

**THE USE OF HEDGING DEVICES IN SPOKEN DISCOURSE BY TURKISH ELT STUDENTS****SÖZLÜ SÖYLEVDEKİ YUMUŞATMA SÖZCÜKLERİNİN TÜRK ÜNİVERSİTE ÖĞRENCİLERİ TARAFINDAN KULLANIMI****Mustafa ÇOBAN¹**

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Abstract

This research sought to investigate Turkish university students' use of hedging as regards to the function and meaning. The devices used in this study were 'I mean', 'sort of/kind of', 'just', 'like', 'I think', 'I guess', 'I don't know', 'you know', 'or something/or something like that'. These are ranked as the most frequently used ones according to Michigan Corpus of American Spoken English (MICASE) and Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English (CANCODE) corpora findings. A total number of 17 senior university students from the English Language Teaching (ELT) department of a major university in Turkey contributed to this study. A questionnaire developed by Kot (2015), including three main sections, was administered to the participants in order to disclose their attitudes and awareness of hedging devices in spoken texts. The findings showed that the ELT students were not actually aware of the function of hedging devices in spoken contexts although they reported to use them frequently both in L1 and L2 in the quantitative section of the questionnaire. This might refer to the deficiencies in the pragmatic aspects of teacher education approaches. Furthermore, this article provides insights into the pedagogical implications for language teacher education programs by building on the relevant literature.

Key Words: Hedging devices, pragmatics, teacher education, Turkish university students.

Özet

Bu çalışma, Türk üniversite öğrencilerinin ifadeyi yumuşatma sözcüklerinin kullanımını işlev ve anlam bakımından araştırmıştır. Bu çalışmada kullanılan sözcükler şunlardır: 'demek istediğim', 'bir nevi / sayılır', 'sadece', 'gibi', 'bence', 'sanırım', 'bilmiyorum', 'bilirsin', 'bunun / veya onun gibi bir şey'. Bu sözcükler, Michigan Sözlü Amerikan İngilizcesi Derlemi (MICASE) ve Cambridge ve Nottingham İngilizce Söylev Derlemi (CANCODE) bulgularına göre en sık kullanılanlar olarak sıralanmaktadır. Bu çalışmaya Türkiye'deki büyük bir üniversitenin İngilizce Öğretmenliği bölümünden toplam 17 son sınıf üniversite öğrencisi katkıda bulunmuştur. Katılımcılara, konuşma metinlerinde yumuşatma sözcükleri hakkındaki tutum ve farkındalıklarını ortaya koymak amacıyla üç ana bölümden oluşan bir anket (Kot, 2015) uygulanmıştır. Bulgular ELT öğrencilerinin sözlü bağlamlarda yumuşatma sözcüklerinin işlevinin farkında olmadıklarını ortaya çıkarmıştır. Ancak, anketin nicel bölümünde ise hem ana dil hem de yabancı dil kapsamında sık sık kullandıklarını bildirmişlerdir. Bu, öğretmen eğitimi yaklaşımlarının pragmatik eksikliklere ışık tutabilir. Ayrıca, bu makale, ilgili literatürden yararlanarak yabancı dil öğretmeni eğitimi programları için pedagojik çıkarımlar hakkında fikir vermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yumuşatma sözcükleri, edimbilim, öğretmen eğitimi, Türk üniversite öğrencileri

1.Introduction

Hedging expressions refer to power of showing uncertainty and politeness patterns. These words are commonly used in both colloquial usage and academic discourse (Hyland, 1994). It is a fact that there is an increasing competition in today's world, it would not be wrong to claim that lack of hedging devices in written and spoken texts will most likely affect the quality of students' and academics' performance (Nivales, 2011). Given the importance of pragmatic aspects, both L1 and L2 users utilize the richness of softening expressions. This flexibility might seem more important than grammatical knowledge. Thinking about the upcoming age of machine learning and artificial intelligence, even a flawless translation may cause communication problems without considering the pragmatic function behind words. More specifically, this situation might become a nightmare for non-native speakers of English (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). Considering the function of pragmatics, Fraser (2010) states that "when non-native speakers fail to hedge appropriately, they may be perceived as impolite, offensive, arrogant, or simply inappropriate. Failing to recognize a hedged utterance, they may misunderstand a native speaker's meaning. This is especially unfortunate when speakers are otherwise fluent, since people typically expect that someone who speaks their language well on the grammatical level has also mastered the pragmatic niceties" (p.15).

In recent literature, there are some studies focusing on the non-native speakers' usage of hedging devices (De Cock et al. 1998; Metsä-Ketelä, 2006; Nikula, 1997). The findings of these studies indicated that hedging devices are not used by non-native speakers as frequently as native speakers. In order to better understand the underlying reasons of this less frequent usage, Nikula (1997) states that "non-native speakers are not aware of the role of modifiers and they thus cannot make appropriate use of them" (p. 195). Even if hedging devices are only a few words, the message that they carry might be as strong as the main elements of a sentence. Carter and McCarthy (1997) call them as mitigating devices which help the speakers save face or decrease the potential effect.

In the literature of hedging devices, there is no general agreement on the function or meaning these devices have. Since the meanings or functions of these words might show variation, it is not very easy to express them. For instance, Brown and Levinson (1987) clearly states that "hedging can be achieved in indefinite numbers of surface forms" (p. 151). In the earlier pragmatic research carried out in the 90s, the function of hedging devices was infamous and classified as verbose, wordy and clumsy speech (O'Donnell and Todd, 1991; Andersen, 1998). On the other hand, with the advance of the studies focusing on the importance of function and meaning in speech, this old belief of hedging device has become obsolete. Moreno (2001) states that "hedging devices fulfill multiple interactive functions fundamental to speaker-hearer relationship, thus being essential elements in everyday interaction" (p.130). These hedging devices are so crucial since they prevent the speakers making a failure of communication. Given that native speakers might not content with the lack or misuse of hedging expressions, , Nugroho (2002) expresses that "second or foreign language speakers very often sound too blunt or too direct in the ears of native speakers. It might be because they are rude or have simple understanding of this world, but it is probably because they do not hedge" (p.17). There are also several recent studies of hedging devices (Flores-Ferrán and Lovejoy, 2015; Grant, 2010; Miskovic-Lukovic, 2009; Yang and Yap,

2015). Similar to the aforementioned studies in the literature, the common rationale behind these studies was to reveal the function of hedging device by various speakers – either native or non-native speakers. In fact, a better understanding of these devices is so crucial that the findings provide crucial implications for all the stakeholders of the language teaching programs. Once learners complete a language program without being aware of the socio-pragmatic value of language items, they will most probably face with communication failures or breakdowns especially in a conversation with a native speaker.

Therefore, with similar concerns in mind, this research set out to investigate the Turkish university students' use of hedging devices in spoken discourse. The research questions are presented below.

Research Questions

1. Are Turkish ELT students aware of the pragmatic value of hedging devices?
2. How do they perceive someone who uses hedges in their speech?
3. How do they interpret a message containing conversational hedges?
4. Which functions and meanings of hedges are Turkish ELT students familiar with?

2. Methodology

In this study, a mixed methodology research design was utilized via a questionnaire that included both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. The data was collected from the ELT department of a major university in Turkey in the 2015-2016 academic year.

Considering the limitations of this study, the generalization of the findings might be risky since the research is context bound of Turkish university students. In order to have deeper understanding of the function of the hedges, it is recommended to carry out a similar study with a larger sample size.

2.1. Participants

A total number 17 out of 40 ELT students voluntarily participated in the study. As for ethical concerns, a consent form was delivered to the participants. Considering the background of the participants, all of the participants were registered as senior students in a full-time program of ELT department. Their medium of instruction was English. While 15 of the participants were females, only two of them were males. The average age was 23. Except for one participant who attended Work and Travel program in the USA for 3 months, none of them stayed in an English speaking country.

2.2. Instruments

In this study, the questionnaire developed by Kot (2015) was utilized in order to identify the perception of the hedging devices. There were three sections in the questionnaire. Each section consisted of extracts taken from Michigan Corpus of American Spoken English (MICASE). In section A with 12 questions, an extract including the mixture of hedging devices – I think, sort of, just, you know, I mean, I don't know - was given to the participants in order to elicit the answers based on the context. In section B of the questionnaire with 3

questions and subheadings, the hedging devices were given in order to identify the participants' interpretation. In section C of the questionnaire with 6 extracts, the participants were requested to comment on the functions of the hedging in the given context.

2.3. Data Analysis

In the data analysis procedure, SPSS 20 was utilized in order calculate the frequencies and percentages of the items. The qualitative data of the questionnaire was analyzed through thematic content analysis in order to determine the recurrent items.

3. Findings

In this section, the findings of the questionnaire are presented and discussed under the subheadings of the questionnaire. The questionnaire includes three sections: Section A, section B and section C.

Section A of the questionnaire

The aim of the first section was to disclose the possible awareness of hedging devices as regards to the appropriateness and context in which they are used. There were both closed and open-ended questions. While the results of the closed questions are presented in Table 1, the open-ended questions are shown under the related subheadings.

Table 1 below provides information on the understanding of the hedges in terms appropriateness and context. More than half of the ELT students (approximately 65 %) perceived the frequent use of the hedging devices as appropriate in the given spoken text. This finding might refer that the participants in this study regarded these items positively. Similar to the response in the first questions, almost 65 % of the ELT students reported that the phrases given in the spoken text are common in their own speech. A majority of the ELT students (almost 83 %) stated that they use hedging phrases in English. This finding, indeed, showed parallelisms as regards to indicating the use of hedging devices by the participants. On the other hand, it is useful to note that nearly 42 % percent of the ELT students were not sure about the importance of hedging phrases.

Considering the context in which the hedging expressions are used, almost 89 % of the ELT students favored using them in informal context. This finding of informality could be due to the perception of hedging devices in spoken discourse rather than written one. Another interesting finding is that while almost 59 percent of the ELT students perceived someone using hedging devices as native-like, nearly 18 % of them viewed such a person as foreign, and also almost 24 % of them were not sure about someone using hedging as either foreign or native-like. Furthermore, the ELT students reported that they use the phrases equally in L1 Turkish and L2 English (almost 59 %). However, only 6 % of the ELT students stated that they use the phrases more in L1 Turkish and almost 36 % of them reported that they use the phrases more in L2 English. This finding could indicate that the ELT students have a certain level awareness of using hedging devices in both L1 and L2.

Table 1

The students' views on the appropriateness and contextual aspects of hedging devices

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Not sure (%)
Do you think the frequent use of the phrases in bold in the extract is appropriate in the context provided?	64.7	35.3	
Do you think the phrases in bold are prevalent in your own speech?	64.7	5.9	29.4
Do you use such phrases in English?	82.4	5.9	11.8
	<i>Formal context</i>	<i>Informal context</i>	<i>Both equally</i>
In which context do you think you would use such phrases more?	0	88.2	11.8
	<i>Foreign</i>	<i>Native-like</i>	<i>Hard to say</i>
How do you perceive someone who uses the phrases in bold in the passage?	17.6	58.8	23.5
	<i>More often in Turkish</i>	<i>More often in English</i>	<i>In both languages equally</i>
Do you think the phrases are used?	5.9	35.3	58.8

Almost all of the ELT students reported that they did not receive any instruction of hedging devices in their language learning process. The majority of the ELT students (15 out of 17) stated that they had never been taught hedging phrases. Furthermore, according to the given responses in the 9th question of section A, there was a similarity. The majority of the ELT students (15 out of 17) reported that the textbooks they used did not cover the topics of hedging devices.

Similar to the ELT students' tendency to use hedging phrases both in L1 and L2 (see Table 1), they also showed an awareness of the Turkish equivalents by giving some examples. The hedging devices in the extract A were 'I think', 'sort of', 'um...sorta', 'just', 'you know', 'I mean', 'I don't know', 'just'. The Turkish equivalents were 'bence', 'demem o ki', 'işte', 'yani', 'öyle işte', 'bilirsin ya', 'falan', 'hani', 'sadece'.

As regards to the relationship between non-native speaker and native speaker conversations, the participants were asked whether the hedging devices help them understand native speakers or rather hinder communication. It is useful to express that there are parallelisms with the aforementioned findings. The majority of the ELT students (14 out of 17) stated that the hedging devices help them comprehend the native speaker conversations.

In order to disclose the participants' ideas regarding the reasons of using hedging devices in English, the 11th question of the section A – ‘Why do you use such expressions in English?’ – was administered. Most of the ELT students favored using such devices for such reasons: to gain extra time, to express the ideas and feelings clearly and to organize ideas. One of the participants stated that ‘‘I use hedging devices in English in order to remember what I am going to say or gain extra time to think while talking’’. This finding might refer that the ELT students showed a typical feature of a non-native speaker, which actually means that they have concerns of handling the conversations in an effective way as native speakers of English naturally do.

Section B of the Questionnaire

This section aimed to investigate three facets to the usage of hedging devices. The first question of the section was ‘‘when people end their phrases or sentences with ‘or something’ or ‘or something like that’, how does that affect the way you interpret what they say?’’. The second one was ‘‘when people use the ‘kind of’ or ‘sort of’ instead of leaving them out, how does that affect the way you interpret what they say?’’. Finally, the third one was ‘‘when people use phrases such as ‘I think’, ‘I guess’, or ‘I don’t know’ instead of leaving those phrases out, how does that affect the way you interpret what they say?’’.

Table 2

The participants' perception of hedges

	‘or something/or something like that’	‘kind of/sort of’	‘I think’, ‘I guess’, ‘I don’t know’	Average
More believable (%)	0	41.2	52.9	31.3
Less believable (%)	35.3	17.6	29.4	27.4
Neither more believable nor less believable (%)	64.7	41.2	17.6	41.1
More confident (%)	5.9	29.4	41.2	25.5
Less confident (%)	70.6	35.3	41.2	49
Neither more confident nor less confident (%)	23.5	35.3	17.6	25.4
More intelligent (%)	11.8	5.9	17.6	12
Less intelligent (%)	29.4	29.4	11.8	24
Neither more intelligent nor less intelligent (%)	58.8	64.7	70.6	65
More memorable (%)	17.6	41.2	47.1	35.3
Less memorable (%)	76.5	35.3	23.5	45.1
Neither more memorable nor less memorable (%)	5.9	23.5	29.4	20
More accurate (%)	11.8	29.4	23.5	22
Less accurate (%)	52.9	47.1	35.3	45.1
Neither more accurate nor less accurate (%)	35.3	23.5	41.2	33.3

More professional (%)	17.6	17.6	29.4	22
Less professional (%)	52.9	23.5	29.4	35.2
Neither more professional nor less professional (%)	29.4	58.8	41.2	43.1
More polite (%)	11.8	23.5	35.3	24
Less polite (%)	29.4	11.8	5.9	16
Neither more polite nor less polite (%)	58.8	64.7	58.8	61

Table 2 presents information on the hedging interpretations of the ELT students in various contexts. When the items are examined closely, the hedging devices were perceived as less believable (27 %), and neither more or less believable (41 %). In fact, the majority of the ELT students (68 %) regarded hedging devices as either less believable or neither more nor less believable. Nearly half of the ELT students (49 %) evaluated these devices as less confident. The majority of the ELT students (65 %) were not sure about the more or less intelligent impact of the hedging devices. There were similar tendencies in the categories of memorable (65 %), accurate (78 %) and professional impact (78 %). Another striking finding is that the majority of the ELT students (77 %) defined hedging devices either less polite (16 %) or neither more nor less polite (61 %).

Section C of the Questionnaire

The goal of this section was to reveal the participants' knowledge of the given hedging items' meanings. The findings of this section were significant in order to understand whether the participants were really aware of the function of the hedging devices.

Table 3

The students' views on the functions of the given hedging devices

Hedging Items	The perceptions of participants	<i>f</i>
1. 'like'	Comparison	1
	Explanation	4
	Fillers – to gain time	1
	Hesitation	2
	To strengthen the meaning	1
	No answer given	8
2. 'just'	Emphasis	8
	Fluency	1
	Fillers – to gain time	1
	Politeness	1
	Connection items	1
	No answer given	5
3. 'kind of/sort of'	To present the choices	4
	Fillers	2

	Exemplification	2
	Similarity	1
	Explanation	1
	Fluency	1
	No answer given	6
4. 'you know'	To get audience's attention	4
	To provide informality	1
	Fillers – to gain time	3
	Fluency	1
	Lexical search	1
	To seek for confirmation in one's own talk	2
	No answer given	5
5. 'I think'	To give an opinion	11
	Fillers – to search for ideas	2
	No answer given	4

According to the information presented in Table 3, it is clear that each hedging item included the entity of 'no answer given'. The majority of the ELT students could not give comments on the given hedging context. This finding contradicts the one in Table 1, in which the ELT students seemed to have a certain level of awareness for using hedging devices in English. However, when the participants were asked in the format of open-ended questions, they found them difficult to comment in the context. Looking into the details of hedging device called 'like', we can easily notice that the 13 of the ELT students were not aware of the pragmatic function. The literal meanings such as comparison and explanation were favored. The reason of this might be due to the quality of instruction in English. For instance, when the course books are examined, it will not be difficult to notice that 'like' is mostly presented in the format of comparison, verb, approximation device. In the extract given to the ELT students, the function of 'like' was a direct speech. However, none of the ELT students attempted to express it as a direct speech.

He's taken on his wife's name I see and, I just, I look at him and mhm he didn't have a beard then and I look at him I'm Saint Lawrence? and uhuh he's **like** yes.

Most of the participants (n=11) determined the function of 'I think' as to give an opinion instead of offering a pragmatic aspect.

...so that's all the questions I had really. okay and it's a lot of questions and it's good to see you still kinda I mean **I think** it's it's you've learned a lot this semester **I think** yeah
<LAUGH>yeah and you know it's it's hard work to to do real well here **I think**... but it's good too because if can learn this stuff then you can build on it...

Another similarity can be seen in the comments made on the function of 'sort of/kind of'. The ELT students favored the comments such as 'to present choices, exemplification, explanation and fillers.

When I said I was going to a feminism in the workplace everyone was like, a what? **you know** it was like **you know** they_ immediately I think they got this picture of all of us **you know** with like, big signs **you know** like women rule<LAUGH> and, like plotting like this big, **you know** massive attack on men or something ...

More than half of the participants marked the hedging device 'just' as either emphasis function (n =8) or no answer (n=5). Similar to the other given comments, the ELT students favored the literal meaning of these words.

it really varies, some evenings I, decide especially if there's something I'm working on writing a proposal writing a paper I may **just**, work on my laptop and and continue from you know ten P-M till later, there are other nights that I don't do anything. I **just**, you know my wife and I hang around we talk, I would say at least a couple of nights a week, I'm working after uh, going home after the kids are in bed. the ve- the weekends are also, uh uh, uh, kind of similar, I do tend to work a little bit, on weekends.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This research study sought to disclose whether Turkish ELT students were fully aware of the function of the hedging devices given by building on the aforementioned research in the literature and triangulating of the findings of its close ended questions in the survey. The findings of the close-ended questions (section A) in the survey indicated that Turkish ELT students were aware of the functions and meanings of the hedging devices. However, when the ELT students were administered to open-ended questions (Section B and C), it was found that they were not fully aware of the hedges. In the comments of section C, majority of the students were not able to express the hedges in their pragmatic context by either leaving the comment box blank or giving the dictionary meaning (see Table 3). This finding showed parallelisms with De Cock et al. 1998; Nikula, 1997; Nugroho, 2002 and Metsä-Ketelä, 2006.

The most striking finding of this study was the contrast between the quantitative and qualitative data. If the findings had only been attributed to the quantitative data, the results would have shown that Turkish ELT students were fully aware of hedges in English.

Finally, this study revealed that ELT programs in Turkey should raise the awareness of socio-pragmatic competence of student teachers. As they are prospective foreign language teachers, they should primarily be equipped with the components of hedges. Instead of building grammarian teachers, it would be wiser to construct teachers who tend to use and teach hedging words appropriately. Moreover, the book publishers should be informed about the importance of hedges for EFL learners.

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