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A Study on the Use of Hedges in English Writing of College Students at Different Levels*

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***Abstract*—This paper explored features of hedges in college students' English writing at different language levels and their differences from native students' writing. The 2000 writing texts by students from 3 key universities and 8 ordinary universities in Chongqing and Sichuan Province were offered by China Wordnet Company who initiated English writing campaign in 2016. The result showed that compared with native students, students from key and ordinary universities used more hedges, relied on a narrow range of hedges and offered stronger commitments to statements. Language level did not play a decisive role in these aspects.**

***Index Terms*—hedges, English writing, language level**

I. Introduction

Hedges can clearly convey the author's views and attitude towards the reader, which is very important in any form of writing (Hyland, 1998). Authors use hedges not only as a persuasion and interpersonal strategy to express skepticism, thereby reducing their own responsibility for a point of view, but also to express attitudes toward the reader's point of view (Milton & Hyland, 1999). The ability to correctly express doubts and affirmations in English is an important manifestation of the language ability of second language learners, but hedges are generally considered to be difficult for second language learners to master. Many foreign studies have explored second language learners' use of hedges (Hu et al., 1982; Allison, 1995, Hyland & Milton, 1997, Milton & Hyland, 1999, Chen, 2010). For example, Hu et al. (1982) found that compared with writings of native speakers, writings of Chinese second language learners appeared more direct and authoritative in tone, and used more modal words with strong tone. Allison (1995) also stated that L2 learners in Hong Kong often made unreasonably strong assertions. Hyland and Milton (1997) compared the use of hedges between Hong Kong middle school students and British middle school students at different levels (divided into A to F grades, F stands for failing grades), and the results showed that the higher the level, the closer it was to native language students. Low-level students used more affirmative words, while A and B students used more words expressing possibility. Milton and Hyland (1999) examined the words expressing doubt and affirmation in the writings of native language students and non-native language students. The study found that Chinese non-native language students often inappropriately overused prescriptive and authoritative assertions in argumentative essays. Chen (2010) compared five different educational levels (high school, college English level 4, college English level 6, and primary level of English majors) by analyzing the English corpus of Chinese learners and the native language corpus (BNC academic text sub-corpus) in order to discover differences in the use of modal words between Chinese English learners and native speakers. The study found that there were significant differences in the use of modal words between Chinese English learners and native language authors, with native language authors using almost three times as many modal words as Chinese English learners. An analysis of the writings of Chinese learners of five different levels found that as the level increased, they increased their awareness of using modal words, which were closer to the essays of native language authors.

In China, the research on hedges mainly focuses on academic papers. For example, Xu et al. (2014) analyzed the similarities and differences in the use of hedges in English scientific research papers of Chinese mainland scholars and English native speakers. The results showed that the proportion of hedges used by mainland Chinese scholars was slightly higher than that of native speakers. Wang et al. (2016) analyzed the use of hedges between Chinese science and engineering doctoral students' academic writing and international journal scholars' papers, and found that the hedges used by science and engineering students were slightly higher than those used in journal papers. Chinese students are more likely to use fixed and limited hedges. There are relatively fewer studies on the use of hedges in Chinese college students' writing, with one exception being Chen and Huang (2015) who compared the differences in the use of hedges in English newspaper editorials and advanced English learners' eight compositions, and found that Chinese advanced English learners were more inclined to use hedges in their compositions, but the type of hedges they used was relatively simple. In general, previous studies have found that Chinese scholars overused certain hedges.

So far, few studies have considered language proficiency, that is, comparing the differences in the use of hedges among students with different language proficiencies. Hyland and Milton (1997) and Chen (2010)'s research provided

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great inspiration for this research. However, Hyland and Milton (1997) studied secondary school students in Hong Kong, while Chen (2010) compared Chinese students' compositions with published academic texts by native-language authors. The two texts belong to different genres and are not comparable, as Hyland and Milton (1997) mentioned, it is inappropriate to compare non-native language students' writings with the unrealistically high standard writings of "experts", because "experts" academic research texts are rigorously reviewed and revised before publication. In view of this, on the basis of previous research, this paper compares the use of hedges in English writings by students in key universities and ordinary universities, and compares it with the writings of native language student to explore the use of hedges by college students at different levels in order to provide some inspiration for English writing teaching.

II. Research Design

A. Research Questions

The questions that this study intends to answer are: 1) What is the difference between the hedges used by students from key universities and those used by ordinary university students? 2) What is the difference between the hedges used by students of key and ordinary universities on the one hand and the hedges used by native language students on the other hand?

B. Research Material

The data analyzed in this article comes from the writings collected by a writing campaign held by China Wordnet Company in 2016. The title of the essay is "How will AI affect our life?". The title has a paragraph in English that introduces the background of Alphago (artificial intelligence program) defeating the Korean Go master Lee Sedol, and requires students to write an argumentative essay on the impact of AI on human beings, with a word count of 180-400 words. This paper selects 1,000 writings from 3 key universities in Sichuan and Chongqing, with a total of 240,383 words; 1,000 writings from 8 ordinary universities in Chongqing, with a total of 184,973 words. We then compare the results with the Leuven Native Language Composition Corpus (LONCESS). We choose LONCESS as the reference corpus, because LONCESS contains the writings of British and American college students. Because some of the writings of British college students are literary essays, this paper selects the writings of American college students, all of which are argumentative essays, which are comparable to those of Chinese college students in subject matter. There are 176 argumentative writings selected from American college students with a total of 150,591 words.

C. Research Object

Hedges used for comparison were selected from Hyland and Milton's (1997) classification of hedges. Hyland and Milton (1997) classified hedges into five categories according to their degree of certainty: Certainty, Probability, Possibility, Usuality and Approximation. The author admitted that this distribution is somewhat arbitrary (Hyland & Milton, 1997), and since Chinese college students often do not distinguish between probability and possibility, we combined them into one category, called Possibility. Hyland and Milton (1997) divided hedges into five categories according to their grammatical categories: modal verbs, adjectives, nouns, verbs and adverbs. Considering the reality of Chinese college students' writings, this study added another category: phrase. Finally, from the list of Hyland and Milton (1997), the hedges that may be most commonly used by L2 learners were selected as research object. The modal verbs such as *can/could/can't /couldn't/should/shouldn't, must/mustn't* were not selected in this study because these modal verbs can express obligation meaning as well as modal meaning, and manually excluding obligation meaning in large amounts of data is time-consuming and almost impossible to accomplish. The following table listed categories and examples of hedges for analysis.

TABLE 1
HEDGES FOR ANALYSIS

category	modal verb	adjective	noun	verb	adverb	phrase
Certainty	will, won't	certain, sure, clear		think , believe	actually, certainly, definitely , clearly , obviously , essentially, indeed, surely, undoubtedly, quite	there is no doubt, in fact, of course, as we (all) know, as far as I am concerned, in my opinion
Possibility	would, may, might, wouldn't	probable, possible likely	possibility probability	seem, argue, appear, indicate, predict, assume, claim, doubt	probably, rarely, possibly, generally, perhaps, relatively	generally speaking
Usuality					always, never, often, frequently, usually, sometimes	
Approximation					about, almost, around	to a certain extent

D. Research Tools

The research tool used in this paper is the corpus analysis software AntConc.

E. Research Process

To answer questions 1 and 2, we used AntConc to extract all concordances of hedges, and then manually excluded concordances that do not contain modal meaning (e.g., we can *clear* our room), and finally calculate its absolute frequency and relative frequency. The absolute frequency is the number of times the hedges appear in the corpus. The calculation method of the relative frequency is: the original frequency of the hedges / the total number of words in the corpus * 100,000.

III. RESEARCH RESULT

Table 2 showed the total word count of hedges in the three corpora.

TABLE 2
THE TOTAL NUMBER OF HEDGES IN THE THREE CORPORA

hedges	Key university students' writings	ordinary university students' writings	Native language students' writings
total word count	6937 (2.89%)	4985 (2.69%)	2737 (1.82%)

From Table 2, we can see that the proportions of hedges used by Chinese college students in the entire corpus are 2.89% (key universities) and 2.69% (ordinary universities), and the proportions of hedges used by American college students in the entire corpus is 1.82%. Chinese students use more hedges than native language students, and students from key universities use slightly more hedges than ordinary university students. It can be seen that compared with native language students, students in both key universities and ordinary universities use more hedges, and students in key universities use more hedges. This also confirms the previous hypothesis of overuse, that is, Chinese students and scholars as a whole overuse hedges.

Below, we extract top 10 most commonly used hedges. To make the data comparable, we calculate the relative frequency of hedges and the results are shown below:

TABLE 3
THE MOST COMMONLY USED HEDGES IN THE THREE CORPORA

Key university students' writings			Ordinary university students' writings			Native language students' writings		
ranking	hedges	relative frequency	ranking	hedges	relative frequency	ranking	hedges	relative frequency
1	will	1283	1	will	1342	1	would	428
2	think	304	2	think	372	2	will	321
3	may	278	3	may	171	3	may	133
4	believe	108	4	believe	111	4	think	88
5	would	103	5	would	89	5	believe	73
6	in my opinion	97	6	always	58	6	never	58
7	never	67	7	as far as I am concerned	48	7	claim	58
8	always	64	8	won't	34	8	often	50
9	possible	41	9	there is no doubt	33	9	always	48
10	won't	35	10	as we (all) know	32	10	seem	43
TOTAL		2380			2290			1300

Hedges used in the two Chinese college students' corpora are roughly the same, but the order is slightly different. The hedges that Chinese students have in common with native language students are: *would, will, may, think, believe, always.* It is worth noting that the frequency of the modal verb *will* in Chinese college student corpus is about 4 times that of its native language student corpus, while the modal verb *would* appears in the native language student corpus about four times as often as its Chinese college student corpus. This trend is basically consistent with the findings of Hyland and Milton (1997), who found that the frequency of *will* in non-native language compositions is twice as high as in native language compositions, while *would* is the opposite. Their explanation for this is that second language learners tend to make more confident prediction, while native language learners tend to predict tentatively (Hyland & Milton, 1997). Students in key universities use *will* slightly less than students in ordinary universities, and use *would* more than students in ordinary universities. The frequency of the modal verb *may* in Chinese college students corpus is higher than that of native language students, which is basically consistent with the research results of Hyland and Milton (1997), who found that the frequency of *may* in non-native language compositions appeared twice as often in native language compositions, and it appeared to be an idiom used by non-native language students to express possibility. Students from key universities use *may* slightly more than students at ordinary universities. The occurrence frequency of the verbs *think* and *believe* in the corpus of Chinese college students is higher than that of native language students, which are almost the main verbs used by Chinese college students to express affirmative meaning. Students at key universities use *think* and *believe* slightly less than students at ordinary universities. The high-frequency hedge phrases commonly used by Chinese students, such as *in my opinion, as far as I am concerned*, etc., do not appear in the native language writings. Hedges such as *seem, often, claim* commonly used by native language students do not appear in Chinese college students' writings. It can be seen that the high-frequency hedges in native language writings are not completely consistent with the hedges commonly used by Chinese students. In addition, we found that the top 10 most commonly used hedges accounted for about 82% (key universities) and 85% (ordinary universities) of all the hedges used by Chinese college students, respectively. Hedges accounted for about 71% of all the hedges used by native language students. This shows that the Chinese college students heavily rely on a narrow range of hedges.

Next, we compare the distribution of hedges across grammatical categories in the three corpora.

TABLE 4
DISTRIBUTION OF HEDGES ACROSS SIX GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES IN THREE CORPORA

grammatical category	Key university students' writings	Ordinary university students' writings	Native language students' writings
modal verb	1726	1668	931
adjective	84	59	74
noun	14	7	6
verb	456	517	313
adverb	355	255	446
phrase	250	189	48

It can be seen from Table 4 that the all the students use modal verbs (especially *will, would, may*) the most, and Chinese college students, especially those from key universities, use more modal verbs. This is consistent with the findings of Hyland and Milton (1997), which may result from an overemphasis of modal verbs in second language writing textbooks (Hyland, 1994). In Chinese writing classes, teachers may also overemphasize the use of modal verbs to express modal meaning to students. After modal verbs, Chinese students rely more on verbs (especially *think* and *believe*) rather than adverbs to express modal meanings, while native language students are just the opposite. Hyland and Milton (1997) also found that native speakers used more and varied adverbs. Students from key universities use

fewer verbs and more adverbs than students from ordinary universities. In this respect, students from key universities are closer to native speakers. Nouns and adjectives are used less in the three corpora, and Chinese college students use more phrases (especially *in my opinion, as far as I am concerned*) than native language students. These phrases have been deeply rooted in the minds of Chinese college students and have become their fixed phrases for expressing their views.

Below, we compare the degree to which hedges represent certainty across the three corpora.

TABLE 5
THE AFFIRMATIVE DEGREE OF HEDGE EXPRESSIONS IN THE THREE CORPORA

The degree of certainty	Key university students' writings	Ordinary university students' writings	Native language students' writings
Certainty	2122	2130	668
Possibility	566	415	896
Usuality	165	133	212
Approximation	33	16	41

From Table 5, we can see that Chinese college students use far more hedges expressing certainty than those expressing possibility. This is consistent with previous studies (e.g. Hyland & Milton, 1997; Milton & Hyland, 1999; Chen, 2010) that many L2 learners often used stronger assertions and had a more authoritative tone than native language authors. Chinese college students use more than three times as many hedges to express Certainty as native language students, and students from key universities use slightly less hedges to express Certainty than students from ordinary universities. Native language students use more hedges to indicate Possibility, Usuality and Approximation than Chinese college students. Students from key universities use more hedges expressing Possibility, Usuality and Approximation than students from ordinary universities. In this regard, students from key universities are closer to native language students. This is consistent with the findings of Hyland and Milton (1997), who found that students with higher proficiency were closer to native speakers, while students with lower proficiency used more hedges expressing certainty. Among the hedges expressing the Usuality, Chinese college students use *always* (64 in key universities, 58 in ordinary universities) and *never* (67 in key universities, 32 in ordinary universities) the most, while native language students use *never* (58) and *often* (50) the most. For examples:

- AI will **always** be under mankind's control and be utilized by mankind.(key universities)
- The artificial intelligence will be enduring technology of being eliminated by The Time and **never** change. (key universities)
- This event showed that the AI **will** have human's thought and wisdom one day. (key universities)
- I **think** school life will be different from now.(ordinary universities)
- I **believe** it will be the direction of the future. (ordinary universities)
- If euthanasia was ever argued as an act of consequence it **probably would** not have the impact that it has by handling it a values issue. (Native)
- In this case, criminals **seem** to model their behavior after the state. (Native)
- Forty years ago, starting the day off in a public school **often** meant reciting the pledge of allegiance and a group prayer. (Native)

From these examples, it can be seen that the tone of Chinese college students' writing is too affirmative, while the tone of native language students' writing is much softer.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper uses the network platform to collect students' writings, builds a corpus, and compares it with the native language corpus LONCESS in order to systematically analyze the use of hedges in the writings of Chinese students at different levels and find out the differences in the use of hedges from native language students. The research results show that: 1) Compared with native language students, Chinese college students as a whole overuse hedges in their writings, and students from key universities use slightly more hedges; 2) Compared with native language students, the hedges used by Chinese college students are more limited and they rely too much on modal verbs, that is, Chinese college students do not know how to properly use other grammatical categories (such as verbs, nouns, adverbs, etc.) to express doubts or uncertainty. Both students from key universities and ordinary universities have this problem; 3) Compared with native language students, Chinese college students from key universities and ordinary universities use more hedges to express Certainty, and use less hedges to express Possibility, Usuality and Approximation. Students from key universities use slightly more hedges to express Possibility, Usuality and Approximation. 4) Language proficiency does not play a big role here in distinguishing writings by students from key universities and students from ordinary universities, since both group of students shows similar tendency in the use of hedges, so it can be seen that hedges indeed pose great difficulties for students no matter what their language level is.

There may be two reasons for this phenomenon: first, as Hyland and Milton (1997) pointed out, Chinese writing tends to be more implicit, and Chinese students may mistakenly believe that English writing must be explicit and direct, so they may adopt a way of conveying meaning that can be overly direct and arbitrary. Second, in traditional writing classes, teachers hardly emphasize and guide students to use hedges correctly, and the existing writing teaching

materials lack this content, which makes it difficult for students to master the use of hedges (Milton & Hyland, 1999).

In 1997, Hyland and Milton found that non-native speaks in Hong Kong could not use epistemic devices appropriately in their writing. However, after 25 years, the situation does not see much improvement. According to our study, Chinese students both at key and ordinary universities do not know how to use hedges in their writing and their writing sounds assertive. That means hedges have not received adequate attention in English teaching, which for years have focused on vocabulary and sentence structure. The fact is that hedges can be acquired through effective teaching. As Hyland and Milton (1997) pointed out, explicit instruction may help students acquire the usage of hedges. In order to address this problem, teachers can start by explicitly teaching students the writing norms of English, in which the tone of possibility (rather than affirmation) and the expression of caution (rather than overconfidence) are appropriate, while the expression of strong imperative tone is considered offensive (Hyland, 2006, cited in Chen, 2010). Moreover, teachers can raise students' awareness of different degrees of probability by providing students with examples that convey Certainty, Possibility, Usuality and Approximation and tell students the difference between them. In addition, teachers can provide students with hedges in various grammatical categories, so that students can have a variety of hedges to convey modal meanings instead of excessively relying on modal verbs. Lastly, writing textbooks also need to address this inadequacy by adding relevant examples and exercises concerning hedges in their materials. Only through efforts from all sides, can students master this device and communicate appropriately in English discourse community.

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