



Examining American and Chinese Students' Strategies When Giving Face-to-Face Critical Feedback in Academic Settings

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While the literature on popular Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) such as complaining, requesting, promising, apologizing, and giving and receiving compliments is thriving, the speech act of giving critical feedback in an intercultural setting is quite understudied (but see Itakura & Tsui, 2011; Nguyen, 2008, 2012). In addressing this issue, this paper aims at examining how American and Asian students utilize mitigating strategies when giving face-to-face critical feedback. The study was also designed to record these students' strategy modification in order to adapt to an intensified level of face-threat. Ten participants (five American and five Chinese students) were recruited to join a three-part interview. For the first component of the study, the subjects watched a video of a badly presented presentation and played the role of the presenter's classmates to comment on the presenter's presenting skill (Task A). The face-threatening level was then enhanced as the interviewees were required to imagine facing and giving feedback directly to the presenters (Task B). The second step features the participants reading four written arguments and making critical evaluations (Task C). The change in face-threatening level was marked when the participants' comments were unexpectedly challenged by the interviewer who pretended to hold an opposite viewpoint (Task D). Finally, a semi-structured interview was carried out to find out the participants' perspectives on giving critical feedback. Collected data reveal fairly equivalent use of mitigating devices by American and Chinese students in Task A and C, while some divergences in strategies were observed in Task B and D.

Keywords: critical feedback, mitigating strategies, strategy modification, American, Chinese

Introduction

Face is a popular and important concept in the field of pragmatics. Originated in Chinese culture and once termed as a "hollow thing which men in China live by" (Lin, 1936, p. 191), face advanced to the position of "a technical or scientific term to denote the public self-image all human beings wish to maintain" (Locastro, 2012, p. 137). Phenomenal as this concept is, face in different cultures may depict divergent characteristics. To be specific, in an individualistic society, saving face is characterized by fulfilling an individual's demand for being autonomous and independent. In contrast, whether an individual's needs must succumb to a group's needs determines if face is maintained or not in a collectivistic society (Hofstede, 1980, 1991). The distinct values of face across cultures are congruent with Brown and Levinson's (1987) concepts of positive and negative face. While people embracing positive face desire to be included and treated as members of groups or communities, ones with negative face put forward the expectation of not being disturbed or imposed on. As a result, in maintaining a positive face for interlocutors, speakers tend to emphasize inclusiveness, friendliness, and solidarity, while apology, self-denigration, and softened imposition are of favor to preserve the negative face.

Regarding the fact that different cultures value specific face-saving strategies over others, maintaining politeness in intercultural contexts and avoiding negative stereotypes in L2 cultures requires language learners to master not only linguistic but also pragmatic knowledge (Locastro, 2012, p. 136). Of these two elements, the latter one is considered as a real challenge for L2 learners. Ishihara and Cohen (2010) even claimed that without explicit teaching, it may take language learners more than 10 years to acquire native-like pragmatic ability in an L2-immersion setting. As a result, having pragmatically appropriate conversations in L2 is a daunting task for L2 learners, especially when they are involved in face-threatening acts (FTAs). While the literature on popular FTAs such as complaining, requesting, promising, apologizing, and receiving and giving compliments is thriving, the speech act of giving critical feedback in an intercultural setting is quite understudied, with a few exceptions by Itakura and Tsui (2011) and Nguyen (2008, 2012, 2013). In addressing this issue, this paper aims at examining how American and Asian students utilize mitigating strategies when giving face-to-face critical feedback. The study was also designed to record these students' strategy modifications in order to adapt to an intensified level of face-threat.

This paper is organized in three main sections. It will continue by reviewing studies on how Asian English learners carry out some common FTAs, and then by clarifying the main concept, which is giving critical feedback, by contrasting it with the speech act of disagreeing. In the subsequent section, details of the present study, namely the research questions, participants, methods, and data analysis will be provided. The final part will be dedicated for discussing the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study, directions for future research, and the pedagogical implications.

Literature Review

Asian English Learners and Their Uses of Mitigation Devices in FTAs

Murphy and Neu (1996) examined 14 Korean and 14 American graduate students' recorded responses to a complaint-prompted situation: Their papers had been marked unreasonably low. The collected data revealed similarities in three out of four semantic components of their responses such as clarifying purposes, explaining reasons, and proposing compensations. The divergence, however, lies in the key component of the target speech act. Instead of complaining, 11 out of 14 Korean students unwittingly formulated criticisms. Whereas the American subjects utilized the speech act of expressing dissatisfaction to refrain from directly confronting the professor with criticism, a typical response of the Korean counterparts demonstrated a denial of responsibility, an accusation of the professor for their undeserved scores, and an explicit demand for a solution with the modal verb "should" (Murphy & Neu, 1996, pp. 205-206). The differences in produced speech acts between the two groups gave rise to discontent among the English native speakers who perceive the criticisms of the Korean students as belligerent, contemptuous, untrustworthy, and improper.

Regarding the same speech act, Chen, Chen and Chang (2011) explored the strategies employed by 20 American and 20 Chinese students using a written discourse completion test. This study reported a resemblance in the types of strategies and a distinction in linguistic devices to realize some strategies between two groups. Specifically, with regard to requesting a repair, the American preference for "hedged performatives" such as "I would like..." was contrasted with the Chinese's uses of "subjectivizers" such as "I hope..." and "I want to..." (Chen, Chen, & Chang, 2011, p. 264). Similar to Murphy and Neu (1996), the American participants found their counterparts' direct requests impolite.

The perceived impoliteness can be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, the Asian language learners demonstrated an underuse of pragmalinguistic devices to mitigate face-threat, such as the use of pronoun "we" to share the responsibility, asking for advice and permission, the use of "it" to shift the focus of the complaint, and some downtoners like "maybe," "just," "a little," and "kind of" (Murphy & Neu, 1996, p. 204). This lack of such mitigating devices was also confirmed in Yang (2014). By comparing the

frequency and the collocations of “somewhat” in the native English BYU-BNC corpus and the Chinese Learners’ English corpus, the author emphasized the less regular use of this downtoner by the Chinese speakers.

The second factor lies in Asians’ general negative transfer of L1 sociopragmatic knowledge. As members of a collectivistic society, Asian speakers refrained from expressing annoyance with the aim of maintaining the solidarity among interlocutors. The American speakers, in contrast, exhibited dissatisfaction in their complaint, which was previously redressed by a downgrader such as “I love working here” (Chen, Chen, & Chang, 2011, p. 267). The discrepancy in sociopragmatic choices of strategies was echoed in Yuan and Wan-de’s (2011) study of requests made by 30 American and 30 Chinese college students. A comparison of responses for a discourse completion test disclosed higher levels of directness in the Chinese students’ requests. This choice of strategy, despite being considered rude in individualism-oriented societies, is deemed to enhance intimacy and harmony in collectivism-oriented countries.

The Speech Act of Giving Peer-to-peer Critical Feedback

Giving critical feedback is defined as disclosing speakers’ dissenting opinions and suggesting remedies for the hearers’ undesired acts or products (Cutumisu & Schwartz, 2018; Kearney, Webb, Goldhorn, & Peters, 2013; Nguyen, 2012; Olwagen & Swart, 2018). This speech act is also equated with constructive criticism, a situation “when a person honestly criticizes another in a way designed to promote growth or improvement with the underlying intention of being kind” (Lamborn, Fischer, & Pipp, 1994, p. 495).

A brief comparison of constructive criticism with disagreeing is useful for clarifying two special characteristics of giving critical feedback as well as to clear some confusion that may arise when discussing the method of this study. First of all, while one can disagree with another by simply expressing his/her contradictory viewpoint, critical feedback, once given, requires supporting details to justify its validity (Malamed, 2000). The second distinction lies in the nature of the two speech acts. Disagreement threatens harmony, intensifies tension, and pushes interlocutors toward the “conflict threshold” (Angouri, 2012, p. 1566). The sole purpose of giving critical feedback, on the other hand, is to promote improvement despite some risks of unexpected misunderstanding due to improper uses of strategies.

In academic settings, critical feedback is not only directed from teachers but is also initiated by classmates in peer interaction activities. For a long time, peer feedback has been characterized as an effective method to lower students’ anxiety, boost learning experiences, and build up motivation (McGarrell, 2010; Sato, 2007, 2013; Tulung, 2008).

Despite considerable value, peer feedback faces issues due to learners’ insufficient confidence and a lack of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge (McGarrell, 2010, p. 74). Further complications even arise when peer feedback is carried out in an intercultural setting. Discrepancy between strategies for providing critical feedback may result in serious misunderstandings and negative stereotypes (Cheng & Tsui, 2009; Malamed, 2010; Martinez-Flor & Uso-Juan, 2010; Meier, 2010; Thomas, 1983).

Regarding the indispensable role of critical peer feedback and the foreseeable obstacles that students may encounter, the present study was designed to enhance mutual understanding and to foster effective learning experiences. In this study, critical peer-to-peer feedback is defined as making negative evaluations on the hearers’ disagreeable academic performances. Participants’ choices of making suggestions, however, are counted as justification for their evaluations. Accordingly, the terms ‘negative evaluation’ and ‘critical feedback’ may be used interchangeably throughout the paper.

How to Make Evaluations

To prevent possible failure in communication regarding the speech act of making evaluations, a variety of studies have been carried out to examine the evaluating strategies employed by people from English-speaking countries. For example, Mauranen (2002) compared the one-million-word MICASE corpus,

which features academic speech in the US, and the equal-size part B of the Microconcord corpus, which focuses on academic contexts in a broader sense, so it also includes popular publications and didactic texts. The author concluded that in spoken discourse, evaluations are more positive and that evaluative terms (e.g., *right, cool, good, nice, right, well*, etc.) are less specific than those in written discourse such as *sensible, strength, vital, weak, unlawful, or reckless*. Additionally, in oral evaluations, while the most common intensifiers (e.g., *very, really* or *highly*) are strongly associated with positive adjectives, common mitigators, such as *just, probably, and slightly*, do not demonstrate a clear preference for negative adjectives. Instead, the most common mitigator *just* was used as a part of lead-in expressions (e.g., *I just wanted to point out..., if we could just...*).

The result of Mauranen's (2002) study is similar to a study done by Jucker, Smith, and Ludge (2003). In their study, the authors explored how American people make use of vague expressions to maintain fluency, to lower processing cost, and to express conversational implicatures, which include evaluations. The study contributed a wide variety of strategies which speakers utilize, not only to mitigate their evaluative comments, but also to relevantly and appropriately express their true opinions. For example, downtoners and double hedges such as *sort of, kind of, or a bit*, can be used to soften the speech act of criticism while implying a more complicated thought in speakers' minds than the direct expressions. Additionally, parenthetical phrases, such as *I think, I believe, or I guess*, adverbs like *probably, presumably, probably, and possibly*, as well as various kinds of modal verbs, such as *might, would, and could*, can effectively indicate a detachment of speakers from their expressed propositions and give hearers opportunities to make their own interpretations, thus reducing the face-threatening effects and establishing an interpersonal relationship.

Despite regular vagueness in wordings, speakers are still able to indicate their evaluative stances through certain word choices, as confirmed in Kamoen, Mos, and Dekker's (2015) three studies. Specifically, in the first study, participants were instructed to provide demographic details, then they were asked to imagine that they were looking for information about hotels for a trip to a Greek island. After that, they continued to read four composed reviews about four fictional hotels, the rated appreciation for the hotels, the reviewers, and the reviews on a 7-point agree-disagree scale. The second study resembled the first one, with restaurants substituted for hotels. The final study was to examine if participants' beforehand expectations can affect their latter evaluations. Based on analyzed data, the authors concluded that the reviewers' choices of negative or positive frame (e.g., half empty or half full) in direct or indirect comments (e.g., bad or not good) indicate their evaluative stances or uncertainty, which then can be interpreted by the interlocutors. Moreover, the results also revealed that while reviewers use negated positive term (*not good*) instead of direct negative term (*bad*) to maintain politeness, the negated negative term (*not bad*) demonstrated a slightly less positive evaluation than direct positive term (*good*). Beneficial as the findings of this study are, it is important to be aware that writing online reviews is not truly a face-threatening act as there is no specific interlocutor in this kind of interaction, and the approach through which the reviewers make online evaluations and through which the readers interpret the evaluations may be different from the true face-threatening speech act of evaluating.

In another examination of written evaluations, Fortanet (2008) analyzed 50 blind or anonymous reviews in the fields of Business Organization and Applied Linguistics and specified a variety of linguistic forms that reviewers used in order to express evaluations and imply requests in the process of blind peer-reviewing. The author furthered the analysis by reporting common mitigating strategies such as (1) negating the verb followed by an adjective with positive meaning, (2) preceding or following the negative evaluations with clauses of positive criticism or suggestions for improvement or explanation, (3) denoting the negative evaluations to a mental process resulting from interpreting or appreciating a certain attribute of the manuscript, and (4) reviewers' showing doubts about their own criticisms.

How People from Different Cultures Differ in Making Evaluations

A number of studies are dedicated to discovering how people from English-speaking and Asian

countries utilize different mitigating strategies while evaluating. Itakura and Tsui's (2011) analyzed a corpus of twenty English and twenty Japanese book reviews to examine the divergent mitigation devices employed by Japanese and English reviewers. With the global-level English reviews, the authors focused on the opening and closing parts of the book reviews to identify evaluating strategies related to praising and mitigating evaluations. With the local-level Japanese reviews, the authors categorized, counted, and analyzed all the uses of mitigation devices accompanying positive and negative comments. Based on collected and analyzed data, the authors concluded that both the English and Japanese book reviews included hedges, praises, hypothetical statements (*It would have been valuable if P had devoted close attention to...*), and established inclusiveness (*I am sure F would agree that we need more data,... before we have a truly comprehensive theory of...*) as tools to mitigate the face-threatening act of reviewing others' academic published products. However, the Japanese ones were characterized with exclusive mitigating strategies such as using highly formulaic expressions and honorific language to express self-denigration and apology, asking rhetorical questions to shift the role of evaluating to readers (*Doesn't the way of thinking... lack objectivity and logic?*), recasting problems as potential for future research and attributing problems to the next generation.

Of great interest is how the authors attributed the differences between utilized strategies in English and Japanese book reviews, not only to national or ethnic cultural norms (the English are in favor of positive politeness while the Japanese prefer the negative one), but also to the established feature of the "small culture" of book reviews. Specifically, the long history and tradition of book reviews in English-speaking countries enabled the English reviewers to be more comfortable making direct, explicit evaluations, while the recent emergence of this genre accompanied with the lack of official guidelines in Japan led to the Japanese reviewers' reluctance while evaluating the texts of others. The acknowledgement of the "small culture" in pragmatic choices effectively enhances a comprehensive and case-specific approach toward studying speech acts and pragmatics. For example, in identifying instances of criticism in this study, the authors not only based it on lexico-grammatical features to make their decisions but also took the culture and conventions of the book review genre into account. However, since the study extensively focused on the strategies employed by the Japanese reviewers, the exclusive features of mitigating strategies utilized by the English reviewers were left insufficiently explored.

Nguyen (2008, 2013) studied the criticizing strategies used by Vietnamese speakers (English language learners) and New Zealand and Australian speakers (native speakers of English). While Nguyen (2008) investigated how Vietnamese EFL learners with different levels of proficiency diverge among themselves and from the Australian native speakers in modifying their criticisms during peer-feedback sessions, Nguyen (2013) examined the various strategies utilized by native (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of New Zealand English in making criticisms in daily conversations. From these two studies, Nguyen confirmed significant differences between the native and non-native English speakers' uses of mitigation devices, the variation of pragmatic ability according to the learners' levels of language proficiency, and the negative interference of L1 on L2 learners' pragmatic performances.

These studies are two among the few which specifically focus on how differently the speech act of criticism is carried out by language learners and native speakers. The validity of these studies is enhanced due to the involvements of participants in natural and spontaneous oral communications elicited by conversation-eliciting tasks and role-plays rather than the commonly-used written discourse completion. However, despite their originality, some parts of these studies still need to be carefully considered. First, in Nguyen (2008), since participants were paired in their own groups (native-native, beginner-beginner, intermediate-intermediate, and advanced-advanced), the results of this study are quite limited in the practices of intra-cultural and intra-level communication. For this reason, learners may have refrained from utilizing mitigating strategies prompted by intercultural interactions. On the other hand, Nguyen (2013) demonstrated a greater concern for intercultural communication. Specifically, the involvement of NS and NNS in role-play situations resembled the real interactions that international students encounter in their real lives. However, the limited number of participants with various nationalities may limit the generalization of data to a specific group of speakers or to the whole population of NNS. Furthermore, if

the author had included more academic-related situations in the role-play activity, the results of the study would be more beneficial in enhancing NNS' performances in academic contexts.

Research Questions

The present research study focuses on exploring the gap in evaluating strategies employed by Asian and American students. Due to the small scale of the study, Chinese students, who make up a large percentage of Asian students studying abroad in the US, were chosen as representatives. Accordingly, the two research questions are:

1. How do American and Chinese students differ in making critical feedback in oral academic discourse?
2. How do American and Chinese students adjust their mitigating strategies in dealing with a more face-threatening situation?

Method

Participants

Ten participants (5 American and 5 Chinese students) were recruited at a university in the southern part of the US. Both the American and Chinese groups are comprised of two doctoral students, two master's students, and one undergraduate student, respectively. The participants' age ranges are matched between the two groups (3 participants belong to the age range of 26 or more while the other 2 belong to the range of 21-25).

All the American students reported learning second languages, but only two of them have Asian-related L2 learning experiences. Specifically, one of the American students used to study Vietnamese in Vietnam, while the other was majoring in Chinese and had spent a year in China for a cultural exchange program.

All five Chinese students varied in the time residing in the US and learning English but possessed equivalent oral English proficiency levels. According to the interpretation of their self-reported TOEFL iBT speaking and listening scores, four of the Chinese participants have fair speaking and high listening ability (ETS, n.d.). One Chinese participant is an immigrant and reported his ESL scores instead of the TOEFL iBT results. Four participants self-evaluated their current speaking ability in English as higher-intermediate while one placed herself at the lower-intermediate level.

Information about the recruited participants is summarized in the tables below. The participants chose pseudonyms for themselves.

TABLE 1
Background Information: American Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Current Academic Level	Second Language	Studied Abroad	Location
Brian	26 or more	Doctoral	Vietnamese, Spanish, French	Yes	Vietnam, Dominican Republic
Meggie	26 or more	Doctoral	Spanish	No	
Jean-Michel	26 or more	Master	Spanish, French	No	
Leslie	21-25	Master	German	Yes	England
Allison	21-25	Undergraduate	Chinese	Yes	China

TABLE 2
Background Information: Chinese Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Current Academic Level	Length of Learning English	Length of Residing in the US	Reported English Proficiency	Oral
Lily	26 or more	Doctoral	More than 13 years	3 years	Fair Speaking High Listening Self-assessed speaking skill: higher intermediate	
Si	26 or more	Doctoral	More than 13 years	7 years	Fair Speaking High Listening Self-assessed speaking skill: higher intermediate	
Nina	21-25	Master	More than 13 years	2 years	Fair Speaking High Listening Self-assessed speaking skill: higher intermediate	
Jessica	26 or more	Master	10-13 years	Less than 1 year	Fair Speaking High Listening Self-assessed speaking skill: lower intermediate	
Finesse	21-25	Undergraduate	Less than 10 years	6 years	ESL scores: Speaking: 87 Listening: 98 Self-assessed speaking skill: higher intermediate	

Procedure

Conversation-eliciting tasks were applied to elicit the participants' critical feedback, while a semi-structured interview was used to collect data that complemented the participants' specific choices of evaluating strategies.

Step 1

The participants were directed to watch a video entitled *Bad Presentation Masterclass* and play the role of the presenter's classmates to provide critical feedback. Due to the fact that all participants shared how they would evaluate the presentation in the first place instead of making direct oral evaluation to the presenter, the interviewer (also researcher) followed up with requests for "direct quotations," that is, the exact feedback that participants would give the presenters. The data elicited in this step were recorded under Task A (initial responses after watching the video) and Task B (responses after being requested for direct quotations)

Step 2

In a hypothetical scenario, the participants joined a peer-reviewing session of a composition course in which they were expected to make critical evaluations on their peers' arguments in some argumentative essays (see Appendix A). Once the initial evaluations were provided, the interviewer intentionally presented opposite points of view in order to raise the level of face-threatening, thus eliciting the participants' strategies to deal with such a change. As discussed in the literature review, the participants' responses were considered as adapted versions of their critical feedback rather than disagreement due to the fact that they were all in the flow of making evaluations, and their responses were not simply to show contrasting viewpoints, but were accompanied with supporting details and suggestions. The data elicited in this step were recorded under Task C (responses after reading the arguments) and Task D (modified responses after being challenged by the interlocutor).

Step 3

A semi-structured interview and a questionnaire were carried out to find out the participants' perspectives on giving critical feedback in academic settings. The participants also justified their strategic choices by sharing how working with people from different cultures may affect their strategies to mitigate negative evaluations (see Appendix B & C).

For the first two parts of the study, there is a progression in the face-threatening level on the scale of intra- and inter-steps. To be specific, within Task 1, the situation of facing and giving feedback directly to the presenter poses more face-threats than just sharing critical evaluations about the presentation with the interviewer. Regarding Task 2, the change in face-threatening level was marked when the participants' comments were unexpectedly challenged by the interviewer. Moreover, weighing the possibility of causing face loss between the two steps, step 2 required more caution in choosing mitigating devices. In general, all the steps of the study were carried out to answer the first research question, while Task B and D of step 1 and 2 respectively are specifically dedicated for the second one.

Data Analysis

Participants' responses were recorded, and their uses of mitigation devices were coded based on the following Checklist of Evaluating Strategies (see Appendix D). In case the participants used more than one strategy in one sentence, all the used strategies were noted.

Except for the first strategy which incorporates direct evaluation (DIR), the others can be classified under three main categories: justification (JUS), commiseration (COM), and demotion (DEM) (see Table 3). Of the three groups, while JUS can be of use in maintaining both positive and negative face, COM is closely related with saving the former, and DEM conforms to strategies that preserve the latter.

To determine the statistical relationships among nationalities, task types, and strategies, the frequency counts of used strategies were calculated using Pearson chi-square test with the alpha level at $p < .05$.

TABLE 3
Descriptions of Eight Groups of Evaluating Strategies

Categories	Strategies	Descriptions
Direct Evaluation	Criticizing directly	Criticize explicitly with strong negative words and no mitigating devices e.g.: I <u>disagree</u> . The presentation is <u>very boring</u> .
Justification	Praising	Mention positive aspects even though they are quite forced e.g.: I <u>appreciate you prepared the topic</u> .
	Providing reasons	State subjective reasons for the negative feedback or use facts to support the evaluations e.g.: First, he didn't have eye-contact with the audiences. For <u>good presentation</u> , you need to <u>prepare before you start</u> .
	Suggesting improvements	Make suggestions on how to improve using modal, semi-modal verbs and conditional sentences e.g.: I <u>would</u> say that you <u>should</u> prepare more carefully. <u>It would be better if you could</u> show the audiences one of the videos and instruct them to look for these videos on Youtube.
Commiseration	Expressing empathy or partial agreement	Express some agreements, understanding of the interlocutor's situation, and use inclusive pronouns (<i>we/our/us</i>) when referring to the problem or make suggestions e.g.: <u>The first sentence is fine</u> , but the second one maybe problematic. As teachers in the future, <u>we</u> also need to learn how to make evaluations. <u>I also thought</u> it's unfair when you had to do all the work.
	Shifting the subject to evaluator's feelings/ mental processes	Express the negative aspects through their own feelings or mental processes using <i>I think, I guess, personally, I don't think, I feel like, for me...</i> e.g.: <u>It's hard for me</u> to read the words with light colors. <u>I think</u> it's not a good idea.
Demotion	Understating the evaluations	Reduce the negative aspects of the evaluation as well as the intensity of the suggestions using downtoners (<i>sort of, kind of, a little bit, just, etc...</i>) and approximators (<i>about, sometimes, not that, etc...</i>). e.g.: At least, <u>it's not as bad as</u> some presentations I have seen. <u>Sometimes</u> you didn't make the ideas clear enough. <u>I'm kind of</u> confused because I didn't hear about this person before.
	Stating/Excusing the directness, appropriateness & doubting the validity of the evaluations	Show uncertainty about their own evaluations or the way that they evaluate e.g.: <u>I'm not sure</u> about GRE but for GMAT, it doesn't measure all of students' abilities. I think that group work is necessary, <u>but that just me</u> . <u>I apologize for being so direct</u> but I think these sentences need to be corrected.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Analysis and Findings

Uses of strategies across task types

A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the frequency of strategies used by the American and Chinese participants. A significant interaction was found between the participants' nationality and their employed strategies ($X^2(7, 540) = 16.21, p = 0.023 < 0.05$). In general, the American participants made use of more evaluating strategies than the Chinese (290 examples vs. 250 examples). The only category in which the Chinese learners outnumbered the Americans was criticizing directly. While the American group strictly limited the use of direct criticism, their Chinese counterparts seemed to be more relaxed about this. Among other categories of strategies, JUS was equally popular among the

users of both nationalities while there were clear distinctions between the American and Chinese speakers' uses of COM and DEM. In both categories, there were no obvious preferences for positive-face-oriented (COM) or negative-face-oriented (DEM) strategies by any specific nationality. In other words, the belief of Chen et al. (2011), Hofstede (1980, 1991), and Yuan and Wan-de (2011) about the clear division between mitigating strategies favored by specific cultures was not observed in this study.

TABLE 4
Total Strategies Used by Each Nationality Group

Strategy		Nationality		
		American	Total of each category	Total of each Chinese category
DIR	Criticizing directly	2	2	11
	Praising	13		7
JUS	Providing reasons	82	157	93
	Suggesting improvements	62		44
COM	Expressing empathy/ partial agreement	26	77	14
	Shifting to the evaluator's feeling/mental processes	51		44
	Understating the evaluations	27		19
DEM	Stating/Excusing the directness/ appropriateness/doubted validity of the evaluations	27	54	18
Total		290		250

However, the significant relationship between strategy and nationality was not found in all different task types (see Table 5 below). Specifically, according to the result of a chi-square test for three variables (i.e., nationality, task types, and strategy), it is only in Task B and D that the interactions between the participants' used strategies and nationalities are statistically significant, leaving no significant relationship found in Task A and C (Task B: $X^2(7, 99) = 15.76$, $p = 0.027 < 0.05$; Task D: $X^2(7, 102) = 14.55$, $p = 0.042 < 0.05$; Task A: $X^2(7, 137) = 7.6$, $p = 0.37 > 0.05$; Task C: $X^2(7, 202) = 11.9$, $p = 0.104 > 0.05$). These differences can be attributed to the distinct characteristics of these task types. While Task A and C feature less face-threatening acts (the participants just reported how they would make negative evaluations without face-to-face interactions), Task B and D present a higher possibility of the interlocutor's face loss (the participants were requested to make negative evaluations exactly the same way they would in real life in Task B and to continue giving critical feedback after being challenged by the interviewer in Task D).

TABLE 5
Each Group's Strategy Used in Each Task

Tasks				Strategies							
				Criticizing directly	Praising	Providing reasons	Suggesting improvements	Expressing empathy/ partial agreement	Shifting to the evaluator's feeling/ mental processes	Understating the evaluations	Stating/ Excusing the directness/ appropriateness/ doubted validity of the evaluations
Task A	Nationality	American	% (count)	3.4% (2)	3.4% (2)	45.8% (27)	18.6% (11)	1.7% (1)	8.5% (5)	10.2% (6)	8.5% (5)
		Chinese	% (count)	5.1% (4)	0.0% (0)	53.8% (42)	9.0% (7)	1.3% (1)	15.4% (12)	10.3% (8)	5.1% (4)
Task B	Nationality	American	% (count)	0.0% (0)	4.8% (3)	19.4% (12)	38.7% (24)	6.5% (4)	16.1% (10)	11.3% (7)	3.2% (2)
		Chinese	% (count)	2.7% (1)	18.9% (7)	5.4% (2)	51.4% (19)	0.0% (0)	8.1% (3)	5.4% (2)	8.1% (3)
Task C	Nationality	American	% (count)	0.0% (0)	5.0% (6)	30.6% (37)	13.2% (16)	7.4% (9)	23.1% (28)	7.4% (9)	13.2% (16)
		Chinese	% (count)	4.9% (4)	0.0% (0)	38.3% (31)	12.3% (10)	7.4% (6)	18.5% (15)	8.6% (7)	9.9% (8)
Task D	Nationality	American	% (count)	0.0% (0)	4.2% (2)	12.5% (6)	22.9% (11)	25.0% (12)	16.7% (8)	10.4% (5)	8.3% (4)
		Chinese	% (count)	3.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (18)	14.8% (8)	13.0% (7)	25.9% (14)	3.7% (2)	5.6% (3)
Total	Nationality	American	% (count)	0.7% (2)	4.5% (13)	28.3% (82)	21.4% (62)	9.0% (26)	17.6% (51)	9.3% (27)	9.3% (27)
		Chinese	% (count)	4.4% (11)	2.8% (7)	37.2% (93)	17.6% (44)	5.6% (14)	17.6% (44)	7.6% (19)	7.2% (18)

Modifications of strategies when shifting from less to more face-threatening tasks

Even though there are statistically significant differences between the Chinese and American participants' strategies in Task B in D, there is clear evidence that the Chinese participants were fully aware of the intensified face-threatening level and responded with modifications of evaluating strategies (from Task A & C to Task B & D, respectively). Considering the similar nature of shifting from Task A to B and from C to D, within each nationality group, another chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the frequency of different strategies combined in Tasks A & C and Tasks B & D. The results confirmed the significant relationships between strategies and task types in both groups (American group: $X^2(7, 290) = 28.78, p = .000$; Chinese group: $X^2(7, 250) = 36.6, p = .000$).

Table 5 above provides more detailed information about how each strategy was utilized differently in different tasks. According to the information from the table, it is important to highlight four main modifications of strategies: (1) the considerable decrease in *giving reasons* and the increase in *suggesting improvements* within JUS category when both groups shifted from Task A to B, (2) the higher uses of *expressing empathy* and *shifting to evaluators' feelings* (COM) in Task B by the American group, and (3) the more frequent uses of category COM observed in Task D by both groups, and (4) the decreased uses of DEM category observed in Task D by the Chinese group.

First, when shifting from Task A to B, both the American and Chinese participants demonstrated a significant drop in *providing reasons* and a sharp rise in *suggesting improvements*. Although these two strategies fall under the same category JUS, there are still slight differences between them that inform the speakers' strategic choices. While *providing reasons* plays a key role in justifying the validity of the evaluations, thus enhancing the speakers' legitimacy, *suggesting improvements* centralizes on ameliorating the situations for the hearers' sake. This tendency closely corresponds with the participants' points of view about giving critical feedback which will be examined closely in the qualitative analysis, which is not to hurt or insult their peers or classmates but to help them improve.

Second, when the level of face-threat was enhanced in Task B, the American group paid more attention to the category COM than the Chinese one. This observation once again contradicts the notion of culture-specific politeness strategies. To be more specific, while sympathizing with others is assumed to enhance positive face in collectivistic cultures, it was out of favor with the Chinese participants in Task B. However, it is worth noting that since this is the first part of the interview, Chinese English learners may have not familiarized themselves with the situation, thus failing to incorporate a variety of evaluating strategies.

Third, in Task D, both groups demonstrated higher concerns for category COM strategies after being challenged by the interviewer. This modification can be explained by the fact that confronting an opposite point of view may prompt the speakers' concern for the interlocutors' feelings. However, a closer look at how each nationality group utilized each component of category COM may reveal some interesting features. Even though both nationality groups, especially the American one, witnessed an increase in the *expressing empathy* strategy, the other component, *shifting to the evaluators' feelings and mental processes*, was actually more favored by the Chinese participants. This preference may stem from the fact that phrases like "I think," "Personally," "I find it..." which characterize the *shifting to the evaluators' feelings and mental processes* strategy are so simple as well as universal that they can be acquired and applied more easily by the English learners.

Finally, there was a drop in Chinese speakers' uses of DEM category phrases when shifting from Task C to Task D. In other words, the Chinese participants did not effectively make use of linguistic devices listed in the *understating evaluation* strategy like downtoners, hedges, and approximators. While the Chinese participants demonstrated quite equivalent uses of these devices in less face-threatening tasks (Task A and C), they failed to use them sufficiently in the more face-threatening settings (Task B & D). In short, in more 'online' communication tasks, the Chinese participants may place more focus on salient and easy-to-appreciate mitigating strategies like semantic devices.

Qualitative Analysis and Findings

Attitudes toward negative evaluations

The Chinese participants emphasized that making face-to-face negative evaluations is a taboo in Chinese culture which can bring speakers trouble if carried out inappropriately. For example, Si and Nina explained that negatively evaluating others will make the speakers sound like they are “angry, unhappy, and rude” or seeking “revenge” for something. According to their responses, face-to-face negative evaluations are taken very personally in China from the “ancient time.” Lily stated that face-to-face critiques always tend to be avoided in China, saying that face relates to “mentally important stuffs such as reputation and fame” and how people may “lose face” when confronting negative evaluations. Based on the participants’ answers, it is apparent that the Chinese usually refrain from judging people and avoid face-threatening acts.

This Chinese traditional point of view about negative evaluations, however, was not popular among all participants. Specifically, evaluating was defined as a more academic and professional term rather than a personal reaction for taking revenge or offending others. Two American and two Chinese participants reported that their strongest and first impressions about evaluating are associated with “scoring, grading, and testing,” even though they are fully aware that “it can be more than that.” Among the other six participants, the Chinese ones generally described making evaluations as “telling others your true feeling and provide them with feedback to help them improve.” In comparison with the Chinese students’ definitions, the American participants were much more detailed. For example, Allison considered evaluating as “taking ideas as whole to see if they are coherence, or presentable,” then making suggestions according to these categories. Brian emphasized that “it depends on who and what you are evaluating” and broke down the evaluated aspects into “amount of work, efforts, effectiveness, and success.” He furthered his answer by clarifying four essential elements of evaluating: assessing, offering constructive feedback, and suggesting. The diverse levels of detail of both groups’ definitions correspond with Itakura and Tsui’s (2011) discussion of the effects of “small culture” on how people from different countries carry out different pragmatic strategies. According to our American participants, making appropriate face-to-face critical feedback is a part of American culture. Meggie confirmed that in school settings, it is common to make polite criticisms which do “not put some body in a spot... [or make them feel] criticized in front of a group.” Brian stated that students were “taught and encouraged to offer constructive criticisms for classmates from the young age,” while Jean claimed that the American people are too critical by nature. Having a longer history of making face-to-face critical feedback than the Chinese counterparts, the American participants demonstrated a more comprehensive view about the speech act of evaluating. While the American were quite comfortable in providing detailed suggestions, the Chinese’s suggestions were generally limited.

Almost all participants agreed on the benefits of giving critical feedback. Si believed that in comparison with only positive evaluations from which he can learn quite little or nothing, critical evaluations are beneficial in informing him which are not good enough and how to improve. Without explicit support for critical evaluations, Finesse expressed his concerns toward positive evaluations:

I don’t think evaluation is so effective because no one gonna point directly what you did wrong or something. They just try to be polite, be nice, so like, I think that’s why it’s not very helpful (Finesse, personal communication, March 30, 2015).

Despite the apparent benefits, both groups asserted that face-to-face negative evaluations are “hard to give and receive.” Overcoming the first impression by the negative evaluations is a tough task for participants from both groups:

When people give me constructive feedback, criticism, I’m very quick to think it as a personal attack

on my character, even if it's really critical and it wasn't mean to be personal, but I will take it as personal. (Jean, personal communication, March 27, 2015)

I mean it's hard not to be [hurt], but you know once I get pass the initial hurt, it's just like "Ahh, how dare you?" it's like "OK, but you may have a point." (Leslie, personal communication, March 26, 2015)

This is my first time to see so many negative evaluations... it made me look like a loser or something like that. (Si, personal communication, April 1, 2015)

Nina even claimed that she is not in favor of making negative evaluations since she does "not want to disappoint other people." Participants from both groups reported the tendency to opt out from face-to-face negative evaluating in order not to "insult or hurt [their] classmates, [or their] peers." Instead, they suggested using online or written messages as well as one-on-one conference/talk. Allison also suggested creating a common platform, where everyone is supposed to give and receive positive and negative feedback as a way to prevent hurting or being hurt by negative evaluations.

In general, both the American and Chinese participants pay considerable attention to maintaining the appropriateness of as well as minimizing the possible detrimental effects of face-to-face critical evaluations. As discussed in the quantitative analysis, the focus on maintaining face was clearly reflected through pervasive uses of mitigating strategies as well as the adaption of strategies when shifting from less to more face-threatening tasks by both groups of speakers. However, despite being native speakers with more experiences in making negative evaluations, the American participants still found it hard to carry out this speech act appropriately. This reality predicts more challenges for the Chinese participants as second language learners when learning and using evaluating strategies in a new academic setting.

Strategies to mitigate negative evaluations

All the Chinese participants shared that they were strongly impressed by how polite their American peers' critical feedback were, thus making efforts to adopt the native speakers' evaluating strategies:

After they have seen American students' feedback, they'll try to imitate the same writing style. That's how I picked up. First, I may be a little bit more direct, but after I listened to what's people's evaluation to me, I thought that my feedback is too direct or maybe it's not a good way to do this in this situation. I just tried to adjust more. (Finesse, personal communication, March 30, 2015)

For me, in the first time, I tried to avoid the serious critique, I just say something mild, try to make them feel better, but I actually learned a lot from my American peers. Because I see how they comment on my works, they're trying to use nicer words to make suggestion, and avoid making you feel being offended. This is a very important technique." (Lily, personal communication, March 27, 2015)

All Chinese participants reported quite similar strategies for making negative evaluations: providing positive and constructive feedback first, then wording the negative feedback in structures such as *I think...; If you can..., it would be better; If I were you, I would....* This uniform approach toward making negative evaluations was clearly demonstrated through a significant raise from 0% to 18.9% in *praising* when the Chinese participants shifted from Task A to Task B. Beside this common approach, Lily suggested giving listeners choices rather than imposing on them a fixed suggestion, "I'm not saying your uses are wrong, I just say I would prefer another choice rather than your choice."

The American participants, on the other hand, proposed a wider range of strategies which cover more aspects in order to mitigate their negative evaluations. Allison and Brian recommended not rambling,

looking, or gesturing aggressively, and to not fluctuate intonation too much. Instead, they recommended maintaining a calm voice and formulating thoughts in advance. Brian also suggested using “disguised criticism and suggestion,” during which the evaluator “intentionally misinterpret the intention of the presenter but it’s a way to teach them.” Meggie and Leslie focused more on wordings by reframing negative evaluations as recommendations hoping that “instead of feeling bad about what they did, they will leave having ideas for how they can improve.”

A general look at proposed strategies by the two groups of speakers reveals that the Americans had more diverse strategies in mitigating negative evaluations. However, based on the interviewer’s observation of the participants, which are not supposed to be deeply discussed within the scope of this paper, the Chinese participants demonstrated good control over their facial expressions, gestures, and voices when making negative evaluations. Except for some differences in strategies as already discussed above, for other parts, the Chinese participants were able to demonstrate similar performances with the Americans. In other words, the Chinese students’ initiative roles in learning and adapting to the new learning environment contributed to the improvement of their pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge.

While the salient pragmatic strategies were explicitly clarified by both groups, the less salient linguistic strategies, however, were mentioned quite superficially. Both the American and Chinese participants did not emphasize modified linguistic devices as a strategy to mitigate negative evaluations, which led to a question: Is it because the linguistic strategies are not very important for the native speakers in mediating their negative evaluations or because the native speakers unconsciously used these strategies and considered them as an obvious part of mitigating devices? This question can be saved for future research on this theme.

Conclusion

This study addressed an underexplored area of pragmatic research, that of oral critical feedback in inter-cultural academic interactions. While previous studies focused on contrasting written discourse between two cultures (Itakura & Tsui, 2011), intra-cultural communication (Nguyen, 2008), and inter-cultural interaction over daily topics (Nguyen, 2013), the current study was designed with a specific and exclusive focus on how students from different cultures may differ in making and modifying their oral negative evaluations in classroom contexts.

To some extent, the findings of this study conform to those of previous research. For example, the fact that all participants suggested accompanying negative evaluations with positive ones and refrained from making so serious or straightforward criticisms reflects Mauranen’s (2002) conclusions about the positive and less specific nature of oral evaluations. The mitigating strategies discussed in previous studies (Jucker et al., 2003; Fortanet, 2008; Itakura & Tsui, 2011, Nguyen, 2008, 2013) were also commonly and naturally carried out by the participants. Additionally, as confirmed by other studies, a statistically significant difference in the total strategies employed by different nationality groups was also observed in this study.

However, the notion of culture-specific mitigating strategies depicted in Chen et al. (2011), Hofstede (1980, 1991), and Yuan and Wan-de (2011) was not confirmed by the collected data. Speakers were not always in favor of particular strategies that are commonly associated with their respective cultures. This observation may lead to an interesting question for future research: If culture is not the only determinant of which mitigating strategies a speaker can use, then what are the other factors?

In general, the American and Chinese participants demonstrated relatively equivalent evaluating strategies in less face-threatening tasks (Task A, sharing how they would evaluate the presentation with the interviewer; task C, giving peer-feedback on some arguments in argumentative essays) but employed considerably different strategies in more face-threatening settings (Task B, imagining facing and making critical evaluation directly to the presenter and Task D, continuing with their negative evaluations after

being confronted by the interviewer with an opposite viewpoint). Another noticeable distinction lies in the frequency of the less salient linguistic devices. The Chinese speakers' underuses of hedges contrast with the Americans' skillful incorporation of less salient linguistic devices to mitigate face-threatening acts. Despite these differences, the Chinese participants demonstrated a strong awareness of the intensified face-threatening level and actively adjusted their sets of evaluating strategies, which clearly reflected their efforts in autonomously learning and adapting to the new culture. Through this study, a set of strategies for giving critical feedback was compiled and hopefully could inform teachers' instructional strategies. Additionally, the study also calls for teachers' attention on explicitly providing students with pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge, thus preparing them for effective intercultural communication.

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Appendix A

Four Arguments

1. Standardized test is the most reliable form of assessment. Having low scores in standardized tests such as GMAT or GRE means that you don't have enough knowledge and skills to enter graduate schools.
2. Group work is more detrimental than beneficial. Lazy students may benefit from other hard-working group members. For this reason, students should be evaluated according to their individual work only.
3. Online courses are not as efficient as face-to-face ones because without face-to-face communications with professors and other classmates, students will be less motivated to improve their works.
4. Although peer-evaluation can save a lot of teachers' time and effort, teachers should never use peer-evaluation in class since students are not knowledgeable enough to evaluate their peers.

Appendix B

List of Interview Questions

1. In your opinion, in academic setting, what does it mean by "evaluating?"
2. Is evaluating other classmates' presentations, papers, or the like a common practice in your class? Can you give some examples?
3. How do you think about making evaluations, especially negative evaluations about other classmates' works in class?
4. In your culture, is making evaluations, especially negative ones common in academic settings? Can you give some examples?
5. If you have to make a negative evaluation about your classmates' papers or presentations, what will you do in order to make your evaluations sound polite?
6. In your current classes, have you ever felt uncomfortable/ annoyed about a negative evaluation made by another one? Does this person come from the same country with you? Do you think that their evaluating strategies are influenced by their home culture?

Appendix C

Questionnaire (Chinese Participants)

1. Give yourself a pseudonym
2. Which best describes your age? a. 26 or older b. 21-25 c. 20 or under 20
3. Which best describes your current academic level? a. Doctoral student b. Master student c. Undergraduate
4. How long have you been learning English? a. More than 13 years b. 10-13 years c. Less than 10 years
5. How long have you been in the US? a. More than 18 months b. 12-18 months c. Less than 12 months
6. Which best describes your TOEFL iBT speaking score? a. 26-30 b. 18-25 c. Under 18
7. Which best describes your TOEFL iBT listening score? a. 22-30 b. 15-21 c. Under 15
8. How do you evaluate your current speaking ability in English? a. Advanced b. Higher intermediate c. Lower intermediate or below

Questionnaire (American Participants)

1. Give yourself a pseudonym
2. Which best describes your age? a. 26 or older b. 21-25 c. 20 or under 20
3. Which best describes your current academic level? a. Doctoral student b. Master student c. Undergraduate
4. Do you know a second language? a. Yes. What is it? _____ b. No
5. Have you ever studied in another country? a. Yes. Which country? _____ b. No

Appendix D

Checklist of Mitigating Strategies

(Adapted from Fortanet (2008), Itakura & Tsui (2011), Jucker & Ludge (2003), & Nguyen (2008, 2013))

	Task A	Task B	Task C	Task D
Criticizing directly				
Praising/ Mentioning positive aspects though they are quite forced.				
Providing reasons for negative feedback				
- Utilizing facts as reasons for negative feedback				
Suggesting how to improve				
- Modals and semi-modals (should/ could/ may/ might/ need to)				
- Conditional sentences (If you had...; If I were you...)				
Expressing empathy/ partial agreement/ encouragement				
- Inclusive pronouns (We, our)				
Shifting the subject of the sentence to the evaluator's feelings and mental processes				
- Propositional attitudes (I think, I believe, I guess, personally, I don't think, I feel like, I assume, for me, It seems like)				
Understating the negative aspects of the evaluations				
- Downtoners (sort of, kind of, a bit, just)				
- Approximators (about/ around/ like/ some/ sometimes/ not that)				
Stating/Excusing the directness of the evaluations				
Stating/ Excusing the possible inappropriateness of the evaluations				
Doubting the validity of the evaluations				
- Adverbs (maybe, probably)				

Task A: Responses after watching the video

Task B: Responses after being requested for “direct quotations”

Task C: Responses about the arguments

Task D: Modification after being challenged.