Curriculum and Teaching Methodology (2024)
Clausius Scientific Press, Canada

DOI: 10.23977/curtm.2024.070623
ISSN 2616-2261 Vol. 7 Num. 6

Use of Hedges in Spoken Discourse—A Corpus-Based Contrastive Study between Chinese English Majors and Native Speakers

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Keywords: Corpus, pragmatics, hedges, Chinese English majors, spoken discourse

Abstract: The current study is a corpus-based analysis of the use of hedges in spoken discourse by Chinese English majors and native speakers. It examines the frequency and type distributions utilized by the two groups as well as the pragmatic functions of hedges, so as to explore whether Chinese EFL learners at higher proficiency levels can achieve native-like use of hedges and whether distinctions exist between the use of hedges by Chinese English majors and native speakers. The findings imply that, with the exception of attribution shields, Chinese English majors utilize hedges in spoken discourse at a higher rate than native speakers. To some extent, Chinese English learners can achieve native-like use of hedges in spoken language. However, when it comes to the use of shields, Chinese English majors diverge significantly from native speakers. The study contributes to the development of hedges in China and has pedagogical implications for second language teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

Hedges are commonly used communicative strategies in vague language to increase or decrease the force of the propositional content in statements for their multiple pragmatic functions[1]. They can be used to indicate politeness, uncertainty and lack of confidence as well as convey certain attitudes towards listeners or readers. As a consequence, a great number of studies have been conducted to shed light on the significant role of hedges and contribute to the development of hedges in various contexts of language use.

Given the significance of hedges in language use, it is critical for second language (L2) learners to acquire native-like use of hedges in their language use. Previous research has shown that the capacity to use hedges adequately is challenging for L2 learners, and the unskilled use of hedges has resulted in a widespread phenomenon in which L2 learners could use the second language in correct grammar but fail to accomplish their communicative goals[2]. Nevertheless, the use of hedges has not received sufficient attention in L2 teaching and learning, and the dearth of research on this issue leads to limited understanding regarding the use of hedges by Chinese EFL learners in comparison to native speakers.

Thus, the present study seeks to compare the use of hedges in spoken discourse by Chinese English majors and native speakers with equivalent education levels. The frequency and type distributions of

hedges employed by the two groups are analyzed in this study to highlight the similarities and differences in the use of hedges between them. Additionally, the study investigates whether the underuse of hedges by EFL learners compared to native speakers occurs among Chinese EFL learners at higher proficiency levels.

2. Literature Review of Hedges

Hedges which are commonly used to express vagueness in language use have been placed a high value in linguistic research since their proposal. Hence, there exists a huge number of studies about hedges encompassing numerous domains ranging from semantics to pragmatics. In this section, studies on hedges are generally divided into theoretical research and empirical research in order to present a coherent and logical review of the development of hedges.

2.1 Theoretical Development of Hedges

Although hedge theory can be traced back to Zadeh's *Fuzzy Sets*, it was not until 1972 that Lackoff first proposed this concept. Since then, researchers specializing in this topic have made major contributions to the theoretical development of hedges, most notably in terms of the definition and classification of hedges.

2.1.1 Definition of Hedges

Hedge, as one typical phenomenon in vague language, can be traced all the way back to Zadeh's *Fuzzy Sets*[3]. However, its first notion was introduced by Lackoff with his oft-quoted definition "hedges are words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy"[4]. By borrowing Zadeh's fuzzy theory, Lackoff pointed out the nature of hedges—fuzzy.

In subsequent studies of hedges, Lackoff's far-reaching influence can still be seen since researchers have a firm grip on the semantic property "fuzzy" of hedge when they define it. For instance, Takimoto stated that "hedges modify words or phrases within a proposition, making the border fuzzier or making the border less fuzzy"[5]. Similar as it to Lackoff, Takimoto expanded the definition of hedge from the grammatical perspective. Nevertheless, his limitation of hedges within modifying proposition phrases seems to be deficient. In comparison to Takimoto, Fraser's assertion that "hedges are linguistic devices used to attenuate the full semantic value of a proposition or to damp down the force of a speech act"[6] tends to be more comprehensive since he has incorporated both the semantic and pragmatic functions of hedges. Similarly, Yang also believed that "some hedges have deeper meanings that extend beyond their surface meaning and are not found in the dictionary"[7], which refers to their pragmatic meanings. On this basis, study on hedges in the pragmatic field has been popularized. Notably, Wu was the first Chinese scholar who has introduced fuzzy theory into China and made substantial contributions to the study of hedges, particularly in the Chinese discourse[8].

On the other hand, terms like "true" and "uncertain" are frequently used to characterize the effect of hedging instead of "fuzzy". Typically, Brown and Levinson[9] defined hedge as "a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership that it is true only in certain respect, or that is truer and more complete than perhaps might be accepted". Another example is Neary-Sundquist's research in which hedges are stated as "single- or multi-word expressions used to indicate uncertainty about the propositional content of an utterance or to diminish its impact". While these definitions vary in expression, they nonetheless concentrate on the vague effect of hedging.

2.1.2 Classification of Hedges

In the theoretical development of hedges, the classification of hedges is the other interesting sub-

field for linguists. In general, these various classification methods proposed by different researchers can be grouped into three broad categories in terms of three different perspectives.

The first category is classified according to the syntactic feature of hedges. Hedges used to express doubt and uncertainty are classified into five grammatical classes: modal verbs, lexical verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and nouns[10]. Although Holmes's approach to classify hedges directly by their word class is easy to operate, it is only applicable to simple hedges in the word form while complex hedges in the phrase form are not included. In this sense, Heng and Tan corrected this defect by classifying hedges into adverbial, epistemic verb, modal verb, cognition verb, hypothetical constructions, and anticipatory it-clause[11]. In this classification, hypothetical hedge constructions and hedges in the clause form have been taken into account.

Given that study on hedges is a branch of semantics, another category based on the semantic meaning of hedges is acceptable to a greater number of researchers. One of the well-known methods is Hyland in which hedges are classified into four groups: (a) compromiser such as *very*, *usually*, *normally*. (b) diminisher such as *partially* and *slightly*; (c) minimizer such as *rarely* and *seldom*; (d) approximator such as *almost*, *practically*, *relatively*[12].

Meanwhile, with the development of hedging research in the pragmatic field, the third category classified by the pragmatic function of hedges has become well-established. As a leading figure of this categorization system, Prince classified hedges into two broad categories: approximators and shields, each with two sub-categories below[13]. Based on this, several researchers have refined Prince's categorization and added additional hedging strategic sub-categories to meet their specific objectives[14]. Notably, another direction in the theoretical development of hedges has been the integration of hedge theory with other pragmatic theories such as the cooperation principle and speech act theory[15].

2.2 Empirical Studies on Hedges

With more and more achievements have been made in the theoretical development of hedges, researchers have access to apply these theories to investigate the use of hedge in real life, resulting in a wealth of meaningful empirical findings of hedges. According to the mode of discourse in which hedges are used, the empirical studies on hedges mainly fall into two groups: studies in written discourse and studies in spoken discourse.

2.2.1 Hedges in Academic Writing

The bulk of existing empirical research on hedges generally focuses on the use of hedges in written discourse, particularly academic writing, which is often seen as an adequate source for researchers to examine the issues regarding hedges due to its richness in hedging propositions[16].

Typically, Salager-Meyer[17] discussed the frequency and genre of hedges used in medical English journals. The results showed that the three most frequently used hedges are shields, approximators and compound hedges. Similarly, Hyland explored the use of hedges in English academic discourse. Notably, in his study the articles selected from eight disciplines allowed for the comparison of hedges used in academic writing across different disciplines.

Apart from studies of hedges in first language (L1) writing, there also exist studies comparing the use of hedges between the native and second language (L2) learners[18]. Notably, these studies have verified some common findings, that is, the underuse of hedges among L2 learners compared with native speakers and the general difficulties for L2 learners to express uncertainty in English academic writing.

2.2.2 Hedges in Spoken Discourse

Compared with studies of hedge in written discourse, there are comparatively smaller quantity of studies conducted on hedges in spoken discourse. In general, previous studies on hedges in spoken discourse concern with political discourse, advertisement, L2 discourse and so on.

Among these, studies on the use of hedges in L2 discourse are more pertinent to the present study. Typically, Nikula examined the comparative use of hedges in conversational speech between Finnish English learners and native speakers[19]. Similar to the findings in written discourse discussed above, the results indicated that EFL (English as a foreign language) learners use less hedges with less variety in their spoken English. Based on Nikula's findings, Yu analyzed Chinese English learners' pragmatic development of hedges by collecting spoken data from students at different proficiency level including junior high school, high school, and university. She found that learners generally progressed with awareness of hedging skills as they advanced in schooling level[20]. Meanwhile, Yu noted that there was one limitation in her research due to the absence of comparison with the use of hedges by native speakers. To address this issue, Neary-Sundquist investigated the comparative use of hedges in spoken discourse between foreign English learners and the native at multiple proficient levels, obtaining similar results as Yu. By ranking EFL learners from level 1 (lowest level) to level 6 (highest level) according to the proficiency level, Neary-Sundquist found that the use of hedges by EFL learners generally increases with their proficiency level, and they progressively attain native-like use of hedges. Besides this, a new phenomenon that EFL learners with the highest proficiency level even use hedges more than that of native speakers was found in Neary-Sundquist. In light of this finding, the present study examines whether Chinese EFL learners at higher level use hedges more frequently than native speakers. Considering that relative studies on hedges used by ordinary Chinese EFL learners have not achieved similar findings, the present study resolves to examine the use of hedges by Chinese English majors.

Nevertheless, studies on the use of hedges among Chinese English majors are relatively limited. To a degree, this gap is directly related to the scarcity of spoken samples of Chinese English majors. Fortunately, the examination of hedges in spoken discourse among Chinese English majors is possible owing to the Spoken English Corpus of Chinese Learners (SECCL) built by Wen Qiufang and her team. Based on this corpus, Duan analyzed the use of hedges by Chinese English majors using the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) as a reference corpus[21]. Once again, the study confirmed prior findings that Chinese EFL learners use hedges less frequently and variously than native speakers. However, considering the comparability between the two corpora, Duan's finding seems less persuasive, because the language style of SECCL is casual and informal in short sentences while the language style of MICSE is literary and formal in lengthy paragraphs. Therefore, the present study takes the British National Corpus as the comparative corpus rather than MICSE since the comparability between SECCL and BNC has been well proved by Liu and Zhang's research in which the two corpora are used to compare the use of connectives by Chinese EFL learners and native speakers in spoken discourse.

3. Research Methodology

To investigate the use of hedges by Chinese English majors and native speakers, a qualitative method is applied to analyze data. The data used in this study are selected form two corpora: SECCL and BNC. With the help of Sketch Engine, the raw number of hedges is tallied so as to analyze the frequency and types of hedges found in each corpus.

3.1 Research Questions

The current study aims to examine the frequency and type distribution of hedges in spoken discourse used by Chinese English majors and native speakers. It further investigates the comparative use of hedges by Chinese English majors and native speakers in order to evaluate whether Chinese EFL learners at higher proficiency level use more hedges than that of native speakers.

To achieve these goals, the present study focuses on the following research questions:

1) What are the characteristics of hedges used by Chinese English majors?

2) What are the characteristics of hedges used by native speakers?

3) How does the use of hedges differ between Chinese English majors and native speakers in terms of frequency and function?

3.2 Corpus Description

The current study is a corpus-based contrastive analysis of hedging in spoken discourse used by Chinese English majors and native speakers. The Spoken English Corpus of Chinese Learners (SECCL) and the British National Corpus (BNC) provide the data presented in the study since they are respectively representative of the two groups of subjects discussed here. The former corpus is composed of spoken samples provided by Chinese English majors and the latter is designed to represent a diverse range of British English including spoken samples provided by students with equivalent education levels. Taking into account numerous contributing elements such as the style of language, the context of discourse, the age of speakers and the size of corpus, the data are selectively chosen from SECCL and BNC referring to Liu and Zhang's study in 2009.

3.2.1 Spoken English Corpus of Chinese Learners

The Spoken English Corpus of Chinese Learners (SECCL) was substantially released in 2005 under the leadership of Wen Qiufang. It is a one-million-word collection of spoken language samples from the oral section of TEM-4 spanning the years 1996 to 2002. Chinese English majors, more precisely sophomores and juniors, served as sample providers. Additionally, the corpus comprises three different kinds of texts defined by the task of discourse: story retelling, impromptu speech, and conversation. The establishment of SECCL seeks to provide researchers with available data to investigate issues concerning the spoken discourse of Chinese EFL learners.

3.2.2 British National Corpus

The British National Corpus (BNC) is a 100-million-word collection of written and spoken language samples gathered from a wide range of sources. In contrast to SECCL, here only the spoken part is selected and described in detail. The spoken part consists of orthographic transcriptions of unscripted informal conversations recorded by volunteers drawn from a various range of ages, regions, and social classes as well as spoken language collected in a variety of settings, ranging from formal business or educational meetings to radio shows and phone calls. Its various spoken sources make the studies with regards to different subjects possible.

3.3 Instrument

Sketch Engine is used in this study as a corpus tool for building corpora and evaluating data. It contains 577 ready-to-use corpora in 97 languages, each of which comprises a fully representative sample of the target language. Meanwhile, it enables users to develop their own corpus for their specific requirements. Moreover, Sketch Engine is a simple tool with multiple functions for linguists

to examine how words and phrases work in texts. It is capable of processing texts containing billions of words in order to identify the occurrences of a certain word, phrase, or phenomena and present the results in the form of word sketches, concordances, or word lists.

3.4 Procedure

To examine the use of hedges in spoken discourse by Chinese English majors and native speakers, firstly data presented in this study are well collected from two representative corpora: SECCL and BNC. Following that, each form of hedges is searched as a key word in two corpora according to Prince's taxonomy of hedges. Finally, the frequency of each kind is computed for each corpus.

3.4.1 Corpus Condensation

In accordance with to Liu and Zhang, the author has constructed a subset of SECCL, designated SECCL-1, and a subset of BNC, designated BNC-1. Similarly, selected with discretion, the two corpora are comparable in terms of size and the schooling level of data providers. Notably, an improvement has been made in comparison to Zhang's corpora. Except for impromptu speech and conversation, both SECCL and SBNC in Liu and Zhang's research contain a third discourse type: storytelling, which is ordinary in SECCL but rarely marked in BNC. Therefore, storytelling is omitted from both corpora in this study. Detailed information about the two corpora is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Corpus description of SECCL-1 and BNC-1

Corpus Name	Discourse Type	Corpus Size (words)	Data Provider	Schooling Level
SECCL-1	Impromptu speech, Conversation	927,509	Chinese English majors	University
BNC-1	Impromptu speech, Conversation	997,613	English native speakers	University

3.4.2 Data Analysis

To analyze the data, Prince's classification of hedges according to their pragmatic functions are drawn upon in the study. Accordingly, the data presented here have been classified into two types of hedging construction, each with two sub-categories.

1) Approximators: words which can alter the original meaning of propositions.

(a) Adaptors: words which can modify the truth value of propositions, including *sort of*, *kind of*, *somewhat*, *really*, *almost*, *quite*, *entirely*, *a little bit*, *more or less* etc.

(b) Rounders: words which can make propositions fuzzy, including *perhaps*, *roughly*, *approximately*, *essentially*, *nearly*, *about*, *around*, *something*, etc.

2) Shields: words which do not alter the original meaning of the propositions.

(a) Plausibility shields: words which can indicate subjective assumptions, including *I think*, *I believe*, *I am afraid that*, *as far as I*, *it is hard to say*, *seem*, *wonder*, *probably* etc.

(b) Attribution shields: words which can indicate objective source of information, including *according to*, *somebody says that*, *it is said that*, *it seems that*, *presumably* etc.

3.4.3 Data Calculation

The raw number of hedges can be easily acquired with the application of Sketch Engine.

Considering the slight difference in the size of the two corpora, the frequency of hedges is calculated per 10,000 words in each corpus. Besides, the Chi-square test is used to objectively determine whether there are significant differences in the use of hedges by Chinese English majors and native speakers.

4. Results and Discussion

Data reported in this study are analyzed below in order to explore the research questions posed above. The results are organized as two major sections: the types and frequency of hedges and the function of hedges. Each section begins with an overall description of the characteristics of hedges used by Chinese English majors and native speakers, followed by the contrastive analysis between them, and lastly the further interpretation of data.

4.1 Types and Frequency of Hedges

The hedges used by speakers are classified into four types: adaptors, rounders, plausibility shields and attribution shields according to Prince The raw number and frequency (per 10,000 words) of each type in each corpus are presented and discussed below.

4.1.1 Overall Description

The first research question addresses the type and frequency of hedges used by Chinese English majors in spoken discourse. General results can be seen in Table 2, where the frequency is displayed as the number of hedges per 10,000 words. The distribution of hedges classified into four types is demonstrated in Figure 1 In each instance, the rate of each type is calculated as a ratio of that type relative to the total number of hedges used by Chinese English majors.

By and large, the chart shows that Chinese English majors use more approximators (58%) than shields (42%). Within each category, adaptors (41%) and plausibility shields (38%) are most frequently used. Notably, Attribution shields (4%) are the least frequently-used type among the four sub-categories while adaptors (41%) are most frequently used. Specifically, the top three most frequently used hedges are *I think* (36%), *very* (30%), and *maybe* (8%).

Table 2: Types and frequency of hedges used by Chinese English majors

Types		Raw Number	Frequency
Approximators	Adaptors	12,444	134.17
	Rounders	5,107	55.06
Shields	Plausibility shields	11,392	122.82
	Attribution shields	1,411	15.21
Total		30,354	327.26

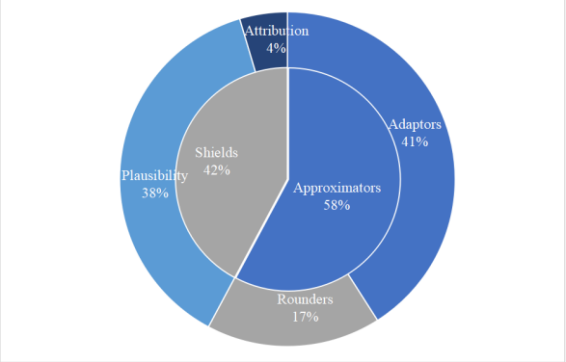

Figure 1: Distribution of hedges used by Chinese English majors

The second research question addresses the type and frequency of hedges used by native speakers in spoken discourse. General results can be seen in Table 3, where the frequency is demonstrated as the number of hedges per 10,000 words. The distribution of hedges classified into four types is presented in Figure 2. In each instance, the rate of each type is calculated as a ratio of that type relative to the total number of hedges used by native speakers.

In general, the chart indicates that native speakers use more approximators (61%) than shields (39%). Within each category, adaptors (44%) and plausibility shields (24%) are most frequently used. Notably, Attribution shields (15%) are the least frequently used type among the four sub-categories while adaptors (44%) are most frequently used. Specifically, the top three most frequently used hedges are *I think* (17%), *very* (13%), and *somebody says that* (11%).

Table 3: Types and Frequency of hedges used by native speakers

Types		Raw Number	Frequency
Approximators	Adaptors	8,550	85.70
	Rounders	3,282	32.90
Shields	Plausibility shields	4,744	47.55
	Attribution shields	2,941	29.50
Total		19,517	195.63

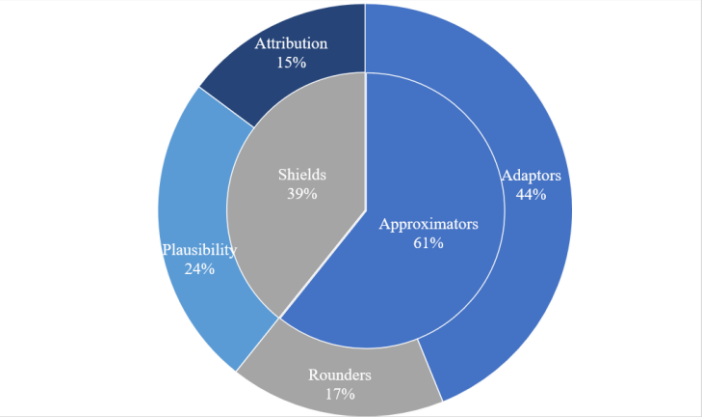

Figure 2: Distribution of hedges used by native speakers

4.1.2 Comparative Explanation

The third question addresses the differences in the use of hedges by Chinese English majors and native speakers. In general, the result of Chi-square (x^2=33.70, $p<0.05$) test reveals that there is a significant difference between Chinese English majors and native speakers in terms of hedging in spoken discourse. As Table 4 below shows, Chinese English majors (327.26) use hedges more frequently than native speakers (195.63), which corresponds to Neary-Sundquist's finding.

Neary-Sundquist explored the use of hedges in spoken discourse by EFL learners and native speakers at various proficiency levels and discovered that while EFL learners use hedges less frequently than native speakers on average, the highest EFL proficiency group uses hedges more frequently than native speakers in spoken discourse, particularly when expressing individual opinions or passing information. Meanwhile, similar to Neary-Sundquist's finding that EFL learners at a higher proficiency level can achieve native-like use of hedges, the current study discovered that while the frequency of hedges used by Chinese English majors appears to be higher than that of native speakers, the distribution of different types of hedges in total use is similar in certain aspects between the two groups of people. Firstly, the rank of the types of hedges used by Chinese English majors and native speakers are in the same order. From the most frequent type to the least frequent type, adaptors are

the most prevalent kind, followed by plausibility shields and rounders, while attribution shields are the least frequent type. Besides, both Chinese English majors and native speakers use a greater proportion of approximators than shields. Similarly, the result of Chi-square test (x^2=0.43, p>0.05) suggests that there is no significant difference in the distribution of approximators and shields used by Chinese English majors and native speakers.

Results in Figure 3 suggest that Chinese English majors use the other three types of hedges more frequently than native speakers with the exception of attribution shields. The result of Chi-square test (x^2=21.80, p<0.05) indicates that there is a significant difference between Chinese English majors and native speakers in terms of using shields. Though they both use more plausibility shields than attribution shields, the gap between the frequency of plausibility shields and attribution shields used by Chinese English majors is much bigger than that used by native speakers.

As for the use of approximators, results in Figure 3 indicate that adaptors are more frequently used than rounders both by Chinese English majors and native speakers. Meanwhile, the result of Chi-square test (x^2=0.07, p>0.05) shows that there is no significant difference in the distribution of adaptors and rounders by Chinese English majors and native speakers.

Table 4: Frequency per 10,000 words of hedges in SECCL-1 and BNC-1

	Approximators		Shields		Total
	Adaptors	Rounders	Plausibility	Attribution	
SECCL-1	134.17	55.06	122.82	15.21	327.26
BNC-1	85.70	32.90	47.55	29.50	195.63

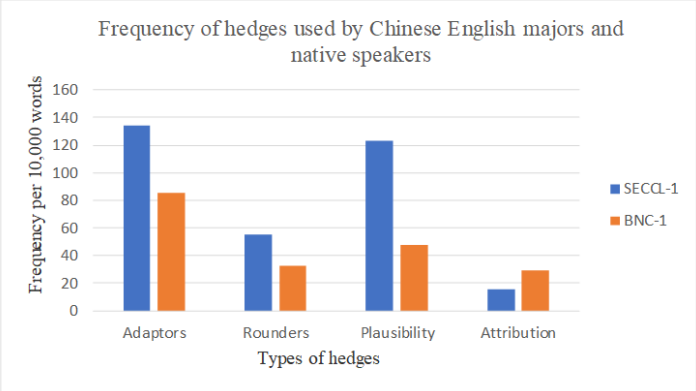

Figure 3: Frequency per 10,000 words of hedges in SECCL-1 and BNC-1

4.1.3 Further Interpretation

Overall, the data reported in the present study demonstrate that the acquisition of native-like use of hedges is possible but challenging to achieve for Chinese EFL learners.

On the one hand, Chinese English majors tend to overuse hedges in spoken discourse compared with native speakers, as shown by the fact that the frequency of hedges used in spoken discourse by Chinese English majors (327.26) is much greater than that of native speakers (195.63). However, this does not mean that Chinese English majors' use of hedges is totally different from that of native speakers. On the contrary, in terms of the distribution of different types of hedges, Chinese English majors are comparable to native speakers except for the distribution of attribution shields. Therefore, it can be seen that Chinese English majors are edging close to the native-like use of hedges in spoken discourse.

On the other hand, it is still a challenging task for Chinese EFL learners to acquire the truly native-like use of hedges. The overuse of hedges and the similar distribution of hedges used by Chinese

English majors discussed above may seem to be contradictory, but in fact they reveal the challenges faced for Chinese EFL learners in using hedges both moderately and appropriately. The underuse of hedges addressed in previous studies is not the only problem encountered by Chinese EFL learners. Consistent with Neary-Sundquist's finding, the present study suggests that the overuse of hedges is another issue that arises in Chinese EFL learners' use of hedges in spoken discourse. Moreover, the present study also underlines another problem hidden behind the frequency of hedges, that is, the distribution of different type of hedges.

In general, the data in the current study verify both the possibility for Chinese EFL learners to acquire the native-like use of hedges suggested by Neary-Sundquist's research and the difficulties for Chinese EFL learners to acquire the native-like use of hedges reported in previous studies.

4.2 Functions of Hedges

This section discusses the other issue addressed in the third research question, which is how the differences in the use of hedges by Chinese English majors and native speakers influence the quality of their language. To illustrate this problem clearly, typical examples of each type of hedges used by both groups are demonstrated in the following tables. In this section, the functions of hedges used by Chinese English majors and native speakers are described respectively, followed by the comparative explanation of data between the two groups, and lastly the interpretation of data is further discussed.

4.2.1 Overall Description

Results in Table 5 show that Chinese English majors tend to use adaptors like *very*, *really*, *kind of*, and *quite* to modify the truth value of propositions. In this instance, hedges are used to convey certain affective meaning or attitudes towards concerned person or issue[22]. Rounders like *maybe*, *something*, *about*, and *perhaps* are most likely to be used to express uncertainty and vagueness of sentence meaning. Although the plausibility shield accounts for a large portion of the frequently-used hedges, its high frequency mainly attributes to the highly-used *I think*. Notably, *I think* is also the most frequently-used hedge by EFL learners at all levels to express their humility or lack of confidence. Attribution shields are less frequently used in comparison to the other three types of hedges. Within this type, hedge constructions like *somebody says that* and *according to* are frequently used to quote others' remarks so as to make the propositions more objective or persuasive.

Table 5: Examples of hedges used by Chinese English majors

Classification		Examples
Approximators	Adaptors	very, really, kind of, quite, almost
	Rounders	maybe, something, about, perhaps, nearly
Shields	Plausibility shields	I think, seem, wonder, I believe, I'm afraid
	Attribution shields	somebody says that, according to, it seems that

Results in table 6 show that native speakers are more likely to use adaptors like *very*, *really*, *a (little) bit*, and *sort of* to modify the strength or force of propositions. Rounders like *something* and *about* are most frequently used to make propositions fuzzy. Plausibility shields are slightly less frequently used than adaptors. Within this type, *I think* accounts for a substantial amount. Although the attribution shield is the least frequently used compared with the other three types of hedges, its proportion is not much less than that of rounders. Hedges construction like *somebody says that* is

largely used within this type.

Table 6: Examples of hedges used by native speakers

Classification		Examples
Approximators	Adaptors	very, really, quite, a (little) bit, sort of
	Rounders	something, about, perhaps, maybe, nearly
Shields	Plausibility shields	I think, probably, seem, wonder
	Attribution shields	somebody says that, suppose, guess, it seems that

4.2.2 Comparative Explanation

As analyzed above, the functions of each type of hedges used by Chinese English majors are similar to that of native speakers. However, the differences in the distribution of each type of hedges with different functions can reveal the characteristics of language used by Chinese English majors and native speakers. Similar to previous studies, results in the current study suggest that Chinese English majors use a smaller range of hedges than native speakers and the most frequently-used hedges in each type are generally different, which indicates that the frequently used vocabulary of Chinese English majors in spoken English is relatively smaller and less varied than that of native speakers. For example, Chinese English majors often use rounders like *about* and *around* to modify an inexact quantity while native speakers prefer various synonymous hedges of this kind such as *roughly* and *approximately*.

Significantly, the primary distinction between the two groups is the use of shields in spoken discourse. Chinese English majors mainly use plausibility shields to express their subjective viewpoints while attribution shields are comparatively rarely used to indicate objective source of the conveyed information. The attribution shield is the only type of hedges whose frequency of use by Chinese English majors is lower than that of native speakers. In this regard, the overuse of plausibility shields by Chinese English majors makes their words more subjective and the relatively rare use of attribution shields makes their remarks lack of information.

4.2.3 Further Interpretation

Given the close relationship between the function of hedges and their specific types, the present study on Chinese English majors' use of hedges draws similar conclusions in the functions of hedges and the distribution of different types of hedges. In comparison to native speakers, although Chinese English majors use hedges for similar pragmatic functions in spoken discourse, their use of hedges has not achieved the native level yet.

Similarly, a large part of hedges used by both Chinese English majors and native speakers serve to modify the truth value of utterance, convey certain attitudes or express uncertainty. However, the overuse of hedges to express subjective opinions and the underuse of hedges to indicate objective sources are the primary problems in Chinese English majors' use of hedges in spoken discourse. The former problem might be a result of their efforts to convey humility, which has long been recognized as a feature of Chinese EFL students. The use of hedges like *I think* to express modesty is not the problem itself, but the overuse of such hedges may reveal the speaker's lack of confident and subjectivity, thus giving listeners an impression of untrustworthiness. As regard to the latter problem,

it might be a result of Chinese EFL students' intention to concentrate on the here-and-now situation. In other words, their talks are often confined to the present moment and are less connected with the larger outside world and the people around them.

Therefore, to acquire the native-like use of hedges, Chinese EFL learners should pay more attention to the appropriate use of hedges to indicate the source of information so as to strike a balance between the effect of subjectivity and objectivity.

5. Conclusion

The present study compares the use of hedges by Chinese English majors major to that of native speakers. The quantitative results show that the frequency of hedges used by Chinese English majors (32.6) is higher than that of native speakers (19.7). To some extent, the same order of hedges ranked from the most frequently used type to the least frequently used type and the similar distribution of the types of hedges used by the two groups suggest that Chinese English majors could attain native-like use of hedges. Nonetheless, there are some dramatic differences in the way the two groups use hedges in spoken discourse. Chinese English majors are likely to use more plausibility shields but less attribution shields than native speakers. Notably, the overuse of plausibility shields largely attributes to the highly-used hedge construction *I think*, which is also the most frequently-used hedge among all types by Chinese English majors. Due to the underuse of attribution shields, the statements of Chinese English majors convey an air of subjectivity and untrustworthiness.

This present study contributes to the contrastive analysis of hedges used by Chinese EFL learners and native speakers by examining the frequency and type distribution of hedges used by Chinese English majors and native speakers with equal education level. In this study, the possibility to acquire native-like use of hedges in spoken discourse for EFL learner has been proved in Chinese field. In addition, more detailed descriptions of the similarities and differences between the two groups in terms of hedging in spoken English have been demonstrated with data.

Meanwhile, the findings in this study can provide some pedagogical implications for second language teaching and learning. Although Chinese English majors have acquired the native-like use of hedges to some extent, there are still some challenges for Chinese English majors to achieve the truly native level, typically including the overuse of certain hedge constructions and the underuse of attribution hedges to indicate persuasive sources of information. Accordingly, Chinese English majors should pay more attention to these problems in their spoken English so as to improve their skill of using hedges consciously. Similarly, teachers can provide students with more substitutable hedge constructions to expand their repertoire of hedges.

This study has one significant limitation that should be mentioned and taken into consideration. As previous studies have demonstrated that the rate of hedges used in dialogic task is higher than in monologic task, the current study has ignored the influence of task type that is related to the spoken data. Since the data presented in this study come from two different kinds of task: impromptu speech and conversation, the rate of hedges in each task may have an effect on the overall rate of hedges in the whole corpus. The limitation also suggests possible areas for future research. Future researches concerning the contrastive analysis of hedges used by EFL learners and native speakers are recommended to take into account the relationship between the use of hedges in spoken discourse and the task related to the spoken discourse.

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