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Mitigation of Suggestions and Advice in Post-Observation Conferences Between 3 English Language Teacher Educators

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, there has been much research into the discourse of post-observation conferences in the supervision of teachers in both mainstream education and the teaching of English as a Foreign Language. However, the discourse of post-observation conferences in peer observation of teaching has received little attention. The purpose of this study is to investigate the way in which suggestions and advice are mitigated in such discourse. 21 audio-recorded and transcribed post-observation conferences held between 3 dyads of English Language teacher trainers as part of a larger action research project were analysed. It was found that both the observing and the observed teachers made suggestions and gave advice. The participants also made frequent use of negative politeness strategies, and less so positive politeness strategies, when offering suggestions and advice to their colleagues. The findings show that while collaborative in nature, post-observation conferences in peer observation of teaching can construe a threat to the face of the participants, even when power relations are levelled.

Key Words: English Language Teaching, Peer observation of teaching, Post-observation conferences, Suggestions, Advice, Mitigation

Özet

Öğretmen denetlemesi esnasında yapılan gözlemlenme sonrası toplantılarının söylem çözümlemesi, hem genel eğitim alanında hem de İngilizce öğretmenliği alanında son yirmi yıldır birçok çalışmanın konusu olmuştu. Ancak, öğretmenlikte akran gözlemlenmesinden ortaya çıkan söylem konusu ile ilgili olarak fazla çalışılmadığı gözlemlenmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, akran gözlemlenmesinin esnasında yapılan önerilerin konuşmacı tarafından ne şekilde hafifletildiğinin incelemektir. Bu amaç

doğrultusunda, bir eylem araştırma çalışmanın parçası olarak 3 üniversite İngilizce öğretim görevlisi ile yapılan toplam 21 gözlemlenme sonrası toplantılarının söylemleri çözümlenmiştir. Bu çözümlemelerin sonucunda ortaya çıkan bulgular, şu şekilde sıralanabilir. Toplantılarda hem gözlemleyen hem de gözlemlenen öğretim görevlilerinin birbirlerinin sınıf içi uygulamalarına yönelik öneriler yaptıklarını; ayrıca, iş arkadaşlarına öneri verirken, katılımcıların sıkça olumsuz nezaket stratejilerine, fakat daha az olarak olumlu nezaket stratejilerini kullandıkları gözlemlenmişti. Son olarak, öğretmenlikte akran gözlemlenmesinde yapılan gözlemlenme sonrası toplantıları katılımcıların işbirliği ile yapıldığı gözlemlenirken, katılımcıların arasında güç ilişkilerin azalmış olsa bile, bu toplantılar tehdit unsuru olabilecekleri sonuca varılmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: İngilizce Dili Öğretimi, Akran gözlemlenmesi, Gözlemlenme sonrası toplantı, Öneriler, Tavsiye, Hafifletme

1. Introduction

There has been considerable interest over the last 20 years in the analysis of post-observation conference (POC) discourse in the supervision of both prospective and practising teachers in mainstream education (Roberts, 1991; Waite, 1991, 1993; Vasquez, 2004; Copland, 2010), and to a lesser extent in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) (Wajnryb, 1994a, 1994b, 1995, 1998). However, research on the discourse of POCs in peer observation of teaching (POT) has largely focused on the application of (e.g., Martin & Double, 1998), personal reactions to (e.g. Peel, 2005) and the problems of (e.g., Shortland, 2004) the process. There appears to be a paucity of discourse-level studies of POCs between peers, particularly in the context of higher education ELT in Turkey.

Unlike traditional supervisory approaches to observation, POT puts teachers at the centre of their own professional development, in keeping with its roots in reflective practice (RP) (see, e.g. Wallace, 1991). Because it is a collaborative enterprise among colleagues without the implied hierarchy of supervision, it may be reasonable to expect POCs in POT to display discourse level differences with those in supervisory approaches. This study aims to investigate the mitigation of suggestions and advice, commonly

occurring speech acts in POCs which can potentially threaten the face of the hearer (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

2. Literature review

This section covers pertinent research on peer observation of teaching and politeness theory and the post-observation conference. It is intended to be representative rather than exhaustive.

2.1 Peer observation of teachers

The term observation is unfortunately rich with the negative connotations of evaluation by superiors, reminiscent of the 'Supervisory Approach' described by Freeman (1982) and Richards (1997), in which the observed teacher is assumed to have some deficiencies in his/her practice which can only remedied by a supervisor, usually an academic or professional superior. The implied asymmetric power relationship between the observer and the observed in such top-down approaches to teacher development can often be a source of friction and be counterproductive (Cosh, 1999; Shortland, 2004; Bailey, 2006; Copland, 2010). Furthermore, while such an approach may be appropriate for prospective teachers during their initial education when they are concerned about *what* to do when they teach (Freeman, 1982), it is not as fruitful for practicing teachers who are more concerned with *how* and *why* they teach the way they do (Richards, 1997).

Reflective practice (RP) has provided a more teacher-centred approach to professional development in ELT (see, e.g. Wallace, 1991). According to Farrell (2007), RP is a bottom-up approach to teacher development which lies on the assumption that both experienced and novice teachers can understand their practice by conscious and systematic reflection on their practice. As an approach to reflection on practice, POT has been suggested by many researchers in the field of ELT (see, e.g. Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Farrell, 2007) as a more appropriate way to understand with more depth the *hows* and *whys* of teaching and to involve the teacher more actively in the process. The aim of POT should be the professional development of the teacher rather than a judgement on their performance. Moreover, some researchers (Wajnryb, 1992, Martin & Double, 1998; Cosh, 1999; Schuck, Aubusson & Buchanan, 2008) emphasise the aim of POT in a reflective context as being to encourage self-development and self-awareness about their practice in both the observer and the observee, rather than

to impose an outsider's opinion of how teaching should take place. In other words, POT for teacher development should be seen as a learning tool which provides access to a whole range of experiences and processes which can lead toward the professional development of all participants.

The procedure for implementing POT resembles the three steps of clinical supervision suggested by Goldhammer, Anderson and Krajewsky (1980): Namely, the pre-observation planning conference, classroom observation and the post-observation feedback conference. It is the final feedback meeting which provides a forum for both the observer and the observee to reflect on the observation (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005) in order to develop their conceptions of teaching and to reduce the gap between theory and practice (Vidmar, 2006). At this stage it is vital that the relationship between the two participants is open and honest for constructive reflection to take place. However, both giving and receiving feedback can be stressful processes. First, the observer needs to be skilled in giving critical feedback in such a way that it is not construed as judgemental criticism. Second, the observee must be willing to be reflective (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004, 2005), and in order to do so needs to tolerate a certain lowering of self-esteem when realising that there is a gap between what they aspire to do when teaching and what they actually do. This is what Gebhard and Oprandy (1999: 163) refer to as 'destabilisation', a state which motivates teachers to change their practice.

Being able to tolerate a lowering of self-esteem and engage in self-disclosure requires an environment of trust. Given such an environment, the observee is more inclined to be open to feedback and thus be more willing and able to bring about fundamental changes in his/her practice (Martin & Double, 1998; Strong & Baron, 2004; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). For this to happen, both participants need to attend to each others' face (Goffman, 1967/2005) by employing politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The following section will discuss these concepts.

2.2 Politeness theory and post-observation conferences

Studies on politeness lie in the field of pragmatics (see, e.g. Schiffrin, 1994). Brown & Levinson (1987) based their theory of politeness on the concept of face defined by Goffman (1967/2005: 5) as 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact'. Face is an emotionally invested notion which can be lost or enhanced, and constantly needs to be

maintained in social interactions. It can be seen as basic wants mutual to all participants, and has two components: *negative* face, the want of an individual to be free from imposition and distraction; and *positive* face, the want that an individual's wants be desirable to others (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

While both participants of an interaction have a mutual interest in maintaining each other's face; certain acts by their nature can be threatening to both the negative and positive face of either the speaker or the hearer. Brown & Levinson (1987) refer to such acts as face-threatening acts (FTAs). The seriousness of an FTA depends on the social distance, or the familiarity between the participants; the relative power, or social status of the participants; and the magnitude of the risk of imposition. Research has shown the discourse of POCs in supervisory contexts to be rife with FTAs such as suggestions and advice, which threaten the hearer's negative face; expressions of criticism and disagreements, which threaten the hearer's positive face; and excuses in response to criticism, which threaten the speaker's negative face (see, e.g. Roberts, 1991; Waite, 1991, 1993; Strong & Baron, 2004; Vasquez, 2004).

In order to minimise the potential threat of an FTA, participants mitigate, or deliberately adapt, what they are saying in order to take account of the hearer's reactions (Wajnryb, 1994a). Discourse analytical studies on supervisory discourse in mainstream education (e.g. Roberts, 1991; Waite, 1991, 1993; Strong & Baron, 2004; Vasquez, 2004) have shown the central role of mitigation in POCs with practicing teachers. In the ELT context, Wajnryb (1994a) suggested a typology of utterance-level mitigation devices (see Figure 1). These devices can be indirect, mediated through syntactic strategies such as tense shift and use of modals, or through semantic strategies such as use of hedges.

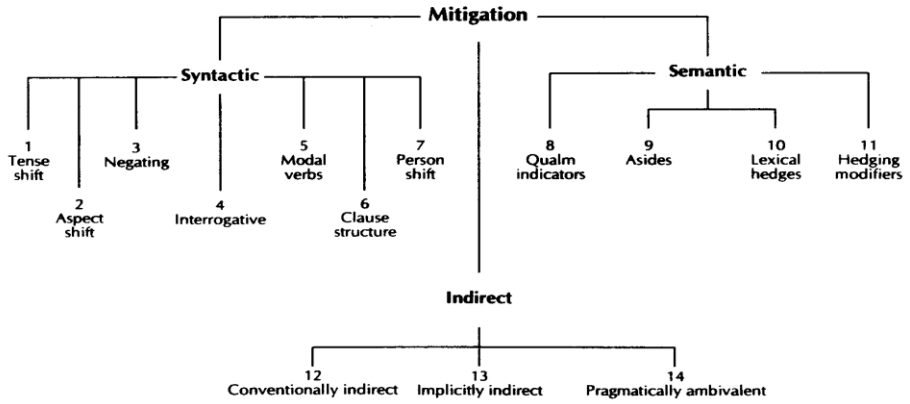

Figure 1: Typology of utterance-level mitigation strategies (Wajnryb, 1994a: 230)

There appears to be a paucity of discourse-level research on POCs in POT with practicing teachers, perhaps because of the relative novelty of the approach. This is particularly true in the field of ELT in Turkey, where POT is not as widely used as it is in the United States, the United Kingdom or Australia, from where most of the literature discussed in this section has originated. By definition, reflective observation with a peer is inherently different to that by a supervisor. The social distance between participants of POT is assumed to be low and there is no implied asymmetrical power relation. However, it appears that the threat factor remains, particularly when POT is a mandatory part of university life, as colleagues feel anxious about giving feedback to each other (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005) and may be unwilling to jeopardise their relationship by inquiring into the values and beliefs central to their peers' practice (Schuck et al, 2008). This suggests that POC discourse in POT could also be carefully mitigated.

The current study focuses on an application of POT for reflective development as a part of a larger action research study with three English Language teacher educators (ELTEs) working in the Foreign Languages Education Department of a large state-run university in the western Black Sea region of Turkey (see Author, 2008). The data are the transcripts of the 21 POCs taken from this investigation. The aim of the current study is to analyse the mitigation of the negative FTAs, suggestions and advice, given during the POCs in comparison to that of previous studies conducted on teacher supervision (Roberts, 1991; Waite, 1991, 1993; Wajnryb, 1994a; Vasquez, 2004. One research question has been formulated to this aim: 'What are the patterns of utterance-level mitigation strategies used in formulating the suggestions and advice given during post-observation conferences in an application of peer observation of teaching between 3 English Language teacher educators?'

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The main participants in this study were the three ELTEs teaching the basic language skills courses in the first semester of the ELT programme at a large, state-run university in the Western Black Sea region of Turkey during the autumn term of the 2007-2208 academic year. They chose pseudonyms to protect their identities. Table 1 summarises the biographical details of the main participants at the time of the data

collection. Biker, a 56 year-old Turkish male with over 20 years of teaching experience in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, was responsible for the Contextual Grammar I and Listening and Pronunciation I courses; Bookworm, a 35 year-old Turkish female, took the Advanced Reading and Writing I course and had over 10 years of experience teaching at high schools and universities in Turkey; The Brit, a 40 year-old British female, was responsible for the Oral Communication Skills I course and had nearly 20 years of teaching experience in Taiwan, the United Kingdom and Turkey.

None of the participants were trained in observation; however, they all had experience supervising prospective teachers during the Practicum course.

Table 1. Biographical details of the participants

Participant	Gender	First language	Age	Qualifications	Teaching Experience	Course(s) taught
Biker	Male	Turkish	56	B.A. English Language and Literature	20+ years	Contextual Grammar I Listening and Pronunciation I
Bookworm	Female	Turkish	35	M.A. English Language Teaching	10+years	Advanced Reading and Writing I
The Brit	Female	English	40	DTEFLA, M.A. English Language Teaching	20 years	Oral Communication Skills I

Note. B.A.= Bachelor of Arts, M.A. =Master of Arts, DTEFLA= Diploma in Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Adults

3.2 Data sources

The framework of the original study was the action research cycle suggested by Elliott (1991). The structure of this framework assisted the instructors in their reflection and was self-perpetual in that each step of action led to the next one. 7 cycles were completed. There were various sources of data involved at each stage of the procedure, including the weekly video-recorded lessons, the transcriptions of the audio-recorded

weekly POCs between the instructors, the weekly entries in the reflective journals kept by the instructors, and student feedback in the form of open-ended questions collected after each lesson. The data relevant to the current study are the transcriptions of the 21 POCs over the period of data collection.

3.3 Data collection

As the initial step of the research process, the participants were asked to make a list of the aspects of their teaching they were pleased with and those they perceived as problematic areas, which served as input for the first conference of the action research process.

At the initial conference, the participants met to discuss their perceived problems and chose ones that could feasibly be observed and attempted to be changed within the limitations of the study. The dynamic nature of the action research allowed the participants to make choices about focus problems as they went along. Due to the time constraints imposed by the workloads of the participants, it was decided that each participant should observe one colleague and be observed by the other. Thus, three dyads were formed in which Biker observed The Brit, who observed Bookworm, who in turn observed Biker.

The next stage was the action research spiral in which the participants had one hour of their lessons a week video-recorded using a digital camera in order to be observed by their partner for a pre-decided problematic area of their practice. They met for a weekly post-observation conference to discuss the lesson in terms of the problem, come up with an action plan, and also discuss possible future focuses for the ensuing cycle. These post-observation conferences were recorded using a digital voice recorder in order for the researcher to transcribe them onto Word documents for analysis. Since the focus of the transcription was on content in the current study, details of prosodic features were not considered.

3.4 Data analysis procedures

To answer the research question, the 21 transcripts were combed for all instances of suggestions made by both the observer and the observee. The segments of the conversation including the suggestions were excerpted together with the surrounding co-

text. Finally, the manner in which each of the suggestions was mitigated was classified according to Wajnryb's (1994) typology of utterance-level mitigation strategies used in supervisory discourse (see Figure 2). The researcher conducted the initial review of the data. In order to ensure the reliability of the coding process, both the researcher and a research assistant familiar with qualitative analysis procedures worked together to apply the typology to 10% of the data in order to become familiar with it and to clear any uncertainties related to the codes. After this familiarisation stage, a further 10% of the data were coded independently by the researcher and the research assistant and an acceptable level of 88.63% agreement (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was reached.

4. Findings and discussion

In this section, the findings related to the frequency of suggestions and advice and the patterns of strategies used to mitigate these speech acts given in the data are discussed. Given the lack of research on the discourse of post-observation conferences for POT, the findings will be discussed in comparison to those gleaned from studies conducted on supervisory discourse in the light of the expectations discussed in the literature review.

Table 2. Frequency of suggestions, mitigation devices, and mitigation devices per suggestion

Cycle	Dyad	Role	Participant	Suggestions	Mitigation devices	Mitigation devices per suggestion
1	1	Obs	Biker	7	24	3.43
		Obsee	The Brit	6	9	1.5
	2	Obs	Bookworm	2	3	1.5
		Obsee	Biker	10	6	0.6
	3	Obs	The Brit	37	85	2.3
		Obsee	Bookworm	11	14	1.27
2	1	Obs	Biker	10	24	2.4
		Obsee	The Brit	4	9	2.25
	2	Obs	Bookworm	3	5	1.67
		Obsee	Biker	2	4	2

	3	Obs	The Brit	14	35	2.5
		Obsee	Bookworm	6	7	1.17
3	1	Obs	Biker	8	22	2.75
		Obsee	The Brit	3	5	1.67
	2	Obs	Bookworm	3	8	2.67
		Obsee	Biker	6	10	1.67
	3	Obs	The Brit	2	4	2
		Obsee	Bookworm	3	4	1.33
4	1	Obs	Biker	2	4	2
		Obsee	The Brit	3	11	3.67
	2	Obs	Bookworm	3	4	1.33
		Obsee	Biker	3	4	1.33
	3	Obs	The Brit	2	3	1.5
		Obsee	Bookworm	1	1	1
5	1	Obs	Biker	0	0	0
		Obsee	The Brit	0	0	0
	2	Obs	Bookworm	3	3	1
		Obsee	Biker	3	5	1.67
	3	Obs	The Brit	0	0	0
		Obsee	Bookworm	0	0	0
6	1	Obs	Biker	6	9	1.5
		Obsee	The Brit	4	6	1.5
	2	Obs	Bookworm	1	2	2
		Obsee	Biker	0	0	0
	3	Obs	The Brit	4	6	1.5
		Obsee	Bookworm	3	5	1.67
7	1	Obs	Biker	0	0	0
		Obsee	The Brit	0	0	0
	2	Obs	Bookworm	0	0	0
		Obsee	Biker	0	0	0
	3	Obs	The Brit	0	0	0
		Obsee	Bookworm	0	0	0

Note. Obs=Observing teacher; Obsee= observee teacher

Table 2 shows the number of suggestions made by each participant in the different roles and the number of mitigation strategies per suggestion. The data reveal a number of interesting trends worth noting. First, suggestions were made by both the observing and observed teacher. This is a characteristic which distinguishes POT as a collaborative enterprise which encourages the active involvement of the observed teacher in their own professional development (Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999; Richards & Farrell, 2005).

In supervisory approaches, it is invariably the supervisor who makes suggestions or gives advice (Roberts, 1991; Waite, 1991, 1993; Wajnryb, 1995; Strong & Baron, 2004; Vasquez, 2004). Second, the suggestions were largely made in the earlier conferences. This could be explained by the fact that the participants chose to focus on the issues they perceived as more problematic, and therefore urgent, in the earlier cycles of the action research, such as Bookworm's teacher talk time, The Brit's classroom management and Biker's tendency to digress. The later cycles focused on aspects of their teaching they were curious rather than concerned about, such as Biker's use of Turkish in grammatical explanations and The Brit's wondering whether or not she spoke too quickly (see Author, 2010). Third, the participants used clusters of multiple devices to mitigate their suggestions, a finding consistent with those of Vasquez (2004). The extensive use of such strategies suggests that the participants in the current study were concerned to preserve their colleagues' face while giving them feedback. This finding is in line with those of Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2005), who noted that personal relationships between colleagues sometimes complicated the feedback process. It also shows that the participants were aware of the potential threat to their colleagues' face of the speech acts they were performing (Vasquez, 2004). The Brit and Bookworm, for example, are good friends out of the work environment and this could have affected the way The Brit delivered her feedback as an observer. Similarly, the fact that Biker was an older male with more professional experience could have shaped the way Bookworm approached her delivery of feedback. An explanation could be that the focus of the POCs was the observees' perceived problems in teaching. Hence, the observer still retained the position of 'knower' traditionally held by supervisors, which created an imbalance of power.

Due to the dimensions of the data of the current study, it would be impractical to present all the findings related to the type of mitigation devices used. However, the most frequently occurring types will be discussed and exemplified in the following section in order to illustrate the range of negative and positive politeness strategies used by the participants.

4.1 Negative politeness strategies

As mentioned in the literature review, giving suggestions and advice pose a threat to the hearer's negative face by constituting imposition. Not surprisingly, a variety of negative politeness strategies were used in conjunction with the suggestions and advice.

The most frequently occurring types of negative mitigation strategies were the hedging modifier 'maybe' and the modals 'can' or 'could' being used together. Hedging modifiers suggest that the speaker does not take full responsibility for the truth of his/her utterances (Brown & Levinson, 1987); the modal 'can' suggests a hypothetical possibility, while 'could' makes the suggestion even more tentative (Leech, 2004). Together they reduce the imposition of the suggestion and thus protect the hearer's negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Wajnryb, 1994a; Vasquez, 2004). Examples from the data include 'So **maybe** you **could** develop some good board skills' (Biker to The Brit, Cycle 2); 'and **maybe** when you have more visuals, you **can** get the students to talk more by drawing attention to the visual' (The Brit to Bookworm, Cycle 1).

Qualm indicators, such as hesitations and reformulations, were also observed frequently throughout the data. Wajnryb (1994a) reports that such features indicate that the speaker may be at pains to find a suitable way of expressing a point which might damage the hearer's negative face. Examples from the current data include: 'And another thing **I noticed**, **if I were you**, **I mean**, I couldn't help elaborating on these expressions, like P.E. teacher, Physical Education teacher, sports teacher' (Biker to The Brit, Cycle 2). In this utterance, Biker begins his suggestion with an '*I+ mental verb'* construction, reformulates with the '*if I were you'* structure for giving advice, gathers his thoughts with the hesitation '*I mean'*, then gives his suggestion.

Another pattern in the data was the use of '*I+mental verb'* followed by the FTA embedded in a subordinate clause. For example, '**I think** you might need to give them

some of the control.' (The Brit to Bookworm, Cycle 2). The FTA is mitigated first by giving prominence to the speaker's declaration of subjectivity (*I think*), thus suggesting that the following proposition is an opinion rather than fact. Second, the presentation of the FTA in a subordinate clause distances it from a prominent position. The overall effect is to give an opinion-like quality to the suggestion and therefore make it negotiable (Wajnryb, 1994a), thus reducing its imposition.

4.2 Positive politeness strategies

There were also occurrences in the data of mitigation devices that protected the positive face of the hearer. One such strategy is the deflecting aside, which serves to shift the focus from the hearer to the speaker (Wajnryb, 1994a). In the current context, the observed teacher acknowledges his/her own difficulties with a particular aspect of teaching. For example, when Biker suggested to The Brit that she could develop good board skills in Cycle 2, he concludes by denigrating his own ability (Vasquez, 2004) by adding 'writing on the board while maintaining contact at the same time…some people can do that, **but personally speaking I can't'**. Similarly, when The Brit suggested using more visuals to Bookworm in Cycle 2, she preceded the FTA as follows 'Maybe you could have…ha…one thing I've noticed that's sort of related, **and I've realised this with my own classes**, if you have yourself and a book, and 30 students and 30 books, all their eyes are on the books and there's no eye contact. So I wonder if...' Here, The Brit established common ground with Bookworm before she delivered the suggestion by admitting she had a similar problem.

Another means by which to protect the positive face of the hearer is by using interrogatives (Wajnryb, 1994a). In the POCs of the Bookworm-Biker dyad, it was observed that Biker as observee made an equal amount or even more suggestions than Bookworm as observe (see Table 2). On a number of occasions he used interrogatives to formulate these suggestions, as in the following examples 'actually I should be more patient and I should get the students to ask and answer the questions during this review. Don't you think so?' (Cycle 1); and '...do you think I should have written down the responses on the board?' (Cycle 2). In this way he asked for Bookworm's opinion, and thus invited her to comment. By making suggestions about his own practice, he was in effect doing what the traditional supervisor would normally do. He could have construed

this as a threat to Bookworm's position as observer. By asking such a question, he paid heed to her knowledge and experience and thus acted to protect her positive face.

While all of the examples given here focus on one mitigation device at a time, they show how multiple devices are used to mitigate suggestions and advice. These findings show that despite the voluntary nature of the POT application, and despite the collegial rather than hierarchical relationship between the three participants, each participant found it necessary to protect their peers' face by using a number of positive and negative mitigation strategies. This suggests that the participants feel that there is still some threat to face involved in giving suggestions or offering advice in POT.

5. Conclusion

This study focused on the patterns of mitigation of suggestions and advice in the POCs conducted between 3 ELTEs voluntarily engaging in POT for reflective development. The main findings can be summarised as follows. First, both positive and negative politeness strategies were used to mitigate the suggestions and advice. This indicates that there was still an element of threat despite the voluntary nature of the POT and the fact that the participants occupied equal academic positions in the department. Second, similar to previous research, the participants used clusters of multiple strategies to mitigate their suggestions. Third, on the whole, more mitigation strategies were used in the earlier meetings than the later ones. This could be because of the nature of the problems under focus, with the more urgently regarded ones being dealt with earlier on. Alternatively, it could be an indication of the participants becoming more familiar with the POT process and more comfortable in their new relationships with their colleagues.

This study has a number of implications for foreign language teacher development. First, the findings of the current study suggest that POCs in voluntary contexts with peers can construe a threat to negative and positive face in a similar way to supervisory POCs. This could be due to the participants' conception of the observer as 'knower' and therefore superior to the observee in line with traditional supervisory practices. Hence, when embarking on any application of POT for purposes of reflective development, it should be emphasised that the process is to promote the learning of both participants. The predominant focus on problematic areas in teachers' practice in the

current study could have increased the conception of observee as superior. Therefore, future applications of POT could have more varied focuses.

There are a number of limitations to this study which cannot be overlooked. First, the data were gathered from one specific educational context with a small number of participants. Further research on POCs in different settings with more participants needs to be conducted to explore whether suggestions and advice are mitigated in similar ways. Second, studies investigating the role of variables such as gender, personality and language proficiency (when participants are non-native speaking teachers) can reveal their effects on mitigation styles. Finally, suggestions and advice are not the only FTAs to occur in POCs. Responding to these speech acts constitute a threat to the positive face of suggestions and advice inevitably are generally followed by a response, further investigation of the types of response utterances of the participants make may also be an interesting direction to take in future research.

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