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Chapter 9

Teaching Constructive Critical Feedback

INTRODUCTION (6,269 words with answers)

This chapter introduces the notion of *constructive critical feedback* by peers, a type of activity which, when preceded by some initial training, has been found to be effective in improving production in L1 academic classes, particularly composition courses. While a great deal of research has been devoted to orienting students to the content of peer feedback and the structure of peer feedback sessions (Liu & Hansen, 2002; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Rollinson, 2005), little attention has been focused on the language used to provide this feedback. This chapter addresses this lack by providing a set of activities designed to orient learners on how to offer appropriate constructive critical feedback in an English-speaking academic context.

Constructive criticism in general refers to a negative assessment of an individual's current work with the aim of improving current or future performance. It usually involves the identification of a problematic action, choice, or product, as well as advice on how to change or correct the problem. In institutional settings (e.g., classrooms) advice from a superior (e.g., a teacher) on how to improve one's work is expected. At the same time, advice-giving by one peer to another is often tricky. In particular, advice on personal subjects is frequently unwelcome in most English-speaking cultures (See chapter on advice-giving). Students who are asked to assess a peer's work are apt to be

uncomfortable and may convey their message inappropriately. This is especially true for non-native speakers. Research has shown that while students from some countries may find giving feedback that can improve a colleague's work a positive exercise, students from other cultures (particularly Asian cultures) are uncomfortable expressing criticism of another's output (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Soares, 1998).

Other studies have indicated that learners of English may give constructive criticism very differently from native speakers, softening criticism less frequently and aggravating criticism more often, as well as using intensifiers such as *too* and *very* and modal verbs such as *must*, *should*, and *have to* inappropriately (Nguyen 2005). And learners' compliments may be simplified to the point of appearing insincere and lukewarm by native speakers (Takahashi & Beebe 1993).

To address some of the problems that L2 learners may have with constructive critical feedback, this chapter introduces activities designed to increase learners' sensitivity to cultural issues involved in offering critical feedback to peers in English and to help them identify language for expressing critical feedback in academic contexts that is both appropriate in the L2 context and comfortable to the learner.

CONTEXT

The activities described in this chapter were originally devised for and employed successfully with a group of 20 highly motivated young Vietnamese students, ages 17 to 20, who were learning Australian English as a Foreign Language in an EAP program in Hanoi, Vietnam. The learners had been studying English between 4 and 10 years, but had received limited exposure to English outside the program and had never visited an

English-speaking country. They had scored at an intermediate level of English on the International English Language Testing System with scores ranging from 5.0 to 5.5.

The six-month program was designed to prepare the students for future university study in Australia. The curriculum included writing classes and classes that required oral presentations by students. In these classes, the students were often required to give feedback to their peers, for example by reading and commenting on the written draft of a fellow student.

One of the areas in which these students had problems was in giving critical feedback to peers. Problems arose from learners' L1 influence, as well as from their lack of familiarity with the ways constructive criticism is performed in the target language. Constructive criticism in English is usually performed using strategies and softeners.

The activities in this chapter were thus designed to address problems that these students encountered when giving critical feedback. The critical feedback that the students gave to their peers in subsequent classes demonstrated that they improved considerably in their ability to provide appropriate constructive critical feedback to their peers.

Strategies

The two main strategies for constructive criticism are identification of the problem and advice on how to resolve it. Examples include:

Identification of Problem: "I thought you had two conclusions."

"I don't think the comma should've been here."

Advice:

"Why don't you decide on just one conclusion."

"You might want to delete the comma."

Mitigation

Among the means of mitigating a criticism are softeners, linguistic devices that limit potential offense. Softeners that may be used in identifying a problem include external modification such as a) compliments, and internal modification such as b) expressions of uncertainty (using phrases such as *I don't know*, certain modals such as *may*, *might*, and questions), c) problem minimization, and d) Other linguistic devices such as use of past tense or conditional that can also serve to diminish the negative effect of the criticism. A complete description of mitigation devices can be found in Handout 1.

Handout 1

Constructive Criticism: Mitigation Devices

Mitigation Devices are linguistic devices that can reduce the potential offence of an act. They include external mitigating devices such as additional comments, and internal linguistic softening devices, such as uncertainty markers, shifts in tense or condition, softening lexical items or phrases.

1. External Modification: additional comments, separate from the problem identification and advice giving

Compliment: Say something good about the thing you are going to criticize. Avoid bluntness or frankness.

Ex: It's an interesting paper.

That was a great presentation.

2. Internal Modification – linguistic softeners

a. Uncertainty Markers: Show hesitation or uncertainty about the criticism

- i) Use explicit statements of uncertainty

Ex: I'm not sure about that; maybe it needs a transition word.

I don't know that I agree with the third point you made.

- ii) Use modal verbs, adverbs, and phrases that indicate uncertainty: *might, could, may; possibly, probably*

Avoid modal verbs and phrases such as *must, should, and have to* when you are trying to soften problem identification and advice; these modals are usually associated with directness

Ex: This section could be clearer. (Problem) You might add a transition word here. (Advice)

Ex: Your presentation may be too long. (Problem) I'm not sure but maybe you could cut out the second section. (Advice)

- iii. Use Questions, rather than bald statements or imperatives, to identify a problem or propose a potential solution

Ex: Did you summarize the main ideas?

Ex: Could this work?

- b. Past tense, Conditional – Past tense and conditional create a sense of distance between the speaker and the comment.

Ex: Past Tense: I thought it would make more sense that way.

Conditional: If you added a few more examples, your presentation would be stronger.

- c. Other Linguistic Softeners:

Use modifying words and phrases such as *kind of, a little, sort of,*

Ex: This sentence is sort of confusing. It's kind of unclear.

Your second point is a little too direct.

Use the verb *seem*

Ex: Your introduction seems too long.

Use parenthetical phrases such as *I think*, *I'm afraid*

Ex: *I think* you need more examples.

(Note that *I think* is a very weak softener, and may have little or no effect.)

Teachers should be aware that *I think* is very easy for novice learners to add to a statement. However, as they become more proficient students need to be encouraged to master a variety of softeners.

Although the use of mitigation alone does not guarantee that the feedback will be appropriate, criticism without mitigation is often too direct and blunt (although the degree of mitigation expected will vary even among native English speaking communities). The content of the feedback will also have an effect, as will the inclusion of intensifiers such as *too*, *very*, *rather*. (e.g., “You put it too strongly here.”).

CURRICULUM, TASKS, MATERIALS

This section presents the sequenced set of activities for warming up students to start them thinking about how they offer constructive criticism, raising awareness of the strategies commonly used for peer criticism, recognizing softeners, practicing softening critical feedback and producing constructive criticism. The activities are based on authentic language samples (Nguyen 2005).

Activity 1: Warming Up. Reflecting on Giving and Receiving Feedback

The Warming Up activity encourages learners to reflect on their own experiences with constructive critical feedback and on their knowledge of this act in their L1 and the L2.

The teacher might start off by explaining the notion of constructive critical feedback, using the explanation and examples in the Introduction. Students are then ready to work in groups of 3-4 students on Worksheet 1.

Worksheet 1

Warming Up

Work with your group to answer the questions below.

Group A: Discuss your experience in giving constructive critical feedback to peers in English learning contexts, for instance when you are asked to comment on your peer's work or performance. If you have never experienced this in an English context, use your experience in your L1, or try to imagine what would happen.)

Specifically, explain:

- a. What difficulties have you had giving constructive critical feedback?
- b. What are some typical ways in which you have delivered critical feedback?

Write your answers on a piece of paper to turn in.

Group B: Discuss your experience in receiving constructive critical feedback from peers. Recall a time when you received constructive critical feedback and explain:

- a. How did you feel about the feedback?
- b. What type of feedback have you felt is effective?
- c. What kind of feedback is not helpful? Why not?
- d. What are your expectations of 'good' critical feedback/?

Write your answers on a piece of paper to turn in..

Group A and Group B: How are your native language and culture and the English language and culture similar in regard to giving critical feedback? How are they

different? Write any differences you can think of on a sheet of paper to turn in.

After 10-15 minutes, the groups submit their answers to the teacher. Groups' ideas can be displayed on an overhead projector or read aloud. Teachers will want to refrain from making any comments on the groups' responses at this stage.

Activity 2: Raising Awareness of Strategies Employed in Giving Feedback

Activity 2 engages learners in analyzing authentic language samples and working out the rules for giving constructive critical feedback in a range of classroom situations. It aims to raise awareness of the resources for giving critical feedback in English and to teach the linguistic forms for realizing and softening critical feedback in English.

Students work on Worksheet 2 in small groups. The comments on Worksheet 2 are constructive criticisms made by one learner to another learner on the second learner's essay. The comments are taken from transcriptions of naturally occurring feedback by native speakers of English in university settings (Nguyen 2005).

After students have read the instructions, and gone over the first excerpt with the instructor, the groups will need about 15-20 minutes to reach an answer to the four questions on each of the remaining turns.

Worksheet 2

Identifying Constructive Criticism

Read the constructive criticism from one native speaker to another native speaker and, for each comment, determine the following:

1. What aspects of the essay did the speaker give feedback on (i.e., what

problem does the speaker identify)?

2. What advice did the speaker use in giving feedback (i.e., what advice did she give on how to correct or improve the problem)?
3. How did the speaker soften her critical comments?

Here's an example of how you might do it:

1. Anne: Okay, well, I think it's a pretty good paper, pretty good argument, so most of the problems I have are probably with the organizational structure and a couple of grammatical things. Um to start, I think it seems like both of these introductory paragraphs may be put together as just one paragraph. It would be easier because they're both good paragraphs. They're both introductory ones so I think if they were together they would make more sense (laugh).

Sample Answer:

1. Identify Problem(s): "Organizational structure and a couple of grammatical errors"
2. Identify Advice: "Combine both of the introductory paragraphs together into just one paragraph."
3. Identify Softeners:

Compliment ("pretty good paper," "pretty good arguments," "they're both good paragraphs")

I think, probably, seems, may, would

Conditional (*If they were together, they would make more sense.*)

2. Anne: And I thought you had sort of two conclusions as well. But they're both

good so I thought maybe if that one came after that one, because that was more of a conclusion than that one, perhaps that would be better.

3. Anne: Then just a couple of the other problems were grammatical, like I think *is* is better than *are* there because *traffic* is single. I think I'm not sure about that (laugh). It's just what I think. You might want to check that.

4. Anne: And yeah this phrase here, I wasn't sure that was the best phrase you could've used. So you could think of one.

5. Anne: And ah you put "their" but I think "t-h-e-r-e". Yeah that's just a grammatical thing.

6. Anne: Um and down here I don't think the comma should've been there. It could've been better without the comma so ah ... (laugh).

When each group has finished, the members can present their responses. As students present, the teacher can elicit comments from the rest of the class, give feedback, summarize the points raised, and list these points using the terms for strategies and softeners mentioned in the previous section (and elaborated on in Handouts 1 and 2). The teacher may wish to distribute this information to students before they complete the exercise so that students can use it in recognizing strategies and softeners. Information on strategies is included as Handout 2. Information on selected softeners is covered in Handout 1 in the Context section.

Handout 2

Strategies for Offering Constructive Criticism

The two main strategies for offering constructive criticism are 1) Identifying the problem and 2) Giving advice for correcting the problem.

1. Identifying the problem

State the problems or errors found with Hearer's choice, work or products. Be as specific as possible. Avoid using negative words such as "wrong", "weak", and so on.

The following examples illustrate acceptable problem identification statements.

Ex: I thought you had two conclusions

I didn't see your introduction

2. Giving advice: One "do" and some "don'ts"

Explain how the problem can be repaired.

Problem

Advice

Ex: You wrote "their" but I think "t-h-e-r-e"

Peer feedback can be tricky, especially between speakers of equal status. To avoid sounding imposing, native speakers of English often choose to avoid the following:

Don't use the modals/phrasal modals *should, must, have to, ought to*

Too Strong: You should elaborate more on this.

Do use the modals *could, may, might*.

Softened: You might want to give more examples.

Don't use imperatives.

Too strong: Give more examples.

As teachers review the information on the handouts with learners, they may want to discuss to what extent students want to adopt NS ways of giving critical feedback and how their choices might affect their communication with NSs. In some cases, divergence from the native speaker norm may cause communication breakdown. Thus, while it is totally acceptable for learners to express their systems of values and beliefs, they might also want to be sensitive to the L2 rules of speaking and adjust their behavior where necessary.

Activity 3: Recognizing Softener and Directness Levels

Activity 3 aims to provide learners with practice in identifying relative degrees of softening. Using Worksheet 3, the teacher can guide the whole class through the analysis of the first situation, reviewing the softeners on Handout 1. Students can then analyze the remaining situations individually and compare their responses in pairs before going over the activity with the whole class. Finally, the teacher can lead the class discussion of how they feel about each of the responses (a-c) to the four situations and whether they would feel comfortable giving those responses. The teacher should emphasize that this is a personal decision and there is no right answer.

Worksheet 3

Recognizing Softeners and Directness Levels

Each situation below is followed by three possible constructive critical comments (a.-c.). For each situation,

1. Identify all the softeners in the responses to each situation.
2. Calculate a relative directness level between 1 and 5, with 1 being most direct and 5 being most softened.

direct

1

2

3

4

softened

5

Note that perceptions of level of directness may vary.

4.

Example Situation

In a writing session, Student A had to give critical feedback to Student B's English essay. Student A thought that Student B's essay presented only one-sided arguments, which could make it hard for her to convince her readers. In her feedback, she said:

- a. I think everything **must** be seen from two sides but in this essay you presented only one-sided arguments. So you **have to** address the opposing points of view as well.

Answer:

1. Softeners: *I think*
2. Level of relative directness: **Level 1** (due to use of strong modals *must*, *have to* in direct statements) Note that simply using I think does not soften this response.

- b. Your arguments are not well-balanced so they can't convince the readers. Can you address the fact that there is a very strong voice against your opinions?

Answer:

1. Softeners: Use of question to offer advice (Use of question softened what would otherwise have been very direct constructive criticism.)
2. Level of relative directness: **Level 2-3**

- c. You wrote very to the point but I think you didn't sort of address the fact that there was another point of view, you know. So you might not convince someone who doesn't agree with you.

Answer:

1. Softeners: Compliment (*You wrote very to the point*), *I think*, *sort of*, *might*
2. Level of relative directness: **Level 5**

Situation 1

After a classmate's presentation you were asked to give her some feedback. You thought that the presentation was not very well organized and sometimes she wandered off the topic. You said:

- a. I think what you said was really interesting but sometimes your points seemed to stray from the topic. So it'd probably be easier to follow it if you limited your arguments to just a few strong points.

Answer:

1. Softeners: _____
2. Level of relative directness: **Level** _____

b. To tell the truth, your talk lacked a focus and sometimes you went a bit too far from the topic.

Answer:

1. Softeners: ` _____
2. Level of relative directness: **Level** _____

c. I think some of your points are not related to the topic, so you should organize your talk more carefully and try to stick to the topic.

Answer:

1. Softeners: ` _____
2. Level of relative directness: **Level** _____

Situation 2

The teacher asked you to help a weaker peer to edit his essay. You found the concluding paragraph not very well-written because it did not summarize the main points and restate the thesis. You two were not very close although you got on quite well. You said:

a. Generally, I think you wrote a very good essay but I found your conclusion pretty weak. A good conclusion must summarize your main ideas and restate your thesis.

Answer:

1. Softeners: ` _____
2. Level of relative directness: **Level** _____

b. I think it may be useful to summarize your main ideas and restate your opinions in the conclusion. I think that'd be a very nice way to wrap up things. But generally, I found the essay very interesting to read. It was very well-thought out.

Answer:

1. Softeners: ` _____
2. Level of relative directness: **Level** _____

c. I found this concluding paragraph a bit confusing. Did you summarize the main ideas? I wasn't sure if there was a restatement of the thesis.

Answer:

1. Softeners: ` _____
2. Level of relative directness: **Level** _____

Situation 3

When helping a friend to edit her essay, you found that the essay contained many

grammatical errors. This was a very close friend of yours. You said:

- a. If I could be blunt, this essay contained quite a few grammatical errors. I think you should probably spend time proofreading your essays more carefully if you don't want to be marked down.

Answer:

1. Softeners: ` _____
2. Level of relative directness: *Level* _____

- b. Did you check your grammar carefully? I'm afraid I got a bit lost with your meaning here and there. For example, what were you trying to say in this sentence?

Answer:

1. Softeners: ` _____
2. Level of relative directness: *Level* _____

- c. I thought your essay was pretty good, especially taking into consideration that we had pretty limited time writing it. You had a few grammatical mistakes here and there – but I think that's because you were writing pretty fast. So if you could've spent a few minutes in the end checking what you'd written, I'm sure you'd be able to correct them all.

Answer:

1. Softeners: ` _____
2. Level of relative directness: *Level* _____

Situation 4

You were working on a team project. Each member of the team completed a part of the work and then brought it together. You thought one of the parts would need some revision because the arguments were not developed very well. You and the friend who wrote that part were quite close. You said:

- a. I thought the arguments were pretty logical but they seemed to be kind of repeated. So I think if you go and do it again, you're going to figure it all out and put it straight. It's nothing too major.

Answer:

1. Softeners: ` _____
2. Level of relative directness: *Level* _____

- b. Here you presented very interesting arguments but I guess you didn't have time to develop them more. How about giving a few examples to support them and finding a way to link them together?

Answer:

1. Softeners: _____
2. Level of relative directness: *Level* _____

c. Frankly speaking, I don't think these arguments were developed well enough. You talked about a bit of the problem in the first paragraph and then you talked about it again in the next paragraph. Why don't you find a way to connect your arguments? Also, try to explain them more.

Answer:

1. Softeners: _____
2. Level of relative directness: *Level* _____

Activity: Practicing Softening Criticism

This activity provides intensive practice in using softeners in critical feedback. On Worksheet 4, learners are asked to suggest appropriate softener markers for each turn. Learners may complete Worksheet 4 individually first and then compare and discuss their answers in pairs before the teacher checks the answers with the whole class. Note that for lower level learners, the teacher might want to focus only on a few forms, such as compliments and perhaps modals that soften versus those that strengthen or the verb *seem*.

Worksheet 4

Practicing Softening Criticism

How might you modify the following ways of giving critical feedback to include softeners? Look at the underlined forms and write them in a more softened form (some already incorporate some softeners). Two possible sample answers are provided to the first feedback example.

1. You know, in this paragraph you changed from passive to active voice and then back to passive, so it was inconsistent. I think you should keep one or the other.

Sample Answer: Below are two possible answers. The first is less softened; the

second is more so. Both are appropriate.

- a. You know in this paragraph you changed from passive to active voice and then back to passive, so it was **sort of** inconsistent. You **might just** keep one or the other.
- b. You know in this paragraph you changed from passive to active voice and then back to passive, so it **may seem sort of** inconsistent. **Do you think it would be a good idea to just** keep one or the other?

2. It wasn't clear what you think about the topic. I can see how you've given two sides of the arguments but you can stress one side more.
3. There are quite relevant arguments that you presented but you didn't back them up. They are personal opinions but you stated as if they were facts.
4. Look at this sentence here. I think it's wrong. Can you improve it?
5. This example was very vague. Can you explain it?
6. I didn't think your paragraphs were sequenced logically enough. They can be sequenced much better. For example, if this one comes before this one, they will flow more naturally.
7. In the introduction you didn't put what you thought about the issue. You left it until very end. So yours was not a clear introduction.
8. That point doesn't strengthen your arguments. Why don't you leave it out?

REFLECTIONS

The activities in this chapter were developed in an EFL context in classes in which the teacher was familiar with learners' L1 language and culture. However, they can easily be used in mixed-L1 classes such as those in many ESL contexts. At the same time, teachers should be aware that research suggests that students in an EFL setting may respond differently to assignments requiring peer critical feedback from students in an ESL university class with students from other cultures (Levine, Oded, Connor, & Asons 2002). Thus, it can be helpful if the learners themselves find and present samples of critical feedback in their L1 to compare with the L2.

For non-academic contexts or younger groups of learners (e.g., middle school students) the activities can be adapted to include giving feedback on other types of peer performances such as dramas and role plays. For students who live in an environment in which English is spoken, the teacher can encourage learners to collect more samples of feedback as used by NSs that they hear in real life, note down the contexts of use, and bring the samples to share with the class.

Providing constructive critical feedback to a peer or colleague can be a daunting experience for L2 learners. Awareness of some of the strategies and linguistic forms commonly used in many English-speaking cultures can give learners some much-needed confidence and offer the possibility that they may profit from both offering and receiving such feedback.

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Answer Key

Worksheet 1 Warming Up (Some Suggested Responses)

1. Giving critical feedback:

- Difficulties might involve the decision about how direct and specific the criticism should be. A direct criticism might cause offence to the hearer but an indirect one might not be effective because the hearer might not recognize the speaker's intention.
- Some typical ways to deliver critical feedback that could be mentioned: stating the problems, expressing disagreements, giving advice or suggestions for change, hinting about the problems, etc.

2. Receiving critical feedback:

- Effective criticisms are often well-grounded with specifics and softened. They also suggest how to make changes possible.
- Ineffective criticisms are either too harsh, thus putting off the hearer or too indirect for the hearer to recognize them.
- Learners may expect that feedback will be comprehensible and helpful.

3. Cross-cultural differences: Some cultures prefer a direct approach while other prefer an indirect one but they might all appreciate criticisms that are delivered in a tactful manner that do not hurt the hearer's feelings. Note that what constitutes “tactful” may vary from culture to culture

Worksheet 2 Raising Awareness

Constructive Criticisms

2. 1. Identify Problem: Two conclusions

2. Identify Advice: Put one conclusion after the other
3. Identify Softeners: Past tense: *thought... had; sort of; Compliment: they're both good; maybe; perhaps; would*
3. 1. Identify Problem: a couple of grammatical problems
 2. Identify Advice: use *is* after *traffic*, not *are*
 3. Identify Softeners: *just; I think, I'm not sure; it's just what I think; might*
4. 1. Identify Problem: "this phrase here"
 2. Identify Advice: Move or delete the phrase
 3. Identify Softeners: *I wasn't sure, could've, could*
5. 1. Identify Problem: You put "their"
 2. Identify Advice: instead of "t-h-e-r-e"
 3. Identify Softeners: *I think*
6. 1. Identify Problem: don't think comma should have been there
 2. Identify Advice: It could've been better without the comma. (Rather indirect way of saying "delete the comma.")
 3. Identify Softeners: *I (don't) think, should've, could've*

Worksheet 3: Recognizing softeners and directness level

Situation 1:

After a classmate's presentation you were asked to give her some feedback. You thought that the presentation was not very well organized and sometimes she wandered off the topic. You got on well with this classmate but you two were not very close friends. You said:

- a. I think what you said was really interesting but sometimes your points seemed to stray from the topic. So it'd probably be easier to follow it if you limited your arguments to just a few strong points.

Answer:

Softeners: Compliment, *sometimes, seemed to, probably*, conditional [note - *just* doesn't seem to be used as a softener here]
=**Suggested Level 5** (Note that perceived levels may vary among speakers)

- b. To tell the truth, your talk lacked a focus and sometimes you went a bit too far from the topic.

Answer:

Softeners: *a bit*
=**Suggested Level 2**

- c. I think some of your points are not related to the topic, so you should organize your talk more carefully and try to stick to the topic.

Answer:

Softeners: *I think*
=**Suggested Level 1-2 (especially with the strong modal should)**

Situation 2

The teacher asked you to help a weaker peer to edit his essay. You found the concluding paragraph not very well-written because it did not summarize the main points and restate the thesis. You two were not very close although you got on quite well. You said:

- a. Generally, I think you wrote a very good essay but I found your conclusion pretty weak. A good conclusion must summarize your main ideas and restate your thesis.

Answer:

Softeners: Compliment (“you wrote ...essay”), *pretty*
=**Suggested Level 2** (note use of strong modal *must*)

- b. I think it may be useful to summarize your main ideas and restate your opinions in the conclusion. I think that'd be a very nice way to wrap up things. But generally, I found the essay very interesting to read. It was very well-thought out.

Answer:

Softeners: *I think, may, would*, Compliment (“I found....out.”)
=**Suggested Level 5**

- c. I found this concluding paragraph a bit confusing. Did you summarize the main ideas? I wasn't sure if there was a restatement of the thesis.

Answer:

Softeners: *a bit*, Question for advice (*Did you summarize ...?*), Uncertainty (*I wasn't sure*)
Directness forms: None

=Suggested Level 5

- b. You had a time constraint of 10 minutes but you *couldn't* make it. Maybe you should consider cutting some parts short to give enough time for those presenting after you..

Answer:

Softeners: *couldn't, maybe*

=Suggested Level 2 (note use of strong modal *should*)

- c. Your talk was very engaging although I'm afraid you ran a bit over time. So maybe if you could keep strictly to 10 minutes, there would be enough time for everyone.

Answer:

Softeners: Compliment (“Your talk... engaging”), *I'm afraid, a bit, maybe,*
Conditional (if you could keep....for everyone”)

=Suggested Level 4-5 (Advice is not very helpful; Repetition of problem could be taken as criticism)

Situation 3

When helping a friend to edit her essay, you found that the essay contained many grammatical errors. This was a very close friend of yours. You said:

- a. If I could be blunt, this essay contained quite a few grammatical errors. *I think* you should *probably* spend time proofreading your essays more carefully if you don't want to be marked down.

Answer:

Softeners: *I think, probably*

Suggested Level 1 (bluntness, intensifier *quite a few*, use of *you should*)

- b. Did you check your grammar carefully? I'm afraid I got a bit lost with your meaning here and there. For example, what were you trying to say in this sentence?

Answer:

Softeners: Advice stated as question; *I'm afraid, a bit*

Suggested Level 3

- c. I thought your essay was pretty good, especially taking into consideration that we had pretty limited time writing it. You had a few grammatical mistakes here and there – but *I think* that's because you were writing pretty fast. So if you could spend a few

minutes in the end checking what you wrote, I'm sure you'd be able to correct them all.

Answer:

Softeners: Weak compliment (*pretty good*); *a few, I think* + excuse,
Advice in conditional if-clause
Suggested Level 2

Situation 4

You were working on a team project. Each member of the team completed a part of the work and then brought it together. You thought one of the parts would need some revision because the arguments were not developed very well. You and the friend who wrote that part were quite close. You said:

- a. I thought the arguments were pretty logical but they seemed to be kind of repeated. So I think if you go and do it again, you're going to figure it all out and put it straight. It's nothing too major.

Answer:

Softeners: Compliment ("I thought.... logical"), *seemed, I think*,
= **Suggested Level 4-5**

- b. Here you presented very interesting arguments but I guess you didn't have time to develop them more. How about giving a few examples to support them and finding a way to link them together?

Answer:

Softeners: Compliment ("Here.... Arguments");, *I guess*, Advice as *how about* question
= **Suggested Level 5**

- c. Frankly speaking, I don't think these arguments were developed well enough. You talked about a bit of the problem in the first paragraph and then you talked about it again in the next paragraph. Why don't you find a way to connect your arguments? Also, try to explain them more.

Answer:

Softeners: *I don't think*; Advice using *Why don't* question
= **Suggested Level 2** (Note effect of strengthening imperative "try to explain them more")