

Using Hedges as Relational Work by Arab EFL Students in Student-Supervisor Consultations

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ABSTRACT

One of the challenges that Arab EFL male and female postgraduate students in the Malaysian universities have to anticipate is the consultation process with their supervisors regarding their academic projects. During the consultations, the students ask questions and respond to the supervisors' comments and demands. To perform these academic tasks appropriately, these students need to modify their interactional patterns using various linguistic devices. One of these is hedges, the linguistic politeness markers. Incorrect selection of these devices can be interpreted as inappropriate behaviour, which may affect the student-supervisor relationships. To avoid any breakdown in communication between the two parties and maintain effective consultations, a pragmatic knowledge of using hedges is necessary. Previous discourse analysis studies on the use of hedges have focused on the student-student interaction while student-supervisor academic consultations still need to be explored to understand how these learners perform in more formal academic settings. The current study, therefore, aimed to investigate how Arab EFL postgraduate students use hedges to express various types of politeness. It also aimed to find out whether the use of this device is gender specific. The data were collected by means of four one-to-one student-supervisor consultations and a pragmatic knowledge questionnaire. The findings showed that the students are familiar with hedges as they used a huge number of them. Also the female students used more hedges than male students. However, the analysis of the questionnaire showed that the students were not fully aware of the pragmatic functions achieved by these devices.

Keywords: Hedges; gender; relational work; EFL Arab students; academic consultations

INTRODUCTION

Hedges are defined by Fraser (2010) as words and expressions in the form of modals, uncertainty markers, fillers, tag questions, or others, that can (1) attenuate the force of the speech acts and (2) express levels of uncertainty towards the propositions in the utterances. Achieving these two functions by the use of hedges can yield utterances that are more appropriate to the context, and, therefore, achieve politeness (Alward, Mooi & Bidin, 2012; Kuang, David, & Lau 2013; Brown & Levinson 1987; Holmes, 1984). However, using hedges is not limited to achieving politeness (Caffi, 2007; Fraser, 2010). According to Caffi (2007, p. 3), other goals that can be achieved by using hedges include avoidance of the "unnecessary risks, responsibilities and functions such as good rapport, giving options,

respect, showing uncertainty, caution, or consideration”(Caffi, 2007, p. 7), and most importantly to achieve academic acceptance and success.

Speaking of the academic context of the Arab EFL learners recruited in the current study, the employment of hedges to modify their speech with their supervisors goes beyond the expression of politeness to include and achieve other academic and social functions referred to in literature as ‘relational work’. According to Watts (2003), during interaction, the participants (speakers and hearers) build on their previous practices to produce patterns of talk that are not only polite, but also political in nature. This case was labeled by Watts (2003, p.19) as ‘politic behavior’. For instance, when students interact with their lecturers or supervisors, they usually mitigate their utterances to express their desire not only to appear polite or impolite, but also to achieve other interactional functions.

Like other graduate students in the Malaysian universities, Arab students are also involved in the supervision of their academic projects. During the consultations, the students usually ask questions and respond to their supervisors’ comments and demands using the English language. To achieve this in ways that guarantee more appropriate and effective talk with their supervisors, the students should use words and expressions in less offensively and imposingly to be perceived as polite so that their ideas and opinions become more convincing to their supervisors. Hence, the use of hedges comes to play an essential role. However, incorrect selection of these devices can be interpreted as inappropriate, thus affecting the student-supervisor relationships. Using hedges requires students to possess pragmatic knowledge of using them, which is necessary to avoid any breakdown in the communication and to maintain effective consultation process.

Previous research on using hedges in the academic discourse of Arab EFL learners has focused mainly on the use of these devices in academic writing only (Al-Quraishy, 2011; Alward, Mooi, & Bidin, 2012; Majeed & Hamid, 2009; Mukheef, 2012). In these studies, there was an agreement that the use of hedges by these learners is problematic and challenging. This challenge includes their inadequate ability to communicate their ideas, feelings and demands successfully because they rely so much on the formal forms of English which negatively impacted on their overall communicative performance (Al-Khateeb, 2009; Umar, 2004). However, there are very few studies on how these students perform in more formal academic settings, especially during student-supervisor academic consultations. Moreover, previous research on gender in the Arab learners’ speech act performance and modification has been conducted (Al-Rousan & Awal 2016). Hedges and their application in politeness were investigated with the purpose of finding out whether the use of these linguistic devices is gender specific. While hedging strategies and devices were found used similarly by males and females (Dixon & Foster, 1997; Aziz, Chin, & Nordin 2016), in other studies, such as (Ansarin & Bathaie, 2011), these devices were found to be an attribute of the females more than males, or an attribute of males’ speech rather than females’ (Hameed, 2010).

Research on politeness in the Arab EFL context has been investigated largely through the lenses of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model of politeness (Alaoui, 2011; Hameed, 2010; Najeeb, Marlyna, M. , & Nor Fariza, 2012; Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012). However, this model has been criticized for its reliance on the notion of face, which is considered by Brown and Levinson as universal and consisting of either positive or negative face (Locher & Watts, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Watts, 2003). This classification by Brown and Levinson excludes other types of behaviors, such as being appropriate or inappropriate linguistic behavior to the social context and the participants’ previous experiences of a similar or same situation. In other words, a substitute model for the analysis of politeness that can take the social norms, which derive their meaning from the interactants’ expectations, prior experience, and the knowledge of the act being performed, still needs to be considered. In the

current study, it was more suitable to apply the Relational Work Theory by Watts (2003) to underpin the interpretation of politeness of the students, and the Relational Work Scheme by Locher and Watts (2005) for the classification of the students linguistic and pragmatic behaviors during their interaction with their supervisors.

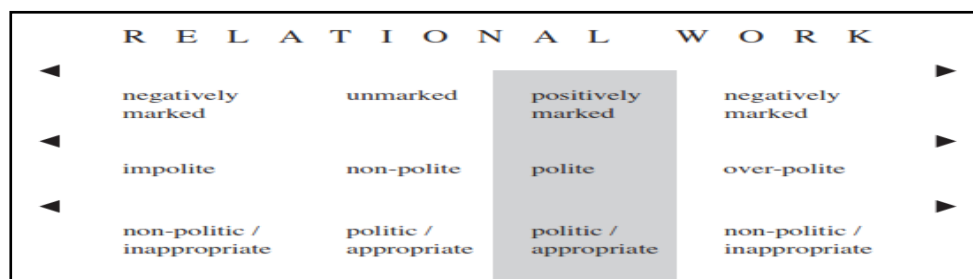
The intent of this study was, therefore, to fill these gaps in the literature by analyzing the types, frequency, and functions of hedges as used by a group of male and female Arab EFL postgraduate students during student-supervisor consultations. The study also intended to determine whether the students were aware of the pragmatic functions achieved by the use of hedges and whether they consider using these devices appropriate or inappropriate.

HEDGES IN SPOKEN DISCOURSE

Hedges are speech act modifiers that are also known as ‘performative hedges’ (Fraser, 1975). According to Fraser (1975), the function of these linguistic utterances is to attenuate the illocutionary force of the speech acts such as request, apology or promise; while keeping the main meaning of the speech acts intact. Following Fraser’s (1975) work on hedging, Brown and Levinson (1987) discussed the speech act in more detail in light of the politeness phenomena. Brown and Levinson (1987, p.35) defined a hedge as "a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or a noun phrase in a set; it says of that membership that it is partial or true only in certain respects, or that it is more true and complete than perhaps might be expected". This definition assigns a dual function of a hedge either in attenuating or reinforcing the speech act strength, which can be used as a strategy to lessen the threat to the face thus showing politeness. In this study, these modifiers will be analyzed in terms of their effect on the proposition and the force of the speech act in which they exist as an expression of relational work.

RELATIONAL WORK THEORY

In his Relational Work Theory, Watts (2003, p. 165) maintained that “[t]here are no objective criteria with which we can ‘measure’ politeness, and the interpretations are always open to discursive struggle” over social practices. In other words, the interpretation of politeness is subject to personal or group interpretation. This depends on what is agreed upon among the interlocutors of what is (im)polite and what is non-polite (politic), or over polite. Locher and Watts (2005) maintained that interpreting the interlocutors’ behavior should be inspected at the scheme of politeness (impolite, non-polite, polite, and over-polite) as presented in Figure 1. This interpretation depends on the nature of the social situation which is built upon previous practices and the relationship among the participants in the social practice (Locher, 2004 as cited in Locher & Watts, 2005).



Source: Adopted from Locher (2004) as cited in Locher & Watts (2005, p. 12)

FIGURE 1. Relational Work Scheme

Past research on the speech act modifiers have been done in various social academic contexts. Shengming (2009) conducted a study that analyzed the production of 211 Chinese EFL school and university students, specifically looking for the relationship between the students' awareness of using hedges and their year of study. Three instruments were used to collect the data: questionnaires, interviews, and structured debates. The findings revealed that the students used varied hedges to attenuate their utterances and that the selection of hedges was in accordance with the students' level of study. It started with the use of common hedges, such as "I think" and "maybe" at school level and ended with the use of double negations and hedge combinations at the university level. The results indicated that the use of hedges requires more linguistic and social knowledge and awareness, which can be achieved through longer exposure to the language. The limited special and systematic training on the usage of hedges at the different levels of learning would result in the use of hedges barren from their actual semantic and pragmatic meanings, thus, leading to ill-formed usage of this device. It would also lead to repeated use of limited number of hedges to serve in different occasions. For example, the hedge "I think" will be a general representation of any mental state utterances, in place of "guess", "believe", or "reckon" that qualify for this function.

In the Arab EFL learners context, Sattar, Qusay, and Farnia (2014) investigated the cross-cultural differences and similarities in the realization of request external modifications between the Iraqi and Malaysian students. Through data collected by means of eight Discourse Completion Tests and questionnaires, utilizing Spencer-Oatey's rapport management as the theoretical framework, and categorizing the corpus against Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper's (1989) classification of external modifiers, the results showed that 'grounders' were the most prominent type of hedging devices used by the subjects.

In another study, Lin (2015) compared the use of speech act modifiers in academic context between Mandarin Chinese lecturers and their native counterparts. The focus of comparison was on identifying the frequency and the functions of Pragmatic Force Modifiers as well as the relationship between these modifiers and academic cultural contexts. The qualitative and quantitative findings showed that the Mandarin Chinese lecturers used specific types of softeners such as intensifying and colloquial modifiers which were ascribed to their limited repertoire of these devices, the interference of the first or mother tongue Language (L1), and the personal involvement. The Chinese-speaking lecturers also used the same linguistic devices to achieve different pragmatic purposes, which were also the result of their lack of awareness of other modifiers to achieve pragmatic functions.

Lin (2013) analyzed and described the everyday spoken interaction between native British and Taiwanese students. By employing discourse analysis approach, vague categories, hedging and approximations were examined quantitatively and qualitatively using Chanell (1994) analytical framework. Although the researcher made a difference between the three types of devices which in fact belong to hedges (Fraser, 2010, p. 21), the findings showed that vague expressions (e.g., "kind of", "sort of", "staff like that") were the most used devices in the corpus. The findings also showed that the Taiwanese EFL learners used less of these devices than the British learners. The pragmatic analysis of the functions of vagueness expressions showed that these devices were used to maintain harmonious interpersonal group memberships in everyday spoken communication. It was also found that certain devices pragmatically behave differently depending on the linguistic and social context. For example, the use of "sort of" as a hedge expression shows uncertainty and less directness when giving comment, thus expresses positive politeness. It is also used as a filler to show hesitation.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

The sample in the study consisted of 8 Arab postgraduate students (4 males and 4 females) aged between 22-25 years. The students speak Arabic as their native language and study English as a foreign language in a Malaysian University. For sampling, the students were selected purposively to suit the purpose of this study in exploring student-supervisor consultations. According to Creswell (2013, p. 209), a purposive sampling method is suitable in qualitative studies with the fewer number of subjects the more focus is given to the phenomenon under investigation and that “the larger number of cases can become unwieldy and result in superficial perspectives.” This method helped the researchers in this study to focus more on the use of hedges and the expression of politeness. Moreover, the data collected from 8 subjects in this study was relatively huge as the female subjects produced 390 turns and the male students produced 364 turns when talking to their supervisors, which were enough to reach the saturation point and achieve the aims of the study.

DATA COLLECTION AND INSTRUMENTS

This study used a descriptive pragmatic analysis approach to explain the use of hedges as expressions of relational work in the interaction between Arab EFL students and their supervisors. Based on this approach, the data were collected by means of two instruments. The first instrument was one-to-one student-supervisor consultations where eight consultations with a total of 1303 exchanges between the students and their supervisors were audio recorded, transcribed, and keyed in into an Excel workbook to prepare for the analysis. This instrument was used to answer the first research question.

The second instrument used in this study was a two-part pragmatic awareness questionnaire. It was developed by the researchers by taking excerpts from the students’ actual use of hedges. Each excerpt was followed by five questions focusing on the following aspects of language use:

- The function of hedges
- The way hedges served the speaker
- The way hedges affected the hearer
- The level of appropriateness / inappropriateness of the utterance

The options provided in each question were selected from various resources in the literature. The purpose of using this questionnaire was to measure the students’ level of awareness of the functions of hedges as uncertainty and mitigation markers, and to decide on the appropriateness/inappropriateness of using these devices from the students’ perspectives. This part is to answer the second and third research questions.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

For data analysis, a descriptive pragmatic approach that employed qualitative and quantitative methods was used. The following procedures were taken to analyze the transcribed material of the audio recordings:

- The hedges were identified and inspected following Shengming (2009) framework of analyzing .
- Each of the identified hedges was double checked by applying criteria adopted in the present study for this purpose (see next section).
- Each of the identified devices were then grouped and classified into its category and sub-category, then the frequencies and percentages were calculated.

- The devices were then analyzed in relation to the functions they achieved in the consultations.
- To further inspect the data, the students' views of the pragmatic functions achieved by using hedges were explored from the students' perspectives.
- Depending on the Relational Work Scheme by Locher and Watts (2005), the level of appropriateness or inappropriateness of using hedges by the students were identified from the students' point of views and classified into five social behaviors:
 - (1) appropriate polite behavior,
 - (2) appropriate over polite behavior,
 - (3) inappropriate impolite behavior,
 - (4) inappropriate over-polite and
 - (5) appropriate politic behavior.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Shengming's (2009) framework was used for the categorization of hedges. This framework proposed four major categories as shown in Table 1, which include quantification hedges, performative shields, modal shields, propositional hedges, and interpersonal hedges. Specifically, hedges are identified when the word:

- (1) semantically modify the "quantity, quality, degree, frequency, extension, intensity, precision, attitude, or commitment" of the proposition being communicated.
- (2) achieve scalarity from the two polar positions.
- (3) is a possible source of hedging (I have *just* arrived vs. it is *just* an idea)
- (4) pragmatically modify the force of the speech act it accompanies by which this force is mitigated or quantified by displaying levels of uncertainty, vagueness, mental state uncertainty, and other epistemic fuzzy reactions that reflect the speaker's personal view, estimation commitment of facts and people's behaviors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify the types and frequency of hedges as expressions of relational work between the Arab EFL male and female students and their academic supervisors in the one-to-one consultations.

CATEGORIES, TYPES, FREQUENCY AND FUNCTIONS OF HEDGES

As shown in Table 1, the students used 4 major categories of hedges with 393 tokens. The pragmatic markers hedges were the most frequent, with 111 tokens where the females used more hedges (17%) than the male students (11%). The second position of frequency was occupied by the quantification hedges and modal shields hedges categories with 24% each. Performative shields hedges came in the last position of frequency with 23%.

TABLE 1. Summary of Findings

Hedge Category	Females		Males		All	
	Freq.	Percent	Freq.	Percent	Freq.	Percent
Pragmatic Markers Hedges	68	17%	43	11%	111	28%
Quantification Hedges	52	13%	44	11%	96	24%
Modal Shields (auxiliaries, adverbs, adjectives)	49	12%	47	12%	96	24%
Performative shields Hedges	50	13%	40	10%	90	23%
Total	219	56%	174	44%	393	100%

This high number of hedges indicates that all students do have the linguistic repertoire of hedges. However, the selection and use of these hedges were not all the time appropriately chosen as seen from the limited and repeated use of the same hedges in the same sentence. For instance, a close look at the use of “according to” as a hedge by the students in Example 1 shows that the students are quite familiar with this type of expression. However, they do not seem to be fully aware of its semantic and pragmatic use, which was in many occasions not at all successful. In 207, the student used “according to” incorrectly instead of “because of”. In 117, the student also used ‘according’ to incorrectly to replace “regarding of”.

Example [1]

207	P3	... according to humanitarian aspects he should provide this assistance.//
117	P3	..., but according to American native speakers, I already send so many drafts of questionnaires...

*Note. P stands for Participant (student)

The results also indicate that the subjects are more into using modal shields which is mainly to achieve uncertainty and vagueness in the interaction. This is possibly due to their need to pass their projects and avoid any clash with their supervisors. The table also shows that the female students used more hedges than males across almost all the categories. They used more pragmatic markers hedges (17%) than the male students (11%), slightly more quantification hedges (13%) than the males (11%), and more performative shields hedges (13%) than males (10%). However, both used the same amount of modal shields (12%). These findings indicate that the female students are more inclined to use hedgy language, and they have keen desire to attenuate their propositions and mitigate the force of the speech acts they performed to achieve more harmonious relationship with their supervisors.

PRAGMATIC MARKERS HEDGES

The students in the current study used 111 tokens of pragmatic markers hedges as shown in Table 2. Forty-eight (76%) of these tokens were classified as belonging to propositional hedges category, while 27 (24%) of them were classified as belonging to interpersonal hedges category. Under the first category, 4 other sub-categories were identified. The analysis showed that referring to others or things as a base of judgment or proposition were the most frequent category (32%) with 35 tokens. This was followed by using precaution strategy against potential misconception (20%) with 22 tokens. Less frequently (15%) and with 17 tokens, the students referred to the supervisor as a source of information. However, referring to the speaker, who is the student, came last in the frequency (9%) with only 10 occurrences. The analysis of this category also showed that across the four categories of the propositional marker hedges, the female students used almost double the amount of these hedges. Overall, it was found that using propositional hedges was two thirds (64%) by female students and one third (36%) of these hedges was used by male students.

On the other hand, the students used 27 tokens as interpersonal pragmatic markers hedges with “you know”, “as you know”, “if you can see”, and “you can say” with “you know” as the most frequent interpersonal hedge types. It can be noticed that the use of this category of hedges formed 24% of the total pragmatic markers for hedges. Females used higher amount of hedges to those used by male students. Overall, the female students used more pragmatic markers hedges (61%) than the male subjects (39%).

TABLE 2. Pragmatic Markers Hedges

Type	Female	Male	All	Freq.
Propositional Markers Hedges				
- Reference to thing(s) or other(s): according to, based on, following something or someone / X Said /Because of something / for them / as long as one can / for someone / If something / in case of something, .../ They/he/she said / it seems that	22	13	35	32%
- Precaution against potential misconception: hopefully/unfortunately /actually / strictly speaking	15	7	22	20%
- Reference to hearer: as you like, want / according your advice, notices / you said, mentioned / as you said / If you don't mind/find it good/ask me/want, sure...	11	6	17	15%
- Reference to speaker: for me/I know, I said if, I said, for me, according to my..., it seems to me / if I could, find, change	6	4	10	9%
Sub-total	54	30	84	76%
Percentage	64%	36%	100%	
Interpersonal Markers hedges:				
You Know, as you know, if you can see, and you can say Gross Total	14	13	27	24%
Percentage	52%	48%	100%	
Pragmatic Markers Hedges: You know, as you know, if you can see, possibly, you can say				
Gross Total	68	43	111	100%
Gross Percentage	61%	39%	100%	

The pragmatic markers hedges were the most frequent (28%) among all other hedges categories. In contrast with the other hedges categories; namely, quantifications, performative shields, and modal shields, which are explicit markers by which the literal meaning of the words or phrases reflects the function, pragmatic markers hedges, are implicit markers by which achieving the meaning needs the use of inference to understand the speaker's intention. The scope of effect of this type of hedges is on the syntactic and utterance levels, and not the proposition. Functionally, pragmatic markers hedges have qualities from both quantification and shields. However, defining their functions is not only dependent on the linguistic context, but also is greatly dependent on the social context of the utterances. In this sense, pragmatic markers hedges can achieve a dual function, propositional and interpersonal.

Propositionally, the students adjust, attenuate or fine-tune their claims in such a way to meet what is expected by the hearer. Notice how in Example 2 the use of the propositional pragmatic marker hedges "actually" and "according to your recommendation" helped the student demonstrate that what she has done is only based on the supervisor's instructions. In this way she met the expectations of the supervisor and protected the student from the direct involvement in the performed action. This is clear from the supervisor's response, who felt that he was part of the decision taken by the student, so he admitted and defended his own suggestion without much blame extended to student.

Example [2]

- 424 P2 So here is my abstract **actually** I change it **according to your recommendation**. Also about the methodology you advised me to collect authentic data by collecting actual emails and not to use DCT.
- 425 S Yah it is just a suggestion because I want you to collect authentic data. So, this is what you have written for your project. Right?
- 426 P2 //Yah, but I follow your suggestion//

*Note. S stands for Supervisor

QUANTIFICATION HEDGES

The analysis of the students' interactions with their supervisors showed that subjects used 3 major categories of approximating hedges with 96 tokens in total (Table 3). This included the use of quantity approximators, degree approximators, and frequency approximators. The analysis also showed that quantifying the proposition was the most frequent category with 70 tokens consisting 73% of the total approximating hedges. Following that, modifying the degree of the proposition or the force of the speech act came in the second position with 20 tokens forming (21%) of the total hedges of this type. In the last position of frequency came the frequency approximators 6 (6%). On the other hand, the analysis also showed that across the three categories of quantification hedges, the female students used more hedges tokens 52 (54%) than male students 44 (46%).

TABLE 3. Quantification Hedges

Type	F	M	All	Freq.
Quantity Approximators: most, many, about, just, some, No. Or No, main, a lot of, only, so many, something, the only, a little bit, a lot, above, few, many of, most of, much, not enough, not only, not the only one, one of, some of, something between, the majority of, and the whole	37	33	70	73%
Degree Approximators: somehow, about, just, almost, approximately, a kind of, and anyway	13	7	20	21%
Frequency Approximators: usually just, and sometimes	2	4	6	6%
Total	52	44	96	100%
Percentage	54%	46%	100%	

Quantification hedges came in the second position of occurrence (24%). Quantification hedges are words or phrases that are used by language speakers to approximate their propositions in order to achieve vagueness or uncertainty to make the meaning sound a little imprecise. The main purpose of doing so is to convey the speaker's intention that he or she seeks the truth and accuracy, and avoid committing themselves to the responsibility and consequences of their utterances (Prince, Frader & Bosk, 1982; Shengming, 2009). In example 3 below the student wanted to convince the supervisor:

Example [3]

- 451 P2 I think this one looks **somehow** easier than the other one.
 452 S Very good. So why you want to do this?
 453 P2 Because the other one need **more** time and effort. So, if I collect the data following this way may be the students or the lecturers, I don't know, have no time to participate in this study and they will excuse. I don't know. Actually, I cannot feel **much** confident to do that because **some of** my friend did the same and they have face **many** difficulties to collect the data as **most** students have excused and they didn't have time. For me I also don't have time because I need to collect the data within **two or three** months.
 454 S Ok. So you prefer that way?

The discussion was on using face to face interactions or discourse completion task (DCT) as instrument for data collection. The student (P2), wanted to convince the supervisor of using the DCT. She employed a number of approximators to attenuate her decision to look less imposing and to obtain acceptance by the supervisor. In 451 the frequency approximator "somehow" indicates that this instrument is not difficult, but at the same time, is not easy. She wanted to say that she wanted to adopt DCT not because it is easy, but it is most practical

for the context of her study. This was effective as she obtained temporary approval from her supervisor. However, the supervisor wanted to know about other practical justification and elaboration on using this instrument. This was achieved in 453, when the student used an array of approximated reasons. For example she used the quantity approximators “more”, “much”, “some of, many”, “most”, and “two or three” to quantify the reasons, so her intention is conveyed more accurately. Moreover, the use of these approximators was to negotiate her way to adopt DCT in order to make it easy for her potential respondents to respond to her instruments (the DCT). It seems that showing impreciseness and fuzziness through using the approximators was quite effective in convincing the supervisor to accept using this instrument for data collection.

MODAL SHIELDS

Shields are markers of speaker’s uncertainty. They signal that the speaker’s evaluation of the proposition is fuzzy and based on personal view. By using these devices, the speaker protects himself/herself from any future risks resulted from his or her claim. The responsibility will shift then from the speaker to the fuzziness that resides in the hedge itself. They also achieve other functions, such as showing that the speaker is searching for a better proof and the current claim is just a temporary state. This leaves the hearer or addressee with a space to negotiate or modify the proposition to arrive at the complete truth. At the same time the addressee will not in any way accuse the speaker of being dominant and imposing (Aiezza, 2015; Prince, Frader & Bosk, 1982; Shengming, 2009).

The subjects in this study used three major categories of modal shields with a total of 166 tokens as shown in Table 4. The modal auxiliaries hedges of the modal verbs “can”, “should”, “could”, “may”, “cannot”, “should”, “could”, “couldn’t”, “should not”, and “would” were the most frequent types of modal shields used (69%) with a total of 66 tokens. The use of modal adverbs “maybe”, “generally”, and “perhaps” as hedges is the second highest, while Modal adjectives, such as “it’s better?”, “I am not sure”, “it is much better”, “and it would be better” is the lowest. Across the three sub-categories, it was found that the female students used almost the same number of hedges (51%) as by the males (47%).

TABLE 4. Performative Shields Hedges

Type	Female	Male	All	Freq.
Modal Auxiliaries: <i>Can, can?, should, could, may, cannot, should?, Could?, couldn't, should not, would</i>	33	33	66	69%
Modal Adverbs: <i>maybe, generally, and perhaps</i>	9	8	17	18%
Modal Adjectives: <i>it's better, I am not sure, it is much better, and it would be better</i>	7	6	13	14%
Gross Total	49	47	96	100%
Percentage	51%	49%	100%	

Similar to quantification hedges, the frequency of using the modal shield was 24%. In Example 4, the supervisor thinks that the student’s writing needs improvement in order to be better understood. In response to the supervisor’s comment, the student wanted to defend the defects in his writing production and, at the same time, wanted to avoid confrontation with his supervisor. Therefore, the student responded by using the modal adverb “perhaps” to express doubt and uncertainty towards the supervisor’s statements. When it did not succeed, he then checked his understanding of the supervisor’s comment by asking a question. Without waiting for the answer from the supervisor, the student told the supervisor that he will possibly make some changes to the ideas and support them, which is not exactly what the supervisor wanted. By using the modal adverb “maybe”, the subjects again expressed doubt

and uncertainty not only towards the validity of the supervisor’s claim, but also towards his intention to make the changes. With the supervisor’s absence of participation or interruption, the student finally admitted that he wrongly thought it is a kind of academic writing style, and apologized to his supervisor accordingly.

Example: [4]

- 833 S Yah, because of the language yah and also maybe in some parts the ideas are not well connected there is rather a just chopped in . So I have tried to rewrite but in parts where I am not clear myself I have to ask you rephrase and some questions. In some part I have to ask what you mean .Yah?
- 834 P3 **Perhaps**, there are sort of misunderstanding as you say. Many parts like that one you don’t understand at all? I think **maybe** I need to change and elaborate on the idea. Actually, I use such style of language because I thought it is a form of academic writing. But you say this style stops the meaning there and you are trying to edit the paragraphs. So sorry doctor.//

PERFORMATIVE SHIELDS HEDGES

Performative shields are hedges that express the language speakers’ mental state about the predicate proposition. The judgment is based on the speaker’s temporary thinking, feeling or evaluation of the proposition being communicated in the predicate or based on hard evidential personal view by the speaker. The former is called mental performative and the latter is called modal performative. Functionally, the purpose of using these two types of performatives is to show epistemic modality and uncertainty in varied degrees, so the speaker is not blamed later for his or her judgment or directions. In this case, these hedges serve the speaker by avoiding much responsibility and serve the hearer by avoiding much imposition on him or her to accept the proposed predicate. In the data, the students used 2 major categories of the performative shields hedges with 90 tokens in total (Table 5). In the first category, the subjects used 70 mental performative shields tokens, such as “I think”, “I have to”, “I know”, “I don’t think”, “I feel”, “I think I have to”, and “I think so”, and others forming 78% of the total performatives used by the students. Under the second category of performative shield, the subjects used 20 tokens of modal performative shields, such as “I should ask”, “I should say”, and “I would advise” consisting 22% of the total performatives. The analysis also showed that, on the other hand, the female students used more performative shields hedges tokens 50 (56%) than male students 40 (44%).

TABLE 5. Performative Shields Hedges

Type	Female	Male	All	Frequency
Mental Performative Shields: I think, I have to, I know, I don’t think, I feel, I think I have to, I think so, as I assume, as I feel, as I think, as if you, I can say, I don’t mean, I feel as if, I find it, I guess, I hope that, I say, I will do my best, and I will say.	37	33	70	78%
Modal Performative Shields: I should ask, I should say, and I would advise	13	7	20	22%
Gross Total	50	40	90	100%

In Example 5, the student proposed a method for recruiting the subjects in her study. She suggests sending an email to students to invite them to participate in her study. In order to communicate the suggestion without much imposition on the supervisor to accept this type of sampling, the students used the performative shield ‘I think’ twice. She used this mental hedge to communicate to her supervisor that this is just a temporary mental state, which only

becomes valid when the supervisor approves it. The use of ‘I think’ in the two occasions indicates that the student is showing uncertainty, not only to show that she is really unsure of her proposition, but strategically to involve the supervisor to take a final decision. Meanwhile, she wanted to protect herself if her idea was rejected. Following this strategy was convincing to the supervisor who approved the sampling method suggested by the student.

Example [5]

487	P2	Aha, I think doctor if I first send them just an email and after that I send them another email to tell them if they would do this email for research purposes. I think that would be better. If you don't mind, I will just use this. So, the one who will accept, then I will include him or her within the sample, and those who do not accept, I will just exclude them. So this will be more authentic doctor?
488	S	Yah that's fine. Yah that's' fine.

PRAGMATIC AWARENESS OF HEDGES

The pragmatic awareness questionnaire was administered to the students to find out whether they were pragmatically aware of the use and functions of hedges and their effect on them as speakers and their supervisors as addressees. The themes and questions in the questionnaire were taken from the students' actual uses of hedges during the consultations. The students were given an excerpt from their actual talk with their supervisor that had two quantification hedges, “about” and “approximately”. As illustrated in Figure 2, the students considered these hedges as uncertainty markers, which in a way, reflected the student's lack of confidence and commitment. The results indicated that not all students are aware of the pragmatic aspects of using hedge in interaction. This also justifies the large number of incorrect selection and use of these hedges in the student-supervisor interactions.

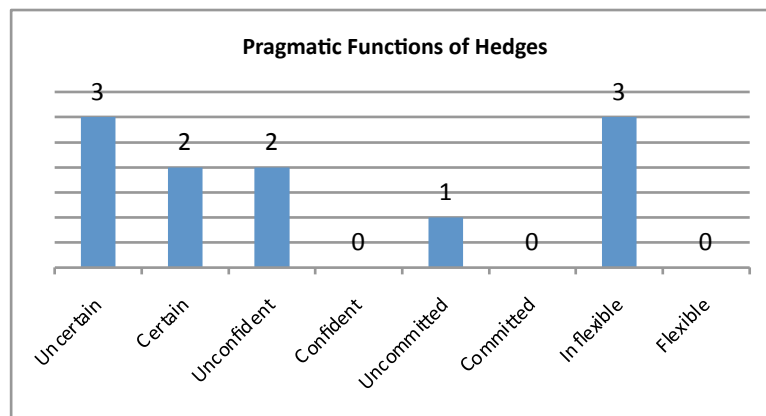


FIGURE 2. Pragmatic Functions of Hedges

When asked about the pragmatic functions of the hedges for the students (Figure 3), the students claimed that hedges can mainly help speakers avoid risk or conflict with others. This was followed by attenuating the speech utterances and avoiding responsibility while no damage to their own face is intended. Only one student wrongly believed that the use of hedges is intended to reinforce speech. These results indicate that almost all of them are aware about most of the functions.

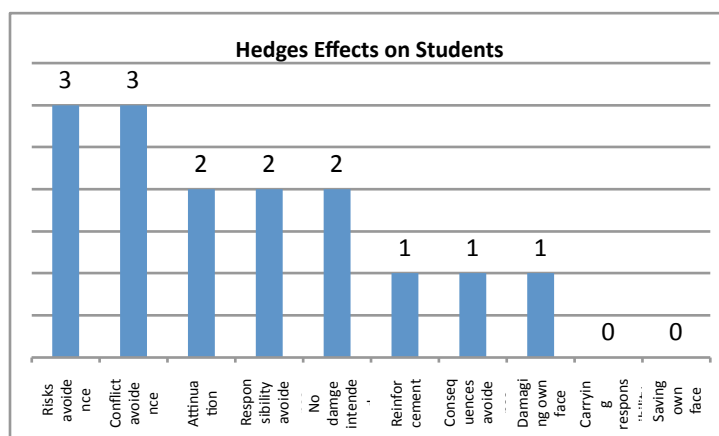


FIGURE 3. Using Hedges to Serve Students

With regard to the pragmatic functions achieved through using hedges which affected the supervisor (Figure 4), most of the students thought that using hedges gives more freedom to the supervisor to negotiate the proposition without imposing any restriction to his or her freedom of action. Moreover, no damage to the supervisors' face by imposition is intended by the speaker. Giving options to the supervisor to accept or decline the proposition was another function achieved by using hedges. Only one student wrongly thought that the use of hedges is intended to force the supervisor to accept the opinion. These results indicate that most of the students are aware of the need to pragmatically use hedges to serve their own purposes when talking to their supervisors. They also know that hedges can be used to satisfy their supervisors' needs in obtaining more freedom of action. Using these hedges strategically could avoid disharmony to achieve effective supervisory meeting.

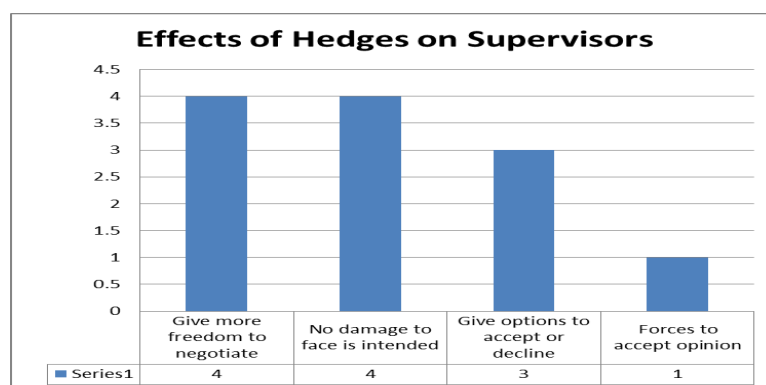


FIGURE 4. Effects of Hedges on Supervisors

STUDENTS' VIEWS OF RELATIONAL WORK MANIFESTED IN THEIR DISCUSSION WITH THEIR SUPERVISORS

The fourth section of each part of the pragmatic questionnaire was specified to elicit the students view about the appropriateness of using hedges in the student-supervisor consultations. Five options were given to students following the Relational Work Scheme by Locher and Watts (2005). The analysis of the student responses (Figure 5) showed that the majority of students think that using hedges by a student while speaking to his or her supervisor is considered neither polite nor impolite, but it was an appropriate behavior to such a social context. This means that students use hedges not to show politeness per se, but to communicate their ideas and opinions in an appropriate way that is accepted by the

supervisor. Meanwhile, the student denied using hedges as a kind of strategy that is considered over polite inappropriate behavior or even appropriate over polite behavior, or inappropriate impolite behavior.

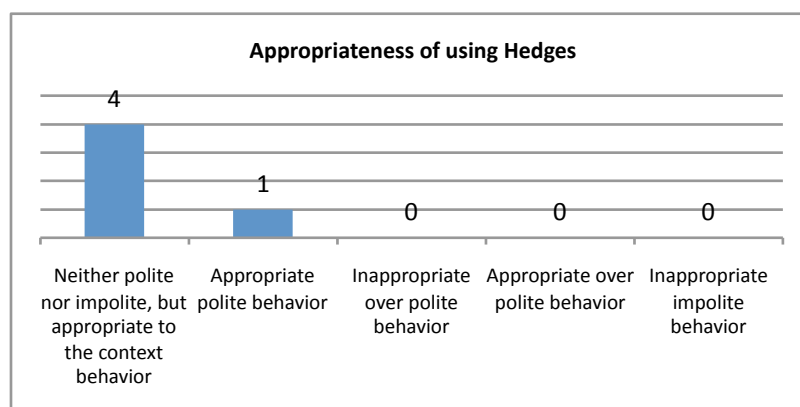


FIGURE 5. Appropriateness of Using Hedge

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the Arab male and female postgraduate learners' use of hedges as expressions of relational work when talking to their supervisors. The findings showed that the students employed a large number of hedges. These hedges were identified under four major categories of hedges with the pragmatic markers shields as the most frequent. However, the students' use of these hedges was not always fortunate, as they used certain basic hedges, such as 'I think' and 'just' more frequently than others. In other words, the students selection of hedges was limited to a small group of basic hedges, while low frequency hedges, such as 'if I am not mistaken' was not within their linguistic repertoire. The findings in this section are consistent with Shengming (2009), who found that the students in his study used varied hedges to attenuate their utterances, but the used hedges were lacking the accuracy and variety. It is suggested that these students receive more training on using hedges in academic context.

In this regard also, the female students were found to use more hedges than male students indicating that female students are more inclined to use hedgy language, and they have a keen desire to attenuate their propositions and mitigate the force of the speech acts they performed to achieve more harmonious relationship with their supervisors. The male students used fewer hedges than females indicating that they are more into showing confidence, commitment, and responsibility towards their propositions. These results are consistent with the findings reached by Ansarin and Bathaie (2011), who found that these devices are an attribute of the females more than males. However the results are not consistent with Hameed (2010), who found males using more hedges than females.

The results obtained from the pragmatic questionnaire indicated that although the students used a large number of hedges, they were still not fully aware of the semantic and pragmatic functions of using these devices in interaction. Moreover, the students showed awareness towards the need for using hedges pragmatically to serve their own purposes when talking to their supervisors and, at the same time, satisfy their supervisor needs in obtaining more freedom of action. This means that the use of hedges is not only to save the face of the supervisor, but to strategically avoid any trouble with their supervisors that might hinder their success and achievement. These results were in agreement with Lin (2015) who found that there was a big difference in the pragmatic functions awareness of using hedges between the

Chinese-speaking lecturers attributed by to the lack of awareness of using these modifiers to achieve pragmatic functions.

The majority of students think that using hedges while speaking to their supervisors is considered a non-polite appropriate politic behavior in such a social context. In this case, hedges are not used by students to show politeness for the sake of politeness, but simply to communicate their ideas and opinions in appropriate ways that is accepted by the supervisor. Accordingly, the students thought that using hedges in speech serves two purposes, to show politeness or to show appropriate non-polite politic behavior.

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