

**The Pragmatic Development of Hedging in
EFL Learners**

EFL學生緩衝語的語用發展

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Abstract

This cross-sectional study distances itself a bit away from the traditional crosscultural and contrastive interlanguage pragmatics, to go beyond interlanguage speech acts and discourse to investigate EFL learners' pragmatic development in hedging, an ability in mitigating speech acts or discourse. 211 Chinese Mainland students at junior-high, senior-high, and university levels participated in the study, and the data were collected with open written questionnaires, oral interviews, and organized oral debates.

Results show that the major hedging categories elicited from the EFL learners are quantificational approximators, performative shields, modal shields, pragmatic-marker hedges, and other syntactic and discoursal hedging strategies. While each category develops in its own way, these categories have shown a sequential developmental pattern, roughly simplified as a route starting from performative *I think*, to modal shields, to quantificational approximators, to other performative shields, to pragmatic-marker hedges, and finally arriving at hedge clusters. Their sociopragmatic hedging awareness also develops along with their pragmalinguistic hedging devices: in the early stage the learners tend to emphasize rather than mitigate their speech acts or discourse, which gradually gives way to an incongruent combination of intensifiers and mitigators, showing an increased hedging awareness but incompetent hedging system. It is at the university level that the learners develop both a high awareness of hedging and a congruent and harmonic hedging system. Therefore, the hedging effect increases over the stages, but even at the higher stage, the hedging effect is merely medium ranged.

In spite of the developments, the EFL learners habitually fall back on *I think* and a few top hedges (e.g., *maybe*), regardless of their proficiencies. This has been characterized as one of the most distinctive features for the EFL hedges, and is perhaps the way EFL learners use hedges. However, their dependency on *I think* decreases as their English proficiency increases, suggesting that other hedges are gaining chances to develop.

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