

## **EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS EMPLOYED A CRITERIA OF HEDGES DURING THEIR SPEAKING CLASS WITHIN THE ACADEMIC SETTING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Communication becomes an essential aspect in language classroom because it bridges the meaning of a person's ideas. Therefore, as foreign language learners, the students have to have a good understanding at how to interact effectively with other students. Regarding to this, the researcher considered it is crucial to investigate English Foreign Language (EFL) university students' ways in communication during their speaking class which includes hedges. The objectives of the research was to find out the types of hedges employed by EFL university students during their speaking class within the academic setting. This study was conducted at Politeknik LP3I Makassar and it was focused on the students in the first semesters in subject Basic Speaking with the total participants were 23 students of one class. The method used was descriptive qualitative method. There were 3 recordings based on the students' interactions in the classroom. The theory from Riekkinen and Svarova (2009) was used to analyze the data gain. After transcribing and analyzing the data, the results showed that the students in EFL speaking class utilized some types of hedges. The hedges used involves personal evaluation, expression of limitation, expression of hesitation, and the combine hedges. Besides, the students employ hedges for some reasons.*

*Key words: Types of Hedges, EFL speaking class*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Being able to communicate using English is not only means that students are being able to ask and answer using English words but also they have to understand what utterance they should produce in any particular condition concerning make the statements are properly for the situation and suitable for the interlocutor. Based on Wilamova (2005), when it first became common to discuss pragmatics, the definition of pragmatics was "meaning in use" or "meaning in context." It is also stated that pragmatics, as the study of meaning, is not generated by the linguistic system but as conveyed and manipulated by participants in a communicative situation.

Dealing with pragmatic competence, hedging is one language competence that is related to it. Based on Hua (2011), the concept of the hedge was first put forward by American linguist, George Lakoff (1972) in his paper "A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concept" in which hedges were defined as words whose job was to make fuzzier or less fuzzy. Another definition is from Wilamova (2005) in her study about pragmatics. She stated that hedges are pragmatic markers that annotate or weaken the strength of an utterance. Besides, Holmes (2001) believed that hedging is a way to express uncertainty and also to soften the utterances of the speaker. Language has function to show our participation, as speakers, in the speech situation; the roles we take on ourselves and impose on others, our wishes, feelings, attitudes, and judgments. That is why people may say the same thing to different people in different ways. However, people sometimes hesitate to conduct and share their thought through spoken language. There are some reasons why people make this hesitation, such as age, first encounter, etc. People used to think that conducting communication is an exchange idea between people, however, spoken language performs a variety of other tasks, too. These tasks of language divided into two categories, which is one covering the exchange of information and the other is interpersonal aspects of communication. It means when we are speaking, we do convey not only meaning but also carry interpersonal messages. According to Holmes (2001) hedging is one way of conveying interpersonal messages in spoken interaction which enables speakers to soften the force of their utterances in order to make them more acceptable to the interlocutor.

In the linguistic aspect, hedges are helpful for the speakers for two prominent reasons. First, the existence of hedges in some cases gains confidence for speakers in terms of giving opinion in front of the crowd or answering journalistic interviews. Sometimes, people cannot avoid saying about unfamiliar topics and, it is not wise to use declarative statements since listeners are always ready to assess the exactness of what are said. Therefore, another advantage is protecting speakers' self-image from their unfriendly listeners (Teng, 2015). 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, and most importantly to achieve academic acceptance and success (Ahmed & Maros, 2017). In English Language Teaching (ELT), hedges are considered important because based on research conducted by Teng (2015), it is stated that using hedges is a powerful strategy in communicative interactions between teacher and students so both teacher and students should learn this device to help them to become more successful in communications especially in ELT process. The understanding of using hedges, both theory and practice, leads to no more feel confused when using it. When teacher and students are confident with knowledge, they will probably have the ability to translate correctly about what they want to the hearer gets in appreciate situations.

Based on the explanation above, hedges are related to the way people weaken or soften their utterance that including vagueness. For example, instead of saying, “your idea is wrong,” the speaker may hedge his/her utterance and say “I think, your idea is quite wrong.” The adding of the words “I think” and the changing from “wrong” into “quite wrong” is the example of how hedging is done. Hedges make the utterances weaker and softer so that it can be more accepted by the listener without any doubt of being judged. By using hedges, the willing attitude to cooperate with the other speakers is highlighted.

Varma and Tan (2015) stated that specific speech acts, for example criticism, are often hedged to enable it to sound less threatening to the hearer, and therefore unlikely to be rejected. The use of such devices was interpreted by Lakoff (1972) as a sign of social insecurity, indecisiveness and lack of confidence. For instance, hedges are particularly used to dilute an assertion (e.g., sort of, kind of, I suppose, and you know) while epistemic modal forms signal the speaker’s feeling towards their utterance (e.g.: may, might, should and must) where a degree of certainty or otherwise is shown). Dousti and Rasekh (2016) believed that in some cases, hedging represents an essential aspect of language where the appropriate use of hedges reflects efficient social interaction by showing the ability to express degrees of certainty and mastering rhetorical strategies required under certain circumstances. It was supported by Nozawa (2015) who stated that speaker could use hedges to bargain their offerings to the hearer. Hence, the use of hedges comes to play an essential role.

In speaking, advanced learners will sometimes purposefully or spontaneously use hedges to soften their utterances so that their utterances are acceptable (Warsono, 2016). They are expected to be able to hedge their utterances in their writing and speaking because they have already had skills and competences in English. That skills and competences are not only important for advanced learners but also for language learners. Therefore the basic learners are also needed to be taken as the subject of the research in their speaking activity to be observed by the way they survive to make the statements more accepted to the interlocutors. However, notwithstanding the importance given to hedging, little is known about the distribution or use in academic contexts between the two components : speaking class and basic students and since the study of hedges mainly about advanced learners (Yagis & Demir, 2014; Nozawa, 2015; Varma & Tan, 2015; Teng, 2015; Warsono, 2016) therefore, this research will be conducted to bring the use of hedges in the learning process in speaking class used by EFL university students, especially in the basic level students.. The subject of this research was the students of undergraduate program at Politeknik LP3I Makassar. The reason why the researcher chooses a speaking class of basic students because of the statement from Hua (2011) who stated that when a speaker is talking about something like his failures, he uses a lot of hedges to protect his face by attenuating the self relief he has made. In other words, in speaking class, both speakers and listeners should maintain the look no matter they are in pros or cons

and hedges will be used as their function in softening the words. The transcription of the students' oral productions during the class was the data for this research and was concerned about identifying types and reasons for hedges used by the students.

## **METHOD**

Qualitative method with descriptive analysis was used in this research. As Gayet al. (2006), the qualitative approach deals with the collection, analysis and, interpretation of comprehensive, narrative, and visual data to gain insight into a particular phenomenon of interest. Furthermore, the purposes of qualitative method are research focused and deal with promoting a deep understanding of a specific aspect, such as environment, a process, or even belief. Hence, it was applied to collect data, analyze, and interpret data which appropriate with the purpose of the research to get and find out the description of the hedge's types employed by EFL university students during their speaking class and the reasons they hedge their utterance.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Findings**

The types of hedges employed by English Foreign Language (EFL) university students during their speaking class within the academic setting.

#### **a. Personal Evaluation**

Personal evaluations with the purpose of subjectivity markers that allow students to soften their opinions in a less threatening way.

#### **Extract 1**

*The student explained about the choice that she wants to choose.*

*I choose between online and offline class I think they got their own advantage and disadvantage however if I choose one of them I choose the offline class.*

*Classroom observation. Monday, November 22nd, 2021.*

In extract 1, the student used hedges in personal evaluation by saying "I think" in the middle of her explanation. She explained about the advantage and disadvantage of both online and offline class by using her opinion and experience after facing those two conditions. The function of the word "I think" here was to defend her statement from the other student's statement that was contradicted to her statement. In concluding her statement, she also uttered word "I choose" to strengthen her statement that was totally her choice and cannot be distracted by other student's opinions.

### **Extract 2**

The student explained about the choice that he wants to choose and explained his reason.

I think I like online class Mem because why first I want to explain why I like the online class em I have two reasons.

Classroom observation. Monday, November 22nd, 2021.

In extract 2, the student uttered word “I think” in starting his statement. This means that he was soften his opinion in a less threatening way in explaining his statement because he had to choose one of two choices that may differ with his friends. He used word “I think” firstly to confirm that his opinion was personal and completed it by mentioning the reasons.

### **Extract 3**

The student explained about his choice and the reason

Student 2 : Ok I like em offline class Mem I think offline class are easier to understand than the online class

Classroom observation. Monday, November 22nd, 2021.

In this extract, the student uttered “I think” in the middle of the statement to confirm that it is his personal statement based on his experience and to support his statement then he continued to mention his reason why he chose that choice. By using the word “I think” he could explain her statement freely without hesitation and judgement.

### **Extract 4**

The student explained her reason that supported her statement

The first I’m living and born in Makassar so yeah I I know what language here I know how to speak em Makassar and how to pronounce that because I’m so long I mean I’m born here so I know what have to do e e speaking with anyone here

Classroom observation. Monday, December 13th, 2021.

In extract 4, the function of hedges especially in personal evaluation was to confirm that her statement was totally her personal reason and could be a good way to express her reason and experience without hesitation that other students

will argue that statement. She said “I mean” to support her previous reason and continued by concluding her statement.

**Extract 5**

The student expressed her feeling

Sometimes I'm happy sometimes I sad I can't explain that. That's normal I guess  
Classroom observation. Monday, December 13th, 2021.

In extract 5, the student used hedges in personal evaluation by saying “I guess” to express her belief in the truth of the utterance. She uttered “I guess” in the end of her statement to express her personal evaluation as the supporting idea of her utterance.

**Extract 6**

The student answered the question

I think the happiness I feel when I can gather with my family even tough now it is no longer complete because my father is gone

Classroom observation. Monday, December 13th, 2021.

In extract 6, “I think” and “I feel” were the two hedges in type of personal evaluation that student uttered in the beginning of her statement. The statement that she stated was from her personal experience. The student uttered “I think” and “I feel” as the hedges in personal evaluation in the beginning of her sentence and followed by the explanation of the statement.

**Extract 7**

The student gave his statement

I think lying is not good lying is define as lie in Islam causes great sinin that lying can make but it's temporary

Classroom observation. Monday, December 13th, 2021.

In extract 7, the student began his statement by using “I think” to express his personal opinion. He also uttered “In Islam” to support his statement that means he tried to find evidence and supporting fact by including another party in stating the statement.

### **Extract 8**

The student provided a contradictory

Student 1 : after waiting for a while finally my question was answered but

I thought the answer provided did not make sense

Classroom observation. Monday, December 27th, 2021.

In extract 8, the student uttered hedges in personal evaluation by saying “I thought” to express her opinion that was contradicted to the previous student when answering her question. She used “I thought” to soften her opinion in a less threatening way in expressing that the answer is out of her expectation.

### **Extract 9**

The student explained his opinion

Yes Mem online class in my opinion is not good because lesson will be deleted when network is bad and we cannot understand what the lecturer explain.

Classroom observation. Monday, November 22nd, 2021.

In extract 9, the student uttered “in my opinion” before explaining more about his reason. It means that he gave a distance to his opinion so it cannot be judged by the other students because it was totally his opinion based on the experience that he had been faced during the class.

### **b. Expression of Limitation**

Expression of limitation with the purpose as down graders that function to minimize the size of the imposition of the student’s utterance.

### **Extract 10**

The student provided an answer

The sentence is like everyone has to talk everyone has sadness but it doesn’t mean but it doesn’t mean they don’t deserve to get happiness in their life. Just it.

Classroom observation. Monday, November 22nd, 2021.

In extract 10, the student uttered “Just it” in the end of her statement to minimize the size of the imposition of her utterance. She used hedges in expression of limitation for ending the statement she uttered.

**c. Expression of Hesitation**

Expression of Hesitation with the purpose as the need for time for the student to formulate their words or thoughts lead to the usage of hesitation markers, vague expressions.

**Extract 11**

The student asked for repetition

E before em when you e finish to explain this topic I'm recently in this zoom em so I e like not understand what the topic this e this day can you explain maybe

Classroom observation. Monday, November 22nd, 2021.

In extract 11, the student uttered "maybe" in the end of his statement with the purpose as the need for time for him to formulate his words or thoughts lead to the usage of hesitation and vague markers. In this situation, that function was refer to his request whether he could get the explanation about the material that had been presented.

**d. The Combined Hedges**

The combined hedges is the new type of hedges that is found by the researcher. The combine hedges mean there are two or more types of hedges that is in sequence in one sentence that uttered by the students.

Expression of Hesitation and Expression of Limitation

**Extract 12**

The student gave a reason to the lecturer's statement about choice When he gives assignment and it's like it's not good for me because I'm not really understand what assignment giving without explanation like that. Maybe just it.

Classroom observation. Monday, November 22nd, 2021.

In extract 12, the student added word "maybe" in his last statement after explaining about his reason why he chose one of the choices that was given by the lecturer. He was hesitating whether his reason was enough for the lecturer's statement or not and also continued by saying "just" that also showed a hedges in expression of limitation because he thought he just finished his opinion and was not to aim to add another reason.



### **Extract 13**

The student gave an explanation

Yes and yeah and like countries is em Turki because there are so many history of Islam about historical about Islam and there so many war in once upon a time in Prophet life's so yeah maybe just it my story Mem thank you.

Classroom observation. Monday, December 13th, 2021.

In extract 13, the student uttered two hedges in expression of hesitation “maybe” and expression of limitation “just.” She uttered the two hedges in sequence in the end of her explanation.

### **e. Lexical Verbs and Polite Maxim**

#### **Extract 14**

The student requested the attention of the hearer.

Student 3 : In the end they gave me a good answer, but I still suggest please before answering the question think about it first.

Classroom observation. Monday, December 13th, 2021.

In extract 14, the student uttered two hedges in lexical verb “suggest” and politeness maxim “please.” She uttered the two hedges in a statement as the expression of her personal evaluation and suggestion further the politeness maxim with the purpose as to apply politeness in her request refers to the way the student answer her question at that time.

### **Discussion**

The researcher found that classification of hedges are numerous and often display noticeable differences. This may be because the underlying principles of research on hedging are different. Researchers view hedges from different perspectives, and different variables are taken into consideration in classifying them. Moreover, the classes of hedges subjected to analysis may vary considerably. For example, Lakoff (1972) focused on propositional hedging, Fraser (1975) considered performative verb hedging, and Brown and Levinson (1987) investigated the speech act aspect of hedging, describing hedges in terms of politeness strategies. In this study, the researcher found there were some types of hedges utilized by English Foreign Language (EFL) university students in classroom interaction. The types of hedges involved personal evaluation,

expression of limitation, and expression of hesitation that are based on the theories from Riekkinen and Svarova (2009) and the combined hedges that is a new type of hedges that is found by the researcher.

The first type gained in classroom interactions was personal evaluation. It can be found in extract 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9. The function of personal evaluation in these extract was the subjectivity markers that allow the students to soften their opinions in a less threatening way. In extract 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7 the students uttered “I think”, “I choose” and “I feel” to indicate the student’s belief about the statement they uttered. In extract 4 the student uttered “I mean” to emphasize the statement shuttered in the previous explanation. In extract 5 the student uttered “I thought” to express the idea from the student’s belief. In extract 8 the student uttered “I thought “in order to express the student’s belief that was contradictive to the answer given. Further in extract 9 the student uttered “in my opinion” in order to express the student’s feeling about the explanation given. This is in line with Gribanova (2019), who found that hedging allows speakers to present information to the audience in a more precise way. It can be seen from the explanation above that the students mostly hedged their statement by using personal evaluation.

The second finding was expression of limitation. There were only one extract analysed by the researcher on this type of hedges. It can be seen only in extract 10. The student uttered “just” in order to minimize the size of her utterance and put it into the end of the statement as a closing explanation. This result support Gribanova’s study (2019) who found that hedges are expressions that affect the emotive and relational aspects and reduce the degree of the speaker’s commitment.

The third type found was expression of hesitation. There were only one extract analyzed by the researcher on this type of hedges. It can be seen only in extract 11. The student uttered “maybe” in order to formulate his words or thoughts lead to the usage of hesitation markers and vague expressions as an asking about whether he could get any repetition or further explanation.

The last type found was the combined hedges. Actually, it is a new type that the researcher gained from this research. It makes this research different with the previous studies. The combined hedges here was the combination between expression of hesitation and expression of limitation that can be found in extract 12 and 13 and lexical verbs and polite maxim in extract 14. The function of expression of hesitation and expression of limitation was to minimize the size of the speaker’s words or thoughts and lead the speaker to use them at the end of the statement as a closing statement. Further, in extract 14 the student uttered lexical verbs and polite maxim in order to express their personal evaluation and applying politeness in requesting the attention of the interlocutor.

## **CONCLUSION**

The students in English Foreign Language (EFL) speaking class utilized some types of hedges. The hedges used involves personal evaluation, expression of limitation, expression of hesitation, and the combined hedges. Personal evaluation was used to allow speakers to soften their opinions in a less threatening way. Besides, expression of limitation as down graders that function to minimize the size of the imposition of the speaker's utterance. Further, expression of hesitation with the purpose as the need for time for the speaker to formulate their words or thoughts lead to the usage of hesitation markers and vague expression and the combine hedges that has more than one function over the functions of each hedges' function mentioned.

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