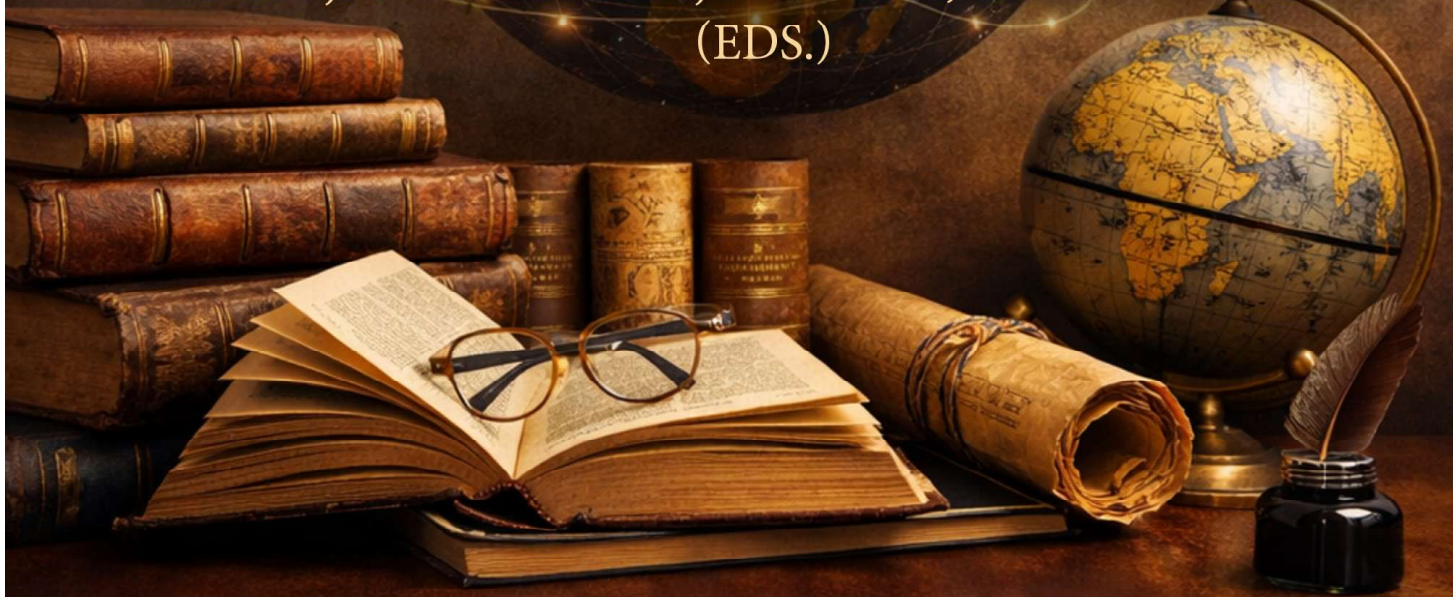


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(EDS.)



Contemporary Approaches to
Intercultural Pragmatics Research and its
Application in Language Teaching



From Scientific Concepts to Practical Implementation

*Contemporary Approaches to
Intercultural Pragmatics Research
and its Application in Language Teaching –
From Scientific Concepts to
Practical Implementation*

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From Scientific Concepts to Practical Implementation***



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 9 FOREWORD**
Biljana Ivanovska
- 11 PROJECT DESCRIPTION: “CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO INTERCULTURAL PRAGMATICS RESEARCH AND ITS APPLICATION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING – FROM SCIENTIFIC CONCEPTS TO PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION” (2025-2026)**
Biljana Ivanovska
- THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**
- 21 Natka Jankova Alagjozovska**
THE INTERPLAY OF INTERCULTURAL PRAGMATICS,
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION, AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE
- 35 Brikena Xhaferi, Simona Serafimovska**
PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF EMOJIS AND EMOTICONS
IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION
- EMPIRICAL FRAMEWORK**
- 47 Biljana Ivanovska, Gëzim Xhaferri**
A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF COMPLAINT STRATEGIES
IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE: EVIDENCE FROM UNIVERSITY
STUDENTS’ INTERACTIONS
- 67 Brikena Xhaferi, Natka Jankova Alagjozovska,
Sashka Jovanovska, Simona Serafimovska, Ana Koceva**
POLITENESS IN ACADEMIC EMAILS: PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE
AND POWER IN TEACHER–STUDENT COMMUNICATION
- 95 Marija Leontik**
THE SPEECH ACT OF APOLOGIZING
IN MACEDONIAN AND TURKISH
- 117 Sashka Jovanovska, Ana Koceva**
PRAGMATIC PATTERNS OF DISAGREEMENTS
AMONG EFL STUDENTS
- 131 Marija Grkova-Beader, Ana Koceva**
THE SPEECH ACT OF CONGRATULATING IN THE
MACEDONIAN DIGITAL LANGUAGE
- 141 Aleksandra Minkova, Katerina Harbova,
Biljana Ivanovska, Gëzim Xhaferri**
THE ACT OF THANKING AND THE ROLE OF MODAL VERBS
IN TEACHING GERMAN IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

PRAGMATIC PATTERNS OF DISAGREEMENTS AMONG EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper analyses disagreements in speech acts among learners of English as a foreign language. The focus is on the linguistic pattern of written disagreements produced by EFL learners, the most frequently applied strategies and the level and type of politeness. Researchers employ a mixed method analysis aiming to determine the type and frequency of applied strategies through quantitative data, but also to analyze the interrelations and influences between the linguistic form of the disagreements with the social relations between the speakers through a quantitative analysis. The data was collected from 40 first-year university students enrolled in the Department of English Language and Linguistics at the Faculty of Philology, Goce Delcev University in Stip; all with a B1+ level of English proficiency. An anonymous questionnaire containing three situational prompts was used as the main research instrument. Each scenario required participants to express disagreement toward the interlocutors of varying social roles: a friend, a classmate, and a teacher. The findings aim to reveal patterns in disagreement strategies and the use of pragmatic modifiers, contributing to a better understanding of intercultural and instructional pragmatics in EFL contexts.

Key words: *disagreements, EFL, English, speech acts.*

1. Introduction

Disagreement is a fundamental communicative act through which speakers express divergent opinions, beliefs, or evaluations. Although it is essential in the negotiation of meaning and the construction of interpersonal relations, disagreement is also a potentially face-threatening act, as it directly challenges the interlocutor's standpoint (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Therefore, speakers frequently rely on a range of pragmatic strategies and linguistic modifiers to mitigate or intensify the force of disagreement, depending on the social context in which the interaction takes place. Hence, the realization of a disagreement is highly sensitive to contextual variables such as social distance, relative power and the degree of imposition, which makes it a productive object for pragmatic and intercultural analysis.

According to the speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), disagreement is commonly classified as a responsive or reactive act, which occurs as a reaction to a prior assertion. Previous research has shown that disagreement may be realized through a variety of direct and indirect strategies, including explicit negation, partial agreement, justification, and the use of hedging or softening devices (Locher, 2004; Rees-Miller, 2000). The choice of strategy is often influenced by socio-pragmatic norms and culturally embedded expectations regarding politeness and appropriateness. Consequently, cross-linguistic and interlanguage studies have highlighted significant variation in how disagreement is performed across languages and learner populations (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; Chen et al., 2011). In the field of interlanguage pragmatics, considerable attention has been devoted to the production of speech acts by learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Research indicates that even learners with relatively high grammatical competence may experience difficulty in selecting pragmatically appropriate forms, particularly in situations involving unequal power relations or increased social distance (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Disagreement poses a particular challenge for EFL learners, as it requires balancing clarity of stance with the maintenance of interpersonal harmony. Inadequate pragmatic choices may lead to perceptions of rudeness, excessive directness or over-politeness, potentially resulting in pragmatic failure.

Despite the growing body of research on disagreements, relatively few studies have focused on the Macedonian EFL context, particularly with regard to written discourse. Moreover, existing studies tend to prioritize either strategy use or politeness features, while less attention has been paid to the full linguistic structure of disagreements, including opening and closing sequences and the role of pragmatic modifiers. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine written disagreements produced by Macedonian EFL learners, with a comparative perspective that considers both Macedonian and English realizations. This study aims to analyze the strategies used to perform the central act of a disagreement, as well as the modifiers employed to manage its pragmatic force. Special emphasis is placed on the influence of social relations, operationalized through variations in social distance and social status between interlocutors. By examining disagreements addressed to a friend, a classmate, and a teacher, the study seeks to identify systematic patterns in learners' pragmatic choices. The findings are expected to contribute to the understanding of disagreement as a speech act in interlanguage pragmatics and to offer pedagogical implications for the teaching of pragmatic competence in EFL contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Disagreements as speech acts

Disagreement is widely acknowledged as a complex and potentially face-threatening speech act, owing to its inherent opposition to another's proposition. Pragmatic research emphasizes that disagreements cannot be fully understood solely through semantics, but must be analyzed in terms of illocutionary force, context, and relational goals (e.g., Makalela & Mokhothu, 2024). Politeness theories, notably Brown & Levinson's (1987)

framework, conceptualize disagreement as a face-threatening act (FTA) that requires strategic mitigation to protect positive and negative face needs. Within this perspective, strategy choice is influenced by social power, social distance, and the weight of imposition of the act itself.

Several cross-linguistic studies have adopted Brown & Levinson's politeness model to compare disagreement strategies across different cultures and learner populations. For example, Al Jaid & Ghazanfari (2023) found that native English speakers tend to use direct and negative politeness strategies, while Iraqi EFL learners more frequently used positive and indirect strategies, especially when the interlocutor held a higher status, indicating sensitivity to face, but different strategic preferences. Similarly, research with Chinese undergraduates demonstrated that American and Chinese speakers differ in politeness strategy deployment: Americans favored positive politeness regardless of power or distance, whereas Chinese learners' choices varied significantly according to these socio-pragmatic variables. Other studies (Behnam & Niroomand, 2012; Niroomand, 2012), which use discourse completion tests (DCTs) with Iranian EFL learners, show that power relations influence the selection of politeness strategies, with learners adapting their disagreement strategies depending on whether the addressee was of higher, equal, or lower status.

Although spoken disagreement has been extensively studied, written and online contexts reveal unique pragmatic features. For instance, Chaqmaqchee & Jasim (2022) investigated disagreement in online asynchronous discussions among Iraqi EFL learners and found that learners' responses often neglected interlocutors' face needs and social statuses, leading to pragmatic choices that did not align with socio-pragmatic norms. Research on the interface of politeness strategies and power relations underscores the dynamic relationship between socio-pragmatic context and linguistic realization. Heidari et al. (2015) demonstrated that both male and female Iranian speakers modify their disagreement strategies based on interlocutors' power status, with females showing heightened caution even in high solidarity situations. Studies adopting comprehensive taxonomies of disagreement, such as that of Muntigl & Turnbull (1998), highlight how the selection of pragmatic strategies in disagreement is shaped not only by culture and proficiency, but also by macrostructural roles, such as lecturer–student vs peer interactions (Huettner, 2010).

The challenge for EFL learners lies not only in mastering lexical and grammatical proficiency but also in developing pragmatic competence to negotiate FTAs effectively. Song (2020) observed that EFL learners often lack explicit instruction in pragmatic strategies for disagreement, limiting their ability to use culturally appropriate politeness forms, which can lead to miscommunication or perceptions of rudeness. Similarly, corpus studies comparing Tunisian non-native speakers and American English speakers show clear differences in how disagreement is linguistically structured, with NT learners depending more heavily on overt mitigation devices. While Brown & Levinson's model accounts for strategic mitigation to protect face, Spencer-Oatey's (2008) "Rapport Management Framework" broadens the analysis by emphasizing how relational goals

and sociality rights shape interactional patterns, including opening and closing sequences, pre-disagreement moves, and post-disagreement repair. This holistic perspective aligns with empirical observations that disagreement does not occur in isolation but within broader discourse structures and relationship contexts.

Although extensive research exists on EFL disagreement in Arabic, Chinese, and Iranian contexts, studies specific to Macedonian EFL learners remain limited. However, research on intercultural pragmatics and politeness in North Macedonian university settings reveals variation in face negotiation strategies across different ethnic and language backgrounds, supporting the need for studies that are sensitive to local socio-pragmatic norms.

3. Methodological Framework

This study applies a mixed method analysis on the speech act of disagreement. The focus is on the full linguistic structure of written disagreements with both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the applied strategies and level of politeness. Also, special emphasis is put on the variable social relations between the interlocutors and their probable influence over the linguistic form of the disagreements.

The participants in the research are 40 first-year university students. All of the participants are currently enrolled at the department of English language and linguistics as part of the Faculty of Philology at the University Goce Delcev in Stip. The level of English they are taking as first-year students is B1+.

The main research instrument was an anonymous questionnaire with 3 sample situations. Data was collected during an intercultural workshop event held at the Faculty of Philology at the Goce Delcev University. The participation in the workshop was entirely voluntary and students were informed that declining to participate would have no impact on their academic work. First, the student followed a short presentation about the study's purpose and procedures. Second, they were given a short questionnaire. Informed consent was implied through the anonymous submission of the completed questionnaires. Personal information such as age, gender etc. was not collected; hence full confidentiality was guaranteed. Students received a printed questionnaire and were asked to respond with their most natural reaction to three described sample situations, where they need to reply with a disagreement toward an interlocutor, who changes from a friend to a classmate and then a teacher.

Table 1: Questionnaire Description

Described scenario	Social distance	Social status
Disagreement about a movie with a friend	low	equal
Disagreement about a project with a colleague	medium	equal
Disagreement with professor's feedback on an assignment	high	unequal

The questionnaire produced 120 responses for the three situations, which were analyzed based on the Brown & Levinson's politeness framework. Further qualitative analysis was also applied without following any particular framework rigidly, but a few classification frameworks (Song, 2020; Hamdan et al., 2024) were loosely considered during the analysis. The main aim of the data analysis was to determine the linguistic realization structure of the expressed disagreements and to possibly correlate any connections between the actual linguistic form and the different social relations between the interlocutors. The main focus is on the strategies used to express the act of disagreement as the central act in the analyzed utterances. Moreover, the modifiers that appear as words and/or phrases in the opening and closing sequence were also analyzed and classified.

4. Results & Analysis

4.1. Quantitative results

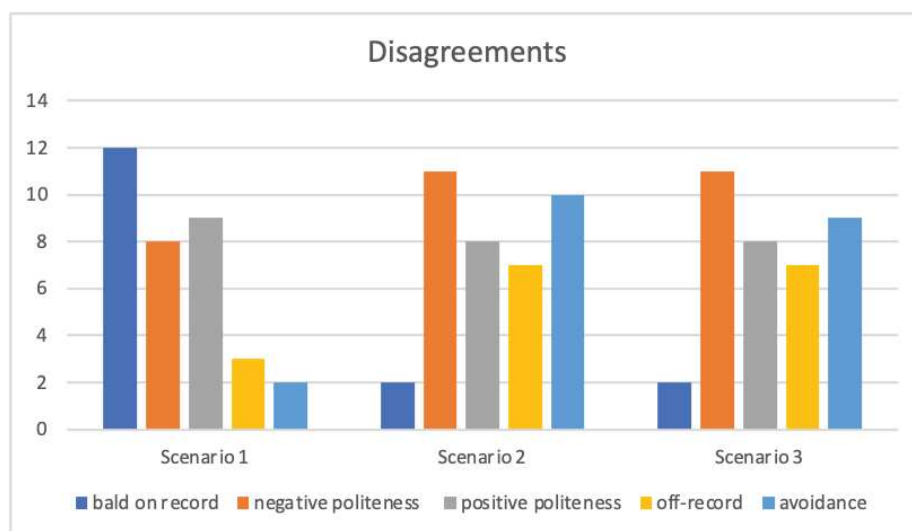
The present study investigates the realization of disagreement strategies across three different communicative contexts: peer disagreement about a watched movie (scenario 1), colleague disagreement regarding a project (scenario 2) and disagreement with a professor concerning essay assessment (scenario 3). The initial results show the most frequent form of a disagreement is through a combination of strategies (69%), then there is significantly smaller percentage of single strategy responses (20%) and a few responses of avoidance (11%).



Figure 1: Frequency of Strategy Types

In the second stage of the analysis, we classified and analyzed (both quantitatively and qualitatively) the responses for each situation separately. As illustrated in Graph 1, the distribution of disagreement strategies varies systematically across the three situational contexts. In the first scenario, the most frequently employed strategy is bald on record, which indicates a preference for direct and unmitigated expression of opposition. In

contrast, the second and third scenarios are characterized with a predominance of negative politeness strategies, which suggests that respondents are more inclined to mitigate their disagreements in order to preserve the interlocutor's face and minimize potential imposition. However, it also has to be emphasized that positive politeness strategies occur at nearly same frequency as negative politeness strategies that demonstrates a relatively balanced use of face-mitigating devices. Herein, respondents do not rely only on strategies that minimize imposition, but also on those that express solidarity or rapport with the interlocutor.



Graph 1: Scenario-Based Frequency of Strategy Types

Although this quantitative overview highlights clear differences in strategic preferences across different scenarios, it does not provide a comprehensive account of the internal structure of disagreements. The graph illustrates the frequency patterns of the general types of strategies used to express disagreement, but it does not reveal how specific linguistic forms, pragmatic functions and contextual variables interact with each other. Consequently, a detailed qualitative analysis followed, which enabled to correlate the identified strategies with the relevant contextual and social features. Hence, it enabled a better understanding of the pragmatic and linguistic structure of disagreements.

Scenario (1)

The first scenario includes a disagreement between peers about a watched movie. This scenario includes a moderate familiarity, moderate social distance between the interlocutors, manageable power difference and medium imposition.

The results show that the dominant form are direct disagreements or bald on record strategies, which indicates that the participants were relatively comfortable expressing opposition openly. However, the direct disagreements are often followed by expressions of sympathy, reasoning and explanations, while they are also preceded by hedges and

statements of understanding. Hence, there is high frequency of positive politeness as well, through expressions of understanding and approval. This reflects participants' effort to maintain solidarity and group cohesion. On the other hand, negative politeness strategies such as hedges, apologies, explanations etc. appear in moderate frequency. The off – record use was very limited in the form of avoidance of ambiguity or preference for clarity. Hence, in a situation with a lower power distance, familiarity between interlocutors and lower perceived face threat, the participants tend to mitigate the disagreement rather than avoid it.

Examples:

“I don't like this movie, to be honest.”

(bald on-record: direct disagreement)

“I'm glad you enjoyed it, but I just didn't find it very good.”

(positive politeness: solidarity-oriented mitigation)

“I really think that the movie we watched was not my cup of tea.”

(negative politeness: hedging and softening)

“Maybe you can tell me what was the think that made you enjoy it so I can see it as well?”

(off-record politeness: indirect/implied disagreement)

Scenario (2)

The second scenario includes a disagreement between colleagues with moderate social distance and professional context. Although colleagues may hold relatively equal institutional status, this type of context also entails accountability and long-term collaboration. Therefore, the rank of imposition is higher than in a more casual peer interaction. In this scenario the dominant strategy is negative politeness in the form of: hedges, apologies, indirect disagreement, personal opinions etc. This suggests high awareness of face threat, greater social distance, high power difference and high imposition. Participants aim to minimize the imposition and respect the hearer's autonomy. Avoidance appears significantly more in this scenario that points toward discomfort of the participants with open disagreement, high perceived risk and strong face sensitivity. Compared to the first scenario there is a large drop in direct disagreement. On the other hand, there is moderate use of off-record strategies in the form of hints and indirect suggestions.

Examples:

“That's not a good plan. We can do better so we don't make mistakes.”

(bald on-record: direct disagreement)

“I like the fact that we are suggesting things in order to help us completing the project, but I think that the method you suggested is not so compatible in this situation. We can try and use another method.

(positive politeness: acknowledgement + mitigation + suggestion)

“I'm really sorry for interrupting you, but I personally think that this method is not really effective for our project.”

(negative politeness: hedge, apology, indirectness)

“Okay I understand what you mean, but maybe we should come up with some other method as well, I think it could be quite productive and we might end up with an even better idea.”

(off-record: indirect)

“To be honest I don’t completely agree with your suggestion. I think it is inefficient and could lead to mistakes. How about we stop that part because we’re running out of time and the last thing we need is to cause conflict?”

(multiple strategies: positive politeness + negative politeness + indirect mitigation)

Scenario (3)

The third scenario includes a disagreement between a student and a professor due to an assessment of a certain task. It represents a high - face threatening act (FTA) because it threatens the professor’s positive face, or the desire to be seen as competent and fair; and simultaneously threatens the student’s own face due to the social power asymmetry between the interlocutors. Moreover, it includes a relatively high level of imposition. Results show that when disagreeing with a professor, participants prefer negative politeness strategies mostly by asking for clarifications or reasons for the low assessment. Then follows a considerably lower frequency of positive politeness strategies and off-record strategies with almost equal application. The frequent use of thanking, apologies and hedging further demonstrates participants effort to mitigate the face threat. Off-record strategies such as hinting also show avoidance of explicit confrontation. Direct disagreement was rare, indicating strong sensitivity to power relations. There were also a few instances of complete avoidance to respond to the given scenario. Therefore, the analysis reveals that participants overwhelmingly prefer mitigated and indirect strategies when disagreeing with a professor about an essay assessment.

Examples:

“I’m sorry, but I think that I have well separated essay.”

(bald on-record: direct disagreement)

“Thank you Mrs, I thought my point was clear, but I am glad you pointed it out to me, could you help me find exactly what I did wrong.”

(positive politeness: solidarity + acknowledgement)

“Thank you for your feedback. Would you be able to elaborate why you thought any argument was unclear? I would like to hear your thoughts, so I can improve”.

(hedging + deference + indirectness)

“Hey I don’t mean to be disrespectful, I just ought to know why you think the argument in one of the paragraphs is unclear, I worked really hard on it.”

(off-record: indirectness + implicature)

“Thank you so much for the feedback. I’d like to point out that I don’t fully agree about the point you made towards that paragraph. I believe it was well.”

(multiple strategies: positive politeness + negative politeness + indirect disagreement)

5. Discussions

The present findings reveal a systematic relationship between contextual variables and the strategic realization of disagreement. Across the three scenarios, participants adjusted their linguistic behavior in ways that reflect sensitivity to power relations, social distance and the perceived seriousness of the face-threatening act. Rather than functioning as a fixed communicative behavior, disagreement emerges as a contextually negotiated act shaped by relational dynamics. Following the framework of Brown & Levinsons (1987), the observed data demonstrate a graduate shift from relative directness in low-risk contexts to heightened mitigation in situations including professional evaluation and institutional hierarchy. Based on Brown & Levinson's (1987) model of politeness, the weight of the face-threatening act is determined by three social variables: power, social distance and rank of imposition. The obtained and analyzed data closely aligns with this theoretical formulation.

In the peer interaction scenario, disagreement is realized with comparatively greater directness. The prevalence of bald-on-record strategies suggests that when interlocutors share equal power and low social distance, the perceived weight of the FTA is relatively limited. In such contexts, clarity and authenticity appear to be prioritized, and speakers seem comfortable expressing opposing views explicitly. However, it is important to emphasize that directness does not equate to relational insensitivity. Even when disagreements are formulated openly, they are frequently accompanied by mitigating elements such as justification, partial agreement, or expressions of empathy. This indicates that speakers remain attentive to face concerns, even when the interactional risk is minimal. Positive politeness strategies play a meaningful role in this context, reinforcing solidarity and shared group membership. Thus, peer disagreement is best characterized not as confrontational, but as balanced - speakers combine openness with relational maintenance, reflecting pragmatic awareness rather than face disregard.

A noticeable shift occurs in the professional colleague scenario. Although institutional power may be relatively symmetrical, the professional setting introduces evaluative pressures, expectations of teamwork, and the possibility of long-term relational consequences. In this context, disagreement becomes more cautiously managed. The reduced presence of direct strategies, alongside the increased reliance on negative politeness, off-record formulations, and avoidance, suggest heightened sensitivity to interpersonal risk. Speakers appear concerned not only with expressing dissent, but also with doing so in a manner that safeguards professional rapport. The prominence of negative politeness strategies in this scenario indicates a stronger orientation toward respecting the interlocutor's autonomy and minimizing imposition. Hedging, indirect suggestions, and deferential phrasing allow speakers to register disagreement while softening its impact. At the same time, the increased use of off-record strategies reveals a preference for ambiguity, enabling speakers to imply dissent without committing to explicit confrontation. Avoidance strategies further underscore the perceived delicacy of professional disagreement; withholding or delaying disagreement may serve as a risk-management mechanism in contexts where harmony and cooperation are institutionally

valued. Compared to the peer setting, solidarity-building strategies appear less central than the protection of individual autonomy, highlighting a shift in the primary face concern from positive to negative face.

The hierarchical professor-student scenario demonstrates the most pronounced re-orientation in strategic behavior. Here, disagreement is embedded within a clear asymmetry of power and a context of formal academic evaluation. Such conditions substantially increase the perceived weight of the FTA. In line with Politeness Theory, speakers overwhelmingly rely on negative politeness strategies, including extensive hedging, apologetic framing, and detailed reasoning. These strategies function to signal deference and acknowledge institutional authority, thereby reducing the threat inherent in challenging a superior's judgment. Direct disagreement in this context is markedly constrained, reinforcing the perception that unmitigated opposition is socially inappropriate or potentially risky in hierarchical academic relationships. Interestingly, while avoidance is present, it does not dominate to the same extent as in the professional colleague scenario. This suggests that when there is a possibility for an academic outcome, speakers may feel compelled to articulate disagreement; for instance, to seek clarification or contest an evaluation, but they do so through carefully mitigated forms rather than complete withdrawal. In this sense, the academic hierarchy does not silence disagreement; rather, it reshapes its linguistic realization into highly deferential and face-sensitive forms.

Taken together, the three scenarios reveal a clear pragmatic gradient. As relational risk intensifies, whether through increased social distance, professional accountability, or institutional power asymmetry, direct strategies recede and mitigation becomes more elaborate. In low-risk peer contexts, disagreement is managed through balanced directness and solidarity markers. In professional contexts, speakers prioritize autonomy protection and ambiguity to preserve working relationships. In hierarchical academic settings, deference and imposition-minimization dominate, reflecting acute awareness of authority and evaluation. These findings provide strong qualitative support for the central claims of Politeness Theory. Strategy selection appears systematically aligned with variations in power, distance, and imposition, confirming that disagreement is not merely a linguistic act but a socially calibrated performance. At the same time, the data suggest that speakers rarely rely on a single strategy type in isolation. Instead, disagreements are often constructed through layered combinations of direct statements and mitigating devices, indicating that pragmatic competence involves flexible strategy blending rather than categorical choice.

Overall, the study underscores that disagreement behavior is socially conditioned and strategically negotiated. Speakers demonstrate a sophisticated capacity to adapt their linguistic choices to contextual demands, balancing clarity with relational sensitivity. The observed progression from relative directness to extensive mitigation across scenarios illustrates how interpersonal risk shapes communicative behavior. Future research may further explore how additional variables, such as cultural norms, gendered interactional styles, or institutional conventions; interact with power and distance to influence

disagreement practices. Such investigations would deepen our understanding of how pragmatic competence operates across diverse communicative environments.

From an applied perspective, these findings carry important implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) studies. Pragmatic competence, or i.e., the ability to use language appropriately across contexts, is a crucial component of communicative competence. However, EFL instruction has traditionally prioritized grammatical accuracy over socio-pragmatic awareness. The present results demonstrate that disagreement, a common yet potentially sensitive speech act, is highly context-dependent and requires nuanced understanding of power, distance, and imposition.

For EFL learners, failure to adjust disagreement strategies appropriately may lead to perceptions of rudeness, passivity, or lack of confidence. For instance, excessive directness in hierarchical contexts may threaten the interlocutor's face, while excessive avoidance in professional contexts may undermine credibility. Explicit instruction in politeness strategies, including awareness of positive and negative face, can therefore enhance learners' ability to navigate academic and workplace interactions effectively. Moreover, incorporating scenario-based pragmatic training into EFL curricula may help learners develop sensitivity to relational variables and expand their repertoire of disagreement strategies. Teaching learners how to hedge, justify, partially agree, or frame disagreement deferentially, can foster pragmatic flexibility and reduce the risk of cross-cultural misunderstanding. In this regard, the study not only reinforces the explanatory power of Brown and Levinson's model, but also highlights its pedagogical relevance in developing learners' interactional competence. Furthermore, by extending these insights to EFL contexts, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how pragmatic awareness can be cultivated to support effective and context-appropriate communication.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that EFL learners' written disagreements are systematically shaped by social context, particularly by factors of social distance and social status. The mixed-method analysis revealed consistent patterns in the selection of disagreement strategies and pragmatic modifiers, showing a clear shift from more direct forms toward increased mitigation as interlocutor power increases. These findings confirm that disagreement is not produced randomly, but it reflects learners' development of pragmatic competence and sensitivity to interpersonal risk. By highlighting the interaction between linguistic choice and contextual variables, the study contributes to research in instructional and intercultural pragmatics and provides insights that may help future pedagogical approaches in teaching pragmatic competence in EFL settings.

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Appendix 1 - A Questionnaire for students

Task: How EFL learners disagree with people of different social status or familiarity?

1. You and your friend just watched a movie together. You thought it was boring and poorly made, but your friend really enjoyed it and thinks it's one of the best movies they've seen. You want to express your different opinion without upsetting them. (write down couple of sentences)

2. You are working on a group project at university. One of your classmates suggests a method for completing the project that you think is inefficient and could lead to mistakes. You need to express your disagreement and suggest a better approach without causing conflict in the group.

3. You received feedback on your essay from your teacher. The teacher commented that your argument in one paragraph is unclear, but you believe your point is well-supported and accurate. You want to express your disagreement politely and ask for clarification or reconsideration.

