



A Functional Analysis of Hedges in Teacher Talk

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Abstract

Teacher talk considerably contributes to teacher-student interaction and the application of hedges in teacher talk can lead to their negotiation of meaning as well as be the samples for students to learn a second language. It is intended to approach hedges from the perspective of three metafunctions under the framework of systemic-functional grammar and reveal how and why hedges can figure in the teacher-student interaction in the classroom context. The registerial characteristics of hedges imply the pedagogical importance concerning teachers' roles and students' language proficiency.

Key words: Teacher talk; Hedges; Metafunctions

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INTRODUCTION

The dynamic process of classroom interaction is of crucial importance to second language education and teacher-student interaction as a major medium to instruct English and evaluate students' linguistic ability is distinctive in registerial characteristics. Wen and Xia (2014) postulate that teachers should prioritize their roles on behalf of the promoters to devise and exert the learning environment to adapt to students' needs. The context of situation in classroom communication can be approached from the perspective of systemic-functional grammar concerning

field, tenor and mode, which focus on three metafunctions under the Hallidayan framework. Systemic-functional linguistics holds tremendous influence on classroom discourse (Hu et al., 2005), which does not isolate teachers and students but delve into the teaching exchange. Besides, the interactional sequence concluded by Sinclair & Coulthard (1975) involves three moves of Initiation, Response and Follow-up and it is still undergoing changes. The IRF sequence reveals the features of classroom exchange that teachers must maximally activate and motivate students in their interaction and thus teacher talk should be tactfully conducted.

Teacher-student interaction is centered on the negotiation of meaning, which is a process of face-to-face communication constructed between teachers' meanings and students' understandings (Jiang, 2006). Undoubtedly, teachers should exert optimal control over the structure and content in teacher talk for their comparatively higher status in power relations with students. Hedges as a linguistic as well as a pedagogical strategy can be widely applied by teachers in the process of communication for the sake of students-centered learning environment. First and foremost, they can be explicitly or implicitly used in teachers' assessment of students' performance, which can be more accurate and objective in so far as they can save the other party's face regarding students' affect and learning efficacy. Second, teacher talk accompanied with the application of hedges can elicit students' further response and kindle their initiative in their turns of negotiation of meaning. Third, Brown (1979) expounds that "learning to be imprecise" is one important aspect of SLA, and the teaching of vague expressions and their appropriate use can be conducted in teacher-student interaction. Moreover, Channell (1994, p.205) asserts that vague language and contexts are interrelated, so it is necessary that specific guidance be provided in the negotiation of meaning for students to ensure the relationship of hedges and the specific setting.

Hedges have long been studied from multiple perspectives of semantics, pragmatics and cognitive linguistics, which have been expanding the research domain of hedges, whereas systemic-functional linguistics that is closely related to language teaching has not been fully employed in the study of hedges. In addition, hedges are generally delineated on the pivot of “fuzzy” and the concept of hedges appears to have been spanning from morphemes to clauses and from form to function. On the other hand, the Hallidayan framework can also shed light on the study of the linguistic device, which is comparatively more systematic as an integral whole. Halliday and Matthiessen (1999) do not try to define or delimit the place of semantic indeterminacy in our overall construal of experience but they assert that they “try to embody a general awareness of indeterminacy in our overall interpretative frame”. Moreover, as yet the functional study of hedges are mostly confined to the interpersonal metafunction, and that can be complemented and furthered in the realization of the three metafunctions at the strata of language.

1. THE REALIZATION OF METAFUNCTIONS THROUGH HEDGES

1.1 Ideational Metafunction

Halliday (1994) assumes that the ideational meaning is language as representation, including both experience of what is around us in the outside world and experience inside us. “We can express what we have said about the content of clause in terms of processes involving participants in certain circumstances” (Thompson, 1996). It appears that interlocutors can often resort to hedges with respect to processes, participants and circumstantial elements in the transitivity system. “We take indeterminacy as a normal and necessary feature of an evolved and functioning semiotic system, which should be built in our ways of representing and interpreting language” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999). Accordingly, more often than not the embodiment and construal of experience cannot be isolated from the application of hedges. Besides, Halliday (1994) asserts that meaning is choice, and a language or any other semiotic system is interpreted as networks of interlocking options. The intensive use of hedges in teacher talk serves the teacher-student communication which is intended to adapt the negotiation of meaning to pedagogical needs.

1.1.1 The Emphasis on Processes

Halliday and Matthiessen (2008) categorize processes into six types and in the special context of classroom discourse mental processes and relational processes predominate in teachers’ feedback to students’ response. As is suggested, the verbs like *guess*, *suppose* or *think* often function as the predicates in the clauses and the emphasis on the process

of cognition in the formative assessment of students’ learning performances suggests the dynamic yet reserved evaluation in teacher-student interaction. Likewise, relational process is also widely used in teachers’ feedback, i.e. the linking verbs like *seem*, *appear*, etc. Teachers can moderate their tone in making judgment on the fact and shield the imposing threat to student’s positive face.

E.g. (1) *I believe* Cathy has more to say to us.

(2) *I suppose* it is not close to the right answer.

(3) *Well*, it *seems* that this exercise is a little bit difficult for you; do you think so?

The choice of the foregoing hedges has realized the meaning potential in the context of classroom talk. Furthermore, teachers and students are not confined to the mechanical and procedural ask-and-answer, but empower the talk with more scope for further negotiation of meaning, even though teachers bear the definite assessment on the classroom performance. The intentional use of hedges in the moves of classroom talk highlights the importance of hedges in language learning regarding learning motivation. Besides, since the simulated communication activities between teachers and students predominate the whole class and teachers more often than not have to tackle the superior power distance over students, the absolute obedience of students often stand in the way of classroom talk. The linguistics device of hedges can dilute the power of teachers over students in English-learning classroom and present what real communication should be carried out between conversationalists. In this sense, teachers are not expected to make the impassive assessment or evaluation but a more inspiring prompter of discourse.

1.1.2 Circumstantial Elements

Halliday (1994) argues that circumstantial elements occur freely in all types of process with essentially the same significance wherever they occur. They are typically expressed as either adverbial groups or prepositional phrases and then contribute to the construal of the clause as representation. In other words, they are in a sense derived from the processes especially relational process and verbal process. It is noted that hedges consist of the expressions concerning the extent of the process or the angle of the utterance.

(4) I do agree with you *in some degree*.

(5) *According to* Longman Dictionary, this word has another definition.

The prepositional phrase *in some degree* in (4) reveals the teacher is reluctant to give an absolutely positive response and the vague assessment is likely to arouse the next round of negotiation. The seemingly affirmative feedback implies the communication strategy in teacher-student interaction to maximally motivate the students rather than frustrate them, and the other way round the students can understand the distinction triggered by the

hedge and later master it. As regards (5), teachers are often authoritative instructors in class, and they must be more prudent to confirm their remarks. The specification of the viewpoint and the rigor in wording however changes the truth-conditions and thus makes the speaker detached. On the other hand, students are often motivated to consider the significance of the hedges and then the sequence of teacher-student exchange can be carried on.

1.2 Interpersonal Metafunction

Halliday (1994) delineates that interpersonal meaning is language as interaction, and interpersonal metafunction of language expresses the speaker's intrusion in the speech event, that is, attitudes, evaluations, judgments, expectations and demands. "So far as 'system' is concerned, the teaching objective is to develop students' meaning potentials and thus they can choose the right wording in the context" (Zhang et al., 2005). A speaker as an intruder always undertakes both the speech role and the social role. Accordingly, the registerial characteristics of classroom discourse reveal the power relationship between teachers and students, whereas the students-centered and teacher-led classroom learning mode requires more participation of students. Speakers can attempt to influence others' attitudes and action by means of the vague expressions which can make the propositions or the proposals fuzzier and create more opportunities for students to initiate or respond in their negotiation. Every move on the part of teachers in the exchange is intended for students and in this sense teachers' roles are redefined.

Language learners are always in the continuum to natural language and hedges in teacher talk can still encourage students even though their answers are not satisfying. Moreover, teachers can play the role as a cooperater and participant in the sequence of interaction, so they should moderate their tone in initiation and feedback, which both serve the creation of students-centered classroom discourse. The Hallidayan pattern correspondingly distinguishes the points and ends of the continuum, so polarity and modality are also reflected in meaning potentials. Polarity is the choice between positive and negative, while various kinds of indeterminacy fall in between which are known collectively as modality. Modality can be realized by a finite modal operator or a modal adjunct, so a modal verb, an adverb group or a prepositional phrase can figure in the interactive event as hedges to modify the proposition or the proposal.

(6) You *might* be confused by the two similar words.

(7) Here we *can* use an adjective, isn't it?

(8) What is showed in the presentation is *quite* right.

Example (6) is obviously extracted from a teacher's feedback. The teacher criticizes the student's error in the apparently quite moderate statement of the hedge *might* of low probability. Example (7) is a moderate requirement proposed by a teacher which is more indeterminate

by the hedge *can* and thus the tension in teacher-student interaction can be alleviated and blurred while students can better appreciate the distinction triggered by the hedge. The word *quite* in (8) as a mood adjunct emphasizes the degree of the affirmative statement. As is suggested by Channell (1994), the study of hedges can provide materials for language teaching, and the register of classroom discourse needs the teachers to accommodate themselves to the flexible use of hedges. The negotiable feedback projected by teachers can stimulate the participation on behalf of students, which lead them to discover and deduct the communicative functions in real communications. As Cheng (2009) points out, teachers and students can co-construct knowledge in the interactive communication.

1.3 Textual Metafunction

Textual metafunction creates relevance to context (Halliday, 1994), which reflects how the message is organized. The three strands of meaning are often combined in the semantic configuration and mapped on to one another to produce a single wording. Hedges cannot only figure in the experiential and interpersonal metafunction but also be the textual component. Teachers often implicitly indicate the intention in giving command, but students can infer from the hedges in relation to the context within which meaning is being exchanged.

It is assumed that thematic structure expresses the organization of the message by having a special status assigned to one part of it. Some hedges can be the components of the theme, as is "the element which serves as the point of departure of the message and that with which the clause is concerned" (Halliday, 1994). Some discourse signallers or modal adjuncts can realize certain prominent semantic features when they figure in thematic configuration, which needs further systematic exploitation in the study of teacher talk. Although they may not be obligatory in the theme as elements outside of the experiential structure of the clause, they can specify the details of the textual and interpersonal metafunction. Teachers can stress the semantic features when they are in the initial position, which can demonstrate their effects on the unfolding of the discourse.

As is suggested by Example (3), *well* can signal that a new movement is beginning and the transition in the feedback sounds indeterminate which can moderate the tone in expressing the attitude and judgment. As a matter of fact, the indirectness in teacher talk can reveal the dissatisfaction with students' performance and endeavor not to dispirit students. The apparently fuzzier feedback actually forcefully and tactfully suggests the changes of teachers' roles for the sake of the significance to students' affect in second language learning.

Some modal adjuncts can function as hedges in the thematic position, especially the adverbs and prepositional phrases that can indicate opinion, probability, usuality,

typicality, obviousness, etc.. The degrees of commitment to the proposition or proposal can be on a large scale strategically wielded by teachers, and the systematic study of hedges can be conducted with more importance attached to the application in the special register of teacher talk based on the systematic classification and delineation of the hedge-characterized elements.

2. THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF FUNCTIONAL STUDY ON HEDGES

2.1 To Make the Teacher-Talk Negotiable

The variables in the register of classroom talk suggest that hedges need to be employed by teachers to motivate the communicative dynamics in their interaction. Teachers should attach more importance to the strategies of initiation and feedback in teacher talk in case the classroom discussions are simplified by a single round of ask-and-answer between teachers and students. The proper use of hedges could empower the discourse turns and effectively meet the communicative needs. Teachers could wait, insinuate, imply the response by means of hedges and intentionally lead the students to cultivate the communicative competence. With the use of hedges, teachers can create more opportunities for the students to voice their ideas, which are currently often denied without the negotiable tolerance.

2.2 To Stimulate the Maximum Language Output by Students

Teachers contribute to language input for students in that their utterances present good samples and they often require students to model themselves on the examples. However, the absolute acceptance of the samples off the varied communicative activities cannot arouse the interest for language learning because the communicative motives are not highlighted but underplayed in classroom discourse. While the scope of negotiation is expanded in the simulated communication environment and the discourse turns are effectively extended, the students tend to achieve the maximum output. Meanwhile, students are not confined to what the teachers intend to say but how they utter it. In this process students can gradually enhance their awareness of the use of hedges and promote the language proficiency.

2.3 To Redefine the Roles of Teachers in Classroom Talk

Teachers should not be the absolute controllers or the authoritative assessors in classroom interaction, but the active interactants and consultants, who can motivate the students in speaking and thinking. Wen and Xia (2014) assert that teachers should be creators for a new learning paradigm and from the perspective both teachers and students should collaborate on the teaching process. While

teachers are trying to achieve the teaching objectives of an English class, they could diversify the wording, or rather, the realization of meaning. The use of hedges in teacher talk can enrich the interaction which could extend the traditional model of classroom talk. In addition, the traditional teacher-centered learning model could be practically moderated or transformed with the inquiring and negotiable communicative needs.

CONCLUSION

The theoretical framework of functional grammar acknowledges the vagueness in language use, which cast insight into the study of hedges. The special register of classroom discourse requires that teachers should adopt hedges effectively to meet the pedagogical needs, because it assigns value to the choice from the options of meaning potential. The realization of the choice on hedges demonstrates the mutual influence between teachers and students. By means of hedges of teachers could diversify the communication strategies and activate the classroom exchange.

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