics are mainly concentrated on semantic features of hedges, i.e. exploring the original meaning of words, or exploring the cognitive meaning of linguistics. In 1980s’, gradually hedges are studied from the aspect of pragmatics, such as cooperative principle and politeness principles. The recent studies concern more about discourse analysis, such as economic debates, law English and scientific articles representing different inquiry, including medicine, biology.

| Modal Auxiliaries       | can, could, may, might |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Full verbs              | argue, claim, propose, suggest, assume, speculate, seem, tend |
| Adverbs                 | potentially, probably, potentially, usually, occasionally, often, quite, somewhat, greatly, significantly, almost, approximately, nearly |
| Adjectives              | likely, predictive, potential, common, normal, usual, significant, slight, substantial, approximate, close, gross |
| Nouns                   | prediction, implication, suggestion, assumption, belief, inference, likelihood, potential, possibility |

Researchers in and abroad classified hedges from different perspectives. The most widely used and accepted one is Prince’s classification of hedges. E.F. Prince and his colleagues (1982) categorize hedges from the aspect of pragmatics based on Lakoff’s definition. They categorized at
least two kinds of fuzziness: one is fuzziness within words and the other is the fuzziness in the relationship between the utterer and the prepositional content. Accordingly, there are two kinds of hedges. They defined them as approximators with subcategory adaptor and rounder, shield with subcategory plausibility shield and attribution shield.

To identify the linguistic forms of hedge and lay a foundation for further investigation, Hyland (1994) indicates six kinds of forms of hedges. Vattala (2001) gave a thorough account of the realizations of hedge. Vattala’s category will be adopted in present study. Since the present study is concentrated on the study lexical items of hedges, his study about non-lexical hedge is ignored.

Methodology

Research Questions

The study will be addressed the following questions: 1) what are the differences in the use of hedges in argumentative essays between Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers in term of frequency distributions? 2) What are the characteristics of Chinese EFL learners’ use of hedges? 3) Are there any pragmatic mistakes in the use of hedges in writing?

Instrument

The data used in present study is compiled from two ready-made corpora, WECCCL (Written English Corpus for Chinese English Learners) and LOCNESS (Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays). Argumentative essays written by Chinese English majors are extracted from WECCCL to build a new corpus named CCLE (167,738 words). Essays written by British university students and a similar part of essays written by American university students are chosen from LOCNESS to build another corpus named CNS (163,654 words). Retrieve hedges listed in Table 1 by index software Antconc 3.2.4 and then make a quantitative analysis about the frequency and distribution of hedges used in two corpora with the help of software SPSS 19.0.

Results and Discussion

Distribution and Frequency of Hedge Authors

Apparently, Chinese learners used more hedges in number than native speakers did (Table 2). This finding is contradict to the widely accepted belief that “the use of hedges in argumentative writings is discouraged and even be treated as a defeat to be avoided in English teaching.” A probable reason contributing to this is the pursuit of stability and humbleness in traditional Chinese culture. Chinese tend to achieve harmony when settling disputes, so they are more euphemistic when expressing opinions.

For the categories of hedges, the descending order by frequency is: Modal auxiliaries > Epistemic adverbs > Epistemic verbs > Epistemic adjectives > Epistemic nouns. Modal auxiliaries appear at the highest frequency both in the two corpora, covers 35.6 percent of the total. While Epistemic adjectives and nouns are at the least, only 2.9 percent and 4.8 percent of the total.

927 modal auxiliaries are used in CCLE, whereas 1363 modal auxiliaries in CNS. Eight different modal auxiliaries appear in both corpora, namely may, might, should, would, must, will, can and could. There exists no significant difference (p=0.783).

|                | CCLE(167,738 words) | CNS(163,654 words) |
|----------------|---------------------|--------------------|
|                | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage  |
| Modal auxiliaries | 927      | 35.6       | 1363     | 55.3        |
| Epistemic verbs   | 562      | 21.6       | 358      | 14.5        |
| Epistemic adverbs | 914      | 23.8       | 552      | 22.4        |
| Epistemic adjectives | 75      | 2.9        | 93       | 3.8         |
| Epistemic nouns   | 125      | 4.8        | 100      | 4.1         |
| Total             | 2603      | 100        | 2466     | 100         |
But the two groups have difference preferences in terms of total occurrences since the distribution of items presents obvious differences. *Will*, *can* and *may* are the top three used both in two corpora. *Could* is used at the least frequency in CCLE while *must* is least used one in CNS. By a contractive analysis of collected data manually, two problems for Chinese learners in the use of modal auxiliaries are noticed.

First, Chinese learners significantly overuse epistemic *must*. Although most of the usage is appropriate, some instances of misuse do exist. For example:

a) When people write a letter, they *must* be very happy. (CCLE: a324fysy)
b) If children find that it is difficult to communicate with their parents, they *must* have not have [had] communicated with each other for a long time. (CCLE: a322sd)
c) Gradually, the paper letter *must* disappear, instead the E-mails will play the hero. (CCLE: a312agg)

According to Quirk et al., epistemic *must* is used to express that a proposition is necessarily true or at least has a high likelihood of being true (Quirk et al., 1985: 225). It conveys the speaker’s confidence in the occurrence of the event or state described on the basis of the facts known to him, whether he expresses them or not (Coates, 1983: 41). However, the prepositions in the three instances are not necessarily true, or have high likelihood of being true. It is advisable to change them into *may* or *might*. Chinese learners’ overuse of this item shows a flavor of unjustified directness and authoritativeness to the argumentation.

Second, Chinese learners use less past tense modal auxiliaries such as *would*, *could*, *might* and *should* than native speakers in their essays. Moreover, each of the four items accounts for a smaller proportion of epistemic usage in CCLE than that of CNS.

Take the word *would* for example, the number employed by CNS learners is almost one time the one used by CCLE learners. For instance,

a) If they have had a frequent communication, there *wouldn’t* have been so much trouble and hurt. (CCLE: a122nd)
b) Without his trip, those items *would not* have been available, and so it is worthwhile having the box. (CNS)
c) In this case, Britain *would* have retained her sovereignty and Parliamentary supremacy. (CNS)
d) To stay in Arogs and try to belong *would have* been an act of bad faith, as it is Oreste’s actions. (CNS)
e) Pangloss however claims that he doesn’t mind having syphilis because otherwise people *wouldn’t* have known what chocolate was. (CNS)

Since past tense modal forms are often used to express weaker epistemic commitment in essays, this finding reveals that Chinese learners are not good at using these forms of hedges to convey meanings and they are more likely to use direct tones in their writings than native speakers.

There are many possible factors contribute to these two problems. But the most important one is that Chinese learners tend to translate Chinese directly into English in writing. It is unavoidable to ignore the use of some modal forms or misuse them. It is also impossible to use various modal forms to express meanings correctly.

Adverbs and adjectives are comparably easy to be identified. The occurrences of adverbs used as hedges in CCLE are approximately twice those used in CNS, with 914 in the former and 552 in the latter. Significant difference is found in the analysis of Epistemic adverbs (*p*=0.38). Chinese learners have a tendency to overuse epistemic adverbs. Of all the 55 items examined, 15 are overused while the rest 40 are underused. The overused items are mainly come from adverbs of indefinite frequency, the occurrence of which in CCLE are nearly three times as many as that in CNS. Adverbs of indefinite frequency are used when the utterer is not certain about the exact figure because s/he uses hedges to show that the exact figure cannot be obtained. They are used to present that what be mentioned is an often occurrence or a rare one. Salager-Meyer (2000) points out adverbs of infinite frequency are often used in writings, and this has been proved in present study. The occurrences of this category used in CCLE is 512, covering 56% of the total. Its occurrence in CNS is much less,
only 186, covering 33.7% of the total. As to probability adverbs, the occurrences of probability adverbs used in the two corpora are similar to each other. Epistemic verbs are frequently used in two corpora. The occurrence of epistemic verbs is 562 in CCLE, while the occurrence in CNS is 358. It’s clear that CCLE learners use epistemic verbs more frequently than learners in CNS.

Chinese learners overuse epistemic verbs significantly, especially certain verbs like think, which is about eight times as many as that used by native speakers. But some words like presume are on the contrary.

Moreover, it is interesting to find that Chinese learners tend to use think in almost every sentence. According to Varttala (2000), the use of epistemic verbs such as think implies that the information introduced may be supposedly but not correct. Or the information may derive from the utterer’s subjective estimate rather than experimental truth. This is probably due to Chinese learners’ limited vocabulary.

**Chinese Learners’ Typical Problems of the Use of Hedges**

In order to get a closer look at the problems in using hedges in Chinese learners’ compositions, we randomly chosen 30 essays from CCLE for examination. Altogether we found 27 obvious mistakes and detailed information is presented in the table below.

| Frequency |
|-----------|
| Using hedges in inappropriate places | 14 |
| Using inappropriate hedges | 13 |

The following are examples selected from those compositions. Hedge item used in example (3) is inappropriate and hedges items in rest examples are used in inappropriate places.

a) So many many good things that we must admit its advantage. (CCLE: A103FYSY)

Obviously, the writer translates Chinese directly into English since many many are often used in spoken rather than written English. (eg. Many many thanks!)

The writer seems to be absolute and subjective by using should have. Here Quality Maxim in cooperative principle is flouted, because the writer can’t offer adequate evidence for what he writes. It is advisable to add “according to me” before the sentence.

b) They maybe funny, maybe catch, at least they are colorful. (CCLE: A217NGG)

Many students are confused about the using of maybe and may be. In fact, the former is an adverb of possibility and the latter is a modal auxiliary. It’ better to replace maybe in example b) with may be.

In summary, many problems exist in students’ compositions. On the one hand, Chinese learners pay much attention to the semantic and grammatical functions of hedges rather than the pragmatic functions. On the other hand, although they can remember the form and meaning of hedges, they cannot use them appropriately. For example, they have no idea about the combination of hedges with certain words. It seems that they have difficulties in using appropriate hedge items in appropriate place.

**Comparison between Students from Different Grades**

In order to have a close look at the characteristics of Chinese learners’ use of hedges, we made a comparison between students from different grades in CCLE. The distribution of three grades is presented in figure 3.2. It is clear that all the learners of the three grades overuse hedges compared with native speakers. There are no significant differences in using hedges between grade 1 and grade 2 learners, but both of the two groups do use hedges less than grade 3 learners. The overuse of hedges seems more significant with the increase of proficiency.

After having a closer look at the figure, we found that epistemic nouns and epistemic adjectives are underused by learners of three grades while epistemic modal auxiliaries, epistemic verbs and epistemic adjectives are overused by them. As for modal auxiliaries, it is interesting to notice that the
occurrences increase with the increasing of English proficiency. But the overuse of adverbs seems to become more significant as proficiency increases.

**Conclusion**

There exist no significant difference in the use of Epistemic adverbs, but examples of misuses and overuses are identified manually. Certain modal auxiliaries and epistemic verbs are significantly overused. That indicate Chinese learners’ lack of pragmatic competence.

There are no significant differences for compositions by learners of different proficiencies. They share the same characteristics as a whole. Students with high English proficiency can employ more hedge items in their writings than those with lower proficiency. The problem of overuse hedge items becomes severe with the increasing of proficiency.

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