

TEACHING HEDGING DEVICES IN THE ESP CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT

Hedging is an essential style of academic discourse. The article presents linguistic means of hedging as well as their peculiarities. Adjectives, adverbs, quantifiers and modal verbs are considered as hedging devices. Some features of hedging in formal written and informal discourse are highlighted. Supporting examples are used from different scientific spheres.

The focused teaching of hedges will help learners master the academic style, be open for scientific discussions, avoid categorical claims, be polite when expressing personal positions, demonstrate competence in a professional sphere.

Key words: *linguistic devices, exaggerations, formal and informal style, scientific discussions.*

РЕЗЮМЕ

ОБУЧЕНИЕ СРЕДСТВАМ ХЕДЖИРОВАНИЯ СТУДЕНТОВ НЕЯЗЫКОВЫХ ФАКУЛЬТЕТОВ

Хеджирование – важный стиль академического дискурса. В статье рассматриваются лингвистические средства хеджирования и их особенности. Исследуются прилагательные, наречия, местоимения и модальные глаголы как лингвистические средства хеджирования, а также особенности их функционирования в официальном и разговорном стилях, приводятся примеры из различных научных областей.

Обучение навыкам академического стиля поможет студентам правильно излагать свои мысли в соответствии с требованиями научного стиля, стараться быть сдержанными и вежливыми при выражении собственной позиции, а также открытыми для научных обсуждений, демонстрируя компетентность в своей профессиональной области.

Ключевые слова: *лингвистические средства, преувеличение, формальный и неформальный стиль, научные обсуждения.*

ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ

ՀԵՋԱՎՈՐՄԱՆ ՄԻՋՈՑՆԵՐԻ ԴԱՍԱՎԱՆԴՈՒՄԸ ESP

ԼՍԱՐԱՆՈՒՄ

Հեջավորումն ակադեմիական խոսույթին բնորոշ կարևոր հնարք է: Հոդվածում ներկայացված են հեջավորման միջոցները (ածականներ, մակբայներ, դերանուններ, եղանակավորող բայեր), դրանց առանձնահատկությունները և ճիշտ կիրառությունը ակադեմիական տեքստում:

Դիտարկվում են պաշտոնական և ոչ պաշտոնական խոսքի առանձնահատկությունները: Բերված են նաև օրինակներ գիտական տարբեր ոլորտներից:

Հոդվածում կատարված ուսումնասիրությունները կօգնեն ուսանողներին տիրապետել գիտական ոճին, ազատորեն մասնակցել գիտական քննարկումներին, խուսափել կտրուկ պնդումներից, լինել քաղաքավարի սեփական դիրքորոշումն արտահայտելիս, ցուցաբերել արհեստավարժություն իրենց մասնագիտական ոլորտում:

Բանալի բառեր՝ լեզվական միջոցներ, չափազանցություն, պաշտոնական և ոչ պաշտոնական ոճեր, գիտական քննարկումներ:

A good scientist is a humble scientist, who is open-minded to listen to other scientists when they discover something.

(Dan Shechtman)

It is often believed that academic writing, particularly scientific writing, is factual simply to impart facts and information. However, it is now recognized that an important feature of academic writing is the concept of cautions language or hedging. The scientists' assertions express not only their content but also their attitude towards this content. The researcher's aim is not only what to say but also how to say. Presenting scientific works authors are engaged in processes of negotiation and persuasion and are to be careful not to offend readers or listeners. In such cases it is often said that scientists

qualify the information presented using hedging strategy.

Thorough analysis of large English language corpora confirms the prevalence of various types of hedging devices in academic prose. We shall dwell upon adjectives, adverbs, quantifiers and modal verbs as hedging devices.

According to Hinkel hedging represents the use of linguistic devices to show hesitation or uncertainty, display politeness and indirectness and defer to the reader's point of view (Hinkel, 1996). Hyland is of the opinion that the purpose of hedging is to reduce the writer's commitment to the truthfulness of a statement (Hyland, 1998). Jordan points out that hedging in academic writing, in business, economics, medical sciences is not just desirable but requisite. He emphasizes that hedging is a "vitaly important" skill in teaching NNS (non-native speakers) (Jordan, 1997).

Research has shown that NNS have a restricted word stock that often leads to a shortage of hedging devices employed in the text. Therefore, focused instruction in appropriate uses of hedges is urgent. Why are hedges to be taught?

Consider some reasons to hedge:

1. One of the most important reasons to hedge is a lack of certainty. Scientists avoid categorical statements, they allow readers (listeners) to disagree, object, get involved in the discussion. According to Salager Meyer, a lack of certainty doesn't necessarily show confusion or vagueness. Hedges can be regarded as ways of being more precise in drawing inferences. (Salager Meyer, 1997).

2. Hedges may be understood as positive or negative politeness strategies. Scientists can reject or admit other scientists' points of view trying to appear humble than arrogant or all-knowing. According to Myers, "Hedges permit academics to present their claims while simultaneously presenting themselves as the humble servants of the scientific community". (Myers, 1989). In this sense, hedges are used in conversations between people of different ages, social status or simply strangers.

3. Hedging functions to conform to the currently accepted style of academic writing.

Hedges are widely used both in formal written and informal conversational discourse.

It is natural that in informal conversations with friends and in writing a business letter different language features are used. Discourse analyses indicate, that overstatements and exaggerations are common for both formal and informal written discourse. Being used in informal conversations overstatements and exaggerations are taken for granted and can hardly be noticed. In casual conversations we can come across: “I am always late ...” or “I tell you thousand times ...”, “Every time I leave for work I forget to take the key”.

In formal style these sentences may sound: “I am often late ...”, “I tell you many times...” and “I often forget to take the key when I leave for work”.

In formal style the exaggerations and overstatements are restricted and not suitable. In professional correspondence, scientific works and other types of formal prose overstatements and exaggerations can be precarious and appear to be irresponsible and untrue. The information in formal written discourse is expected to be more accurate and cautiously hedged.

There are cases anyhow when exaggerations are used as persuasive means in formal written prose when both the writer and the reader admit that the real state of events is a little bit exaggerated. Consider the following example:

“Students always show excellent results” or “Crimes can always be prevented”.

It is obvious that there is exaggeration in the sentences as the statements contradict the reality, the students can’t always show excellent results, and crimes cannot always be prevented, but both the writer and the reader admit, that no overstatement takes place and hedging is presumed by both of them.

Adverbs of frequency as hedges.

Adverbs of frequency: *frequently, often, usually and occasionally* are the

most typical hedging devices. Such adverbs as *always* and *never*, which possess some extreme are rarely used as hedges. According to Biber D. (1999), due to their ubiquity, frequency adverbs can be employed to hedge the meanings of verbs or whole sentences and can be easier to use in editing than other more complex types of hedges. For instance, *sometimes*, *often*, *usually*, *generally* are more common in academic prose, than, for example, *ever* or *never*, which are particularly rare. In the list given below the frequency adverbs are arranged in declining order of frequency rates. They are indefinite frequency adverbs and function as hedges in appropriate contexts:

- *frequently, often*
- *generally / in general, usually, ordinarily*
- *occasionally / on occasion, sometimes, at times, from time to time, every so often*
- *most of the time, on many / numerous occasions*
- *almost never, rarely, seldom, hardly ever (negative meanings)*
- *almost / nearly always, invariably*

Some *frequency adverbs* can be definite, e.g. *hourly, daily, weekly, monthly*.

Consider the extract taken from the text on Biology:

Sufferers from rheumatism and asthma complain of feeling worse when it rains.

Using adverbs of frequency we can hedge the meaning of the whole sentence:

Generally/ almost / always / usually / occasionally / once in a while / sufferers from rheumatism and asthma complain of feeling worse when it rains.

The excerpts are taken from economic and mathematical texts:

In a partnership two or more people / generally / usually / often / share ownership of a single business. The definition is / usually / often / rigorous.

Adverb phrases of frequency, such as *on many occasions, at times, from time to time*, can be placed at the beginning of the sentences or at the end of

short sentences. Single – word adverbs are placed in a sentence in front of the verb – predicate if the verb – predicate is not *be*.

In many cases the use of frequency adverbs is followed by the use of the Present Simple tense.

Quantifiers as hedges.

Quantifiers are used to denote quantity. We should differentiate between definite (*a half, a quarter*) and indefinite quantifiers. Indefinite quantifiers are used as hedges and include the following:

- *all, many / much*
- *some, a few / a little*
- *a number of + noun / noun phrase*
- *a good / great deal of + noun / noun phrase*
- *a bit (of)*

It is obvious that the quantifier *all* implies some extreme and overstatement, therefore it cannot be used as a good hedging device. Consider the example below:

All teachers are very concerned about their students' career prospects.

However, in the following extract it's possible to decrease the effect of broad generalization by using quantifiers *many, some, a number of*.

Most / some / many / people work because they need money to live. But money is not the main reason / many / most / some / people stay in their jobs. / Most / Many / a number of / people work because they like to be with other people, they want to contribute something to society and they feel a sense of accomplishment.

Similarly, the extremity in the use of indefinite pronouns *no one* and *nobody* can be hedged by using negative quantifiers *few / fewer* with countable and *little / less* with uncountable nouns.

From a student's essay:

People work to earn their living but few people / no one / enjoy (s) their work getting small salaries. Few people /no one/ are (is) satisfied with this situation. They will try to choose a higher paying job and lead a comfortable

life.

Possibility hedges are represented by adjectives, which are used with nouns *a probable version, a possible solution* and by adverbs in constructions with verbs, adjectives, whole sentences and other adverbs.

According to Hyland such adverbial hedges as *probably, perhaps, possibly, and in (this / that) case* are particularly common in formal academic writing. (Hyland, 1998).

Both frequency and possibility hedges are easily taught and perceived by the elementary, intermediate and advanced learners. From a student's essay:

Scientists perhaps make the most valuable contributions to the society.

Artists probably make important contributions too, but society seems to value scientists more...

In this excerpt the adverbs *perhaps, probably* reduce the power of broad generalization referring to the contributions made by scientists and artists to the society.

Adjective and adverb hedges are widely used in academic prose. They range from single-word adjectives (essential, permanent) to more complex constructions, such as according to + noun, most + adjectives and relative to + noun. They have many syntactic and semantic functions; differ in the degree of formality and frequency of occurrence.

The exaggerative and emphatic adjectives and adverbs are prevalent in informal conversational written register. To differentiate between formal and informal language uses students should be aware of these hedges and avoid using them in academic texts:

complete(-ly)	huge(-ly)	unbelievable(-ly)	perfect(-ly)
clear(-ly)	high(-ly)	total(-ly)	never
awful(-ly)	forever	strong(-ly)	ever
bad(-ly)	for sure	sure(-ly)	very much
by all means	fully	terrible(-ly)	even (+adjective/noun)
always	extreme(-ly)	sever(-ly)	amazing(-ly)
certain(-ly)	great(-ly)	too (+adjective)	enormous(-ly)

Teachers should carry persistent and consistent work in directing their students away from overuse of exaggerative hedges through offering various oral and written exercises, and assignments. For example, 1) *underline the adjective (adverb) hedges in the text and explain their use;* 2) *comment on the use of the hedges in the text;* 3) *find the exaggerations in the passage and give alternatives to them.*

Modal verbs as hedges.

In general, in formal writing modal verbs can be divided into three classes:

- ability and possibility – can, may, might, could, be able to.
- obligation and necessity – must, have to, should, ought, need to, to be to, to be supposed to (highly informal)
- prediction – will, would.

There are some limitations in the employment of modal verbs as hedging devices. The modal verb *will* expresses a strong degree of certainty referring the action to the future. It is preferable to use *may, can (could)* instead of *will*.

Consider the following extract on ecology:

The environmental pollution will/can be liquidated and inevitable changes in the balance of matter and energy on the planet will/can be adequately compensated because the cultivation of recoverable natural resources and the transformation of their equilibria will/can make it possible to increase many times over the productivity of nature on the earth as a whole.

In the above mentioned extract the modal verb *will* expresses high degree of definiteness and certainty. The author is sure that all processes in the nature are under control, no hesitation is implied on the part of the author. The modal verb *can* is more preferable in the academic text.

In the academic prose modal verbs of possibility can be used as hedges and necessity modal verbs can be applied to express some judgments and inferences. The modal verb *may* expresses possibility and *should* a reasoned

conclusion. Consider the following example:

Some university students think only about their careers. If the choice is left to them, they may only study courses for their future profession. Therefore, university should require students to take classes in many subjects.

Hyland (1998) is of the opinion that “although *can* is common in the conversational register, in formal discourse *may* is more appropriate particularly in academic prose in humanities and social sciences. In formal writing *can* rarely refers to abilities, but rather possibilities and implications”.

It is necessary to mention that the modal verb *must (not)* expressing obligation and prohibition is seldom employed in academic writing. On the other hand the negative modal *cannot* occurs in academic texts in denials, refutations or counterexamples.

The predictive modal verb *would* may be used as hedging device in formal and informal academic writing. It reduces the writer’s commitment or responsibility for the accuracy of evidence.

The precaution measures would really help to reduce traffic accidents but there are people who oppose these measures.

We can admit that modal verbs are effectively used in academic texts to moderate claims. According to Biber and Hyland analyses of academic corpora have shown that *can* and *may* are by far the most common modals, whereas *must*, *should* and *have to* are less frequent as are *will* and *would*. (Biber, 1999; Hyland, 1998).

It should be mentioned that while teaching modal verbs as hedges, it is essential to concentrate on the contextual meanings of only some but not necessarily all modal verbs. Teachers may confine themselves to considering hedging uses of *may*, *can* and *could*.

Summing up, we may infer that focused instruction of hedges is an important issue. Students should differentiate between formal and informal, spoken and written registers, express their thoughts correctly in accordance with rules and norms of academic English. In this respect ESP teachers have responsibility to help students acquire an awareness of why, how and when

hedges are used through elaborating special tasks, providing students with valuable scientific material in their field of study, assisting them in presenting hypotheses, conclusions, reports. A good writing proficiency can be contributing factor to students' professional recognition and career prospect.

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Ստեփանյան Նաիրա – դասախոս, ԵՊՀ եվրոպական լեզուների և հաղորդակցության ֆակուլտետ, անգլերենի թիվ 1 ամբիոն, էլ. փոստ՝ naira.stepanyan21@yahoo.com:

Ներկայացվել է խմբագրություն՝ 10.11.19, տրվել է գրախոսության՝ 18.11.19 - 26.11.19, երաշխավորվել է ԵՊՀ եվրոպական լեզուների և հաղորդակցության ֆակուլտետի անգլերենի թիվ 1 ամբիոնի կողմից, ընդունվել է տպագրության՝ 05.12.19: