



METADISCOURSE MARKERS OF HEDGING IN CLASSROOM INTERACTION: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study investigates the types of hedging devices employed in classroom interactions, the metadiscourse markers or linguistic items that are used to realize hedging and the pragmatic roles hedging plays in the interactions. Hedging is basically used to mitigate the force of illocution in a speech act and to soften the certainty or commitment of a speaker to the value of proposition. It has come to be accepted as an indispensable tool in interpersonal communication. Data for the study were 30 minutes each of 18 lessons of four English language tutors in a College of Education in the Western North Region of Ghana. The interactions of both tutors and students were recorded. In all, 540 minutes of classroom interactions were recorded using audio-tapes and note taking during the second semester of the 2020/2021 academic year. The data were analysed based on the framework of Salager-Mayer's (1995) taxonomy of hedges cited in Mansour and Alghazo (2021). The results reveal that 10 classes of hedging devices are adopted in classroom interaction, the predominant ones being the modal auxiliary verbs, modal lexical verbs and adverbial phrases/approximates. It was also discovered that hedging devices are used for purposes such as placing emphasis on a point, attaining politeness and expressing lack of commitment to a proposition. However, given the limited number of teachers and classroom lessons processed in this study, the findings need to be confirmed by the analysis of a wider corpus of classroom interactions.

Keywords: Hedging; metadiscourse; illocution; proposition; interpersonal communication

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1. Introduction

Teaching is not just the exchange of information on a subject between the teacher and the student, but also, the careful use of interactive metadiscourse markers to show one's commitment to the value of proposition in the interactive process (Alward et al, 2012). In classroom interaction, and academic discourse generally, one is often cautious in expressing their intellect and these two key qualities are best packaged using hedging (Hyland, 1996). Particularly in this era where advocacy for a student-centered approach to teaching and learning is heightened, the interaction during teaching has even become more non-negotiable. Hence, the ability to express oneself through the appropriate use of words is key (Lomotey, 2021). It is in this light that the pragmatic competencies of both teachers and students have become important skills in the classroom. In order for one to effectively communicate their thoughts and transfer/exchange knowledge and information as what happens in the typical classroom, it is imperative for them to master pragmatic competencies. One of such pragmatic competencies that must be mastered for an effective interaction is hedging (Faris, 2015). Hedges are intended to soften the certainty or absoluteness of a proposition (Cruse, 2006). Consequently, an inappropriate or wrong usage of hedges during interaction could make a speaker appear impolite, arrogant or offensive (Gribanova & Gaidukova, 2019). In fact, unhedged statements could even be treated as “intellectually dishonest” (Ustyantseva, 2019, p. 85).

Lakeoff (1972) is the first to introduce the term *hedging* and, since then, language scholars have defined it in different ways (Alward et al, 2012; Rezanejad et al, 2015). In the original definition, Lakeoff (1972, p. 195) posits that “hedges are words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy”. Similarly, Lyon (1977, p.797) provides one of the early and well-known definitions of hedges indicating that hedging is “any utterance in which the speaker explicitly qualifies his commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed by the sentence he utters in an epistemically modal or moralized sentence”. Generally, hedges are linguistic resources which are employed in spoken and written discourses to ‘manage’ the tone, attitude and information therein (Getkham, 2011). Hedging involves employing linguistic devices in a manner that indicates that “a statement is based on plausible reasoning rather than certain knowledge, and allow readers the freedom to dispute it” (Hyland, 1998, p. 4).

Afshar and Bagherieh (2014) attempt to break down the earlier definitions of hedging by explaining that hedges are linguistic devices that are employed in interactions to perform two main functions; to not express a commitment categorically and, second, to not commit a speaker fully to the truth of a proposition. AL-Jawadi (2022, p.47) intimates that hedging is related to matters such as “lack of full commitment, vagueness, politeness, tentativeness, approximation, possibility, indeterminacy and indirectness”. These show that hedging is adopted mainly to minimize the force of illocution in a speech act. Hence, speakers and writers are able to use hedging to present their propositions cautiously, and not absolutely. The belief is that, in interactions, especially in academia, objectivity is key and one of the important requirements for achieving objectivity is tentativeness, which largely relies on the use of

hedging (Rezanejad et al, 2015). Indeed, hedging is important such that its overuse, underuse or misuse can lead to distortion of information (Alward et al, 2012).

There is currently no unanimity on the exact linguistic resources to be referred or classified as hedges because hedging can be expressed using various grammatical devices, syntactic structures and lexical items depending on what and how a speaker or writer intends their message to be conveyed and interpreted (Samaie et al, 2014). This accounts for the reason it is difficult to find any empirical universal classification and categorization of hedges that includes and describes all the existing forms of hedging devices. Even though it is generally difficult to identify a universally accepted classification of hedging, studies such as Alward (2014), Argina and Ijabah (2022), Rosanti and Jaelani (2016) and Zakia (2018) are consensual in their findings that the nine (9) types of hedging illustrated in Table 1 below have attained some relative universality in language studies.

<i>Classification</i>	<i>Examples of words</i>	<i>Sample Sentences</i>
<i>Modal auxiliary verb</i>	<i>Can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should</i>	<i>'The decision may affect all the students'</i>
<i>Lexical verb</i>	<i>Seem, appear, assume, suppose, suggest, estimate</i>	<i>'The results appear authentic.'</i>
<i>Adjective</i>	<i>(un) likely, probable, possible, certain,</i>	<i>'It is likely to rain today'</i>
<i>Noun</i>	<i>Suggestion, assumption, possibility, probability, belief</i>	<i>'The belief is that everybody will pay the money'</i>
<i>Adverb</i>	<i>Virtually, perhaps, probably, generally, presumably</i>	<i>'They probably didn't know who the headmaster was.'</i>
<i>Approximates</i>	<i>Sometimes, occasionally, normally, frequently</i>	<i>'I often visit the widow'</i>
<i>"If" clause</i>	<i>if anything, if true</i>	<i>'If true, all of them will be imprisoned.'</i>
<i>Compound hedges</i>	<i>appears probable, may be suggested, seems reasonable,</i>	<i>'It seems reasonable to report in the afternoon.'</i>
<i>Fillers</i>	<i>you know, you see, by the way, sort of, well, hmm, uhm</i>	<i>'You see, entering the room was a wrong decision.'</i>

Table 1: *Classification of Hedges* (Rosanti & Jaelani, 2016; Zakia, 2018)

This study is a contribution to the scholarly attempts at describing hedging devices employed in relation to the illocutionary force in speech acts during interactions. The study focuses on teacher-student interaction in the classroom. The aim is to identify and describe the linguistic resources that are employed to serve as hedges in the interactions of teachers and students. Beyond identifying and describing the hedges, the study also examines the functions or roles that hedges are employed to play in the classroom interactions consistent with Samaie et al's (2014) argument that a holistic investigation into hedging should look at the lexical/structural forms of the hedging devices and describe their functions as well. In order to achieve these aims, the study is guided by two questions;

1. *What linguistic devices are used to realize the types of hedging employed in classroom interaction?*
2. *What pragmatic functions do hedges perform in classroom interaction?*

2. Literature Review

Hedging has received a remarkable interest in the literature due to its importance (Al-Mudhaffari et al, 2020). Hedges are the most frequently used metadiscourse devices in second/foreign language usage (Hinkel, 2005; Hyland, 2005; Min et al, 2019). The studies of Hinkel (2005), Hyland (2005) and Back (2011) even confirm the overuse of hedging in foreign language usage. Studies on hedging cut across non-native writing (Loi, Lim & Wharton 2016; Yagız & Demir 2014), undergraduate students' writings (Ho & Li 2018; Lee & Deakin 2016), post-graduate essays (Hyland, 2010; Risda, Effendi Kadarisman & Astuti, 2018.), academic disciplines (Hyland, 1998; Youssef, 2016) and cultures (Mur-Dueñas, 2011; Mu et al. 2015). All these studies underscore the relevance of hedging and confirm that hedging strategy is an essential convention in written and spoken discourses.

Several studies on hedging focus on reporting the frequency of occurrence of the hedging resources in discourses. For instance, Aditama (2018) recorded the frequency of hedges in 50 journal articles authored by native and non-native users of English. The study found that the native speakers had high frequency in using writer-oriented hedging devices while the non-native speakers show high frequency in using reader-oriented hedging devices. Departing from Aditama's (2018) native and non-native usage of hedging, Argina and Ijabah (2022) did a frequency study of male and female usage of hedging. The study examined a corpus of 40 research articles authored by male and female postgraduate EFL students in India. The study found that male students in India used hedging devices more frequently than female students, however, the study could not determine whether one's gender directly influenced his/her frequency of use of hedging devices. In other words, it is unknown whether one's gender influences their frequent use of hedging or otherwise. Regardless, the study confirmed that there was significant influence of gender on the use of some types of hedging such as quantifiers, adjectives, approximates, adverbs and epistemic lexical verbs.

In the Ghanaian context, Musa (2014) and Edusei (2015) focused on hedging in academic writing. Musa investigated the frequency of hedging in English and Chemistry Master's theses at the University of Cape Coast. Forty (40) theses were selected for the corpus, 20 each for English and Chemistry. The introduction and discussion sections were the focus of examination. The study found that lexical hedges were used more than non-lexical hedges in both disciplines. It was found that modal verbs were the most used while nouns were the least used, in both disciplines. Edusei (2015) also examined 24 theses and 40 research articles with a total corpus of 700,082 word tokens. The results showed that epistemic modals have the highest frequency of use while epistemic nouns are the least used.

Departing from recording frequencies, other studies also focused on the functions of hedging in discourses. For instance, the studies of Coates (2013) and Chai (2021) revealed that there are four fundamental functions of hedging; to avoid expert status, showing sensitivity to the feelings of others, to express doubt and measured confidence and, finally, researching for the appropriate lexical item. Teng's (2015) study on hedging in the inaugural speeches of American presidents also found three pragmatic functions of hedging; avoiding absoluteness, achieving politeness and accomplishing tactfulness. In a similar study, Marta's (2017) investigation into the polypragmatic functions of hedges in research articles confirms that hedges are adopted in discourse as a politeness strategy. It must be underscored that different scholars have examined the functions of hedges in different discourses. However, there is yet to be sufficient studies on the functions of hedges in classroom interaction. For instance, Salager-Meyer (1994) examined the functions of hedges in medical discourse, Ghazanfari and Abassi (2012) looked at academic discourse, and Taweel et al (2011) and Al-Rashady (2012) focused on political discourse. Similarly, Elheky (2018) focused on social and business discourses while the studies of Rabab'ah and Abu Rumman (2015) and Idowu and Owuye (2019) examined the functions of hedges in political speeches. It is obvious that studies on the use of hedges relative to classroom interaction have received minimal attention. This study examines the roles that hedges are employed to perform during teacher-student interactions in the classroom with support from evidences and excerpts from the available data.

The existing literature on hedging shows clearly that studies on types of hedges and their functions in classroom interaction need more attention, especially in an ESL context. The current study therefore would contribute to the discussions on hedging, in terms of the linguistic realizations of hedging devices and the pragmatic functions they play in classroom interactions. The earlier studies focused predominantly on written discourses. The few studies on spoken discourses examined political speeches. The interactions in the classroom have not received sufficient scholarly attention relative to hedging, despite the fact that classroom discourse remains one of the important discourses in language studies. It is this gap that the study fills.

3. Method

This study is a descriptive qualitative study. Departing from the earlier studies where the frequency or number of occurrence of the hedging devices has been the major focus, this study focuses on identifying and describing the linguistic resources that are employed to serve as hedges in classroom interactions and their functions. The descriptive qualitative design is not statistically-based and does not rely on figures and numbers to draw conclusions. It rather borders on deductive reasoning, engages in a critical description of a phenomenon, underscores relevant thematic patterns and draws empirical conclusions (Rockhmania, 2012).

To obtain data, 18 real-time lessons of all the four English language tutors of a College of Education in the Western North region of Ghana were recorded through audio-tape recorders and note taking. Each class session had an average of 30 students and the recording lasted for 30 minutes. This makes a total of 540 minutes of classroom lessons recorded for the study. The recording was done during the second semester of the 2020/2021 academic year and it lasted a period of four weeks.

Relevant portions of the recorded data were then transcribed and presented in the study. In the context of the study, a relevant portion is determined by the presence of a metadiscourse marker of hedging. The analysis of the data went through three major steps. First, all the hedging devices were identified and written down. Second, the collated hedging devices were then classified into the various taxonomies using the framework of Salager-Mayer (1997) cited in Gribanova and Gaidukova (2019). Third, adopting a collective adaption of the polypragmatic framework developed in Chai (2021), Coates (2013), Marta's (2017) and Teng's (2015), the study examined the roles that hedging devices were employed to perform in the classroom interactions.

Scholars have underscored that categorizing hedges is generally a daunting task, however, when the categorization is done within the framework of a recognised theory, it is helpful and makes the concept more comprehensible (Faris, 2015). The several existing taxonomies of hedges attest the general difficulty in classifying hedges (Demir, 2018). Examples of the taxonomies include Skelton (1988), Hinkel (1997), Hyland (1998), Crompton (1997) and Koutsantoni (2004). For this study, the classroom interactions sampled for analyses are processed through Salager-Mayer's (1997) taxonomy of hedges cited in Mansour & Alghazo (2021). This taxonomy is adopted for the study in consonance with Almutairi et al (2022:75) assertion that, though it has its own weaknesses like all other taxonomies, Salager-Mayer's categorization "represents the most widely used hedging categories" and proven to be comprehensive and effective. The findings are presented in the next section.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 What linguistic devices are used to realize the types of hedging employed in classroom interaction?

The data reveal ten categories of metadiscourse markers of hedging. Each of these categories is described with support from relevant excerpts from the data.

▪ 4.1.1 Modal auxiliary verbs

It is the use of modal auxiliary verbs as hedging words. The corpus reveals that eight modal auxiliary verbs were used to mark hedging in the classroom interactions. These include

- | | |
|-----------------|------------------|
| 1. <i>Will</i> | 5. <i>Would</i> |
| 2. <i>May</i> | 6. <i>Might</i> |
| 3. <i>Shall</i> | 7. <i>Should</i> |
| 4. <i>Can</i> | 8. <i>Could</i> |

It was realized that both teachers and students found modal auxiliaries as relatively simple and easy to use to hedge their expressions during classroom interactions. Excerpts 1 and 2 below are examples of the classroom interactions that employed modal auxiliary verbs.

Excerpt 1

*Teacher: I **will** not accept a handwritten work. You **should** type and print the assignment.*

*Student: Sir, I **can** quickly rush to the printing press to have it typed right now.*

Excerpt 2

*Teacher: No group **shall** present without the group leader.*

*Student: Sir, our group leader fell sick so we **may** have to do the presentation without him.*

▪ 4.1.2 Modal lexical verbs

The modal lexical verbs are typically referred as speech act verbs. In the data, it is found that 29 different lexical verbs were used to achieve hedging. These lexical verbs are:

- | | | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| 1. <i>Claim</i> | 7. <i>Seem</i> | 13. <i>Feel</i> | 19. <i>Observe</i> | 25. <i>Look</i> |
| 2. <i>Assume</i> | 8. <i>Advise</i> | 14. <i>Consider</i> | 20. <i>Attempt</i> | 26. <i>Indicate</i> |
| 3. <i>Propose</i> | 9. <i>Appear</i> | 15. <i>Display</i> | 21. <i>Presume</i> | 27. <i>Maintain</i> |
| 4. <i>Reveal</i> | 10. <i>Argue</i> | 16. <i>Estimate</i> | 22. <i>Assert</i> | 28. <i>Expect</i> |
| 5. <i>Offer</i> | 11. <i>Show</i> | 17. <i>Suggest</i> | 23. <i>Find</i> | 29. <i>Believe</i> |
| 6. <i>Guess</i> | 12. <i>Anticipate</i> | 18. <i>Predict</i> | 24. <i>Hope</i> | |

The examples below attest the use of modal lexical verbs as hedges in the classroom interactions.

Excerpt 3

Teacher: *There is too much noise in this class. I **presume** the class is not ready for the lesson.*
 Student: *I **suggest** we move to the next room. The noise is coming from the canteen.*

Excerpt 4

Teacher: *Your answer **appears** similar to what your friend wrote. You copied from him, right?*
 Student: *No please, I **guess** we consulted the same textbook.*

▪ 4.1.3 Adjectival modal phrases

In the data, adjectival modal phrases are also used to mark hedging in teacher-student interaction. Nine of such adjectival modals were found in the corpus. These are:

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1. <i>Likely</i> | 6. <i>slight</i> |
| 2. <i>Potential</i> | 7. <i>advisable</i> |
| 3. <i>Unlikely</i> | 8. <i>possible</i> |
| 4. <i>probable</i> | 9. <i>partial</i> |
| 5. <i>subtle</i> | |

The sample interactions below exemplify the use of adjectival modal phrases as markers of hedging.

Excerpt 5

Teacher: *It is **possible** that next week's class would not be held due to the graduation ceremony.*
 Student: *Madam, in the **unlikely** event that it is called off, I will inform you.*

Excerpt 6

Teacher: *It is **advisable** to always consult textbooks and researched articles for your assignments.*
 Student: *It is **likely** our views may be wrong since our source is Wikipedia.*

▪ 4.1.4 Nominal modal phrases

The data reveal that nominal modal phrases were also adopted as hedging devices in the classroom conversation between the teachers and the students. In the corpus, 9 different nominal phrases were identified.

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 1. <i>Assertion</i> | 6. <i>Claim</i> |
| 2. <i>Tendency</i> | 7. <i>Assumption</i> |
| 3. <i>Possibility</i> | 8. <i>Anticipation</i> |

4. Suggestion 9. Expectation
5. Prediction

Examples from the recorded data are:

Excerpt 7

Teacher: Your **claim** that verbs can occupy the subject position in a sentence is debatable.

Student: It is your **assertion** that gerunds can occupy subject position which made me draw such conclusion.

Excerpt 8

Teacher: The **tendency** that your argument can fetch you enough marks is low.

Student: Our **anticipation** was that our argument could fetch us enough marks.

▪ 4.1.5 Adverbial phrases/Approximates

One other marker that is used for hedging in the classroom interactions is the adverbial phrase and approximates. In the corpus, 32 different approximates were found. Approximates are adverbials that usually express degree, quantity, frequency and time. The 32 approximates found in the corpus are:

- | | | | | |
|----------------|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. Nearly | 8. About | 15. Occasionally | 22. Rarely | 29. Almost |
| 2. Often | 9. Virtually | 16. Approximately | 23. Partially | 30. Reasonably |
| 3. Arguably | 10. Partly | 17. Relatively | 24. Fairly | 31. Perhaps |
| 4. Roughly | 11. Frequently | 18. Possibly | 25. Seemingly | 32. Sometimes |
| 5. Potentially | 12. Slightly | 19. Hardly | 26. Predictably | |
| 6. Largely | 13. Presumably | 20. Somewhat | 27. Mostly | |
| 7. Probably | 14. Usually | 21. Primarily | 28. Generally | |

Excerpts 9 and 10 below are teacher-student interactions that demonstrate the usage of some of the approximates.

Excerpt 9

Teacher: It is **generally** assumed that a sentence and a clause are similar, **especially** the independent clause.

Student: But Sir, they are **slightly** different.

Excerpt 10

Teacher: Those boys are **almost always** absent in my class. I **rarely** see them.

Student: Sir, Derrick is **usually** the first student to report to class.

▪ 4.16 Quantifiers

The data reveal that 12 quantifiers were used in the classroom interaction to mark hedging. These 12 are:

- | | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. <i>Few</i> | 6. <i>Much</i> | 11. <i>A few</i> |
| 2. <i>Little</i> | 7. <i>Many</i> | 12. <i>A little</i> |
| 3. <i>Most</i> | 8. <i>Some</i> | |
| 4. <i>More or less</i> | 9. <i>To some extent</i> | |
| 5. <i>To an extent</i> | 10. <i>Several</i> | |

The classroom interactions recorded in excerpts 11 and 12 below are examples of the use of quantifiers to mark hedges.

Excerpt 11

Teacher: **Several** points can be raised to support the argument.

Student: Sir, only **a few** points are on my mind now.

Excerpt 12

Teacher: **Many** students believe a teacher must know everything.

Student: **Some** of us think otherwise.

▪ 4.1.7 Introductory phrases

One other category of hedges identified in the classroom interaction is the introductory phrases. Four of such phrases were found in the corpus.

1. *I believe,*
2. *to our knowledge,*
3. *it is our view that*
4. *we feel that.*

Excerpt 13

Teacher: **I believe** that everybody understands what I am saying.

Excerpt 14

Student: Sir, **my opinion is that** the ladies should start first then the guys can follow later.

▪ 4.1.8 If clauses

The ‘if-clauses’, such as *if true* or *if anything* are hedges that begin with an ‘if’ expression often to indicate a conditional clause. It is realized in the data that such hedges are used in classroom interactions.

Excerpt 13

*Teacher: I reschedule the class for another time **if confirmed** that the ceremony will take place in the afternoon.*

Excerpt 14

*Student: We will do the corrections and print a new one **if rejected**.*

▪ 4.1.9 Compound hedges

This is the type of hedging where two or more hedges are combined in a single structure. In situations where two, three or four hedges are combined, it is called double, treble and quadruple hedges respectively. The examined data reveal that only the double hedges were employed in the classroom interaction. Excerpts 15 and 16 illustrate the point.

Excerpt 15

*Teacher: You **can suggest** any alternative view to what I said.*

Excerpt 16

*Student: It **appears unlikely** to have the principal as a resource person for our next lecture.*

▪ 4.1.10 Fillers

It is discovered in the data that teachers and students tend to use fillers to serve as hedges as well. It was realized in the data that 12 fillers are used in the classroom. These are

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| 1. <i>You know,</i> | 7. <i>Kind of</i> |
| 2. <i>You see,</i> | 8. <i>Erm</i> |
| 3. <i>By the way,</i> | 9. <i>Well</i> |
| 4. <i>Sort of,</i> | 10. <i>Hmm</i> |
| 5. <i>Uhm</i> | 11. <i>I mean</i> |
| 6. <i>Yeah</i> | 12. <i>Hmm</i> |

Excerpts 17 and 18 below are transcripts of some interactions recorded.

Excerpt 17

*Teacher: I came, but, **you see**, I couldn't wait for long.*

Excerpt 18

*Student: A noun is, **erm**, the word that names a person, place or thing.*

Generally, interaction is a spontaneous unrecorded activity (Faris, 2015). Regardless of how one prepares for an interaction, new issues could come up that might need to be discussed. In fact, in this era that critical pedagogy and student-centered classroom are emphasized, the interactive nature of the 21st century classroom cannot be overemphasized (Nation & Newton,

2009). As has already been indicated, in classroom discourses such as teacher-student interaction, the expression of absoluteness and certainty are done with extreme care, tact, and in most cases, expected to be done on the back of empirical data. Given that interactions in a typical classroom can be quite spontaneous and may reflect the subjective opinions of the interactants, the use of hedges is almost indispensable (Faris, 2015).

The data reveal that all the main categories of hedges espoused in the framework of Salager-Mayer's (1997) are employed in the classroom interaction. This bespeaks the indispensability of hedges in classroom interaction. A critical examination of the data also shows that the modal auxiliary verbs category of hedges and the adverbial phrases/approximates are the most commonly used hedges in the interactions. This is consistent with the findings of Rabab'ah and Abu Rumman (2015) who argue that the modal auxiliaries are less complex in nature.

Unlike the earlier studies, this study sought to offer a description of the hedges that are employed in the L2 classroom. The earlier studies mostly counted and recorded the frequencies of occurrence of the hedges. The frequencies, even though are important in giving a general impression of the hedges that interactants are more convenient in using, often lacked an in-depth description of their uses/functions in interactions. The current study's peculiarity in recording and describing the different types of hedges employed in the classroom by both the teachers and students affords the authors the opportunity to delve into the roles these hedges are employed to perform in the interactions. The identified roles are discussed in the next section, in response to research question 2.

4.2 What pragmatic functions do hedges perform in classroom interaction?

Seven functions are identified, thematised and discussed below.

- **4.2.1 Politeness Strategy**

Hedging minimizes face-threatening acts. In fact, it is closely related to Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory (Fraser, 2010). Hedges are used to save face and extend politeness to one's listener (s). This is why Demir (2018, p. 74) describes it as a "face-saving strategy". The data reveal that the teachers employed hedging to show an emotional connection with their students and also extend respect, courtesy and politeness to the students. This was done to emphasise that even though the teacher is an 'authority' figure in the classroom, the teaching practice is mixed with elements of humility and politeness. It is assumed that when the learners have a sense of emotional and psychological affinity with the teacher, they are able to feel comfortable in the classroom (Feniyi & Owusu, 2021). Also, the students employ hedging to show their politeness and respect towards the teacher. It can be seen from the data that teaching and learning is built on mutual respect and hedging helps to achieve such mutuality. The interaction below is an evidence that hedging is used to show politeness and reduce strict imposition.

Excerpt 19

Teacher: *I suggest we go for a 10-minute break.*

Student: *Sir, I think we should continue with the lesson.*

In the interaction above, the teacher employs the hedge *suggest* to soften his proposition and not seem as though he is imposing the proposition on the learners. As stated earlier, the teacher is an ‘authority’ figure in the classroom and could have decided to command the students or impose his wish on them. However, the teacher uses hedging to show some modesty in his claim. It is as though the students are allowed to have a counter opinion to the teacher’s suggestion and even turn it down if they so wish, which case is clearly seen in the student’s response. This is an element of politeness where an ‘authority’ would soften his proposition to give room for the subordinate to have a take, or even disagree, with the discourse. This is consistent with the findings of Cabanes (2007) and Martin-Martin (2008). In fact, Cabanes (2007, p. 141) asserts that hedging “helps to tone down, mitigate or modulate the statements so that the audience feel that they are still able to judge for themselves and that the author is pending their acceptance”.

- **4.2.2 Establish Power Relations**

The teacher is a leader figure in the classroom. Even though a student-centered approach to teaching and learning has been emphasized by several pedagogues, the fact remains that the teacher is an authority figure in the classroom and steers the affairs of the class. Therefore, the teacher employs hedges that connote that he wields some ‘power’ over the students. Similarly, the students also employ hedges that indicate that they are submissive and wield lower power than the teacher. Excerpts 20 and 21 illustrate power relations.

Excerpt 20

Teacher: ***Should** any student report late, I **will** not allow him/her in the class.*

Students: *Okay, Sir.*

Excerpt 21

Student: *Sir, **may** I go out?*

Teacher: *No, sit down.*

In excerpt 20, the teacher employs the auxiliary verb *should* and *will* to give a directive. Such an instruction can only come from someone who wields authority over the listener. Similarly, a student uses *may* to seek permission in excerpt 21. This is an inherent admission that before he (the student) can go outside the classroom, the teacher must first grant permission. This shows a student acknowledges a higher ‘authority’ in the class and in fact, the teacher turns down the student’s request.

- **4.2.3 Soften Claims of Certainty and Absoluteness**

Hedges are employed in the classroom when one wants to subtly admit that their knowledge about a thing is not absolute or complete (Teng, 2015). It is used to give room for counter opinions and superior arguments. Jabbar (2019) asserts that speakers employ hedges in anticipation of potential negative consequences of being proved wrong in future. Hence, while a speaker gains credibility by indicating their strongest claims with evidential support, they are also quick to cover themselves against emphasizing their claims using hedges. Knowledge can be a very complex and relative concept, therefore, making categorical commitments can be a very daring activity, especially when proven otherwise (Coates, 2013). It is in this light that teachers and students found hedges as indispensable tools that aid to avoid laying absolute ownership of a claim as a way of protecting their reputation and limiting the damage that could result from making categorical propositions. The examples below from the data illustrate the point.

Excerpt 22

*Teacher: Kwame Nkrumah died **about** 90 years ago.*

Excerpt 23

*Student: I **often** meet them around the canteen.*

In excerpt 22 above, the teacher uses the approximate of quantity *about* to show that he is not completely knowledgeable about the actual or exact time Nkrumah died. Even though he has given the figure 90, he uses *about* to indicate some extent of uncertainty. Similarly, the student employs an approximate of frequency *often* in excerpt 23 to show that he is not certain of the number of times he meets them. In their study, Feng, Li, Davvaz, and Ali (2010) found that the approximate of frequency *often* is used when the speaker does not want to indicate the precise extent to which the information applies.

- **4.2.4 Emphasis**

It is realized in the data that, the teachers and students employed hedges, especially the approximators, which are generally used to describe time, frequency, degree or quantity, to place emphasis on a concept they wish to espouse.

Excerpt 24

*Teacher: I am **highly** disappointed in the performance of the class.*

Excerpt 25

*Student: I have **many** examples to give on the topic.*

The teacher's use of the approximate of degree *highly* is to place emphasis on the level of disappointment he has in the students. Similarly, the student uses the approximate of quantity *many* to stress on the high number of examples he has.

- **4.2.5 Express Lack of Full Commitment**

Hedges are also used to evade duty and commitment (Rabab'ah, 2013). In this context, hedging is employed to indicate that one is not completely committed to what they claim (Fraser, 2010). If a teacher or a student makes a proposition or claim with emphasized expressions, they would be obliged to undertake such commitment and the failure of which could lead to punishment or a negative outcome. To avoid these, hedges are employed to avoid such risk (Faris, 2015). The excerpts below attest to the use of hedges for such purpose.

Excerpt 26

*Teacher: I **may** finish marking your examination scripts by next week.*

Excerpt 27

*Student: **We wish** to study deep into the night.*

Clearly, the teacher's use of the auxiliary verb *may* make him less committed to the proposition he makes. In other words, he cannot be blamed if he is not able to finish the marking because he has not fully committed himself to the task. The same claim can be made of the student's proposition in excerpt 21 where the hedge *wish* is used to indicate that they are not committed to learning deep into the night even though that is their desire.

- **4.2.6 Customise Claims and Responsibility**

Hedges are used by speakers to also take responsibility and claim ownership of a proposition. It is intended that such claim would not receive long-winding debate and arguments. Once a speaker takes responsibility for their proposition, they give impressions to their listeners that their (counter) opinions are not entirely welcomed or they can hold on to their opinions while the speaker 'owns' theirs. In the excerpts below, it could be attested that the speakers take responsibility for their claims and do not give room for any counter opinions.

Excerpt 28

*Teacher: I **believe** that the class has been a successful one.*

Excerpt 29

*Student: I **feel** that we should hold a second session to complete the course outline.*

The use of the modal lexical verbs, *believe* and *feel* shows that the speakers have limited the propositions to themselves; they have taken responsibility for the claims they have made. In other words, they seem to be saying that what I *believe* or *feel* may not be the same as what you *believe* or *feel*, hence, they are solely responsible for what they feel or believe.

- **4.2.7 Search for the Appropriate Words**

Teachers and students employ hedges in their interactions to buy time to search for the appropriate words to use (Chai, 2021). This is seen especially in the use of fillers. Lomotey (2021) confirms that fillers are usually used to stall a speech and while stalling, the period is used to think through what one is about to utter and ensure that the appropriate expressions are selected to convey what the speaker wish to put across. The data confirm Lomotey's findings that fillers are used to search for appropriate words, and sometimes, even give opportunity to interactants to suggest appropriate words as exemplified in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 30

Student 1: The decision will not be, erm...

Student 2: ..suitable

Student 1: yes, suitable for those of us who live outside the town.

In the interaction above, it can be observed that student 1 adopted the filler *erm* to stall his speech and search for the appropriate expression to use. The waiting period filled by *erm* gave student 2 the opportunity to suggest an appropriate lexical item.

5. Summary and Conclusion

This study endeavoured to describe hedging devices employed in classroom interactions and examined the functions of hedging in the interactions. Critical attention was focused on the types of hedges employed in the interactions and the linguistic devices that are used to realize these types. The study again examined the pragmatic functions of hedging in the classroom. The study hypothesizes that, even though classroom interaction is an important discourse, it has not been sufficiently investigated with respect to the use of hedging. The study therefore contributes to the scholarly attempts made at identifying the linguistic realization of hedging and the functions they perform in discourses situating it in the classroom context. 30 minutes each of 18 lessons of the four language tutors in a College of Education in the Western North region of Ghana culminating into 540 minutes of classroom interactions were examined and analysed as the case for the study. Based on the analysis of the data and discussions presented in the study, it is confirmed that

1. Hedges are used in classroom interactions. While the earlier studies confirm that hedges are used in political discourses, native and non-native writings, male and female writings, political speeches, this study adds that hedges are equally used in classroom interactions.. This finding is consistent with Almutairi et al (2022) that hedges are important conventions in written and spoken discourses.
2. Ten (10) classifications of hedging are employed in the classroom interactions of teachers and students examined for the study. These ten classifications and some of their linguistic realisations are; modal auxiliary verbs (*will, would, may*), modal lexical verbs (*claim, seem, feel, observe, look, assume*), adjectival modal phrases (*likely, slight, possible, potential*), nominal modal phrases (*assertion, claim, prediction, tendency*), adverbial phrases/approximates (*nearly, about, occasionally, rarely, almost,*

often, virtually), quantifiers (*few, much, a few, little*), introductory phrases (*I believe, to our knowledge*), if clauses (*if true, if anything*), compound hedges (*can suggest, appears unlikely*) and fillers (*you know, kind of, you see, erm*).

3. These hedges are employed to achieve several purposes in the classroom. Critically examining the data, it was revealed that the hedges are employed to basically perform seven functions. It is used to mitigate face-threatening acts and achieve politeness. This is why Levinson (1978) likened hedging to politeness theory. Also, it is discovered that hedging is used to establish teacher-student power relations and also place emphasis/stress on issues. It is also used to soften claims of certainty and absoluteness and express a lack of full commitment, while fillers were used to search for search for the appropriate words.

It must be underscored that the study is not without limitations. As one of the pioneer studies on hedging in classroom interaction in Ghana, it would have been ideal if several institutions and many more teachers and students were engaged. However, the study focused on a specific College of Education. Also, the study could have been done as a comparative analysis of the use of hedging between students and teachers. Based on the limitations and the findings, it is recommended that a future study could engage several institutions and widen the corpus so that the findings could be more generalizable.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests and Ethics

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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