Research Article

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Hedging in Iranian English language teachers' spoken language: Any differential effect for gender?

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Abstract: Despite the importance attached in the literature to the use of hedges, the study of hedging has been shown to target, mainly, the written corpora of various types and so remains neglected in naturally occurring speech. Moreover, the existing discussion predominantly encompass cross-cultural variation in the use of hedging devices and gender as a variable has largely been overlooked. This study was conducted to shed more light on the differences between 4 Iranian male and female English instructors' use of hedging and its different realizations in their actual speech. One teaching session of each instructor was videotaped and the instructors were asked to view their video and to recollect their reasons for resorting to different activities for teaching. Their recollections were recorded and transcribed. Based on Hyland's classification of hedges, the frequency and realization of hedging in male and female corpus were identified. Results showed considerable differences in the overall distribution of hedges as well as certain types of hedging linguistic devices throughout the male and female corpus.

Keywords: Hedging, gender, spoken language, ELT

1 Introduction

Hedging has turned to one of the frequently discussed issues in the field of applied linguistics, in general, and in contrastive academic rhetoric, in particular (Lewin 2005; Vassileva 2001). Hyland (1998b) defines hedging as using items such as *possible*, *might*, and *believe* which indicate the writer's decision to present information as an opinion rather than as a fact. In other words, by the use of hedges, speakers or writers communicate a low commitment to their assertion and seek to distance themselves from what they communicate (Prokofieva and Hirschberg 2014). Hedging is motivated by epistemological and social factors (Koutsantoni 2006). On the one hand, hedging devices help writers and speakers to present their unproven claims with appropriate accuracy and caution and to attach the correct degree of certainty to their statements (Hyland 1996, Hyland 1998b; Koutsantoni 2006; Salager-Meyer 1994). On the other hand, hedges enable writers to enter a dialogue with their audience (Hyland 1998b), to allow room for alternative interpretations, and tone down their assertions in order to solicit acceptance for them (Hyland 1996; Koutsantoni 2006; Myers 1990).

Despite the importance attached in the literature to hedges, the study of hedging, either descriptive or exploratory, has been shown to target, mainly, the written corpora, including scientific articles, theses and dissertations (Examples in the Iranian context include Hassani and Dastjani Farahani 2014; Jalilifar 2007;

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Samaie, Khosravian and Boghayeri 2014). Accordingly, it remains neglected in naturally occurring speech, notably of non-native speakers of English. Moreover, the existing discussion predominantly encompass cross-cultural and cross-discipline variation (e.g., Atai and Sadr 2006; Poos and Simpson 2002; Vold 2006) in the use of hedging devices and the effect of social constructs like gender on the realization of hedging in the spoken discourse has largely been overlooked. The need to investigate gender differences in the use of linguistic forms has been highlighted by scholars like Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003). More specifically, cross-gender variation in the use of hedging linguistic devices has recently captured the attention of researchers. Subon (2013), for instance, maintains that realizing differences in the use of hedges in the speech of men and women will help to gain a better understanding of cross-gender variation in applying hedging which, consequently, contributes to efficient communication between genders. The present study was conducted to document differences between Iranian male and female English instructors in their use of hedges in spoken language. To be more specific, we aimed at addressing variation in the discourse of English instructors of various genders in terms of their overall use of hedges as well as the distribution of particular hedging devices.

2 Theoretical Preliminaries

The term hedging has been defined and understood in various ways. Lakoff (1973: 471) uses the term to describe "a set of words or phrases that function to make things fuzzier". Hyland (1995: 1) defines hedging as "expressions of tentativeness and possibility in language use", which "indicate interpretations and allow writers to convey their attitude to the truth of the statements they accompany, thereby presenting unproven claims with caution and softening categorical assertions". Hyland (1998b: 1) further defines hedging as the expression of "lack of complete commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition regardless of whether the author is actually committed". To him, hedges enable writers not only to express their perspective on the precision of their own propositions, but also the propositions of others. Hyland (2004) believes that hedges mark the writer's reluctance to present propositional information categorically. Holmes (1984, 1990) defines hedging as the way that writers seek to modify their claims, toning down uncertain or potentially risky statements, and conveying appropriately collegial attitudes to readers. As these definitions show, by using hedging devices writers avoid to accept complete responsibility of the truth of their propositions or utterances. Similar purposes for employing hedging devices in spoken language has been documented. Crompton (1997: 281), for instance, defines hedging in spoken interactions as "items of language which a speaker uses to explicitly qualify his/her lack of commitment to the truth of a proposition he/she utters".

There are a variety of approaches to the lexico-grammatical criteria for classifying hedging devices. In his taxonomy, Salager-Meyer (1994) presents types of hedging items and constructions, labelling them as shields, approximators, compound hedges and expressions indicating authors' personal doubt and direct involvement. Modal verbs and semi-auxiliaries such as *seem* and *appear* are classified as shields, adjectives and adverbs are approximators, phrases containing items like *suggest* and *assume* are labelled as compound hedges, and expressions of the type *I believe* and *to our knowledge* indicate authors' personal doubt and direct involvement. The classification proposed by Lewin (2005) includes approximators, attributions, and qualifications. Approximators include structures such as *approximately*. Attributions include attributors which consist of devices that show that the reality in the proposition has somewhat been mediated by human understanding; this type of hedging covers both personalization like *I argue that* and depersonalization as *the findings suggest that*. Qualifications would include strengtheners such as *completely* and weakeners such as *partially*. As the latter category indicates, Lewin includes both certainty and uncertainty in his classification of hedging; the majority of literature, however, considers expressions of certainty as boosters rather than hedges (e.g., Hyland 1998b).

Hedging devices of different types, lexical or discourse-based, have been viewed to be motivated by both epistemic and social or interpersonal purposes. The epistemic function of hedging has been captured in different terms. Holmes (1988: 12) touches on this function in spoken interaction by introducing hedges

as "means of expressing the extent of the speaker's confidence about the validity of a proposition"; i.e., to express epistemic modality. Hyland (2004) elaborates on the epistemic purpose of hedging in oral discourse by maintaining that hedges indicate the degree of confidence in what is said and is used to convey propositional uncertainty. In his other studies, Hyland focuses on the epistemic function of hedges in written texts and indicates that they "alert readers to the author's perspective towards the propositional information" (Hyland 1996: 83) and that they "reveal the assessments of reliability the claims carry" (Hyland 2000: 1). Similarly, Koutsantoni (2006: 77) believes that "hedges withhold writer's full commitment to statements", and Crismore and Vande Kopple (1997: 235) hold that hedging devices "signal that the truth of the material is tentative".

Besides the epistemic function of hedging, interpersonal or social function thereof has also been examined by many scholars. According to these researchers, hedging "stimulates a personal interaction between a producer and a receiver of language in that the receiver has room to evaluate and judge for him/herself" (Crismore and Vande Kopple 1997: 235); hedges are used to make claims more acceptable to colleagues, to soften interpersonal imposition and to display conformity to interactional norms (Hyland 1999); hedging devices suggest "a greater orientation to readers and more sensitivity to the possible subjective negation of their claims" (Hyland 1999: 4). Functioning as interpersonal devices, hedging expressions also "make the claims appropriate in terms of the social interactions they appeal to" (Hyland 2000: 1); they value "community norms concerning rhetorical respect for colleagues' views" (Hyland 1999: 4); hedges are pragmatic devices used to modify the illocutionary force of utterances for interpersonal reasons, i.e., as politeness strategies (Holmes 1988); they can signal acknowledgement of readers' face needs (Myers 1989); and they "mark informality, conviviality and group membership in conversation" (Hyland 1999: 3).

In addition to theoretical investigations of different facets of hedging, there are numerous empirical studies on the realization of hedges in actual practice. Hyland (1995) reviewed 26 realizations of hedges in science research articles composed by English native speakers. He found that lexical verbs, adverbial constructions, adjectives, modal verbs, reference to limiting conditions, modal nouns, reference to a model, theory or methodology and admission of a lack of knowledge were among the most to the least important hedges throughout the corpus. Koutsantoni (2006) scrutinized hedging devices in 17 research articles and 9 samples of theses to ascertain how relations of power affect the density and function of hedges. Results suggested variations in the density of resorting to hedging and certain types of strategic hedges between the texts produced by students versus expert authors. Vassileva (2001) examined the degree of both detachment (i.e., hedging) and commitment (i.e., boosters) in English, Bulgarian and Bulgarian English research articles and found considerable differences in the overall spread of hedges and boosters throughout the introduction, discussion and conclusion parts of the articles.

In addition to the written language, Holmes (1988) concentrated on the relative frequency of different grammatical classes in spoken language and found marked variations in the way hedges and boosters were applied in the corpora under study. Oral discourse has been surveyed by a few other scholars as well. Farr and O'Keeffe (2002), for instance, looked into the function and realization of *would* in two sub-corpora of institutionalized spoken interaction in an Irish context. Poos and Simpson (2002) studied the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) to identify the realization of hedges in the academic disciplinary contexts of physical sciences and humanities. Their findings suggested a considerable academic-related effect on hedging occurrence. Makatchev and Simmons (2011) evaluated how hedging devices utilized in dialogues of native speakers of American English living in the US and native speakers of Arabic living in North Africa and Middle East manifest features like naturalness, agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness. Their comparisons reflected disparities in the use and perception of hedging items across cultures and languages.

As most of the above reviews indicate, cross-cultural comparisons have prevailed in written and spoken literature on hedging. The literature on hedging has also paid sporadic attention to the role of gender in the application of hedges (e.g., Farr and O'Keeffe 2002; Taweel et al. 2011). Research on gender differences in the use of hedges has been influenced, to a large extent, by the work of Lakoff (1973). She argued that women's speech lacks authority and confidence and therefore "expression of uncertainty is favoured" in the

unassertive style of communication they tend to adopt (p. 45). In later years, there were debates on gender-related differences in the frequency and function of hedging devices. Brown (1980), Dixon and Foster (1997), Poos and Simpson (2002), and Alajmi (2015) have shown that gender differences in the use of hedges are subtle and vary across speakers and contexts. On the other hand, scholars like Montgomery (1995) and Holmes (2013) emphasized on higher frequency of hedging devices in the female corpus. In addition to disagreement on the density of detachment devices, there have been controversy on the function of hedges as used by different genders. For instance, females have been viewed to use hedges more to show politeness (e.g., Brown 1980), euphemism (e.g., Montgomery 1995), or interpersonal warmth (Dixon and Foster 1997). Men, on the other hand, 'employ hedges to convey impression and incertitude' (Dixon and Foster 1997: 89).

3 Method

3.1 Context and participants

Participants were four English instructors, selected through convenience sampling, labelled as instructors A, B, C, and D in the present study, teaching English for specific Purposes (ESP) courses in four public universities in Tehran. Instructors A and B were female and instructors C and D were male. Their age ranged between 41 and 50, and their teaching experience varied from fifteen to nineteen years. All four instructors had completed their PhD degree in ELT. We obtained their consent to use their data in writing an academic paper; however, the exact focus of the study was not revealed to them as we thought that might influence their responses.

Improving learners' translation and communication skills was followed by all four instructors who were teaching sections of the same course book published by The Iranian Organization for Researching and Composing University Textbooks in the Humanities, along with some complementary materials based on learners' needs. The classes were further parallel in terms of their content focus (i.e., all had been offered to Iranian MA students of history).

Instructor A, around 48 years old, included reading and translation in her class activities. With almost 16 years of teaching experience, she taught ESP courses for four hours a week in the university. There were seven female students in her class whose age ranged between 23 and 29. Instructor B, who was the youngest among the four participants, 45 years old, mostly focused on reading comprehension, translation and class discussions that originated from topics covered in reading comprehension. With around 19 year and a half of pedagogical practice, she spent only two hours a week teaching ESP courses. Six female learners varying in age between 22 and 30 were her students. Instructor C who also covered writing activities besides reading comprehension, translation and discussion in his class was 49 years old; he has been teaching at different universities since 20 years ago and was spending around four hours a week teaching ESP courses at the time of the data collection. His class population included only three male and two female students who were between 22 and 25 years old. Instructor D, who was the oldest participant, was around 50 years old and mainly covered review exercises; the review was followed by focus on collocations and translation practice. At the same time, with 25 years of teaching experience, he was the busiest instructor allocating six hours a week teaching ESP courses. His students were four female and four males whose ages ranged from 24 to 29.

3.2 Data Collection

To collect data of the participants' spoken discourse, the stimulated recall technique, advanced by Meijer, Beijaard and Verloop (2002) was employed; i.e., one teaching session (about 90 minutes) of each instructor was videotaped and, later, instructors were asked to view the video of their teaching and to recollect why they were doing what they were doing in the class (i.e., to give their reasons for resorting to different activities while teaching in the classroom). The logic behind gathering this kind of data was the fact that when instructors were required to give us their reasons for their selection of certain activities, techniques or

approaches in their teaching, they were more likely to utilize detachment items to indicate their degree of certainty/uncertainty in their claims about the appropriateness of their choices. The delay in viewing time varied for different instructors depending on their teaching schedule; it was around fifteen minutes for instructors A, B, D and an hour and a half for instructor C.

3.3 Procedure and data analysis

We drew on Hyland's (1995, 1996, 1998b, 2000) classification of hedges as we saw it as the most comprehensive taxonomy covering the most cases of linguistic devices identifying hedges. The taxonomy of hedges introduced by Hyland includes both lexical and discourse-based types of hedges. The main categories in his taxonomy of lexical hedges are modal verbs like *may* and *might*, epistemic lexical verbs like *believe* and *appear*, epistemic adverbs like *possibly* and *probably*, epistemic adjectives like *possible* and *likely*, epistemic nouns like *probability* and *possibility*, indefinite articles + nouns like *a way to*, numerals + nouns like *one way to*, and general determiners + nouns like *another possibility is*. Hyland categorizes epistemic lexical verbs into judgmental and evidential verbs. The judgmental category is further split into speculative and deductive verbs. Speculative verbs are subdivided into performative verbs such as *propose* and cognitive verbs such as *speculate*. Evidential verbs include sensory verbs such as *appear* and verbs that indicate the means by which evidence was acquired, such as *seek*. Discourse-based hedges comprise whole sentences which serve the same purpose as lexical hedging items (i.e., admission of lack of knowledge on the part of writers or speakers). Hyland's taxonomy does not include non-linguistic and paralinguistic devices such as facial expressions, hesitations, and stutter which were recorded by Holmes (1988) to be among many ways of expressing doubt in English.

Based on Hyland's taxonomy, all instances of hedging devices were first identified through a qualitative approach. In other words, they were carefully analysed in their contexts by the researchers to ensure they were functioning as hedges. A qualitative approach was employed since, as stated by Hyland (1996: 479), "the choice of a particular device does not always permit a single, unequivocal pragmatic interpretation". For instance, in addition to expressing detachment, a single linguistic form such as *may* is used to express other modal meanings such as permission, as well as functioning affectively as a politeness device (Holmes 1988). Due the highly contextual nature of hedging and the fact that a particular form can serve either a propositional or metadiscoursal function, items were coded manually rather than by computer. In the next stage, quantitative approach served to identify frequency of occurrences of various hedging devices and to produce comparable data across genders. To facilitate comparison across corpora of different sizes, an electronic version of the corpus was also obtained. The number of words in the whole corpus totaled over 5203 cases with 2417 words comprising the female and 2786 words forming the male corpus. Densities (i.e., the number of occurrences per word) were computed by dividing the number of hedges by the total number of words of corpus. It needs to be mentioned that while classifying hedging devices, different types of epistemic lexical verbs as introduced in Hyland's taxonomy were grouped into the same category due to the low number of occurrence of these verbs in the corpus under study (modification of taxonomies to suit one's corpus is also reported in the literature, for example, Vassileva 2001).

4 Results

Results of data analysis will be presented in two sections. The first section presents and examines the overall distribution of hedges throughout the two segments of the corpus; i.e., male vs. female data. The second section includes results of the investigation of particular linguistic devices employed in the two segments under comparison.

4.1 Section 1: Differences in the overall distribution of hedging in male and female speech

The overall spread of hedges is shown in Table 1. As the table indicates, the distribution of hedges in the two sections of the corpus analyzed reveals that females hedge more than males. The density of hedges per total in female corpus is 35.54, compared to 41.93 in male corpus. Based on this finding, it seems that the degree of detachment from one's claims and ideas is considerably higher with the female participants.

Table 1. Density of hedges in male and female corpus

	Females			Males		
Hedges	**Instructor A**	**Instructor B**	**Total**	**Instructor C**	**Instructor D**	**Total**
Number of hedges	43	25	68	36	45	81
Total number of words	1305	1112	2417	1836	1561	3397
Density	30.34	44.48	35.54	51	34.68	41.93

4.2 Section 2: Differences in particular linguistic devices in male and female speech

Table 2. Differences in particular linguistic devices

	Females			Males		
Linguistic Devices	**Instructor A**	**Instructor B**	**Total**	**Instructor C**	**Instructor D**	**Total**
Modals	24(55.8%)	13(52%)	37(54.4%)	10(27.8%)	21(60%)	31(38.3%)[1]
Epistemic verbs	7(16.2%)	5(20%)	12(17.6%)	9(25%)	5(14.3%)	14(17.3%)[2]
Adverbial phrases	5(11.65)	4(16%)	9(13.2%)	7(19.4%)	4(11.4%)	11(13.6%)[3]
Adjectival phrases	2(4.65%)	1(4%)	3(4.4%)	5(14%)	2(2.8%)	7(8.6%)[4]
Epistemic nouns	2(4.6%)	0	2(3%)	4(11.1%)	3(5.7%)	7(10.1%)[5]
Indefinite articles + nouns; Numerals + nouns; General determiners + nouns	3(7%)	2(8%)	5(7.3%)	1(2.8%)	2(2.8%)	3(4.3%)[6]
Total	43	25	68	36	45	81

Note: Superscripts indicate the ranking of the categories in the entire corpus

As Table 2 indicates, male and female participants have rather similar orientations regarding the distribution of modals, epistemic verbs, and adverbial phrases throughout their actual speech. As observed, the most frequent subcategory in both sections of the corpus is modals, which constitute around 54.4% and 38.3% of all occurrences of hedging in female and male discourse respectively. The frequency counts, further, indicate equal importance of epistemic verbs to both groups of participants (about 17% in both groups). This subclass occupies the second position in both segments of the data. Similarly, as the table reveals, male and female respondents resort to adverbials roughly to the same degree (around 13%).

The picture, however, turns out to be rather different if we examine the other three categories of linguistic devices. While epistemic nouns occupy the fourth position in the male corpus, they occupy the last position in female data; nouns are employed nearly three times as frequently in male as in female corpus (3% vs. 10%). The observation that there were no occurrences of this type of hedging items in instructor B's corpus is unexpected. Differences in the use of adjectival phrases are also rather striking. Male participants use this hedging device approximately twice their female counterparts (4% vs. 8%). Accordingly, while this

grammatical class captures fifth position in the two segments of the corpus, it does not enjoy a parallel significance in the discourse of the two groups. Another variability was found in Indefinite articles + nouns; Numerals + nouns; General determiners + nouns category which was favoured more by females. Actually, female contributors use this device almost twice as much as their male counterparts (7% vs. 4%).

In addition to identifying the distribution of hedging devices and their categories across the groups, we also examined the occurrence of various subcategories of each hedging device within the two parts of the data. With respect to the modals, as pictured in Table 3, which were found to be the most frequent hedging feature in the two groups, it was found that all forms of modal verbs, except *will*, *should* and *might* have appeared similarly in the speech of male and female practitioners. In contrast to *will* which was observed to occur noticeably more in the male corpus (35% vs. 27%), *should* and *might* were recorded almost twice as frequently in female compared to male speech. Another interesting finding was the absence of *would* and *should* in instructor C's corpus and *might* in instructor D's data which might imply that females employ a wider range of modal verbs in their speech.

Table 3. Range and frequency of modal verbs expressing hedging

	Females			Males		
Linguistic Devices	**Instructor A**	**Instructor B**	**Total**	**Instructor C**	**Instructor D**	**Total**
Will(not)	6(25%)	4(30.8%)	10(27%)	3(30%)	8(38%)	11(35.5%)
May(not)	5(20.8%)	3(23%)	8(21.6%)	2(20%)	5(23.8%)	7(22.6%)
Can	4(16.6%)	1(7.7%)	5(13.5%)	2(20%)	2(9.5%)	4(12.9%)
Would(not)	4(16.6%)	1(7.7%)	5(13.5%)	0	3(14.3%)	3(10.9%)
Could(not)	2(8.3%)	2(15.38%)	4(10.8%)	1(10 %)	2 (9.5%)	3(9.7%)
Should(not)	1(4%)	2(15.4%)	3(8%)	0	1(10%)	1(3.2%)
Might(not)	1(4.6%)	2(15.4%)	3(8%)	1(10%)	0	1(3.2%)
Total	23	15	38	9	21	30

Table 4 demonstrates differences in the use of particular lexical verbs across the groups. As the table reveals, female participants resort more to *think* and *guess*, while male instructors favour *assume*, *wonder* and *suppose* which seems to be rather typical of a more formal style compared to the verbs recorded in group one's interview. Holmes (1988) reports *think* and *suppose* among the verbs evidently frequent in spoken language, with *suppose* also functioning as a feature of written contexts in the infinitive constructions.

Table 4. Lexical verbs expressing hedging

	Females			Males		
Linguistic Devices	**Instructor A**	**Instructor B**	**Total**	**Instructor C**	**Instructor D**	**Total**
Think	3(42.8%)	1(20%)	4(33.3%)	0	0	0
Assume	0	0	0	2(22.2%)	1(2.2%)	3(21.4%)
Seem	1(14.3%)	0	×	0	0	0
Suggest	1(14.3%)	0	×	0	0	0
Tend	0	0	0	1(11.1%)	0	×
Guess	2(28.6%)	2(40%)	4(33.3%)	3(33.3%)	0	×
Believe	0	0	0	0	1(20%)	×
Wonder	0	0	0	2(22.2%)	1(20%)	3(21.4%)
Hear	0	1(20%)	×	0	0	0
Need	0	1(20%)	×	0	0	0
Suppose	0	0	0	1(11.1%)	2(40%)	3(21.4%)
Total	7	5	12	9	5	14

Table 4 further indicates that in some cases, a particular form is favoured by only one contributor (examples are *seem*, *suggest*, *tend*, *believe*, *here*, and *need* in teacher A, A, C, D, B, and B's responses respectively, identified by the symbol × in the table). Furthermore, teacher C exhibits the highest number of lexical verbs in his recollections. Due to variations in the occurrence of lexical devices across participants of the same group, these differences might be attributed to instructors' preferred individual style rather than their gender.

Table 5. Adverbs expressing hedging

	Females			Males		
Linguistic Devices	**Instructor A**	**Instructor B**	**Total**	**Instructor C**	**Instructor D**	**Total**
Maybe	1(20%)	0	×	0	1(25%)	×
Perhaps	1(20%)	2(50%)	3(33.3%)	1(14.3%)	0	1(9%)
Probably	0	0	0	1(14.3%)	2(50%)	3(27.3%)
Likely	0	0	0	2(28.6%)	0	×
Usually	3(60%)	2(50%)	5(55.6%)	1(14.3%)	1(25%)	2(18%)
Hardly	0	0	0	2(28.6%)	0	×
Total	5	4	9	7	4	11

Table 5 summarizes the realization of adverbs expressing hedging in the male and female data. As the table reveals, *perhaps* and *usually* are used about three times as frequently in female corpus as in male responses. Unlike *perhaps*, *probably* occurs in 27% cases of male corpus but is totally absent in female data. Regarding other adverbs, due to the occurrence of a particular form in one instructor's speech, it could not be attributed to the effect of gender. A further interesting point is the wider range of adverbs in the male segment. As a last observation, the use of *may be* was neglected by all participants, , though this device has been claimed to be predominantly a speech form (Holmes 1988).

Table 6. Nouns expressing hedging

	Females			Males		
Linguistic Devices	**Instructor A**	**Instructor B**	**Total**	**Instructor C**	**Instructor D**	**Total**
Opinion	0	0	0	1(25%)	2(66.7%)	3(42.8%)
Idea	2(100%)	0	3(33.3%)	2(50%)	0	×
Possibility	0	0	0	0	1(33.3%)	×
Assumption	0	0	0	1(25%)	0	×
Total	2	0	2	4	3	7

From among four nouns, as illustrated in the above table, the primacy of one term (i.e., *opinion*) for the male participants is noticeable. As Table 6 summarizes, *opinion* occurred in 43% of the male corpus but was entirely absent in the female data. In other cases, the occurrence of one form in one participants' speech in each group prevented us from making any claims about the effect of gender on the occurrence of hedging devices. Here again a wider range of nouns functioning as hedging was recorded in the male corpus.

Table 7 shows how adjectives expressing hedging appear in the corpus under investigation. A glance at the table reveals that except for instructor C who employs three different forms of adjectives, i.e., *likely*, *unlikely*, and *possible* in his discourse, the other three professors resort to only one linguistic device; i.e., *possible*.

Table 7. Adjectives expressing hedging

	Females			Males		
Linguistic Devices	**Instructor A**	**Instructor B**	**Total**	**Instructor C**	**Instructor D**	**Total**
Possible	2(100%)	1(100%)	3(100%)	1(20%)	2(100%)	3(42.8%)
Likely	0	0	0	3(60%)	0	×
Unlikely	0	0	0	1(20%)	0	×
Total	2	1	3	5	2	7

Table 8 shows the frequency of Indefinite articles + nouns, Numerals + nouns, General determiners + nouns in the spoken language of participants of different genders. This last subcategory exhibited differences between the male and female corpus. Males employ *a way of* in 33% of their talk, while there is no occurrence of this subcategory in the female corpus. On the other hand, *some sort of* occurs in the female segment twice as often as in the male corpus. Finally, *a sort of* was totally absent in the male segment and was given a low priority in the female corpus.

Table 8. Indefinite articles + nouns, numerals + nouns, general determiners + nouns

	Females			Males		
Linguistic Devices	**Instructor A**	**Instructor B**	**Total**	**Instructor C**	**Instructor D**	**Total**
A way of	0	0	0	1(100%)	1(50%)	2(33.3%)
Some sort of	2(66.7%)	2(100%)	3(33.3%)	0	1(50%)	1(16.7%)
A sort of	1(33.3%)	0	×	0	0	0
Total	3	0	3	4	2	6

5 Discussion

As indicated in the previous section, our non-native English instructors employed 149 instances of hedging devices in their audiotaped spoken interaction. More specifically, female and male practitioners used one hedging item every 39 and 41 words respectively. The recorded density of hedging items in the whole data appears to be lower than what has been recorded in the literature. Riekkinen (2009), for instance, found an average of 3.85 and 4.44 cases of hedging items per minute in her non-native and native academic spoken corpus respectively. Regarding using hedges in the native and non-native corpora, bulk of the literature (e.g., Hyland, 2000) confirms the lower degree of detachment in non-native data. Though such cross-linguistic variation in the use of hedges may indicate the necessity of giving higher priority to the teaching of this aspect of rhetoric in second language curricula, it can be said that this feature has largely been neglected in EFL materials and unnoticed by EFL teachers in the Iranian educational system. So, it comes not as a surprise that Iranian foreign language speakers do not comply fully with the rules of native speaker community. The disregard for the detachment devices in EFL textbooks has been documented in various second language contexts. Zuck and Zuck (1986), Hyland (1994), and Vassileva (2001), for instance, are dissatisfied the primary focus of EFL textbooks on how referential information is typically conveyed at the expense of the epistemic aspects of texts. The consequences of this neglect have been highlighted in the literature (e.g., Carr and Curren 1994; Holmes 1983; Vassileva 2001; Wierzbicka 2006) which confirms that English L2 speakers simply focus on propositional information and semantic value of the English discourses, overriding the epistemic significance and pragmatic import of the target items. The existing literature considers such neglect in style guides and instructional materials as especially serious, reasoning that English modality appears to be notoriously problematic for second language speakers and because there is considerable evidence that L2 speakers benefit considerably from teaching practices that develop an explicit awareness of what is to be learnt.

In addition to lack of proper attention to the application of detachment devices in EFL material, the language proficiency level of the participants might explain the low degree of hedges in the whole data. This point of view has been confirmed in earlier studies which suggest that competence in this area is quite difficult to achieve in a foreign language (e.g., Clyne 1987; Hyland 2000; Mauranen 1997). In fact, it can be argued that non-native speakers with lower level of language proficiency hedge less than those with higher level of proficiency.

In addition to exploring quantity of hedging items in the whole corpus, the present study investigated the role of gender in the density of hedges and their realization forms in the data. First, the females' style was found to be more detached by applying a higher number of hedging items. This result is attested by Holmes (2013) who maintains that females represent a more sophisticated approach to language since they seek to make more concrete attempts to engage with their listeners. To her, the use of hedges in conversations allows women to facilitate their communication with the environment. Secondly, in the present article, some differences were observed in the means of expressing hedging in the two sections of the corpus. While modals, epistemic verbs, and adverbial phrases constituted the most frequent linguistic items in the female and male segments, there were variations in the distribution of other hedging items in the two segments of the corpus. For females, indefinite articles + nouns, numerals + nouns, general determiners + nouns, adjectival phrases, and epistemic nouns occupied from the forth to sixth position. For males, however, epistemic nouns, adjectival phrases, and indefinite articles + nouns, numerals + nouns, general determiners + nouns, consecutively, followed modals, epistemic verbs, and adverbial phrases. In addition to these variations, differences were observed in the distribution of particular linguistic devices. In other words, disparities were found in the orientation of instructors of different genders towards applying items representing six linguistic devices, i.e., modals, verbs, adverbs, and indefinite articles + nouns, numerals + nouns, general determiners + nouns.

Regarding the realization of adverbs expressing hedging in the male and female data, it was found that *perhaps* is used about three times as frequently in female corpus as in male responses. As Holmes (1988) maintains, the high frequency of *perhaps* in the female corpus can be justified by the fact that it is a feature of spoken language. However, its low occurrence in the male speech might point to the effect of gender on the frequency of this spoken hedging device. Overall, the wider range of adverbs in the male segment indicates that gender can be an influential factor in the degree of variation of different adverbial hedging devices. For the category of nouns, the scarcity of nouns in the female corpus and its low distribution in the male speech might well be justified by recognizing the fact that nominal constructions are much more likely to occur in written texts than in speech (Holmes 1988). The same reason can provide a rational justification for the lower range of nominal items in the corpus compared to the range of modal verbs, epistemic verbs and adverbs. Holmes (1988) reported similar ranking for these categories of hedging items in her data. Similar to nominal items, a low range of occurrence of adjectives expressing hedging was recorded in the corpus under investigation. Though, the absence of *likely* in the speech of three teachers is difficult to justify due to its being a feature of spoken language, the scare use of adjectives in the whole data can be justified by Holmes's (1998) assertion that, just like epistemic nouns, adjectives are used as devices to express doubt considerably more often in written than in spoken texts. Overall, no variation which could be attributed to instructors' gender was observed in the occurrence of adjectives in the actual speech of the two groups. For all the categories, in some cases, a particular form is favoured by only one contributor. Due to variations in the occurrence of these devices across participants of the same group, these differences might be attributed to instructors' preferred individual style or their typical class context rather than their gender. Overall, the results of this section support Dixon and Foster (1997) who believe that hedging is a flexible resource that is used by men and women in varied manners.

6 Conclusion

The present study can offer insights into our understanding of hedging and clarify an important dimension of rhetorical variations between male and female L2 speakers of English. Overall, the results can provide

evidence in favour of incorporating hedges into L2 educational curricula. To this aim, it is suggested that L2 textbooks and materials provide enough information for students to become familiar with the use of hedging and to figure out the crucial contribution they have to the meaning of texts or utterances. Not only does the foreign language curriculum need to familiarize students with how to employ hedging in their discourse, but it also informs learners of the need to process and interpret these features adequately in written or oral interactions. As for the realization of hedging devices in male and female discourses, the present study provided evidence on the differences in the use of hedges in the speech of men and women, and helped gain a better understanding of male and female talk. Subon (2013) maintains that raising awareness of the community of the variations in the application of hedging items across genders can help develop efficient communication between them.

The fact that researchers in the present study interpreted realization of hedging devices based on their own understanding of the utterances means that more research is needed in this area. To explain further, analysts are recommended to seek clarification of hedged propositions from the producers of the utterances, and to consult the actual speakers of the discourses to better identify instances of hedges. Perhaps, researchers' closer collaboration with speakers, asking them to analyse their own texts and identify specific hedges, can provide a more valid way to ascertain which structures are functioning as hedges. Furthermore, due to the significance of hearers' interpretation of the hedged items to engage in successful mutual interaction with the speakers, it is proposed that future studies investigate interlocutors' understanding of the hedged utterances. The need for a greater understanding of speakers' intentions in producing detachment devices and how different hearers interpret them was recognized by Markkanen and Schröder (1997: 9) who maintained that the discourse "does not contain hedges per se but gets them through the author-reader interaction".

Finally, due to the fact that the findings of this study are based on a small sample of English instructors, no generalizations are made. However, the results can point to new directions for inquiry on a larger scale.

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