La interacción bajo presión: ayuda a los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera a negociar el desacuerdo

Pragmatics under pressure: How do EFL speakers negotiate disagreement?

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Resumen

A diferencia de la relativa seguridad comunicativa en clase de lengua extranjera, los estudiantes se encuentran frecuentemente bajo presión en situaciones comunicativas en la lengua meta cuando tienen que reaccionar rápidamente, con poco tiempo de preparación y con la información limitada sobre la interacción. Al explorar específicamente el acto de habla que expresa desacuerdo, se examina cómo se puede ayudar a los estudiantes de inglés a expresar el desacuerdo fuerte y suave. En lugar de simplemente emplear los conocimientos disponibles sobre estructuras lingüísticas, los estudiantes necesitan identificar cómo desean responder y desarrollar recursos pragmáticos interpersonales como posicionalidad (postura), identidad (inversión) e intervención (participación). Los resultados indican que los estudiantes necesitan estar preparados más a fondo para responder a situaciones imprevistas y desprevenidas.

Palabras clave: pragmática, desacuerdo, posicionalidad, identidad, participación

Abstract

In contrast to the relative communicative safety of the foreign-language classroom, learners often find themselves under pressure in target-language communicative situations when they have to react quickly, with little preparation time and with limited interactional information. Taking the specific speech act of disagreement, I examine how English-language students can be helped to express strong and soft disagreement when faced with criticism. Rather than merely accessing their knowledge of available language structures, language learners need to identify how they wish to respond and develop such interpersonal pragmatic resources as positionality (stance), identity (investment) and degree of participation (involvement). Results indicate that students need to be more thoroughly prepared to respond to unplanned and unrehearsed situations.

Keywords: pragmatics, disagreement, stance, identity, participation

Introduction

In difficult and seemingly antagonistic situations, speakers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) frequently need to make on-the-spot, spontaneous judgments and formulate appropriate reactions. Whilst EFL teachers aim to give learners the correct grammatical, lexical and communicative resources to react, there is the danger that learners' responses are limited by their immediate linguistic and communicative knowledge rather than by how they wish to respond and to come across. This can be described in terms of the interactional stance they want to take, the pragmatic strategy they wish to employ and the resources that they have available to them.

In this paper, through the use of discourse complete tasks (DCTs), I analyse how advanced EFL users in Mexico responded spontaneously and with little preparation time to criticism of their academic work from a teacher (reflecting power and authority in an instructional setting) and from a friend (reflecting supportiveness and solidarity in a social setting). First of all, I examine how the respondents employed ideational and interpersonal language functions to voice both strong and soft disagreement regarding the appraisal of their work and the range of speech acts used. I then consider how participants expressed positionality (stance), identity (investment) and degree of participation (involvement) when articulating dissent. In the analysis of results and the subsequent discussion, I discuss the pragmatic resources that the respondents accessed and those such as upgraders and downgraders which would appear to be underutilised. The results indicate that Mexican EFL users need to be exposed to a wider range of impromptu interpersonal situations where there is a pressing need to react in spontaneous and unrehearsed ways.

Theoretical Framework

I define difficult and antagonistic situations in terms of Brown and Levinson's (1987) face threatening acts (FTAs). Brown and Levinson argue that interactants have a mutual interest in satisfying each other's face – 'the want to be unimpeded and the want to be approved of in certain aspects' (1987, p. 58). However, in relation to problematic interpersonal communication, Domenici and Littlejohn argue that 'Face is almost always a central concern in conflict situations' (2006, p. 79). Whilst most interaction aims to reflect reassuring communicative moves that support participants' face, Brown and Levinson argue that 'some acts intrinsically threaten face; these "face threatening acts" will be referred to henceforth as FTAs' (1987, p. 60). In particular, 'Criticism, rudeness, blame, attack, embarrassment, and deprecation' (Domenici and Littlejohn 2006, p. 73) are characteristic face threatening acts that can lead to difficult and uncomfortable situations.

The challenge for EFL users is to respond to an FTA in both an appropriate way whilst, at the same time, coming across and interacting in the way that they want to. When faced with potential conflict in the target-language context, EFL users need to decide how they will react, and subsequently respond, on both the ideational and the interpersonal levels (Halliday, 1973/1997). The ideational dimension comprises the content of the interaction and the interpersonal dimension covers the interactional relationship and the expression of individual personality. In reacting and responding to a given antagonistic encounter, foreign-language interactants judge and evaluate the situation as they perceive it (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001), decide on their degree of investment (Norton, 2000) in wanting to respond and consequently determine their level of involvement/distance (Goffman, 1981). These factors characterise an interactant's participation and consequently lead to which strategy to employ in terms of aggressing (e.g. challenging), persisting (e.g. justifying) or acquiescing (e.g. complying) (Beebe and Waring, 2005). Pragmalinguistic resources, such as downgraders and

upgraders (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) are also employed to accentuate the force of any selected strategy.

Ideational and interpersonal

In any difficult situation, three functions of language can be seen at work: the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual. The ideational reflects the content of the interaction and 'its function as a means of the expression of our experience, both of the external world and of the inner world of our own consciousness' (Halliday 1973/1997 p. 36). In difficult and seemingly antagonistic situations, the ideational content of a message conveys what is seen as problematic and hostile. At the same time, the message reflects the social relationship and how individuals want to come across, what Halliday calls the interpersonal function of language. The interpersonal function includes 'all that may be understood by the expression of our own personalities and personal feelings on the one hand, and forms of interaction and social interplay with other participants in the communication situation on the other hand' (Halliday 1973/1997, p. 36). Besides responding to the ideational content, EFL users also need to evaluate the nature of their relationship with the other interlocutors whilst, at the same time, formulating how they want express their personality and their individuality. Halliday discusses these two dimensions of the interpersonal functions in terms of interactional and personal language use. At a social level, Halliday argues that interactional language 'is used to define and consolidate the group, to include and to exclude, showing who is "one of us" and who is not....' (1969 p. 30). Therefore, the EFL user's response needs to take into consideration his/her current and ongoing position with regards to the rest of the group. At the same time, interactants may also want to come across as individuals and this can be achieved through personal language in order '... to make public his [sic] own individuality; and this in turn reinforces and creates this individuality' (1969, p. 30). Halliday argues that personal language use reflects 'expressions of personal feelings, of participation and withdrawal, of interest, pleasure, disgust and so forth....' (1975, p. 20). There is, therefore, a potential conflict between interactional and personal language use which Mead (1934) describes in terms of the creative 'I' and the conforming 'me'. The I reflects the individual's awareness and response to the world whilst the me captures the social self which is 'the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself [sic] assumes (Mead 1934, p. 175). In difficult and awkward situations, the EFL user needs to decide whether to assert the individualistic and creative I or conform to the social me. Employing the creative I may further antagonise the situation whilst the use of the social me may convey submission and acceptance.

The textual function provides the resources which 'enables the speaker to organize what he [sic] is saying in such a way that it makes sense in the context and fulfils its function as a message' (Halliday 1973/1997, p. 36). The textual function allows the EFL user to formulate his/her response either by following accepted norms and patterns of use or by finding ways to express individuality and personality.

In assessing the ideational content, determining an appropriate interpersonal response and organising that response, an interlocutor needs to evaluate the communicative situation and context before deciding the action to be taken.

Judgement and perception

Foreign-language users may view potentially face-threatening situations differently than native speakers (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Cohen, 2008; Kasper and Rose, 2001). First of all, EFL users may perceive a face threatening act (Brown and Levinson, 1987) in an interaction whilst native speakers might argue that none exists or was intended. Domenici and Littlejohn note that 'What is intended may not be the actual effect. You may mean to compliment a new acquaintance only to discover that this person took your comment as a patronizing insult, or you may intend to reproach a co-worker, who merely thanks you for the constructive feedback!' (2006, p. 16). Therefore, FL users need to realise that utterances (or speech acts) may not be evaluated in the same way; the target-language hearer may interpret a given utterance in a way other than intended and, vice versa, the FL users may interpret a speech act in a way other than intended.

Furthermore, in the target-language context, interactants may have little preparation time to formulate an answer and they may have little information to go on. FL users need practice giving unrehearsed spontaneous answers.

Different perceptions may be due to, among other things, different weightings or understandings of interactional norms (e.g. expressing solidarity vs. respecting social distance) and pragmatic practices (e.g. directness vs. indirectness; conventionalized language use) (Brown and Levinson 1987, p. 246). In a society that values consensus and harmony, straightforward academic criticism, for instance, however well-intentioned and seemingly friendly, may be seen as particularly face threatening. Subsequently, how interactants view potentially face-threatening situations such as criticism will influence their response strategies. For instance, they may view academic criticism positively e.g. as advice or constructive feedback or negatively e.g. as disparagement or fault-finding and will therefore correspondingly construct their response. The EFL user's judgement and perception will be apparent through studying the use of pragmatic resources such as linguistic politeness, directness/indirectness, implicitness/explicitness and upgraders/downgraders. These may be employed differently than the way the target language speaker uses them. This may be especially apparent when the EFL user is under pressure to respond straightaway to a potentially negative comment.

Disagreement in EFL

Paramasivam argues that 'Disagreement occurs when participants' beliefs about their common ground are diverging.' (2007, p. 92). Within the discoursal framework of adjacency pairs (e.g. offer - acceptance or compliment - thanks), disagreement is a dispreferred response (McCarthy, Matthiessen and Slade 2010) and therefore EFL users need 'to make the sequence as little-damaging to the participants' "face" (sense of personal worth) as possible' (2010, p. 59.). Disagreement might be expected to be a quite frequent occurrence in the target language. Furthermore, disagreement may not always be simple to detect as argued by Schnurr (2010) who claims that subversive humour, especially in the workplace, may be one way of expressing disagreement. Meanwhile, Haugh (2015) notes that interactants sometimes opt for qualified disagreement as interactants withdraw expressions of agreement. Moreover, in the EFL context, 'The question of why individuals agree or disagree on what is and is not impolite is of tremendous importance because it gives us a window into how relations are managed within groups' (Graham 2007, p. 743). Despite its importance, Zhu and Boxer note that 'Relatively few studies have addressed disagreement behavior among English L2 speakers' (2012, p. 116). One exception is Walkinshaw (2009) who examines disagreement in terms of Brown and Levinson's (1987) sociological variables of power, social distance and

ranking imposition. He argues that strategies need to respond Brown and Levinson's Face Threatening Acts 'in order to deliver a disagreement with the minimum risk of face-loss' (Walkinshaw 2009, p. 137) and they can be formulated in terms of positive and negative politeness. Since disagreement potentially undermines the *face* of the hearer, an interactant has choices in expressing differences of opinion. He/she can go 'bald on record' and openly state his/her disagreement e.g. *I don't agree*. To soften the answer and express closeness and solidarity, an interactant may opt for positive politeness e.g. *Let's see if we get reach some sort of agreement*. To demonstrate social distance and avoid imposing on the hearer, the interlocutor may articulate negative politeness e.g. *I know that you know more about this than me and you are very busy but….* Finally, an interactant might not want to openly state disagreement and consequently goes 'off record' e.g. *I can see what you are trying to say*. Walkinshaw (2009) examines Brown and Levinson's (1987) *face-saving* strategies in terms of direct, softened, inferred and evasive disagreement by employing the following categories: explicit disagreement, hedged disagreement, implied disagreement and avoidance, i.e. no disagreement (2009, p. 137). To illustrate the choices in a hypothetical context, Walkinshaw offers the following ways of disagreeing over a couch:

1. Explicit / direct disagreement e.g. 'I don't like this couch at all.'
2. Disagreement hedged with positive politeness, e.g. 'It's a nice couch, but I don't like it.'
3. Disagreement hedged with negative politeness, e.g. 'You've obviously set your heart on it, but I don't like it.'
4. Implied disagreement e.g. 'Um, well, it's certainly an interesting colour...' (Walkinshaw 2009, p. 72)

Disagreement is therefore expressed with different speech acts and with different levels of intensity and mitigation depending on the interpersonal relationship between the interlocutors and how this is formulated in terms of stance, investment and involvement.

Stance, Investment & involvement

In interpreting an apparently difficult and seemingly antagonistic situation, interactants need to adopt a stance i.e. take up a position with respect to the form or the content of an utterance (Jaffe, 2009). EFL users need to decide how they will react and subsequently respond. Stance, therefore, embraces the concert of positionality that is:

> how speakers and writers are necessarily engaged in positioning themselves vis-à-vis their words and texts (which are embedded in histories of linguistic and actual production), their interlocutors and audiences (both actual and virtual / projected / imagined), and with respect to a context that they simultaneously respond to and construct linguistically. (Jaffe 2009, p. 4)

The perceived importance and meaningfulness of their academic writing will determine how EFL users position themselves with regard to any criticism of their texts and how far they are willing to go in explaining, clarifying or defending their viewpoint, their ideas and their thoughts. Norton employs the term investment to signal 'the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it' (2000, p. 10). Investment necessarily involves interaction with others but also Halliday's personal function of language since 'an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space' (Norton 2000, p. 10 - 11). And by identity, Norton means 'how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future' (Norton 2000, p. 5). Any expression of identity will obviously vary from individual to

individual and from situation to situation. In the context of second-language academic writing, the EFL user may be concerned with his/her standing and recognition as both a writer and as a writer in a foreign language as well as with his/her self-esteem in presenting ideas and thoughts and his/her status as a competent foreign-language user.

When confronted with a difficult situation which potentially implicates an FTA, the EFL users' involvement per se is not the key issue. By definition, they are necessarily involved since they have identified an uncomfortable and antagonistic situation even if they choose or attempt to ignore it. Rather, it is, as Goffman (1963) points out, the intensity of involvement within a given content and situation that needs to be determined. If a writing assignment is merely treated as compulsory homework, the EFL user may not be closely bound to the text and may demonstrate scant interest in any interaction that evaluates the assignment. Furthermore, any reaction will also depend on interactional and personal relationships (Halliday, 1973/1997). Responses in a transactional relationship with a teacher may contrast heavily with a more interpersonal relationship with a friend. With a teacher, the EFL user may feel the need to follow and adhere to social interactional norms. With a friend there may be a greater opportunity to express personality and emotions. When criticising academic work, context and situation affect the intensity of involvement. A teacher offering criticism privately in a bar over a few drinks may produce a different intensity of involvement than when openly deprecating a writing assignment in the classroom or in the teacher's office. Similarly, a friend softly critiquing a piece of work over a cup of coffee in the university cafeteria will produce a different intensity of involvement than if he/she publicly criticised an assignment in the classroom in front of their peers.

Reaction and response to criticism results in interactants adopting a position (stance), projecting their identity (investment) and showing how interested they are in engaging in the interaction (involvement). These pragmatic resources now need to be seen in context since they offer the EFL user choices regarding how he or she wants to come across.

Pragmatic resources in context

The selection of a specific strategy which displays stance, investment and intensity of involvement needs to be seen within a specific context. I will now discuss these resources in the context of the EFL user who submits a draft paper to a teacher and to a friend and receives a critical evaluation. I examine how EFL user frames strong and softened disagreement with regard to the evaluations.

Stance

Stance is reflected in how the EFL user views criticism and the speech act he/she uses in response. In showing disagreement with a negative evaluation, an interactant has a range of choices as expressed by Spencer-Oatey: expressing explicit disagreement; rejecting criticism or giving negative evaluation; questioning the criticiser; offering an alternative suggestion; showing gratitude for the criticism; being positive regarding the evaluation; showing initial token agreement and then disagreeing (Spencer-Oatey: 2008, p. 24 - 25).

In the case of disagreeing with academic work, the EFL user can express explicit disagreement (e.g. I cannot agree with you), criticise the evaluator (e.g. You are not following what I am saying), question the criticism (e.g. How do you reach that conclusion?), offer an alternative suggestion (e.g. What would you think if I tried…?), demonstrate gratitude (e.g. Thank you for looking at my work but…), offer a positive remark (e.g. You obviously spent a lot of time checking my work) and show token agreement (e.g. I agree with your overall comments but…). Therefore, such a range of disagreement speech acts allows EFL users to

modulate the severity of disagreement or even provides a means of undermining the criticism or the criticiser.

Investment

The degree of investment in a given interaction is marked by how interactants are able to express their own identity. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital offers a way of understanding how EFL users need to come across in acceptable and appropriate ways, articulate their voice and position themselves within a given social structure. Bourdieu's theory redefines the aims of linguistic competence:

> In place of *grammaticalness* it puts the notion of *acceptability*, or, to put it another way, in place of 'the' language *(langue)*, the notion of *legitimate language*. In place of *relations of communication* (or symbolic interaction) it puts *relations of symbolic power*, and so replaces the question of the *meaning of speech* with the question of the *value* and *power* of speech. Lastly, in place of specifically *linguistic competence*, it puts *symbolic capital*, which is inseparable from the speaker's position in the social structure. (Bourdieu 1977.p. 646 italics in the original)

Therefore, target-language linguistic competence should not be seen in terms of grammatical accuracy and correctness but rather in how EFL language users can employ speech acts in acceptable and appropriate ways, how they can give value and power to their interaction and promote their social standing. This can be achieved through the use of pragmalinguistic resources (such as conventional patterns of use, explicitness, implicitness, directness and indirectness) and sociopragmatic resources (e.g. expression of social distance, the use of power and mitigation of imposition). At the same time, EFL users need to understand how ideational, interpersonal and textual functions of language can help them to achieve communicative objectives and develop the ability to be 'believed' and 'respected' (Bourdieu, 1977). Pellegrino compares EFL users who 'can express themselves completely and with sophistication' and have 'the ability to influence others' behaviors or attitudes, gain respect, or control the environment in which they find themselves' with those who 'avoid speaking in the second language as a defensive or protective measure, just preserve their position on the social hierarchy' (2005, p. 36). She argues that interactants may opt for compliance and identification as they succumb to the power and /or influence of the speaker or, alternatively, they may opt for internalisation as they are influenced by other credible interactants (2005: 37).

Investment allows the EFL user to use symbolic power to express him/herself in a way that projects his/her identity as a legitimate member of a linguistic community where 'those who speak regard those who listen as worthy to listen and those who listen regard those who speak as worthy to speak' (Bourdieu 1977, p. 648).

Involvement

The intensity of involvement will be marked by the attitude of interactants in whether they want to come across in a forceful or conciliatory manner. This can be achieved through directness and indirectness towards the addressee, explicitness and implicitness with regards to the content of the message, and upgraders and downgraders (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) in order to modify the speaker's commitment to the message.

Directness and indirectness will be largely dictated by social relationships and how fully and clearly the speaker wants to convey his/her utterance. For instance, the following examples taken from the corpus indicate an unequivocal position which leaves the addressee in little doubt regarding how the speaker positions the addressee: I think you're wrong and

Well, that's your opinion. Meanwhile, indirectness reflects a much more conciliatory approach towards the respondents as in Can we go through it? I have a different opinion and I'm sorry to say I have a different opinion.

Explicit and implicit disagreement focuses more on the subject matter than the position taken by evaluator. Explicit disagreement can be seen in affirmative sentences such as I'm sorry sir but based on the notes I have from previous lessons I believe that I covered all the points in a very academic and accurate way the assigned task and I know what you mean. But I really worked on this project and I followed the guidelines. Implicit disagreement may often be in the form of a question as in: *Would you mind enlightening me? What do you want with this project?* and *You know it depends on your perspective.*

Upgraders and downgraders (House and Kasper, 1981; Spencer Oatey, 2008) offer a myriad of ways of intensifying or softening a speech act. Spencer-Oatey argues that '[u]pgraders increase the force of the speech act, whereas downgraders reduce or weaken the force' (2008, p. 23). Upgraders include: overstaters e.g., absolutely and terribly; intensifiers e.g., very and really; committers e.g., I'm sure and certainly; and lexical intensifiers e.g. swear words (House and Kasper 1981 p. 166). Downgraders cover: politeness markers e.g. please; play-downs e.g. I was wondering if ….; consultative devices e.g. Would you mind if….; hedges e.g., kind of and sort of; understaters e.g., a little bit and not very much, downtoners e.g., just and perhaps; and hestitators e.g., erm and er (House and Kasper 1981, p. 166).

In conclusion, EFL users should have pragmatic resources such as stance, investment and intensity of involvement at their disposal which will allow them to come across in the way they want to, especially in terms of how they want to participate in a conversation.

Operationalising pragmatic resources

To put a stance, investment and intensity of involvement into action, interactants need to select an appropriate strategy in a given situation. Response strategies can be examined: in terms of isolated speech acts; as part of interactive negotiation; or in the context of an ongoing pragmatic development.

At the level of the isolated speech act, Edelmann, for instance, describes possible responses to embarrassing and difficult situations. Choices include conventional speech acts such as 'apologies (including remediation), accounts (including excuses and justifications), avoidance (including escape), humour (including laughter) and aggression' (1994, p. 239). In the context of this study, criticism of academic work offers the EFL user various choices: employing apologies to reflect responsibility and acceptance of the negative observations; using accounts to make excuses and/or finding justifications for the academic work; trying to evade unwelcome opinions from the teacher or a friend; engaging in humour to downplay or neutralise comments; and being aggressive and demonstrating hostility regarding criticism.

On an interactive level, Domenici and Littlejohn (2006) examine response modes in terms of compete-accommodate, compete-compete, collaborate and compromise. Compete-accommodate results in one person giving way to the other; in terms of the present study, the EFL user may accept criticism from the teacher and a fellow student. Compete-compete reflects an attempt by both parties not to back down and defend their positions. Therefore in this context, the EFL user refuses to accept criticism. Under the category of collaborate, interactants try to reach a mutually satisfactory conclusion as criticism is discussed and evaluated. Finally, with compromise, neither party can achieve all its objectives and, consequently, interactants respect (and possibly to some degree accept) the other's position.

In terms of ongoing pragmatic development, Beebe and Waring (2003) argue that reaction and response needs to be seen in terms of evolving interaction in a specific context in

which interactants make active and deliberate choices. Beebe and Waring propose 'three cluster of strategies' (2003, p. 71): aggressing, persisting and acquiescing. Aggressing strategies include insults, threats and challenges, and criticism. Persisting strategies involve arguing, justifying and requesting clarification. Acquiescing strategies cover apologising, thanking, acquiescing and opting out. Beebe and Waring offer contrasting strategies regarding how interactants may want to proceed in face-threatening situations. Therefore, the EFL user may accept the negative comments (i.e. acquiesce and accept criticism), decide to contest and dispute the criticism (i.e. persist), or take a defensive and antagonistic stance (i.e. aggress).

Choices will depend on such factors as the perceived power of the criticizer (i.e. the teacher and the friend), academic and interpersonal closeness/ distance between the interactants and the degree of importance given to the academic work. Such choices are paralleled in Brown and Levinson's (1987) sociological variables: social distance, relative power and absolute ranking of impositions. And whatever decision is taken will lead to facework regarding how the interactants want to come across.

Methodology

I now describe how I identified the strategies that EFL users employed to negotiate conflictive situations. After outlining my research interest, I highlight the overarching research problem and my research questions. Besides describing the data collection procedures, I give background information regarding the research participants and their target-language context.

Language of description

EFL users have a range of pragmatic resources which allows them to express the position they want to adopt (stance), how they try to express their identity (investment) and the way they project their level of participation (intensity of involvement).

In order to examine stance, I identify the speech acts used when responding to explicit criticism of academic work from a teacher (reflecting power and authority in an instructional setting) and from a friend (reflecting supportiveness and solidarity in a social setting). Participants were asked to respond both with strong disagreement and softened disagreement. I analyse whether respondents used aggressing, persisting and acquiescing strategies (Beebe and Waring 2005) in order to show disagreement. To further understand the underlying stance participants adopted, I examined whether EFL users focused on: the ideational or content (e.g. engaged in explicit disagreement with the assessment or defended their work); the interactional or relationships (e.g. questioned/attacked the criticiser or showed token agreement before disagreeing) or the personal /individuality (e.g. expressed how they wanted to come across or tried to sound positive regarding the evaluation).

In order to understand the degree of investment, I examine how the interactants expressed their identity when disagreeing in terms of how they expressed their own beliefs, attitudes and values when responding to criticism. I want to ascertain how much power, authority, decisiveness and assertiveness they convey when responding to criticism. I follow Pellegrino (2005, p. 36) in trying to identify EFL users who express themselves 'completely and with sophistication' thus gaining authority and respect and appearing to 'control' their environment. In other words, were the respondents willing and able to stand up to the negative comments and, if so, how they did do so?

In order to identify intensity of involvement and how strongly they wanted to come across, I examined the use of pragmalinguistic resources such as directness/indirectness,

explicitness/implicitness and upgraders and downgraders (as particular sways of intensifying or softening a speech act).

Research question

By employing the language of description i.e. stance, investment and involvement, I can now undertake an analysis regarding how the Mexican EFL users react to criticism in the target-language. Therefore, my overarching research question is: When faced with criticism, how do EFL users react?

I first of all need to see whether interactants formulate an analysable reply before I try to identify the characteristics of any response. Participants may react through silence, circumventing the incident or by formulating an articulated response.

If EFL users voice an answer, I want to identify the pragmatic resources employed in order to achieve interactional objectives. Therefore, my follow-up research questions are:

1. How do EFL users take up a position (*stance*) when faced with criticism in the target-language?

I examine the categories of speech acts employed in terms of aggressing (e.g. challenging), persisting (e.g. justifying) or acquiescing (e.g. complying) (Beebe and Waring, 2005) as a way of understanding how interactants position themselves towards their critics and their negative evaluation.

2. How do EFL users express their identity (*investment*) when faced with criticism in the target-language?

I examine how interactants express identity when they provide communicatively complete and elaborated answers and if they convey authoritativeness and determination in their opinions.

3. How do EFL users project their level of participation (*intensity of involvement*) when faced with criticism in the target-language?

I examine interest in the interaction by evaluating how EFL users express clarity, commitment, and intensity or mitigation through the use of directness/indirectness, explicitness/implicitness and upgraders and downgraders.

Procedure

To answer the research question, I asked 27 students to respond in English to a written discourse completion task (DCT) by expressing strong and softened disagreement. Respondents were asked to respond to the following situations:

1. You, as a student, have submitted a draft paper for correction to a teacher. This is what he/she says: *This draft is not really up to standard. You have to agree with me, don't you?* How would you react?

2. You, as a student, have asked a fellow student, to whom you are fairly close, for his/her comments on an academic paper you are about to submit. This is what he/she says: *Your draft really could be a lot better. Come on, you have to admit it.* How would you react?

The two questions implicitly invite participants to consider ideational aspects such as the evaluator's assessment of the assignment and interpersonal dimensions such as status, power and distance/closeness along with the importance of taking a position with regard to the criticism.

The participants were not given any instructions on how to respond to the situations and were free to respond in any way they liked. However, they were pressured to produce

fairly rapid answers i.e. within one minute since this would be closer to a target-language context.

Participants

The 27 students who participated in this research consisted of 16 women and 11 men who were in the fourth and final year of their BA at a public university in Guadalajara, Mexico. They are between 22 and 24 years old. They describe themselves as middle-class from urban backgrounds. They have an advanced level of English and are preparing themselves to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and need 500 points or more in order to obtain their degree. The participants have had limited contact with English-speaking countries, which they have mainly visited on holiday and therefore their pragmatic knowledge of the target language has been largely learnt or garnered in Mexico, principally in the EFL classroom.

Results

Users of English as a foreign language should be allowed to come across in their own ways. They have choices as to whether they wish to come across as aggressive, antagonistic and assertive or as easy-going, conciliatory and hesitant. Consequently, I will not be examining individual answers in terms of positionality (stance), identity (investment) and degree of participation (involvement). Rather, I examine the overall variations in the answers with respect to the four different contexts: strong and softened disagreement with a teacher and strong and softened disagreement with a friend.

Stance

Since I am interested in understanding how the respondents used pragmatic resources to position themselves regarding disagreement, I first of all examined and contrasted the different speech acts used in each of the four scenarios.
With regards to strong disagreement with the teacher, participants offered a conflicting opinion (nine replies), openly disagreed (seven replies) and argued (five replies). One respondent felt unable to formulate any response.

Examples of conflicting opinions include *I don't think so* and *I'm not quite sure about that* whilst openly disagreeing can be seen in *I totally disagree* and *Why? I think it's the opposite*. With the use of the personal pronoun *I* in all of the answers demonstrating conflicting opinions, respondents were asserting themselves rather than focusing on the hearer. Examples of openly disagreeing included *But why? I'm totally disagree* [sic] and *Well, I have a different opinion*.

When expressing softened disagreement with a teacher, the majority of participants voiced their dissent by giving a negative opinion (16 replies) e.g. *I see your point but I think* and *Mmm. it depends on how you've looked at ….* The use of the verb *see* was extremely common when expressing disagreement as in *I see what you mean but...* and *I can see your point but I believe there may be some interesting points to it*. Some respondents adopted a conciliatory approach and sought clarification from the teacher e.g. *Could I know why?* and *May I ask you requirements to meet in this paper*? Three respondents adopted the strategy of agreeing e.g. *Mmm probably if I do what you say I'd be complete* and *I see you point but I can correct it if you let me*. Once again, one respondent felt unable to formulate any response.
With regards to strong disagreement with a friend, respondents were divided between arguing (14 replies) and disagreeing (10 replies). The strategies for arguing ranged from the defensive

What do you mean? It is excellent to the potentially belligerent *You're wrong*. Disagreeing could be seen in terms of directness and indirectness as replies extended from the impersonal *This is not right* and *It's not that bad* to the much more direct *I don't agree with you* and *That's what you think*. Three respondents were not able to formulate a response.

With regards to softened disagreement with a friend, respondents largely opted for disagreeing (17), followed by arguing (4) and agreeing (2). Disagreement varied from the conciliatory *I don't think the same* and *ah, ok, I get your point, but ...* to the more blunt *I don't think so* and *I'm not sure you got it*. Meanwhile arguing ranged from the assertive *Really? I think it's well done* to the much more conciliatory *You know it depends on your perspective*. Three respondents were not able to formulate a response.

Disagreement strategy

Related to stance is the respondents' underlying strategy towards disagreement in whether they demonstrate aggressing, persisting or acquiescing strategies (Beebe and Waring, 2005). In the four scenarios the results are as follows

Table 1. Use of aggressing, persisting and acquiescing strategies

	Aggressing	Persisting	Acquiescing	No response
Strong disagreement with teacher	4	17	5	1
Softened disagreement with teacher	-o-	19	7	1
Strong disagreement with friend	19	5	-o-	3
Softened disagreement with friend	-o-	18	6	3
Total number of participants				27

When dealing with the teacher, there were a few incidents of aggressing e.g. *I totally disagree* (challenge) and *Are you serious? Well, that's the best I can do* (challenge). However, respondents seemed to more or less adopt the same strategy whether they were engaged in strong or softened disagreement. There were few differences in persisting strategies which were characterised by the widespread use of the verb *think* as in: *Why? I don't think I did it wrong* (request) and *Sorry, but I think it is good* (justify) (in strong disagreement) and *I see your point but I think* (take issue) and *You know what, I don't think....* (argue) (in softened disagreement).

When dealing with a friend, the participants were less restrained when demonstrating strong disagreement and overwhelmingly adopted aggressing strategies such as *That's what you think* (challenge), *No way! Read it again* (challenge) and *You're always against what I do* (criticise). However, with softened disagreement with a friend, the participants largely chose persisting strategies such as *Okay thanks for your feedback but I tried hard with this paper* (justify) and *You know it depends on your perspective* (take issue). The answers also reveal a strong use of the informal verb *get* as in *I get what you mean but...* (argue), *I get you but...* (argue) and *ah, ok, I get your point* (argue). There was also the frequent use of the verb *see* as in *I see your point but....* (argue*), I see what you mean but...* (argue) and *I see what you mean, bro but, I'm not sure about that* (argue).

These results indicate that interactants were sensitive to the context when choosing aggressing, persisting or acquiescing strategies. However, the results suggest that respondents would more often than not argue with teachers (persisting strategy) and challenge friends (aggressing strategy). This may reflect a limited use of the pragmatic options available.

Language function in disagreement

When examining the language function behind the disagreement i.e. ideational or interpersonal (interactional or person), respondents heavily focused on the interactional as can be seen in the table below:

Table 2. Language function behind the disagreement strategy

	Ideational	Interpersonal		No response
		Interactional	Person	
Strong disagreement with teacher	2	11	13	1
Softened disagreement with teacher	4	16	6	1
Strong disagreement with friend	3	20	1	3
Softened disagreement with friend	1	17	6	3
Total number of participants				27

The results indicate that, whether it be with a teacher or a friend, both strong and softened disagreement was largely centred on the interactional function of language rather than on the ideational and on the draft itself. For instance, with softened disagreement with the teacher, comments ranged from the emphatic *Could I know why?* and *You made your point but....* to the more conciliatory *I'm not quite sure you share the same point of view* and *Mmm, it depends on how you've looked at.....* When told that a piece of work is not up to standard, it might be expected that the student would seek clarification, ask for further advice or discuss why the teacher or the friend has reached that conclusion rather than openly challenge the person giving the feedback.

The focus by the speaker on Halliday's person function of language in strong disagreement with the teacher included *I worked really hard* and *Why? I don't think I did it wrong*. When receiving feedback, one might not expect students to play such a defensive role and be more open to improving their academic work.

Investment and involvement

The results indicate that the respondents demonstrated a high level of investment whilst their involvement tended to be direct, explicit with little use of either upgraders or downgraders.

In terms of investment, respondents projected a strong identity when expressing disagreement. In strong disagreement with a teacher, 18 respondents provided communicatively complete and elaborated answers that convey authoritativeness and demonstrated the ability to remain firm in their convictions as can be seen in the following responses: *Can we go through it? I have a different opinion*; *Would you mind enlightening me? What do you want with this project*? and *I'm sorry sir but based on the notes I have from previous lessons I believe that I covered all the points in a very academic and accurate way the assigned task*. The responses indicate that a large number of the EFL users come across as confident in what they are saying and ready to defend their work.

In softened disagreement with a teacher, 12 respondents came across as ready to concede to the teacher's point of view but equally ready to defend their own position as can be seen in: *I see your point but I think it is not that bad; I see your point, but in my opinion….*; *I see your point but I think…*; and *I can see your point but I believe there may be….* These respondents can be seen as conciliatory but at the same time assertive in wanting to discuss their work. However, many interactants seemed uncertain regarding how they projected themselves e.g.

Mmm probably if I do what you say I'd be complete and *Mmm. It depends on how you've looked at it.*

In strong disagreement with a friend, all but one respondent voiced a strong sense of identity as seen in the following examples: *No way! It's not that bad*; *We have to agree to disagree. I worked hard on this*; and *You're always against to what I do*. The interactants had no difficulty in defending their *face* (Goffman 1967) amid criticism from a friend.

In softened disagreement with a friend, 13 respondents came across in the same conciliatory way as they did with the teacher i.e. they accepted the other's point of view but still remained firm e.g. *I see what you mean, bro but, I'm not sure about tha*t; *Man, I see what you mean but you know I like to do things my way*; and *Okay thanks for your feedback but I tried hard on this paper*. However, other respondents were less sure of themselves: *You know it depends on your perspective* and *I don't think the same*.

In terms of involvement, respondents were responsive to the situation and the addressees as can be seen in the table 3:

Table 3. Involvement: Expression of directness & explicitness

	Direct	Explicit
Strong disagreement with teacher	20	22
Softened disagreement with teacher	13	12
Strong disagreement with friend	24	23
Softened disagreement with friend	8	10
Total number of participants		27

As to be expected, directness was a notable feature in strong disagreement e.g. (with a teacher) *But why? I'm totally disagree* [sic] and *Would you mind enlightening me. What do you want with this project?* and (with a friend) *You're wrong, I don't think this is correct* and *if you checked the info, you could see what I'm trying to tell you*. At the same time, explicit involvement was a feature in all of the situations. For instance, softened disagreement with a teacher included *I see your point but I think it is not that bad* and *You made your point but...* In softened disagreement with a friend, responses included *I get what you mean but* and *ah, ok, I get your point, but ....*

In terms of upgraders and downgraders, respondents demonstrated a limited use of intensifiers and mitigators as can be seen in the table 4:

Table 4. Use of upgraders and downgraders

	Upgraders	Downgraders
Strong disagreement with teacher	6	13
Softened disagreement with teacher	4	10
Strong disagreement with friend	1	4
Softened disagreement with friend	-o-	7
Total number of participants		27

The use of upgraders and downgraders was not a particularly strong feature since out of a possible 108 replies, there were only 11 upgraders and 34 downgraders. The greater part of the upgraders and downgraders were used in interaction with the teacher. The most common upgraders were *really* (4 times); *quite* (3 times) and *totally* (2 times). Downgraders included: *think* (12 times), *well* (3 times) and *believe* (3 times). With a friend, one upgrader (the word *totally*) and one downgrader (*think* used four times) were employed in strong disagreement. In softened disagreement, only two downgraders were used: *think* (four times) and *well* (three times). The use of *think* four times in both strong and softened disagreement

suggests little change in overall strategy among the respondents even though they were not used by the same respondents in strong and softened disagreement.

Discussion

In analysing the results, the first finding is that the vast majority of respondents could formulate a response in the four contexts. Furthermore, the respondents used a range of pragmatic resources to express disagreement: *stance*, *investment* and *involvement*. However they are used to different degrees.

An analysis of *stance* shows the utilization of a limited number of speech acts were principally limited to giving contrary opinions, arguing and disagreeing. Both strong and softened disagreement with a teacher was marked by voicing a negative opinion. There was more arguing with the teacher in strong disagreement. Participants often used the verb *disagree* as in *I totally disagree* and *I'm sorry to disagree*. These findings suggest that respondents are aware of disagreement strategies but do not realise that target-language users more often than not do not openly use the verb *disagree* when expressing disagreement. Disagreement in the study was frequently characterised by token agreement followed by disagreement, apologising for taking a contrary position and hesitation with the use of *mmm*. Therefore, respondents demonstrated a narrow repertoire with regard to employing speech acts but showed a wider range of disagreement strategies.

Furthermore, with regard to aggressing, persisting or acquiescing strategies, the respondents did use different strategies depending on the addressee. With the teacher they were more careful when disagreeing than with a friend. However, when they were interacting with the same addressee there was less variation. For instance, persisting was the most usual strategy when dealing with a teacher whether it be for strong and soft disagreement. Respondents showed more variation with friends as they demonstrated aggressing with their peers in strong disagreement whilst using persisting in softened disagreement. One might have expected to have seen a wider use of options given that one would not have expected the majority of respondents to treat all their friends through aggressing. Even though a friend offers strong criticism, there is still the option of replying by acquiescing or persisting. When analysing the responses in terms of language functions, the relationship is highlighted rather than the assignment itself. There was a stronger focus on disagreeing (interactional function) rather than on discussing the work itself or how it might be improved. This focus on the interactional function in both strong and soft disagreement with a teacher and a student suggest that interactants rely on the same language function irrespective of context and/or the addressee.

An examination of investment reveals that the respondents interacted as self-confident and able to get their point across when it involved strong disagreement. They were less certain of themselves with softened disagreement. This suggests that the participants do not have a problem in expressing themselves antagonistically but were unsure of themselves when they had to come across less forcefully.

Regarding involvement, the EFL users were direct and explicit when engaged in strong disagreement. They were less direct and more implicit with regards to softened disagreement which suggests that they have the pragmatic resources to moderate their involvement depending on the context and the addressee.

Besides the restricted use of upgraders and downgraders, there was not a significant difference between the use of strong and softened disagreement especially when interacting with the teacher. In strong disagreement, six upgraders were used whilst with softened disagreement four were employed. In strong disagreement with a friend, 13 downgraders were used compared to ten in softened disagreement. This suggests that the participants do not see

upgraders and downgraders as key pragmatic resources that can be used to intensify or soften a speech act. With friends, there was an increase in downgraders from four in strong disagreement to seven in soft disagreement. However, their scant use suggests that the respondents did not feel that they needed to soften speech acts with friends.

Conclusions

The results and analysis indicate that most respondents provided an analysable response when asked to disagree in the target language. This suggests that the interactants were able to perceive an antagonistic situation and make the necessary judgement in a given context and have a range of pragmatic resources with which to express dissent. In the four contexts, there was only a maximum of three respondents in each situation who could not formulate a response. Given these results I was able to analyse how EFL users expressed disagreement and answer my overarching research question regarding how EFL users react when faced with a difficult and seemingly antagonistic situation.

When conveying *stance*, respondents used a limited number of speech acts and overused explicit disagreement strategies such as *I disagree* which are used to a limited degree by target-language speakers. Whilst a range aggressing (e.g. challenging), persisting (e.g. justifying) or acquiescing (e.g. complying) strategies were used by the interactants, there was a lack of variation according to the addressee. With regards *investment* and *involvement*, interactants were surer of themselves in transactional contexts i.e. with the teacher, than in interpersonal situations where they have had less exposure to target-language use. This seemed to be reinforced by the lack of upgraders and downgraders which would enable EFL users to increase or soften the force of their participation.

Obviously, reactions in the classroom may not be mirrored in real-life contexts where interactants may be under even more pressure to react instantly and with little preparation. Nevertheless, the results reveal how the EFL users intended to react and that perhaps learners should have had more pragmatic resources at their disposal in order to negotiate difficult and antagonistic situations. Further research needs to determine whether EFL users have the appropriate pragmatic resources but cannot access them or whether they are in fact limited by a lack of pragmatic knowledge.

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