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A Corpus-based Analysis of EFL Learners' Use of Hedges in Cross-cultural Communication*

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This study examines the use of hedges in cross-cultural communication between EFL learners in an e-learning environment. The study analyzes the use of hedges in a corpus of an interactive web with a bulletin board system through which college students of English at Japanese and Korean universities interacted with each other discussing the topics of local and global issues. It compares the use of hedges in the students' corpus to that of a native English speakers' corpus. The result shows that EFL learners tend to use relatively smaller number of hedges than the native speakers in terms of the frequencies of the total tokens. It further reveals that the learners' overuse of a single versatile high-frequency hedging item, *I think*, results in relative underuse of other hedging devices. This indicates that due to their small repertoire of hedges, EFL learners' overuse of a limited number of hedging items may cause their speech or writing to become less competent. Based on the result and interviews with the learners, the study also argues that hedging should be understood in its social contexts and should not be understood just as a lack of conviction or a mark of low proficiency. Suggestions were made for using computer corpora in understanding EFL learners' language difficulties and helping them develop communicative and pragmatic competence.

[**Hedging, Corpus, Cross-cultural communication, E-learning**]

I. Introduction

Hedging, an expression used not to sound too blunt or assertive, is a well-documented feature of spoken discourse and a significant communicative resource because the use of

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hedging can mitigate the directness of what we say (Lakoff, 1972; Brown & Levinson, 1978; Channell, 1990; Hyland, 1994, 1996; Clemen, 1997; O'Keeffe, 2006). Within a pragmatic paradigm, hedging is viewed in terms of how the use of certain words or expressions can mitigate the directiveness and assertiveness of what we say and so operate as a face-saving device (Brown & Revinson, 1978; Clemen, 1997; O'kaeeffe et al., 2007). Speakers are often careful not to sound too blunt and assertive and a variety of markers exists to hedge (O'Keeffe et al., 2007). In this way, hedging has pragmatic functions in the organization and management of interaction in terms of maintaining good relations. Therefore, hedging is a feature of relational language which serves to create and maintain good relations between participants in interactions. Hedging is context-sensitive. Some situations demand more hedging than others. This is borne out when a corpus is searched for some of the most frequent hedging items across different types of data. As Farr, Murphy, and O'Keeffe (2002) showed, even the most frequent hedging forms vary in frequency across the different context such as family conversation, teaching practice feedback, and etc.

Hedging has received a great deal of attention in conversational analysis and linguistics and been a considerable body of conceptual and empirical research (Holmes, 1985; Coates, 1987; Chrismore et al., 1993; Channell, 1990; Lyons, 1977; Powell, 1985; Dubois, 1987; Palmer, 1990; Prince et al., 1982; Skelton, 1988). Analyses in written corpora ,both academic and non-academic, revealed the clear pragmatic importance of hedging as a discourse resource for expressing uncertainly and a writer's attitude within a certain context (Butler 1990; Hyland 1996; Myers, 1989, 1992; Pindi & Bloor, 1986; Salager-Myer, 1994). However, hedging in EFL learners' discourse represents a little-studied area of pragmatic competence and we still know little about how it is typically realized in EFL learners' interaction and how it is different from that of native speakers'.

One convincing attempt to place hedges within a EFL context is that of Flowerdew(2000) who argues that the overall tendency of underuse of hedging devices in EFL learners' writings makes their writing too direct. But Flowerdew's work focuses its attention on English for academic writings in EFL context not giving attention to interactional communication.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the use of hedges, one aspect of the complex phenomenon of collocations, in a corpus of cross-cultural communication between EFL learners in an e-learning environment. More specifically, the study compares the EFL learners' corpus with a corpus of native speakers in terms of both the type and token counts. The study aims to gauge whether EFL learners have a tendency to overuse or underuse hedging devices, and understand the roles hedges play in their cross-cultural communication.

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II. Corpus-based studies on hedging

With revolutionary developments in corpus linguistics and the increasing availability of computer corpora of native English such as British National Corpus, International Corpus of English, and Brown Corpus, a number of researchers have explored and described the complex nature of the authentic native English. The advantage of the corpus-based approach is that researchers at least are able to place a number of restrictions on our cognitive biases, they cannot remove bias completely though (Baker, 2006; Blommart, 2005; McEnery & Wilson, 1996). At least, with a corpus, research can be starting from a position whereby the data itself has not been selected in order to confirm existing biases. Coupled with computer corpora a search tool like a concordance allows researchers to combine quantitative and qualitative analysis taking into account the context that a single word is placed (Baker, 2006).

With roots in corpus linguistics, researchers in the field of second language acquisition and contrastive interlanguage analysis have created English learner corpora (Flowerdew, 2002; Granger, 2002; Tono, 2002) and compared native language and learner language focusing on various linguistic features such as amplifiers (Granger, 1998; Kennedy, 2001; S. Lee, 2006), adverbial connectors (Altenberg & Tapper, 1998; E. Lee, 2004), and adjective intensification (Lorenz, 1998, 1999). Most of these studies argued that due to the lack of communicative competence and the low proficiency in English, EFL learners show a tendency to overuse or underuse each items.

The use of hedges also has been explored in a corpus-based approach (Blum-Kulka 1994, 1997; Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Farr, 2005; Farr et al., 2002; O'Keeffe et al., 2007). But all these studies focus their attention to the context-based frequency distribution of hedging items in various native English corpora. They argue that hedges vary relative to context and a relative degree of hedging correlates with the speaker relationship (Farr, 2005). The more asymmetrical the speaker relationships, the more hedges to downtone or encourage their counterparts. Analyzing on the use of scientific research corpus, Hyland (1994, 1996) demonstrates the clear pragmatic importance of hedging as a discourse resource and suggests an explanatory framework for scientific hedging.

The most cogent attempt to place hedges within a EFL context is that of Flowerdew(2000) who argues that the overall tendency of underuse of hedging devices in EFL learners' writing makes their writing too direct. Analyzing the use of hedging devices in a corpus of Hong Kong EFL learners' writing, Flowerdew shows that learners' underuse of hedging devices are due to their limited repertoire and communicative competence. Flowerdew's work (2000, 2002, 2003) is clearly suggestive to any discussion of hedging in EFL context, but his extension of interlanguage research

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(Granger, 1998; De Cock, 1998; Ringbom, 1998) that argues for EFL learners' lack of pragmatic competence and their small repertoire provides only a partial account of hedging in EFL learners' discourse. Flowerdew's work (2000, 2002, 2003) focuses its attention only on hedging in EFL learners' English for academic writing.

Corpus-based research actually depends on both quantitative and qualitative techniques. As Biber, Conrad, and Reppen (1998: 4) says, association patterns represent quantitative relations, measuring the extent to which features and variants are associated with contextual factors. However, functional (qualitative) interpretation is also an essential step in any corpus-based analysis (Baker, 2006). Comparing the EFL learners' use of hedges with that of native speakers, therefore, this study aims to gauge whether L2 learners have a tendency to overuse or underuse hedging devices and investigate the similarities and differences between EFL learners' and native speakers' use of hedges. Based on the results and the interviews with the learners, it argues that hedging should not be understood as a lack of conviction or a mark of low proficiency and it can be fully understood in its social contexts.

III. Method

1. Corpora

This study used two sets of corpora, the non-native EFL learners' corpus (NNC) and the native speaker of English corpus (NC). The NNC was compiled by a corpus of cross-cultural communication through the bulletin board system through which college students of English at Japanese and Korean universities interacted with each other discussing the local and global issues. Thirty six students (16 Koreans who registered in a national university in Korea and 20 Japanese from a private university in Japan) participated in on-line discussion through the bulletin board system. All Korean participants majored in English education or English language and literature, and Japanese students were English and computer science majors. Participants from both countries volunteered for the on-line discussion. The NNC contains of 1005 messages totaling about 133,664 words, each message having an average length of about 133 words. Though the students wrote messages through the bulletin board rather than face-to-face conversation, their on-line discussion is quite similar to the spoken communication. It was informal and almost real time interaction. A sample of the NNC is presented in the Appendix.

For the native speaker corpus, a sub-corpus of the International Corpus of English Great Britain (ICE-GB), one million word collection of spoken and written texts, was

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used. The ICE consists of total twenty varieties of English around the world for comparative studies of English worldwide. The ICE United States was not released yet. Currently available ICE corpora include Canada, East Africa, Great Britain, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, and Jamaica, Singapore. Among these, ICE-GB was selected for the corpus of native English speakers. The sub-corpus of written English in ICE-GB consists of formal writings in both academic and non-academic contexts except some personal letters. Considering context-sensitive nature of hedging, therefore, in this study the sub-corpus of ICE-GB spoken discourse, in particular, face-to-face conversations in the workplace, broadcast interviews, and broadcast discussions, was used. The speakers of the texts are aged 18 or above and educated in the Great Britain. The NC is made of texts of 50 conversations, 10 interviews, and 10 discussions with a total of 149,505 words. Each text of the NC has an average length of about 2,000 words. A sample of the NC is also presented in the Appendix.

2. Procedure

Hedges come in many forms such as adverbs, nouns, modal verbs, and syntactic choices (Biber et al., 1998; Carter & McCarthy, 2006; O'Keeffe et al., 2007). However, it is not possible to sort out every possible hedging items. So, collocations associated with the ten most frequent hedging items; *just, really, actually, probably, I think, a bit, kind of, sort of, you know,* and *I suppose* (Farr et al., 2002; O'Keeffe et al., 2007), whose examples are below, are the focus of this study.

I think they are more acceptable nowadays anyway aren't they?.
I'm a kind of dazed from the whole situation.
I suppose we make it vague enough to say
(ICE-GB)

'really' is often classified as a degree adverb, that is, an amplifier, but many grammarians and linguists see it as a hedge functioning as a degree or stance adverb (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; O'Keeffe et al., 2007; Farr et al., 2002). So following their classification, this study includes 'really' among hedging items.

WordSmith Tool (Scott, 2001) was used to find the hedging items in the two corpora. The primary use of WordSmith Tool is to generate concordance or listings of all the occurrences of any given word in a given text, with words shown in context. With the use of WordSmith 4.0 (Scott, 2001), all the ten hedging items were automatically retrieved from the NNC and the NC, and then manually sorted. This process allowed to eliminate an expression such as "Do you know when he's coming?" and "Really?" in

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which 'do you' and 'really' do not function as hedging. 'Just' can also be an intensifier not a hedge in directives. So this sort of token was eliminated.

First, the number of tokens of hedging items in the two corpora was compared in order to see the difference in the use of hedges between the NNC and the NC. Then each hedging item was examined to look at whether the non-native EFL learners' use of hedges is a general phenomenon or due to overuse/underuse of particular hedging item.

IV. Results

1. Overall frequencies of hedging items

Table 1 shows the frequencies of the tokens of the hedging items used in the NNC and the NC. Since the two corpora differ in size (133,665 words for the NNC and 149,505 words), the number of tokens per 10,000 words is also provided.

TABLE 1

Frequencies of hedging items in the Corpora

	NNC	NC
Tokens	506	585
Tokens per 10,000words	37.87	39. 15

The frequency in the token analysis of the NNC indicates that EFL learners use fewer hedging items in their cross-cultural communication than the native speakers (37.87 vs. 39.15). But the difference in token frequencies between the two corpora is small. The result contrasts with Flowerdew's (2000) finding that EFL learners have a strong tendency to underuse hedging devices in their writings. This discrepancy may result from the fact that while the learner corpus used in Flowerdew's study consisted of EFL learners' formal academic writing, the present study was compiled from the informal on-line interactions between Korean and Japanese students. Their on-line communication style is more like spoken discourse. The analysis in terms of the frequencies of hedging items only does not confirm that the vocabulary of nonnative speakers is smaller than that of native speakers in general (S. Lee, 2006; Ringbom, 1998). In the next section, therefore, a more detailed examination will be made on EFL learners' use of hedges in comparison with native speakers'.

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2. Frequencies of each hedging items

Tables 2 and 3 show the frequency scores for the ten most frequent hedging items in the NNC.

TABLE 2

The frequencies of the ten hedging items in the NNC

Rank	Hedging item	Tokens	Tokens/10,000 words	%(tokens/506)
1	I think	324	24.25	64.03
2	you know	34	2.54	6.71
2	Just	34	2.54	6.71
4	probably	25	1.87	4.94
4	kind of	25	1.87	4.94
6	really	24	1.79	4.74
7	sort of	14	1.04	2.76
7	actually	14	1.04	2.76
9	a bit	9	0.67	1.77
10	I suppose	3	0.22	0.59

Table 2 shows the tokens and the percentage of hedging items occurred in the NNC. The most frequent hedging item is *I think*, which comprises about 64% of the total use of hedging items. EFL learners combine *I think* with various words, phrases, and sentences. This means that *I think* is the most versatile hedge that EFL learners use in their interactions. Their overuse of *I think* indicates that their on-line communication through the bulletin board resembles speech rather than writing and may well be the results from their L1 transfer. Both Korean and Japanese have a direct translation equivalent which is used as a politeness strategy. But further cross-linguistic investigation is expected to warrant this observation.

In terms of frequency, other types of hedges are comparatively rare. Overall occurrence of all other types of hedges is much lower. *I suppose* occurred only three times in the total use of hedges in the NNC.

Table 3 shows the tokens and the percentage of hedging items occurred in the NC.

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TABLE 3

The frequencies of the ten hedging items in the NC

Rank	Hedging item	Tokens	Tokens/10,000 words	%(Tokens/585)
1	sort of	85	5.68	14.52
2	a bit	82	5.48	14.01
2	kind of	82	5.48	14.01
4	just	78	5.21	13.33
5	I suppose	70	4.68	11.96
6	you know	60	4.01	10.25
7	probably	34	2.27	5.81
7	really	34	2.27	5.81
9	I think	30	2.00	5.12
9	actually	30	2.00	5.12

The native speakers' use of *I think* (5.12% of the total) sharply contrasts with the EFL learners' use of it, which is the most frequent hedge and takes up 64.03% of the total use of their hedging items. The use of *I suppose* comprises about 12% of the total in the NC. This also strikingly contrasts with the EFL learners' use of it, which is rarely used taking up about below 1% of the total use of their hedges. It is interesting to note that the use of hedges with modal verbs, *I think* and *I suppose,* shows the most marked difference in use between the two corpora. In the NC *I suppose* is twice as frequent as *I think*.

In terms of frequency, other types of hedges are also relatively commonly used in the NC. The commonly used six hedging items in the NC such as *sort of, a bit, kind of, just, I suppose*, and *you know*, vary significantly in their distribution in the NNC. Among them, only *kind of, you know*, and *just* show relatively high frequency in the NNC, ranking the fourth and the second in order of use each. And the other three hedging devices mark the lowest in their rank order of use in the NNC.

To sum up, the results of the study show that the EFL learners tend to use relatively smaller number of hedging with limited number of different types than the native speakers. The study shows that EFL learners' overuse of one single versatile hedging item, *I think*, results in relative underuse of other hedging devices. And the most notable difference in use of hedges between the two corpora is that the most commonly used hedging items in the two corpora vary significantly in their distribution. The EFL learners' tendency to overuse one single item and underuse of the others may cause their speech or writing to become less competent.

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3. Interviews with the students

The interviews with Korean and Japanese students who participated in the on-line discussion were conducted after all the interactions between participants to see their attitude toward the on-line discussion itself and their use of hedges when they communicate with each other in English. The interviews revealed that the students enjoyed on-line cross-cultural communication without pressure of using English. Even though they are not proficient in English and made many grammatical errors in their writing, they know how to negotiate meaning when they face problems either in English itself or in the content of communication. The students used a large number of hedges in their writing. This does not mean that with hedges they hesitate to find more suitable expression in English or that their use of hedges is just a mark of low proficiency, as seen in the following excerpts.

> In the beginning it was not easy to talk with Japanese students who I do not know. But as I participate in the discussion, I found myself enjoying discussion. Though my English is not quite good, I had not problem in communicating in English. As for the use of expressions such as "I think", I did not use this to emphasize the fact that I'm thinking something, but I just believe I felt more like polite in this way. (Park, aged 20)

> Usually I don't feel so comfortable to talk to foreigners because I have to use English. But since I participated this communication, I found myself more confident in speaking in English and I also found it's good experience to communicate with Korean students in English. You asked me why I used the expressions such as "I think", "you know". I think it's polite to use that expression. It's natural for us to use that kind of words when we talk to each other. (Murahata, aged 22)

Interviews also revealed that using hedges, the students exhibit deliberate vagueness in the sense of not being too direct or unduly assertive. In this sense hedge is an important feature of interpersonal meaning (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 202). Therefore, their use of hedge as a mark of vagueness is motivated and purposeful. Sometimes it is necessary to give accurate information in informal contexts, too. Speakers or writers, however, prefer to convey information which is softened in some way (Chu, 2006; O'Keeffe et al., 2007; Suh, 2010). For EFL learners as well as for the native speakers, hedges are pragmatic markers and should not be understood just as a lack of conviction. Hedges should be understood in their social contexts.

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V. Conclusion

Corpus-based analysis of EFL learners' use of hedges revealed much about what the learners use to vague or mitigate the directness of what they say. The results of the study show that some discrepancy exists between EFL learners' corpus and the native speakers' corpus in the use of hedges. The EFL learners tend to use relatively smaller number of hedging than the native speakers in terms of total tokens. The EFL learners' tendency to overuse one single hedging item and underuse the others may cause their speech or writing to become less competent. Their overuse of one single versatile form of hedge and a few other hedges demonstrates the EFL learners' difficulties in acquiring subtle stylistic variation in target language registers and collocational competence (Hill, 2001). The EFL learners' difficulties in using variety of hedging collocations may due to their limited knowledge of or lack of experience in collocational relationships.

Due to the fact that the limited amount of data of the EFL learners' on-line discussion was analyzed and the corpus of native speakers compared does not belong to the exact same category with the EFL learners' corpus, however, the findings of the study should be corroborated in further studies. And while the use of hedges in the EFL learners' interaction is found to be inconsistent with that of native speakers, this study analyzed only ten most frequent hedging items among many, so confirmation of the difference awaits further research. Moreover, the circumstances recognized as appropriated for the use of hedge and the functions hedge is seen to fulfill might be differ markedly in different domain, family conversations, female vs. mal friends chatting, teacher-student interactions, personal letters, and etc, so the results of this study should be compensated in the future.

For all these limitations, this study still has both methodological and pedagogical implications. Methodologically speaking, computer corpora of both native and non-native English prove to be useful tool to yield meaningful data for investigating the aspects of EFL learners' language difficulties. The data used in this study came from small sub-corpora (on-line discussion, face-to-face conversations, broadcast interviews and discussions). By isolating sub-corpora of specific contexts of interaction from very large sized corpus, researchers can get a picture of how language use becomes specialized in its context of use and how lexico-grammatical patterns become routinized. Many of the features may not be shown up if they just focus on the mega sized corpora. Therefore, more attention needs to be given to specialized sub-corpora of specific contexts.

Pedagogically speaking, the EFL learners' heavy use of a limited number of hedging items such as *I think* indicates their small repertoire of hedges. Hedges relate to how speakers or writers in on-line discussion manage and soften their messages so as to relate

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to their counterparts. This is as much a part of transactional relation as it is part of communication between friends and colleagues, though it may vary in degree and nature. This makes a compelling argument for not neglecting this area of language when teaching. It is important that language teachers have an understanding of pragmatics and of the implications for teaching it, particularly in the L2 classroom (Dash, 2004). The focus of teaching and learning English as a foreign language also should be given to how to actively use a pragmatic marker such as hedge, because features such as hedging are socially valued (O'Keeffe et al., 2007). It is not something that can be put aside only for the interactions between native speakers. The EFL learners need to be aware of its role in both spoken and written English to improve their communicative and pragmatic competence, so that the learners can be better equipped to avoid cross-cultural communication problems .

After all, language teachers need to be aware of the importance of implicit knowledge that learners unconsciously acquire and help learners to internalize it. As S. Lee (2006) suggests, instead of listing the explicit knowledge that learners need to know, teachers should develop new curriculum through which learners can get frequent opportunities for experiencing a vast collection of units of language in use and internalizing the language

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APPENDIX

A sample of NNC

To tell the truth, I don't know about that 19 years old and 20 years old are not much different from each other. On the contrary, I think I agree with you. However, I think that to be 20 years old is the big event which marks the stages of life. 19 years old is a

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minority still, and 20 years old is an adult. So I also think that this arrangement is very strange and difficult to understand. Therefore, I want to know various opinion or thinking of everyone. Please tell me about this if you have some idea!

Yes, when we are a grown-up, we can do a lot of things by ourselves. Over twenty years, all behaviors come with responsibilities and we should be responsible for our behavior. However, I think sometimes we claim only the rights and don't' care about the responsibilities. A 20 year old youth is not a real grown-up. I think they just mature physically but not mentally. They just demand many things for reason of just an adult. In Korea, it can be found easily in and around us. I also think that the people don't have enough consciousness of adults at the beginning of 20 years old. You know what I mean. I don't think drinking and smoking is quite natural for us at the age of twenty. Many people think drinking and smoking is natural. Do you think so, too? We have to think about the right and responsibility as an adult.

A sample of NC

So that you know that I do takes notes at the other end. There are my notes and that It absolutely critical for us to know.
All Right, Yes.
I haven't just done that. It's quite a different coloured pen. He did mention that to me he did say that to me. There are two or three things that we are essential for us to find out when people phone in. Well, first of all, whether the whole environment of selling advertising appeals. Whether they can be understood on the phone. And I'm not worried about accents.
No.
I think they are more acceptable nowadays anyway aren't they? If I can understand people after twenty five thirty years in sales and marketing listening to people on the phone and knowing how important it is in this. Then I then that's fine. But I've actually spoken to an even a real Tyne and Wear Geordie accent.
Yes, Sure.
Because we're talking to a lot of professional people who are from all Scots you name it they're from it. So that's why we make the advert curious enough or enough curiosity in it, no vagueness I suppose we make it vague enough to say I've got to phone it. Some people will say to us, now I've seen your ad's paper. And that paper there are two things I get from that. Either you've got a massive turnover in staff or you're going somewhere. I say well it's definitely the latter.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable Levels: Secondary

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