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Vague Language and Interpersonal Communication: An Analysis of Adolescent Intercultural Conversation

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Abstract

This paper was concerned with the analysis of the spoken language of teenagers, taken from a newly developed specialized corpus, the British and Taiwanese Teenage Intercultural Communication Corpus (BATTICC). More specifically, the study employed a discourse analytical approach to examine vague language in an intercultural context among a group of British and Taiwanese adolescents, paying particular attention to the three categories of vague expressions: (a) vague categories, (b) approximations and (c) hedging. Initial quantitative analysis was employed to inform further qualitative analysis to identify the pragmatic functions of each type of vague language. The different uses of vague expressions between Taiwanese and British participants were also presented in detail. The research findings demonstrated the pedagogical merit of the analyses of naturally-occurring discourse, and thus help in the design of English courses for adolescent intercultural interaction.

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1. Introduction

It is accepted that maintaining good relations between the speaker and hearer is important in casual face-to-face conversation, particularly in intercultural communication. O’Keeffe, McCarthy, and Carter (2007) propose the term “relational language” to refer to language that serves to “create and maintain a good relationship between the speaker and hearer” (p. 159). One such device is vague language, which is found to be particularly common in daily conversation as speakers are often cautious not to sound over definite, which might be perceived as threatening or over-educated (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Cheng & Warren, 2003; O’Keeffe et al., 2007). Vague language, therefore can have an informal, “socially cohesive function” (Cutting, 2007, p. 3). O’Keeffe et al. (2007) also note that one central function of vague language is to hedge assertions or to make them fuzzy by allowing speakers to downtone what they say. In this regard, vague language softens expressions, so the speakers “do not appear too direct or unduly authoritative and assertive”; the use of vague expressions is therefore a conscious choice by speakers and is not a product of careless thinking or sloppy expression (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 202).

There has been a burgeoning field of research looking at vague language in different social contexts, identifying different kinds of vague expressions and describing how they are employed in a particular setting. Koester (2007), for example, investigated conversations across a variety of office environments and shows that vague language occurs regularly in work-related interactions. Adolphs, Atkins, and Harvey (2007) examined the Nottingham Health Communication Corpus (NHCC) and showed that vagueness is extremely common in health communication contexts and plays an important part in the negotiation of advice and thus in affirming patient choice. Moreover, Parvaresh and Dabghi (2013) looked at vagueness across languages. Their comparative studies reported on the extent to which transfer takes place from Persian into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) discourse.

Lin (2012) compared and contrasted vague expressions used in EFL textbook conversation and authentic discourse. A significant gap between the two datasets was identified, which shows that vague language, which is pervasive in authentic discourse, is rarely presented in the EFL learning materials he examined. As such, it is suggested that including the use of vagueness would not only enrich the description of target language use but also increase novices’ awareness of the patterns of use in an authentic communication context.

2. Theoretical Framework

Vague language has been included in major English grammar books as an important grammatical and interpersonal feature of spoken discourse, such as the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999) and the *Cambridge Grammar of English* (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Biber et al. (1999) explain that vague language conveys imprecision that hedges and that in generic reference the noun “refers to a whole class rather than to an individual person or thing” (p. 265). Carter and McCarthy (2006, p. 928) also described vague expressions as words or phrases “which deliberately refer to people and things in a non-specific, imprecise way”, such as *stuff, like, or anything, or whatever, sort of* and approximations, as in “*around six*”. Channell (1994) defines vague language as a language which “can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition” and which is “purposely and unabashedly vague” (p. 20). Her analysis of vague expressions shows that “their meanings are themselves vague”, and that “speakers share knowledge of how to understand them” (p. 196). This also accords with O’Keeffe et al.’s (2007) definition, vague language indicates “assumed or shared knowledge and mark in-group membership” (p. 177). In other words, it is “a marker of intersubjectivity” (Overstreet & Yule, 2002, p. 787). The interlocutors, in this case, do not need to convey precise and concrete information simply because they are accustomed to relying on a common ground of knowledge

and belief shared with others. As Channell (1994) notes, “any social group sharing interests and knowledge employs non-specificity in talking about their shared interest” (p. 193).

Although discourse communities use vague language to assert in-group membership and show solidarity, critical discourse analysis takes a different point of view, considering vagueness as a social divider. Wodak (1996) explains that confusion can result when there are “gaps between distinct and insufficiently coincident cognitive worlds”, since these can separate “insiders from outsiders, members of institutions from clients of those institutions, and elites from the normal citizen uninitiated in the arcana of bureaucratic language and life” (p. 2). This notwithstanding, vague language is pervasive in everyday talk, serving interpersonal and pragmatic functions in discourse. Carter (1998) sees it as a social leveller: it “puts the speakers on an immediately casual and equal footing with their interlocutors” (p. 45). Several studies have also reported that vague language is typical of adolescent speech (Cheshire, 2007; Martínez, 2011; Stenström, Anderson, & Hasund, 2002; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2010; Winter & Norrby, 2000). Stenström et al. (2002), for example, analyzed the Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language (COLT) and noted that “in the teenage world it is cool to be vague, and it is cool to demonstrate that one cannot be bothered to be precise” (p. 88). Nevertheless, some researchers report that adults actually use more vague language overall than teenagers, though a wider range of different forms of vague expressions is found in the teenage data (e.g., Martínez, 2011). While different variations regarding the frequency of vague language use can be found in the comparison of adult and teenage data, vague expressions usually have “the purpose of expressing solidarity, self-connection and assumption of shared experience” (Martínez, 2011, p. 2468). Vagueness is therefore motivated and purposeful and it is often a mark of sensitivity and the skill of a speaker. Although vague language used in various contexts has been extensively studied, little is known about their use in adolescent

learners of English who take part in intercultural exchanges. This paper employs a discourse analytical approach to examine vague language used in an intercultural setting among a group of Taiwanese and British adolescents, paying specific attention to the three categories of vague expressions: (a) vague categories, (b) approximations and (c) hedging. Initial quantitative analysis is employed to inform further qualitative analysis to identify the pragmatic functions of each type of vague language. The different use of vague expressions between Taiwanese and British participants will also be presented in detail.

3. Methodology

3. 1. Participants

This study is based on a global partnership program “British Council Connecting Classrooms Project” that aims to create global partnerships between clusters of schools in the UK and others around the world, and thus offer language learners an opportunity to communicate and work directly with their international peers (British Council, n.d.). The participants recruited for the study were 35 Taiwanese learners from Hualien and 35 English secondary school students from Cumbria, between 13 and 14 years of age, all participating in the Connecting Classrooms Project. Most of the Taiwanese participants are English learners at a low-intermediate level, having learned English for averagely five to six years, and nearly all (97.5%) have never had the experience of interacting with students with a different linguistic background, and particularly from English-speaking countries. Similarly, few of the English participants have a friend or an online pen pal from an Asian country.

3. 2. Corpus

Since this study aims to examine the particular linguistic features of spoken communication, an analysis based on naturally occurring samples of language data is necessary. British and Taiwanese Teenage Intercultural Communication Corpus (BATTICC), a specialized corpus,

therefore can be of value as it represents the language use of specific people in specific contexts. The data that forms the basis of BATTICC was collected from casual face-to-face conversation in an intercultural exchange project, involving British and Taiwanese teenage participants between 13 and 14 years of age. This spoken data collection resulted in approximately 4 hours of recorded chats, amounting to a total of approximately 34,089 words, transcribed in accordance with standard orthographic practices in order to facilitate analysis by currently available corpus analytical tools.

With regard to the construction of a corpus, *representativeness* and *sampling* are two essential criteria. McEnery, Xiao, and Tono (2006) note that these are the features typically used to distinguish a corpus from an archive. That is, an archive is simply a random collection of texts whereas a corpus is designed to provide insight into a particular genre. In this study, BATTICC was constructed to present the informal nature of intercultural communication by adolescent learners in a face-to-face setting. As such, all the samples collected represent that genre. Biber (1995) defines representativeness as the extent to which a sample includes the full range of variability in a population. This suggests that one should strive to collect samples from all the possible situations within a certain genre to completely present the language being studied. However, for collecting spoken discourse, it does not seem to be possible to record all of the spoken interactions in the participants' daily lives. Koester (2010) suggests that what is important is to ensure that the samples are collected from a range of fairly typical situations. In this regard, as the aims of the intercultural exchange project were to build relationships between participants in casual settings, spoken data for BATTICC were collected from a range of informal chats between Taiwanese and British participants during the intercultural exchange program, in a wide variety of locations such as schools, homes, restaurants, tourist spots, public parks, and social gatherings, wherever possible consisting

of the entire speech event. Nevertheless, it needs to be noted that this paper has attempted to demonstrate the particular linguistic patterns (i.e., vague expressions) via a case study of adolescent intercultural exchange project, and consequently the sample might not lead to any generalizable observations for intercultural interaction in general.

3.3. Procedure

The analytical framework adopted in the current study for describing and analyzing vague language was drawn from the work done by Channell (1994), since her work provides a systematic and rigorous description of vague language used in real and varied contexts of communication. The framework has also been applied effectively to a variety of contexts of interaction (e.g., Adolphs, Atkins, & Harvey, 2007; Drave, 2000; Koester, 2007; Lin, 2012; Stenström et al., 2002). In this study, three categories of vague language are examined: (a) vague categories, (b) hedging and (c) approximations. Vague categories involve the use of words and phrases such as *kind of thing*, *and stuff*, *and so on* and *things like that*, which deliberately refer to sets or categories of items in an imprecise way. The speakers in this case do not necessarily convey precise and concrete information, and the hearers in most cases know what their vague expressions refer to (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; O'Keeffe et al., 2007; Overstreet, 2011). This use of vague language is sometimes given different labels, such as "general extenders" (Overstreet & Yule, 2002; Parvaresh & Dabghi, 2013), "extension particles" (Dubois, 1992), "vagueness tags" (De Cock, 2004), "set marking tags" (Winter & Norrby, 2000), "vague category identifier" (Channell, 1994) and "vague category markers" (Evison, McCarthy, & O'Keeffe, 2007; O'Keeffe et al., 2007).

The second major category of vague language includes the expressions which serve to hedge the commitment of the speaker to what he or she asserts in my data so that utterances are softened in some way and they are slightly more indirect and less assertive. I particularly focus on

adverbial hedges, such as “*a bit confusing*”, “*sort of tricky*”. Approximations, which are often described as vague language used with numbers and quantities, are included in another type of vagueness in the current study, as in “*around six*”, “*a couple of days ago*”. They are also described as “vague additives” (Channell, 1994) or “vague approximators” (Koester, 2007). They are commonplace in the domain of measurements and quantitative data, which have the effect of blurring category boundaries or otherwise precise measures (Adolphs et al., 2007). The corpus analytical tool *WordSmith 5.0* was used to determine the frequency of the vague items in BATTICC, and these were

examined in their discourse contexts to find the functions they performed.

4. Results

The use of vague language falls into three aspects: vague categories, hedging, and approximations. Table 1 presents the total number of instances for each type of vague expressions, which will be discussed in the following three subsections. The table also shows statistically significant differences in the amount of use between the two groups of participants revealed by using log-likelihood ratios (Rayson, 2008) to compare the cumulative frequencies of each item.

Table 1
Number of Different Vague Expressions

Vague expressions	Taiwanese		British		Sig. (LL)
	Number	per 1000	Number	per 1000 words	
Vague categories					
<i>(and) stuff (like that)</i>	2	0.36	15	1.33	<i>p</i> <.05
<i>(that/this) sort of (thing/like)</i>	0	0.00	12	1.06	<i>p</i> <.01
<i>(or) anything (like that)</i>	2	0.36	10	0.89	
<i>(or/and) something (like that)</i>	7	1.24	12	1.06	
<i>(that/this) kind of (thing)</i>	3	0.53	3	0.27	
<i>(and) everything</i>	3	0.53	7	0.62	
<i>(and/but) thing(s) (like that)</i>	5	0.71	24	2.13	
Total	21	3.91	83	7.36	<i>p</i> <.01
Hedges					
<i>sort of</i>	0	0.00	17	1.51	<i>p</i> <.001
<i>a bit / a little bit</i>	2	0.36	14	1.24	
Total	2	0.36	31	2.75	<i>p</i> <.001
Approximation					
<i>about / around</i>	6	1.07	6	0.53	
<i>lots of / a lot</i>	10	1.78	34	3.02	
<i>loads of</i>	0	0.00	8	0.71	<i>p</i> <.01
<i>a couple of</i>	0	0.00	4	0.35	
Total	16	2.84	52	4.61	

4. 1. Vague Categories

Vague categories refer to vague use of categories of items. In BATTICC 104 instances of expressions indicating vague categories were found. As can be seen in Table 1 they typically include words and phrases such as *thing*, *stuff*, *like*, *or something*, *or anything*, *kind of*, and *sort of*, which are found in 21 and 83 instances in the Taiwanese and British datasets respectively. Tests of log-likelihood revealed a significant difference in the use of *(and) stuff (like that)*, *(that/this) sort of (thing/like)*, and the cumulative frequencies of vague categories between the two sets of data.

Sort of is one of the most commonly used vague expressions in the British data, while no instances were found in Taiwanese learners' discourse. The following extract presents how it is used in context. In (1) BT13 and BT14 are talking about gift ideas for their fathers. BT14 used the vague expression *that sort of thing* twice, and BT13 may well know what he/she means although no explicit reference is given.

- (1) <BT14>: Right, because all of them .. all the presents I've made .. you know what I mean, like I made all the key rings they're more for Mum than you know ... my Dad doesn't like *that sort of thing*.

<BT13>: Yeah, I bought a load of rope bracelets for my Dad.

<BT14>: My Dad's not into *that sort of thing*. I was going to get him like a model *or something* ... If I do, I'll get him some alcohol from duty free ...

The first use of *that sort of thing* may well refer to the presents that the speakers have made during the cultural exchange program, and this reference appears to be a marker of shared knowledge and experience that they can draw on. The second use of *that sort of thing* refers to the gift that BT13 bought for his/her father so the speaker BT14 does not necessarily need to repeat the noun phrase *a load of rope bracelets*, and this in turn further asks the hearer to

construct the relevant ideas of buying a gift. Moreover, the use of *or something* basically indicates an alternative category of gifts, and such usage simply "keeps options open" (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 202). Such use of vague language describing categories of items is sometimes referred to as a "vague category identifier" (Channell, 1994), which is made up of an exemplar (i.e., *a model*) plus a vague tag (i.e., *or something*), where the exemplar directs listeners to identify the category referred to. Some more instances of vague expressions retrieved from the BATTICC are presented in the following excerpts:

- (2) <BT07>: I know that they're a lot more like ... the girls have to have their hair out of their faces and they can't wear make-up *and stuff* and ...
- (3) <BT07>: But then we might not have chance to come again because of like money *and stuff*.
- (4) <BT23>: So .. er ... what sort of different things have you been noticing in our culture and traditions *and stuff*?
- (5) <BT18>: Yeah, so it's like a lot fresher and generally do you find that we have fresher ... erm ... fresh vegetables *or anything like that*?
- (6) <BT17>: ...but *things like* you know, your hair or your shoes *or anything* – they're not really bothered about it.
- (7) <BT08>: Erm it wasn't like amazing *or anything*. I'm just like weird anyway so people laugh at it.

The *and stuff* shown in (2) may be inferred to mean the kinds of girls' make-up, dress and accessories; the use of the same phrase in (3) was used for stating the reasons that might discourage BT07 from having another chance to visit Taiwan, which might include funding, school rules and other complicated restrictions that are not easy to explain in detail. Such use of vague expressions serves both set-marking and interpersonal functions in conversation and is

probably preferred by interlocutors as it may have distanced the speakers from the interlocutors if they had used more formal terms, such as cosmetics for (2) or economic hardship for (3). Vague category identifiers sometimes occur with an interrogative manner, i.e., being used as a tag question, as in (4) and (5), which likely leave room for the interlocutors to add their own description of the situation (Adolphs et al., 2007). In these cases, BT23 and BT18 seem to not only ask the interlocutors to describe the differences between British and Taiwanese cultures or the different fruits or vegetables they have found, but also direct them to consider an entire category of cultural differences to share with the speakers. In addition, it can be seen that vague category identifiers can basically be divided into adjunctive and disjunctive one. The former usually begins with adjunctive coordinator *and*, implying that more detailed information could be given without actually saying so, as in (2)-(4). The latter, on the other hand, typically begins with *or* and basically indicates the existence of alternatives (Fernandez & Yuldashev, 2011; Parvaresh & Dabghi, 2013), such as *or anything* in (5)-(7).

In some cases vague categories can be used to exemplify the explanations (Koester, 2007), as in (2) and (6). For example, the use of *your hair or your shoes or anything* in (6) refers to the *things* in the utterance, where the speaker BT17 explains the different items related to school dress code. BT17 even puts stress on the *or anything* in the utterance, with an explicit meaning that there is no specific requirement concerning hairstyle, make-up and attire in British schools, while the Taiwanese schools normally set a strict dress code. Another situation of using vague language happens when BT08 won the award for the talent show. As in (7), people praise and admire BT08 for his/her excellent performance, and the use of *or anything* seems to soften his/her response and function as a disclaimer used to forestall negative evaluation by others. As Overstreet and Yule (2002) claim, such use of *or anything* may “support the speaker's attempt to make sure that

the co-participant does not adopt the possible negative interpretation of behavior being disavowed” (p. 51). This use seems to downtone or hedge the utterance, which I will examine further in the following subsection.

4. 2. Hedges

As shown in Table 1, *sort of* is the most prevalent example of such use (17 instances), although most of the instances of *sort of* function to indicate vague categories. As can be seen in the following extract involving the British speaker BT18 and the Taiwanese TW16 talking about the differences between Taiwanese and British food, *sort of* is used three times in one utterance.

(8) <BT18>: Okay. Yeah, your food generally is a lot more *sort of* ... erm ... traditional and special than ours. Ours is just *sort of* simple, *sort of*, ...

<TW16>: It's okay, I like it ... it's your culture actually.

<BT18>: Yeah.

<TW16>: But I am ... I don't like the traditional breakfast because it's too salty and the flavour is too strong.

The speaker BT18 is likely trying to hedge the assertion by frequently using *sort of* when giving comments on Taiwanese food so that the statement sounds less direct. This is perhaps explained by the uncertainty of the speaker BT18 about his/her own assumption, and he/she thus intends to be less assertive; on the other hand, the speaker TW16's response *I don't like the traditional breakfast because it's too salty and the flavor is too strong* seems much more direct compared to BT18's statement. Miskovic-Lukovic (2009) calls such use of vague expressions “positive politeness strategies” (p. 622). These help to “downtone the force of the utterance” and to “mitigate against any potential threat to face” (O’Keeffe et al., 2007, p. 174). Moreover, the pervasive use of *sort of* in BT18's utterance seems to indicate

a certain level of hesitance in the planning of speech and searching for appropriate words in that the expression *sort of* functions as a filler or a time-buying device in the discourse, which might further develop speaking fluency in general. However, as can be seen from the extract, very few instances of this kind of vague expressions can be found in the Taiwanese speaker TW16's utterances.

Interestingly, vague quantifiers such as *a bit* and *a little bit* found in my data pragmatically function as downtoners, which is exemplified in the following cases. Such use of vague quantifiers as hedges can be found in 16 examples in BATTICC.

- (9) <TW05>: I think the question is boring.
 <BT06>: They were *a bit confusing*.
- (10) <BT17>: Because we go back to school the day I do my birthday. It is *a bit annoying* but it is okay.
- (11) <BT13>: Uh...thanks. How would you write all of that? ... I'm not sure. Just *a little bit difficult*. Maybe just that word.
- (12) <BT07>: Don't mind these two they're *a bit weird*.

In these cases *a bit* or *a little bit* is commonly prefaced to different adjectives, such as *confusing*, *annoying*, *weird*, *cheeky*, *strange* and *uncomfortable*, most of which seem to be used with negative situations. Such use of vague quantifiers seems to downtone and hedge the utterances, which is highly likely to be more appropriate in conversation, and as such this is considered as possessing more "pragmatic adequacy and integrity" in informal contexts (O'Keeffe et al., 2007, p. 71). Adolphs et al. (2007) describe this as "a modification which serves to reduce the negative assessment" by the speakers (p. 72). For example, in (9), BT06 identifies with the negative assertion previously provided by TW05 and reformulates it, which presumably helps to minimize the negative emotion of the interlocutor and constructs and

maintains a relaxing tone of conversation. The result here also accords with a number of previous research on the analysis of hedges (e.g., Adolphs et al., 2007; Koester, 2007; Overstreet, 2011), which show that vague language is very frequently used as a hedging device.

4. 3. Approximations

Similar to vague expressions, approximations, particularly used with numbers, quantities or some other measurable units, are frequently introduced by speakers in informal situations to downtone what might otherwise sound overly precise (O'Keeffe et al., 2007). In BATTICC a wide range of expressions can be found. The most prevalent item of this type is *lots of/a lot*, which can be found serving this function in 44 instances. Other uses of approximations include *about/around* (12 instances), *loads of* (8 instances) and *a couple of* (3 instances). In the following extracts derived from BATTICC, we can see how the approximation is used in conversation:

- (13) <TW07>: Really?
 <BT07>: Not all the time – for *a couple of* days – and then there's *a couple of* months and it's quite warm.
- (14) <TW01>: So how is the weather in the UK?
 <BT01>: Rubbish.
 <BT03>: Raining.
 <BT01>: If you come over, just pack *loads of* jumpers.
- (15) <BT15>: Harry Potter?
 <TW11>: Yeah.
 <BT15>: Yeah. I ... erm ... I know someone who's read the entire series *about* fourteen times.

The extracts present approximations found in spoken discourse involving the use of vague

quantifiers such as *about*, *a couple of* and *loads of*. These items seem to indicate the absence of precision, and they have the same interpersonal functions as the vague expressions in that young learners tend to engage in a more conversational style and avoid being absolutely precise and perhaps being considered pedantic (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). As in (13), *a couple of* occurs twice to refer vaguely to the amounts of days and months as the exact amount of time might not be relevant. As Anderson (2000) claims, exactitude would not benefit the hearer as it requires additional and unnecessary cognitive effects

Although three categories of vague expressions were discussed individually, they usually co-occur at the same time. Some more examples of vague language are derived from BATTICC, as shown in the following excerpt (16). The conversation takes place between two British speakers BT07 and BT09 and one Taiwanese learner TW07, mainly talking about trains in the UK. The use of both vague expressions and approximations are pervasive in the discourse, where the speakers regularly insert hedges and monitors of shared knowledge.

(16) <TW07>: Yeah, so how did you feel er .. to take this train?

<BT09>: Yeah, it's *a lot* cleaner on the trains here. Sorry if that's scared you about English trains.

<BT07>: *I think* they're *like* ... in England they're *sort of like* ... *well* I've missed it I'll *just* wait half an hour and get the next one.

<BT09>: It's every 15 minutes by the way.

<BT07>: Yeah, they don't over here they take *lots of like* care in the presentation *like* being clean and people have *like a lot of* respect for them.

<BT08>: Yeah, everyone has *loads of* respect for different *like* ... *you know*, trains *and stuff* but in the UK, it's *sort of*

like no one has as much respect for *things* as you do over here, *like* for trains or buses *or anything* because they *just* ... I don't know why ... they *just* don't have as much respect.

This example presents nearly 20 instances of vague words or phrases in that the multi-word expressions in italics seem to mark a purposive vagueness to hedge the assertions by allowing interlocutors to downtone what they say. Some of them also indicate assumed or shared knowledge and mark in-group membership (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; O'Keeffe et al., 2007). Although these items are vague in nature, they are interpreted successfully by the hearer because the referents of the expressions can be assumed to be known by the interlocutors. As Carter and McCarthy (2006) state, such use of language presents that young learners tend to engage in a more conversational style and avoid being absolutely precise and perhaps being heard as pedantic.

5. Discussion

This paper employs a discourse analytical approach to examine vague language used in an intercultural setting, paying particular attention to the three categories of vague expressions: (a) vague categories, (b) approximations and (c) hedging. It was evident that they not only perform a set-marking, hedging, and textual functions, but also serve to express interpersonal relationships between the speakers and their interlocutors, indicating assumed or shared knowledge and marking in-group membership. This is highly relevant to successful interaction in an informal communication setting, and as such this is considered as possessing more "pragmatic adequacy and integrity" in intercultural contexts (O'Keeffe et al., 2007, p. 71). Anderson and Trudgill (1990) draw attention to the fact that the existence of these words and phrases with a wide application and reference is of key importance in English and indeed in other languages since they are part of everyday communication (p. 29).

The study has also highlighted the differences in

the use of different types of vague expressions between British and Taiwanese datasets, and substantial differences in the total amount of use between the two groups can be found. Vague language use therefore has implications for the English language teaching and intercultural communications. For EFL learners with an intention to maintain a good relationship in face-to-face conversation, it would therefore be very helpful for them to be aware of and learn these important features. As such, it is suggested that EFL pedagogical materials should include these important spoken patterns that commonly occur in authentic data and expose learners to authentic language use to some extent. Carter, Hughes, and McCarthy (2011) suggest that “not to provide opportunities for exposure to language use is to take away choices from both teachers and learners” (p. 90). Corpora and results of research based on naturally occurring intercultural discourse have not yet exerted a strong influence on EFL textbooks, and syllabus, and teaching/learning materials design could be dramatically improved by a corpus-informed approach accordingly (Carter et al., 2011; O’Keeffe et al., 2007; Reppen, 2010; Tono, 2011).

Based on the findings of this study, I have developed a sample material (see Appendix) demonstrating how authentic data from BATTICC can be used to inform EFL instruction and materials development. It presents an example of teaching vague language, including two parts of vague expressions: vague categories and softening comments. In Part A, learners are asked to add a vague expression, which refers to vague use of categories of items. Common vague expressions such as *and stuff* and *and things like that* are provided for learners to choose from. Part B asks learners to add a vague expression to soften the comment in some way. As has been discussed, such a device is frequently used to hedge the commitment of the speaker to whatever he or she asserts. This material, therefore, would raise the Taiwanese learners’ awareness of how their British peers employ vague language, so that their comments do not appear overly direct.

Further research of vague language on more data and on more diverse intercultural settings is needed with a view to gaining a better understanding of the role of vague language in intercultural conversation. The cultural meaning of the genre, the distance, status and power relations of the participants have to be also taken into account. In addition, examining a wider range of discourse types, with varying degrees of formality in intercultural communication, would increase the extent to which the conclusions drawn from the research can be generalized.

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Appendix: Teaching Materials for Vague expressions

❖ Conversation Strategy 1: Vague categories

What do you think the underlined expression means?

We have a lot of festivals and things like that in Taiwan.

a. people

b. festival

c. Taiwan

❖ Building Language

✓ Now, listen to the CD and add vague expressions to the comment.

1. The girls have to have their hair out of their faces and they can't wear make-up (**and stuff**).
2. Every year we Amis people celebrate our harvest festival (**and things**).
3. We might not have chance to come again because of like money (**and stuff**).
4. What sort of different things have you been noticing in our culture and traditions (**and stuff**)?

Useful expressions

and things (like that), and stuff (like that), and everything, or whatever, and that kind of thing, and that sort of stuff



❖ Conversation Strategy 2: Softening comments

Which comment in each pair sounds "softer"?

a. It looks strange.

a. They are shy.

b. It looks kind of strange.

b. They are just a little shy.

❖ Building Language

✓ Now, listen to the CD and add 'something' to soften the comment.

1. Don't mind these two, they're (**a bit**) weird.
2. In a way it was (**a bit**) boring because we had to ...
3. (**I think**) English is (**a little bit**) difficult so I can't speak well.
4. (**I think**) I'll go for the easy stuff.
5. Yeah, your food generally is a lot more (**sort of**) traditional and special than ours.
Ours is just (**sort of**) simple.

Useful expressions

I guess / I think, a little / a (little) bit
kind of / sort of, in a way / just

