

**A Systematic Review of Undergraduate English Language Learners' Use of Hedging in
English Academic Writing**

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore current problems English language learners face in using hedging devices while conducting English academic writing. Through a systematic review of research works with a special focus on the use of hedging devices in English academic writing, I analyzed a series of potential causes that may result in English language learners' relatively poor mastery of hedging. I found that: (a) generally speaking, English language learners use hedges much less frequently than native speakers of English; (b) English language learners may use certain types of hedging devices in wrong ways that will cause grammatical mistakes and result in misunderstandings and low scores; (c) English language learners would overuse some hedging devices, while they rarely use others, and they also tended to avoid using complex hedging devices to refine their argumentation in English academic writing. Potential causes of problems in English language learners' application of hedging include: limited L2 proficiency, impacts from knowledge of the first language, the learners' understanding of both his or her own culture and the western culture, and insufficient and inappropriate writing pedagogies without enough attention on hedging skills. This literature review ended with implications of urgent challenges existing about teaching hedging devices and suggestions that may help to teach college-level Chinese English language learners' L2 hedging skills better.

Keywords: English language learners, hedging, English academic writing, undergraduate, Chinese English language learners

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For many English language learners (hereafter ELLs), writing in English can be a daunting task. English academic writing is even more challenging for not only students who are native speakers of English but also for those who learn English as a second or a foreign language. According to (Morton et al., 2015), it is difficult for undergraduate Chinese ELLs to express their thoughts and make argument precisely and convincingly when they only have limited proficiency of the second language (hereafter L2) and knowledge of writing conventions in the Anglophone culture. In fact, speaking and writing are two major ways to communicate and exchange information with others in human societies. Compared with other kinds of writing, writing research papers should not be simply presenting facts, thoughts or emotions but needs to make the audience accept the ideas in the text. Instead, academic writing requires the writer to master a series of advanced techniques to persuade the audience to accept his or her arguments, and thus the writer can reach the ultimate goal of making contributions to the academic community by engaging the readers in dialogues with the writer (Hyland, 2005). Thus, academic writing, at least in terms of writing academically in English, is interpersonal but not impersonal. Since hedges are a type of rhetorical strategy to present various degrees of uncertainty in arguments (Casenove and Kirk, 2016; Hyland, 2005; Hyland, 2008; Lee and Deakin, 2016), show politeness and modesty (Asghar, 2015; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Hyland, 2008), and establish an image of a cautious writer (Crosthwaite and Jiang, 2017; Hyland, 2008; Petchkij, 2019), they are presented in academic papers with a specific aim: making readers to think the writer as reasonable, credible and knowledgeable,

thus being more likely to understand and accept the writer's claims. Although hedges along with other rhetorical strategies are indispensable elements in English academic writing, hedges have not received much attention from instructors and students in daily English as a Second Language (hereafter ESL)/English as a Foreign Language (hereafter EFL) teaching (Crosthwaite and Jiang, 2017; Liu and Liu, 2019; Petchkij, 2019). A few studies (Asghar, 2015; Gao, 2012; Petchkij, 2019) have found that textbooks in ESL/EFL classrooms do not emphasize on the appropriate use of hedging devices. A lack of clear guidance and scientific training of academic writing in ESL/EFL classrooms in non-Anglophone countries set barriers for ELLs to master hedging skills and refine their argument in scholarly papers. In fact, current research have found that the use of hedging devices are closely related to writing scores (Al-mudhaffari and Abdullah, 2019; Ruan, 2019). After giving consistent instructions and training of hedging, ELLs' writings gained higher scores by using a diversity of hedging devices more frequently in appropriate ways, and their writings were more likely to successfully persuade readers (Al-mudhaffari and Abdullah, 2019; Ruan, 2019).

In my literature review, I focused on the existing problems in the use of hedges that undergraduate Chinese ELLs may face while using hedging devices to refine their English academic writing pieces. I mainly used the model of metadiscourse and theories of pragmatic transfer to analyze how a lack of writer-reader relationship, limited L2 proficiency, negative transfer caused by L1 and culture and the ignorance of hedges in ESL education across non-Anglophone countries. Based on the analysis of different kinds of hedging problems, I took linguistic, cultural and pedagogical perspectives to analyze how a series of potential factors can cause ELLs to perform poorly on hedging their statements. With considerations of

the potential factors, I tried to answer the following questions: (a) What are the challenges that ELLs need to deal with in their learning of hedges? (b) How can teachers at college and universities in non-Anglophone countries, especially those who work at Chinese higher education institutions help their students solve the existing problems and assist them to enhance hedging skills in English academic writing?

Theoretical Framework

Definitions of Hedges

In the past decades, numerous scholars have given definitions of hedges with a variety of special foci respectively. Early in 1972, Lakoff introduced the term *hedge*, which he defined as linguistic devices that modify predicates and sentences to make language “fuzzy” (p. 458). Lakoff (1972), as a logician, believed that the natural language which used by humans for communication is neither completely true nor completely false but often falls in between the two polarities. Thus, hedges function as signals to tell the degree of truthfulness in considerations of various aspects of one expression. Later, other theories and models related to hedging have been studied. Brown and Levinson (1987) developed politeness theories, stating that successful interpersonal communication must be based on protecting interlocutors’ faces so that no one would feel offended or threatened. Western societies view negative face—that is, feeling less controlled by others and can freely expressing one’s opposite ideas or alternative viewpoints—as one of the most important aspects in English academic writing (Gao, 2012). Thus, hedges are frequently and widely used in a variety of discourses to protect the audience’s negative face. From another angle, Gao (2012) pointed out that hedges may also be studied from a perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis

(hereafter CDA). CDA can be used to study the power relation among different groups of individuals, including the relation between the writer and readers. From this perspective, the academic community is often perceived as “a controlled and hegemonic place, where only powerful people may have the right to get their voice heard” (Gao, 2012, p. 360). Hence, the use of hedges is important to change or at least challenge the existing power structure in academic discourses to form an equal instead of a hierarchical relation between the writer and readers.

Thus, hedging devices play a significant role in making academic texts constructive. According to Hyland (2005), hedges are a kind of rhetorical device that foster trust and agreement between the writer and the potential audience. With hedges, one’s academic statement could become more precise in meaning and show the appropriate degree of certainty to make propositional contents more accurate (Hyland, 2005). Moreover, hedging shows the writer’s welcoming attitude towards readers and invites readers to engage in the conversations in text, thus mitigating potential collisions between the writer and readers (Hyland, 1996). Most scholars of hedging devices in English academic writing agreed that Crompton (1997) gave the most precise definition of hedges in the current research field. His definition was based on previous researchers’ (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Hyland, 1996; Lakoff, 1972) definitions of hedges, with a special focus on different functions hedges serve in texts and conversations. Different from previous research, Crompton (1997) argued that “Hedging may be used to display not only or necessarily the degree of confidence speakers have in their propositions but also how much confidence they feel it is appropriate to display” (p.281). He defined hedges as linguistic devices writers use to present “a lack of commitment

to the truth of a proposition” (Crompton, 1997, p. 281). Hence, hedges should not be simply viewed as a set of lexical items or expressions. Rather, hedging devices are very diverse in both forms and functions.

Researchers also have categorized different hedges according to structures. While Prince et al. (1982) divided different hedging devices into groups that have different functions in written texts. Other researchers classified hedging devices by forms and structures, which is also a type of relatively logical classification and could be effective for detecting which types of hedges ELLs use less or more frequently (Chen and Zhang, 2017; Crompton, 1997).

Hedging And Its Importance in Metadiscourse And Pragmatic Transfer

As to major theories and models used to analyze ELLs’ use of hedging devices, this research article will use the model of metadiscourse and pragmatic transfer theory. Hyland (2005) formed a model of metadiscourse in which he put a great emphasis on the writer-reader relationship in all genres of writing, including academic writing. In his model of metadiscourse, there are two kinds of metadiscourse markers: interactive markers and interactional markers (Hyland, 2005; Hyland, 2008). The former ones refer to linguistic devices that organize a piece of writing in a way that can effectively guide readers to follow the logical flow of the writer (Hyland, 2004). The latter ones, namely, interactional markers or interactional resources, are functioned as tools for the writer to present his or her cautious, negotiable and constructive persona to the potential audience, thus closing the distance between each other and reach the goal of adding credibility to the written texts (Hyland, 2004). Hedges as linguistic devices that “withhold writer’s full commitment to proposition”

(Hyland, 2004, p. 139) belong to the category of interactional markers. In Hyland's (2005) point of view, with considerations of English language and the tenant of communication embedded in the western academic community, hedges are one of the most crucial types of interactional markers that significantly influence the writer-reader relationship which would indirectly determine whether one's writing would be defined as successful or less successful in research fields.

Hedges as rhetorical devices are related to the concept of pragmatic transfer, which is a concept that related to two types of transfers: pragmalinguistic transfer and sociopragmatic transfer (Bou 1998; Kasper, 1992). The former means that conventions of politeness in the first language (hereafter L1) will be transferred when a person speaks in L2. Thus, a person's L2 proficiency will determine the extent him or her being influenced by L1 when communicating with others in L2. The latter focuses on the social context and the relation between interlocutors, and hence insufficient understanding of the culture behind L2 will largely restrict one's use of L2, and he or she may also be negatively affected by his or her own cultural background (Kasper, 1992).

Previous Research on Hedging

As Šeškauskienė (2008) mentioned, early interest of hedging devices first started in spoken language instead of the written one. Hence, theories related to the study of hedges were initially relevant to spoken language such as speech act theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Beauvais, 1989) and discourse analysis (Holmes, 1997). Hedges were deemed as a crucial element for facilitating and softening conversations to build up relationships with others. Hedging devices are an essential parts of pragmatics, and hence they are crucial for

facilitating communication and building up interrelationships among interlocutors.

As research on hedges develops, researchers further explored not only native speakers' use of hedging devices but also English L2 learners' acquisition of hedges in academic reading and writing. In both daily conversations and written texts, hedges are vital for constructing dialogues and exchanging ideas. Writing academically also requires advanced interpersonal skills to persuade readers in various ways. In fact, research on pragmatics has shown that hedges are necessary in scientific conversations to make the writing more polite, negotiative and constructive (Gao, 2012).

In sum, hedges are important to English academic writing, and it is a nuanced concept that is not easy for college-level ELLs to master in a relatively short period.

In fact, research on hedges have presented productive results in various aspects. In the past decades, a series of comparative studies (Akbas and Hardman, 2018; Hyland, 2005; Petchkij, 2019) have been conducted. Many researchers have also been focusing on ELLs who possess different L1s and cultural backgrounds and their use of hedging devices. A number of studies focused on Turkish (Akbas and Hardman, 2018; Demir, 2018), Yemeni (Btoosh and Taweel, 2011), Swedish (Ädel and Erman, 2012), Spanish (Alonso et al., 2012), Lithuanian (Šeškauskienė, 2008), Thai (Petchkij, 2019), Pakistani (Asghar, 2015), Indonesian (Hinkel, 2005), Vietnamese (Hinkel, 2005), Arab (Btoosh and Taweel, 2011; Hinkel, 2005) Japanese (Casenove and Kirk, 2016; Yoon, 2021), Korean (Yoon, 2021) and Chinese (Chen and Zhang, 2017; Gao, 2012; Hinkel, 2005; Lee and Deakin, 2016; Liu and Liu, 2019; Ruan, 2019) ELLs' use of hedges. Numerous studies showed that although there are studies focusing on Chinese ELLs' hedging skills, these studies lack detailed investigation and

research on undergraduate Chinese students as a specific age group and college English classrooms in China as a specific context (Chen and Zhang, 2017; Gao, 2012; Liu and Liu, 2019; Ruan, 2019).

Meanwhile, research have shown that genres, disciplines and topics also set impacts and requirements for writers to use hedging devices (Hyland, 2008; Yoon, 2021). In addition, Chen and Zhang (2017) argued that writing different parts of paper requires writers to use hedging devices differently.

The use of hedges is related to scoring in academic writing tests. Lee and Deakin (2016) conducted studies to compare hedging devices used in successful writing samples and those in less-successful ones. It showed that the inappropriate use of hedges did set impacts on the raters' perceptions towards the writer, and thus affect the grading in writing examinations (Lee and Deakin, 2016).

A few longitudinal studies with an intention of bringing educational implications have been completed (Crosthwaite and Jiang, 2017; Ruan, 2019). In these studies, researchers designed pretests, posttests, questionnaires and long-period courses based on theories and models related to hedging devices and English academic writing strategies. Ruan (2019) found that pedagogy about hedging shows positive effects on helping ELLs to be adapted to using more hedges and use more kinds of hedges in their English academic writings.

In terms of current research methods and data, studies about hedges have used both direct data collection method by gathering ESL/EFL students' writing samples or organizing writing tests and indirect data by gathering texts from selected corpora. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are commonly used in studies about ELLs' use of hedging devices.

Questionnaires and interviews are also frequently used by researchers to let research subjects to express their feelings and thoughts while using hedges in actual writing experiences and views from raters or instructors towards collected samples.

Research methods

In this article, in order to design the research procedure, I referred to the guidance of the research procedure from *Doing A Systematic Review: A Student's Guide* edited by Boland, Cherry and Dickson (2017). The main research questions for this research are: (a) What are the current difficulties teachers and ELLs (including college-level Chinese ELLs) may face when it comes to hedging in English academic writing? (b) Based on the analysis of these difficulties and previous educational practices in English academic writing, what are the possible responses to help college-level Chinese ELLs to enhance their hedging skills?

The inclusive criteria are listed below:

1. Due to the lack of articles exploring college-level Chinese ELLs' hedging in English academic writing, articles including research on hedging skills of ELLs in a global context might be considered. However, articles which focus on different groups of ELLs who have different language and cultural backgrounds should be related to English academic writing with a special focus on college-level ELLs.
2. Articles that are not related to undergraduate English academic writing but research on hedging in both Chinese academic papers and English academic papers could be included as literature that may be helpful to explore the impact which is set by Chinese as L1 on Chinese ELLs' hedging in English

academic writing.

3. All searched literature should be peer-reviewed articles that contain empirical studies.

I searched and collected literature from four online databases. Three of them are closely related to second language acquisition and education: Education Full text, the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA). One of the four databases, Google Scholar, was first used for searching additional literature related to the research background and context, prevalent theories in L2 writing and current empirical studies that provide possible responses for enhancing ELLs' hedging skills. Key terms used to search relevant literature in Google Scholar were "hedging OR hedges OR indirectness", "academic writing OR second language writing", "English as a second language (ESL) OR English as a foreign language (EFL) OR ELLs (ELL)". 14 articles fit the parameters to include in my literature review.

Next, in Education Full Text, I searched three types of combinations of key terms. In the first round, the searched key terms were "(hedging OR hedges OR indirectness) AND challenges OR barriers OR difficulties AND writing". Only two articles fit the inclusive criteria. Articles irrelevant to English academic writing and hedging were excluded. In the second round, key terms used for searching were: (hedging OR hedges OR indirectness) AND writing. 41 articles were found, and six articles were selected as useful references for my literature review. In the third round, I searched "(hedging OR hedges OR indirectness) AND academic writing AND (China OR Chinese OR Mandarin)" with a specific focus on Chinese ELLs. Eight articles were found, while five articles irrelevant to L2 writing or the

Chinese context were filtered. After reading through all the selected research works, only six articles in total were found to be helpful to this research.

In ERIC, key terms used were: (hedging OR hedges OR indirectness) AND (English language learners OR English as a second language) AND (challenges OR difficulties OR barriers). Four journal articles presented current challenges in teaching hedging to ELLs in English academic writing classrooms. After carefully examining the filtered results, three peer-reviewed articles were left and were used in conducting this research.

In LLBA, by searching “(Chinese OR China OR Mandarin) AND (English language learners) AND (undergraduate OR College OR university) AND (academic writing) AND (hedging OR Hedges OR indirectness)”, 311 peer reviewed scholarly papers were found. 11 articles were included for my literature review. A preliminary examination for searching relevant articles contained processes of skimming titles, abstracts and key words. Then, a second examination for deciding articles that were finally included in my literature review were conducted, through which I carefully read the selected articles, excluded irrelevant articles and extracted the key themes that might be helpful for answering the research questions.

In sum, 34 articles are included in my literature review. Articles not available in these databases were excluded, which could be a limitation of the research.

Findings And Discussions

In this section, current problems in ELLs’ use of hedging devices are first presented. Later, I analyzed how learners’ L1, L2 proficiency, cultural factors and English language teaching in ESL/EFL academic writing classrooms shape ELLs’ use of hedging devices.

Finally, in the discussion part, I explored several potential aspects that are relevant to challenges and future development in teaching college-level Chinese ELLs hedging devices with regard to the model and theories as well as main research findings in my literature review.

Main Research Findings About Difficulties in Using Hedging Devices

ELLs' mastery of hedging skills is different from that of native speakers of English, and a number of problems exist in their use of hedges in English academic writing.

Firstly, research have found that ELLs generally use fewer hedging devices than native speakers of English (Ädel and Erman, 2012; Btoosh and Taweel, 2011; Demir, 2018; Lee and Deakin, 2016). Ädel and Erman (2012) pointed out that non-native speakers of English produced fewer and less diverse hedges than native speakers even in the research focusing on those who are advanced learners. Btoosh and Taweel's (2011) research also showed that native speakers of English put more hedges and downtoners than English L2 speakers do in academic writing.

Secondly, in terms of the variety of hedging devices in ESL/EFL students' English academic writing, research showed that ELLs tend to use less-complicated hedging devices (Ädel and Erman, 2012, Demir, 2018, Lee and Deakin, 2016). In Demir's (2018) research, it turned out that Turkish authors as non-native speakers have a smaller lexical repertoire of hedging devices than native speakers of English. Ädel and Erman's (2012) study also presented that native speakers possess more diverse and complicated hedging devices than those who learn English as a second language do. Ädel and Erman's (2012) research on speakers of Swedish showed that these ELLs only share no more than 20% lexical bundles

with native speakers. In line with studies mentioned previously, Lee and Deakin's (2016) research on ESL students' use of hedging devices showed that the research subjects frequently used short, grammatically simple hedges and the ones that are common in informal settings, while they seldom use longer, complex hedges that are more suitable for academic English. For example, Lee and Deakin (2016) found that Lithuanian speakers of English as ESL students tended to use *try* as a hedging device more than the word *appear*. Lee and Deakin's (2016) research also showed that modals serving as less-complicated hedging devices in academic English are much more easily learned and mastered by ESL students.

Thirdly, ELLs use different hedging devices presented an unbalanced tendency: some kinds of hedging devices that have simple forms or have similar usage or meanings in learners' L1 are frequently used, while others which are complex in both forms and meanings seldom used by ELLs (Ädel and Erman, 2012; Chen and Zhang, 2017; Demir, 2018; Hinkel, 2005). Ädel and Erman (2012) found that non-native speakers tend to overuse certain lexical bundles (including a number of hedging devices) while seldom use others. For example, non-native speakers were found to use a large number of simple epistemic modals such as *can* and *may*, but hedges which are more accurate in meaning and diverse in form such as *there appear to be*, *it is not possible to*, *may or may not*, and so on. In contrast, in writings produced by native speakers contain more stance bundles, especially epistemic bundles and attitudinal ones which serve the function of presenting different degrees of uncertainty (Ädel and Erman, 2012). Ädel and Erman (2012) also found that native speakers tend to use unattended *this*, existential *there*, hedges and passives much more frequently than Swedish ELLs to show attitudes and certainty in writing. It seems that it is hard for non-native

speakers to jump out of the comfort zone and try to master more subtle hedging devices.

Without clear instructions, consistent training and effective encouragement, it is difficult for

instructors to change the current dilemma which non-native speakers face during their

learning of hedging. In terms of the unbalanced use of hedging, Demir (2018) have also

pointed out that ELLs' unbalanced use of hedges would further reduce their credibility in

readers' perspectives. Additionally, Demir (2018) mentioned that the overuse of certain

hedges when it is necessary will cause readers to think that the writer is not assertive enough.

Chen and Zhang (2017) found that Chinese L2 writers overused *should* as a deontic modal

that is relevant to obligation and morality, while they rarely use *should* as a kind of epistemic

modal that serves as hedges in English academic writing to show degrees of speculation and

inference. This phenomenon may cause raters who are native speakers of English in

Anglophone academic community to think that Chinese L2 writers' statements are too blunt

and absolute, thus affecting their assessments of the writings produced by Chinese L2 writers.

Hinkel's (2005) research showed that Japanese, Korean and Chinese ELLs relied on only a

small range of hedging devices (most of them are epistemic hedges such as *according to*, *may*,

almost, etc.) to modify their writings, and they would use these types of hedging devices

repeatedly in different L2 writing tasks. In sum, ELLs, including those whose L1 are Chinese,

tend to overuse a limited number of hedges while avoid using or trying to use other hedging

devices.

In addition, ELLs' use of hedging devices also contain grammatical mistakes that may

cause confusion to readers from the academic community, thus leaving the audience with an

impression of being unprofessional. Research conducted by Lee and Deakin (2016) showed

that ELLs may encounter difficulties in using hedges in correct grammatical forms. For example, Lithuanian ELLs were found to have difficulties in using *some* and *certain* as hedges while writing in English. Due to being affected by their L1, they tended to use *some* *certain* in their L2 writing as a kind of hedging, but such kind of pattern is not grammatically correct in English, which may result in leaving a negative impression to raters and lower scores in writing tests. In sum, the difficulties existing in ELLs' use of hedging devices show that English L2 learners may need to spend more time dealing with limited L2 proficiency and negative L1 transfer.

Possible Explanations of English Language Learners' Misuse of Hedges

Previous studies have found that there were several main linguistic and sociocultural factors that may cause ELLs develop relatively weak hedging skills. Students who have different L1 backgrounds may encounter difficulties due to interference from: (a) their first language acquisition (especially when there are asymmetries of hedging devices in terms of syntactical and morphological aspects in L1 and L2); (b) limited L2 proficiency; (c) the writing culture and other heritages or conventions embedded in learners' L1 that overlook hedging or encourage people to use hedges in ways different from Anglophone societies; (d) A lack of introduction and practices for hedges in ESL/EFL instructions, textbooks and curriculum.

Firstly, negative L1 transfer can seriously affect ELLs' mastery of hedging devices. Akbas and Hardman (2018) found that Turkish L1 writers tended to add affixes instead of using a variety of lexical words to create hedges in writing, thus having less diverse but more monotonous styles for showing tentativeness and politeness in academic texts.

Studies led by other researchers took a closer look at L1's impacts on the learning of hedges. Demir (2018) found that the most frequently used hedges are verbs for Anglophone writers, while these rhetorical devices are in fact modals in Turkish. Demir's (2018) study was in accordance with previous research which showed that due to syntactical and morphological features of L1, Turkish ELLs would use certain hedges much more frequently. For example, according to Demir (2018), while Anglophone writers tend to use *may* as hedging devices more in academic papers, Turkish authors would use the epistemic verb *can* much more frequently. Similarly, Alonso et al. (2012) found that hedges function differently in English and Spanish. Unlike Spanish writers, writers who are native speakers of English tend to use hedges much more as a kind of tool to present uncertainty and limited support of particular claims mentioned in their writings. In contrast, Spanish L1 writers, though using hedges to present politeness and soften speech, they are not used to exert hedging devices as shields to defend their credibility and avoid being rejected: hedges in Spanish simply do not have certain functions that exist in English.

However, sometimes L1 knowledge may set positive impacts on L2 learning. Lee and Deakin's (2016) study showed that, when an English language learner's L1 has similar grammatical structures to the one in L2, his or her L1 knowledge have positive language transfer on their L2 acquisition. For instance, Lee and Deakin (2016) studied *may* and *can* as two hedging devices in English and found that both Lithuanian and English have *can/may* + *infinitive* structure. It turned out that Lithuanian ELLs have fewer problems in using *can* and *may* as hedges in their English writing.

Nevertheless, positive L1 transfer in studies about ELLs' acquisition of hedging

devices is not common, and in most cases L1 indeed cause challenges for ESL/EFL students to reach a higher level of English academic writing skills. Yoon's (2021) research showed that even among learners at a high L2 proficiency level, similar patterns of hedging devices can be found in their academic writing pieces. Yoon's (2021) findings resonated with previous findings which suggest that ELLs' L1 would largely influence their use of hedging devices.

Numerous studies have found that limited L2 proficiency is another major factor that may affect ELLs' use of hedges (Btoosh and Taweel, 2011; Demir, 2018; Hinkel, 2005). Due to a limited proficiency of English, although ELLs might agree that mastering hedges is vital to English academic writing, they are usually unwilling or afraid of using hedges with concerns of making mistakes (Demir, 2018). Hinkel (2005) stated that limited vocabulary and lexical ranges caused L2 writers to repeatedly use the same group of hedging devices without trying to apply more complex but also more informative hedges. Hinkel (2005) further pointed out that due to limited L2 proficiency, ELLs' use of hedging devices presented an obvious restriction, and they tended to apply more intensifiers such as boosters in order to show persuasiveness.

Hence, it is possible that limited L2 proficiency may cause ELLs to use fewer hedges while add more unnecessary intensifiers that will aggravate the existing writing problem of being too absolute. Btoosh and Taweel's (2011) findings resonated with Hinkel's (2005), concluding that due to a lack of understanding and experience of English language and the Anglophone culture, for ELLs, it is harder for them to try to use hedges than to add more boosters. Btoosh and Taweel's (2011) research findings also supported that ELLs' relatively small vocabulary and limited grammatical knowledge impel them to repeatedly use simple

hedging devices which may not be a good way to express thoughts precisely and refine arguments effectively.

When it comes to sociocultural factors related to ELLs' use of hedges, different writing cultures as well as attitudes towards transmitting knowledge and initiating arguments in academic writing may set barriers in ELLs' learning of hedging devices. According to Akbas and Hardman (2018), when comparing with English L1 students, Turkish L1 writers presented a higher degree of commitment. In contrast, the western writing culture contains more about the writer's thoughts on dealing with potential counterarguments, doubts and criticisms from the audience. Although Turkish L1 English L2 writers are more adapted to using hedges in academic writing than Turkish monolingual writers, both of them tend to build the relationship with readers by adding more self-promotion techniques such as self-mentions and boosters to increase credibility, while English L1 writers who are deeply influenced by the Anglophone culture after birth tend to use more hedges to show politeness and to reduce overstatements about what they have achieved in their research in order to avoid being rude. In Alonso et al.'s (2012) research of Spanish writer's use of hedging devices, it showed that Spanish writers preferred unhedged texts, for they feel that writings with few hedges are more direct and less ambiguous, which are opposite to Anglophone writers' attitude towards hedging devices.

In terms of studies of Chinese ELLs, Chen and Zhang (2017) focused on Chinese writers' use of hedging devices in the conclusion sections of research papers. Chen and Zhang (2017) found that Chinese ELLs do not use enough necessary hedges when they make conclusions, and this may be a result caused by the rhetorical conventions in the Chinese

writing culture. Chen and Zhang (2017) stressed that the tradition of transmitting knowledge and preserving authority can be one of the main reasons for Chinese L2 writers to intentionally use fewer hedges and use more boosters to present confidence and assertion in their argument. Chen and Zhang (2017) further stated that both Taoism and Confucianism, as two major philosophical trends, propose that “facts speaks louder than words” (Peng and Nisbett, 1999, p. 747), and thus in the Chinese culture, there is a natural tendency for Chinese people to show respect to tradition and authority, while there is a lack of thoughts on dealing with opposite viewpoints. Hence, it is interesting to see that Chinese authors choose to present a higher degree of certainty and confidence in making arguments, while Anglophone writers believe that distancing and tentativeness are indispensable for reducing overstatements and make their argument more acceptable by readers.

In fact, Btoosh and Taweel (2011) implied that English L2 writers tend to get lower scores in writing tests when comparing to English L1 speakers. This is usually not because English L2 writers make too many errors in their writings, but merely because their voices in the texts do not sound “native” enough, and in most cases, hedges and other rhetorical strategies play a vital role in helping these writers to deal with this issue. Btoosh and Taweel (2011) referred to a comparison between English and Arabic, stating that the “authenticity” in writing may be depended on the rhetorical features of a certain culture. For example, Btoosh and Taweel (2011) found that repetitions, informality and parallelism as common rhetorical features in Arabic are often misinterpreted by English L1 writers as negative factors that may affect the quality of one piece of writing. Hence, it is plausible to see that ELLs’ understanding of their writing cultures might not be helpful for them to develop English

writing techniques. Al-mudhaffari and Abdullah (2019) also pointed out the insufficient cultural experiences in Anglophone societies will make it harder for ELLs to notice the use of hedging devices to facilitate both English speaking and English writing.

Again, in terms of Chinese academic writing, Liu and Liu (2019) pointed out that the Chinese writing culture does not contain a high requirement for counterargument while persuading the potential audience. In fact, the writing culture in the Chinese academic community allows writers to widely quote various authoritative works with a confident voice, and this weighs more than considering potential skeptical views from readers.

Finally, numerous research results (Chen and Zhang, 2017; Hinkel, 2005; Lee and Deakin, 2016; Petchkij, 2019; Zhao, 2013) showed that ELLs' inappropriate use of hedging devices may related to potential problems in ESL/EFL instructions, textbooks and curriculum. In Chen and Zhang's (2017) interviews with Chinese ELLs at advanced L2 level, although these ELLs possess a relatively high level of L2 proficiency which indicates that they face less pragmalinguistic barriers, they are not familiar with the function of *should* as an epistemic modal in English academic writing, either. This is probably related to the design of English textbooks and curricula in secondary schools and universities in China, since the word *should* as a deontic modal was taught way earlier than it as an epistemic modal in English classes in China. Thus, Chinese ELLs often find that they are more familiar with and are more likely to use *should* as a word that expresses a sense of responsibility or a call for people to take responsibilities.

In addition, since hedging devices are significant for mitigating and modifying propositions in English academic writing, Hinkel (2005) has pointed out that there is a need

for educators and instructors in ESL/EFL education to put more efforts in teaching hedging devices. Nevertheless, for ELLs around the world, textbooks often merely have very rough descriptions of hedges, and usually there are no authentic examples or practices. It is also common in ESL/EFL classrooms that there is no time set aside for ELLs to systematically learn hedging devices.

Similarly, in Lee and Deakin (2016) research, the researchers expressed concerns for enhancing ELLs' mastery of hedging devices. Lee and Deakin (2016) argued that it is true that ESL/EFL instructors stressed the importance of using hedges and other rhetorical devices to show appropriate stance and engagement while making arguments, but they do not provide sufficient resources and explicit guidance for students to learn using hedging devices systematically in daily teaching and designed curriculum. More specific examples could be found in Zhao's (2013) findings. Zhao (2013) mentioned that ELLs from Pakistani universities using few hedges and other rhetorical strategies does not mean that these learners prefer to be rude in communication. In fact, their insufficient use of hedges resulted from students not having been taught how to use hedging in writing. Zhao (2013) stated that, in order to deal with this issue, ESL/EFL educators need to carefully reform current textbooks that guide students to write academically. That is, ELLs need to learn the hidden communicative rules behind English language. Another example can be extracted from Petchkij's (2019) research. According to Petchkij's (2019) study, over 90% of the Thai ELLs had not known the concept of hedges before taking the designed courses for enhancing hedging skills in the research. Around 40% of them claimed that "they had never studied about how to hedge in research article before" (Petchkij, 2019, p. 107).

In sum, it seems that hedges are indeed a concept that is unfamiliar to most ELLs, and explicit teaching on hedging devices is necessary for helping English L2 writers to enhance their academic English.

Pedagogical Implications For College-level Chinese English Language Learners

The research findings presented a series of challenges ELLs are facing when learning hedging devices, and potential causes of the linguistic and sociocultural barriers they encounter were also carefully analyzed. This literature review provided practical suggestions for ESL/EFL instructors in Chinese undergraduate English Academic writing classrooms.

With a special focus on college-level Chinese ELLs, I intended to explore ways for ESL/EFL teachers in China to help students appropriately deal with potential negative impacts from L1 and the Chinese writing culture, have a positive attitude towards students' learning of hedges with sufficient patience and confidence, and try to pay more attention to hedging and put more efforts in assessing students' learning of English academic writing with a consideration of the use of hedging devices.

Dealing With The Impacts From Knowledge of L1 and the Chinese Culture

Previous research findings presented how limited L2 proficiency and the knowledge of L1 set negative impacts on ELLs' use of hedging devices, but there are also numerous studies introduced solutions that indeed have been proved effective for educators to limit negative impacts from students' L1 language and culture. In fact, researchers also find possible responses to reduce the amount of negative L1 transfer (Petchkij, 2019; Yoon, 2021). Yoon (2021) advised that using authentic texts written by native speakers of English in academic research journals as examples to teach hedging devices may be effective for

English L2 speakers to be less affected by L1 negative language transfer and gain more L2 experience that would help them use hedges in ways that are more similar to native speakers of English. In Petchkij's (2019) study, the researcher designed a consistent course to teach Thai ELLs hedging devices. Petchkij (2019) stated that could introduce the concept of hedging first with authentic examples that show different functions of hedging devices. A clear list of hedging devices with authentic sentence examples selected from corpora is helpful for learners to memorize, understand and internalize knowledge of hedges in English. Then, in the next stage, instructors could arrange practices for ELLs to use hedging devices at both sentence and discourse levels. In addition, Petchkij (2019) stressed that, like any other learning process, the acquisition of hedges should also be a gradual process from the hedges which are simple and commonly used in writing to those which are more complex and used in special contexts.

Instructors in China should strengthen students' English language proficiency while also teach students cultural knowledge behind English language. Liu and Liu (2019) stated that, aligned with previous research results, Chinese ELLs often leave the international academic community an impression of exaggeration and overconfidence due to a lack of hedges in their writings. According to Gao's (2012) observation on Chinese academic writers, the lack of using hedging devices makes these writers' voice in academic works sound impolite and arbitrary, and this phenomenon may be closely related to a deemphasis on the interrelationship between the writer and readers in the Chinese writing culture.

In contrast, according to Chen and Zhang's (2017) research, interviews with Anglophone writers about hedging devices showed that, in English academic writing, the

writer is required to have a deep understanding and full respects to his or her readers. Chen and Zhang's (2017) study showed that Anglophone writers attach great significance on reviewing the written texts from angles of the potential audience. However, from interviews with Chinese writers, it showed that Chinese authors have fewer considerations on how readers might think of their statements. Crosthwaite and Jiang (2017) and Gao (2012) further stated that since hedges are hidden or even "invisible" elements that are usually hard for L2 learners to notice and get familiarized with. In Gao's (2012) analysis of the relation between hedging and the convention of politeness in the western culture, Gao (2012) pointed out that hedges are "so deeply embedded in the western culture that people no longer talk about it explicitly" (Gao, 2012, p. 356). This in fact indicates that explicit instructions containing clear explanations the concept of hedging and authentic sentence or phrases examples of hedging devices are crucial for ELLs to form the awareness of hedging and being adapted to the western culture and implicit rules of using hedges. Since the functions of hedges in English academic writing are new and different to college-level Chinese ELLs, instructors should spare time to help College-level Chinese ELLs realize that, apart from transmitting knowledge and asserting one's own claims, it is of much importance to interact and engage readers while writing academically in English. The writer needs be cautious and respectful so that readers are willing to trust and accept his or her ideas. According to Zhao (2013), English academic writing is not a context-independent task. In fact, writing for different contexts can determine what kinds of writing techniques and rhetorical strategies are appropriate to use in the writing process, for "the criteria used to evaluate voice may vary" (Zhao, 2013, p. 216) from one context to another. Zhao (2013) stated that, for English academic writing, hedging

is one of the key features that suits the specific academic context where credibility is based on cautiousness and counterargument is always welcomed. Hence, while teaching hedges in English academic classrooms, it is advisable for instructors to help ELLs recognize and understand what the specific context they are writing for, and thus being easier to learn using hedging devices appropriately. Even when the importance of hedging in English academic writing is accepted successfully, it is advisable for advanced learners to notice that there are nuances in using hedges to write research articles for different disciplines. Hyland's (2008) cross-disciplinary research on hedges in academic journals showed that, in soft sciences, there needs to have more space for alternative explanations and potential responses from readers. Thus, when teaching hedges to ESL/EFL students who plan to become scholars in fields of social sciences and humanities, it is advisable for instructors to stress the importance of using hedges in research that focuses on human subjects.

Patience and Confidence in Teaching Hedges to English Language Learners

When reviewing how the sociocultural factors might affect ELLs' learning of hedging devices, many may pessimistically think ELLs would never be able to reach hedging skills comparable to which Anglophone writers have. However, such point of view is biased, and there is sufficient evidence to prove that ELLs can master the use of hedges in English academic writing. For example, in Akbas and Hardman's (2018) research, Turkish writers of English used more hedges than monolingual Turkish writers. This indicated that Turkish writers of English can be influenced by both their mother culture and the Anglophone culture, and they are able to accept rules of using hedges to make cautious statements in L2 writing. Šeškauskienė (2008) further supported that although challenges exist in ELLs' mastery of

hedging devices, L2 users of English indeed are able to notice hedges in English reading and writing. In fact, writers who reach a high L2 competency can use hedges appropriately to be comparable to native speakers of English. Similarly, Petchkij (2019) implied that direct teaching of hedging devices showed a positive impacts on ELLs' academic writing skills, and Petchkij (2019) stated that ELLs can notice, accept and understand complicated forms and functions of hedges in English academic writing through systematic and consistent teaching. Although ELLs may take a relatively longer time to recognize, understand and accept the concept of hedging in English, they are not culturally or linguistically "insulated" to hedges. In fact, results of Ruan's (2019) longitudinal research provided evidence that through carefully designed curriculum with a special concentration on interactional strategies in English academic writing, ELLs' use of hedges and other rhetorical devices can be improved in terms of both quantity and quality. Thus, ESL/EFL instructors in Chinese English academic writing classrooms need to be more patient to students who are taught about what hedges are for the first time, and it is essential for these teachers to believe in their students' abilities to master the use of hedging devices.

Professional Training and Grading Standards

ELLs' limited use of hedges is not a result solely caused by learners themselves. In fact, there are problems existing in daily teaching as well as grading standards in ESL/EFL writing. Ruan (2019) did research on Chinese ELLs and native speakers of English. Through the research, Ruan (2019) found that ELLs' English academic writing often contains a mix of both formal and informal features, which could be caused by their early L2 learning experiences in secondary education. It showed that if hedging as an essential concept could

be introduced and be taken seriously in early phases of English language learning, Chinese ELLs' understanding and application of hedging devices may be much better. Based on the analysis of the research findings in this article, it is advisable for ESL/EFL teachers in secondary schools and universities in China to receive professional training about hedges so that they may be more likely to provide consistent guidance for Chinese ELLs to distinguish between informal hedges and formal ones. In addition, previous research (You, 2004; Steinman, 2003) have shown that instructors in Chinese colleges and universities seldom have sufficient time to give feedback to individual students who are struggling in English academic writing.

According to Steinman's (2003) research, as to students who learn English as an L2 in a non-Anglophone environment, the time these students spent in class for English learning and writing practices is way too little for these students to fully digest all class materials, let alone becoming critical thinkers and mastering the art of writing academically in a second language. For hedges, as a kind of rhetorical strategy that requires speakers and writers to flexibly use them in a series of forms and functions in a variety of contexts, educators need to consider developing ways to help college-level Chinese ELLs use time both in class and after class to form a deeper understanding of hedges. Small-class teaching, teaching assistants, English writing centers and in-class group works or peer reviews are a number of ways ESL/EFL teachers and school administrators could consider to use in order to help college-level Chinese ELLs hone their hedging skills and many other English academic writing techniques.

Grading in writing examinations is another aspect which educators may consider to

reform for improving college-level Chinese ELLs' hedging skills. Kirkpatrick and Xu (2012) pointed out that the Chinese college entrance exams set great impacts on students' further learning after entering universities. In higher education, most Chinese universities continue to provide undergraduate students (including non-English majors) English courses, and there is still a national exam, College English Test-4 (hereafter CET-4), which also "emphasizes on grammar drilling" but "overlooks academic writing" (Cai, 2017, p. 127). Thus, it is advisable for Chinese educators to view the testing culture in Chinese schools wisely. It may not be possible to change the examination-oriented L2 teaching in a very short period, but textbook authors, curriculum designers, examiners and evaluators may reconsider the significance of hedging devices and set new grading standards for English academic writing tests in China with a greater emphasis on the appropriate use of hedges.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review showed that when globally viewing ELLs' use of hedging devices, there are a number of common challenges all these L2 learners face in their learning of hedging in English. Both pragmalinguistic factors such as limited L2 proficiency and negative L1 transfer and sociopragmatic issues such as the conflicts between learners' home culture and the western culture related to hedges need to be carefully examined when teaching ELLs hedging devices. In this literature review, in order to explore more potential ways to help college-level Chinese ELLs learn hedges in academic English, I added more analyses and interpretations related to Chinese English learning contexts. The findings and discussions showed that L2 writing instructions, textbooks, grading and curriculum need to be further improved with serious considerations of Chinese language learners' linguistic and

cultural knowledge. Future researchers could conduct more longitudinal research to study how educational practices based on existing theories of hedging influence college-level Chinese ELLs' use of hedges. By tracking these learners' use of hedges, we may have a deeper understanding of ELLs' use of hedges and find out most effective solutions to deal with challenges encountered by both teachers and learners in English academic writing classrooms in China. Furthermore, this literature review indicated that there is a need for future research to investigate in what ways educators in Anglophone countries can gain a deeper understanding of ELLs' use of hedges with sufficient knowledge about these learners' language and cultural experiences in their previous lives. In this way, ELLs, especially those who have difficulties in being adapted to a new environment away from their home, may gain more effective supports from their teachers and be more motivated to learn hedges and other English academic writing skills. Mastering hedges in English academic writing bring benefits to both ELLs' academic lives and their social lives in Anglophone societies. Thus, this literature review along with future research may help ELLs not only become more successful in academic settings but also better participate in new societies and cultures.

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