

An Analysis of Hedging Devices in Complaint Business Letters

Hooi Chee Mei

hooiesther@yahoo.com

*English Language Studies Section
School of Humanities
Universiti Sains Malaysia*

Munir Shuib

munir@usm.my

*English Language Studies Section
School of Humanities
Universiti Sains Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

Hedging devices are important tools and have been used widely in academic and scientific writing, but their usefulness in business writing has seldom been explored. In a business setting, very few studies have been carried out on hedging in business letters. Some scholars have indicated that the use of hedges is also important in business letters. However, not many business writers are aware of the use and importance of hedging devices in business letters, especially complaint business letters. The aim of the paper is to present findings in the use of hedging devices in complaint business letters among 30 native speakers of English, who have working experience in the business context. The study aims to determine the types and forms of hedging devices that native speakers of English commonly use when writing business letters, as well as, to determine the types and forms of hedging devices that commonly occur in the rhetorical sections (introduction, body, and closure) of business letters. The study employs Hyland's model of hedging to identify the forms and types of hedges commonly used by native speakers of English. The findings show that content-oriented hedges are used more frequently in terms of types of hedging devices, while reader pronouns are the forms of hedging devices that are used most frequently in terms of forms of hedging devices in complaint business letters. In all the rhetorical sections of complaint business letters, content-oriented hedges and reader pronouns are commonly used. From the findings, it is clear that hedging is an important aspect of business writing because hedges make a text more reader-friendly since those hedges allow negotiation to occur between the writer and the reader. Hedges also allow the message to be carried across more clearly and precisely.

Keywords: hedging devices; complaint business letters; native speakers of English; rhetorical sections; Hyland's model

INTRODUCTION

Hedging is a significant communication device for academics since it both confirms the individual's professional persona and represents a critical element in the rhetorical means of gaining acceptance of claims (Hyland, 1996). This means that hedges allow writers to anticipate possible opposition to claims by expressing statements with precision, caution, and diplomatic deference to the views of the audience. They are used to execute a range of functions such as to convey possibility, signalling distance, indicating tentativeness, and toning down statements (Munir, 2003). In other words, it may be described as a discourse strategy.

Hedging may take place when the precision level of precise references or numerical expressions is lowered to meet the interests of a non-specialist audience (Olmo, 2006). On the other hand, hedging may be applied in business letters in a seemingly opposite manner, so as to make sure that the readership draws the desired conclusions from the information presented (Zhang, 2007). In both cases, hedging takes place when the specialist author aims at adjusting the information to the assumed earlier knowledge of an audience, who knows a little about hedging devices.

Hedging devices are important in a business context because hedging devices not only avoid conflict between business writers and readers, but they also help to justify a statement correctly and accurately (Hyland, 1996). Hedges exist although business letters require clarity and conciseness. In the business letters that require a response, the content of the letters would be explained concisely through the proper use of hedges, so that the readers would be able to know what to do, and when to do it (Tg Zatul, Mohd Juzaidin & Siti Hamin; 2010). Moreover, the readers would be able to know the claims stated in the letters precisely and accurately.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Since hedging devices do not only help to avoid conflict among readers and justify a statement correctly (Hyland, 1996), it is important for writers of business letters to be able to use hedges effectively. For instance, they must know the appropriate language forms to use when making statements that may be sensitive to others. However, currently, we know very little about hedging in business writing. Many studies on hedging have focused on academic or scientific writing (Lewin, 2005; Atai & Sadr, 2006). Very little attention has been given to the use of hedges in business writing. Consequently, several scholars (Plutsky, 1996; Bila, 2007; Junhua, 2010) have indicated that more emphasis should be placed on hedging elements in business writing, as well.

Hedging has been studied from various perspectives, such as cross-cultural comparisons, gender studies, translation studies, politeness theory, and academic discourse (Nikula, 1997; De Cock et al., 1998; Cheng & Warren, 2001; Jucker, Smith & Ludge, 2003; Aijmer, 2004; Wilamowa, 2005; Metsa-Ketela, 2006, Shirato & Stapleton, 2007; Seskauskienė, 2008; Riekkinen, 2009). However, majority of them have focused on the pragmatic aspect of hedges. While it is useful to understand how hedges are used pragmatically, it is also important to determine how hedges are realised structurally. Syntactically, hedging devices may be realised in many different forms (Hyland, 1996). These include adverbs or adverbial devices, modal auxiliaries, full verbs, modal adverbs, adjectives, nouns, first person pronoun, reader pronouns, directives, questions, and so on. Thus far, no study has been carried out to examine the use of the forms of hedging devices in business letters. Perhaps, the most comprehensive analysis of syntactic structure of hedges to date, is Hyland (1996). However, Hyland examines hedges in academic writing.

There have only been very few studies that examined hedging features in business writing, including business letters. For instance, Munir (2001) investigated on politeness strategies in business letters by Malaysian writers. Santos (2002), on the other hand, examined rather briefly, lexico-grammatical choices (including hedges) in letters of negotiation. Zhang (2007) carried out a comparative investigation of hedges in business letter writing from home textbooks and from corporate business companies. Bilikova (2010) also carried out a research on politeness to compare business correspondences between letters and emails. Sinturat (2010) examined lexical phrases and hedges in online Business Letter Corpus. Nonetheless, the findings of the study did not examine the use of hedges in detail.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

Based on the statement of problem, the research objectives are to:

1. determine the types of hedging devices that are commonly used by native speakers of English in complaint business letters.
 - 1.1. determine the content-oriented hedges used in complaint business letters by native speakers of English.
 - 1.2. determine the reader-oriented hedges used in complaint business letters by native speakers of English.
2. identify the forms of hedging devices commonly used by native speakers of English in complaint business letters.
3. examine the types and forms of hedging devices that commonly occur in the rhetorical sections (introduction, body, or closure) of complaint business letters.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

This study is important because thus far, very few studies (Santos, 2002; Zhang, 2007; Sinturat, 2010) have been carried out to examine the syntactic features of hedges in business letters. Existing studies tend to focus on other aspects of hedging (cross-cultural comparisons, gender studies, translation studies, politeness theory, and academic discourse) and the corpus used is mostly academic or scientific. Furthermore, most gave very brief treatment of hedging. This study is intended to fill the gap.

Of all international business communications, business letters are a major mode of communication in the means of international commerce. In terms of greater understanding of hedging devices, the findings contribute in language teaching among the students and business professionals in Malaysia. According to Zhang (2007), it is obvious that even good business writers of English are not automatically equipped to adapt their linguistic habits according to the hedging guidelines of the professional community, whose linguistic conventions they wish to master. Fresh graduates, who graduated from business course, often arrive believing they have a good grasp of the working environment, but often lack real-life experience (Hodges & Burchell, 2003). Therefore, measures should be taken to ensure some form of structured guidance can be provided by course lecturers to learners. Although there are some textbooks, which offer guidelines on the use of hedging available in the markets, the guidelines are rather general and do not focus specifically on complaint business letters (King, 2003). Therefore, the findings will be able assist curriculum designers to create more suitable and meaningful curriculum materials for business students and professionals. According to Kaur (2013), it is vital for the course lecturers to engage learners in meaningful learning experiences in various courses offered in the university. Ong and Yuen (2014) concurs with Kaur (2013) by stating that course lecturers could also develop a range of teaching and learning activities or exercise in real life situations. This would enable the consciousness raising tasks to offer the opportunities for the students in business courses to be productive.

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON HEDGING IN DISCOURSES

Many studies were conducted on hedging in different types of spoken and written discourses (Nikula, 1997; De Cock et al., 1998; Cheng & Warren, 2001; Jucker, Smith & Ludge, 2003; Aijmer, 2004; Wilamowa, 2005; Metsa-Ketela, 2006, Shirato & Stapleton, 2007; Seskauskiene, 2008; Riekkinen, 2009). Hedging is used widely in spoken and written discourses. This shows that hedging is vital for any spoken and written discourses. Hedging

had been given emphasis in all discourses except for written business discourse (Plutsky, 1996; Bila, 2007; Junhua, 2010). , therefore this research attempts to research on hedging devices in business letters, particularly complaint letters.

Earlier studies on hedging in spoken interaction have been primarily interested in native speaker usage of hedges (Aijmer, 2004; Wilamowa, 2005; Seskauskiene, 2008; Riekkinen, 2009). Aijmer's research (2004) on hedges has facilitated the study of native speakers' use of English in speech and writing. The research consists of computer-based corpora. The findings show that learners use vague and hedging devices to express uncertainty or hesitation and not for face-saving or to signal politeness. These findings are supported by Hunston (2002). There are not many studies on hedging in written business communication compared to spoken interaction.

HEDGING IN WRITTEN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Written business communication is very important in the business community because it enables exchanging of information among business parties (Bilikova, 2010). It is very powerful in business agreement and other business deals. This is because effective written business communication could increase the quality of working relationships and the quantity of business, as well as, decrease wasted hours and money (Seglin & Coleman, 2012). According to Seely (1998), there is a great range of different forms of written business communication, which include business letters, business reports, email messages, fax messages, and memos. They serve many purposes including to maintain an ongoing business relationships, to apply for a job, to resign from the workplace, to enquire for information, to order goods, to request for information, to complain about the dissatisfaction about certain matters, to introduce a new firm, to promote a new product or to publicise a special offer for an existing product, and to persuade clients to buy goods and products from the business company (King, 2003).

There are only a few studies, which are directly related to hedging in written business communication (Munir, 2001; Santos, 2002; Zhang, 2007; Sinturat, 2010 & Bilikova, 2010) The researchers carried out their research on various themes, such as politeness, lexical phrases and hedges, negotiation, and comparative investigation of hedges.

COMPLAINT LETTERS

There are various ways to convey complaints. One could either complain through memos, emails, verbal communication, or letters (Bly, 1999; Kimball & Gelder, 2007). Of the various ways, written complaint letters are still considered the most appropriate because they are without a doubt more professional than email because an email is intended to be a quick way to communicate something that is not critical (Taylor & Gartside, 1998). Complaint letters are an official way to offer concerns.

In complaint business letters, it is the writers' responsibilities to let the readers know about the problems of their services or products, hence the letters would be written clearly and precisely, not forgetting that it would be written politely, so as not to offend the readers because actions would not be taken if the readers feel offended (Bly, 1999). Hence, it is vital that the writers know how to make the complaints appropriately.

Complaint letters are a legal necessity. Complaint letters normally are written with strict pertinence and very direct. The fairly high levels of directness are mitigated both lexically and syntactically by the use of institutional references and vague suggestion, so that actual redressive actions might be perceived correctly (Hartford & Mahboob, 2004). Syntactically, according to Hartford and Mahboob (2004), the use of passives, impersonals,

and complex sentences lends an overall level of politeness which offsets much of the directness, which is common in the complaint letters.

MODELS OR APPROACHES TO HEDGING

There are various models of hedging. There are House's and Kasper's model (1981), Skelton's model (1988), Myers' model (1989), Salager-Meyer's model (1994), Hyland's model (1996), Markkanen's and Schröder's model (1997), and Crompton's model (1997). House's and Kasper's model (1981) focuses on typology of linguistic expressions, which includes a small part of hedges that are frequently used to signal politeness (or impoliteness) in English. Skelton's model (1988) only focuses on the linguistic terms of hedges in lexical verbs and modal verbs. Myers' model (1989) is only concerned with hedges as realisations of politeness strategies. Salager-Meyer's model (1994) emphasises that hedging is often linked to purposive vagueness and tentativeness that suggests hedges are typically associated with an increase in linguistics fuzziness. Hyland's model (1996) focuses on syntactic forms and pragmatic categories of hedging. Markkanen's and Schroder's model (1997) concentrates on hedging in the form of pragmatic function from the semantic modification of the words or phrases. Crompton's model (1997) extends the reference of hedge to politeness-related features of academic writing, such as impersonal constructions, the use of the passive, and lexis-projecting emotions.

From all of the models mentioned, the current study draws on Hyland's model because it focuses on both the syntactic function and pragmatic function of hedging, which is the objective of the research. Hyland (1996) sets a theory, which he claims, offers a "better approach" to the description of hedging, as summarised in Figure 1.

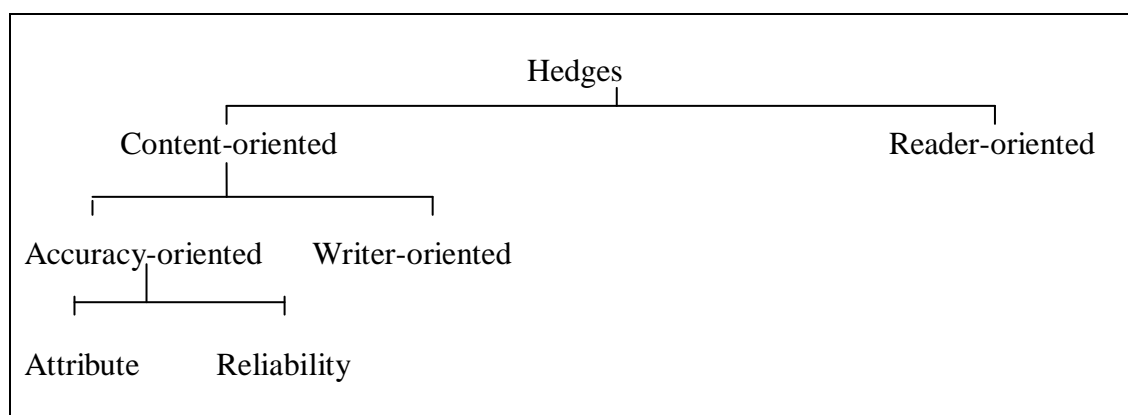


FIGURE 1: Types of Hedges (Hyland, 1996, p. 438)

According to Hyland (1996), the main categories of hedges are content-oriented hedges and reader-oriented hedges. Content-oriented hedges can be seen as an attitudinal dimension and includes features which refer to the ways writers present themselves and convey their judgements, opinions, and commitments. These linguistic devices mitigate the relationship between propositional content and a representation of reality (Hyland, 1996). This means that the linguistic devices hedge the correspondence between what the writer says about the world and what the world is thought to be like. As seen in Figure 1, accuracy-oriented hedging and writer-oriented hedging are the types of content-oriented hedges, while attribute hedges and reliability hedges are the types for accuracy-oriented hedging. Stance hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mention are the forms for content-oriented hedges (Hyland, 2005).

The summary of the types and forms of content-oriented hedges is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Content-oriented Hedges- Stance (Hyland, 2005, p. 177)

Types	Forms	Examples
1. Accuracy-oriented hedges		
a. Attribute hedges	Boosters (adverbs or adverbial devices)	<i>clearly, obviously, demonstrate</i>
b. Reliability hedges	Stance hedges (modal auxiliaries, full verbs, modal adverbs, adjectives, and nouns)	<i>possible, might, perhaps</i>
2. Writer-oriented hedges	Attitude markers	<i>agree, prefer, unfortunately, hopefully, appropriate, logical, remarkable</i>
	Self-mention (first person pronoun)	<i>I</i>

Another type of hedging is reader-oriented hedges (Hyland, 1996). Hyland (1996) explains that reader-oriented hedges deal mostly with the relationship between author and audience, confirm the attention the writers give to the interactional effects of their statement, and solicit collusion by addressing the reader as an intelligent colleague capable of participating in the discourse with an open mind. According to Hyland (2005), there are many forms of reader-oriented hedges, such as reader pronouns, directives, and questions. They are considered to be the forms for reader-oriented hedges.

The summary of the types and forms of reader-oriented hedges is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Reader-oriented Hedges- Engagement (Hyland, 2005, p. 177)

Types	Forms	Examples
Reader-oriented hedges	Reader pronouns	<i>you, your, we</i>
	Directives	<i>consider, note, imagine, must, should, ought, it is important to understand</i>
	Questions	<i>Is it, in fact, necessary to choose between nurture and nature?</i>

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

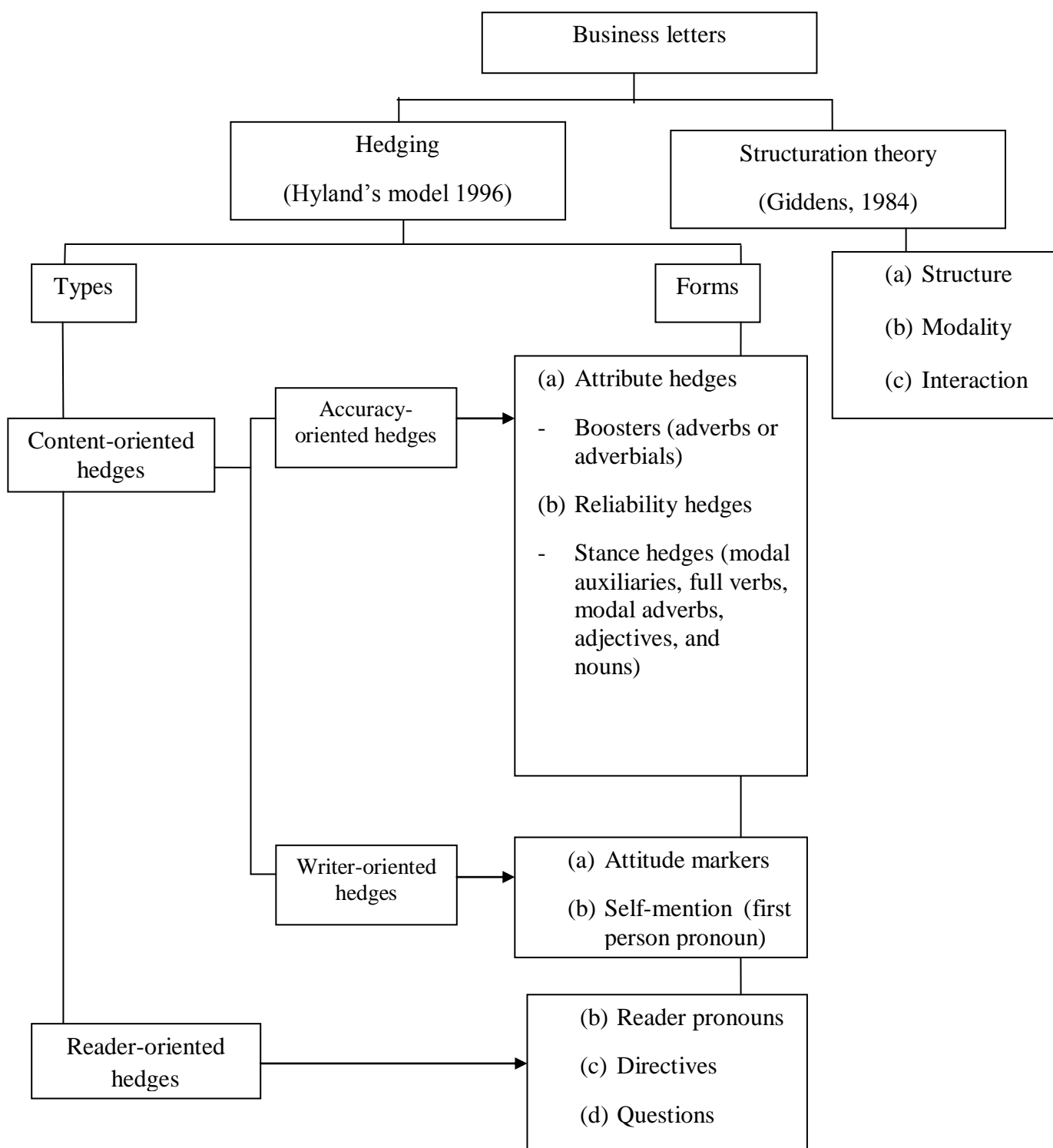


FIGURE 2. Conceptual Framework of the Research

As illustrated in Figure 2, the current research analyses hedging devices in business letters based on two methods that are types and forms. The types of hedges are analysed through two dimensions, which are content-oriented hedges and reader-oriented hedges. Accuracy-oriented hedges and writer-oriented hedges are under the category of content-oriented hedges.

Attribute hedges and reliability hedges are the forms for accuracy-oriented hedging, while attitude markers and self-mention (first person pronoun) are the forms for writer-oriented hedging. Reader pronouns, directives, and questions are the forms for reader-oriented hedges. All of these are linked to Hyland's model (1996) and Structuration theory (1984).

METHODOLOGY

For this research, 30 native speakers of English with working experience were chosen. They are native speakers of English from the US and the UK. This study adopted a mixed-method approach. It adopted two types of research instruments: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative instrument involved a written task given to respondents, in which they had to write a complaint letter based on a given situation (Refer to Appendix B). Frequency counts were carried out on the number of occurrences for the types (reader-oriented hedges and content-oriented hedges) and forms of hedging devices that appeared in the complaint letters written by the native speakers of English. In order to assure validity and reliability of the research, an interrater was employed to determine the frequency counts on the number of occurrences on the types and forms of hedging devices in complaint letters. The researcher and the interrater came up with a coding system and a table of sequencing of types and forms of hedging devices in complaint business letters. They met three times to analyse all the 30 complaint business letters. After the third meeting, the researcher and the interrater came up with the same conclusion and they agreed with the final analysis. The interrater, who did the frequency counts on the hedging devices, was a researcher in linguistics (syntax and pragmatics), who has used Hyland's model (1996) in her research before. The interrater was a researcher in patterns of hedging strategies by English as an Additional Language (EAL) and English as First Language (EF1) researchers in academic publications.

Besides writing a complaint letter, individual interviews were carried out on the five respondents (Respondents 4, 10, 11, 14, and 26) from the 30 respondents in order to obtain qualitative data pertaining to the objectives of the study. The five respondents were selected based on availability or convenience. The themes of the interview were as follows:

1. Types of hedging devices used in complaint business letters.
2. Forms of hedging devices used in complaint business letters.
3. Tendency to use hedging devices in various rhetorical parts of complaint business letters.

The themes of the interview were decided based on the interview questions that were asked to the respondents (Refer to Appendix C).

FINDINGS

FREQUENCY COUNTS

Table 3 shows the frequency of the two types of hedging devices in the complaint business letters, which are content-oriented hedges and reader-oriented hedges.

TABLE 3. Overall Frequency of Types of Hedging Devices

Types of hedging devices	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Content-oriented hedges	399	54.14
Reader-oriented hedges	338	45.86
Total	737	100.00

As can be seen from the table, content-oriented hedges are used more frequently than reader-oriented hedges in complaint business letters by the native speakers. Out of 737 hedging devices used, 54.14% are content-oriented hedges, while 45.86% are reader-oriented hedges. Examples of content-oriented hedges are shown in the extract as follows:

1. *I regret to inform you that our order received on Dec. 27th, 2013 for 200 copies of the book Freedom at Dawn was not filled to our specifications: the copies received were titled Freedom at Dawn, and were far inferior in quality to the samples forwarded, prior to our order.* (Respondent 1)

In the extract, the content-oriented hedges are “I”, “regret”, and “far”. “I” is used as a self-mention hedge to indicate the writer’s involvement in the content of the letter while “regret” is used as an attitude marker to show the writer’s attitude towards the order that she receives. The word “far” is used as a booster to emphasise the inferiority of the samples.

Table 4 illustrates the overall frequency of types of hedging devices in the various rhetorical sections of complaint business letters. The dominance of content-oriented hedges are found in all the three rhetorical sections of complaint business letters.

TABLE 4. Overall Frequency of Types of Hedging Devices in the Various Sections of Complaint Business Letters

Types of hedging devices	Introduction		Body		Closure	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Content-oriented hedges	109	56.77	215	54.29	75	50.34
Reader-oriented hedges	83	43.23	181	45.71	74	49.66
Total	192	100.00	396	100.00	149	100.00

For all rhetorical sections (introduction, body, and closure), there are similarities in the frequency of the two types of hedges. As indicated in Table 4, content-oriented hedges occur more frequently than reader-oriented hedges in all the rhetorical sections.

Examples of content-oriented hedges are shown in the extracts as follow:

2. Introduction: *Your handling of this order has been very poor and I have several serious complaints.* (Respondent 12)

The word “very” is used by Respondent 12 to emphasise on poor handling of the order. Respondent 12 uses “several” to highlight that there are many serious complaints.

3. Body: *The books you did ship are QUITE POOR IN QUALITY, much inferior to the samples you had sent us.* (Respondent 17)

Respondent 17 uses “quite” to give emphasis on the quality of the books and “much” to stress the inferiority of the books.

4. Closure: *I am sorry that I need to write to you directly about this matter I am sure you will take the appropriate action as requested above.* (Respondent 15)

Respondent 15 uses “appropriate” to convey the importance of doing the action in a proper manner.

Examples of reader-oriented hedges are shown in the extracts as follow:

5. Introduction: *The delivery date stated on the order, which you agreed to when accepting our order, was 19 December but the consignment was not received here until one week later on 26 December. Your company has not given any reason for this delay.* (Respondent 12)

Respondent 12 uses reader pronouns “you” and “your” to ensure that the reader is involved in the letter, so that he or she would be able to understand what he or she needs to do.

6. Body: *We want you to despatch immediately the 200 copies that we ordered on 22 November 2012, and you **must** use the fastest possible means of delivery so that they reach us by 5 January at the latest.* (Respondent 12)

Respondent 12 uses “must” to invite the reader to the content of the letter, so that the reader would perform the action, which is to inform Respondent 12 and his company if the reader is unable to meet the deadline.

7. Closure: *Can you please ensure that the incorrectly delivered items are collected and the correct books are provided as a matter of urgency?* (Respondent 11)

Respondent 11 poses a question to emphasise on the reader’s involvement in the discourse, which indirectly reduces the impact of the intended idea, statement, or claim. He poses a question to ask the reader to ensure that the wrong items are collected and the correct books are provided as soon as possible.

Table 5 displays the overall frequency of the various forms of hedging devices in the letters.

TABLE 5. Overall Frequency of Forms of Hedging Devices

Forms of hedging devices	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Reader pronouns	328	44.50
Self-mention	175	23.74
Boosters	155	21.03
Stance hedges	58	7.87
Attitude markers	11	1.49
Questions	6	0.81
Directives	4	0.54
Total	737	100.00

As shown in Table 5, reader pronouns are used most frequently (44.50%), while directives are used least frequently (0.54%). This indicates that reader pronouns are commonly used by native speakers of English in complaint business letters. Examples of reader pronouns are “you”, and “your”. Their use in the data is demonstrated in the extract below:

8. *In good faith, on December 5 we ordered 200 copies of the book Freedom at Dawn from **you**, with **your** commitment to have them delivered to us at our address by December 19.* (Respondent 17)

Respondent 17 uses “your” and “you” to ensure that the reader is involved in the letter, so that he or she would be able to understand what he or she needs to do.

Table 6 shows the frequency of forms of reader-oriented hedges in the various rhetorical sections of complaint business letters.

TABLE 6. Frequency of Forms of Reader-oriented Hedges in the Various Rhetorical Sections of Complaint Business Letters

Forms of reader-oriented hedges	Introduction		Body		Closure	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Reader pronouns	82	98.80	174	96.13	72	97.30
Questions	1	1.20	4	2.21	1	1.35
Directives	0	0.00	3	1.66	1	1.35
Total	83	100.00	181	100.00	74	100.00

As shown in Table 6, reader pronouns occur more frequently than the other forms (questions and directives) in all the rhetorical sections. In the introduction section, they account for (98.80% of the total hedges), in the body section (96.13%), and closure section (97.30%). Examples of reader pronouns are shown in the extracts as follow:

9. Introduction: *First and foremost I want **you** to confirm, as per the attached email of the above mentioned order, that the copies of books that I ordered is “Freedom at Dawn” and not “Freedom at Midnight”.* (Respondent 16)
10. Body: *In looking over the books **you** sent me, I am concerned about the quality of the books I received.* (Respondent 25)
11. Closure: *Therefore, contact us immediately with **your** intentions and we look forward to doing business with **you** in the future.* (Respondent 8)

From the extracts, the reader pronouns “you” and “your” are used to ensure that the reader knows that he or she is acknowledged in the letter and needs to perform a required action.

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEW

The discussions would be focusing on the responses by the respondents based on the themes of the interview questions.

1. Types of hedging devices used in complaint business letters

Four of the respondents claimed that they used a mixture of reader-oriented hedges and content-oriented hedges. According to Respondent 14, “*I will normally use reader-oriented hedges to disarm the statement and content-oriented hedges to state the details clearly*”. There was, nevertheless one respondent, who preferred to use only content-oriented hedges in the complaint business letter. According to Respondent 26, “*I want to convey the content clearly, so I will write the letter as precisely as possible*”.

Respondent 4, 10, 11, and 14 used a mixture of content-oriented hedges and reader-oriented hedges in complaint business letters. Respondent 4 stated that he would use both reader-oriented hedges and content-oriented hedges in complaint business letters. He explained that he would also establish and maintain business relationship with the reader through the content of the letter. According to him,

“I won’t distance myself, although the situations aren’t pleasant. I just want actions to be taken. I want them to deal the problems. I write the letter for a purpose to establish a stronger tie, not to distance myself”.

Respondent 4 mentioned that he would be very direct especially when he wants to complain to let the readers know who he is, what the problem is, and what he wants. For Respondent 10, she mentioned that she would use reader-oriented hedges and content-oriented hedges. She stated that clarity is also important in the letter, so the reader would understand the situation better. She would withhold a commitment in making a claim when she writes a complaint by using hedging devices to make sure the reader understand her frustration. She does not choose to connect or distance herself from the readers when she writes a complaint business letter just like what she mentioned in this statement:

“I don’t think whether I connect or distance myself to the reader, but more on how I write the letter, so it would be important for my point of view of the situation”.

She also stated that she would be specific in giving details, so that actions would be taken. Respondent 14 explained that he would use reader-oriented hedges to disarm the statement

and content-oriented hedges to state the details clearly. He said he would withhold a commitment in making a claim when he writes a complaint through this statement: *“If the order can’t be fulfilled quickly, I would order from a different business”*. This shows that he would convey the statement as an opinion rather than a recognised fact because he inserts his own decision and judgement to order the books from a different company if the reader could not comply with his demands. Typically, he would connect to the readers depending on the size of the company. He illustrated a situation by giving an example:

“If I forward the letter to Intel, the person receiving the letter may not be the person, who did the mistake, but if the person reading the letter is from a small company, I would try to connect”.

Therefore, he stated that he would either choose to connect or distance himself from the readers depending on the size of the company and the person receiving the letter. He mentioned that if the issue is really severe, he would distance himself from the reader. He mentioned that he would be direct in complaint business letters if the situation is too harsh and unforgivable.

According to Respondent 11, he mentioned that he would use content-oriented hedges more than reader-oriented hedges. He would withhold a commitment in making claim when he writes a complaint because according to him, *“I would make the business elsewhere, but it actually depends on the implications of the situation”*. He went on to explain that he would either choose to connect or distance himself from the readers but it also depends on the context. He illustrated that if the relationship is closer, he would connect to the readers, but if he does not know the reader, he would distance himself. Respondent 11 mentioned that the directness of the content in complaint business letters depends on the situation, but he would usually be more direct.

Respondent 26 explained that at times, she would be as direct as possible in complaining because she feels that if she is indirect, the readers would not be able to take any prompt actions on what she needs. This is because she wants actions to be taken to solve the problem of the situation. She went on to say that she prefers to withhold a commitment when making a claim. She expresses her judgement and opinions on this issue because she wants the readers to do the process of shipping back the wrong consignment and she wishes that the readers would bear the cost for the wrong books. She mentioned that she would either connect or distance herself from the readers depending on the situation. According to her,

“If my relationship with the reader is really close, I would try to connect, because I do not know what’s going on over there and what’s happening in that company, it’s more than questioning their attitude. If I do not know the situation that well, I would distance myself from the readers, because I may not know about the problem or the use in detail”.

A further possible determinant of hedging in complaint letters seems to be culture. According to Respondent 10, since she is an American, she prefers to state the problem objectively instead of going round the bush, which is slightly less direct. However, she stated that she would indirect in conveying the statement in a positive way, so that it would be more easily accepted by Asian culture. This means that she would vary the hedging devices depending on the culture. She explained that hedging devices are vital for her to explain the statement precisely and more politely in the letters. Her statement is consistent with Jung’s (2005) research, which shows that national culture always affects the choices of politeness strategies by business professionals in business settings.

2. Forms of hedging devices used in complaint business letters

All the respondents stated that they would hedge depending on the severity of the complaint in order to gain empathy from the reader and to create rapport with the reader. They would also hedge in order to create rapport with the reader or the person they are addressing the issue to, so that the reader will read the letter and not feel offended while reading the letter. They also agreed that they would hedge to ensure the desired action would be taken by the recipient of their complaint letter. They mentioned they would hedge mainly for clarity sake. According to Respondent 14, *“We are talking about business. It’s about business to business. If you get the point across, it will defeat the purpose”*. This means he would use hedging devices but leave out disappointments and anger in the letter.

Respondent 4 stated that he would use terms like “prefer”, “appropriate”, “it is important to understand”, and “first of all” in complaint business letters. From reference to Hyland’s model (1996), “prefer”, “appropriate”, and “first of all” are used as forms of content-oriented hedges, whereas “it is important to understand” is used as a form of reader-oriented hedges. He stated that he would withhold a commitment in making a claim by using bullet points and sentence connectors like “first of all” to mention the specific steps he wants the readers to make.

For Respondent 10, she mentioned that she would use “should”, and “it is important” as form of reader-oriented hedges. She would also use “unfortunately” as a form of content-oriented hedges. Besides that, she would use attitude markers, such as “hopefully”, “unfortunately”, and “I expect to hear from you soon” to make sure the reader understand her frustration.

Respondent 14 explained that he would use terms like “I know that you are doing the best job possibly”, instead of “you didn’t do your job”; “it is important”; “I think”; and “it seems”. This is because it is the clarity of the points that is most important and it is not worth sacrificing the point he wants to convey. According to him,

“In the business world, you can do whatever you want and say whatever you want. I think that’s the culture where I come from. The point is to get the point done. I would tell you what I need to hear, and you tell me what you need to hear”.

Conversely, Respondent 26 only used content-oriented hedges in complaint business letters. According to her, she would use more of content-oriented hedges because she wants to be specific in her details of the letter. She would use words like “unfortunately” as attitude markers to express her feelings or disappointments and also to show her frustration over the complaint.

3. Tendency to use hedging devices in various rhetorical parts of complaint business letters

The respondents have varying points of view about using hedging devices in the different rhetorical parts of the complaint business letters.

Respondent 4 mentioned that he would use content-oriented hedges in the introduction and body because the reasons of the letter should be mentioned as specifically as possible in the introduction, while the suggestions for the problem should be stated clearly in the body as clarity is vital in this section. He would also use reader-oriented hedges in the closure because he would end the letter by offering compliment. This would ensure that the reader would not get offended from the content that had been written in the letter. For Respondent 10, she mentioned that throughout the whole letter, she would use more reader-

oriented hedges in the introduction and closure to explain the situation, so that the readers would understand the situation better.

According to Respondent 11, he stated that he would use reader-oriented hedges in the introduction and closure because he needs to create rapport with the readers, so that they would understand and have sympathy on this issue that causes a lot of trouble in his company. However, he would use content-oriented hedges in the body to state the facts and explains the situation. Respondent 14 stated that he would use reader-oriented hedges and content-oriented hedges in the introduction to tell the readers about him and the problem of the situation. He would use content-oriented hedges in the body to discuss the issue. Meanwhile, in the closure, he would use reader-oriented hedges to end in a polite manner, so that actions would be taken.

According to Respondent 26, she would use reader-oriented hedges in the introduction to soften the situation. Nonetheless, she stated that it depends on the situation because she feels that if she hedges, it would take away the effect of the command. Therefore, she does not normally hedge when the problem is severe and too harsh.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Both the frequency counts and interview analysis demonstrate that content-oriented hedges are used more frequently than reader-oriented hedges. This is indicated not just from the frequency counts, but also from the interviews. It is established that the native speakers of English in this study had a greater tendency to use hedges that are related to accuracy of messages than those are more associated with establishing rapport.

In terms of forms of hedging devices used, there is some difference of findings between the frequency counts and interviews. The written task indicates that reader pronouns were most frequently used by the respondents. However, responses from the interviews show that attitude markers were more preferred. It shows that their beliefs or perceptions are inconsistent with their practice as they are not aware of the fact that in practice, they use a considerable number of reader pronouns as hedges.

Content-oriented hedges were found to commonly occur in all the rhetorical sections (introduction, body, and closure). This was found from both the quantitative and qualitative data. Also, in all the rhetorical sections, reader pronouns were the most frequently used.

Although the findings in this research indicate that content-oriented hedges were most frequently used compared to reader-oriented hedges, it is observed that most of the respondents used a mixture of content-oriented hedges and reader-oriented hedges. This shows many respondents not only wanted to convey the message across as accurately as possible, but they also wanted to create rapport with the readers.

In general, content-oriented hedges, especially accuracy-oriented hedges (stance hedges and boosters) were used most frequently compared to reader-oriented hedges. In other words, most of the hedges that occurred in the complaint business letters were used to convey messages across accurately and precisely.

The dominance of content-oriented hedges can be found in all the rhetorical sections of the complaint letters. However, the purpose of using the hedges varies from one section to another. In the introduction section, the hedges were mostly used to help convey the reason or purpose of the letter. In the body, the hedges were mainly used to address the problems and the suggestions for the problems in a clear and accurate manner. On the other hand in the closure, the hedges were mainly used either to help summarise or re-emphasise the problem and state suggestions taken by the readers in a clear manner.

The findings of this research are consistent with some studies on business letters. One example is Santos (2002) who carried out a study on the genre of business letters of

negotiation. Like the present study, in Santos' study, content-oriented hedges are used more than reader-oriented hedges. The findings of this research are also consistent with Sinturat's (2010) research on lexical phrases and hedges in business letters. The findings show that in business letters, content-oriented hedges are used more than reader-oriented hedges, which mean that the hedges used are aimed to convey the message of the letters as clearly and precisely as possible rather than maintaining the relationship with the readers.

Munir (2001) carried out a study on politeness strategies in business letters. He found numerous examples and expressions, which are meant to maintain relationship with readers. However, it is difficult to compare the findings of his study with those in the present study since he only examines examples of hedges, which convey politeness on his business letter data. Nevertheless, his study demonstrates that hedges used to maintain reader-writer relationship are quite frequent.

The findings of some studies on other genres (spoken texts, written discourse, newspaper articles, new discourse, magazine discourse, and academic discourse) have similarities with the findings of this research. For instance, the findings of this research are consistent with the findings of Aijmer's research (2004) on hedges among the native speakers' use of English in speech and writing. The findings show that content-oriented hedges are used more than reader-oriented hedges, which are quite similar to the findings of this research. The findings of Wilamowa's study (2005) are also consistent with the findings of this research. Wilamowa's study deals only with spoken texts. The findings show that content-oriented hedges are used more than reader-oriented hedges, which are comparable with the findings of this current study.

In general, this study indicates that the use of hedging devices in business writing is different compared to other forms of writing because in business writing, the hedging devices are used primarily to convey the message across as precisely and accurately as possible. However, reader-oriented hedges are used in a slightly lesser extend in business writing.

For academic writing (research articles, magazines, and newspapers), the main purpose is to convey the content in a very accurate and clear manner, so that the information would be clearly understood by the readers. There is no establishment of relationships between the writers and readers in the disciplinary-situated situations (Hyland, 1996). This means that the content of the academic writing is primarily to convey or express the message across as clearly as possible without acknowledging the presence of readers or engaging the readers in the situations.

CONCLUSION

The findings illustrate that hedging plays an important part in written business communication. From the data, the findings show that hedging tends to be used primarily to convey the message across in a precise and accurate manner in complaint business letters. In addition, although precision is the most important goal in complaint business letters, hedges do fulfil a number of other functions, such as humility, honesty, and proper caution (Laane, 2010). Without the presence of hedges, the business writers would be unable to formulate statements describing new information or creating different viewpoints through persuasion and negotiation of information. Since hedging is vital in business communication, it is regarded as the most significant resource with a variety of realisations that the business writers have to acquire to reflect their professional persona and interact with the readers with respect. This means that reader-oriented hedges are also vital to establish and maintain relationships between the writers and the readers, in order that business would be carried out and also extended in the near future. The researcher believes that there needs to be a mixture of content-oriented hedges and reader-oriented hedges in complaint business letters because

as much as the content of the letter needs to be specific, so that the message could be carried across clearly, some offensive remarks could be disarmed, as well in order to create rapport with the readers through the appropriate use of reader-oriented hedges.

The findings would provide new insights into business trainers and instructors' understanding on how to improve the teaching materials or design, thus the learners would be able to study in the business course effectively and they would also know how to use hedging devices efficiently. This would prepare the learners for an authentic experience of language in business settings on how far they engage the language user in authentic interpretation, interaction, and communication; and on how the findings of the authentic data could activate the learners' prior knowledge, interest, and curiosity about language and structure (Morrow, 1977; Breen, 1985; Arnold, 1991; Canado & Esteban, 2005).

REFERENCES

- Aijmer, K. (2004). Pragmatic Markers in Spoken Interlanguage. *Nordic Journal of English Studies*. 173-190.
- Arnold, E. (1991). Authenticity Revisited: How Real is Real? *English for Specific Purposes*. 10(3), 237-244.
- Atai, M. & Sadr, L. (2006). A cross-cultural genre study on hedging devices in discussion section of applied linguistics research articles.
- Bila, M. ((2007). Structural and Cohesive Devices in Business Letters. *Topics in Linguistics*. 1, 23-25.
- Bilikova, P. (2010). *Expressing Politeness in Business Correspondence*. Tomas Bata University Bly, R. W. (1999). *The Encyclopedia of Business Letters, Fax Memos, and E-mail*. Petaling Jaya, Advantage Quest.
- Breen, M. P. (1985). Authenticity in the Language Classroom. *Applied Linguistics*. 6(1), 60-70.
- Canado, M. L. P. & Esteban, A. A. (2005). Authenticity in the Teaching of ESP: A Proposal. *Journal of the Slovene Association of LSP Teachers*. 5, 35-43
- Cheng, W. & Warren M. (2001). The Use of Vague Language in Intercultural Conversations in Hong Kong. *English World-Wide*. 22, 81-104.
- Crompton, P. (1997). Hedging in Academic Writing: Some Theoretical Problems. *English for Specific Purposes*. 16(4), 271-287.
- De Cock, S.; Granger, S.; Leech, G. & McEnery, T. (1998). An Automated Approach to the Phrasicon of EFL learners. In Granger, S. (Ed.). *Learner English on Computer* (pp. 67- 79). London: Longman.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Hartford, B. & Mahboob, A. (2004). Models of Discourse in the Letter of Complaint. *World English's*. 23(4), 585-600.
- Hunston, S. (2002). *Corpora in Applied Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hodges, D. & Burchell, N. (2003). Research Report- Business Graduate Competencies: Employers' Views On Importance And Performance. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*. 4(2), 16-22.
- House, J. & Kasper, G. (1981). Politeness markers in English and German. In Coulmas, F. (Eds.). *Conversational Routine* (pp. 157-185). The Hague: Mouton.
- Hyland, K. (1996). Writing Without Conviction? Hedging in science research articles. *Applied Linguistics*. 17, 433-454.
- Hyland, K.(2005). *Stance and Engagement: A Model of Interaction in Academic Discourse*. Discourse Studies.

- Jucker, A. H.; Smith, S. W. & Ludge, T. (2003). Interactive Aspects Of Vagueness In Conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics* 35, 1737–1769.
- Jung, Y. (2005). Power and politeness in Korean business correspondence. In F. Bargiela-Chiappini & M. Gotti (Eds.). *Asian business discourse(s)*, (pp. 291-312). Berm: Peter Lang.
- Junhua, W. (2010). Convergence In The Rhetorical Pattern Of Directness And Indirectness In Chinese And U.S. Business Letters. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*. 24, 1-24
- Kaur, S. (2013). Critical Literacy Practices Of English Major In A Tertiary Institution. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*. 13(2), 21-39.
- Kimball, C. & Gelder, J. V. (2004). *Ultimate Books of Business Letters: Customize Your Letters, Memos, E-Mails And Presentations with the Enclosed CD-rom*. Entrepreneur Press.
- King, A. (2003). *Effective Business Letter Writing, 2nd Edition*. Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd.
- Laane, M. (2010). *Strategies of Hedging in Science Writing*. Birkbeck University Of London.
- Lewin, B. A. (2005). Hedging: An Exploratory Study Of Authors' And Readers' Identification Of 'Toning Down' In Scientific Texts. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*. 4, 163-178.
- Markkanen, R. & Schroder, H. (1997). *Hedging and Discourse: Approaches to the Analysis of a Pragmatic Phenomenon in Academic Texts*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Metsa-Ketela, M. (2006). "Words Are More Of Less Superfluous": The Case Of More Or Less In Academic Lingua Franca English. *Nordic Journal of English Studies*. 5(2), 117-143.
- Morrow, K. (1977). Authentic Texts and ESP. In S. Holden. (Ed.). *English for Specific Purposes* (pp. 13-16). London: Modern English Publications.
- Munir, S. (2001). Politeness Strategies in Business Letters by Malaysian Writers. *A Journal on English for Specific Purposes*. 7(1), 39-53.
- Munir, S. (2003). Hedging in research articles and its pedagogical implications. *Issues in Linguistics and English Language Teaching*, pp. 20-36, Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang.
- Myers, G. (1989). The pragmatics of politeness in scientific articles. *Applied Linguistics*. 10(1), 1-35.
- Nikula, T. (1997). Interlanguage View on Hedging. In R. Markkanen, & H. Schroder (Eds.). *Hedging and Discourse: Approaches to the Analysis of a Pragmatic Phenomenon in Academic Texts* (pp. 188-208). Walter de Gruyter: Berlin.
- Olmo, S. O. (2006). The Role of Passive Voice in Hedging Medical Discourse: A Corpus-Based Study on English and Spanish Research Articles. *Revista de Lenguas para Fines Específicos Nos. 11(12)*, 205-218.
- Ong, C. S. B. & Yuen, C. K. (2014). A Corpus Study of Structure Types of Lexical Bundles in MUET Reading Texts. *3L: Language Linguistics Literature®*, *Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*. 20(2), 127-140.
- Plutsky, S. (1996). Faculty perception of students' business communication needs. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 69-77.
- Riekkinen, N. (2009). *'This is Not Criticism, But...'* Softening Criticism: The Use of Lexical Hedges in Academic Spoken Interaction. University of Helsinki.
- Salager-Meyer, F. (1994). Hedges and textual communicative function in medical English written discourse. *English for Specific Purposes*. 13, 149-170.
- Santos, V. B. M. P. (2002). Genre Analysis of Business Letters of Negotiation. *English for Specific Purposes*. 21, 169-199.

- Seely, John. (1998). *The Oxford Guide to Effective Writing and Speaking*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Seglin, J. L. & Coleman, D. (2012). *The AMA Handbook of Business Letters*. 4th Edition, American Management Association.
- Seskauskiene, I. (2008). Hedging in ESL: A Case Study of Lithuanian Learners. *Studies About Languages*.13, 71-76.
- Shirato, J. & Stapleton, P. (2007). Comparing English Vocabulary in a Spoken Learner Corpus with a Native Speaker Corpus: Pedagogical Implications Arising From an Empirical Study in Japan. *Language Teaching Research*. *Language Teaching Research*. 11(4). 393-412.
- Sinturat, T. (2010). *An Analysis Of Lexical Phrases In Business Letters: An Online Business Letter Corpus And Textbooks*.
- Skelton, J. (1988). *Comments in Academic Articles*. *Applied Linguistics in Society*. London: CILT/BAAL.
- Taylor, S. & Gartside, L. (1998). *Gartside's Model Business Letters & Other Business Documents*. London: Financial Times/Prentice Hall.
- Tg Zatul Hidayah Tg Petra, Mohd Juzaidin Ab Aziz & Siti Hamin Stapa. (2010). Thematic Role To Assist Preparation Of A Business Letter Based On Genre Approach. *IEEE*, 689-692.
- Wilamova, S. (2005). On the Function of Hedging Devices in Negatively Polite Discourse. S 11. *Brno Studies in English*. 31, 85-93
- Zhang, H. (2007). The pragmatic function of hedges in business English. *Journal of Hunan Business College*. 3, 117-120

APPENDIX A

Handout **Hedging devices**

1. Reader-oriented hedges (Engagement)
 - deal mostly with the relationship between author and audience, confirm the attention the writers give to the interactional effects of their statement, and solicit collusion by addressing the reader as an intelligent colleague capable of participating in the discourse with an open mind.
 - a. Reader pronouns- you, your, we
 - b. Directives- consider, note, imagine, must, should, ought, it is important to understand
 - c. Questions
2. Content-oriented hedges (Stance)
 - mitigate the relationship between propositional content and a representation of reality.
 - hedge the correspondence between what the writer says about the world and what the world is thought to be like.
 - a. Hedges- possible, might, perhaps
 - b. Boosters- clearly, obviously, demonstrate
 - c. Attitude markers- agree, prefer, unfortunately, hopefully, appropriate, logical, remarkable
 - d. Self-mention- first person pronoun (I)

APPENDIX B

Write a complaint business letter based on the situation stated below.

“Imagine yourself as a manager in a company called Esther Sdn. Bhd. You want to order 200 books from Ghee Cooperation Berhad. On examining the consignment, you discovered a lot of unsatisfactory issues regarding the books and thus, you want to complain to the company about the issues. The complaints are as follows:

1. Ghee Cooperation Berhad have sent you 200 copies of the book Freedom at Midnight instead of Freedom at Dawn. This is an extremely irritating mistake on the business company’s part because your company has many unsold copies of the former (Freedom at Midnight), but several customers, have requested on the latter (Freedom at Dawn).
2. The books do not match the samples Ghee Cooperation Berhad sent because most of the books are in poor quality.
3. The books are not sent on time as they are sent one week after the supposed date, which was supposed to be on the 19th of December 2012.

You want to express your feelings and suggest actions to be taken on these issues, such as:

1. Express disappointment or anger.
2. Ask to arrange to take back the wrong consignment.
3. Demand Ghee Cooperation Berhad to send you the books that you ordered as soon as possible because there will be two possibilities, which are you will opt to order the books with other companies, or stop the contract with Ghee Cooperation Berhad.”

(Adapted from King, 2003, p. 98)

APPENDIX C

Interview questions

1. Do you hedge in any type of business letters? Why is that so?
2. Do you think that it is encouraged to use hedging devices in complaint business letters? Why do you say so?
3. What hedging devices do you commonly use in complaint business letters?
4. When do you normally hedge in complaint business letters? Why do you normally hedge in complaint business letters? (e.g. to explain the statement precisely and accurately, to make sure that the order in the statement is not too direct, to be more polite, and so on)
5. Do you think that hedging devices are important to help the readers understand the content of the complaint business letter clearly? How is it possible?
6. Are hedging devices in complaint business letters important to maintain the relationship between the writers and the readers? In what way?
7. In a business setting, when you write a complaint business letter, will you be direct or indirect in your content of the letter? Why do you say so?
8. Do you prefer to make or withhold a commitment when you make a claim in complaint business letter? Can you elaborate more on your response?
9. Do you choose to connect the readers to the discourse of the complaint business letter, or distance yourself from the readers when you write a complaint business letter? How is that possible?
10. Which part of the complaint business letter (introduction, body, or closure) do you normally use hedging devices? Why is that so?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Hooi Chee Mei received her degree of Education TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages)- Honours from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in 2011. She is currently a Masters student in Applied Linguistics, English course at USM, where she pursues her research in “An Analysis of Hedging Devices in Complaint Business Letters”.

Munir Shuib (Ph.D) is an Associate Professor at the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia. His areas of interest include English for Specific Purposes, the teaching of English grammar and graduates’ skills and competencies. He currently serves as the Chief Editor for the Bulletin of Higher Education Research.