

Politeness Strategies in Criticisms and Responses in TESOL Quarterly Forum

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Abstract

Politeness is pervasive in human interaction and crucial for social cooperation so as to avoid offenses and communication breakdown. Indeed a number of studies have investigated politeness strategies in academic discourse, shedding light on how interaction in academic discourse involves extensive use of politeness strategies. This paper aims to extend this body of knowledge, looking into a genre that has rarely been studied. This paper investigates politeness strategies in “A Reader Responds” and “Authors Reply” in the Forum section of TESOL Quarterly journals which were published from 2005 to 2009, using Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory and Hyland’s (2000) mitigation strategies as analytical frameworks. Moreover, this paper proposes two new strategies: backgrounding FTA and attributing faults to the speaker. Data analysis indicates that the politeness strategies employed by both “A Reader Responds” and “Authors Reply” that were identified included: hedges, praise-criticism pairs, impersonalization, tense shift, assert a common ground, nominalize, rhetorical question, and backgrounding FTA. The strategies only found in “A Reader Responds” are overgeneralizing hearers and attributing faults to the speaker. In conclusion, this study finds that these academic genres are highly interactive and thus require many politeness strategies to deal with the issues of face which is at stake due to the nature of these genres.

Keywords: *politeness, TESOL Quarterly forum, academic discourse, criticisms*

1. Introduction

Politeness is pervasive in human interaction (Fraser, 1990, p.219) and crucial for social cooperation so as to avoid offenses and communication breakdown (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.1-2). During communication while humans have a linguistic message to communicate, they have to maintain social relationship with others (Leech, 1983, p.81-82).

Linguistics research on politeness in various settings has shown how important politeness is even in the academic written genre which is perceived to be purely informational and impersonal (Myers, 1989, p.3).

The pioneering work on politeness in written academic genre is Myers' (1989) work which used Brown and Levinson's (1987) *Politeness* to investigate politeness strategies in biology research articles. Moreover, Salager-Meyer (1994) and Hyland (1994) studied hedges in academic research articles. Hyland (2000) also studied mitigation strategies of the evaluation in book reviews. In fact, book reviews have been further investigated by Salager-Meyer, Ariza and Berbesi (2007), Itakura and Tsui (2011) and Itakura (2013). I would like to extend this knowledge of politeness in academic texts to two more genres, "A Reader Responds" and "Authors Reply", in the Forum section of the *TESOL Quarterly* journals. While these genres have been studied by Nicol (2005), the analysis is only based on genre analysis and the issue of politeness is yet to be investigated.

TESOL Quarterly is an international refereed journal aiming to advance English language teaching and research. It publishes various forms of writing such as article, forum and book review. The Forum section allows readers to submit a criticism to a work published in *TESOL* and this is sent for reply to the author of that article (*TESOL Quarterly*, 2009). Presumably, both readers and authors may have to bear in mind that the criticism must be constructive and aim to foster development in English language teaching and research in accordance with the purpose of this journal. Yet, criticizing and rebutting, which may contain disagreement, are face threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.66); therefore, the readers and the authors need to employ politeness strategies to avoid personal conflicts.

In consequence, I would like to investigate politeness strategies in the Forum section of *TESOL Quarterly* journals, with particular focus on "A Reader Responds" and "Authors Reply". The research question of this paper is: What are the similarities and differences between the politeness strategies used in "A Reader Responds" and "Authors Reply"? In the next section, I will provide a review of related literature. Then I will illustrate the research methodology. Finally, I will provide the data analysis, the discussion and the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Politeness is crucial in achieving a communicative goal during social interaction (Fraser, 1990). The motivation to be polite is attributable to the need to balance the social relationship between interactants so as to communicate without endangering the social relationship with each other (Locher, 2004, p.59). From a linguistic perspective, politeness is the phenomena in which people are indirect during communication and thus breach Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) which stipulates that when communicating, people are cooperative in getting the message across and thus need to be truthful, sufficiently

informational, relevant, and clear.

To account for such indirectness, Leech (1983) argues that the indirectness is attributable to politeness, and thus he proposes a principle of politeness to account for how people can communicate their intention and at the same time maintain an interpersonal relationship with others. The formation of this theory is that “other things being equal, minimize what is unfavourable to the hearer or to a third party and maximize what is favourable to the hearer or a third party” (Leech, 1983, p.81).

Another influential theory is Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory based on Goffman’s concept of face. Face is an “individual’s self-esteem and a public self-image that every member of a society wants to claim for himself” (Fraser, 1990, p.228). There are two types of face — Negative Face and Positive Face. Negative Face is a desire to be free and not disturbed while Positive Face is a desire to be liked and accepted by others (Fraser, 1990, p.299; Yule, 1995, p.61-62). During social interaction, participants might commit an act that threatens the face of the interlocutors and this is termed Face Threatening Act (FTA). As a result, the speakers might use linguistic strategies to minimize the face threat on the interlocutors. These strategies are classified by Brown and Levinson (1987, p.69-70) as follows:

1. Bald on record: in some situations, people might directly express their needs to others such as an emergency situation, when talking to close familiars (Yule, 1995, p.63), when the face threat is very small or when the speaker has far more power than the hearer (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.69)
2. On record with redressive strategies: redressive strategies involve some efforts to reduce the face threat and indicate that the speaker has no intention to cause face damage by modifying the speaker’s speech (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.69-70; Fraser, 1990, p.230). These include Positive Politeness and Negative Politeness.
 - 2.1 Positive Politeness strategies attend to hearer’s Positive Face by expressing solidarity with the speaker.
 - 2.2 Negative Politeness strategies, on the other hand, attend to the hearer’s Negative Face, showing the speaker’s deference to the hearer’s rights to freedom by apology, question, or impersonalisation.
3. Off record: a speaker might avoid the imposition on a hearer by not directly addressing or only hinting to the hearer.
4. Don’t do FTA: when the situation poses a high face risk to the participant, the speaker might decide not to perform the face threatening act.

There are a number of studies on politeness strategies in the academic genre. The pioneering work is Myer’s (1989) *The Pragmatics of Politeness in Scientific Articles*. This study employed Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Politeness as an analytical framework to

analyze politeness strategies embodied in molecular biology research articles. Myers investigates two face threatening acts, namely claiming and denial of claims. It is found that to perform those acts writers use politeness strategies including Bald on record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, Off record and Don't do FTA.

Furthermore, Salager-Myers (1994) investigated the occurrence and function of hedges in the four communicative sections in medical research articles and case reports. She claimed that hedges might convey the actual state of understanding and help writers to express their commitment to the claims and the degree of certainty not too blatantly, thus saving the face of both the writers and the readers (Salager-Meyer, 1994, p.155-164).

Hyland (1994) studied the linguistic realization of hedges. They could be realised through modal auxiliary verbs, adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal expression (possible, perhaps, probable), modal lexical verbs (believe, assume), if-clauses, question forms, passives, impersonal phrases and time references (Hyland, 1994, p.240). It helped reduce writers' accountability and was exploited by writers to intrude into the texts and stake a new claim in a humble manner, making the claims more acceptable by the research community.

Later, Hyland (2000) adds the notion of interaction in academic texts to complement this theory for the genre under investigation. He argues that interaction in academic texts involves: 1) the academic community that provides sites for communication which is a crucial mechanism to advance disciplinary knowledge, rules of knowledge enquiry and linguistic conventions to members of the discipline and 2) researchers who conduct research and communicate their findings via the modes provided by the discipline in order to contribute to disciplinary knowledge and gain rewards such as funds, reputation and professional development. Yet, before getting the work published, they must satisfy gatekeepers (journal editors, for example) of academic communities by observing adequacy condition and acceptability condition. Adequacy condition refers to the epistemological framework or how the reality is perceived to be like by the community's members. Researchers have to satisfy this condition by presenting new knowledge with arguments that are common and seem possible to community members and displaying knowledge of disciplinary culture, values and ideologies. Acceptability condition is a rule governing social interaction between researchers and their fellow members. To meet these conditions, researchers need to portray a suitable persona and attitude, showing their competence while expressing their humility as a servant of the discipline (Myers, 1989, p.4; Hyland, 2000, p.13). Thus, it is the acceptability condition that relates to politeness phenomena.

With this notion of politeness, Hyland (2000, p.41-62) investigates praise and criticism in book reviews. Book review, he argues, provides a domain for disciplinary members to follow disciplinary advancement and state their position towards theories and approaches. Those

writing book reviews need to exhibit critical evaluation and cater to the face need of the reviewed authors to avoid personal conflict as well as the face of the academic community since when writing a book review they are claiming an authoritative voice to criticize an academic work. He found that writers often praise the overall general contents while frequently criticizing specific arguments. Also, writers attend to the interpersonal factor by mitigating the criticism with the following strategies: the use of praise-criticism pairs, hedging, personal responsibility, other attribution, metadiscoursal bracketing, and limited praise as an indirect criticism.

Politeness in book reviews has been further investigated diachronically (Salager-Meyer, Ariza, & Berbesí, 2007) and cross-culturally (Itakura & Tsui, 2011; Itakura, 2013). Salager-Meyer, Ariza, and Berbesí (2007) compared 19th century medical book reviews with 20th century medical book reviews and found that politeness strategies were used more frequently in the 20th century book reviews.

Itakura and Tsui (2011) analyzed how criticisms were mitigated in Japanese and English book reviews. They found that while politeness strategies were used to create solidarity in English book reviews, in Japanese book reviews “apology and self-denigration” are used more frequently (ibid., p.1366), thereby indicating cross-cultural differences in politeness strategy use.

Itakura (2013) compared how praise was hedged in English and Japanese book reviews. She found that while praise was hedged more by Japanese book reviewers who portray themselves as not committed to the praise, the English book reviewers used fewer hedges, portraying themselves as responsible evaluators.

Both Brown and Levinson’s Politeness and Hyland’s mitigation strategies in book reviews might be effective tools for this study. This is because, firstly, Brown and Levinson’s Politeness has elaborate linguistic strategies (Hyland, 2000, p.14). Secondly, book reviews and article criticisms aim to evaluate a piece of work so they seem to be closely related. In consequence, I will adopt Brown and Levinson’s Politeness and Hyland’s mitigation strategies as a framework to identify politeness strategies and to interpret their mitigating effects.

3. Methodology

To achieve the aim of this paper, first, two sets of data were compiled. The first set included eleven “A Reader Responds” and the second contained eleven “Authors Reply” in the Forum sections of *TESOL Quarterly*, which were published between 2005 and 2009. The information of each article is provided in Appendix 1.

After that, politeness strategies in these articles were investigated, using Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Politeness and Hyland’s (2000) typology of mitigation strategies. The

investigation focused on face threatening acts in these texts, including criticizing and rebutting. Based on these two frameworks and data analysis, the classification of politeness strategies are as follows:

1. *Hedges*: “particles, words, or phrases which show the degree of membership of a predicate or a noun phrase in a set” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.145). They can soften the statement (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.147), show the speaker’s degree of commitment to that statement and portray a humble persona of the speaker (Hyland, 2000, p.88).
2. *Praise-criticism pair*: posing positive comments adjacent to criticisms (Hyland, 2000, p.55-56). The writers may do this by embedding a positive comment in the same sentence before a criticism.
3. *Impersonalization*: lowering the degree of face threat by avoiding a direct reference to the speaker or the hearer (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.198).
4. *Assuming a common ground*: the use of inclusive “we” which includes both writers and readers in the same activity and thus assumes that they share the same attitude and goal (Myer, 1989, p.7-8).
5. *Nominalization*: turning a verb into a noun, which can serve as a politeness strategy because it increases the formality of the proposition, removes the agents from and shifts the focus to the FTA itself (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.207-208).
6. *Rhetorical questions*: asking a question without wanting the answer, flouting the maxim of quality, to implicate the FTA (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.223).
7. *Backgrounding FTA*: this strategy does not fit either Brown & Levinson’s Politeness or Hyland’s mitigation strategies. Here the authors sometimes write their criticisms or rebuttals in brackets, after a dash or as footnotes. This, I believe, can soften the FTA because the FTA does not seem to be part of the main proposition. I therefore will call this strategy backgrounding FTA.
8. *Overgeneralizing hearers*: stating the FTA as if it is a general rule of belief that does not directly address the hearers, leaving them to decide whether such a statement involves them or not (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.226).
9. *Limited praise*: implying the criticism by praising insignificant points to hint at the criticisms (Hyland, 2000, p.59-60).
10. *Attributing faults to the speaker*: this does not fit either Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Politeness or Hyland’s (2000) mitigation strategies. I would term it “attributing faults to the speaker” because in this strategy the writer states as if the fault belongs to him or her.

The next section shows the strategies identified in the data and discusses how they are used.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

In this section, I will present the politeness strategies that were identified in my data, starting with those found in both “A Reader Responds” and “Authors Reply”; then I am going to show the strategies that occur only in either of them. First, each strategy and some examples from “A Reader Responds” in (a) and “Authors Reply” in (b) are shown. Then I will offer my interpretation of their mitigating effect. The initial of the journal’s name and the year of publication will be provided for each sample text.

4.1 Strategies found in both “A Reader Responds” and “Authors Reply”

The strategies that were identified included hedges, praise-criticism pairs, impersonalization, tense shift, assert a common ground, nominalize, rhetorical question, and backgrounding FTA.

4.1.1 Hedges

- 1 (a) *Such tasks **seem** hard to justify on any pedagogical grounds and consequently in research apparently applicable to classroom vocabulary learning tasks. (TQ 2007)*
- (b) *Therefore, what **appears to be** a better exercise featuring the panacea of so-called deeper processing **may** not be so. (TQ 2007)*

In 1(a) Bruton and Lopez are criticizing Folse’s research instrument. Instead of stating it baldly as an objective fact, they use the word “seem” which tones down the certainty and illocutionary force of this statement. It indicates that this statement is their opinion, which opens for audience’s alternative interpretation.

In 1(b) Folse responds to Bruton and Lopez criticism on his research instrument, saying that his suggestion may not prove more effective. He uses the word “appear to be” and the modal “may” which decreases the illocutionary force of his statement and makes it seem provisional. Thus these hedges can lower the face threat on the addressee.

Another form of hedges is personal attribution. This flouts Gricean Maxim of Quantity because it would be assumed that what is written is the author’s belief unless stated otherwise (Hyland, 2000, p.58). This seems to create an implicature that the author does not presume that the audience shares the same opinion (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.164), thus making it provisional and open to alternative viewpoints (Myers, 1989, p.14-16). For instance:

- 2 (a) *Jenkins does not condemn her ELF users to voicelessness, but, **in my view**, she risks bringing them stuttering onto the world stage (TQ 2007)*
- (b) *A unique contribution of my study, **I believe**, is that it reveals such variability and complexity in the views and experiences of a group of female Japanese*

international students, as well as their personally significant transformations over time. (TQ 2006)

In 2(a) Promodou criticizes Jenkins's teaching of World Englishes that it deprives the students of their necessary language skills and marks this statement as his personal opinion rather than an objective fact. In 2(b) Morita responds to Trent's criticism on her insufficient emphasis on a wider context of classroom interaction. She defends the value of her research and clearly marks it as a personal opinion, which also opens for different opinions.

4.1.2 Praise-criticism pair

- 3 (a) *This interactionist standpoint addresses power from the perspective of individual actors, **which is valuable**, but it also appears to carry with it possible limitations, both conceptual and methodological. (TQ 2006)*
- (b) *Although such contexts **may be interesting**, they were **not the focus of the current study**, which sought to look at the facilitating effect of written practice exercise on vocabulary learning. (TQ 2007)*

In 3(a) Trent criticizes Morita's work which involves identity construction in the class room and the role in which power relations may play. He offers a positive evaluation of the interactionist approach that Morita uses before stating the critical comment. The presence of the positive comment mitigates the criticism.

In 3(b) Folse replies to Bruton and Lopez's call for more authentic input context. Folse offers a praise that the comment is interesting but writes that it is not the focus of his research. Thus, the positive statement serves to soften the rebuttal.

Apart from the sentential level, this strategy influences the whole organization of the articles. That is, the authors begin their articles with positive evaluations before criticizing or rebutting. Actually nine of "A Reader Responds" and seven of "Authors Reply" begin with a positive statement before criticisms or rebuttals.

- 4 (a) *There is **much** that one can **agree with** in Jennifer Jenkins's article in *TESOL Quarterly* (Jenkins, 2006). Some of her points are, however, quite controversial. (TQ 2007)*
- (b) *We **appreciate** Rod Ellis's **thoughtful** comments and hope that this exchange will help to shed further light on the nature of motivated classroom behavior as a criterion measure in classroom-oriented motivation studies. (TQ 2009)*

It seems important to note why the authors respond to criticisms with praise. A possible explanation is that it is a way of reducing face threats before giving a refutation as noted by Hyland (2000) in his analysis of book reviews. On the other hand, since the aim of *TESOL Quarterly* is to "foster inquiry into English language teaching and learning by providing

a forum for TESOL professionals to share their research findings and explore ideas and relationship in the field.” (TESOL Quarterly, 2009), it may be assumed that articles submitted to TESOL Quarterly also purport to achieve this aim and thus criticisms aim to encourage more development. Accordingly, the authors respond to the criticism by expressing their appreciation because they acknowledge that the readers and the authors are collaborators in an effort to foster development in English language teaching and research.

4.1.3 Impersonalization

The first linguistic realization of this strategy in my corpora is a dative construction with agent deletion (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.192) as in the following examples:

- 5 (a) ***It would seem that*** *what Guilloteaux and Dörnyei have in mind is alertness.* (TQ 2009)
- (b) ***It therefore seems misguided to criticize us*** *for not “explicitly call[ing] for a shift in SLA from a first- to second-generation cognitive paradigm” (p. 822), or to assert that we “might argue that the cognitive perspective will continue to dominate its parallel SCT world” (p. 823; in our article, we do not predict the future with regard to sociocultural versus cognitive paradigms).* (TQ 2006)

In 5(a) Ellis contradicts Guilloteaux and Dörnyei and argues that “alertness” would be a better term for this research. Contradicting is clearly a face-threatening act but he uses a politeness strategy to soften the rhetorical force of this statement, putting it in a dative construction “It would seem that...” Actually, the full construction of this sentence should be “It would seem to me that” but “to me” is deleted; thus it looks as if the agent is the dummy “it” rather than Ellis himself. Furthermore, it reduces the face threat by making the statement less blunt and impersonal.

In 5(b) Zuengler and Miller contend that Hill’s criticism is irrelevant to their study. Again, the real agent is deleted from this dative construction “It therefore seems (to us) misguided to criticize us...” This avoidance of reference to speakers may be attributable to politeness, aiming at reducing the involvement of the writers in the FTA.

Another realization of this strategy that is found only in “A Reader Responds” is passive and circumstantial voices (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.194) as in the following example:

- (a) ***It can simply be pointed out that*** *efforts toward one have been made in SLA (Atkinson, 2002) and sociocognitively oriented SLA research has been conducted (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; De Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; Hill, 2006; Ohta, 2001).* (TQ 2006)

Here Hill states that Zuengler and Miller mention the incommensurability between cognitive and socio-cultural approach in SLA but there are, he argues, some researchers

who try to bridge them. In this sentence, this passivized construction seems to lack the agent, but who could point it out if not the author himself? Therefore, Hill, in this sentence avoids referencing himself by deleting the agent of this passive and circumstantial voice construction.

The other realization of impersonalization is avoiding “I” and “you” by replacing them with indefinites. This can distance the involvement of the speakers or hearers from the FTA (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.193-194).

7 (a) *How, **one wonders**, does Ellis account for both this and the many European applied linguists who speak English fluently, accurately, and spontaneously — once again thanks to different forms of TGT still offered in most European schools. (TQ 2006)*

Here Sheen cast doubt on Ellis who, he claims, suggests that traditional grammar teaching (TGT) does not contribute to the ability to use language in communication. Sheen argues that many fluent language teachers who study under that approach are counterevidence to that claim. Here the author distances his personal responsibility of the disagreement by attributing it to an indefinite agent “one.” This masks his involvement in the FTA although it is clear that he is the actor of “wonders”.

In addition, point-of-view distancing via tense shift is identified in the data. In this strategy, writers shift from present tense to past tense to distance themselves or the hearers from the FTA (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.204-205) as follows:

- 8 (a) *Second, **had Ellis appealed** to relevant research on incidental learning in ordinary classrooms, he **would have to** account for the precious little incidental learning acquired during 6 years of incidental learning in the New Brunswick Project (Lightbown et al., 2002) and the chronic fossilization illustrated in Sheen’s (2005a) study of Quebec students who begin producing at elementary level third-person questions without auxiliaries (e.g., *Where your wife live?*) and are still doing so 8 years later. (TQ 2006)*
- (b) *Swan and Walter also appear to position me as an “academic” while they presumably wish to position themselves as “practitioners.” I **would** point out that I function as a practitioner (at least in the sense that I write textbooks like Swan and Walter) as well as an academic, and, also, that Swan functions as an academic (as evidenced by his publishing in academic journals like *Applied Linguistics*) as well as a practitioner (textbook writer). (TQ 2006)*

In 8(a) Sheen criticizes Ellis support for incidental learning. He writes with a counterfactual tense. This stimulates an implicature that Ellis has not appealed to relevant research in incidental learning and thus fails to account for its limited success. The way he expresses this criticism distances the event to the past and may be less face threatening than a direct criticism.

In 8(b) Ellis disagrees with Swan and Walter who denounces the divide between practitioners and academics and positions Ellis as an academic. Here Ellis uses a past tense form of “will” to state his rebuttal, thereby distancing the FTA of disagreement and decreasing the face threats.

However, in some cases, tense shift can create a satirical undertone and thus it seems ambiguous whether it reduces face damage or actually increases it. For example:

- 9 (a) *Had Ellis found the time to look in any detail at our course, to read the Teacher’s Book introductions, or to **skim** our other published writings on pedagogic grammar, he **would have seen** that, like most professional course writers, we are centrally concerned to select and prioritise in this and all other syllabus areas. (TQ 2006)*
- (b) *But if he **had read** this article carefully (**and he clearly has not**) he **would have seen** that there is no such single SLA mind-set. (TQ 2006)*

In 9(a) Swan and Walter claim Ellis wrongly criticizes their text book in his articles because he has not read it carefully. They put this in a counterfactual conditional sentence, which in turn creates an implicature that the statement is not true, that is, Ellis did not spend time reading their textbook before criticizing. This sentence seems satirical due to the tense in combination with the word “skim” which exaggerates Ellis’s lack of effort to read their book. Although criticism is distanced, it has a satirical tone and thus may be even more hurtful.

In 9(b) Ellis responds to Sheen that Sheen has not read the article carefully and therefore misconceived that SLA researchers share the same view about traditional grammar teaching. He puts this in a counterfactual sentence, which implicates that the clause “but if he had read the article carefully...” is not true and thus Sheen has not done so. Moreover, Ellis writes in brackets that “and clearly he has not”, which confirms this implicature. This seems cynical and thus might hurt the addressee more deeply.

4.1.4 Assuming a common ground

- 10 (a) *Arguably, then, what **we** need to know is what motivates students to participate with these qualitative behaviors rather than focusing just on the quantitative aspect of participation. (TQ 2009)*
- (b) *Generalities might be comforting but in the end **we** need, as far as possible, to ground **our** teaching in the concrete practices, discourses, and beliefs of individuals acting in particular disciplinary communities. (TQ 2008)*

In 10(a) Ellis’s use of the inclusive “we” seems to create the solidarity with readers by including them in the activity and thereby assuming similar needs. In 10(b) Hyland uses “we” and “our” which are inclusive and seems to assume that the audience share the same opinion and goals. In both examples, it seems that both the writers and the readers are

collaborating in developing English language teaching and research, which makes them feel that they belong to the same group and, thus, can reduce the face threat.

4.1.5 Nominalization

- 11 (a) **Inclusion of minority people's perspectives** as data sources or a critical discussion of this issue would have been useful. (TQ 2005)
- (b) A **careful reading** of Kim (2006) would clearly show that the allegation of ineffective control for prior vocabulary knowledge is unjustified. (TQ 2007)

In 11(a) Beckett and Macpherson criticize Nunan's research on the impact of English on Chinese speakers as speakers of minority languages in China have not been included in this research. They nominalize this statement to make it more formal and foreground this criticism while backgrounding themselves.

In 11(b) Kim rebuts Han's criticism, saying that he has inadequately read her article. She nominalizes "reading," which backgrounds who should read and who said that he or she should read it. Therefore, it removes the participants from the action, masking the writer's involvement in the FTA.

4.1.6 Rhetorical questions

- 12 (a) **How**, one wonders, **does Ellis account** for both this and the many European applied linguists who speak English fluently, accurately, and spontaneously — once again thanks to different forms of TGT still offered in most European schools? (TQ 2006)
- (b) **Would it not be better** to see both of us as examples of professionals who actually try (but admittedly do not always succeed) in crossing the "unfortunate divide" that Swan and Walter refer to? (TQ 2006)

Here is a sentence from 7(a) repeated in 12(a). The author phrases his disagreement with Ellis's statement in a rhetorical question that makes the criticism implicit and thereby less face threatening.

In 12(b) Ellis responds to Swan and Walter who criticize him for worsening the divide between academics and practitioners. Ellis argues that he as well as Swan and Walter assume both roles and try, though unsuccessfully, to solve the divide between academics and practitioners. However, he puts this message in a rhetorical question that only implicates that message and also seems less forceful than a direct statement.

4.1.7 Backgrounding FTA

- 13 (a) After the first period of learning (**unspecified by Ellis**), during which learners engage in task-based interaction (for discussion of the impoverished quality of such interaction, see Seedhouse, 1999) the learners speak only agrammatically. (TQ 2006)

(b1) *What we do know, however, is that immersion programmes can achieve high levels of fluency and confidence in the use of the L2 while also enabling students to acquire a considerable amount of grammar (Genesee, 1987) — **points that Sheen chooses to ignore.** (TQ 2006)*

(b2) *In discussing the need for commensurability between sociocultural and cognitive, and explaining how the two might be brought together conceptually, Hill's is not **(contrary to what he claims)** "a response to Zuengler and Miller." (TQ 2006)*

In 13(a) Sheen is criticizing Ellis for allowing students to use language ungrammatically in task-based activities during the period of study. He points out that Ellis does not state the length of time but put this in brackets. This, in my opinion, is softer than a direct criticism because it is not the main propositional content of the sentence.

In 13(b1) Ellis argues against Sheen that students in immersion programs which do not focus on grammar can also acquire grammatical features. Ellis argues that Sheen intentionally omits this information but he puts it after a dash, which seems to background this statement.

In 13(b2) Zuengler and Miller claim that Hill's article does not address what was written in their article. The phrase "contrary to what he claims" is put inside brackets, which might make this statement softer.

Although I assume that this strategy makes the FTA less forceful, one may also argue that it makes the FTA more noticeable to the readers. This is because punctuations such as dashes, commas, or brackets that separate the FTA from the main proposition may instead draw attention to it. Probably it might need to be considered on a case-by-case basis depending on the contexts and indeed further research is required to prove whether this strategy mitigates the FTA.

4.2 Strategies only found in "A Reader Responds"

One strategy found only in "A Reader Responds" is overgeneralizing hearers as shown below.

14 (a) *There is still, all too often, an unfortunate divide in our profession between **academics and practitioners.** (TQ 2006)*

Here Swan and Walter criticize Ellis for being an academic who is unsupportive of the practitioners like them. However, from this sentence, they have not stated who an academic or a practitioner is, leaving Ellis to decide whether it involves him or not⁴.

⁴ Ellis actually understands this message (thus confirming my interpretation) and responds to it in "Authors Reply" as follows:

Swan and Walter also appear to position me as an "academic" while they presumably wish to position themselves as "practitioners." (TQ 2006)

4.3 Strategies only found in “Authors Reply”

There are only two strategies: limited praise and attributing faults to the speaker.

4.3.1 Limited praise

13 (b) **Generalities might be comforting** but in the end we need, as far as possible, to ground our teaching in the concrete practices.... (TQ 2008)

Here “comforting” is not a laudable quality of language teaching. Thus, the author implies the criticism by limited praise, which hints at the FTA.

4.3.2 Attributing faults to the speaker

14 (b) **I fail to find** where in the article I have made this assertion, nor, in fact, does it correspond to my belief. (TQ 2006)

Here Ellis seems to reject Sheen’s criticism but phrases it as if it were his fault. The phrase “I fail to find” may imply that he has not made the statement in question. Yet, the fault seems to be Ellis’s failure to find it instead of Sheen’s false criticism. In consequence, the illocutionary force is weaker and the FTA does not seem to be directed to Sheen.

5. Conclusion

This paper investigated politeness strategies in “A Reader Responds” and “Authors Reply” in the Forum section of TESOL Quarterly journals published from 2005 to 2009. Numerous strategies were identified, namely, hedges, praise-criticism pairs, impersonalization, point-of-view distancing, assuming a common ground, nominalization, rhetorical question, overgeneralizing hearers, limited praise and another two strategies which, to the best of my knowledge, have not been found in previous studies, including, backgrounding FTA and attributing faults to the speaker. Since these genres primarily aim to criticize and rebut and thus they confront the authors directly, various politeness strategies need to be employed to deal with the interpersonal aspect of this genre.

Most of the strategies were found in both corpora. However, a few were found only in either “A Reader Responds” or “Authors Reply.” It remains unclear whether the different rhetorical functions of each genre can account for this disparity. As this paper is an exploratory study, the initial findings cannot yet show the correlation between strategies and genres.

There are a few limitations of this study. First, data size is not very large, involving only one journal with a small number of texts. Consequently, one has to be cautious about the generalization of this study. In addition, using politeness strategies can capture only one aspect of the interaction because actually some articles are aggressive and confrontational. Furthermore, since this study is only exploratory, instances of politeness

strategy use have not been quantified to determine the prevalence of each strategy and whether some of the strategies are used more frequently in one genre over the other. What is more, this study has not considered the sociological variables of the writers. That is, the relationship between the readers and the authors as well as their status in the academic community has not been investigated.

Future research, therefore, should include more journals and larger samples to affirm the generalizability. Moreover, strategies may be quantified to provide a quantitative aspect of the interaction in this genre. In addition, future studies can investigate the sociological variables of the readers and the authors through an ethnographic study supplementing textual analysis. This can in turn shed further light on the interpretation of the politeness strategies and possible explanations of why certain strategies have been used instead of others. Also, future research may investigate both politeness and impoliteness, which, I believe, can cast a new light on the language and interaction in this academic written genre.

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Appendix 1 Articles for analysis

- Beckett, Gulbahar H. and Macpherson, Seonaigh. (2005). Researching the impact of English on minority and indigenous languages in non-western contexts. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(2), 299-307.
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