

“This is not criticism, but...” Softening criticism: The use of lexical hedges in academic spoken interaction

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Abstract

In this article, I present the study I carried out for my Master's Thesis (Riekkinen 2009). This article touches upon the key theoretical concepts of the study as well as the research design. The main results of the study are discussed in more detail. For the Master's Thesis, I analysed the use of hedges in academic spoken interaction, more precisely the use of lexical hedges when giving criticism in face-to-face interaction. I compared two groups: native speakers of English and speakers of English as a lingua franca (ELF). The research questions were concerned with finding out how lexical hedges are used as a politeness strategy by both speaker groups. The aim was also to establish patterns that might characterize the way ELF-speakers use lexical hedges in academic spoken interaction. The results of the study show both quantitative as well as qualitative differences between the two speaker groups. ELF-speaker usage of lexical hedges does in some ways differ from that of the native speakers. This, however, did not result in any communicative problems.

1 Introduction

One way of conveying interpersonal messages in spoken interaction is hedging. Hedging is a communicative strategy which enables speakers to, for example, soften the force of their utterances (Nikula 1997: 188) in order to make them more acceptable to the interlocutor. Certain speech acts such as criticisms are often hedged because in an unhedged form they might sound threatening to the hearer and therefore be likely to be rejected. This becomes clear when considering the following examples of criticism:

You are mistaken.
I think you might be mistaken.

The second example contains two hedges: a lexical expression *I think* and a modal verb *might*. These help to mitigate the content of the utterance thus making it less threatening to the hearer.

In this paper, I focus on the use of lexical hedges in spoken interaction. The paper is based on my master's thesis (Riekkinen 2009), in which I analysed the use of hedges in academic spoken interaction, more precisely the use of lexical hedges when giving criticism in face-to-face interaction. The material consisted of recordings and transcripts of doctoral defences in which I focused on the opponents' language use. I compared two groups of opponents. One group consisted of native speakers of American English. The other group included non-native speakers of English who came from a variety of language backgrounds. The members of the latter group used English as a common language as they did not share a first language. English was thus used

as a lingua franca (ELF). The non-native speakers are referred to as ELF-speakers.

It was interesting to compare the way these two groups used hedges especially because there are varying opinions as to how considerate and polite ELF-speakers in general are. On one hand, it is argued that ELF-speakers are content-oriented and therefore their language is lacking in interactional features, such as hedges (Cogo and Dewey 2006: 65–66). On the other hand, it has also been claimed that ELF-users are particularly sensitive and co-operative language users because of the unfamiliarity with the cultural norms of the interlocutors (Mauranen 2003: 517). A comparative study between ELF-speakers and native speakers of English should be able to reveal which of the two views is valid when it comes to the use of hedges in academic spoken interaction.

The objective of my study was, firstly, to see how the two groups use hedges when giving criticism in face-to-face situations. Secondly, I wanted to see if there were any distinct features that characterized the way ELF-speakers used hedges as compared to the native speaker group. The research questions were the following:

1. How do ELF-speakers and native speakers of English use lexical hedges as a politeness strategy when giving criticism in doctoral thesis defences?
2. What characterizes the way ELF-speakers use lexical hedges as a politeness strategy in academic spoken interaction?

My preliminary hypothesis was that lexical hedges would be used when giving critical comments by both native speakers and ELF-speakers. This view is supported by Brown and Levinson (1987), who see politeness in language use as something universal and present in all human languages. Although ELF is clearly not a language of its own, there is no reason why this statement of Brown and Levinson could not be applied to ELF as well. In addition to the point of view of politeness, using hedges is also very typical of academic discourse, as it is “a world of uncertainties, indirectness, and non-finality” (Mauranen 1997: 115). Therefore I did not expect, for example, the language of ELF-speakers to be void of hedges despite its possible tendency to content-orientedness (Cogo and Dewey 2006: 65–66).

2 Research design

I looked at doctoral thesis defences of both native speakers of English and ELF-speakers. I analysed the language used at these thesis defences, focusing especially on the use of lexical hedges when giving criticism. The aim was to find out how many lexical hedges were used, which expressions were most frequently used, and how all the lexical hedges could be grouped into larger categories. Based on the findings, I analysed how the use of lexical hedges between the two speaker groups differed and tried to establish any patterns that might characterize the language of ELF-speakers.

The material consisted of approximately 60 minutes of recordings and transcripts of doctoral defences. The doctoral defences were obtained from the ELFA corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings¹ and the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE²) respectively. These two corpora both consist of academic discourse and can therefore be reliably compared.

Hedges are important linguistic items used to, for example, soften criticism and

thus avoid problems in communication or even communication breakdowns. For determining which lexical items in my data were in fact lexical hedges, I used discourse analysis as a method. In addition to that, I also used a test similar to the 'test of a hedge' presented by Crompton (1997: 281-282). Crompton's test is very simple but helpful in determining whether a lexical item is a hedge or not. The test consists of the following question:

Can the proposition be restated in such a way that it is not changed but that the author's commitment to it is greater than at present? If 'yes' then the proposition is hedged. (The *hedges* are any language items in the original which would need to be changed to increase commitment.) (Crompton 1997: 282)

This test Crompton devised served as a model for the test I used in my own research. The test I used for the study was the following:

Can the potential lexical hedge be removed without the core meaning of the utterance changing? Does removing this potential lexical hedge make the utterance sound more direct? If yes, then the lexical item is used as a lexical hedge.

The emphasis on the importance of context is why discourse analysis and the 'test of a hedge' are useful methods for analysing hedging. Hedging is an extremely context-dependent phenomenon and any method attempting to analyse hedge usage must be able to address that. The analytical process has to take into account both the co-text as well as the context of the situation, as they both are important for giving hedges their meaning. In addition to the above, discourse analysis also allows the researcher to pick up and analyse expressions that are unique to the ELF-speakers. As there are no set categories or expressions that should be looked for, it is possible to capture the non-native use of lexical hedges in its entirety, without restricting the analysis to native speaker norms.

3 Results

In this section, I first present the overall differences between the groups, starting with the total number of hedges (section 3.1) and then looking into the number of different hedges (section 3.2). Secondly, I focus in on the most common hedges and how they were used (section 3.3).

3.1 Average numbers of lexical hedges

The table below shows the average numbers of lexical hedges found in the data. The numbers are given as average numbers per minute.

Table 1 Average numbers of lexical hedges per minute

	<i>Lexical hedges</i>	<i>Different lexical hedges</i>
Native speakers	4.44	2.30
ELF-speakers	3.85	1.64

The left hand column of Table 1 shows the average number of all lexical hedges used by both groups per minute. These average numbers include all lexical hedges in the material without making any distinction between expressions that are used once or several times. Lexical hedges were thus counted as tokens. The right hand column presents the average numbers of different lexical hedges used by both groups per minute. These average numbers were calculated by counting any one hedging expression only once. These numbers thus reveal any possible differences between the variety of lexical hedges used by the two speaker groups.

As the table shows, the native speaker group used lexical hedges more than the ELF-speaker group. On average, the native speakers used 4.44 lexical hedges per minute whereas the ELF-speakers used 3.85 lexical hedges per minute. The native speakers thus used approximately 13% more lexical hedges than the ELF-speakers.

The native speakers also used lexical hedges in a more varied way. They used 2.30 different lexical hedges per minute. The corresponding number of the ELF-speakers was 1.64. The difference becomes clearer when counted as a percentage: the native speakers used different lexical hedges approximately 29% more in comparison to the ELF-speakers.

Examples 1 and 2 illustrate the differences between the native speaker and the ELF-speaker opponents.

Example 1: Native speaker

S5: let me ask one um, question about the thesis, itself um, while i pretty much agree with your conclusions about, how these cultural differences affect cognition and affect the development of science, *I think* in the thesis itself there's a *pretty* big extrapolation, from your results to the conclusions you wanna draw about science. um so *I guess*, he- i'm *just*, curious if you thought *a little bit* about, *a few* future experiments to fill in that extrapolation and make it more, um, concrete to draw the kinds of conclusions you (made) about, you know, those effects. (Social Psychology Dissertation Defense, S5; word count 97)

Example 2: ELF-speaker

S3: *I think* that there is a tension in your dissertation between the theoretical framework which you , are very well read in <S2> @mhm-hm@ </S2> but at the same time you *seem* to refuse to apply and the , er so to say narrative literary er po- even poetical elements of the texts [themselves] <S2> [mhm-hm] mhm-hm </S2> er . and to go back to my er previous er , statement when i said that you *tend to* solve this problem of speaking of cross-cultural dialogue by simply locating yourself by simply making a political statement *I think* that also the choice of these three autobiographies <S2> mhm </S2> is a political statement in itself - -. (UDEFD110, S3; word count 102)

As becomes clear when looking at these two passages, the amount of hedging differs between the two speakers. In the first passage, the native speaker uses 6 lexical hedges per 97 words (roughly 6% of the words are hedges), whereas the ELF-speaker opponent employs 4 lexical hedges per 102 words, amounting to about 4% of the words being lexical hedges. In addition to hedging more, the native speaker opponent also resorts to a wider array of expressions. In the examples, the difference in the number of lexical hedges is slightly bigger than in the whole material. Despite this, they reflect the tendencies found.

These findings support the initial hypothesis presented in the beginning: native speakers use slightly more lexical hedges and also a broader variety of expressions. It was surprising, however, that the native speakers used different lexical hedges almost 30% more than the ELF-speakers.

In the light of these results, it seems justified to claim that there might be a slight inclination towards content-orientedness in ELF, as was suggested by Cogo and Dewey (2006: 65–66). What is noteworthy, however, is that the difference between the actual numbers of lexical hedges used by the two groups was only approximately 13% in this study. In previous studies on non-native speaker hedging, for example De Cock et al. (1998) have discovered that their non-native English speaker subjects hedged nearly four times less than a native speaker control group. In another study, Nikula (1997) found out that the non-native English speakers she studied used less than half of the number of hedges used by native speakers in casual conversations. Such radical differences were not found in the present material.

This could be explained by the ELF-speakers in this study being highly confident and competent English speakers and that the activity that both the ELF-speakers and the native speakers were engaged in was such that called for hedging. As the speakers performed the task of an opponent in a thesis defence, they faced a communicative situation, a genre that naturally elicits hedging. As Brown and Levinson (1987) argue, giving criticism is a face-threatening act and the need to minimize that threat to a certain extent is universal. Therefore the ELF-speakers using only 13% less lexical hedges could be taken as supporting Brown and Levinson's claim and my initial hypothesis that politeness in language is universal and present in all human languages. Therefore, the language of ELF-speakers was not in the least void of lexical hedges, even if they were employed slightly less than in the native speaker material.

What is important to note is that even though ELF-speakers used lexical hedges somewhat less, this did not seem to cause any visible problems to their interaction. In other words, there were no signs of the use of fewer lexical hedges resulting in any pragmatic failure, which for example Nikula (1997) was concerned about.

When comparing the results of the present study to the findings of some of the previous studies on non-native speaker hedging, it could be speculated that perhaps differences between native speakers and non-native or ELF-speakers come out more in less formal situations, as for example Nikula's (1997) results would suggest. It might thus be possible that the content-orientedness Cogo and Dewey (2006) argue for is a flexible feature of ELF-interaction that can be more or less prominent depending on the communicative situations and its constraints. However, this is a mere speculation and cannot be answered on the basis of the present study, nor on that of Nikula (1997).

Another possible reason for why ELF-speakers used lexical hedges less might be related to the sociological variables presented in Brown and Levinson's theory (1987: 74–84). It could be suggested that ELF-speakers feel a smaller social distance between each other as they are all operating in a foreign language. This might elicit

some feelings of solidarity between the participants and this would in turn decrease the social distance. With a smaller social distance there would be less need for hedging. This is a thought-provoking speculation but would require a sociological analysis to be adequately investigated.

3.2 Different hedges

More profound differences between the two speaker groups came out when calculating how many different lexical hedges were used per minute. It is a striking result that the native speakers employed different expressions nearly 30% more. Even if it can be argued that the result is by no means surprising since the native speakers are obviously using English as their mother tongue and thus supposedly have a better command of it than the ELF-speakers, the result might still reveal some characteristics of ELF lexico-grammar as well.

At least theoretically the premise that the ELF-speakers do not possess a native-speaker-like command of English would not have had to result in a smaller variety of lexical hedges. The ELF-speakers also could have made up their own expressions or translated expressions from their native language and thus could have arrived at the same number of different expressions used as a native speaker group. This is especially true since the method of analysis in this study allowed the researcher to take into account all expressions used as lexical hedges irrespective of whether they are normally used as lexical hedges in English as a native language.

The observation that the ELF-speakers used nearly 30% fewer different expressions might therefore not indicate a lack of proficiency in English but perhaps a more general tendency in ELF, namely a preference for structural simplification and for unmarked features, as Mauranen points out (2003: 514). Cogo and Dewey (2006: 87) also mention increased explicitness as a characteristic of ELF pragmatics. The tendency to stick to well-known hedges in ELF interaction might thus be explained by a preference to use expressions that the majority of interlocutors are familiar with. This is also a sign of cooperation, which Mauranen (2008) lists as a feature of ELF interaction. The results from this study would seem to support these characteristics of ELF.

3.3 The most frequent lexical hedges

After the average numbers of different lexical hedges, let us explore the expressions used most by both groups. Below I first present an overview of the results and then discuss the differences between the percentual shares and the most frequent expressions of native speakers and ELF-speakers.

3.3.1 Overview

Table 2 shows how the most frequent lexical hedges used by the two groups differ to some extent both in terms of expressions and also frequency. Table 2 lists the seven most frequently used lexical hedges of both groups. The reason why precisely seven most common lexical hedges are listed is that after the seven most common hedges,

the percentual shares of any one lexical hedge are very small. When the share of a lexical hedge was approximately three percent or less, including it in the list of most common ones would have been questionable.

Table 2 The most frequent lexical hedges

<i>Hedges by native speakers</i>	%	<i>Hedges by ELF-speakers</i>	%
just	12.00	I think	20.00
would	9.50	would	9.00
I think	7.75	kind of	7.50
sort of	7.50	could	5.00
it seems to me / to me	5.50	a bit	4.50
could	4.00	just	3.25
and so forth	4.00	and so on	3.00

The most common lexical hedges used by the native speakers were *just* (12%); *would* (9.5%); *I think* (7.75%); *sort of* (7.5%); *it seems to me / to me* (5.5%); *could* (4%); and *and so forth* (4%). They all had a share of over three percent of all the lexical hedges used. The most frequent lexical hedges of the ELF-speakers were *I think* (20%); *would* (9%); *kind of* (7.5%); *could* (5%); *a bit* (4.5%); *just* (3.25%); and *and so on* (3%). Also, all these lexical hedges got a share of at least three percent. Below are examples from the data that show some of the most frequent lexical hedges in context.

Native speakers

Example 3: *just*

now why is_ why didn't you **just** notate this with one flat then? is this is this, do you_ is this *somehow* a, a, a Lydian F or a Dorian D *or something* it doesn't sound anything like it *to me* - - i i **just** don't see why this isn't in on E-flat? (Music Dissertation Defense, S5)

Example 4: *would*

well you're making theoretical arguments [S2: right] there rather than, um strengthening them with, with data that could fill in um, w- which **would seem to me** not (a bad thing) to do (Music Dissertation Defense, S5)

Example 5: *i think*

i think it *would* be good, uh to say *something* about the sources of your, [S2: mhm] i i mean in an abstract for a dissertation **i think** it's always a good thing to include, what is this based on? is it based on listening, periodical literature, interviews? (Music Dissertation Defense, S3)

ELF-speakers

Example 6: *i think*

i think for instance what you write about how the nation state is being articulated a postcolonial er nation state is being articulated is theoretical rather than a methodological observation and *i also think* that when you write later in your dissertation on the question of er technology and articulation - - *i also think* that you move from er the problem away from the problem of how you actually it's on page 116 articulation theory and ICT's , er you actually move away from the problem of how do you actually go about doing the research in favour of , making a theoretical point so i would like you to reflect a bit on the relationship (between) theory and method and *i think* this is very important (UDEFD070, S2)

Example 7: *would*

what i *would* like to question is your continuous reference to a materialist dimension whereas you do very seldom refer to a strictly economic or what i *would* call [materialistic] <S2> [yeah] </S2> er frame of analysis as regards er the histories you take into account (UDEFD110, S3)

Example 8: *kind of*

you did not control certain factors or vary them systematically like prosperity or or other factors you *kind of* come later to such possible influential factors between regions inside a country so *i think* what is important *in a way* and *but i think it's also what what you mainly did* is to to take the region as a *kind of* representant of the national welfare state (UDEFD020, S3)

As the lists of the most frequent lexical hedges in Table 2 reveal, the most common ones and their percentual shares differ considerably between the two groups. Before analysing any hedging expressions in more detail, the differences between the groups must be addressed. Just by looking at the percentages, it is possible to notice a clear difference in the hedging behaviour. The observation is actually closely related to the analysis of the average numbers of different lexical hedges used per minute. It was noted that ELF-speakers use fewer different expressions as lexical hedges. The fact that the most frequent lexical hedge in the ELF-speaker group has a share of 20% while the most common lexical hedge of the native speaker group has a considerably smaller share, 12%, shows how the smaller variation comes about.

Interestingly enough, after the striking difference in the shares of the most common lexical hedge, the percentages of the remaining lexical hedges are quite similar in the two groups. The second most frequent lexical hedges get a share of about 9%, the third most common lexical hedges about 7%, and so on. The only difference between the two groups that should be acknowledged is that the percentual shares drop slightly more quickly in the ELF-data than in the native speaker data. This can be explained by the most frequent lexical hedge in the ELF-data having clearly replaced some of the other common lexical hedges thus leaving them with a smaller percentage.

3.3.2 A closer look at the expressions

When moving on to looking at the actual expressions, the composition of the lists in Table 2 must be analysed. The two lists include many of the same expressions, albeit in different places. Expressions that are found on both lists are *I think*; *would*; *could*; and *just*. Expressions found only among the native speakers are *sort of*; *it seems to me / to me*; and *and so forth*. Similarly unique to the ELF-speakers are *kind of*; *a bit*; and *and so on*. On a closer look at the expressions found on only one of the lists, it is easy to notice that some of the different expressions are, in fact, very similar; they only differ very superficially. Such lexical hedges are *sort of* (NS) – *kind of* (ELF) as well as *and so forth* (NS) – *and so on* (ELF). The differences in wording might be partly a consequence of the native speakers in this study being speakers of American English, which might explain the preference for certain wordings, such as *and so forth* in stead of *and so on*.

It is surprising that the lists of the most frequent lexical hedges are so similar in terms of the actual expressions themselves. The percentages certainly suggest larger differences between the two speaker groups. However, it is noteworthy that over half of the most common expressions – four out of seven – were exactly the same on both lists. The number of similar expressions would be even higher if the expressions *sort of* – *kind of* and *and so forth* – *and so on* were counted as the same lexical hedge, ignoring the minor differences. If these were put together, six out of seven lexical hedges would be the same, amounting to over 85% of the most frequently used lexical hedges being the same in both groups.

The only items that have no equivalent on the other list are *it seems to me / to me* of the native speakers and *a bit* of the ELF-speakers. The absence of *it seems to me / to me* from the ELF-speaker's most frequent lexical hedges might be a result of the popularity of *I think*. Both of these are used to express a personal evaluation of some kind. It would seem plausible that ELF-speakers mostly use *I think* to convey a personal evaluation whereas the native speakers use a broader array of expressions for this purpose. What is more puzzling, perhaps, is the popularity of *a bit* among ELF-speakers. It could be speculated that ELF-speakers frequently use both lexical hedges *a bit* and *just* to express some kind of limitation of the scope of the utterance. For this purpose native speakers would most often seem to use their most frequent lexical hedge, namely *just*. Thus, this example represents a case in which the ELF-speakers frequently employ more expressions than the native speakers to convey a certain meaning.

As the analysis of the most frequent lexical hedges reveals, there are certain differences between the two groups in terms of what expressions are used and how frequently they are used. Looking at it from a native standard point of view, it can be said that the ELF-speakers overuse certain expressions and underuse others. The clearest case of overuse would, of course, be the lexical hedge *I think*, which was used more than twice as often by the ELF-speakers than by the native speakers. Another example of overuse would be the modal verb *could*, which is used slightly more by the ELF-speakers than by native speakers. Instances of underuse occur as well. The lexical hedge which is most clearly underused by the ELF-speakers is *just*. It is the most frequent in the native speaker data and it is used nearly four times more by the native speakers in comparison to the ELF-speakers. Returning to an earlier speculation according to which ELF-speakers might use the lexical hedges *a bit* and *just* to convey similar meanings, even their combined usage remains under the use of *just* in the

native speaker data.

These instances of overuse and underuse support some results from previous studies on non-native speaker hedging. For example Metsä-Ketelä (2006) studied vague expressions and discovered that the expression *more or less* was used considerably more by ELF-speakers than native English speakers. Also De Cock et al. (1998) reported on several cases of both overuse and underuse in their study which compared native and non-native speaker hedging. One of their findings was that the expression *and so on* was used almost ten times more often by non-native speakers than by native speakers. This result was not supported by the present study, where the lexical hedge *and so on* was slightly underused by the ELF-speakers if compared to the equivalent expression *and so forth*, which the native speakers preferred. This radically different result might be due to a different speech genre being studied. The material studied by De Cock et al. (1998) consisted of informal interviews whereas the data of the present study was from a rather formal academic setting.

4 Politeness and hedging

The second research question was concerned with finding possible characteristics of how lexical hedges are used as a politeness strategy in ELF. This section aims to provide answers to that question.

From the point of view of politeness theory, it can be stated that both native speakers and ELF-speakers used various politeness strategies in the thesis defences. As this study was concerned with lexical hedges and thus negative politeness, the discussion has naturally revolved around those. However, it has to be remembered that politeness in language is achieved through numerous politeness strategies, both positive and negative. In the following, I discuss some observations I made when analysing the data.

Firstly, there were clear differences between speakers in what politeness strategies they preferred. Some speakers did not use hedges a great deal but chose to mark their speech less threatening by, for instance, the frequent use of the inclusive expression *you know*, which is used to convey a kind of mutual understanding of things. Other frequently used expressions of positive politeness were different tag questions, such as *right* and *isn't it*. These differences between speakers existed irrespective of whether they were ELF-speakers or native speakers. Some individuals simply preferred this strategy, which naturally decreased their need to use lexical hedges. An example illustrates this phenomenon:

Example 9

um, and at that point you don't really feel A-flat has been, has has taken over as the tonic *do you?* i mean this piece is still really really clearly in E-flat major *right?* (Music Dissertation Defense, S5, native speaker data)

The example shows how a speaker uses two tag questions to include the addressee in the discussion and at least theoretically ask for his opinion. No lexical hedges were used in this stretch to mitigate the criticism.

Another observation was that both native speakers and ELF-speakers sometimes start an utterance without softening the criticism at all but quickly correct themselves

and add a lexical hedge, for instance. These are ‘concessive repairs’ (see Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson 2005) and clear evidence of softening the criticism:

Example 10

you say this is the process that's going on *and so forth* but i'm i'm not looking for, (xx) anything smarmy or sentimental *or whatever*, but, it's like you're really on guard, - - *it's a it's a vexed, it's a **slightly vexed position, i think*** (Music Dissertation Defense, S3, native speaker data)

Example 11

you said er and er , well that er translators tend to the dictionary (xx) or **at least i read you as** <S1> mhm </S1> **stated that** (UDEFD050, S3, ELF-speaker data)

Example 12

let's say concretely you have a (village or whatever) the pagoda association and then they have their ideas or very ti- er t- close ti- er tight ties in between themselves and then you come from a NGO from western perspective and you require **at least implicitly you require** a (xx) and it (xx) that then what happens to the culture something happens when the local culture make attempts to assimilate (UDEFD140, S2, ELF-speaker data)

Another factor which affected the number of lexical hedges used was the speaking style of the opponent. Some opponents simply used a more conversational, easy-going style of examining, whereas others were more direct and to the point with their comments. Normally the speakers who preferred a more conversational style used fewer hedges: clearly they had less need to as the face threats were diminished thanks to the relaxed way of carrying out the examination. Those opponents who gave more direct feedback normally also hedged more or at least used some kind of inclusive expressions such as *you know*. Different speaking styles were found in both the native speaker data and in the ELF-data.

5 Conclusion

Based on the analyses above, it is possible to state that the ELF-speaker usage of lexical hedges does in some ways differ from that of the native speakers. This is in agreement with most of the recent studies that have been done on non-native speaker hedging. However, what is different in the present study is that the differences between ELF-speaker language usage and native speaker language usage are not seen as problematic. ELF is thus viewed as a legitimate form of English, not as deficient learner language.

It could be said that all the deviations that ELF-speakers showed from native speaker use seemed to be directed to making the communication clearer and more explicit. The ELF-speakers seemed to stress and prefer certain things, such as lexical hedges expressing personal evaluation, and then again give less weight to other features that were perhaps more prominent in native speaker language use. Interestingly, this shift in preferences did not disturb the ELF-communication in the

least but seemed to serve to make it more effective instead.

Therefore it could be concluded that the results of this study support the idea of ELF being a functional, legitimate variety of English. The thesis defences that were conducted by ELF-speakers were successful speech events in the sense that there did not seem to be any major communicational problems, not to mention breakdowns. The quantitative and qualitative differences that were discovered between ELF-speaker and native speaker usage of lexical hedges clearly did not make the ELF-communication less successful. Quite the contrary, in fact, as has been pointed out throughout the analysis of the results. The differences that ELF-speakers have in comparison to the native speakers simply seem to make ELF a more functional and effective means of communication for its speakers.

In the light of these results, it would be very questionable not to see ELF as a variety in its own right and for instance to continue to uphold native speaker varieties as sole models for language learning. As Jenkins (2007: 17) points out, the socio-cultural characteristics of native speakers and ELF-speakers are so profoundly different that it would be quite unnatural if this was not reflected in how language is used.

Notes

¹ For the ELFA Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings, see <http://www.helsinki.fi/elfa/elfacorpus>.

² For the MICASE corpus, see <http://micase.elicorpora.info>.

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