Hedging as Facework: How Teachers and Learners Hedge Disagreement During Concept-Checking

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Abstract

This study investigated how instructors and learners deploy hedging devices in disagreement sequences that occur during concept-checking in an Iraqi L2 English classroom. This research utilised Conversation Analysis (CA) in the investigation of naturally-occurring classroom talk between second-year university level learners studying English as a foreign language (EFL) at The Open Educational College, where Arabic was the learners' primary language, and examined the way the participants used succeeding episodes of 'concept-checking' within an audio and video-recorded classroom context. All examples showing how the participants reached an understanding of a target form/meaning where there was disagreement/misalignment were transcribed in a structured format for a focused analysis. Analyses of the data indicated that the use of hedging represented a systematic resource and not simply an incidental characteristic of discourse within these classrooms. The teacher purposefully applied hedging to soften her epistemic authority, frame the provision of corrective feedback in a context-sensitive manner and protect the identity of her learners by allowing them to attempt to produce correction-of-response feedback for items they supplied that were either incorrect or incomplete. Oppositely, the learners utilised hedging to indicate that they were uncertain about the accuracy of the explanation provided by the teacher, to cautiously resist the explanation provided by the teacher, and to later adjust their response without suffering any overt loss of face. Moreover, in many cases, the hedge exhibited by both the teacher and learner occurred in adjacent turns, creating a type of patterned, choreographed sequence of interaction that allowed for collaborative negotiation of disagreement. Based on this study, there is a compelling argument for the inclusion of hedging as an essential element of L2 teacher/learner interaction competency in the teaching and learning of EFL.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis (CA), disagreement sequences, facework, hedging, L2 classroom discourse, teacher-learner interaction

التخفيف اللغوي بوصفه عملاً وجاهياً: كيف يخفّف المدرّسون والمتعلمون من حدّة الخلاف أثناء فحص الفهم

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الملخص

بحثت هذه الدراسة في كيفية استخدام المعلمين والمتعلمين لأدوات التحوط في تسلسلات الخلاف التي تحدث أثناء التحقق من المفاهيم في فصل دراسي للغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية عراقي. استخدم هذا البحث في التحقيق في الحديث الصفي الذي يحدث بشكل طبيعي بين متعلمي المستوى (CA) تحليل المحادثة في الكلية التربوية المفتوحة، (EFL) الجامعي في السنة الثانية الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية حيث كانت اللغة العربية هي اللغة الأساسية للمتعلمين، وفحص كيفية استخدام المشاركين للحلقات التالية من "التحقق من المفاهيم" في سياق الصف الدراسي المسجل بالصوت والصورة. تم نسخ جميع الأمثلة التي توضح كيف توصل المشاركون إلى فهم لشكل/معنى مستهدف حيث كان هناك خلاف/عدم توافق في شكل منظم لتحليل مركز. أشارت تحليلات البيانات إلى أن استخدام التحوط يمثل موردًا منهجيًا وليس مجرد سمة عرضية للخطاب داخل هذه الفصول الدراسية. تطبيق أسلوب التحوط لتخفيف سلطتها المعرفية، وتأطير تقديم التغذية الراجعة التصحيحية بطريقة تراعي السياق، وحماية هوية متعلميها من خلال السماح لهم بمحاولة تقديم تغذية راجعة تصحيحية للعناصر التي قدموها والتي كانت إما غير صحيحة أو غير كاملة. في المقابل، استخدم المتعلمون أسلوب التحوط للإشارة إلى عدم تأكدهم من دقة الشرح الذي قدمه المعلم، ولمقاومته بحذر، ولتعديل استجاباتهم لاحقًا دون التعرض لأي خسارة واضحة. علاوة على ذلك، في كثير من الحالات، حدث التحوط الذي أظهره كل من المعلم والمتعلم في أدوار متجاورة، مما أدى إلى نوع من تسلسل نمطي ومنظم للتفاعل سمح بالتفاوض التعاوني على الخلاف. بناءً على هذه الدراسة، هناك حجة مقنعة لإدراج أسلوب التحوط كعنصر أساسي في كفاءة التفاعل بين المعلم والمتعلم في اللغة الثانية في تدريس وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية : تحليل المحادثة ، تسلسل الخلاف ، العمل الوجهي ، التحوط ، الخطاب الصفي، التفاعل بين المعلم والمتعلم

1. Introduction

In communicative language teaching, classroom interaction is a medium through which learners can practice and develop their proficiency with a foreign or second language, but it is also the main way that learners will create and negotiate new meanings, roles, and relationships (Rusk & Rønning, 2020). Concept-checking holds a unique position among the numerous recurring activities in this domain (Rabani et al., 2024). When teachers ask Concept-Checking Questions (CCQs) to see if students understand a grammatical form, a word, or a task instruction, they are trying to get students to misunderstand so that it can be fixed (Mohammed, 2025). But these same moments are also socially risky (Muhaji, 2025). Disagreement is almost built into the activity when a teacher has to tell a student that their understanding is wrong or incomplete, or when a student tentatively questions the teacher's interpretation (Yeremenko & Lukyanchenko, 2020).

This kind of disagreement is threatening to the face because it could make students doubt their own ability to use the language and, at the same time, challenge the teacher's authority (Tseronis, 2021). According to Goffman, participants must always be aware of their "face", or the positive social value they say they have, and do facework to avoid, soften, or fix any threats to that face (Goffman & Newill, 1967). As Brown and Levinson (1987) and Sifianou (2019) stated politeness theory has helped to provide a more complete understanding of how disagreements, criticisms, and corrections are classified as "face threatening" in terms of damaging not just the person's positive social

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standing (i.e., the need for approval), but also damaging their negative social standing (i.e., the need to be physically unobstructed) as well.

In this context, the use of hedging acts as an important tool for teachers and students alike to balance epistemic clarity with interpersonal sensitivity (Livytska, 2019) where hedging means utilising tools to soften an individual's certainty (Salih & Othamn, 2024). This makes room for other points of view and lowers the social risks of being wrong or correcting someone else (Hyland, 1998, 2005). Words like "maybe", "I think", "sort of", "a bit", or "I'm not sure, but..." let speakers show that they are not sure and that their position is negotiable rather than absolute (Hyland, 2005).

In terms of politeness, these kinds of statements are negative-politeness strategies. By saying that something is uncertain instead of certain, the speaker makes it less of an imposition on the addressee and less of a threat to their face (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Vlasyan, 2018). Pragmatic theories of hedging have also made a difference between propositional hedges, which change the truth value of a statement, and speech-act hedges, which make the act itself less strong (Fraser, 2010; Gribanova & Gaidukova, 2019). Both types are very important for checking concepts: a teacher might hedge a correction by saying, "I think we usually use the present perfect here", and a learner might hedge a disagreement by saying, "I'm not sure, but I thought it was...". In both cases, the hedge helps turn what could be a confrontational move into a collaborative contribution (Harvey, 2017).

Hedging continues to play an important role in academic writing. The functions of the hedging in academic writing have been the focus of many researchers (Azher & Nawaz, 2020; Ghahraman et al., 2023; Lysanets et al., 2020; Yu & Wen, 2022). The use of hedging is seen as the means to express assertiveness carefully, to recognize alternative positions, and to protect the author(s) against criticisms (Hyland, 1998, 2005).

Nonetheless, significantly less focus has been directed towards hedging in real-time classroom discourse, especially within the nuanced interactional context of concept-checking sequences. A significant corpus of research in Conversation Analysis (CA) and classroom discourse has elucidated that L2 classrooms are structured through recurring participation frameworks, activity types, and sequence structures, including Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) patterns, repair organization, and teacher follow-up moves (e.g., Afzali, K., & Kianpoor, 2020; Engida et al., 2024; Harumi, 2023; Supakorn, 2020). Concept-checking questions are usually built into these structures to get students to show that they understand, but they can also show where the teacher and student don't agree on something, which can lead to disagreement, either openly or secretly. Research on classroom interaction indicates that disagreement is frequently postponed, alleviated, or recontextualized to sustain affiliation and ensure classroom harmony (Wong, 2020). Despite the wealth of research on disagreement and other forms of facework in the classroom, few studies have

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specifically focused on the use of hedging as a strategy for this facework during concept-checking.

The current study fills this void by analyzing hedging as a form of facework in disagreement instances that occur during concept-checking in L2 classrooms. The integration of Goffman's (1967) notion of face and facework into the politeness frameworks of the Brown and Levinson (1987) system and Fraser's (2010) hedging and Hyland's (1998 & 2005) pragmatics suggests that there is an interactional approach to classroom communication based on conversation analysis (Seedhouse, 2004 & Walsh, 2011) in which the act of hedging is viewed as more than just a reflection of someone being uncertain of their knowledge. Instead, hedging is viewed as an intentional, contextualized method of working through interpersonal relationships and negotiating knowledge authority in one of the fundamental structures of the educational process.

Various aspects of interaction between two or more participants during a concept-checking sequence, with respect to both their attitudes towards the use of the concept-checking sequence and their motivation to engage in a collaborative approach to understanding a misunderstanding, are investigated. In addition, the way in which hedges are being used by instructors and learners while participating in a concept-checking sequence is described, specifically the way they are positioned in each participant's talk (i.e., as an opening statement of disagreement, as a softening statement or evaluation, or as a mitigated repair initiation) and the function of the hedge in terms of facilitating facework, i.e., protecting and restoring an individual's social or relational bond. The study assesses how the practice of hedging can help to transform a potentially face-threatening experience into one that is viewed as part of a collaborative learning process by understanding how hedges function to accomplish this task. Finally, an overview of the differences between how the hedging practices of instructors and learners are described is provided, including the nature of the role the instructor plays in maintaining the teacher-student relationship while engaging in concept-checking activities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Hedging in Spoken Interaction

It has been demonstrated through research and analytic methods that hedging is a major component of pragmatics in spoken discourse. Hedging provides support for both epistemic stances and interpersonal relationships. The foundational work of Lakoff (1973) established that hedges create vagueness in language by attenuating categorical assertions and lessening a speaker's obligation to array propositions. In 1982, Prince et al. created a categorial distinction between two forms of hedging; those that change the literal meaning of what a speaker says and those that indicate a speaker has lower levels of accountability for the truthfulness of an assertion. Most recently, Fraser's (2010) research has focused on the role of hedges in decreasing the effect of an

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utterance, their systematic relationship with other "hedges like "kind of", "sort of", "maybe", "I think" and their functional use in conversational turn construction and discourse organization". According to Hyland (1998, 2005), academic writing has greatly shaped the scholarship of our discipline through the use of hedges. This research provides evidence that through the use of hedges, authors can mark their degree of uncertainty and provide readers with alternative views thereby mitigating negative evaluations made against them.

Hedging is associated with modality, evidentiality, and stance-taking in casual discussions (Moafian et al., 2018). For example, in everyday conversation, a speaker may use the phrase "I think," or expressions like "maybe," "it looks like this," and "somewhat," to indicate uncertainty about their claim, to moderate their assertion, or to show willingness to negotiate (Caprario, 2022). Understanding the distinction between propositional hedge and speech-act hedge shows how hedges function in different contexts and levels within language. An example of this is that hedges assert their dual role by both altering the actual status of the truth of a statement as well as causing social pressure exerted by conversational actions (van Elswyk, 2024). The duality of hedges shows that hedges act as necessary tools in establishing cooperation and avoiding direct conflict (Rajesh and Deshpande, 2025). Research on interpersonal pragmatics has found that hedging plays a key role in facilitating the fluidity of interactions and in lessening the face-threatening implications of direct disagreement while creating an emotionally safe environment within the conversation (Arthur and Fenyi, 2022).

Hedging has been extensively researched (Chai, 2022) with respect to power relationships, gender and social alignment. Hedges were found by Chai (2022) to serve a number of different functions in women's same-sex interactions, such as providing support for each participant's understanding of a situation, maintaining coherence throughout the interaction and demonstrating solidarity rather than uncertainty or weakness. According to Holmes (1987), New Zealanders have used hedges primarily to provide epistemic and affective information; that is, hedges are used both as a means to express doubt and to create a sense of connection with others. This study suggests that hedging is not just an indication of insecurity, as was previously believed, but it can also be a means of facilitating relational dynamics, particularly where maintaining rapport is important.

Recent research has looked at hedging as a pragmatic competence construct in second language (L2) interactions. Hedging was investigated through the study of Norwegian learners of English. Johansen (2020) found that in L2 communication hedges can demonstrate the right amount of certainty while softening feelings when speaking with an L2. Raphalen et al. (2022) studied the effectiveness of peer tutored L2 learners' hedging strategies to navigate the asymmetrical distribution of knowledge between them while minimizing the negative impact of their corrections and facilitating collaborative

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disagreement negotiation between peer participants. These findings indicate the importance of hedging for L2 speakers in managing their dual role as epistemic authorities and as polite interpersonally. The use of hedging within naturally occurring discourse indicates something of a sequential context that can indicate a potential for misalignment. This is shown through the use of pre-disagreement prefaces, repair initiations, downgraded assessments or mitigated directives within a multi-turn exchange. Hedges operate to buffer against the potentially negative impacts of divergent trajectories by providing anticipatory facework to enable cooperation through the emergence of divergence (van Elswyk, 2024).

2.2. Facework and Politeness Theory

The Facework and Politeness Theory (Goffman, 1959; Newill, 1967) provide the basis for understanding how students can disagree with a teacher, provide corrections to their peers, and mitigate tension within classroom exchanges during instructional settings. According to Goffman and Newill (1967), the concept of face is what an individual perceives as positive or negative in terms of their overall social value within an interaction. Thus, when individuals are engaged in a social exchange, they might be performing facework to protect their own face as well as that of the others involved in that social interaction. Additionally, any activities that cause an individual to feel that their competence, autonomy, or alignment has been compromised, can create a potential threat to their face and require the use of mitigating techniques to lessen this threat (Sowton, 2021). Within educational contexts, student comprehension is frequently assessed, corrected and questioned by educators, therefore, face threats will occur often rather than infrequently (Sowton, 2021). Additionally, because students' identities as competent language users are typically on display while teachers' authority is based on their credibility and sensitivity towards others, both groups must be cautious in balancing competing priorities such as providing accurate information while maintaining a harmonious environment (Zamir, 2021).

Politeness theory has been defined by Brown and Levinson (1987) using the framework of Goffman's concept of face-threatening acts and positive vs. negative face. The types of acts that were identified as being quintessential face-threatening acts result in damage to an interlocutor's desired self-image (Tseronis, 2021). The theory states that when speakers engage in the above-mentioned acts, they have the option of selecting from a variety of politeness strategies to lessen the potential threat, including positive-polite strategies that create or reinforce a sense of solidarity or approval, negative-polite strategies that minimize the degree of imposition or soften the expression of authority, and off-record strategies that depend upon implication rather than direct statement (Ackermann, 2023; Shen et al., 2023). In addition, the theory explains why mitigation devices, especially hedges, are essential in situations where teachers must correct the errors of their students and/or encourage their students to revise their positions (Ackermann, 2023). Therefore, Politeness Theory offers a strong

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basis for the requirement for mitigation devices, especially hedging, to help manage the tension created by disagreement (Ramzan & Khan, 2024).

Facework is important in classroom conversations because of the unequal power dynamics and the fact that the interaction is more about teaching than just interacting (Virtanen & Lee, 2022). Teachers are understood to be the primary source of expert information to students. However, it is equally important for teachers to ensure that their students have a safe learning environment and a supportive atmosphere in which to learn (Chu et al., 2025). Students must find a balance between their desire to display competency and their fear of making mistakes publicly or being misinterpreted (Fkhururazi et al., 2023). Politeness theory provides an explanation for how participants manage these concerns, particularly with the use of mitigation techniques, such as hedging, prosodic softening, indirectness, and collaborative framing devices (Donohue & Druckman, 2025). These strategies allow teachers to maintain their authority without appearing too authoritarian. Additionally, they allow students to participate in class discussions, even if they are not certain or do not agree. Facework promotes not only personal relationship-building but also advances pedagogical goals by encouraging students to take risks, maintaining engagement, and facilitating ongoing productive communication.

2.3. Gaps in Previous Research

Although the body of research on hedging, facework and classroom interaction provides a wealth of information, they also fail to adequately integrate the specific activity of concept-checking into one coherent body of knowledge. Studies on L2 classroom interaction and conversation analysis have documented how participants manage the organisation of their discourse through the use of repair, turn-taking, and epistemic management in a variety of pedagogical micro-contexts (Seedhouse, 2004; Walsh, 2011). However, concept-checking tends to be viewed merely as an element of a larger sequence of IRF cycles (Initiation, Response and Follow-up), rather than an independent form of interaction. There has been little or no attempt to explore the relationship between the use of hedging, the use of facework and the use of disagreement within the context of concept-checking episodes. Similarly, there has been very little exploration of the sequential nature of hedging within naturally occurring classroom discourse through the use of conversation analysis. In addition, to date, there has not been a systematic investigation comparing the hedging strategies of teaching staff as opposed to learners in the context of disagreement when engaged in concept-checking.

In this paper, the authors examine the role of hedges when instructors and learners use CA as their framework in their concept-checking and their subsequent responses to be able to create a clearer understanding of how to be respectful toward others while maintaining accuracy with concepts in the classroom, as well as how instructors and learners use hedges to ensure both instructors and learners maintain accurate concepts with integrity and

respectfully towards one another when in a face-off. By following a systemic theoretical and methodological framework, this study aimed to answer the following research question:

RQ: How do instructors and learners deploy hedging devices in disagreement sequences that occur during concept-checking in L2 classroom interaction?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

Qualitative conversation analysis was utilized in this study to explore how instructors and students use hedging in their interactions during disagreements about concept-checking in the L2 classroom context. Conversation analysis is an analytical framework that allows researchers to closely study how people interact through the analysis of individual turns taken during conversation, and how they signify to others their understanding of the content and nature of what they say and do in this context. In addition, rather than fitting the data into any predetermined or imposed categories, the analysis identifies patterns of organization of individual turns and sequences of concept-checking and demonstrates how hedging contributes to disagreement management on an emergent basis.

3.2. Context and Participants

An English language study was undertaken at The Open Educational College located in Iraq with Iraqi EFL students as the participants whose mother tongue is Arabic and who are currently in their second year of training. The group being studied represents a natural grouping of between 50-59 students, which is the average number of students found in a typical class at The Open Educational College. The age of the students varies from approximately 25-40 years old, thereby characterising them as adult learners with diverse educational, personal and previous career experiences. English was taught as a foreign language within a formal institutional setting, and the course in which data were collected aimed to develop students' language proficiency and pedagogical awareness.

3.3. Data Collection

Research data were collected through natural interactions among students in the English Language classes. The recordings captured both the verbal and nonverbal behaviours of teachers and students as they agreed/disagreed with their peers regarding their understanding or clarification of concepts. These recordings included all sessions held by the second-year students over multiple sessions so that researchers could assess students' typical/classroom practises rather than conducting individualized/isolated sessions or staged activities. Researchers received prior institutional approval, and both the teachers and students were made aware of the purpose of the study, as well as their right to voluntarily participate and maintain confidentiality. Researchers provided assurances to participants that any and all recordings would be utilized for research purposes only and would be published anonymously. Every participant

was given a pseudonym to protect their identity, and any potentially identifiable information from the transcripts was removed prior to analysis/review.

3.4. Data Analysis

To identify concept-checking episodes, researchers analyzed the recorded lessons for teacher-initiated sequences that explicitly checked learners' understanding of a target form, meaning, or instruction; specifically looking for instances of observable disagreement/misalignment that emerged when teachers indicated incorrect/incomplete answers given by learners or learners tentatively resisted/adjusted their teachers' evaluations.

Researchers transcribed selected extracts using a CA-informed transcription system (details of the transcription system will be discussed later), which provided detailed information about the turn-taking, timing, overlaps, pauses, intonation, and various salient prosodic/pragmatic features related to the selected extracts. By providing such detail, it was possible to track exactly where and how learners employed hedging devices during disagreement and how their co-participants oriented toward those hedging devices. Transcription was conducted iteratively: while developing the first draft of the transcripts, subsequent drafts were revised to reflect emerging analytic insights and to provide further attention to increasingly salient segments, formulations, or sequential positions of the learners (Ten Have, 2007).

Traditional guidelines for the analysis of CA would be a basic collection of distinct but interrelated approaches (step) within a single 'analytic' (process). The first step would be to thoroughly examine all identified 'concept-checking' episodes. Its' purpose would be to highlight or identify areas of disagreement and resistance and to highlight areas where 'negotiations' took place for clarification or for a greater understanding of the teacher's or students' statements and behaviours. Disagreements and/or resistance can occur in certain areas of the teacher-student conversation: 1) When the teacher challenges the response of the student. 2) When students present a challenge to a teacher's formulation or summary of an earlier statement or thought. 3) When there are subtle forms of disagreement (misalignment) – this refers to a student or learner indicating some uncertainty concerning a particular teacher's response or how far (to what degree) he/she was adhering to, accepting or 'taking-in' the teacher's response.

The second step in this study was to examine those sequences to see what parts of the sequence had hedging devices. All occurrences of hedging devices were analysed for the 'context' in which they occurred in the sequence of the teacher-student interactions: they could have appeared as a preceding phrase to the negotiation of disagreement, as part of how a student-initiated repair, as a mitigating evaluation from the student, or as a response from the teacher that mitigates the acceptance or rejection of a student's response.

Finally, patterns were identified and compared across teacher and student turns. The analysis looks at how hedging devices are used differently, based

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upon whether they were produced by the teacher or the student, based upon their form, placement in the sequence, and their purpose. Throughout, the analysis remained grounded in participants' own displayed orientations, such as how they responded to hedged turns, whether they treated them as disagreement, alignment, or repair, and how they subsequently shaped the trajectory of the concept-checking sequence. In line with the CA approach and the single research question guiding the study, the goal of the analysis was not to quantify hedging, but to provide rich, data-driven accounts of how hedging was deployed as facework in the management of disagreement during concept-checking.

4. Findings

The following extract is taken from a ـEnglish grammar lesson, where the teacher is working on the use of the present perfect to describe ongoing situations. Prior to this segment, the teacher has written the sentence (Sara has lived in Basra for ten years) on the board and briefly contrasted it with the simple past. In this sequence, the teacher initiates a concept-checking question to probe whether students understand whether the situation described by the present perfect is still true at the moment of speaking. The focal student (S1) provides an incorrect interpretation, and the teacher responds by disagreeing with that interpretation while at the same time hedging the correction, thereby softening the face-threatening implications of publicly exposing the error.

Extract 1: Present Perfect, "has lived"

```
01   T:   okay (.) now (.) look at the sentence on the board (.)
02         "Sara has lived in Basra for ten years."
03          (0.5)
04          is she living in Basra now or not.
05          (0.7)
06   S1:  u::hm (.) no (.) she (.) she is not living there now.
07          (0.5)
08   T:   °okay° (.) so you think (.) she is not there now.
09          (0.4)
10   S1:  yes.
11          (0.5)
12   T:   alright (.) maybe (.) have a look again at "has lived" (.)
13          I think it usually means (.) she is still there now.
14          (0.8)
15   S1:  ah (.) so (.) she is still living in Basra.
16          (0.3)
17   T:   yeah (.) in this sentence (.) she is still living there (.)
18          not finished yet (.) right.
19          (0.4)
20   Ss:  yes.
```

The teacher's turn in lines 1–4 initiates a concept-checking question: after re-presenting the target sentence (Sara has lived in Basra for ten years), the teacher asks, "is she living in Basra now or not" (line 4). This turn does several things at once. It orients the class to a specific conceptual target, which is the temporal implication of the present perfect, and then sets up a constrained response space. In a pedagogical context, it would be appropriate to expect either an answer of "yes, she is still living there" or one of "no, she is not" but there is a pedagogical preference for answers with "still living there." The pause at the end of line five implies that learners are interpreting the question as one that needs to be analysed and then processed before giving a response, rather than just as a direct repetition of what was said.

The response of S1 in 6 (no (.) she (.) she is not living there now) provides a clear but incorrect interpretation of the concept being checked. It makes the understanding of S1 publicly available, making it open for evaluation of the epistemic stance. The short pause between line 7 and line 8 signifies a moment of interactional tension, as the teacher now has to disagree with the interpretation of the learner in order to keep the representation of the concept accurate, but disagreeing with the learner side by side (because sides rarely communicate with each other) risks damaging the positive face of the student and possibly discouraging future participation.

In the next turn of the teacher (line 8), they begin a process of mitigation. Rather than stating outright that the answer is wrong, the teacher recycles S1's stance (so you think (.) she is not there now) in a soft, low-volume turn that includes (°okay°). This acknowledges the contribution of the learner and reformulates this as a reported thought (you think…). This slightly distances the teacher from the evaluation of the response and treats S1's response as a possible position to reconsider rather than as an error that must be rejected. S1 affirmed this positioning through a minimal (yes) in line 10, therefore closing the first pair of the concept-checking question, but also leaving open the potential to continue work.

The teacher's contribution in lines 12-13 is the clearest example of disagreement and hedging being mixed together. This portion of the discussion serves to answer the student's question (regarding the meaning of has lived), but uses the verb as a tool to redirect the student's attention and give a different possible explanation. Rather than simply stating the correct answer to the question, the teacher uses hedging extensively with an epistemic adverb (maybe) that opens the sentence (line 12) and an epistemic expression (I think) that introduces the explanatory phrase (line 13).

The devices both provide an opportunity for the teacher to present an alternative view to S1's perspective without creating a fixed or identifiable dichotomy between what the learner has said and what the teacher has stated; instead, the teacher's view is presented as a point of negotiation on the learners part (perhaps, I think...); the hedging language gives the teacher room to

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maintain their authority, but also to demonstrate flexibility and a lack of coercion to do so, which are elements of negative politeness and mitigation strategies within the power dynamic between teacher and student. The phrase (generally speaking) similarly reduces the strength of the statement from a hard-and-fast rule to a generalization that leaves room for the possibility of some exceptions or interpretation.

S1's uptake (ah (.) so (.) she lives in Basra) gives an indication of both adjusted comprehension and an agreement with the teacher's statement. The discourse marker (ah) signifies that S1 has recognized or re-calibrated their earlier position, and re-assessing their position on the sentence is an example of S1 adapting their thinking. The teacher's follow-up comments (lines 17-18) validate and reinforce S1's understanding that she is still living there (sentence) and has not left yet (not finished yet). The teacher's comments combine agreement (yeah), specification of the sentence, and simplified terminology (not finished yet), to reinforce the conceptual content and not repeat S1's original error, while the ending of the teacher's comment (right) demonstrates that S1 is not the only one to understand the concept; he is inviting the group to respond, which the group did (yes) in line 20.

The next extract comes from another segment of the classroom. In this phase, the teacher is working on the modal verb (must) to express obligation. After presenting a few board examples, the teacher invites students to decide whether "must" is appropriate in a particular sentence about university rules. One student (S2) offers a candidate answer that only partially fits the teacher's intended rule. Rather than issuing a direct correction, the teacher uses multiple hedging devices to soften epistemic authority and present the rule as flexible and context-dependent.

Extract 2: Modal, "must"

```
01   T:   okay (.) look at this one (.)
02        "Students ___ wear a uniform at the university."
03        (0.7)
04        what do you think (.) can we use "must" here or not.
05        (0.8)
06   S2:  I think (.) yes (.) they must wear a uniform.
07        (0.4)
08   T:   mhm (.) so you think (.) "students must wear a uniform."
09        (0.5)
10        I'm not really sure (.) maybe (.) it depends a little bit (.)
11        on the university.
12        (0.6)
13   S2:  so (.) maybe it's better to say (.) "have to".
14        (0.3)
```

15   T: yeah I think "have to" is kind of safer here (.)
16   because (.) some universities (.) they don't have uniform.
17   (0.5)
18   so I would maybe say (.) "students have to wear a uniform
19   in this university."
20   (0.4)
21   S2: ah (.) okay (.) not always "must".
22   (0.3)
23   T: exactly (.) "must" is very strong (.) like a rule from God (.)
24   I think (.) and "have to" is usually (.) more about the situation.
25   (0.6)
26   Ss   [((laughter))]

The teacher initiates a concept-checking move in lines 1–4 by presenting a partially blank sentence on the board (Students ___ wear a uniform at the university) and asking, (can we use 'must' here or not) in line 4. This question both invites evaluation of the modal choice and constructs a space for shared reasoning, signaled by (what do you think), which distributes epistemic work to the learners. S2 responds in line 6 with a hedged answer: (I think (.) yes (.) they must wear a uniform). The individual mention of "I think" represents a hedge for this individual; therefore, this individual's answer to S2 would be classified as being based on the individual's own opinion and uncertain in nature. This reflects not only the subordinate status of this student in a classroom setting but also his/her potential risk of "losing face" by giving (offering) a wrong answer.

The teacher's decisions (lines 8-11) were instrumental in demonstrating how hedging diminishes epistemic authority. First, the teacher restates Student Two's opinion (e.g., "so you believe 'students should have to wear a uniform'"), therefore recognizing and validating Student Two's input. Secondly, rather than overtly denouncing the answer as wrong, the teacher used various ways of hedging as a way of softening the student's position: (e.g., "I don't know...", "Perhaps... a bit", "Depends on what type of University you attend") Each aforementioned category contains: a) an example of a strong uncertainty hedge (e.g., "I don't know..."); b) a type of adverb that indicates perceived weakness (e.g., "Perhaps..."); c) qualifiers that suggest rules can be conditional or at least somewhat varying/conditional instead of "hard and fast" rules.

The utterance of S2 in line 13 (so, maybe it's better to say ('have to')) suggests that the student accepted this weaker way of saying something ('maybe') and echoed the teacher's hedging by including the word 'maybe'. In addition, the phrase (it's better to say) is also indicative of the shift from a binary right/wrong (correct/incorrect) evaluation to a scalar (on a continuum) evaluation of (appropriateness). The student used hedging to indicate that they were reformulating their response, rather than just stating their initial response as being incorrect.

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Lines 15–19 continue this pattern. The teacher supports the changes, but preserves a hedged approach, as expressed by (yeah I think 'have to' is somewhat safer here), subsequently (I may say…); this pattern demonstrates the teacher's inclination towards giving grammatical advice as non-rigid and measured rather than presenting it as definite prescriptions. By grounding the explanation in context (because (.) some universities (.) they don't have uniform), the teacher further justifies the hedged stance as the choice of modal depends on real-world variation, so expressing certainty would be interactionally and conceptually inappropriate.

The utterance in line twenty-one; '(ah (.) okay (.) not all the time 'must') demonstrated S2's understanding that the rule is not an absolute. In lines 23–24, the teacher uses a simile to reinforce the difference between must and have to by combining humour with another hedged explanation. The combination of the two approaches offers a humorous metaphor, a weird way of seeing it (like a rule from God) with another level of the teacher's confidence as to the veracity of how likely this is to happen. The shared laughter from the class (line 26) suggests that the teacher's hedged, humorous explanation has reduced tension and turned the potentially face-threatening correction into an engaging moment of joint meaning-making.

The next extract is taken from a later part of the classroom. The class is working with a short dialogue from the coursebook that includes the sentence "You ought to call your mother more often". The teacher uses a concept-checking question to probe whether students understand "ought to" as advice rather than a very strong obligation. One student (S3) insists that "ought to" is "like must", and a disagreement sequence unfolds between teacher and learner.

Extract 3: Modal, "ought to"

```
01   T:   okay (.) look at this sentence in the dialogue (.)
02        "you ought to call your mother more often."
03        (0.6)
04        do you think this is a strong rule (.) like "must" (.)
05        or more like advice.
06        (0.8)
07   S3:  I think (.) it is like "must" (.) he must call her.
08        (0.4)
09   T:   mhm (.) okay (.) so you think it's very strong (.)
10        like an obligation.
11        (0.5)
12   S3:  yes (.) he has to (.) like a duty.
13        (0.3)
14   T:   I'm not sure it's exactly the same (.)
15        maybe it's a little bit softer than "must".
```

```
16        (0.7)
17  S3:   but I think (.) when you say "ought to" (.)
18        you are kind of telling him (.) he must do it.
19         (0.4)
20   T:   right (.) you can feel some pressure (.)
21        but I would say (.) it's more like strong advice (.)
22        not a law (.) you know.
23        (0.6)
24  S3:   so (.) maybe not one hundred percent like "must".
25        (0.3)
26   T:   yeah (.) I think it's close (.) but maybe (.)
27        a bit less strong (.)
28        so we usually use "ought to" when we give advice (.)
29        especially about good behaviour.
30        (0.5)
31  S3:   okay (.) I thought it's like "must" (.)
32        but maybe it's just (.) strong advice.
33        (0.4)
34   T:   exactly (.) that's a good way to say it (.)
35        strong advice (.) not full obligation.
```

In lines 1–5, the teacher sets up the concept-checking environment by drawing students' attention to the sentence from the dialogue and asking a contrastive concept-checking question: (do you think this is a strong rule (.) like 'must' (.) or more like advice). The teacher clearly delineates the situation as a dichotomy between two conceptual frames of meaning, strong obligation versus advising, thereby signalling a decision as to the epistemic positions of his students. In response to this description, S3 uses a hesitated but confident approach to arrive at an answer: 'I think…' followed by the statement that "it is like "must", so he needs". The phrase "I think" is an epistemic hedge that marks the answer as an opinion rather than a categorical claim, which is appropriate for a learner's role. The content of the turn, on the other hand, strongly aligns "ought to" with "must," which puts S3 against with what the teacher wants.

The teacher reformulates the student's idea in lines 9 & 10 (So you believe it has an extremely strong obligation) so as not to immediately contradict the student and thus maintain S3's positive face by viewing the contribution as logical and rational. The teacher's position as Indigenous based legislation does not support how the learner thinks and realizes native people as an authority and to be depended upon as authority figures. S3's utterance indicates that S3 thinks that it is a moral (duty) expectation of a native to have this belief and remains to have uncertainty about how to act towards someone who has been given the responsibility of having authority over them.

The beginning of the teacher's disagreement appears in lines 14–15: (I'm not sure it's exactly the same (.) maybe it's a little bit softer than 'must'.) This turn is heavily hedged. The teacher does not explicitly say to S3, "That's wrong; it is not like 'must'" but instead presents it with mitigated authority through the use of epistemic and scalar hedges. The use of these hedges diminishes the teacher's claim to absolute authority and positions S3's claim in a more nuanced fashion, as an adjustment to the teacher's claim rather than a rejection. In effect, this is a form of facework for S3; the teacher rejects S3's understanding of the context of this statement, but does not deny the correctness of S3's interpretation altogether. In line 17 and 18, S3 demonstrates a degree of resistance in making use of hedging: "But I think when you say 'ought to' you are telling him he must do it." S3 first hedges their claim by saying "but I think," which indicates some degree of disagreement with the previous statement made by the teacher. However, S3 hedges the impact of that statement by qualifying their claim with the word "kind of". S3 thus maintains their basic position while still signalling some tentativeness and respect for the teacher's authority. The disagreement is visible but softly articulated on both sides.

The teacher answers in lines 20–22 by partly agreeing with S3's point (you can feel some pressure) and then repeating the goal of the lesson: (I would say (.) it's more like strong advice (.) not a law (.) you know). Again, hedging is important: (I would say, and more like) present the explanation as a point of view instead of an order. The metaphor, while not a law, is given for the purpose of simplicity in an accessible way, as well as to encourage alignments that support rather than compete against; this is evidenced by S3's later contribution in line 24 that states, "so (.) perhaps (.), maybe not an exactly one hundred percent like "must")." The word maybe and phrase not one hundred percent indicate that S3 has recalibrated his position of alignment and is partially accepting of the teacher's explanation while keeping retention of some of his previously stated intuition.

In lines 26 to 29, the teacher has consolidated the new insight. Rather than being more definitive in their assertion like, 'We generally use "ought to" as a way to offer advice.' But again the fact that the teacher has used hedge language indicates that the teacher is expressing the concept as being probabilistic depending on context and not a set rule. In regard to S3's concluding utterance (lines 31 to 32), the student has clearly reformulated their previous misunderstanding by again making use of hedge language: 'I was thinking it was a "must", but maybe it's only very strong advice'. Here, (I thought) retrospectively marks the earlier stance as a past belief, and (maybe) softens the new formulation, reducing any sense of being corrected too harshly. The teacher's closing turn (lines 34–35) ratifies S3's reformulation and provides a summarizing formulation that both parties can accept. The teacher does not directly state that the previous answer was wrong; instead, they praise the new

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phrasing ("that's a good way to say it"), which helps the student keep their positive face.

In the following extract, the teacher has written two sentences on the board as "When I was a child, I used to play in the street." and "When I was a child, I play in the street". The teacher uses a concept-checking question to elicit which sentence sounds more natural in English to describe a past, repeated habit. A learner (S4) initially prefers the incorrect version without "used to," and a short disagreement emerges. Crucially, both teacher and learner hedge in adjacent turns.

Extract 4: "Used to", for past habit

```
01   T:   okay (.) look at these two sentences on the board (.)
02        "when I was a child (.) I used to play in the street"
03        and (.) "when I was a child (.) I play in the street."
04        (0.7)
05        which one sounds more natural in English (.) do you think.
06        (0.8)
07   S4:  I think (.) the second one (.) "I play in the street."
08        (0.4)
09   T:   mhm (.) so you think the second one is better.
10        (0.5)
11        I would maybe choose the first one (.)
12        I think it's a bit more natural in English.
13        (0.6)
14   S4:  I'm not sure (.) but I feel (.) "I play" is also okay (.)
15        because in Arabic we say it like that.
16        (0.5)
17   T:   right (.) in Arabic maybe you say it that way (.)
18        but in English (.) we usually say "I used to play" (.)
19        especially for something we did many times in the past.
20        (0.7)
21   S4:  so (.) maybe I should say "I used to play" (.)
22        if I talk about my childhood.
23        (0.3)
24   T:   yeah (.) I think that sounds better (.)
25        "when I was a child I used to play in the street."
26        (0.5)
27   S4:  okay (.) I thought "I play" is fine (.)
28        but maybe it's not natural in English.
29        (0.3)
30   T:   exactly (.) your idea is right (.) but the form (.)
31        we would usually change it a little bit.
```

In lines 1–5, the teacher establishes the concept-checking environment by presenting two candidate sentences. The phrase (do you think) already begins to distribute epistemic space to the learners and signals that their judgments are being invited rather than merely tested. S4's answer in line 7 (I think (.) the second one (.) 'I play in the street') is a learner-hedged contribution. The hedge marks the response as an opinion, lowering the risk of face loss if the answer is later treated as problematic. It also displays deference in relation to the teacher's superior epistemic status, which is typical of learner behavior in institutional talk.

The teacher's response in lines 9–12 makes the participant-role contrast visible. The teacher then uses hedging to express what she thinks: "So you think the second one is better." (I might pick the first one because I think it's more natural in English). Here, the teacher's hedging is multi-layered. These hedges do not indicate lack of knowledge; instead, they function as authority-softening devices. The teacher clearly has the institutional right to evaluate correctness, yet she presents her counter-position as a mild, negotiable preference rather than an absolute judgment. The potential face threat to S4, who publicly selected the alternative response is reduced when S4 states, "I am not certain, but I think both sentences are acceptable," and expresses that S4's L1 experience provides support for the L2 response. S4's next utterance (lines 14-15) shows an acknowledgment of the uncertainty and the teacher's greater status than S4 in this instance, as the learner expresses resistance with only slightly hedged statements. S4 begins by stating, "I am not sure; however, I believe (that) the words 'I will play'," may also express the meaning intended by the teacher because (in Arabic) the same phrase is used. In other words, S4 grounds the preference in an L1 experience rather than as a way to dispute the teacher's knowledge.

The passage illuminates how the educator utilizes hedging and compliance in order to bridge disagreements (Lines 17-19). The educator begins by acknowledging the student (S4) by referencing (the word "right" in Arabic); by doing so, the educator displays recognition of S4's cultural-linguistic view, and, by not asserting greater knowledge of Arabic, allows S4 an opportunity for continued participation. The educator then proceeds to illustrate the English equivalent, and goes on to provide context (e.g., "we usually say") relative to the numerous instances of similar context conditions by presenting a nature of the rule (a norm) may not be applicable in all occasions, the educator therefore diminishes their authoritative stance but still leads/redirects the concept-checking process toward the intended goal of understanding. S4's turn in lines 21–22 (so (.) maybe I should say 'I used to play' (.) if I talk about my childhood) shows a shift toward alignment, still hedged. (Maybe I should say) lets S4 adopt the target form without framing their earlier position as simply wrong. The conditional (if I talk about my childhood) shows that the student is using the extra information that the teacher gave them.

The teacher hedging in lines 24-25 is a perfect example of using facework, Likewise the teacher's comment of "yes, I think that sounds better," shows how the uses of "I think" keeps the evaluation open to interpretation and framed as an opinion rather than a definitive judgement. In addition to using facework as a form of hedging, the teacher uses the repeated modelling of a full, grammatically-correct, and appropriate form in ways which do not directly mark S4's initial choice as incorrect. Then in S4's closing turn of "okay, I thought 'I play' is okay but maybe it's not natural in English," illustrates both how S4 expresses the learner's deference to the teacher and demonstrates retrospective hedging. The use of "I thought" places the learner in a position of retrospectively evaluating their previous belief, while "maybe it's not natural" displays how S4 has accepted the teacher's explanation yet retains some level of uncertainty, which mitigates (to a point), S4's self-critique and preserves S4's own face. Finally, the teacher's final turn, "your idea is good but the way we would typically change it a little bit," serves both to validate S4's idea, but to gently refine S4's idea by providing correction with validating feedback from the teacher.

5. Discussion

Hedge words are a consistent pattern in the way instructors and learners communicate with each other. Both instructors and learners used hedges to express their beliefs about knowledge, clarify misunderstandings, disagree with others, and withdraw support from statements they previously made. In particular, hedge words were frequently used during discussions between instructors and learners when there was disagreement, thereby providing a means to protect participants' negative image. In turn, these hedge words acted as a gradual process for negotiating meaning and allowed for both parties to avoid making abrupt agreements or rejections of one another's understanding.

The study revealed that by using hedging language, the teacher was able to reduce the strictness of their epistemic authority and also made corrections appear more as suggestions instead of rules. Through our discussions about grammatical knowledge being flexible, context-dependent and negotiable, the use of hedged sentences allowed the teacher to avoid the potential embarrassment of changing a student's answer in front of others while still maintaining his/her authority. By using hedged modal sequences, the teacher indicated that grammar is a tendency rather than a fixed rule. This view of grammar aligns well with recent ideas about English as a system reliant on usage and context (Lee et al., 2023). The findings from this study complement previous findings on teacher mitigation and rapport-building (Flanigan et al., 2023), as well as support the notion that hedging is an effective means of achieving epistemic balance (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967).

While learners use a large number of hedges, the reasons for this usage vary somewhat from each other. For example, many learners began their conversation turns with hedging phrases such as "I'm not sure" or backward-

looking markers like "I thought I would ...." This hedging permitted the learners to indicate that they were not confident in what they were saying, resist explanation carefully, and maintain a non-confrontational manner. Additionally, by using this type of hedging as a result of Arabic interference, the learners were able to mitigate the level of their resistance significantly compared to what would have been done without using hedging. In later conversation turns, these learners could change their opinion using hedging and 'save face' after previously answering incorrectly. This behavior reflects what researchers know about how L2 learners use hedges to indicate uncertainty, maintain social relationships with others, and protect themselves in situations where one party has more knowledge than the other (Johansen, 2020; Raphalen et al., 2022).

A major pattern noted was the closeness of the hedging of both the teacher and the students which created a synchronized pattern of interaction. When the teacher provided a hedged correction, typically, the students would reply back to the teacher with similar types of hedged correction. The sequential mirroring indicates that hedging was not simply a stylistic choice made by individuals but rather a shared conventional means for the learners and teachers to negotiate disagreement in their organizational setting. The observed patterns of hedging are consistent with previous research on misreferred action design (Doehler, 2022) and support the theory that L2 classrooms exist in local interactional contexts which necessitate negotiation of epistemic asymmetries (Seedhouse, 2004).

The researchers treated hedging as an act of both epistemically and facework. For example, due to the fact that learners engaged in hedging, this provided learners with the opportunity to negotiate the likelihood of their rules. In doing so, learners did not need to simplify their meaning-making practices in order to engage with their teachers as well as with their peers. Therefore, the dual functions of hedging facilitate a means for the teacher to provide the appropriate supportive correction, as well as a means for the learners to engage in resistance, question or revise their learning without appearing to be disrespectful or incompetent. The current study is consistent with the view of different studies regarding marginalisation and social construction within L2 classroom discourse, as they demonstrate the multiple ways in which the construction of affectivity, relationality, and pedagogy interact (Eskildsen & Wagner, 2015).

Finally, the research provides the current and situational perspective regarding multilingual classroom hedging. They often rely on their L1 language, Arabic, when determining both the meaning and naturalness of the language they use while negotiating form and meaning with their partner. This supports recent research on multilingual repertoires and pragmatics (Roever, 2024) by illustrating how hedging can help learners to reconcile mismatches in conceptualisation between their L1 and L2 and during the immediate negotiation process of form and meaning.

6. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to examine the ways in which instructors and learners in Iraqi L2 English classrooms employ hedging devices during disagreement sequences involving concept-checking. Through Conversation Analysis (CA) of naturally occurring interaction, the findings of this analysis indicate that hedging is a central interactional resource, not an ancillary element of conversational exchange. Instructors frequently use hedged formulations as an indirect method of providing corrections and reframing rules, guiding students toward developing their understanding of concepts, while learners employ hedging in order to express uncertainty, resist explanations tentatively, and subsequently revise their position without risking an excessive loss of face. Thus, disagreement during concept-checking is not necessarily a breakdown in communication; rather, it provides a new form of negotiation space within which both parties can construct meaning together through carefully calibrated "neutral" positions.

This research adds to our understanding of classroom discussions and how they include conversations between students and teachers where support is provided for the discussion. The educational supports provided by the use of hedges provide teachers and students who engage in classroom discussions with opportunities to share information with one another while respecting each other's position in classroom discussions. These educational supports enable teachers and students who are engaged in classroom discussions to express their disagreement, provide positive feedback on each other's contributions, and express concern for each other's viewpoints without creating a negative impact on their relationship with each other. Finally, this research shows that hedges play an important role in achieving the purpose of concept checking sequences, which is to confirm that the students have accurately understood the idea being explored as well as to foster an environment that is supportive and respectful.

7. Implications

The results imply that teacher education and professional development must explicitly train future teachers to use hedging as an effective strategy during classroom interactions (not to be viewed negatively as evidence of insufficient knowledge). Instead of looking at hedging as a sign of inadequate expertise, teachers should be guided to utilize hedging phrases like "I think" and "maybe" in order to present corrections as being negotiable and contingent on situational factors. Using hedged phrases will assist students in decreasing the amount of face threatening associated with public error and allow students to continue to be involved in the learning process, especially when large classes of adult students are present where anxiety related to committing mistakes is prevalent. The professional development programs should teach teachers to be able to identify and purposefully use hedged formulations during concept-checking, thus promoting a more dialogic environment and a greater sense of

safety for students to express tentative ideas, request clarification, and to explore other potential interpretations.

Furthermore, this research suggests that assisting learners with their ability to hedge their opinions and develop an understanding of pragmatic functions will be beneficial to them as they communicate in English. Most learners already rely upon their L1 intuition when they wish to express disagreement or uncertainty. However, by training learners to express the same meanings using appropriate methods in their L2, it allows them to participate more confidently and appropriately in discussions that take place in the classroom. Activities that model and practice hedged questions and responses can equip students with the linguistic means to disagree respectfully, negotiate meaning, and revise their own views. In context of Iraq, fostering such hedged, respectful forms of interaction can contribute not only to better grammatical understanding, but also to a more collaborative and psychologically safe learning environment.

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Appendix

Sequencing

[	A single left bracket indicates the point of overlap onset.
]	A single right bracket indicates the point at which an utterance or utterance-part terminates vis-à-vis another.
=	Equal signs, one at the end of one line and one at the beginning of a next, indicate no 'gap' between the two lines. This is often called latching.

Timed intervals

(.)	A dot in parentheses indicates a tiny 'gap' within or between utterances.

Characteristics of speech production

<u>word</u>	Underscoring indicates some form of stress, via pitch and/or amplitude; an alternative method is to print the stressed part in italics.
::	Colons indicate prolongation of the immediately prior sound. Multiple colons indicate a more prolonged sound.
-	A dash indicates a cut-off or an interruption.
.	A period indicates a stopping fall in tone.
,	A comma indicates a continuing intonation, like when you are reading items from a list.
?	A question mark indicates a rising intonation.
↑↓	Arrows indicate marked shifts into higher or lower pitch in the utterancepart immediately following the arrow.
WORD	Upper case indicates especially loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk.
< >	Right/left carets bracketing an utterance or utterance-part indicate speeding up.

Transcriber's doubts and comments

(( ))	Double parentheses contain transcriber's descriptions rather than, or in addition to, transcriptions.