“Try to say things straight, without being offensive, obviously”: the pragmatics of online peer review

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Exploring and Assessing Pragmatic Aspects of L1 and L2 Communication: From Needs Analysis through Monitoring to Feedback

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• The value of (online) peer feedback
• Context and task description
• Analysis of peer feedback messages
  – terms of address
  – Praise and criticism - “sugaring the pill”
  – instances of positive and negative politeness
  – hedging devices + personal attribution
• Student perceptions and preferences
• Some pedagogical reflections
Advantages
Encourages active, autonomous approach to learning
Fosters skills of critical thinking
Provides an audience for the learner’s work
Online peer feedback fosters interaction whilst ensuring permanence

we had the opportunity not only to write an essay but also to read and comment those of our peers. As a consequence, by reading and commenting the texts of my peers, I could indirectly reflect on my own elaboration (student comment)

Challenges
Learners’ lack of confidence in their ability to assess their peers
Learners’ fear of offending their peers - reviews involve face-threatening acts (FTAs - Brown and Levinson 1987)

How can I as a teacher encourage reflection and critical thinking without making learners feel uncomfortable?

Bridging the gap between (pragmatics) research and language teaching practice (see for example Cohen 2017)
The context

3rd-year English Language course for English majors at the University of Padova – level B2+ / C1

Academic writing on topics related to language, language learning, society and culture e.g. language learning strategies, language and identity standard and non-standard languages

2014-2015 + 2017-2018 academic years

Blended course with online platform Moodle for materials and activities (Glossary tool for peer feedback)

Use of technology to encourage collaboration and metacognitive reflection on learning

Criteria for peer review created collaboratively with the students
Peer review essay 1

1. Download your first draft of essay 1 into Documents.
2. Upload your essay into this Glossary.
3. Write your surname and name in the Concept Box e.g. Rossi, Maria
4. Wait for me to check the Glossary, while you watch the videos.
5. Find the peer whose essay is immediately after yours.
6. Write a comment to your peer of around 200 words taking into account "Your criteria".

Comments (1)

After having read your first essay, I can affirm that you did a quite good work.
Firstly, you were able to reorganize the sources we read in an original way, by providing examples, which can support your thesis. Moreover, you wrote your ideas with coherence and cohesion, by using linking adverbials and in particular by avoiding repetitions. Consequently, you created a clear structure, easily to follow and to understand. I also noticed that you were able to give emphasis in some cases to your ideas and to avoid too much direct expressions. In addition, you used the appropriate register and you concluded in an appropriate way.
As far as the citing and quoting are concerned, I noticed that Amy Han appears in your bibliography, but I was not able to find her name in the text. For this reason, I think that you should cite her name or delete her work from bibliography. To conclude, I would suggest you to leave a blank line between paragraphs.
The feedback messages

170 peer feedback messages
138 from 2015
32 from 2017
49,500 words (tokens)
Average length of message – 190 words

- Second person - 131 (77%)
- Third person - 39 (23%)

- Hi + name
- No salutation
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Term</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hi + name</td>
<td>95 – 72.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No salutation</td>
<td>19 – 14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hello + name</td>
<td>8 – 6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dear + name</td>
<td>3 – 3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hi</td>
<td>2 – 1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hello</td>
<td>2 – 1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hey</td>
<td>1 – 0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hi mate</td>
<td>1 – 0.5%</td>
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</table>
Praise and criticism

Johnson (1992: 54) talks about the “global FTA” of peer review:

“The entire peer review is a potentially face-threatening act because it calls for criticism or suggestions for revision”

Confirmation from the closing statements of the peer reviews analysed:

That's all, sorry in advance if I expressed my opinion too hard. Have a nice day :) 
So good job, have fun and don’t hate me!

I hope you don’t get upset with my critics, cause you did a fine job. Have a nice day :)

The use of praise can be considered as a positive politeness strategy

As expected, the majority of student included both praise and criticism in their reviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Praise and criticism</th>
<th>Only praise</th>
<th>Only criticism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>154 (91%)</td>
<td>14 (8%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Hi Michela, I think your essay covers the argument in an exhaustive way and provides your ideas quite clearly. However, there are a few things that I would change in order to improve your text. Firstly, I would link together the first and the second sentence to create a proper introductive paragraph, so that it is not made of one single sentence [...] Last but not least, one more minor detail: it seems that you have forgotten to write your last access in the website you have chosen as a reference. Anyway, I think you have written a very good text. Good luck for your final version!
Hi Marco, I think you did a remarkable job. The topic has been exhaustively developed and the text has been produced in a discursive, almost reader-friendly, manner. Even quotes or examples has been used coherently to your arguments in a way that kept me interested till the end. I consider the register appropriate and sentences have been logically, fluently and coherently connected. You used an appropriate and wide range of vocabulary, which allowed you to express your ideas clearly and always demonstrating a very good level of grammar accuracy. I do not feel myself in the position of correcting nor adding anything to your paper, for I consider it almost perfect and better than mine for sure.
Criticism

The preamble *does not give the main idea* of the essay. The thesis statement that follows is quite *misleading* and does not give a very clear description of the structure of the essay [...] **Abrupt shifts** from one idea to another without providing a logical sequence [...] **Linking adverbials** were not used appropriately, so that the overall essay structure appears as an *unassembled jigsaw puzzle*, to use a metaphor. **Important terminologies**, which should convey key points, **were omitted**. Sometimes **arguments were not supported by examples**.
Salutation (see slide 7)

Optional introductory remark
I'm Davide and I will be your peer "proof reader" for this essay.
I was tasked to review your essay, I hope my thoughts about it can help you improve.
Allow me to say some thing about your essay

Initial praise or “opening-compliment strategy” (Johnson 1992: 66)
Your essay was good, it had captured my attention, you developed interesting topics.

Initial criticism
Starting from the bad news, I would say that this essay needs a check for spelling ...

Initial praise and criticism
I liked your point of view about the given topic and I got the overall meaning of the essay but there are some things I can not completely understand.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial praise</th>
<th>Initial criticism</th>
<th>Initial praise and criticism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>119 (77.3%)</td>
<td>13 (8.4%)</td>
<td>22 (14.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB – Numbers refer to those who used both praise and criticism in their reviews (154)
As well as the global FTA of peer review, there are also specific FTAs (Johnson 1992), in other words, instances of criticism.

These can be mitigated by means of Positive and Negative Politeness Strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987)

I coded all instances of criticism in the corpus of peer reviews as follows:

1. **Positive politeness**
   - Pairing criticism with praise
   - Expressing solidarity with the peer

2. **Negative politeness**
   - Hedging
   - Personal attribution
   
   “Specifying oneself as the source of an opinion can qualify its force by acknowledging that others may hold an alternative, and equally valid, view” (Hyland & Hyland 2001: 198)

3. **No mitigation**
1. Positive politeness

Pairing criticism with praise

*The grammar is quite accurate, but I think you have to check prepositions in some parts.*

Expressing solidarity with the peer

*Personally I found some mistakes scattered here and there, nothing to be worried about, just slips that almost all students do.*

2. Negative politeness

Hedging (about hedging!)

*maybe you could use hedging*

Personal attribution

*In my humble opinion, you should try to rephrase the third paragraph in order to better highlight your good ideas.*

3. No mitigation

*the main body is composed simply by general information about standard and non-standard English, which do not support the opinion stated in the first paragraph*

N.B. THE BIBLIOGRAPHY !!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive politeness (instances)</th>
<th>Negative politeness (instances)</th>
<th>No mitigation (instances)</th>
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<tr>
<td>101</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hedging device</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
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<tr>
<td>I think</td>
<td>108</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would</td>
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<td>personally</td>
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<td>might</td>
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Prompt: Look at the examples above and write a short description of the qualities of good peer review.

Group forum activity – **54 comments**

*First of all, in order to be effective, peer feedback should be written politely and clearly. You have to respect other people's opinions even though you do not share them. If on the one hand hedging is fundamental to convey respect, on the other hand it doesn't have to be taken to the extreme, since you want your critique to be constructive*

Provide constructive criticism (24)

Don’t be too critical (2)

Don’t be afraid of criticising (3)

Report positive and negative features (6)

State positive things first (3)

Conclude with a compliment (1)

Write politely, be respectful (20)

Be objective/impartial (16)

Don’t be too indirect (10)
Some pedagogical reflections

In my opinion you could also cut one or two quotations out of the five ones you have used, but it is just an idea; maybe I would add one or two sentences with your ideas and reasoning instead of a quotation.

Not all students see the peer review process as a dialogue (perhaps more specific guidelines are required e.g. use the second person, include greetings etc.)

Even without explicit instructions, the students adopt a range of politeness strategies (perhaps because “obliged” to criticise”)

There appears to be a sensitivity to hedging (perhaps due to instruction in relation with academic writing)

The activity could lead to discussion of L1 pragmatic strategies (how far are these transferred when writing the peer reviews)

The peer review messages provide material for metapragmatic reflection on pragmatics (post task for an inductive approach)

Such reflection could pave the way to going beyond “academic criticism” (Cohen 2017)


Grazie!

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