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ANETA KOT
University College of Social Sciences in Częstochowa

TO TEACH OR NOT TO TEACH CONVERSATIONAL HEDGES?

While the existing literature focuses on analyzing individual hedges and comparing their use by native and non-native speakers, little attention has been paid to the teaching of conversational hedges. Research reveals that despite their pervasive nature in spoken discourse, hedges are regarded by teachers as 'verbal garbage' (Schiffrin 1987), not worthy of teaching.

The aim of this study is to investigate college teachers' perceptions of hedging devices in spoken discourse as well as their attitudes to the teaching of hedges. A questionnaire was administered to elicit the teachers' responses. The results indicate that college teachers are aware of the significance and usefulness of hedges in spoken discourse; nevertheless, they have doubts about the value of teaching them. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the pedagogical implications of these findings.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Hedging – definition, classification, functions

The purpose of human communication is not only to exchange information, but also to facilitate interpersonal relationships. One way of conveying interpersonal messages in spoken interaction is hedging. Hedging devices are used to "create conviviality, facilitate discussion, show politeness and oil the phatic wheels" (Hyland 1996: 433). Willamová (2005) defines hedges "one of the means through which linguistic politeness can be manifested" (2005: 80), as a subgroup of pragmatic markers whose function is "to soften the propositional content of the message" (*ibid*.: 80). In other words, hedges are those pragmatic markers which "attenuate (weaken) the strength of an utterance" (*ibid*.: 81).

Prince *et al*. (1982) draw a distinction between 'shields' and 'approximators'. 'Shields' are devices such as *I think, I guess, I don't know* that signal a speaker's lack of full commitment to the validity of their proposition, whereas

'approximators'(*kind of, sort of, just,* and general extenders such as *and stuff/and things, or something/or something like that* Overstreet and Yule 1999) render the modified word or expression more fuzzy and imprecise (Prince *et al*. 1982). The expressions *I mean, you know, well, like,* which Nikula (1997) calls 'implicit hedges,' are known in the literature as 'discourse markers'.

According to Nugroho (2002), hedges perform a variety of functions in spoken discourse. They are used to soften claims, requests, commands, performatives and criticism. They are cooperative devices employed by speakers in conversation to diminish face threatening acts (FTA), to negotiate sensitive topics and encourage participation. Hedges may also act as a politeness strategy. Speakers hedge their utterances in order not to sound too authoritative, blunt or assertive (O'Keeffe *et al*. 2007: 174). In other words, they attend to the face wants of their interlocutor and of themselves. In Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1987: 61), positive politeness refers to the creation of a positive self-image and a desire to have this self-image approved of by others, whereas negative politeness is concerned with respecting other people's need not to be intruded or imposed upon. Hedging can be seen as a negative politeness strategy because it minimizes the threat posed by a given FTA. However, it also falls under the category of positive politeness, which is associated with the need for inclusion and social approval. Nikula (1997: 192) states that these two functions of hedges are "closely intertwined".

As conversational hedges play an important role in native speaker communication, there is no doubt that it is useful for non-native speakers to learn the pragmatic functions these devices perform. As Cots (1992: 169 in Müller 2005: 14) claims, "Success in foreign language learning is graded in terms of how similar the linguistic behaviour of the learner is to that of the native speakers of the language". This suggests the importance of the skillful use of conversational hedges in spoken discourse. As a matter of fact, their absence in naturally-occurring conversations may lead to the speakers' being perceived as foreign, rude or overly direct (Channell 1994). This is confirmed by Markkanen and Schröder (1997: 13) who state that pragmatic errors "are not so 'obviously erroneous' as faulty syntax; they only make the foreign language user sound, in the case of hedging, more impolite or aggressive, more tentative or assertive than he/she intends to be, which then may even lead to a communicative failure."

Studies (Nikula 1997; De Cock *et al.* 1998; Metsä-Ketelä 2006) confirm that non-native speakers' use of hedges differs from that of native speakers. Researchers as well as teachers admit that when compared with native speakers, language learners underuse these so-called 'small words'[1] (Hasselgren: 2002) and this marks them as foreign.

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[1] The term 'small words' has been borrowed from Hasselgren (2002)

1.2. Native speakers' (NSs) versus Non-native speakers' (NNSs) use of hedging devices

Research studies show that NNSs do not use hedges to the degree that NSs use them. Moreover, both quantitative and qualitative differences in the use of hedging devices by native and non-native speakers can be observed. For example, Romero Trillo (2002) investigated the use of such expressions as: *listen, well, you know* in English by native and non-native children and adults. His study revealed that non-native adults use a more limited number and variety of such expressions than native children do. Due to the absence of such items, according to Romero Trillo (2002), non-native speakers are sometimes perceived as impolite.

Similarly, Fung and Carter (2007) investigated the production of *yeah, really, say, sort of, I see, you see, well, right, actually, cos, you know, etc.* in pedagogic settings using data from British native speakers and Hong Kong learners of English. They found a considerable discrepancy in the use of such expressions between NSs and NNSs. NNSs used these 'small words' at a very restricted level and with limited functions.

These findings are in line with the results of Nikula's study (1997), in which native speakers used shields, approximators and implicit modifiers much more frequently than non-native speakers. According to Nikula (1997: 195), NNSs "are not aware of the role of modifiers and they thus cannot make appropriate use of them". Moreover, they may be "unwilling to use a bunch of modifiers in an utterance when speaking a foreign language, regarding it as a sign of dysfluency" (*ibid*.).

While the comparative studies mentioned above provide important information concerning the qualitative and quantitative differences in the use of hedging expressions by native and non-native speakers, they offer few pedagogical implications. The questions of whether and how these can be taught remain unanswered.

1.3. Hedges in the teaching/learning context

While researchers (Hasselgren 2002; Nikula 1997; Povolná 2010) highlight the importance of 'small words' in successful communication, there are doubts about how they should be approached in the classroom. As the absence or misuse of hedging devices in spoken discourse can be a communicative obstacle for non-native speakers, it seems that teaching students about the interpersonal functions performed by hedging devices should be a priority. However, hedging devices are seriously undervalued in foreign language teaching (Romero Trillo 2002). As de Klerk (2005: 275) observes, this might be due to the fact that such expressions lack a "clear semantic denotation and syntactic role, which makes formal or explicit commentary on their use fairly difficult". Learners also ignore these so-called 'small words' because they have a procedural rather than

a propositional meaning and students may think they are not important to learn. As such expressions are not explicitly taught in class and non-native speakers can speak grammatically without them, they are usually invisible for non-native speakers (Liao 2009: 1314). As a result "even fairly advanced language learners' communicative acts regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to convey or comprehend the intended illocutionary force or politeness value" (Blum-Kulka *et al.* 1989: 10).

Since there is no attention paid to the use and function of conversational hedges in formal language classrooms, and the appropriate use of hedging devices is a significant feature of native speech, it seems to be generally assumed that non-native speakers need to pick up on their own how ''things are said'' and adopt those ''conventional expressions'' if they want to sound more like native speakers (de Klerk 2005). However, EFL learners who do not have the opportunity to immerse themselves in an English-speaking environment outside the foreign language classroom need to rely on their textbooks or input provided by the teacher to acquire this aspect of pragmatic competence. Moreover, learners in a classroom context often have limited exposure to target-language input and limited opportunities for practice compared to learners immersed in the SL community. Therefore it has been claimed that instruction in pragmatics is necessary to help learners acquire various aspects of pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig 1999; Kasper and Rose 1999).

Bardovi-Harlig (2001) stresses the importance of instruction, stating that second language learners who do not receive instruction in pragmatics differ significantly from native speakers in their use of the target language. Without instruction, non-native speakers often fail to acquire pragmatic features. Kasper (2001), after reviewing studies comparing explicit versus implicit approaches to teaching pragmatic features such as discourse markers and pragmatic fluency, states that explicit metapragmatic instruction is more effective than implicit teaching regardless of such factors as learners' level of proficiency or length of instruction.

Among the studies that have examined the effects of instruction on hedging devices is that of Félix-Brasdefer (2008) (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Studies on instructed acquisition of hedges

The Pragmatic Development of Hedging in EFL Learners	Shengming (2009)
Discourse Marker Teaching In College Conversation Classrooms: Focus on WELL, YOU KNOW, I MEAN.	Lee and Hsieh (2004)
The effects of instruction on pragmatic development: teaching polite refusals in English	Silva (2003)
Teaching pragmatics in the classroom: Instruction of mitigation in Spanish as a Foreign Language	Félix-Brasdefer (2008)

Félix-Brasdefer (2008) examines the effects of explicit instruction on the use of lexical and syntactic mitigators in refusal interactions among intermediate learners of Spanish. Results showed that the experimental group used lexical and syntactic mitigators more frequently, and more importantly, they retained most of these mitigating devices one month after instruction.

Silva's study (2003) demonstrates that explicit instruction in sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistic features of the L2 facilitates pragmatic development. These findings offer considerable support for Schmidt's noticing hypothesis, showing that directing learners' attentional resources to specific target language features promotes learning.

In light of the findings discussed above, it seems worthwhile to collect some college teachers' ideas about suitable approaches to the teaching of hedging devices, to find out what their existing practices are and determine to what extent these expressions are already being taught.

2. The study

2.1. Study description

Inspired by Fung's (2011) study which analyzes Hong Kong teachers' attitudes to the use and teaching of discourse markers, I have decided to investigate the attitude of college teachers in Poland to the teaching of conversational hedges. The main objective of the study is to determine how these teachers perceive the role of conversational hedges in spoken discourse. It also focuses on the teachers' attitude to the importance of raising awareness of hedging devices in the foreign language classroom. The research questions put forward are as follows:

1. Are teachers aware of the importance of hedges in informal spoken interaction?
2. Do they attach significance to the teaching of hedges in conversational classes?
3. What are their ideas about how hedges should be approached in the foreign language classroom?

Eleven teachers (4 of whom were native speakers of English), each with more than 10 years of teaching experience, took part in the study. I have modified Fung's questionnaire to devise and administer a written questionnaire of 19 multiple-choice questions (see Appendix 1) aimed at gathering college teachers' opinions on the pragmatic and pedagogical value of hedging devices. Two short extracts were taken from MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English) to illustrate the form and functions of hedging devices in spontaneous conversation. Subjects were asked to compare the effect hedges have on the message conveyed when the devices are present (Script A) and when they are deleted (Script B). Teachers were asked to indicate their opinions by choosing the appropriate answer: Agree, Disagree, Not sure. They were also encouraged to

give their own views in the form of written comments. Additionally, 4 teachers (2 native and 2 non-native speakers) were asked to complete an additional 11-item open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix 2).

2.2. Data presentation and discussion of results

My research reveals the following findings:

Questionnaire A (Appendix 1)

Use of hedges (see Table 2 below)

Teachers are convinced of the facilitative role of hedges in conversation (73%). They emphasize the fact that without hedges, speakers sound too direct and abrupt, which may in fact lead to miscommunication (73%). There is also a consensus that hedges are not redundant items (73%). Although teachers stress the importance of hedges in communication, they also express the opinion that without such expressions, conversations are still coherent and interpretable (82%). What is more, the data shows that teachers are not sure if the use of hedges leads to the students being perceived as more fluent speakers of English.

Table 2: The use of hedges

	Yes (Agree)	**No (Disagree)**	**Not sure**
The use of hedges			
Hedges can facilitate communication	8(73%)	2(18%)	1(9%)
My students speak in the written form and they do not use features of spoken discourse	3(27%)	6(55%)	2(18%)
Students who display hedges in their speech are perceived as more fluent speakers of English	8(73%)	0	3(27%)
Knowledge of hedges helps listeners understand native speaker conversations	10(91%)	1(9%)	0
Hedges do not necessarily contribute to the speaker's spoken fluency	5(46%)	3(27%)	3(27%)
Without hedges speakers sound rather formal and too direct and abrupt	8(73%)	2(18%)	1(9%)
Hedges are redundant in conversations	2(18%)	8(73%)	1(9%)
Without hedges conversations are still coherent and interpretable	9(82%)	0	2(18%)
My students incorporate hedges in their speech	9(82%)	1(9%)	1(9%)

The majority of teachers (73%) agree that hedges facilitate communication. They are aware of the importance of hedging devices both in spoken discourse comprehension and production. Ninety-one per cent of teachers believe that knowledge of conversational hedges helps listeners understand native speaker conversations (see Figure 1 below).

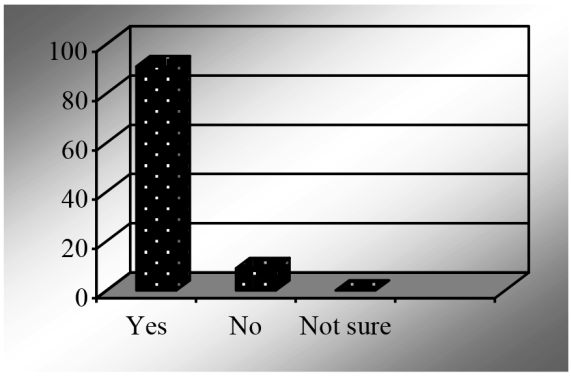

Figure 1: Significance of hedging devices
in spoken discourse comprehension (%)

Moreover, the same percentage of respondents (73%) state that learners who display hedges in their speech are perceived as more fluent speakers of English, which contradicts their previous claim that hedges do not necessarily contribute to the speakers' spoken fluency (see Figure 2 below).

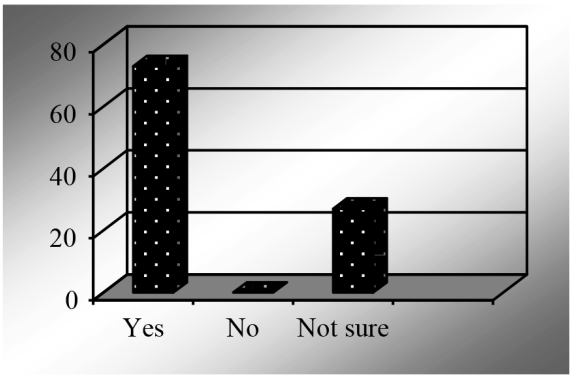

Figure 2: Significance of hedging devices
in spoken discourse production (%)

It is interesting to note that 55% of teachers claim that their students incorporate hedges in their speech as well as utilize other features of spoken discourse.

Teaching of hedges (see Table 3 below)

Generally, teachers disagree (55%) with the claim that hedges are only small words in conversation and that there is not much value in teaching them. In fact, the vast majority (82%) are of the opinion that it is important to raise students' awareness of the functions of conversational hedges. Similarly, they admit that students should be helped to exploit hedges to improve both their listening and speaking skills. However, it is worth mentioning that only 55% of the teachers surveyed highlight hedges in their classes. There seems to be a discrepancy between the perceived significance of hedging devices and their representation in the foreign language classroom.

Table 3: Instruction of hedges

	Yes (Agree)	**No (Disagree)**	**Not sure**
Instruction of hedges			
Hedges are only small words in conversation and there is not much teaching value	2 (18%)	6(55%)	3(27%)
Students should be taught how native speakers use hedges and follow their way of using them	7(64%)	2(18%)	2(18%)
It is necessary to increase awareness of hedges as a spoken fluency device	9(82%)	0	2(18%)
It is too ambitious to expect my students to use hedges in their speech	1(9%)	9 (82%)	1(9%)
The textbook I am using reflects the features of spoken grammar, including the use of hedges in spoken discourse	5(46%)	2(18%)	4(36%)
My students do not need to speak with hedges as they still can fulfill their communicative purpose	2(18%)	6(55%)	3(27%)
Students should be helped to exploit hedges to improve their speaking and listening skills	8(73%)	1(9%)	2(18%)
It's not necessary to teach my students hedges as they will eventually acquire them unconsciously	4(36%)	4(36%)	3(27%)
	Yes	**No**	
I highlight hedges in my classes	6(55%)	5(45%)	

Table 3

	Primary school	Secondary school	College/ university
The appropriate time to raise students' awareness of hedges in spoken discourse is	2(18%)	7(64%)	2(18%)

As Figure 3 below illustrates, more than half of teachers (55%) are convinced of the significance of hedging devices in foreign language teaching.

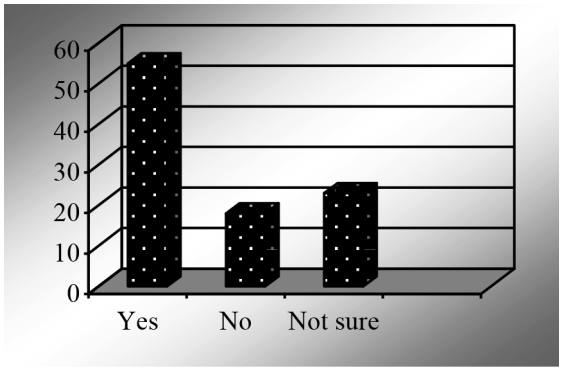

Figure 3: Importance of hedges in teaching (%)

Only 46% of the respondents claim that the textbooks they are using reflect the features of spoken grammar, including the use of hedges in spoken discourse. Thirty-six per cent of teachers are not sure if their teaching materials illustrate authentic naturally-occurring spoken discourse (see Figure 4 below).

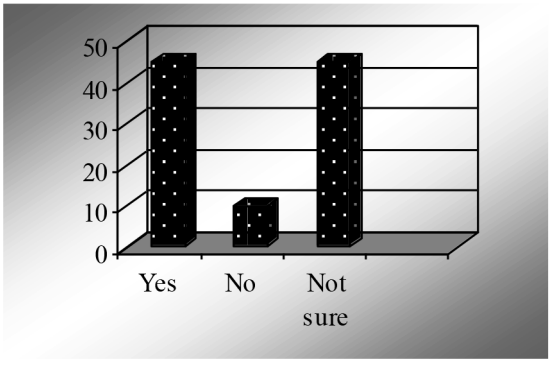

Figure 4: Representation of hedging devices in textbooks and teaching materials (%)

As can be seen from Figure 5 below, 55% of teachers highlight hedges in their speaking, listening or writing courses.

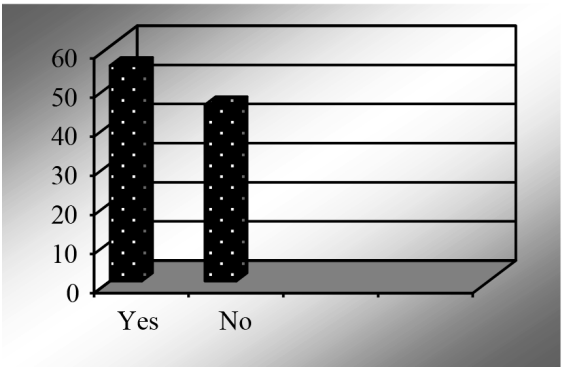

Figure 5: Representation of hedges in the foreign language classroom (%)

Interestingly, teachers have mixed feelings when it comes to the explicit teaching of hedges. As can be seen in Figure 6 below, only 36% of teachers think that it is necessary to teach students hedging devices. The same percentage, 36% of teachers, believe that non-native speakers will acquire such expressions unconsciously. On the other hand, the majority of teachers (82%) emphasize the importance of increasing students' awareness of hedges. This call for some kind of pedagogical intervention is consistent with the claim made by 64% of those surveyed that non-native speakers should be taught how native speakers use hedged expressions and follow their way of using them.

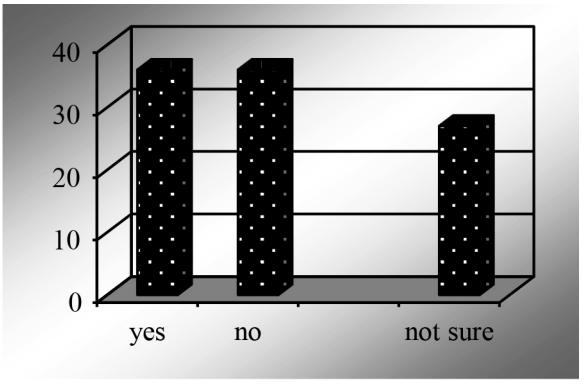

Figure 6: Instruction versus no instruction

Furthermore, the majority of teachers (82%) consider it important for students to use hedges in their speech. This attitude is reflected in their rejection of the statement that it is too ambitious to expect students to use hedges in their speech. Consistent with the previous statement, 55% of teachers disagree with the notion that students do not need to speak with hedges as they still can fulfill their communicative purpose. This implies that teachers realize hedges perform important pragmatic functions in spoken discourse and there is a need for some kind of pedagogical intervention.

When it comes to the best time to introduce such expressions in the learners' learning process, the majority of teachers agree that hedging devices should be introduced at the lower secondary level (see Figure 7).

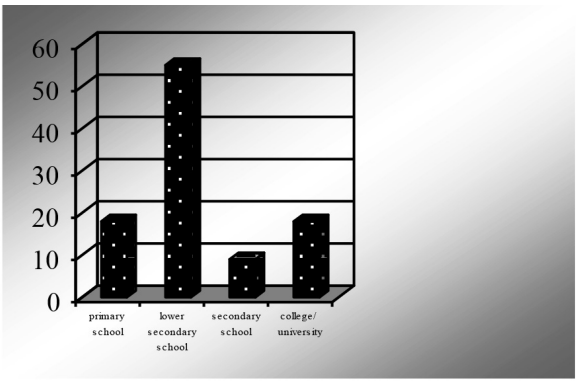

Figure 7: Best time to introduce hedging as a strategy (%)

Additional comments made by native speakers

Native speakers draw attention to the following issues:

– hedges and fluency

Students who display hedges in their speech are perceived as more fluent speakers of English. Native speaker teachers observe that:

It shows a high level of comfort with English – but they have to be used naturally.

I have observed this but usually with 'stronger' or more chatty, communicative, fluent speakers.

– hedges and stay abroad/acculturation

Native speakers point out that only very fluent students, usually those who have lived in the UK or the USA, incorporate hedges in their speech.

– instruction of hedges

In general, native speakers agree that it would be a bad idea to teach students to use hedges. Students need to be able to understand hedging devices but they don't think learners need to be taught to use them. Their experience is that the best students – those who have a high level of comfort with colloquial

English – acquire hedges naturally. Moreover, while they admit that it is necessary to raise awareness of hedges, they feel that students will acquire them unconsciously providing they are exposed to enough authentic input- e.g. via the Internet. They report that:

It is necessary to increase awareness of hedges as a spoken fluency device.

It's important to raise awareness but like forcing learners to use rising + falling intonation it would be very difficult for learners to use them naturally in speech.

– hedging in both cultures

Native speaker teachers observe that underuse/overuse of certain hedging devices might be due to L1 transfer.

– hedges in ELT materials

Native speakers emphasize the fact that most coursebook language is in written form – there are idioms and phrasal verbs but no focus on dialect or spoken grammar.

– perception of hedging devices

Native speakers state that without hedges, students sound rather formal and too direct and abrupt. Moreover, their discourse sounds like a rehearsed dialogue or resembles written language, not spoken.

Questionnaire B (Appendix 2)

In order to get more qualitative results I asked four college teachers (two native and two non-native speakers of English) to comment on their own perceptions of and use of hedges by answering an additional 11 open-ended questions. The findings are as follows.

Value of hedges

As for the value of hedges in communication, teachers report that such devices can be a sign of laziness, a way of filling in spaces in thought. Sometimes they are a way of making a sentence milder and less forceful. They state that:

It is both facilitative (when not abused) and negative (when overproduced.)

Use and functions of conversational hedges

– Teachers' use of hedging devices

They admit to using hedges in their own speech in order to make their speech less assertive/aggressive and more natural. They comment that:

I use them but I have never thought about why.

To sound natural as it's natural to use them in any language.

– Students' use of hedging devices

College teachers claim their students use hedges for different purposes depending on their proficiency level. More advanced learners use them to sound more fluent/natural. However, weaker students are likely to lack structure and

lexis, and therefore use hedges in their speech to compensate for the absence of a needed word.

Instructional practices

It is interesting to note that teachers believe that it might be beneficial to teach learners the functions of hedging. As for the instructional practices they would use to do this, they opt for discovery techniques rather than explicit instruction. They add that:

This is something advanced students tend to pick up on their own from listening to native speakers.

Furthermore, they suggest having students listen to real conversations and analyze transcripts of informal speech rather than explaining the functions directly. They advocate:

Let learners think and discover for themselves

Interestingly, native speakers agree that pragmatics instruction can lead to better comprehension of hedges, but not necessarily production. They claim that:

Comprehension yes – production comes from hearing hedges used repeatedly, until they come automatically, I think.

The more confident/fluent/sophisticated learners have probably subconsciously integrated hedges in their linguistic repertoire as a result (most likely) of an extended stay in Britain or due to a mix of reading/listening practice and contact with native speakers in their own country.

While NNS teachers favour teaching hedges for both receptive and productive purposes, the NS teachers mainly support a receptive approach. Non-native teachers of English believe that pedagogical intervention can result in production of a greater number and wider variety of hedges. All teachers agree, however, that reception should take precedence in the learning process.

Proficiency level and order

All teachers stress the fact that the ability to mitigate speech acts is a fairly advanced ability. Therefore, it seems reasonable to teach this aspect of pragmatic competence to advanced students who are able to comprehend language beyond the surface/literal level.

With regard to proficiency level and the order in which particular hedges should be taught, one teacher reports that:

All of the level groups should be treated with hedges; the difference lies in the way of teaching as it's usually prefabricated patterns or routine formulas that beginners learn by heart while the advanced students can develop them more naturally.

Native speakers consider the order as insignificant. One native speaker observes that:

The order in which they should be taught is not significant. Students will encounter hedges naturally as part of their exposure to English and they can be explained as necessary.

To sum up, the findings discussed above reflect the positive attitude that college teachers have towards hedging devices. They are aware of the important roles these 'small words' play in interpersonal communication and realize there is a need to raise learners' awareness of them. However, they have doubts concerning the value of explicit instruction in the pragmatic functions of hedges.

3. Conclusions and implications of the findings

On the basis of the data obtained the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The use of hedges in the foreign language classroom is neglected. Learners are not provided with enough input on hedges in conversational classes. Teachers think that no pedagogic intervention is necessary as such devices will be acquired unconsciously.
- Textbooks do not present the features of spoken discourse. This finding reflects Carter's (1998) observation that dialogues from textbooks differ to a great extent from real data from CANCODE as they do not present spoken language features such as discourse markers, vague language, ellipsis and hedges.
- When speaking, students typically do not use features of spoken grammar, but rather rely on written grammar. As a result, even students with high level of proficiency may sound pedantic, bookish and non-native like. Students who do not utilize hedging expressions in spoken discourse are often negatively evaluated by native speakers. They are perceived as blunt, abrupt or rude.
- There is a link between the use of hedges and fluency. Non-native speakers who utilize hedging devices are not only perceived as cooperative and polite but also as more fluent and native-like. This finding is consistent with the study by Hasselgren (2002) in which fluent speakers were found to use more hedging devices in their speech.
- College teachers observe that those students who have lived in the UK or the USA for some time utilize a greater number of hedging devices in speech. This observation is in line with that of Sankoff *et al*. (1997) who state that if a non-native speaker has more contact with the local people, he or she will employ more hedging devices than those who do not.
- Students' overuse/underuse of hedging devices might be due to L1 transfer. According to Wierzbicka (2003), the English use hedges to express their opinions as they do not want to sound too direct or authoritative. For the English, being polite means being indirect, not imposing. Poles "express opinions in strong terms without any hedges whatsoever" as they value emotionality and directness.
- Teachers agree that awareness-raising activities might help students to improve their comprehension or even production of hedging devices, although native speakers were more doubtful about whether such activities would facilitate production.

The above findings suggest that some form of pedagogical intervention may be beneficial. Recent studies have provided support for the importance of instruction of pragmatic features. It has been shown that teaching pragmatic language features is facilitative and that explicit instruction is particularly effective in the area of consciousness raising (Kasper & Rose 1999: 96-97).

The majority of teachers expressed their approval of raising learner's awareness of the role and functions of hedging devices in spoken discourse. Schmidt (1993) argues that learners need to pay attention to features of language, and to draw some conclusions from what they notice in order to gain insight into how language works. According to Kasper (1981 in Overstreet and Yule 1999: 3) focused attention is required because often students fail to identify pragmatic markers in the target language, even when related forms are commonly used in a native language L1 interaction. Hedges may actually be unnoticed by non-native speakers, a phenomenon Low (1996) calls the '*Lexical Invisibility Hypothesis*'.

As noticing is a conscious cognitive process, it should be emphasized in the foreign language classroom. Johnson (1988: 93) advocates reformulation tasks, which involve comparisons between L1 models and students' own performance. Swain and Lapkin (1995: 373) mention reconstruction tasks, in which the learner reconstructs a text which was heard or read previously and in this way the student becomes aware of his/her linguistic problems. McCarthy and Carter (1994: 68) propose language-observation activities, problem-solving and cross-linguistic comparisons (*cf* McCarthy and Carter's (1995) analytical-based Illustration-Interaction-Induction approach).

Using authentic spoken transcripts (e.g. taken from corpora) can help raise students' awareness of the functions of hedging devices and let them observe how native and non-native English speakers use such expressions in spontaneous conversations. Students can be asked to underline the expressions (identification) and discuss their functions in the given context (metapragmatic discussions). Kasper (1999) maintains that in purely meaning-oriented L2 use, learners may not pay attention to relevant input features, and that to help them notice these features, input should be made salient through 'input enhancement'. Students can be asked to compare two texts with and without hedges, and then analyze and discuss the effects hedges may have on the exchanges. They can also provide some equivalents in their mother tongue (cross-linguistic comparisons). Kupferberg and Olshtain (1996: 146) showed that explicit exposure to contrastive linguistic input and recognition tasks facilitated acquisition, which supports the noticing hypothesis according to which noticing is necessary for acquisition. Hence, cross-linguistic input facilitating noticing may be considered as an L2 acquisition facilitator.

Teachers as well as linguists should not ignore the significance of the so-called 'small words' in spoken discourse. The frequency with which they appear in spoken discourse and the variety of functions they fulfill make it a must for ESL/EFL teachers to promote students' awareness of their use. According to Mukherjee and Rohrbach (2006: 216),

> In future materials, the various functions of frequently used discourse markers should be given more prominence because mastery of discourse markers is part and parcel of the pragmatic competence and spoken fluency that is necessary for achieving an overall proficiency in line with the levels C1 or C2 in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*.

Although the pervasiveness of 'small words' in native-speaker performance has been confirmed by studies and corpus linguistics (e.g. McCarthy), the results of these findings are not always applied in language pedagogy. Increasing awareness of the abundance of 'small words' in native-speaker spoken discourse should make EFL teachers rethink their approach to English language instruction. Previous theories and methodologies sought to simplify language for learners by removing such small bits of language. However, in light of the findings of corpus linguistics, the importance of drawing students' attention to the functions of such pragmatic devices should not be underestimated.

Clearly the results of the present study need to be treated with some caution. A wider survey would produce more generalizable results. Further studies are needed to establish whether the awareness-raising activities mentioned above lead to better comprehension or production of hedging devices in spoken discourse. In other words, such studies would help us determine to what extent formal instruction can facilitate the development and acquisition of conversational hedges.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

QUESTIONNAIRE A

Information included in this questionnaire is confidential.

Section I

Personal data

Fill in the missing information or circle the correct answer.

1. Age _____ Gender: M / F
2. What is you native country? _____
3. What is your first language? _____
4. For how many years have you been teaching English? _____
5. At present how many English lessons do you take each week? _____
6. What subjects do you teach? _____
7. Level of students you teach:
   - Elementary level
   - Pre-intermediate level
   - Intermediate level
   - Upper-intermediate
   - Advanced level
8. Do you use authentic materials? Yes/No
9. What textbooks do you use?_____
10. Do you use your own materials? Yes/No

Section II

Comparison of texts.

Please read the following native-speaker conversations. Hedges have been highlighted in the original texts (Transcript A). In Transcript B they have been deleted. Compare the effects hedges have on the spoken exchanges. Indicate your opinions in the questionnaire attached.

Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English, English Language Institute, University of Michigan

S6: and then, the tail end of that will be, pleasure, [SU-7: mhm] and, um um my daughter's joining me in Greece at the end of that, um [SU-7: mhm] (xx) somehow and somewhere. <LAUGH> and uh, then, at the end of the, toward the end of the summer (around) July or August, um, early August, um, we all, spend s- about (xx) or five days, or so in, Stratford <UNINTELLIGIBLE SPEECH> join us, so that's fine, (xx) family (xx)

SU-7: it's a nice little town, too. [S6: yeah] there's more to do than, in between places (xx)

S6: yeah, before, we've always stayed in London because, it's a it's a real city **you know**, and Stratford is **sort of,** <LAUGH> corny, **whatever** [SU-f: mhm] but um, **you know** this little country town that had things happen to it but this time we're gonna stay, **you know** some, a few days in Stratford and see (xx) if we can, take it or not <LAUGH> (xx)

SU-7: (xx) (last summer,) two summers ago i was up there, we only stayed for **like** (xx) (he's got a little) bed and breakfast place, **you know**? and it worked out **just** fine, it was **kind of** outside of the downtown area, very beautiful (xx)

S6: and then, the tail end of that will be, pleasure, [SU-7: mhm] and, um um my daughter's joining me in Greece at the end of that, um [SU-7: mhm] (xx) somehow and somewhere. <LAUGH> and uh, then, at the end of the, toward the end of the summer (around) July or August, um, early August, um, we all, spend s- about (xx) or five days, or so in, Stratford <UNINTELLIGIBLE SPEECH> join us, so that's fine, (xx) family (xx)

SU-7: it's a nice little town, too. [S6: yeah] there's more to do than, in between places (xx)

S6: yeah, before, we've always stayed in London because, it's a it's a real city, and Stratford is <LAUGH> corny, [SU-f: mhm] but um, this little country town that had things happen to it but this time we're gonna stay, some, a few days in Stratford and see (xx) if we can, take it or not <LAUGH> (xx)

SU-7: (xx) (last summer,) two summers ago i was up there, we only stayed for (xx) (he's got a little) bed and breakfast place, ? and it worked out fine, it was outside of the downtown area, very beautiful (xx)

Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English, English Language Institute, University of Michigan

S5: so her brother lives here right?

S4: yeah. you met you met her brother right? yeah. he's still around. [S5: right] he bought a house over on (xx) [S5: he did?] yeah. [S5: wow.] so oh got margot married too. [S5: he got married? wow] and got two kid- he's got two kids now

S5: he has two kids? <LAUGH> **well, i guess** he was a pretty young guy (when i,) when i met him.

S4: yeah [S5: yeah] he was only **like** in his twenties when he first came **like**

S5: right right (he was) **just** starting as an engineer?

S4: mhm. yeah he's now. <LAUGH> family man.

S5: Johanna's an aunt huh?

S4: mhm. yeah. i'm trying to convince her to come. she said she will but, she's **i mean**, she was in uh Japan [S5: Japan?] she presented a paper in Japan. [S5: oh wow.] and then, **i think** she presented a paper too in, in Boston, at an international conference [S5: yeah.] and then she's been, **you know** busy

S5: yeah sounds like it

S4: (of course) she's got tenure now too

S5: i know

S5: so her brother lives here right?

S4: yeah. you met you met her brother right? yeah. he's still around. [S5: right] he bought a house over on (xx) [S5: he did?] yeah. [S5: wow.] so oh got margot married too. [S5: he got married? wow] and got two kid- he's got two kids now

S5: he has two kids? <LAUGH> he was a pretty young guy (when i,) when i met him.

S4: yeah [S5: yeah] he was only in his twenties when he first came

S5: right right (he was) starting as an engineer?

S4: mhm. yeah he's now. <LAUGH> family man.

S5: Johanna's an aunt huh?

S4: mhm. yeah. i'm trying to convince her to come. she said she will but, she's, she was in uh Japan [S5: Japan?] she presented a paper in Japan. [S5: oh wow.] and then, she presented a paper too in, in Boston, at an international conference [S5: yeah.] and then she's been, busy

S5: yeah sounds like it

S4: (of course) she's got tenure now too

S5: i know

Read the following statements which refer to the use of hedges – the so-called 'small words'(well, you know, I mean, like, just, I think, or something etc.)in spoken discourse as well as teaching of hedges in foreign language classroom. Indicate your opinions by ticking the answer which reflects your views

***Yes (I agree)* means confirmation, *No (I disagree*) means rejection.**

1. Hedges can facilitate communication.
   - o Yes (I agree)
   - o No (I disagree)
   - o Not sure
2. Knowledge of hedges helps listeners understand native speaker conversations.
   - o Yes
   - o No
   - o Not sure
3. Hedges do not necessarily contribute to the speaker's spoken fluency.
   - o Yes (I agree)
   - o No (I disagree)
   - o Not sure
4. Without hedges speakers sound rather formal and too direct and abrupt.
   - o Yes
   - o No
   - o Not sure
5. Hedges are redundant in conversations.
   - o Yes
   - o No
   - o Not sure
6. Without hedges conversations are still coherent and interpretable.
   - o Yes
   - o No
   - o Not sure
7. I highlight hedges in my classes □ Yes □ No
   □ speaking classes □ listening classes □ other please specify_____
8. The textbook I am using reflects the features of spoken grammar, including the use of hedges in spoken discourse.
   - o Yes
   - o No
   - o Not sure
9. My students incorporate hedges in their speech.
   - o Yes
   - o No
   - o Not sure

10. Hedges are only small words in conversation and there is not much teaching value.
    - o Yes (I agree)
    - o No (I disagree)
    - o Not sure
11. The appropriate time to raise students' awareness of hedges in spoken discourse is
    - □ at primary school
    - □ at lower secondary school
    - □ at secondary school
    - □ at college or university
12. Students should be taught how native speakers use hedges and follow their way of using them.
    - o Yes
    - o No
    - o Not sure
13. It is necessary to increase awareness of hedges as a spoken fluency device.
    - o Yes
    - o No
    - o Not sure
14. My students speak in the written language form and they do not use features of spoken discourse.
    - o Yes
    - o No
    - o Not sure
15. Students who display hedges in their speech are perceived as more fluent speakers of English.
    - o Yes
    - o No
    - o Not sure
16. It is too ambitious to expect my students to use hedges in their speech.
    - o Yes
    - o No
    - o Not sure
17. My students do not need to speak with hedges as they still can fulfill their communicative purpose.
    - o Yes (I agree)
    - o No (I disagree)
    - o Not sure
18. Students should be helped to exploit hedges to improve their speaking and listening skills.
    - o Yes
    - o No
    - o Not sure

19. It's not necessary to teach my students hedges as they will eventually acquire them unconsciously.
    - o Yes (I agree)
    - o No (I disagree)
    - o Not sure

Additional comments: …….
……..

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION!

Appendix 2

QUESTIONNAIRE B

Please read the following questions which refer to the use and teaching of hedges – the so-called 'small words'(well, you know, I mean, like, just, I think, or something etc.) in spoken discourse and provide your answers.

1. Do you think that teaching students the functions of hedges might be beneficial or rather confusing?
   ……
   ……
   ……

2. What techniques (instructional practices) would you use ? (explicit/discovery learning)
   ……
   ……
   ……

3. Do you think that pedagogical instruction can lead to students' better comprehension or even production of hedges?
   ……
   ……
   ……

4. Which hedges would you teach and when (beginners, intermediate students or advanced students – why?) and in what order) ?
   ……
   ……
   ……

5. Should students be taught hedging devices for listening or for speaking purposes (or both)?
   ……
   ……
   ……

6. Do you think it's important to raise students' awareness of hedging as a politeness strategy? Why?/Why not?
   ……
   ……
   ……

7. Do you think it's necessary to provide students with explicit information about L2 pragmatics? Why?/Why not?
   ……
   ……
   …….
8. Do you use hedges in your own speech or try to avoid them? If yes, why do you use them?
   ……
   ……
   …….

9. Do your students use hedges in their own speech? If yes, why do they use them?
   a. To soften criticism and sound polite
   b. To show speakers' attitude
   c. To maintain fluency/gain processing time/ to fill gaps in conversation
   d. For genuine lack of information/For memory loss/For absence of equivalent word
   e. To express uncertainty
   f. ?

   Your answer: ……
   ……

10. How do you perceive students who use hedges? Do you encourage students to use hedges in their speech or rather discourage them from utilizing such devices in spoken discourse?
    ……
    ……
    ……

11. What is the value of hedges in communication? (Dispensable – indispensable? Facilitative or a sign of sloppy thinking that should be avoided?.)
    ……
    ……
    …….

Additional comments: ……..……..……..……..……..……
……..……..……..……..……..……..……..…

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION!