**LESSON PLAN: Cautious or ‘hedging’ language in business essays and formal business writing**

*The lesson plan below comes from the ‘Being objective: grammar for functions’ section of my Udemy course, Teaching Grammar for Business Essays. Other topics in the course include defining language, passives, noun phrases, relative clauses, verb clauses, cohesion, linkers, conditionals, cause and effect language, comparison language, and signposting.*

**Teacher’s Notes**

The use of cautious language, sometimes called ‘hedging,’ is one of the most distinctive features of formal English. Your students have probably already heard of the term ‘hedge’ as a financial strategy that protects your investment against loss. It’s the same idea in language. You protect yourself by saying that an idea is probably correct, rather than certainly correct: that it’s a claim rather than a fact. What’s important is that your students have at their disposal a variety of linguistic ways of hedging.

**LESSON PLAN**

1. The reason for using cautious language

2. The role of verbs such as tend, could, and suggest

3. Passive verbs in cautious phrases

4. Cautious adverbs

5. Cautious adjectives

6. Cautious expressions

7. Practice

**1. The reason for using cautious language**

Start by finding out how much your students know about hedging. Show your students two sentences like this:

The Royal Dutch Shell Group was established in 1907.

Organizational change creates as many problems as solutions.

Ask your class how these sentences differ, not in meaning, but in type. With or without your guidance, they should be able to see that the first is a fact, and the second is an opinion, or ‘claim.’

Now ask them: what might be the problem in using the second sentence as it is in an essay?

The answer you’re hoping for is that the readers of the essay may actually know of a company where the process of change was absolutely smooth. Unlikely, but possible. But already these readers may be thinking that they aren’t reading an objective piece of writing.

So ask students how they could change that second sentence. This will give you an idea of their level of knowledge in the area of hedging. Accept and write up any of the good ideas that your class gives you. Here are a few examples that you might draw your students towards, which exemplify the types of hedging that I’ll cover in this lesson plan:

Organizational change **tends** to create as many problems as solutions.  (using a cautious verb)

Organizational change **sometimes** creates as many problems as solutions.  (using a cautious adverb)

**It can be argued that** organizational change creates as many problems as solutions.  (using a cautious introductory phrase)

Organizational change, **in many cases**, creates as many problems as solutions.  (using a cautious expression)

Say that what you’ve done is to ‘hedge’ the claim, and explain the meaning of this term, as mentioned in the introduction. Before you move on, there are two more things you might want to do with this sentence. The first is to mention two common structures with the noun ‘tendency.’ See if your class has come across them through this short exercise:

Remodel this sentence in two ways: using 1. ‘there + tendency for’ and 2. ‘have + tendency to’

Organizational change tends to create as many problems as solutions.

Here are the answers:

1. There is a tendency for organizational change to create problems.

2. Organizational change has a tendency to create problems.

Secondly, there’s a quick classroom activity you may want to try, based on the same sentence. Ask your class as a whole why organizations sometimes decide they need to change, and what kind of changes they make. Then ask them to think of two or three examples of the sorts of problems that such change can cause. If a student gives you an unhedged opinion, encourage them by some signal, such as putting your hand up in a ‘stop’ gesture, to remodel it. If a student says, for example: ‘Staff do not know what their new roles are,’ you could ask them to think again until they produce something like: ‘Staff may not know what their new roles are.’

**2. The role of verbs such as tend, could, and suggest**

Show your students these useful verbs that can all have a hedging effect:

1. tend/appear/seem to + verb  (very common hedging verbs)

2. could, might, can, may + verb  (modal verbs that express probability: ‘could’ and ‘might’ are more hedged than ‘can’ and ‘may’; ‘can’ is the most common)

3. suggest and indicate + that …  (more hedged than ‘prove’ or ‘demonstrate’)

4. contribute to + noun and helps to + verb  (less common hedging verbs, but both can express the idea that X is partly rather than totally responsible for Y)

Then get your class in groups or pairs to remodel these five sentences:

1. Resistance to innovation comes from two sources. (use *tend to*)

2. A temporary change in the leadership of a team will produce interesting results. (use *can*)

3. The report states that a key market segment was ignored. (use *suggest*)

4. The deregulation of financial systems caused the financial collapse of 2008. (use *contribute to*)

5. Better distribution channels reduce the cost of the final product. (use *help to*)

Here are the answers:

1. Resistance to innovation **tends to** come from two main sources.

2. A temporary change in the leadership of a team **can** produce interesting results.

3. The report **suggests** that a key market segment was ignored.

4. The deregulation of financial systems **contributed to** the financial collapse of 2008.

5. Better distribution channels **help to** reduce the cost of the final product.

**3. Passive verbs in cautious phrases**

Next, show your students a group of verbs that are normally used in the passive after the preparatory subject ‘it,’ to hedge statements at the beginning of sentences or clauses:

These first three all suggest that the argument may not be compelling:

It can/could be argued that …

It has been argued/suggested that …

It is (or has been) claimed/said that …

It is believed/thought that … (suggests a more compelling argument)

It is (widely) accepted + that … (suggests the most compelling argument)

It is reported that … (often used in reference to published reports)

It is estimated that … (often used with statistics)

Then you could take three claims and ask students to hedge them, using one of these phrases.

1. 80% of urban Chinese households have invested in equity.

2. A fall in unemployment boosts consumer confidence in the economy.

3. Internet retailing is still in its infancy.

The answers are a matter of opinion, but I would suggest that ‘estimated’ would suit the first; that there is a compelling argument in the second; and perhaps a weaker, or more contentious argument in the third. So:

1. **It is accepted that** a fall in unemployment boosts consumer confidence in the economy.

2. **It is estimated that** 80% of urban Chinese households have invested in equity.

3. **It could be argued that** internet retailing is still in its infancy.

**Teacher’s note:** I cover ‘It’ as a preparatory subject in the free lesson plan ‘Teaching impersonal subjects.’ I cover passives in two lesson plans on my online course: ‘Passive: main function’ and ‘Passive: more complex forms.’

**4. Cautious adverbs and adjectives**

You could begin with a warm-up activity to get your students thinking about the meaning of some of the most useful hedging adverbs. Show them an alphabetical list and ask them, in pairs or groups, to add the adverbs at the top to the categories below them.

Add these adverbs to the appropriate categories below: *possibly, arguably, usually, occasionally, approximately, probably, rarely, often, apparently, frequently*

1. **probability adverbs**: perhaps, …

2. **frequency adverbs that hedge the idea of ‘always’**: sometimes, normally, …

3. **frequency adverbs that hedge the idea of ‘never’**: hardly ever, seldom, …

4. **other common modifying adverbs with a variety of meanings**: relatively, typically, …

Here are the answers:

1. **probability adverbs**: perhaps, *possibly, probably*

2. **frequency adverbs that hedge the idea of ‘always’**: sometimes, normally, *usually, often, frequently*

**3. frequency adverbs that hedge the idea of ‘never’**: hardly ever, seldom, *occasionally, rarely*

4. **other common modifying adverbs with a variety of meanings**: relatively, typically, *arguably, approximately, apparently*

Your students will be familiar with most of these adverbs, but it may be worth underlining the meaning of *relatively, arguably* and *apparently*:

*relatively* = in comparison with other things; used before adjectives in a comparable way to *fairly, quite* and *rather*

*arguably* = it could be argued that/i.e. ‘there may be some doubt’

*apparently* = it appears that/i.e. ‘at first sight’

Now get your students into pairs or groups, and ask them to hedge the following sentences, using the words in brackets. Tell them to use a mid-position for the adverbs (i.e. just after auxiliary verbs, or just before main verbs), e.g.:

Organisational change is **often** problematic.

Organisational change **often** creates as many problems as solutions.

Here’s the exercise:

1. Local shops will register a decline in trade when a supermarket opens in their neighbourhood. (use *normally*)

2. The process of ‘deskilling’ the workforce to allow for automation was a consequence of the scientific management strategies applied during the early part of 20th century. (use *arguably*)

3. The senior management team lost control of the company’s strategic vision. (use *apparently*)

4. The cognitive processes involved in making a purchase are limited, but need to be studied by the consumer analyst. (use *relatively*)

5. Start-ups do not use major market research companies because they are small enough to approach customers directly for their views. (use *rarely*)

6. The key component of an advertising campaign will be the message that a company wishes to convey to the potential customer. (use *probably*)

And here are the answers:

1. Local shops will **normally** register a decline in trade when a supermarket opens in their neighbourhood.

2. The process of ‘deskilling’ the workforce to allow for automation was **arguably** a consequence of the scientific management strategies applied during the early part of 20th century.

3. The senior management team **apparently** lost control of the company’s strategic vision.

4. The cognitive processes involved in making a purchase are **relatively** limited, but need to be studied by the consumer analyst.

5. Start-ups **rarely**use major market research companies because they are small enough to approach customers directly for their views.

6. The key component of an advertising campaign will **probably** be the message that a company wishes to convey to the potential customer.

**5. Cautious adjectives**

As far as adjectives are concerned, there are a number of structures that can be used to hedge the idea of certainty in the future. Structures with ‘likely’ and ‘unlikely’ are particularly common. Show your class this list:

*1. Ways of hedging ‘X will happen’:*

It is possible that X will happen

It is probable/likely that X will happen

X is likely to happen

*2. Ways of hedging ‘X will not happen’:*

It is unlikely that X will happen

X is unlikely to happen

Now ask your students to hedge these two claims, using the words in brackets:

1. If staff are unsure about their roles, their performance will be affected. (*be likely to*)

2. Levels of cybercrime will not decline in the near future. (*It is unlikely that*)

Here are the answers:

1. If staff are unsure about their roles, their performance **is likely to** be affected.

2. **It is unlikely that** levels of cybercrime will decline in the near future.

**6. Cautious expressions**

Finally, it’s worth mentioning to your students that there are also a number of expressions that writers use to hedge what they say. To see if your students are aware of these, ask the class to try and complete the gaps in these three examples.

1. The decision to enter the US market was, on b\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,  the company’s most serious error.

2. As a r\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, investors in stocks and shares should spread their risks as much as possible.

3. One reason why the largest technology companies are able to make decisions quickly is that, in most c\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, a considerable portion of their voting shares is held by their founders.

Here are the answers:

1. on balance

2. as a rule

3. in most cases

And here is a brief list of expressions:

*in some respects/to some extent/on balance* = suggesting that there are other factors to consider

*as a rule/in principle* = used to hedge generalisations

*in most (or many) cases* = suggests that there may be exceptions

Expressions like these can sometimes be helpful but they’ve been a bit over-used, so you may want to point out to students that they can sound like clichés.

**7. Practice**

Now that students have a good range of hedging devices, you may want to try a classroom activity to give them some practice.

1. Get the students into an even number of groups - two, four or six, for example - with each group forming a pair with a partner group.

2. Every group should now prepare a series of unhedged claims or opinions in the areas of business that they are currently studying. The number of claims depends on how much time you have available, but the focus should be on students producing three or four good ones.

3. Once a group has the agreed number of unhedged claims, they should check these with you, and then exchange them with their partner group. The aim now is for groups to hedge the claims they have just received, using a variety of the features they have studied.

4. When this has been done, you can listen to the hedged claims that groups read out, and write some useful examples on the board.

*END*

This plan has been adapted from my online course, Teaching Grammar for Business Essays:

<https://www.udemy.com/course/teaching-grammar-for-business-essays/?src=sac&kw=teaching+grammar+for+busi>