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Modifying L2 criticisms: How learners do it?

Abstract:

This study examines how Vietnamese adult learners of Australian English learn to modify their criticisms in a peer-feedback session. Data were collected from three groups of learners (12 beginners, 12 intermediate, and 12 advanced), via a conversation elicitation task, a written questionnaire, and a retrospective interview. L1 and L2 baseline data were collected from two respective groups of 12 Vietnamese native speakers and 12 native speakers of Australian English, via the same conversation elicitation task and questionnaire. Results showed that learners, regardless of their proficiency levels, tended to under-use modality markers, especially internal modifiers. A number of factors might have influenced this pragmatic behavior: incomplete L2 linguistic competence, L1 transfer, and cognitive difficulty in spontaneous language production. The study also found evidence of an acquisitional order for criticism modifiers: learners tended to acquire lexicalized modifiers before they acquired grammaticalized modifiers. This finding lent support to Meisel et al (1981)'s Complexification Hypothesis, which holds that the order of acquisition of L2 forms is dependent upon their structural complexity and the processing demands involved; thus syntactically complex structures, which are also more cognitively demanding, are usually acquired later than simpler structures which require a minimum of processing capacity.

Key words: Interlanguage Pragmatics, speech acts, criticism, modifiers, L2 pragmatic acquisition, Vietnamese EFL learners

1. INTRODUCTION

Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) has so far contributed greatly to our understanding of second language (L2) pragmatic use. Yet, it has contributed much less to our understanding of L2 pragmatic acquisition, although acquisitional issues also constitute its primary research goal (Kasper and Rose, 1999; Rose, 2000; Kasper and Rose, 2002). Additionally, previous studies have been confined to a rather small set of speech acts, under-researching such face-damaging acts as complaining and criticizing (Ellis, 1994) even though these may be more challenging for L2 learners. This study investigates how Vietnamese adult learners of Australian English acquire modality markers when providing critical feedback to their peers in English in an academic setting. It is part of a larger scale study of interlanguage (IL) criticisms and responses to criticisms.

The ILP literature on criticisms or oppositional talk is rather scant (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; Takahashi and Beebe, 1993; Salsbury & Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). Beebe and Takahashi (1989) investigate American native speakers' (NS) and Japanese ESL learners' disagreement and chastisement (among other face-threatening speech acts), employing natural data and data elicited via a discourse completion task (DCT). For each speech act, the DCT presents two situations: one involving higher-to-lower status interaction and the other involving the reverse. Beebe and Takahashi found that contrary to stereotyping, the Americans are not always more direct or explicit than Japanese. The Japanese, in comparison, do not always avoid disagreement or critical remarks (especially when interacting with lower status people). To preface their critical remarks, the Americans also use positive remarks more frequently than do the Japanese. Takahashi and Beebe (1993) examine how American NSs and Japanese learners of English offer correction to higher status and lower status interlocutors when the latter make factual errors. Data are collected via a 12 situation DCT. Takahashi and Beebe found that although positive remarks are important modifiers of face-threatening speech acts in English, Japanese learners rarely make use of them. Salsbury and Bardovi-Harlig (2000) conduct a one year longitudinal study of oppositional talk such as disagreements, challenges, and denials by 8 ESL beginners, who come from various first language (L1) backgrounds. Data are collected via conversational interviews on a monthly basis. These researchers found that learners' grammatical competence in L2 precedes their pragmatic competence. In other words, they know the linguistic forms but have difficulty mapping these forms on their pragmatic functions. Salsbury and Bardovi-Harlig also found that learners tend to draw on lexical choices such as "*maybe*" and "*I think*" when modifying their face-threatening speech acts, and make grammatical choices such as *would* and *could* only at the later phase of their language development.

This finding leads the researcher to conclude that lexicalized items may have been acquired before grammaticalized items.

Several findings on how L2 learners modify other speech acts (e.g. requests, complaints, and apologies) are also relevant to this study (Rintell, 1981; Kasper, 1981; Kasper, 1982; Olshtain and Cohen, 1983; Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1986; House and Kasper, 1987; House, 1988; Faerch and Kasper, 1989; Blum-Kulka, 1991; Edmondson and House, 1991; Trosborg, 1995; Hassal, 2001). These findings can be summarized as follows. Firstly, learners tend to display a very different pattern of using modifiers from native speakers. For example, intermediate and advanced learners tend to under-use internal modifiers (i.e. modifiers making up an integral part of the head act) (Rintell, 1981; Kasper, 1981; Kasper, 1982; House and Kasper, 1987; Olshtain and Cohen, 1983; Trosborg, 1995; Hassal, 2001). This is probably because internal modifiers tend to contribute only minimal propositional meaning to the speech act; thus, they are less likely to be attended to by learners (Hassal, 2001). What is more, adding internal modifiers may increase the structural complexity of the speech act, thus requiring more processing effort on the part of learners (Hassal, 2001, Nguyen, 2005). Therefore, under communicative pressure learners may subconsciously reduce modality and focus instead on conveying the message precisely (see Kasper, 1982).

On the other hand, high proficiency learners tend to over-use external modifiers (i.e. supportive moves), thus producing verbose speech acts, compared to NSs (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1986; House and Kasper, 1987; House, 1988; Faerch and Kasper, 1989; Blum-Kulka, 1991; Edmondson and House, 1991; Hassal, 2001; with the exception being Trosborg, 1995 which found a little use of both internal and external requesting modifiers for learners). Interestingly, this 'waffle phenomenon' is more evident in high-intermediate learners than in advanced learners (Ellis, 1994). Explanations for this phenomenon are various. Edmondson and House assume that in the absence of the socio-pragmatic knowledge in the target language (TL), learners may desire to 'play it safe' by making the propositional and pragmatic meanings as transparent as possible. Compared to internal modifiers, external modifiers carry more explicit propositional meaning. They also do not form an integral part of the speech act but are planned in separate constituents to the speech act, thus causing less processing difficulty to learners and are more available for use (Hassal, *ibid.*). Ellis (1994) assumes that verbosity may either reflect a desire on the part of learners to display their linguistic competence (as now an adequate proficiency level makes it possible for them to do so) or their desire to mark a foreigner role in certain situations. However, without probing into learners' pragmatic decision making process, it is hard to confirm these assumptions (Ellis, *ibid.*).

Related to learners' tendency to choose "explicit, transparent, unambiguous means of expressions" (Faerch and Kasper 1989: 233), Hassal (2003) reports a case of Indonesian IL requests made by Australian learners. He found that the learners prefer the modal verb "*boleh*" (i.e. "may" / "be allowed") to the modal verb "*bias*" (i.e. "can"), probably because their status as a non-native speaker has prompted them to opt for a more tentative verbal behavior. This behavior, unfortunately, has been further consolidated by the misleading instruction of modal verbs in their textbooks (see Kasper, 1982 for a similar discussion).

Relevant to the present study are also Bialystok's (1993) processing model of L2 pragmatic acquisition and Meisel, Clahsen, and Pienemann's (1981) Complexification Hypothesis. Bialystok claims that the process of acquiring L2 pragmatic competence entails two separate cognitive processes: acquiring pragmatic knowledge and acquiring control over attention to this knowledge. For adult learners, the major challenge would be the latter but not the former for, being competent L1 users, they benefit a great deal from pragmatic universals. Studies such as Hassal (2001) lend partial support to this hypothesis by suggesting that while learners' little use of internal modifiers may be caused by processing problems, acquiring new pragmatic knowledge can also be a major task for L2 learners. Meisel et al's (1981) Complexification Hypothesis holds that the order of acquisition of L2 forms is dependent on their structural complexity and the processing demands involved; thus syntactically complex structures, which are also more cognitively demanding, are usually acquired later than simpler structures which require a minimum of processing capacity. Studies such as Salsbury and Bardovi-Harlig (2000, discussed above) add evidence to this hypothesis.

This study seeks to add further evidence to the existing literature on learners' use of speech act modifiers. In this study, criticizing is defined as an illocutionary act whose illocutionary point is to give negative evaluation of the hearer's (H) actions, choice, words, and products for which he or she may be held responsible. This act is performed in the hope of influencing H's future actions for H's betterment as viewed by the speaker (S) or to communicate S's dissatisfaction with or dislike regarding what H has done but without the implicature that what H has done brings undesirable consequences to S (adapted from Wierzbicka, 1987).

Modifiers are defined as linguistic devices that are employed to help reduce the offence of a face-threatening act. Table 1 presents a taxonomy of modifiers, adapted from House and Kasper (1981), with illustrative examples taken from the data of the current study. These modifiers were categorized according to their relative locations within the criticisms and criticism responses.

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2. THE STUDY

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Vietnamese EFL learners differ from the Australian NSs in the way they modify criticisms in English?
2. How do learners of different proficiency groups differ from one another in the way they modify their English criticisms?
3. What factors might explain the differences (if any) between the learners and the Australian NSs and between the learners themselves?

2.1. The participants:

This study recruited three groups of Vietnamese learners of Australian English as a Foreign Language, who provided IL data (hereafter referred to as 'IL group' or 'the learners'), one group of Vietnamese native speakers, who provided L1 baseline data (hereafter referred to as 'L1 group' or 'Vietnamese NSs'), and one group of Australian English native speakers, who provided L2 baseline data (hereafter referred to as 'L2 group' or 'Australian NSs').

Learner participants, all randomly selected ¹, comprised 12 high beginners, 12 intermediates, and 12 advanced learners, who were attending an English Program run by a collaborative team of Vietnamese and Australian teachers in Hanoi, Viet Nam at the time of data collection. This Program was intended for those learners who were preparing to go to Australia for university study. It therefore specialized in general English skills, academic English skills, and some on-arrival and cross-cultural skills. All the learning and teaching materials were designed by the teachers based on available Australian-made English textbooks and reference handbooks. Given this learning context and the learners' future study plans in Australia, it was assumed that they were exposed mainly to Australian English.

The learners' proficiency levels were determined by their pre-entry International English Testing System (IELTS) scores² using the classification by the Program Administrators. According to this classification, an overall score of 5.0 and below represented the high beginning level. An overall score between 5.5 and 6.0 represented the intermediate level. An overall score of 6.5 and above represented the advanced level. (In this study, the actual mean IELTS score was 5.0 for the beginner group, 5.5 for

the intermediate group, and 7.3 for the advanced group). This grouping was in agreement with the learners' self-assessment of their English proficiency levels. As regards their past English learning experience, the average number of years of English instruction was 7.5 for the high beginners (ranging from 4 to 15 years), 6.3 for the intermediate group (ranging from 4 to 10 years), and 9.0 for the advanced group (ranging from 5 to 17 years) (see Table 2). All the learners had had limited exposure to English use in their daily life and little chance to use English for communication outside the Program.

Among the learners, twenty four were female and twelve were male, with the mean age being 22.9 for the high beginners, 23.8 for the intermediate group, and 25.8 for the advanced group. Also, twenty-four of them were prospective postgraduates and twelve were prospective undergraduates for their study programs in Australia, with various majors. The learners originated from different parts of Vietnam and spoke different dialects of Vietnamese.

The L1 and L2 groups comprised 12 Vietnamese and 12 Australians who were respectively attending university in Vietnam and Australia at the time of data collection. The L1 group included seven females and five males, with the mean age being 23.9. Four of them were postgraduates and eight were undergraduates from various disciplines. Like the learners, they also came from various parts of Vietnam and spoke different Vietnamese dialects. The L2 group included nine females and three males, with the mean age being 22.8, originating mainly from Queensland, Australia. Five of them were postgraduates and seven were undergraduates from various disciplines (see Table 3). Like the learners, all of the L1 and L2 group participants were randomly selected³. A one-way ANOVA test found no significant difference among the two native speaker groups and the three learner groups in terms of their mean age ($F = .799, p = .531$).

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2.2. The instruments

Criticism speech acts were elicited via a conversation elicitation task (hereafter referred to as 'peer-feedback task') and a written questionnaire. Learners' pragmatic decision-making, on the other hand, was probed via a retrospective interview. All three instruments were validated in a pilot study before being employed in the present study⁴. For the conversation elicitation task, the participants were firstly required to write a 250-word argumentative essay on the benefits of public as opposed to private transportation. Then they were randomly arranged into dyads within each group (i.e. NS-NS, beginner-

beginner, intermediate-intermediate, and advanced-advanced dyads) to give feedback on each other's essays. The feedback was based on three main assessment criteria, namely the organizational structure of the essay, the quality of argumentation, and grammar and vocabulary. Their conversations were audio-taped for later analysis. It should be noted that giving peer-feedback was a quite common learning task in the academic settings where the participants were undertaking their studies. Therefore, it was expected that they were all quite familiar with this type of task, thus making the data more natural. Also, this task allowed for researcher control of relevant social and contextual variables, such as the relative social power (equal) and distance (neutral) between the participants (peer-to-peer), and the topic of criticisms (an English essay), thus making the data more comparable.

After the peer-feedback conversations, the participants were required to complete a written questionnaire consisting of four criticizing situations. These situations were constructed based on the peer-feedback data taken from the pilot study. The purpose was to make the situations as comparable to the peer-feedback task as possible. The questionnaire was used to provide additional criticism data for the purpose of triangulation. Finally, the learners were interviewed about their pragmatic choice in the peer-feedback task. During the interview, the peer-feedback conversations were played back to refresh the learners' memories. The interview was conducted in the learners' mother tongue (Vietnamese).

2.3. Data analysis

The resulting data comprised 326 peer-feedback criticisms, 188 questionnaire criticisms, and 36 interviews. The 326 peer-feedback criticisms were realized via 988 criticism formulae, and the 188 questionnaire criticisms were realized via 308 formulae. The peer-feedback data also comprised 1620 criticism modifiers (including 704 external modifiers and 916 internal modifiers) and the questionnaire data comprised 365 criticism modifiers (including 48 external modifiers and 317 internal modifiers). The peer-feedback conversations and the interviews were transcribed. Then the data were coded independently by two coders based on the coding schemes developed and pre-trialed in the pilot study. The agreement rate for coding the criticism data from both the peer-feedback task and the questionnaire was 90% and that for coding the interview data was 92%. The following results section will be based mainly on the peer-feedback data. The questionnaire data and interview data will be used only to explain and supplement the peer-feedback data. The statistical procedures utilized in the present study included one-way ANOVA, which was to test the differences in means among different groups of participants, and Kruskal-Wallis, which was similar to ANOVA but employed in the absence

of a normal distribution of data. Where a significant difference was found, LSD post hoc ANOVA and manual calculations were also used to find in which comparison the difference lay.

To answer the research questions, comparisons were made mainly between the three proficiency groups of learners. However, a reference to the Australian NS and the Vietnamese NS baseline groups was also made in order to examine the extent to which each proficiency group approximated the target norms and deviated from the L1 norms. Following Kasper (1992), L1 negative transfer in this study was statistically based on (1) the similarity between the learners and the Vietnamese NS group concerning the frequencies with which they use a modifier (IL = L1); (2) plus a significant difference between the learners and the Australian NS group in the use of that modifier (IL \neq L2); and (3) a significant difference between the Vietnamese NS and Australian NS groups in the use of that modifier (L1 \neq L2).

2.4. Results

Overall, the learners tended to mitigate their criticisms both externally and internally significantly less frequently than the Australian NSs. Table 4 demonstrates that on average, the learners made use of 1.6 modifiers per criticism formula whereas the Australians produced two and a half times as many ($M = 3.9$). An examination of individual cases found only two learners (6%) to have a mean higher than the lowest mean demonstrated by the Australian NSs (2.6).

The learners' choice of how often to modify their criticisms appeared to be L1-induced. Indeed, like the learners, the Vietnamese NS group also tended to modify their criticisms fairly infrequently ($M = 1.2$). A one-way ANOVA test with LSD post hoc run for the learners, the Australian NS and Vietnamese NS groups revealed a significant difference between the learners and the Australian NS group ($p = .001$) and between the Australian NS and the Vietnamese NS groups ($p = .001$), but not between the learners and the Vietnamese NS group ($F = 34.406$, $df = 2$, $p = .001$) (Table 4). This seemed to suggest that the learners may have been influenced negatively by their L1 sociopragmatic judgments with regard to how often to modify criticisms.

PUT TABLE 4 AROUND HERE

Table 5 illustrates how often the learners of different proficiency groups modified the illocutionary force of their criticisms. Generally, it shows that the advanced and the intermediate learners tended to soften their criticisms more frequently than their high beginner fellow learners. Indeed, the total number of modifiers tended to increase significantly with proficiency from an average of only .98 per CF for the high beginners to 2.2 per CF for the intermediate and 1.7 per CF for the advanced learners

($\chi^2 = 13.491$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$). This was also the case when the learners were compared on the measures of the total number of external ($\chi^2 = 12.538$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$) and internal modifiers ($\chi^2 = 6.371$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$).

PUT TABLE 5 AROUND HERE

Manual calculations made for each of the three learners groups revealed the existence of differences between the high beginners and both the intermediate learners ($p = .001$) and the advanced learners ($p = .008$). However, no differences were found between the two latter groups ($p = .265$). Specifically, the high beginners lagged far behind both the intermediate learners and the advanced learners in the frequency with which they used external modifiers ($p = .001$ and $.028$, respectively) and they lagged behind the advanced learners in the frequency with which they used internal modifiers ($p = .006$).

These differences became even more obvious when individual cases within each group were examined. It was found that on the measure of total number of modifiers, all twelve high beginners fell below the mean of 1.6 (i.e. the mean calculated for all learners as a whole group – see Table 4), whereas only three out of 12 intermediate learners and six out of twelve advanced learners did so. On the measure of external modifiers, only one high beginner scored above the mean of .83 (ditto), as compared with seven intermediate and four advanced learners. Similarly, on the measure of internal modifiers, while none of the twelve high beginners scored above the mean of .81 (ditto), six intermediate and six advanced learners were well above it.

Despite the remarkably higher means demonstrated by the higher proficiency learners, all three groups of learners considerably lagged behind the Australian NSs on the measure of the total number of modifiers ($\chi^2 = 31.501$, $df = 3$, $p = .001$), the number of external modifiers ($\chi^2 = 25.888$, $df = 3$, $p = .001$), and the number of internal modifiers ($\chi^2 = 22.618$, $df = 3$, $p = .001$) (see Figure 1). The post hoc manual calculations also found a p value lower than the .05 level for the difference between each group and the Australian NS group on these three measures.

PUT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE

An examination of the individual cases of learners shows that on the level of the total number of modifiers, only one intermediate learner had a mean higher than the mean of the Australian NS group ($M = 3.9$). In terms of external modifiers, again, only this learner and two others from her group possessed a mean higher than the mean displayed by the Australian NS group ($M = 1.8$). In terms of internal modifiers, none of the learners achieved the mean of the Australian NS group.

Among the three proficiency groups, the intermediate learners tended to deviate most from the Vietnamese NS group while approximating the Australian NS group most closely. In fact, only the intermediate group was found by a one-way ANOVA test ($F = 24.583$, $df = 4$, $p = .001$) with LSD *post hoc* to differ significantly from the Vietnamese NS group in the frequency of use of modifiers ($p = .003$). The other two proficiency groups were similar to the Vietnamese NS group ($p > .05$), suggesting that they were closer to the Vietnamese native group than their intermediate peers. Table 6 also shows that although the intermediate group still lagged significantly behind the Australian NS group ($p = .001$) in the frequency with which they mitigated their criticisms, they seemed to approximate this group more closely than did the high beginning and advanced learners.

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The learners of different proficiency levels did not exhibit differences from the two NS baseline groups and between themselves in their preferences for particular types of external modification. Generally, like the Australian NSs and the Vietnamese NSs, they all preferred 'sweeteners' to the other three types, of which they favored 'disarmers' and 'grounders' over 'steers'. For example, Table 7 shows that 'sweeteners' made up 40% of the total number of external modifiers in the high beginners' data, and 71% and 41% respectively for the intermediate and advanced groups. 'Sweeteners' were followed immediately by 'grounders' (25%, 15%, and 24% for the high beginners, intermediate, and advanced learners, respectively) and 'disarmers' (high beginner: 24%, intermediate learners: 9%, advanced learners: 24%). 'Steers' ranked last with 11% for the high beginners, 5% for the intermediate learners, and 11% for the advanced learners. This was relatively similar to the Australian and Vietnamese respective ranking of choices, with 'sweeteners' making up 70% and 49%, followed by 20% and 27% of 'disarmers', 6% and 16% of 'grounders', and 4% and 8% of 'steers'. Table 7 also shows that the high beginners and the advanced learners had very similar percentages in their use of different types of external modifiers. In comparison, the intermediate learners were outstanding because of their greater use of 'sweeteners' and less frequent use of the other three types, a pattern similar to the one displayed by the Australian NS group.

PUT TABLE 7 AROUND HERE

Table 8 illustrates the distribution of major criticism internal modifiers by the whole learner group and the two NS groups. Of the compared modifiers, 'syntactic modifiers', 'appealers', 'understaters', and 'hedges' were distributed differently between the three groups ($p \leq .05$). There was no difference, however, in their distributions of 'downtoners' and 'cajolers'.

As can be seen from the table, 'syntactic modifiers' were employed with quite a high frequency by the Australian NS group ($M = .52$) while being almost unused by the learners ($M = .03$) and entirely absent in the Vietnamese NS group's data ($M = .00$). (Indeed, out of 36 learners, only 7 employed this modifier type, whereas it was employed by every Australian NS in the group). This difference was found to be statistically significant by a Kruskal-Wallis test ($\chi^2 = 39.085$, $df = 2$, $p = .001$). The results of manual post hoc calculations also showed that the differences lay between the Australian NS group and both the learners and the Vietnamese NS group ($p = .001$), but not between the learners and the Vietnamese NS group ($p = .284$). Since the Vietnamese NS group did not use this type of modifier at all, the learners' low frequency of use seemed indicative of negative L1 influence.

The above L1 influence became even more obvious when each instance of 'syntactic modifier' produced by the learners was investigated further. Out of the 15 "syntactic modifiers" that were observed in the learners' data, 14 involved modal structures with "may", "might" (which were more or less equivalent to the Vietnamese modal verb "có thể"), and only one involved "past tense with present time reference", which was "I thought" by an intermediate learner. Notably, no case of "modal past tense with present time reference" (e.g. "could/ would/ may/ might have done") was present in the learners' data while structures of this type were abundant in the Australian NS data (14 out of 68 instances of "syntactic modifiers"). Since the Vietnamese language does not have grammatical tense (past, present, future) and expresses modality by means of modal verbs and particles, this seemed to show that the exclusion of "past tense with present time reference" and "modal past tense" on the part of the learners and their reliance on modal verbs instead was due to L1 influence.

Unlike 'syntactic modifiers', 'appealers' were a common feature of the Vietnamese pragmatics but not of the Australian pragmatics. Table 8 shows that this type of modifier was plentiful in the Vietnamese NS data ($M = .16$) while absolutely absent from the Australian NS data. It also shows that the learners did make use of 'appealers', though infrequently ($M = .02$). The fact that this type of modifier was not used by the Australian NS at all but was employed by both the learners and the Vietnamese NS group seemed to suggest an instance of negative transfer. A Kruskal-Wallis test also found a statistically significant difference among the three groups for 'appealers' ($\chi^2 = 21.438$, $df = 2$, $p = .001$). Manual post hoc calculations found that the difference was between the Australian NS and the Vietnamese NS groups ($p = .001$), supporting the above claim.

Compared with 'syntactic modifiers' and 'appealers', 'understaters' were employed more frequently by the learners ($M = .23$). However, when compared with the Australian NS group, the learners still employed this type of modifiers far less frequently. 'Hedges' were also much more favored by the

Australian NSs than the learners ($M = .25$ for the former as opposed to $M = .04$ for the latter). The learners' little use of 'understaters' and 'hedges' could have reflected their L1 pragmatics. Indeed, like the learners, the Vietnamese NS group also rarely drew on these two types of modifiers ($M = .17$ for 'understaters' and $M = .03$ for 'hedges'). The Kruskal-Wallis tests found statistically significant differences among the three groups for both 'understaters' ($\chi^2 = 13.706$, $df = 2$, $p = .001$) and 'hedges' ($\chi^2 = 8.640$, $df = 2$, $p = .013$). Manual post hoc calculations found that the differences were between the Australian NS and the Vietnamese NS groups ($p = .001$) but not between the Vietnamese NS group and the learners.

PUT TABLE 8 AROUND HERE

When the learners were compared among themselves, it was found that they significantly differed only in the use of 'hedges' ($\chi^2 = 7.714$, $df = 2$, significant at $p = .021$) and 'cajolars' ($\chi^2 = 15.069$, $df = 2$, significant at $p = .001$). Table 9 shows that the more proficient the learners were, the more frequently they seemed to opt for these two types of modifiers. Indeed, while the high beginners' mean for 'hedges' was only .005, it rose to .032 for the intermediate learners and to .087 for the advanced learners. In a similar way, the mean for 'cajolars' was .00 for the high beginners, but increased to .03 for the intermediate group and .16 for the advanced group, marking them out as the most frequent users.

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Manual post hoc calculations made for three groups in the use of 'hedges' found a significant difference between the high beginners and the advanced learners ($p = .011$), but not between the high beginners and the intermediate learners or between the intermediate learners and the advanced learners ($p > .05$). Similar calculations made for the use of 'cajolars' found a significant difference between the advanced learners and both the high beginners ($p = .001$) and intermediate learners ($p = .016$), but not between the high beginners and the intermediate learners ($p > .05$).

A 'qualitative' examination of the wording of various types of external modifiers produced by the different groups suggests that like the Vietnamese NSs' 'sweeteners', learners' 'sweeteners' might also not sound as 'complimentary' as those given by the Australian NSs, probably because the language that they used was quite neutral and lukewarm. Let us take examples of the sweeteners given by a learner, a Vietnamese NS, and an Australian NS:

Australian NS:

"I thought it was VERY CLEAR (.) and I really liked the way (.) you know it all flowed and each paragraph had a separate point yeah VERY easy to read what you are going to (.) you know what to - to determine what you were trying to say"

Learner:

"OK I read your essay and here are some my own ideas of this. firstly about the organization it's so clear you have ah introduction, body, and conclusion, and in the body you have 3 paragraphs with 3 reasons to support your ah support your ah (.) topic".

Vietnamese NS:

"Thứ nhất là cách tổ chức bài nhìn vào bố cục thì thấy rõ là ba phần, mở bài, thân bài và kết luận rõ ràng hmm (.) tuy nhiên ..." (i.e. First, looking at the organization, there are three clear parts, introduction, body and conclusion. They're all clear but ...).

In another case, a learner tried to use 'complimentary' words such as "good" and "carefully" when giving her friend a 'sweetener'. Yet, her phrase "I'm glad to say" made her sound superior although this might not necessarily be what she was intended at: "I have read your essay and I'm glad to say it's a G:OOD essay. you have written it very carefully and ah YO:U have made all the requirements".

Similarly, when closing the conversation, an Australian interactant tried to compensate for her criticism by reaffirming the good points of her friend's essay as follows: "but generally it was really good, really its taught me a lot/ looking at the rigor of writing/ yeah it's very nice". In comparison, the same learner did it only by reaffirming her friend's efforts: "so ah but in general you have tried your best/ <I see your effort ah you devote in to this ah essay>". A Vietnamese, on the other hand, tended to restate the weaknesses and offer quite lukewarm final comments on the strengths: "còn về cấu trúc ngữ pháp thì hmm (.) không có vấn đề gì cả nói chung bài này chỉ có về phần ý tưởng thì nó hơi (.) nghèo nàn thôi, còn thì OK" (i.e. the grammatical structures are fine. Well, in general, the essay has only a problem which is poor ideas. The rest is OK).

When it came to 'disarmers', the learners also tended to 'defuse' their interlocutors in a different way from the Australian group. For example, while 75% of the Australian disarmers (31 out of 42 instances) consisted of problem minimizing statements such as "it's nothing too major" or "it's certainly not easy to do off the top of your head", 68% of the learners' "disarmers" (52 out of 76 cases) were constituted by token agreements such as "I understand your point of view but ..." or "I see what you mean but ...", which were similar to such Vietnamese expressions as "Tớ hiểu ý bạn nhưng ...". In 4% of the instances, the learners

even forewarned and apologized before giving a criticism (e.g. *"hmm well, since ah ((laugh)) to err is human ((laugh)) so I'm very I mean very afraid of ah say (.) recognizing or correcting the mistakes with grammatic ah grammatical mistakes and vocabulary mistakes", "I'm sorry but ..."*) and in 5% of the cases they drew on a self-effacing strategy such as *"I'm ah no good at this problem but ..."*, which the Australian NSs did not do at all.

An analysis of the range of internal modifier realization structures used by the learners and the Australian NSs revealed a much more restricted usage on the part of the learners (Table 10). For example, the learners tended to employ only a few structures such as modal *"may"*, 'hedges' *"something like that"*, *"that sort of thing"*, 'understaters' *"some"*, *"few"*, and 'downtoners' *"maybe"*. They rarely made use of or even excluded some other structures from their use, for example modal *"would"*, *"could"*, past tense with present time reference such as *"could have done"*, *"I thought"* (a similar tendency to the Vietnamese NS group – see Table 11), 'hedges' *"sort of"*, *"kind of"*, 'downtoners' *"perhaps"*, *"probably"* and so on. The Australian NSs, in comparison, made a wider and more regular use of various internal modification realization structures.

Table 10 also shows that the more proficient the learners became, the more varied their linguistic structures were. Indeed, while the high beginners and the intermediate learners used quite a few linguistic structures such as *"might"*, *"sort (kind) of"*, *"quite/ rather"*, *"probably/ perhaps/ possibly"*, the advanced learners made use of all of the structures listed in the table.

PUT TABLE 10 AROUND HERE

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In summary, the learners showed a very different use of criticism modifiers from the native speakers and between themselves. First, like the Vietnamese NS baseline group, the learners mitigated their criticisms far less frequently than the native speaker group, especially via syntactic modifiers. They also relied on a much narrower range of linguistic devices to realize the chosen modifiers and produced greatly different wordings from those used by the Australian NSs for the same modifiers. Next, as the learners became more proficient, they tended to modify their criticisms both externally and internally more frequently and draw on a wider range of linguistic devices for realizing their modifiers. Among the three learner groups, the intermediate learners seemed to approximate the NS group most closely in their pattern of use of external modifier types. This pattern, however, was different from those displayed by their lower and higher proficiency peers, a fact that deserves further research.

2.5. Discussion

2.5.1. Learners' use of L2 modifiers

In congruence with other studies (reviewed previously), this study found that the learners generally made fewer attempts to reduce the potential disruptive effects of their criticisms by employing noticeably fewer modifiers than the Australian NS group. As Brown and Levinson (1987) pointed out, face needs to be continually attended to in the process of communication and face-threatening speech acts, therefore, need to be softened so that politeness can be achieved. The learners' under-use of modifiers seemed to fail them in this regard.

The learners also did not seem to use the same modifiers as their NS counterparts, for example, they almost did not make use of 'past tense with present time reference'. Interestingly, even when they used the same modifiers, the linguistic features were so noticeably different as to possibly produce a different effect. An illustrating example would be the case of 'sweeteners', which seemed to replicate Takahashi and Beebe's (1993: 141) finding that the 'positive remarks' that Japanese ESL learners gave to preface a criticism "were so lukewarm that a native speaker would hardly call them positive or feel comfortable with them". They also tended to rely on lexical forms ('understaters', 'subjectivizers', 'downtoners', and so on) rather than syntactic structures (modal verbs and 'past tense') in realization of these modifiers.

Generally, there may have been a number of intertwining factors that contributed to the learners' use of modifiers when performing criticisms in English. Firstly, it could be their limited L2 linguistic competence, as seen in their restricted range of linguistic devices for realizing modifiers. It could be their unsophisticated L2 pragmalinguistic knowledge as shown in their simplified 'sweeteners' that NSs tend to consider 'lukewarm' and 'insincere'. (This could have been perhaps further reinforced by L1 pragmatics which does not seem to encourage overt compliments as evidenced in the Vietnamese NSs' rather 'neutral' sweeteners). It could also be due to a lack of L2 socio-pragmatic knowledge such as in the case of their use of 'apologies' when defusing the criticisms or their infrequent use of modifiers.

Some researchers such as Kasper also (1982) attribute learners' lack of modality markings to their lack of control over language production under communicative pressure (Kasper terms this phenomenon 'modality reduction'). The findings of this study, however, seem to suggest that the situation may be more complex than that.

In this study, for instance, the interview data tended to show a mismatch between the learners' intended meaning as expressed in the L1 and its realization in the L2:

(1) L1 intended meaning: "*Some of your ideas sound interesting but there are some I don't really agree with*"

L2 realization: "*I don't agree with you*"

(2) L1 intended meaning: "*It is perhaps necessary to give a definition of public transport*"

L2 realization: "*Hmm when you say using public transport, is it necessary to give a definition what the public transport is*"

When interviewed, many of the learners commented that under the pressure of online speech production, they concentrated first and foremost on the basic speech act. To put it another way, they focused on ensuring that their intentions were precisely understood before making themselves sound polite. Others reported choosing fluency over modality: they would rather not pause to make appropriate linguistic choices at the expense of speech flow. As a result, these learners tended to simplify their language in order to cope with the competing processing demands. In many instances, the learners commented that had they had more time to plan their utterances, they could have made their utterances more polite.

Interestingly enough, when the learners' answers under the pressure-free condition of the written questionnaires were examined, it was found that although they did noticeably decrease the use of the criticisms they considered 'offensive' such as 'making demands' (e.g.: "*you must do this*") and increase the use of the criticisms they considered 'polite' such as 'advice' (e.g. "*you should do this*") and 'suggestions' (e.g. "*You could do this*"), they did not, however, mitigate their criticisms to a greater extent. In fact, they even produced fewer modifiers when responding to the questionnaire. (Cf.: 'Making demands': $M = .05$, $SD = .06$ for peer-feedback task vs. $M = .02$, $SD = .06$ for questionnaire, $Z = 2.831$, $p = .005$; 'Advice': $M = .09$, $SD = .09$ for the peer-feedback task vs. $M = .21$, $SD = .19$ for the questionnaire, $Z = 2.571$, $p = .010$; 'Suggestion': $M = .10$, $SD = .11$ for the peer-feedback task vs. $M = .19$, $SD = .18$ for the questionnaire, $Z = 1.978$, $p = .048$; 'Modifiers': $M = 1.6$, $SD = .94$ for the peer-feedback task as compared to $M = 1.0$, $SD = .55$ for the questionnaire, $Z = 2.872$ at $p = .004$). This finding seems to suggest that besides processing difficulty, another explanation for the learners' little use of L2 modifiers can be their lack of full awareness of the power of modifiers in softening a face-threatening speech act since modifiers carry only minimal propositional meaning. Thus, they tended to rely more on semantic

formulae, which carry more explicit propositional meaning, for the same purpose and under-used modifiers.

From a pragmalinguistic perspective, this oversight might have been explained by the influence of their L1, which often employs semantic rather than formal means to mark modality (Nguyen, 2005). Indeed, like the learners, the Vietnamese NSs in this study rarely made use of modifiers (see section 2.4). Instead, they frequently softened their criticisms by making use of such semantic formulae they considered 'polite' as 'giving advice' (Cf.: 'Giving advice': M = .09, SD = .11 for the learners; M = .01, SD = .03 for the Australian NSs; M = .05, SD = .05 for the Vietnamese NSs; $\chi^2 = 6.557$, df = 2, significant at $p = .038$). Post hoc ANOVA tests for frequencies of use of modifiers and 'advice' found significant differences between the Australian NSs and the learners and between the Australian NSs and the Vietnamese NSs, but not between the learners and the Vietnamese NSs. These results seemed to suggest that the learners may have been adversely influenced by their L1 pragmatic routines.

L1 influence, which was reinforced by the absence of a complete control over more complex and more cognitively demanding L2 forms, might have also explained the learners' preference for lexicalized modifiers (e.g. "some", "few", "maybe", "something like that", and so on) over grammaticalized modifiers (e.g. "could have done", "might have been" and so on). As mentioned earlier (see section 2.4), Vietnamese pragmatics does not use syntactic forms such as modal structures and verb tenses but uses lexical forms such as modal particles for modification. Plus, the fact that grammaticalized modifiers are more complex and thus more difficult to process, even in the pressure-free condition such as the written questionnaire, might have tempted the learners to make a more familiar and easier choice, which is lexicalized modification.

From a sociopragmatic perspective, the learners' behavior could also have been explained by the different operations of politeness in the Vietnamese and the Australian cultures. The Australian conversational style tends to avoid challenging one's interlocutor (see the maxim of Agreement in Leech, 1983) as this threatens the other's face (see Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987). When arguments are unavoidable, they tend to be 'hedged' as much as possible. However, this does not seem to apply to the Vietnamese culture, where 'private face' is not stressed as much as discernment (see Nwoye, 1992 for the conception of private as opposed to public face). Coming from the culture that values conformity to the social rules over individual face-wants, Vietnamese people thus do not normally hesitate to engage in oppositional talk, especially when they find this necessary. This different socio-cultural perception might have perhaps accounted for the learners' different evaluation of the face-threat of the act of giving critical feedback as compared to the Australian NSs. Furthermore,

Vietnamese people tend to believe that strong arguments may be more convincing than ‘hedged’ arguments, as revealed by some of the learners in the interview:

““When we argue, we usually want to defend our opinion. Sometimes we use strong words just because we want to emphasize our opinion, defend it, and make the listener understand it.” (English translation)

and therefore do not often “hedge” their opinions. This may explain the learners’ lower frequency of mitigating criticisms when compared with the Australian NSs.

2.5.2. Learners’ acquisition of L2 modifiers

The comparison of the three learner groups’ data has provided some insight into their L2 pragmatic development in general and acquisition of modifiers in particular. Firstly, this study found that the differences in modification use between the learners of different proficiency levels can be largely explained by their different levels of control over modifiers. In other words, the main reason for the higher proficiency learners’ greater use of both internal and external modifiers is perhaps their better processing ability in spontaneous communication, when compared with their less proficient peers. The low proficiency learners, on the other hand, might have had quite well-developed universal pragmatic knowledge but their lack of fluency in the L2 prevented them from employing this knowledge for L2 communication. The reason for this claim is that while the lower proficiency learners employed significantly fewer modifiers than the higher proficiency learners when performing in the oral peer-feedback task (see 2.4), they did not necessarily do so when performing in the questionnaire (a Kruskal-Wallis test run for the questionnaire data found no statistically significant difference among the three learner groups in their frequencies of use of modifiers: $\chi^2 = 4.603$, $df = 2$, $p = .100$). On the contrary, they even exceeded their more proficient peers in the total number of modifiers as well as the number of internal modifiers when they had more processing time in the written condition. For example, high beginners made use of almost as many criticism modifiers as the advanced learners (.91 modifier per criticism formula as opposed to 1.3 for the advanced learners) and even more than the intermediate learners (who produced an average of only .71 modifier per criticism formula), especially in the case of internal modifiers (cf. $M = .76$ for the high beginners and $M = .68$ for the intermediate learners). When interviewed in the playback session, 83% of the lower proficiency learners revealed that when required to produce spontaneous speech, they gave priority to the accurate conveyance of their messages rather than to making these messages sound more polite. In contrast, as much as 33% of the intermediate learners and 50% of the advanced learners reported giving greater priority to politeness than accuracy.

These results, to some extent, seem to emphasize the importance of the task of developing control over language processing in acquiring L2 pragmatic knowledge, thus lending support to Bialystok (1993).

This study also found evidence to suggest that lexicalized modifiers tend to emerge earlier than grammaticalized modifiers in the learners' IL, thus supporting Meisel et al.'s (1981) complexification hypothesis (see Salsbury and Bardovi-Harlig 2001 for further such discussions). Meisel et al. argue that the order of acquisition of L2 forms is dependent on their structural complexity and the processing demands involved; thus syntactically complex structures, which are also more cognitively demanding, are usually acquired later than simpler structures which require a minimum of processing capacity. The fact that lexicalized modifiers were abundant in the learners' data from this study whereas grammaticalized modifiers were rare, although the latter did increase slightly according to the learners' proficiency levels, indicates that (1) lexicalized modifiers are acquired earlier and (2) the learners, regardless of their proficiency levels, had difficulty using grammaticalized modifiers, partly because they had not yet gained full control over these complex structures.

In light of the above findings, there is a need here to raise the question of the relationship between pragmatics and grammar in learners' developing IL. Research has generally established that grammatical competence does not necessarily imply pragmatic competence since even advanced learners do not fully acquire L2 pragmatic knowledge (Kasper, 2000; Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). On the other hand, there is also the issue of whether grammatical competence constitutes a prerequisite for the development of pragmatic competence. According to Kasper and Rose (2002), there have been two contradictory hypotheses in this regard. One is the precedence of pragmatics over grammar (i.e. grammatical competence is not required for pragmatic acquisition) with evidence coming from studies such as Schmidt (1983), Koike (1989), and Ellis (1992, 1997). The other is the precedence of grammar over pragmatics (i.e. grammatical competence is required for pragmatic acquisition) with evidence coming from Karkkainen (1992), Salsbury and Bardovi-Harlig (2000, 2001), and Hill (1997) (also see Kasper and Rose, *ibid.*, for further such findings).

The present study does not, however, take the position that grammar and pragmatics are necessarily two totally independent entities as the issue of the precedence of one competence over the other may imply. Rather, its findings only suggest that the learners' limited grammatical competence could restrict their capacity to produce linguistic action in a native-like way. Specifically, the learners sometimes learned grammatical forms but did not learn all their functions, with the result that they did not always put them to the correct pragmatic use. For example, the learners, while displaying knowledge of modal structures such as "*could/would*", and of the 'past tense', rarely used them for

modification. Presumably, although they knew the primary function of such structures (e.g. expressing ability/ possibility, or past events etc.), they were probably less aware that they could also be used for mitigation. In other cases, they did not achieve full control over some complex grammatical forms due to a lack of fluency in the L2, with the result that they did not use these forms despite their knowledge of them.

Finally, the findings of the present study seemed to suggest a possibly non-linear developmental path in learning L2 external modifiers. Similarly to previous studies (see section 1), this study also found a higher frequency of use of external modifiers by intermediate learners, which brought them closer to the target group than their high beginning and advanced peers. However, unlike the existing studies, the intermediate learners in the present study were not found to generate more verbose criticisms than the Australian NSs. Indeed, although they produced more external modifiers than their lower and higher proficiency peers, they still produced fewer external modifiers than the target group. The intermediate learners' behavior might indicate that while still constrained by their L1 pragmatics, which makes restricted use of modifiers, this learner group had had achieved sufficient linguistic resources to express their sensitivity to politeness when realizing criticisms in the L2, as compared to their lower proficiency peers. However, when compared with their more proficient peers, who produced more internal modifiers, they had not yet developed the same degree of control over complex structures. Thus, when under communicative pressure, they tended to compensate for their lack of internal modifiers by drawing more heavily on external modifiers, the addition of which usually does not increase the structural complexity of the utterances and thus requiring only minimal processing attention (see Hassal, 2001 for a similar discussion).

3. Conclusion

This study found that the learners generally under-used modifiers when criticizing in the L2. This under-use can be explained partly by the learners' lack of full control over language processing and partly by their lack of full awareness of the power of modifiers in softening a face threat, a possible influence of their L1, which makes little use of modifiers, too. While supporting the claim made by Bialystok (1993) that gaining control over L2 pragmatic knowledge is a crucial task for adult learners, this study also suggests that learning new pragmatic knowledge may be another important task for them when developing L2 pragmatic competence. This study also found an earlier emergence of lexicalized modifiers and a later emergence of grammaticalized modifiers, thus suggesting an acquisition of the former before the latter in the learners' IL.

Notes:

(1) and (3): All the participants were randomly selected. However, before they were included in the selection round, they were required to satisfy a number of screening criteria (i.e. stratified random selection). Firstly, they needed to fall within the same age group. Secondly, in the case of the learner participants, it was necessary for them not to be studying a foreign language other than English. These screening criteria helped to ensure that these extraneous variables would not interfere with or cloud the effects of the variables under investigation. This screening would also help to make the participants more comparable in terms of the controlled variables.

(2): IELTS is a standardized international proficiency English test intended for non-native speakers of English who wish to undertake university study or work in an English-speaking country. The test is administered by University of Cambridge ESOL Examination in conjunction with the British Council and IDP: IELTS Australia. It covers four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing and assesses on a nine-band scale with 1 being the lowest and 9 being the highest. It reports scores both overall and by skill module. An overall score of 5.0 is described as representing “partial command” of English, whereas an overall score of 6.0 would represent “generally effective command” of English and an overall score of 7.0 would represent “operational command” of English (IELTS Handbook 2005: 4).

(4) The pilot study was conducted with four dyads of Vietnamese EFL learners and three dyads of NSs of American English one month prior to the main study.

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Appendix A: The peer-feedback task

Instruction: You have written a 250 word argumentative essay. Now show it to your friend and work in pairs. Take as much time as you need to read your friend's essay. Try to find something you are unsatisfied with about the essay and comment on it. Does your friend think the same? Discuss with him or her some of the things you think are wrong with the essay. Do not try to discuss two essays at the same time. Work on one essay at a time only. You may discuss between yourselves whose essay to work on first.

- Notes:**
- 1. It is important that you understand the task completely, so before you start you are encouraged to ask questions if you find any detail you are not sure of.**
 - 2. Although the task requires you to comment specifically on the points you are unsatisfied with in your friend's essay, you can also comment on the good points (if any) in his/her essay.**

You may want to ask yourself the following questions when giving feedback on your friend's essay:

Organization:

1. Does the essay directly discuss the topic?
2. Is there a clear organizational structure, i.e. does it have three parts: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion?
3. Is the introduction brief and to the point? Does it indicate the main ideas that you will discuss in the body?
4. Are there several paragraphs in the body, each making a different specific point?
5. Is there a brief conclusion that summarizes the main points in the argument?
6. Are the ideas properly linked?

Ideas:

7. Is the writer's opinion clear or do you think the writer is not quite sure what he or she thinks?
8. Are the ideas relevant and well supported by evidence and examples?
9. Are the arguments presented logically?
10. Are the arguments developed from one paragraph to another or does the writer just repeat him/herself?

Grammar/vocabulary:

11. Is there a variety of sentence structure and vocabulary or is there a lot of repetition?
12. Are the linking words (i.e. words used to link ideas) helpful or do they confuse you?
13. Are the sentences grammatically accurate?

Your friend will also give comments on your essay. Do you agree with his/her ideas?

Appendix B: The questionnaire

You have been explained the purpose of my research study and invited to participate in the peer-feedback task as part of the data collection procedure. Your completion of this questionnaire will also help to ensure the success of the study and is therefore highly appreciated.

Please read the instruction and the given situations carefully and write your answers in English in the space provided under each situation. It is important that you understand the requirements completely, so before you start, you are encouraged to ask questions if you find something you do not understand.

Thank you for your assistance.

Criticisms

Instruction: In reference to the essay that your friend has written, what would you say in the following hypothetical situations?

Situation 1: What would you say to your friend if you think his/her essay is not very well organized, so it is rather difficult to follow his/her ideas?

You:

.....

.....

.....

Situation 2: What would you say to your friend if you think in some instances he or she doesn't support his/her arguments with relevant examples and evidence, so these arguments are hard to convince readers?

You:

.....

.....

.....

Situation 3: What would you say to your friend if you think he or she sometimes wanders off the topic?

You:

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.....

.....

Situation 4: What would you say to your friend if you think he or she doesn't often make use of linking words, so the essay seems to lack cohesion?

You:

.....

.....

.....

Appendix C: The retrospective interview

This interview sheet is not a fixed guideline in the sense that the interviewer can add more or modify probes according to the responses of the learners.

Questions:

1. Could you please tell me a bit about your language choice in this episode?
2. Could you please tell me a bit about how you went about what to say in this episode?
3. What would you say in a similar Vietnamese context?
4. Do you think the Australian NS would say the same?
5. What do you think about these English and Vietnamese structures?
6. Have you ever seen language used in this way?
7. Do you remember what language you were thinking in before you said this?
8. What were you concentrating on when you made your criticism?

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Figure caption

Figure 1: Total number of criticism modifiers, external modifiers, and internal modifiers produced by three groups of learners and Australian NSs

Tables

Table 1: Taxonomy of mitigating devices

Type	Characteristics	Examples
1. <u>External:</u>	The supportive moves before or after the head acts.	
a. Steers	Utterances that S used to lead H onto the issue he or she was going to raise.	<p><i>"I read your essay and <u>here are some my own ideas of this</u>" (L), "Ah <u>I have some comments about your writing</u>" (L).</i></p> <p><i>"<u>Bài của bạn nhé ...</u>" (V) (Regarding your essay ...), "<u>Trước hết mình nói về cái đề bài nhé ...</u>" (V) (Please let me start with the essay topic ...)</i></p>
b. Sweeteners	Compliments or positive remarks paid to H either before or after a criticism to compensate for the offensive act.	<p><i>"There are quite <u>good relevant ideas</u> that you presented (.) <u>ah but ..</u>" (A).</i></p> <p><i>"<u>Còn cái phần thân bài thì bạn triển khai ý tốt (.) Ý của bạn thì rất là rõ ràng nhưng mà ...</u>" (V) (Your development of ideas is <u>good</u>, your ideas are <u>very clear</u> but ...)</i></p>
c. Disarmers	Utterances that S used to show his or her awareness of the potential offence that his or her speech might cause H.	<p><i>"You had a few spelling mistakes (.) but I think <u>that's because you're writing too quickly, (.) nothing too major.</u>" (A).</i></p> <p><i>"<u>Còn về ah (.) ngữ pháp và từ vựng thì cũng ah (.) không có gì cả, chỉ có một số lỗi nhỏ thôi, lỗi nhỏ như thiếu chia động từ chẳng hạn, <u>chắc là quên, đúng không?</u>" (V) (Regarding your grammar and vocabulary, there is no problem except some minor errors, for example, there is no subject-verb agreement. <u>Maybe you just forgot to do it. Is that right?</u>)</u></i></p>
d. Grounders	The reasons given by S to justify his or her intent.	<p><i>"I think <u>"is" is better than "are" there because traffic (.2) ah single?</u>" (A).</i></p> <p><i>"<u>Bởi vì đáng lẽ cả một cái ý này bạn phải nêu ra được ví dụ cụ thể và có những cái supporting cho nó bởi vì nó là một ý lớn trong bài essay mà</u>" (V) (You should have given specific examples and details to support this idea <u>because it is a major idea in your essay</u>)</i></p>
2. <u>Internal:</u>	Part of the criticism and criticism response.	

a. <u>Syntactic</u> :	Syntactic devices to tone down the effects of the offensive act	
- Past tense	With present time reference.	<i>I <u>thought</u> you missed out something (A)</i>
-Interrogative	All structures showing possibility.	<i><u>Should we</u> change a little for its clearness?(L)</i>
-Modal		<i>May, could, would</i>
b. <u>Lexical/ phrasal</u> :		
-Hedges	Adverbials	<i>Sort of, kind of Kiểu như, như kiểu, kiểu dạng (sort of), kiểu thế (something like that)</i>
-Understaters	Adverbial modifiers	<i>Quite, a (little) bit Hơi/ chút (a little), không ... lắm (not ... very), một số (some), một tý thôi (just some), ở một mức độ nào đấy (to some extent)</i>
-Downtoners	Sentence modifiers	<i>Maybe, possible, probably Hình như, dường như, hay sao ý, có lẽ, có thể, có vẻ (perhaps/ maybe)</i>
-Subjectivizers		<i>I think, I feel, in my opinion Mình nghĩ là (I think), Tôi thấy (I see that ...), Tôi cảm giác/ Tôi cảm tưởng (I feel), Đây là ý kiến của tôi (That is my opinion), Theo quan điểm của tôi (In my opinion), Tôi nghĩ thế (That's what I think)</i>
-Consultative	Usually ritualized	<i>Do you think? Do you agree? Bạn có thấy là ... (Do you see that ...?) Bạn có cảm giác là ...? (Do you feel that ...?) Bạn có nghĩ là ...? (Do you think that...?) Bạn có đồng ý không? (Do you agree?)</i>
-Cajolers		<i>I mean, you see, you know Tức là (That means)</i>
-Appealers		<i>Okay? Right? Yeah? Đúng không? Phải không? Thì có phải là ...? (Is that right?) Nhé (yeah?)</i>

Symbols: L: Learners V: Vietnamese NSs A: Australian NSs

Table 2: Summary of the learners' English learning experience and proficiency

Sub-groups	High begin. (N =12)	Inter. (N =12)	Advanced (N =12)
Total number of participants	12	12	12
Actual range of IELTS scores	5.0	5.5	7.0 - 8.0
Average overall IELTS scores	5.0	5.5	7.3
Average number of years of English instruction	7.5	6.3	9.0

Table 3: Background information on the participants

Groups and sub-groups		L1	IL			L2
		(N =12)	High Beg. (N =12)	Inter. (N =12)	Adv. (N =12)	(N =12)
Total No of participants		12	12	12	12	12
Gender	M	5	4	6	2	3
	F	7	8	6	10	9
Courses of study	<i>Undergrad</i>	8	7	5	0	7
	<i>Postgrad</i>	4	5	7	12	5
	<i>Major</i>	Various	Various	Various	Various	Various
Mean Age		23.9	22.9	23.8	25.8	22.8
Location in home country		Various	Various	Various	Various	QLD

Table 4: Results of one-way ANOVA tests for differences in the mean number of criticism modifiers produced per criticism formula by learners, Australian NSs, and Vietnamese NSs

Group:	Learners (N =36)			Australian NSs (N =12)			Vietnamese NSs			F	P
	F	M	SD	F	M	SD	F	M			
Total modifiers	858/597	1.6	.94	447/120	3.9	1.1	315/271	1.2	.29	34.406	.001
Ext. modifiers	382/597	.83	.79	213/120	1.8	.75	109/271	.50	.24	13.304	.001
Inter. modifiers	476/597	.81	.40	234/120	2.0	.80	206/271	.73	.30	29.587	.001

Table 5: Results of Kruskal-Wallis tests for differences in the mean number of criticism modifiers per criticism formula among three groups of learners

Group:	High beginners (N =12)			Intermediate (N =12)			Advanced (N =12)			χ^2	P
	F	M	SD	F	M	SD	F	M	SD		
External modifiers	105/242	.38	.25	117/133	1.3	1.0	160/222	.74	.42	12.538	.002
Internal modifiers	153/242	.59	.18	108/133	.87	.50	215/222	.96	.38	6.371	.041
Total modifiers	258/242	.98	.30	225/133	2.2	1.2	375/222	1.7	.58	13.491	.001

Table 6: Results of One-way ANOVA test for difference in the mean number of criticism modifiers produced per criticism formula by three proficiency groups of learners and two NS groups

Group:	H. begin. (N =12)	Inter. (N =12)	Adv. (N =12)	Aus. L1 (N =12)	Viet L1 (N =12)	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
<i>Frequency</i>	258/242	225/133	375/222	447/120	315/271	24.583	.001
<i>Mean</i>	.98	2.2	1.7	3.9	1.2		
<i>St. Deviation</i>	.30	1.2	.58	1.1	.29		

Table 7: Distribution of different types of criticism external modifiers by three groups of learners in comparison with the Australian NS and Vietnamese NS groups

Group: Types	High beginners (N =12)		Intermediate (N =12)		Advanced (N =12)		Australian NS (N =12)		Vietnamese NS (N =12)	
	<i>F</i>	%	<i>F</i>	%	<i>F</i>	%	<i>F</i>	%	<i>F</i>	%
Steers	12/105	11	6/117	5	18/160	11	8/213	4	9/109	8
Sweeteners	42/105	40	83/117	71	66/160	41	150/213	70	53/109	49
Disarmers	25/105	24	11/117	9	38/160	24	42/213	20	30/109	27
Grounders	26/105	25	17/117	15	38/160	24	13/213	6	17/109	16

Table 8: Results of Kruskal-Wallis tests for the distribution of criticism internal modifiers by learners, the Australian NSs, and the Vietnamese NSs

Internal modifiers	Learners (N =36)			Australian NS (N =12)			Vietnamese NS (N =12)			χ^2	<i>P</i>
	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Syntactic mod	15/597	.03	.10	68/120	.52	.23	0/271	.00	.00	39.085	.001
Appealers	15/597	.02	.04	0/120	.00	.00	52/271	.16	.14	21.438	.001
Understaters	126/597	.23	.18	57/120	.54	.31	41/271	.17	.17	13.706	.001
Hedges	27/597	.04	.09	27/120	.25	.30	13/271	.03	.05	8.640	.013

Table 9: The number of “hedges” and “cajolers” produced per criticism formula by three groups of learners

Group:	High beginners				Intermediate learners				Advanced learners			
	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%
Hedges	1/153	.005	.020	.7	5/108	.032	.080	5	21/215	.087	.130	10
Cajolers	0/153	.00	.00	.0	7/108	.03	.05	6	27/215	.16	.16	13

Table 10: Range of selected internal modifiers used by three groups of learners (by frequency counts)

Group: Range:	High Beginners (N =12) <i>F</i>	Intermediate learners (N =12) <i>F</i>	Advanced learners (N =12) <i>F</i>	Australian L1 (N =12) <i>F</i>
<i>1. Syntactic modifiers:</i>				
<u>Modal:</u>				
May	3/153	2/108	6/215	4/234
Might	0/153	0/108	4/215	6/234
Would	0/153	0/108	0/215	12/234
Could	0/153	0/108	0/215	12/234
<u>Past tense</u>	0/153	1/108	0/215	34/234
<i>2. Hedges</i>				
Sort of (kind of), tend to	0/153	0/108	2/215	21/234
Something (like that)	1/153	5/108	19/215	6/234
That sort of thing				
<i>3. Understaters</i>				
A little (bit)	1/153	0/108	7/215	13/234
Some, few	33/153	20/108	20/215	7/234
Not very (really), not many (enough), almost, slightly	5/153	4/108	8/215	17/234
Just/only	1/153	5/108	8/215	16/234
Quite/rather	0/153	0/108	10/215	4/234
<i>4. Downtoners</i>				
Maybe	10/153	12/108	14/215	12/234
Perhaps, probably, possibly	0/153	0/108	2/215	6/234
<i>5. Appealers</i>				
Is that right? Right?	0/153	0/153	7/ 215	0/ 234
Yeah? OK?	2/153	2/153	4/ 215	0/ 234

Table 11: Range of selected internal modifiers used by the Vietnamese NS group

	<i>F</i>
<i>1. Syntactic modifiers:</i>	
Modal	0/ 206
Past tense	
<i>2. Hedges</i>	
Kiểu như/ như kiểu/ kiểu dạng (sort of/ kind of)	10/ 206
Kiểu thể (something like that)	3/ 206
<i>3. Understaters</i>	
Hơi, chút (a little)	6/ 206
Một số (some, few)	4/ 206
Không ... lắm (not ... very)	21/ 206
(Chỉ) một tý thôi (just some)	7/ 206
Ở một mức độ nào đấy (to some extent)	3/ 206

<i>4. Downtoners</i>		
Có lẽ/ Có thể/ Có vẻ (maybe)		8/ 206
Hình như/ Dường như/ Hay sao ý (perhaps)		8/ 206
<i>5. Appealers</i>		
Nhé (yeah?)		4/ 206
Đúng không? Phải không? Thì có phải là ...? (Is that right?)		48/ 206

Figures

Figure 1

