Increased mobility has led to a greater need for English language teaching materials that prepare speakers of EFL/ESL to engage in informal social interactions. Vague language (e.g. thing, stuff, and all that) is central to casual conversation, but it receives scant attention, even in course books that teach spoken grammar. The study described in this paper was based on the assumption that if EFL/ESL speakers can understand English vague language and have the option to use it, it might help them to achieve their social objectives.

The study was based on the premise that, to help learners understand English vague language, teachers and course book writers need to be aware of the perceptions of vague language that learners could bring with them, since hidden negative attitudes may constitute a barrier to learning. Research on vague language shows that in Anglo-American English, it is used to create an informality, closeness and solidarity, regardless of social background and domain (Channell 1994; Carter and McCarthy 2006), but a small study by Cutting (2006) suggested that some speakers of other languages might understand it as a style only used by ‘less educated people’ and ‘young people’, and associate it with distancing and subterfuge.

This paper describes the results of a questionnaire survey of German and Mandarin speakers. Subjects were presented with items of English vague language in context and asked to translate them into their own language. They were then asked to evaluate the ease of translation and to list other ways of expressing vagueness in their own language. Finally, they were invited to describe the social variables, domains and functions that they associated with vague language in their own culture.