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## “Very carefully managed”: advice and suggestions in post-observation meetings

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### Abstract

This study examined the discourse of teacher supervision/mentoring, specifically within the context of the post-observation meeting. The analysis of six transcripts of post-observation meetings from one semester in a small university Intensive English Program revealed a variety of politeness strategies employed by supervisors in the delivery of suggestions and advice to teaching assistants. A characterization of the post-observation meeting as a “globally face-threatening” activity is supported by participants’ commentary in questionnaires and interviews. Moreover, primary and secondary data suggest that the combination of several different positive and negative politeness strategies used by mentors may have resulted in the subsequent impression of teaching assistants that they received no suggestions, advice, or “constructive criticism” during the meetings.

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### 1. Introduction

Many conversation and discourse analytic studies have focused on the analysis of spoken interaction in institutional as well as in educational settings. What has been far less researched to date is the discourse of teacher supervision/mentoring, or types of speech events that are particular to teachers-in-training outside of the classroom, yet still situated within the academy. One type of speech event unique to this context is the post-observation

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meeting.<sup>1</sup> During the post-observation meeting, a teacher, who has recently been observed in the classroom, meets with a supervisor/mentor/trainer in order to discuss specific events which transpired in the classroom during the observation, as well as general issues related to his/her teaching. A great deal of educational literature on teacher supervision, training, or mentoring has been concerned with exploring teachers' and mentors' perceptions of mentoring (e.g., Jones, Reid, & Bevins, 1997; Kullman, 1998; Orland-Barak, 2001, 2002; Semeniuk & Worrall, 2000), and with providing guidelines for effective teacher supervision (e.g., Acheson & Gall, 1997; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002). However, very few published studies describe, explore, or attempt to explain the interactional dynamics of teacher/mentor post-observation meetings.<sup>2</sup>

In the institutional context of post-observation meetings, speech acts such as offering criticism, giving suggestions, and delivering advice are not uncommon. Such speech acts may represent a source of anxiety for all participants involved (i.e., both teachers and supervisors). The principal research question of the present study is *In what ways do supervisors use language strategically to mitigate these potentially face-threatening acts, or FTAs (Brown & Levinson, 1987), in post-observation meetings?* The primary data analyzed for the study consist of transcripts of six post-observation meetings that took place during one academic semester<sup>3</sup> in an American university Intensive English Program (IEP); the teacher participants were all graduate teaching assistants as well as students in an MA-TESL program. Furthermore, in order to better understand participants' expectations, feelings about, and reactions to the post-observation meetings, the primary data are supplemented by additional information obtained from questionnaires and interviews. This study is informed by previous work which has taken a pragmatic approach to the analysis of communication in institutional settings, in particular, by those studies which have drawn on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness (e.g., Harris, 2003; Holmes, Stubbe, & Vine, 1999; Wasson, 2000).

In the following section, I first explain the purposes of the teacher/supervisor post-observation meeting. I then discuss relevant literature on the face-threatening acts of advice, suggestions and constructive criticism in such meetings. Finally, I comment on institutional roles, power, and politeness as important variables in understanding the ways in which these speech acts are delivered.

### *1.1. Teacher supervision and the post-observation meeting*

For many teachers – regardless of what subject matter they teach, who their learners are, and the type of context in which they are situated – classroom observations are a routine component of professional practice. The individual who observes a teacher's classroom may

<sup>1</sup> The same speech activity has been called a “feedback conference” or “supervisory conference” by other researchers. I prefer the term “post-observation meeting” because I feel it is more specific (i.e., a “feedback conference” could also refer to an activity such as a writing conference between a teacher or tutor and a student; a “supervisory conference” could be related to some other event or situation, and does not necessarily entail an observation).

<sup>2</sup> Exceptions include Waite (1992, 1993) and Farr and O’Keeffe (2002).

<sup>3</sup> These data come from the first of four semesters of data collection, and form part of larger study of teacher identity, agency and development.

occupy various social roles (e.g., workplace supervisor, colleague, or researcher). When the observer is a teacher's supervisor, the observation and related post-observation meeting may actually serve multiple purposes, including: evaluating the teacher's effectiveness, offering critical feedback, and providing an opportunity for the teacher to reflect on his/her own practice.

In recent decades, a technical, rationalist view of teaching as mastery of subject knowledge and discrete pedagogical skills has been replaced with one which recognizes that teaching is "an unpredictable and cognitively complex activity, characterized by decision-making, negotiation for meaning and reflection in action" (Chamberlin, 2000, p. 353). Consequently, teacher supervision has been redefined as well. Models such as "clinical supervision" (Acheson & Gall, 1997) or "reflective supervision" (Britzman, 1991; Goodman, 1984; Sprague, 1992; Zeichner & Liston, 1987) have emerged, and – in many U.S. educational settings – are increasingly favored over more traditional models. As a result, the focus has shifted from supervision as an exclusively evaluative activity, to supervision as a series of practices and opportunities intended to promote teachers' reflection and their ongoing professional development.

Practices related to teaching observations have changed along with newer paradigms of teacher supervision. These models of supervision emphasize communication, interaction, and exchange of ideas between supervisor and teacher—and very often, the post-observation meeting is the primary site where these activities occur. Consequently, for supervisors, there exists an underlying tension: although the newer models of supervision (e.g., Acheson & Gall, 1997) propose that the supervisor's primary role during post-observation meetings is to engage teachers in talk and reflection about their practice, teachers may, nevertheless, continue to expect and actually prefer to hear an expert's assessment of their teaching performance in these meetings. As Chamberlin (2000) suggests, regardless of the current trends in teacher education literature, in many cases, teachers who have opposing expectations may feel dissatisfied with a "reflective" rather than "evaluative" post-observation meeting (p. 355). Very often, what teachers expect to receive from the post-observation meeting is a balance of positive appraisal and constructive criticism.<sup>4</sup>

### *1.2. Feedback and face-threat in post-observation meetings*

Expanding on Goffman's (1967) notion of "face," Brown and Levinson (1987) define "face" as an individual's self-esteem or "public self-image" (p. 61), and differentiate between two types of face: negative face, or an individual's desire to be free from imposition, and positive face, an individual's desire for a positive self-image (p. 65). According to Brown and Levinson, there are "certain kinds of acts [that] intrinsically threaten face" (pp. 60, 65); these are referred to face-threatening acts (FTAs). Suggestions and advice are included among the types of acts that may threaten an addressee's negative face, whereas criticism is considered an act that threatens an addressee's positive face (pp. 66, 67).

Although Brown and Levinson (1987) include criticism in their taxonomy of face-threatening acts, they make no distinction among "constructive," and other, types of criticism. A survey of literature from diverse fields of inquiry (i.e., education, experimental

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<sup>4</sup> I base this observation on interview and questionnaire data obtained from my primary participants.

psychology, business management, etc.) finds that constructive criticism is a largely under-defined and under-theorized concept. A number of publications ostensibly concerned with constructive criticism – including those whose purpose it is to instruct professionals on “how to give” constructive criticism – provide no definition of the construct (e.g., Abbott & Lyter, 1998; Booher, 1999; Conti & Fellenz, 1985; Koballa et al., 1992; Viscott, 1986). In the few sources which do offer definitions of constructive criticism, these definitions are quite varied. Some authors (e.g., Lamborn, Fischer, & Pipp, 1994) focus on speaker intent, and define constructive criticism as instances “when a person honestly criticizes another in a way designed to promote growth or improvement with the underlying intention of being kind” (p. 495). Other definitions are more general: “any response that provides people with information about themselves” (Leptak, 1989, p. 25), or “helpful suggestions with socio-emotional implications” (Petress, 2000, p. 476). A recent study (Vázquez, 2003) finds that a sample of MA-TESL students equates constructive criticism with “helpful advice and suggestions.”

Much of the literature about providing feedback to teachers in supervisory contexts, generally – and post-observation meetings, specifically – tends to be theoretical or prescriptive, rather than empirically based (Waite, 1993). Acheson and Gall (1997), for example, recommend that supervisors avoid giving direct advice to teachers during post-observation meetings. Similarly, Murdoch (2000) suggests that “the process of providing feedback to teachers needs to be *very carefully managed* if it is to help them to develop” (p. 58, emphasis mine). Those researchers who have undertaken empirical studies of post-observation discourse (e.g., Arcario, 1994; Farr & O’Keefe, 2001; Waite, 1992, 1993) have not only documented FTAs (such as criticism or suggestions) occurring in post-observation meetings, but have also noted that supervisors tended to mitigate FTAs with politeness strategies, such as the use of modal auxiliaries, *I*-statements, acknowledgement tokens, emotion talk, and metapragmatic statements.

### 1.3. Institutional discourse, institutional roles, power and politeness

Drew and Heritage (1992) define interaction as institutional when “participants’ institutional or professional identities are somehow made relevant to the work activities in which they are engaged” (p. 3).<sup>5</sup> As a result, studies of institutional discourse have often been concerned with the language that participants use in performing various institutional tasks or goals (Drew & Sorjonen, 1997, p. 92), as well as with how participants’ institutional roles and identities are reflected or created through their linguistic choices and discursive practices.

A particularly salient characteristic of post-observation meetings is the asymmetrical role relationship between participants. As Holmes et al. have observed, “workplace interactions are seldom neutral in terms of power” (1999, p. 354); and the post-observation meeting is no exception. Many studies of institutional discourse have focused on formal contexts (such as courtrooms or classrooms, for example), where situational conventions often govern or

<sup>5</sup> Drew and Sorjonen (1997) have pointed out that even within a single interaction, the boundaries between what talk is institutional and what talk is not are fluid: “Participants may fluctuate between different kinds of discourse (such as sociable and institutional) within a single interaction” (p. 92).

highly constrain the types of spoken contributions that can be made by each participant. In contrast, the following relevant features are associated with non-formal settings: They are “private rather than public”; they allow for “considerable negotiations and/or stylistic variation” in terms of the management of interaction; and although there may be clearly “official task-based or role-based activities” taking place, “turn-taking procedures” may closely resemble those found in casual conversation (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p. 28). Although it undoubtedly varies in realization across different types of settings, the post-observation meeting nevertheless represents a type of institutional interaction that may be characterized as more informal along this proposed formal-informal continuum of institutional discourse types.

Yet even in informal supervision contexts, the supervisor is assumed to possess some degree of authority and expertise relative to the teacher. Relative power asymmetry among participants is one of three “sociological variables” that may “contribute to the seriousness of an FTA” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 74).

Despite an increasing interest in institutional discourse, little empirical work to date has examined the relationship between power and politeness (Harris, 2003; Lakoff, 1989). Recently, Harris (2003) has made a convincing case for the usefulness of politeness theory in understanding discourse that takes place in institutional contexts, particularly where asymmetrical power relationships are involved. In her analysis of discourse in legal and medical settings, Harris (2003) has observed that powerful institutional members often make extensive use of politeness strategies. The present study continues this line of inquiry in a different type of institutional setting.

## 2. The study

In an effort to contribute to the paucity of literature currently available on the interactional dynamics and the actual language used in teacher training/mentoring contexts, this study examined six post-observation teacher meetings, which took place over the course of one academic semester in an Intensive English Program housed in the English department of a public university in the southwestern United States. All participants in the study were women, and included four IEP teaching assistants (TAs) concurrently enrolled in an MA-TESL program, as well as two program administrators: the program director and the program coordinator. Observations and post-observation meetings typically take place in the IEP at least one time per class during each semester of the academic year,<sup>6</sup> and are conducted for the program administrators to gain an understanding of what is happening in each IEP class, and also for program administrators to offer guidance and support to the TAs, most of whom are teaching new content (i.e., English for Academic Purposes), and/or are teaching in a new educational context (i.e., a university IEP). Observations are part of the operations of the IEP, and are largely unrelated to the TAs’ MA-TESL coursework.

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<sup>6</sup> Although they are normally not tape-recorded, these interactions do represent routine events in the operation of the IEP. During the same semester, weekly staff meetings among the TAs and the supervisors were also audio-recorded. Therefore, if audio-recording represented an unnatural intrusion, it was one to which all participants were at least somewhat accustomed.

The primary data consist of six audio taped post-observation meetings, ranging in length from 9 to 24 minutes. These transcribed meetings are supported with secondary data, gathered from written questionnaires and interviews with all participants, as well as with transcripts of audiotapes of weekly IEP staff meetings. Following the observations and post-observation meetings in this semester, all of the four TA participants completed a 2-page questionnaire (included as [Appendix A](#)), which included questions about their sense of themselves as teachers, their feelings about observations/post-observation meetings, and their ideas about the purpose(s) of observations and post-observation meetings. During semi-structured interviews, the four TAs were asked to elaborate on their written questionnaire responses. The program director was interviewed and was asked similar questions, having to do with the goals and objectives of observations and post-observation meetings. The secondary data sources (questionnaires, interviews, and transcripts of weekly staff meetings) were used to provide further context for interpreting interactions in the post-observation meetings. In addition to the analysis of spoken discourse and secondary data sources, I also draw on my own participant-observer perspective as the program coordinator of the IEP.<sup>7</sup> This perspective enables me to bring in background knowledge about the context as well as about role relationships among participants. Furthermore, though I am cautious about making too many speculations, in a few cases, I am able to comment on my own motivations as a participant in some of these interactions.

### 2.1. *Setting and participants*

The setting of the study was a small IEP, which typically serves between 15 and 30 full-time students and varying numbers of part-time students. Students enrolled in the IEP usually range in ages from 18 to 45, but the majority of students are typically in their early 20s. Most students enrolled in the IEP come from Asian countries (Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Thailand), and a smaller minority comes from Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa. Some of the IEP students are members of the local community (i.e., immigrants, refugees, or spouses of international faculty or graduate students), but the majority are international students on student visas, who have been placed in the IEP for pre-academic purposes, in order to improve their English language ability before beginning an undergraduate or graduate program of study. In the semester under investigation, there were 17 undergraduate students and only 1 graduate student; of these, 11 were full-time and 7 were part-time students. Part-time students typically fall into two categories: (a) those who have demonstrated advanced language proficiency in some areas but not others (in these cases, students are “bridged,” and take some IEP classes and other credit-earning university classes concurrently) or (b) community members or spouses of international faculty/students who are not required to satisfy full-time student status requirements for immigration purposes and who, therefore, are able to select only those IEP classes which are of interest to them.

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<sup>7</sup> [Schiffrin \(1994\)](#) has noted that because contextual knowledge is essential in an interactional sociolinguistic approach, a researcher-as-participant perspective can be an important asset (p. 106). [Grimshaw \(1989\)](#) has also discussed the relative advantages and disadvantages that a participant observer approach can bring to a discourse analytic study.

Full-time students in the IEP typically take all seven classes offered by the IEP (i.e., 24 contact hours per week): Core (an integrated-skills, content-based class that is usually team-taught by two teachers, 8 credit hours), Writing (3 credit hours), Reading (3 credit hours), TOEFL (3 credit hours), Pronunciation (3 credit hours), Multimedia (an integrated skills course which integrates English with use of technology, 2 credit hours) and Intercultural Communication (a communicative class that emphasizes oral/aural skills and cross-cultural topics, 2 credit hours). With the exception of Core, most courses are taught by only one teacher, and all class sizes are normally quite small (i.e., 7–12 students).

In the semester during which these data were collected, there were five full-time teachers and one part-time teacher in the IEP.<sup>8</sup> Because all of the teachers in the IEP are graduate students in the department's MA-TESL program, their IEP teaching assistantships serve the dual purpose of giving them an opportunity to gain professional ESL teaching experience, while at the same time providing them with a form of financial support. Generally the group of teaching assistants (TAs) has varied teaching experience; some TAs have extensive prior EFL/ESL teaching experience, whereas other TAs have very little or no previous experience. Only four of the six TAs participated in the study: three native-English speakers (Anne, Michelle, and Sara) and one native-speaker of Russian (Maya).<sup>9</sup> Most of the TAs had taught for one to two years prior to joining the IEP, although one of the TAs (Sara) had over 10 years of teaching experience. Three of the TAs (Anne, Sara, and Maya) were new to the IEP, while one TA (Michelle) was in her second semester of teaching for the IEP. Relevant background information about each teacher participant is summarized in [Table 1](#); the items in bold in the final column indicate a course that was the focus of an audio-recorded post-observation meeting.

Rachel, the program's director, was in her mid-40s and had over 15 years of experience in teaching many different subjects and many different levels. She had been the director of the IEP for six years. Camilla, the program coordinator of the IEP, was 33, had been teaching English for six years, and had one year of prior experience with teacher supervision. Because the director of the IEP (Rachel) was also a professor in the MA-TESL program and the program coordinator (Camilla) was a PhD student in the department's Applied Linguistics program, several of the participants' social roles overlapped in different contexts. Rather than having clear supervisor/subordinate relationships, there were also professor/student, advisor/student relationships between the director and all of the other participants. In several cases, there were also close working relationships among the TAs and between TAs and the program coordinator; these relationships were what one would expect to find among co-workers who encounter one another in the same setting on a regular basis. Because all

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<sup>8</sup> Of the semester's six TAs, two did not participate in the study. One was a native speaker of Japanese, who participated in one post-observation meeting, but who expressed discomfort with having her meeting recorded, so I did not record that meeting. The other TA, the only male TA in the IEP during this semester, participated in a post-observation meeting that took place at a location out of the IEP program offices, where no equipment was available to record the meeting.

<sup>9</sup> In keeping with the university's institutional review board's procedures, after receiving information about the nature of the study, all participants gave their written consent to be audio taped. Pseudonyms have been assigned to ensure participants' confidentiality. All names used in this paper, with the exception of my own, are pseudonyms and not participants' real names.

Table 1  
IEP TA participants' information

Teacher	Age	First language	Teaching experience prior to IEP this semester (time, subject, location, level)	Education	IEP classes taught in current semester
Sara	33	English	3 years, physical education and special education, U.S., elementary 2 years, EFL through physical education, Japan, elementary 2 years, ESL, U.S., adult education 4 years, ESL, U.S., elementary	BS (Physical Education)	Core, <b>Multimedia</b>
Anne	29	English	1 year, "University Colloquium 101," U.S., university 1.5 years, "Human Development 100," U.S., community college	BA (English)	<b>Core, Advanced Writing</b>
Maya	25	Russian	6 months, EFL, Russia, secondary	BA (English Education)	<b>TOEFL, Intermediate Writing</b>
Michelle	28	English	1 semester, IEP, U.S., university 1 semester, first year composition, U.S., university 1 year (associate teacher), ESL, US, elementary 1 year (associate teacher), special education, U.S., secondary	BA (Education)	<b>Advanced Reading, Pronunciation</b>

participants interacted on a regular basis (i.e., minimally once a week), the social distance factor among participants was quite low.

Each TA was responsible for developing the curriculum and for delivering instruction in one or two classes per semester. All TAs were required to turn in lesson plans for each class, which were then reviewed by the director and/or program coordinator. The TAs were also required to attend a weekly IEP staff meeting (also attended by the program director or program coordinator), in order to exchange information about classes, students, administrative issues, etc. Additionally, once or twice per semester, the program administrators and TAs planned a social function outside of work.

TAs were told about the observations in a meeting in mid-October, and the observations took place in the first two weeks of November, toward the end of the Fall semester. TAs were then contacted individually for scheduling of observations and post-observation meetings. The observations took place during TAs' regular hours of instruction, and the post-observation meetings, which occurred two to six days following the observations, were held in the offices of the program director and program coordinator. The following six

dyadic interactions are represented by the post-observation transcripts, with class observed indicated in parenthesis: Anne and Camilla (Core), Anne and Rachel (Advanced Writing), Maya and Camilla (Intermediate Writing), Maya and Rachel (TOEFL), Sara and Camilla (Multimedia), and Michelle and Rachel (Advanced Reading).

## 2.2. *Participants' expectations for post-observation meetings*

During a weekly staff meeting, in which Michelle initiated a discussion about upcoming observations in the IEP, Anne made the following comment: "Having someone observe your class is almost like a guarantee that it's going to go badly." In the following excerpt, Camilla, the program coordinator, responds to this comment by expressing her ideas about the purpose of the post-observation meetings. Her response, below, follows Anne's expressions of anxiety over the observations.

... every time I've done an observation in the past I've just recorded exactly what happened, so it's more kind of having somebody describe to you what's happening in your class. Because I think when you're teaching, it's hard for you- you have a different perspective, right? Because you're at the front of the room and you're thinking about what you're going to do next, and so I think sometimes it's beneficial to have somebody say "OK, you kept calling on this person and you [laughing] never called on this person over here" or whatever. Just to kind of raise awareness of what's happening, um, like not being critical. . .

Although she does provide an example of a potential supervisor response as focusing on something critical (e.g., pointing out that the teacher kept calling on same person), she simultaneously presents the observation as an objective activity ("... just recorded exactly what happened ... having somebody describe to you what's happening in your class. . .") and clearly downplays the role of evaluation in the observation process ("... like not being critical"). As the producer of these comments, I believe that my emphasis on the objective rather than on the evaluative aspect of the observation was deliberate and intended to assuage the TAs' concerns about being observed.

Similarly, when interviewed, Rachel, the program director, responded that for her, the purpose of observations is to get a general sense of the classroom atmosphere. Nevertheless, the evaluative function of the observation is clearly implied by her questions at the end of the excerpt.

Basically I watch for sort of the general demeanor in the classroom. So, as an observer, the program director, I want to know what's the sense of that classroom, what's the feel of that classroom. And then also to look at the techniques the teacher uses. Do they have good eye contact with the students? Do they look around the room? Do they ignore one part of the room? Do they deliver the material confidently and in an engaging way? Are they delivering what they said they'd deliver?

Later in the same interview, Rachel revealed that she prefers to adopt a nurturing stance with teachers, by focusing almost exclusively on the positive when delivering feedback to TAs during post-observation meetings. She explained that this is based on her experience of TAs tending "to beat themselves up as teachers" in past post-observation meetings. She

further indicated that she provides criticism only if she perceives something in the classroom to be problematic. Rachel's comments here show that she is aware that the observation and post-observation meeting may cause anxiety for many teachers.

I think my primary goal after the first observation is to give positive feedback. And to nurture that teacher, to highlight what they do well. . . . Because I think over the years one thing I've seen, is that people tend to beat themselves up as teachers. And often they'll come in and say "Oh that was worst class I've ever taught." Or, as you're leaving the classroom from the observation, "Oh I've never had so much trouble talking in my life" . . . so the negative comes pretty naturally. . . . If there is a problem, if there's something that I see that's problematic, I will point that out in a post-observation. But I try to begin with the positive, begin with what they're doing well, how I see them being effective.

During this interview, both Rachel and Camilla commented on having participated in post-observation meetings in the past, where they had been more critical (e.g., in observing a particular teacher whose teaching techniques or styles were ineffective). However, both expressed their belief that all of the TAs observed in the IEP during this semester were good, competent teachers.

### 3. Analysis

In the following section, I present patterns found in the content and interactional structure of the meetings. Next, I examine the positive and negative strategies associated with delivering advice and suggestions in these data, and illustrate the use of these strategies in five selected excerpts. Finally, the section concludes with participants' impressions of the outcomes of the meetings.

#### 3.1. *Content and interactional structure of the post-observation meetings*

In spite of some variation in the meetings due to participants' individual conversational styles (Tannen, 1984), five of the six meetings were fairly similar in terms of conversational structure, turn-taking allocation, and topics discussed (e.g., classroom management issues, progress of individual students in the class, etc.). However, one of the meetings (Michelle and Rachel) deviated considerably from the others, as is evident from the proportions of teacher talk and supervisor talk in this meeting when compared to the other meetings (see row 6 in the last column of Table 2).

Indeed, Table 2 shows that Michelle's meeting with Rachel did not follow the very "supervisor-centered" pattern of talk of the other meetings.<sup>10</sup> Michelle was, at the time, in her third semester in the program, had been observed by the program director in the past, and perhaps felt more comfortable and confident than the other TAs –

<sup>10</sup> As I began to analyze these data, both the program director and I were shocked to discover how much talk we produced relative to the TAs. This realization led to significant changes in the ways we conducted future meetings. A discussion of these changes is beyond the scope of this paper.

Table 2

Total number of words per participant and participants' proportion of talk per meeting

Meeting	Participant	Total words per meeting	Proportion of talk per meeting (%)
1	Anne	911	22
	Camilla	3243	78
2	Anne	447	18
	Rachel	1983	82
3	Maya	271	10
	Camilla	2352	90
4	Maya	329	20
	Rachel	1356	80
5	Sara	251	10
	Camilla	2193	90
6	Michelle	1464	52
	Rachel	1353	48

who were all new to the program – in initiating topics, providing longer, more elaborated responses about individual students, and sharing her perceptions about a classroom issue that she felt was problematic. As a result, the following analysis focuses on the remaining five meetings, which are considered more “typical” of this particular semester.

In each of the meetings, the supervisors opened with the question “Would you say that [the class that I observed] was a fairly typical class?” which, prior to the meetings, the program director and coordinator had established they would use as an opening. Closings were also fairly formulaic, with the director usually asking a question such as “If I were to visit your class again, what would you want me to look for?” and the coordinator concluding with “in summary” statement, in which she reiterated the TAs’ strengths and mentioned any classroom issues that she felt needed to be resolved.

All of the meetings also included a variety of lexical and grammatical expressions of approbation, typically focused on some specific attribute of the TA or the lesson. A variety of positive adjectives and adverbs, often in combination with intensifiers, were used to express approval, for example: “very good metacomments,” “I liked your explanation, it was very clear,” “very nice composure and presence.” That the word *good* was one of the most frequently occurring words in the corpus of post-observation meeting data – and especially frequent in the talk of the supervisors – is indicative of the overall positive tone of the meetings. The meetings also typically included some non-evaluative description of activities in the classroom as well, with the observer simply recapitulating the events of the class. Very often, however, this type of narration of events was interspersed with positive evaluation, for example: “so they brainstormed solutions to the problems on that board – that’s a good idea. . .”

As might be predicted from the data in Table 2, in the predominant pattern of turn-taking in the meetings, the supervisors had longer turns, and the TAs spoke in shorter turns, frequently uttering only a single minimal response. Holmes et al. (1999) also found that it

Table 3

Situational characteristics and common features of post-observation meetings

Participants	2 (1 TA and 1 Program Administrator)
Duration	9–24 minutes
Purpose	To provide/receive feedback on classroom observation
Location	Office of a program administrator
Common features	Unequal distribution of talk Much of TA interaction consists of minimal responses Objective commentary (e.g., what TA did, what students did) Evaluative commentary (usually positive) Advice/suggestions (direct–indirect; solicited–unsolicited)

is not unusual for the individuals in positions of power to speak for longer turns and for subordinates to offer minimal responses (pp. 362–364).

Finally, the meetings consisted of supervisors giving advice or suggestions, and of TAs asking for suggestions, advice or evaluation. Although there are few, if any, instances of actual negative criticism in these data, the following excerpts include types of acts that may be construed as face-threatening. The primary focus of the following analysis is not on these speech acts themselves, but rather on the ways in which supervisor participants used language to negotiate these potentially face-threatening situations. Although in my analysis I emphasize the politeness strategies used by supervisors in the mitigation of FTAs, at points, I also note the ways in which the TAs position themselves in soliciting and reacting to advice and suggestions.

The situational characteristics and common features of the post-observation meetings analyzed are summarized in Table 3.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2. Linguistic expression of politeness strategies

After multiple readings of each of the transcripts, any topics that included the FTAs of advice, suggestions, or critical evaluations were excerpted. Next, both positive and negative politeness strategies used to mitigate these FTAs were identified. Specific linguistic/discourse features associated with negative and positive politeness strategies were informed by literature on pragmatics, as well as sources which have commented on politeness in post-observation meetings. For example, negative politeness strategies included indirectness, or preceding criticism with a compliment (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999), lexical hedges and modals (Arcario, 1994; Farr & O’Keeffe, 2001; Waite, 1993), and a number of mental verbs (e.g., *mean, think, feel, guess*) combined with the personal pronoun *I*, which, in many cases, may distance the speaker from her interpretation and/or evaluation (Grimshaw, 1989, p. 183).

Positive politeness strategies, which can function to minimize social distance, included the frequently used positive adjectives of evaluation (*good, nice, effective, clear*, etc.), as well other verbal strategies which function to establish a sense of solidarity among participants.

<sup>11</sup> Certainly this selection of features is far from exhaustive, but I have tried to select the topics and patterns which are most frequent and most typical to this set of data.

Table 4  
 Politeness strategies used with advice/suggestion-giving

Negative politeness strategies	Positive politeness strategies
Lexical hedges (e.g., maybe, just, kind of, sort of)	Adjectives of positive evaluation (e.g., good, nice, effective, professional)
Modal auxiliaries (e.g., might, would, may)	Expressions of intersubjectivity (e.g., you know, pronoun shifting in constructed dialogue)
<i>I+</i> mental verb (e.g., <i>think, mean, feel, wonder</i> )	Speaker's denigration of self or own ability
Indirectness (e.g., circumlocution)	
Preceding criticism with compliment	

These strategies include the use of the discourse marker *you know* (Holmes et al., 1999) and other expressions of intersubjectivity, which highlight an assumption of a shared reality and/or mutual understanding (Overstreet, 1999). Less frequent, but nevertheless present in these data, were instances of observers denigrating themselves or their own abilities, often while simultaneously casting their interlocutors in a more positive light (e.g., “I wish I could do. . . as well as you do”). Table 4 summarizes the politeness strategies discussed in the data analysis below.

The following section consists of the close analysis of excerpts taken from the post-observation meeting transcripts. While all of the excerpts illustrate some type of solicitation and/or offering of advice or suggestions, these excerpts do not represent the only instances of this particular set of speech acts found in the data. Rather, these excerpts were selected as case studies because they are illustrative of a range of different strategies used to mitigate the delivery of such FTAs.

It should be further noted that the various politeness strategies listed in Table 3 are not found exclusively in conjunction with suggestion and advice-giving. Some are well-distributed throughout each meeting (e.g., *you know, I+* mental verb). However, as the following cases demonstrate, not only do participants use a range of different politeness strategies in the delivery of advice and suggestions; but in these particular linguistic contexts, speakers also tend to use clusters, or combinations, of multiple strategies. This observation is consistent with Harris (2003), who points out that in institutional settings, participants who are in a position of power make extensive use of politeness strategies. Furthermore, the combinations and interactions of the various politeness strategies used in these particular linguistic contexts suggest that the supervisors are keenly aware that the speech acts they are performing may be threatening to the face of their interlocutor, the TA.

The following five excerpts represent the solicitation of advice or approval, or the giving and receiving of suggestions, and include many of the aforementioned politeness strategies. In Excerpts 1 and 2, the TAs solicit approval or advice. In Excerpt 3, the supervisor provides an unsolicited suggestion indirectly, whereas the suggestions in Excerpts 4 and 5 – while still unsolicited – are stated as such more directly.

In lines 1, 3 and 4 of Excerpt 1, the TA (Anne) asks for confirmation from the supervisor (Rachel) about her implementation of a vocabulary activity during an advanced writing class.

**Excerpt 1**

- 1 Anne: um. . . Do you think that with the list of vocabulary that I had put up as a guide  
 Rachel: {mhm  
 Anne: [unclear] for that article um [clears throat] is that something when I have something like that should I have them read through it instead of me doing it?  
 5 Rachel: well **you know** it's in- that's an interesting question. Because I just was in Michelle's Reading class today where the students had picked vocabulary words and were going up and presenting them to the class  
 Anne: mhm  
 10 Rachel: and they were very unsure of how to pronounce them. So what it usually ended up with was a student attempting to say the word, looking at Michelle for approval  
 Anne: mhm  
 Rachel: or- or affirmation, and then usually Michelle giving the correct pronunciation, and then the student saying the word correctly. So **I think** you saying the word, the one thing that **I wonder** if **maybe** sometimes **you know** putting the words up there and then **just** saying 'do you guys know these words? How many of you know?' and eliciting from the students  
 15 Anne: mhm  
 20 Rachel: **you know** and **maybe** they might not know the word's definition but they could use it in a sentence or  
 Anne: mhm  
 [several lines deleted]  
 Rachel: . . .But um yeah **you know I think** there are different things with the vocabulary but **I think** it's **good** for- you- **I think** it's **good** for them to hear how it's supposed to be said  
 25 Anne: mhm  
 Rachel: {because then otherwise it could be they're not sure.  
 Anne: With that list I- I felt like um a lot of those words are not words we use all the time,  
 30 Rachel: yeah  
 Anne: and so I didn't want to spend a lot of time on it.  
 Rachel: {right and it was up there if they needed it as a resource so **I think you know I mean I think you know you wouldn't** always do vocabulary that way  
 35 Anne: {right  
 Rachel: just as **you wouldn't** always say 'how many of you need help with this word?' because they **would** be **I think** for the words you had yesterday they **would** 've been raising their hands  
 [unclear] the time  
 40 Anne: right  
 Rachel: because they were difficult and not frequent words or frequent enough  
 Anne: yeah that isn't- I don't usually do vocabulary like that  
 Rachel: {mhm  
 Anne: um but since they [unclear]

- 45 Rachel: yeah no [unclear]  
 Anne: {I didn't want to focus on that part  
 Rachel: right well and you also had definitions that fit the context. . .

In her question (lines 1–2 and 4–5) about the implementation of the vocabulary activity, Anne suggests an alternative approach (“when I have something like that, should I have them read through it instead of me doing it?”). By phrasing her request for confirmation in this manner and demonstrating that she is aware of other possible ways of conducting the same activity – as well as later (lines 29–30 and 32) offering a rationale for why she approached the activity in the manner that she did – Anne presents herself as a knowledgeable, competent teacher. Yet, by offering Rachel an opportunity to make a judgment about the activity, she appeals to Rachel’s expert status at the same time as she reproduces their existing asymmetrical relationship.

Before responding to this question, Rachel responds with a temporary digression about a vocabulary activity that she observed in another class. Rachel prefaces this digression (line 6) by saying “well you know it’s in- that’s an interesting question.” Schifffrin (1987) has noted that the discourse marker *well* “locates the speaker as a respondent to one level of discourse and allows a temporary release from attention to others” (p. 127). In the excerpt, the Rachel’s use of *well* signals to Anne that she has heard her question, but does not intend to answer that question immediately. Rachel shifts topics slightly – mentioning the events observed in a different class – to support her positive assessment of Anne’s implementation of the vocabulary activity.

Following the digression about the vocabulary activity she observed in Michelle’s class, Rachel finally responds to Anne’s question in lines 24–26. Rachel’s positive response to Anne’s question (“but I think it’s good. . .for them to hear how it’s supposed to be said”) occurs several turns later, and is also preceded by a number of hedges (lines 16–17) such as *maybe* and *just*. As markers of negative politeness, these hedges function to minimize the imposition associated with Rachel’s suggestion.

Near the end of this excerpt (in lines 33–34 and 36), Rachel follows up her answer to Anne’s initial question by issuing two proscriptive directives, using the modal form *wouldn’t*. These directives are surrounded by a number of mental verbs (e.g., *I think* and *I mean*), which further mitigate their force. In fact, a cluster of mental verbs in lines 33–34, *I think . . . I mean I think. . .*, punctuated with two *you knows* immediately precedes the directives. While repetition and dysfluency are characteristic of spoken discourse in general – and are certainly not unusual in the meetings, more specifically – the location of this cluster of mental verbs immediately before the directives/advice suggests that the supervisor’s dysfluency in this instance may be a stylistic choice that is directly related to the task of giving advice.

Rather than using a first person pronoun in issuing the directives, Rachel speaks to Anne in second person (lines 34 and 36: “you wouldn’t always do vocabulary that way. . .just as you wouldn’t. . .”). In this example of interpersonal modality,<sup>12</sup> Rachel attributes a shared knowledge of pedagogical principles related to teaching vocabulary to herself and Anne. Anne responds to these directives with an expression of agreement (“yeah I don’t usually

<sup>12</sup> For more on interpersonal modality and advice-giving, see Hudson (1990).

do vocabulary like that”), thus ratifying Rachel’s *you wouldn’t* utterances, and at the same time, acknowledging Rachel’s superior judgment.

In Excerpt 2, the TA (Maya) asks Rachel for a suggestion on how to provide feedback to students on a practice test she plans to administer in an upcoming test-preparation class.

### Excerpt 2

- 1 Maya: OK um is it a good idea to collect it and grade it? Or should it be  
 Rachel: **Maybe** do a do a pair do a thing where everybody does it and then **just**  
 have them trade **you know kind of** trade papers and then go over how it should be  
 Maya: OK

Unlike the previous example – in which the TA’s question referred to a classroom activity that happened *during* the actual class observed – in Excerpt 2, Maya asks for Rachel’s advice on how to implement a *future* activity. Although this situation is arguably less face-threatening than the previous instance (i.e., here the solicited advice refers to a future event and not to an activity that the teacher has already completed), Rachel’s advice continues to be mitigated with the lexical hedges *maybe*, *just*, and *kind of*. Rachel’s utterance-initial *maybe* downplays the authoritative force of the advice-giving, while the hedges *just* and *kind of* more locally minimize the importance of the recommended action. However, these mitigators also function together to offset the expert power of the supervisor (Rachel) – whose institutionally-given role of expert is indexed by Maya’s question – as well as to minimize the imposition that Rachel’s suggestion to Maya represents. In contrast to the previous excerpt, in which the supervisor’s response was qualified and negotiated over several turns, in Excerpt 2, the response to the TA’s question occurs immediately as an adjacency pair. Nevertheless, the suggestion in Excerpt 2 is still quite mitigated.

In the following excerpt (Excerpt 3), the supervisor provides indirect suggestions, which are unsolicited by the TA. The first portion (Part 1) of Excerpt 3 comes from the first five minutes of a meeting between Camilla and Sara. Camilla’s commentary here focuses on a specific portion of an integrated-skills class of mixed-level students. During the class session observed, a few minutes after starting this particular activity Sara called a “time out,” stopped the activity, re-iterated the instructions both verbally and in writing, and then resumed the activity.

### Excerpt 3 (Part 1)

- 1 Camilla: Because it seemed like they were not really- they weren’t really getting  
 it. And so I thought that was really **good** because you were- **you know** took control  
 of the situation and saw that not everybody was kind of dialled into [laughing] the  
 same act-  
 5 Sara: yeah  
 Camilla: ivity, right? And so **I think** that’s **good** when you see that happening,  
 stop **you know** ‘I’m going to write this down so you can see it.’ And **I think** that  
 um it’s a **good** idea to write, if  
 you can, to write down the **you know- here’s what we’re doing** on the board and  
 10 be really specifically clear about it. **I know that I’m terrible at remembering**  
**that**. And so sometimes it does happen that **you know** you’re halfway through the

- activity and you realize ‘Oh **maybe I**  
should  
Sara: {Yeah
- 15 Camilla: ‘ve been more explicit.’ But it’s **good** I think w- that you can recognize  
it at that point and then  
Sara: {mm  
Camilla: **you know** seek some remediation and fix it so **that’s good**. Um so they  
were really
- 20 listening they were really talking they were interacting with each other um. . .

Sara’s temporary loss of control of the classroom is implied by Camilla’s statement, (“you . . .took control of the situation and saw that not everybody was kind of dialled into the same activity”) in lines 2 and 3. However, this indirect criticism is preceded by and framed with a positive statement, or compliment, (“And so I thought that was really good”). Camilla’s utterance is marked by many repetitions, which are again, not uncommon in spontaneous, unplanned speech. Perhaps in this particular case, repetition may also be a function of delay in thinking of how to comment on something negative that happened during the observation, while simultaneously framing the event in a positive manner. The positive adjective *good* is used frequently (5 times in this portion of the excerpt) by the supervisor, who also uses circumlocution (“here’s what we’re doing on the board”) in line 7 as an indirect means to refer to giving directions. Additionally, the supervisor’s utterance, “I know that I’m terrible at remembering that,” which denigrates her own ability, both softens the criticism and functions as a solidarity-building device. This utterance as well as the following “. . .sometimes it does happen that you know you’re halfway through the activity and you realize ‘oh maybe I should’ve been more explicit’ ” index the participants’ shared identities as teachers, thereby de-emphasizing the power differential between participants. Again, the combination and variety of politeness strategies used by the supervisor here function to minimize the face-threatening nature of discussing a portion of a teacher’s lesson that went less-than-smoothly.

The second section of this excerpt comes from the last five minutes of the same meeting, at which point the supervisor revisits the same topic, reminding Sara of the importance of being explicit in giving instructions. Again, as the supervisor participant in this exchange, I believe my use of a hedge (*kind of*), the careful lexical choice of *challenge* in line 19 (as opposed to *problem*, *difficulty*, or *obstacle*), as well as the hesitation that precedes that choice, are indications of my own self-consciousness in treating the situation delicately.

### Excerpt 3 (Part 2)

- Camilla: . . .what else? Oh the one thing that seemed like **kind of** a u- challenge  
was getting them to understand the directions,  
Sara: {mm
- 25 Camilla: and again **I think** that your solution was **good** you know call a time out,  
‘here’s what **we’re** doing,’ make sure that everyone understands. So that’s **good**  
um .. yeah that’s [unclear]

- Sara: [unclear] it's one of those things too where it's like I wasn't clear on the directions until, **you know what I mean?**
- Camilla: {yeah well you think that it's going to play out a certain way and then when you get
- 30 in the class it doesn't play out the way that it did Sara: yeah
- Camilla: in your own mind. And you realize 'oh wait a minute **I mean I thought** this was really clear
- Sara: {yeah
- 35 Camilla: why aren't they kind of doing what- yeah and acting the scenario that **I** had made for them? But yeah and **I think** that's that's normal. But **I think** it's **good** to be aware of that and think about **you know just** making sure to be really explicit. So yeah overall it was **fantastic, good plans, good job, yeah nice** activity [laugh]. So did you have any questions, or do you feel like it's going well?
- 40 Sara: yeah um it's good to get feedback though just because sometimes it's. . .

Sara's question ("you know what I mean?") in line 26 serves as an invitation for the supervisor to comment on their shared understanding. The supervisor's willingness to underscore their similarities as teachers is clear from her response in lines 27–28, 30–31 and 33–34, as she projects her interpretation of Sara's experience in the classroom: "Yeah, well you think that it's going to play out a certain way and then when you get in the class. . .you realize 'Oh wait a minute' I mean I though this was really clear. . ." In both portions of this excerpt (Part 1: lines 10–11, 13 and Part 2: lines 27–28, 30–31 and 33–34), Camilla shifts from *you* to *I*. This shift of perspectives from second person to first person ("**you** think," "**you** get into the class," "**your** own mind," "**you** realize," "Oh maybe **I** should have been more explicit" "**I** mean **I** thought," "**I** had made"), creates a sense of intersubjectivity, or a shared perspective, as it is impossible to determine whose thoughts are being narrated—whether they are Camilla's own thoughts, Camilla's perception of Sara's thoughts, or possibly even both participants' thoughts. Similarly, the supervisor's use of the pronoun *we* in her indirect reference to the activity's instructions (*here's what we're doing*) in lines 9 and 23, functions as an additional marker of intersubjectivity (i.e., she appropriates the voice of Sara, the teacher). In both portions of this excerpt, by shifting pronominal reference, Camilla's contributions in this dialogue shift from a "supervisor" point of view to more of a "fellow teacher" perspective.

In Excerpt 4 (Rachel and Maya) and Excerpt 5 (Rachel and Anne), Rachel, the supervisor, provides an unsolicited suggestion and offers an alternative for an activity that was implemented during the class sessions observed.

#### Excerpt 4

- 1 Rachel: yeah and **I think** that **you know** the way that you talked about the listening strategies and then went over that was very **effective**. And then you added, **you know** you reviewed and had the students give you that information of previous strategies, and then you added the fourth one. And then your way of asking 'is it
- 5 hard? Is this **you know** is this OK? are you-' You asked for feedback and they seemed to give it which is **good**. Um when you were doing the answers one suggestion one way to involve them **would** be to **maybe** ask them

- you know** how many voted for this answer or how many chose this answer **you know just** every now and then to mix it up **a little bit**
- 10 Maya: OK  
 Rachel: you **could** have them ask **you know** and then at the end **maybe** ask **you know** they did the one they did the ten that listening exercise with ten things  
 Maya: mm  
 Rachel: and then you gave them the answers **maybe** ask them ‘how many got 8 or  
 15 more right?’  
 Maya: OK  
 Rachel: **you know just** to **kind of** see and **you know** that way it’s not too um it’s not too intimidating if you [unclear] eight or more that’s probably most of the class  
 Maya: mm  
 20 Rachel: if not all of them. And **I thought** you gave very **good** metacomments, things like **you know** where you said ‘you’ll hear this a lot’ or ‘when people say this they you know this is something you’ll hear here but not here’ so **I thought** it was  
 Maya: {mhm  
 25 Rachel: very **effective**.

### Excerpt 5

- 1 Rachel: Joy Reid yeah ..yeah I also one thing I did wonder or not wonder but a suggestion **I think** if you do that again **you know** if you someth- you **could** have them vote on their favorite summary  
 Anne: mhm mhm  
 5 Rachel: you know and then argue for it **or whatever you know?** See which summary **would**’ve won. Because it seemed like there were people who did, as you were going around the classroom, there were different opinions  
 Anne: mhm  
 Rachel: and that’s **good you know** it also shows that the classroom environment  
 10 is such that a different opinion is OK  
 Anne: yeah

In both Excerpts 4 and 5, the suggestion that is being offered by Rachel is stated as such directly. In Excerpt 4, lines 6 and 7, Rachel begins her suggestion with “one suggestion, one way to involve them. . .”. Although Rachel begins her suggestion indirectly in line 1 of Excerpt 5 (“one thing I did wonder”), she self-corrects, “switching to a more direct form: “or not wonder but a suggestion.” In both examples, the actual suggestion is surrounded by modals, hedges and other politeness strategies (*would, could, maybe, a little bit, just, or whatever, you know*).

It is likely that a suggestion of this type (i.e., offering an alternative way of implementing an activity) could be received as a type of indirect criticism by the hearer, as the following excerpt of an interview with Anne suggests:

. . . You know I think even if the instructor is doing a good job, it might be kind of, it might be kind of a good thing to give other possibilities of how to do things. Like you

Table 5  
Summary counts of each type of politeness strategy used by supervisors

Excerpt number	Negative politeness strategies	Positive politeness strategies
1 (advice solicited by TA)	3 lexical hedge 4 modal 8 <i>I+</i> mental verb	2 positive adjective 8 expression of intersubjectivity
2 (advice solicited by TA)	3 lexical hedges 1 <i>I+</i> mental verb	1 expression of intersubjectivity
3 (unsolicited suggestion offered by supervisor (indirect))	2 lexical hedge  8 <i>I+</i> mental verb 2 indirectness (e.g., circumlocution) 1 preceding criticism with compliment	10 positive adjective  11 expressions of intersubjectivity 1 speaker's denigration of self/own ability
4 (unsolicited suggestion offered by supervisor (direct))	7 lexical hedge  2 modal 2 <i>I+</i> mental verb	4 positive adjective  10 expression of intersubjectivity
5 (unsolicited suggestion offered by supervisor (direct))	2 modal  1 <i>I+</i> mental verb	1 positive adjective  4 expression of intersubjectivity

know, "There isn't anything wrong with how you did it; that was great. Here's some other ways I've seen it done, if you want to try new things or something." I suppose that could come across a little strange but-

*Why? Why do you say that?*

Well I suppose if someone says "you're doing fine, but here's some other ways you could do it," it could have the message of "it was okay, but these would be better" or "try this"...

However, it is difficult to know how exactly the TAs in Excerpts 4 and 5 interpret the supervisor's suggestion. The TAs' responses reveal little about whether or not they accept or reject the proposed suggestions. In both Excerpts 4 and 5, the supervisor's suggestions are received by the TAs with minimal responses (e.g., *OK, mm, mhm, yeah*). In fact, these types of responses to suggestions and advice are common to all five of the excerpts. The conversational structure typical of these interactions is not unlike that of the supervisor/subordinate relationships discussed by Holmes et al. (1999), with the more powerful participant tending to speak in longer turns, and the less powerful participant often providing only minimal responses.

Table 5 provides a descriptive summary of the number and type of various positive and negative strategies used by supervisors in each of the excerpts discussed.

The analysis summarized in Table 5 identifies a number of politeness strategies used in the context of advice/suggestion-giving during post-observation meetings. These include

the use of modals (*would, could*), lexical hedges (*maybe, just, a little, kind of*), frequent use of first person pronoun + mental verbs (*think, mean*), prefacing criticism with a compliment, and strategies of intersubjectivity, such as pronoun shifting in constructed dialogue. In all of the excerpts analyzed, a number of different types of politeness strategies appeared concomitantly in the linguistic environments of giving suggestions/advice. Moreover, in delivering these face-threatening speech acts, supervisors typically attended to both the negative and positive face wants of their teacher interlocutor, even in instances when it was the teacher who solicited the advice or suggestions. Therefore, this study provides evidence not only for the use of a wide variety of politeness strategies, but also clearly illustrates the interactions of these various strategies in these contexts.

In the previous excerpts, participants' social roles and relationships were both institutionally-given, as well as constructed and negotiated through discourse. The supervisors' position of expert power was enacted by, for example, their turn-taking patterns (i.e., their tendency to hold the floor for longer turns). However, this position of power was also reproduced when TAs asked for approval or confirmation, instances in which they appealed directly to the supervisors' institutionally-given authority. In these excerpts, by adopting various politeness strategies, the supervisors used linguistic/discourse resources to minimize the force of their advice and suggestions, as well as to reduce the social asymmetry between themselves and the TAs.

In their analysis of workplace discourse, Holmes et al. (1999) claimed that "in doing power...negative politeness strategies proved particularly important" (p. 354). Although the counts provided in Table 5 reflect only a small set of data, they nevertheless suggests that in the context of post-observation meetings, positive politeness strategies, which seek to establish solidarity among participants, may also be extremely important.

### 3.3. Participants' impressions of the outcomes of the meetings: match or mismatch?

Several weeks following the observations and post-observation meetings, questionnaires were administered and interviews were conducted with all of the TA participants. TAs were asked to reflect on and describe their feelings before, during, and after their observations. Individual teachers reported feeling from "a little bit nervous" to "very nervous" before their observations. The majority of teachers indicated that during the observation, they tended to relax; in some cases, they became so engrossed with teaching that they paid little attention to the observer. Several teachers commented that after the observation they once again felt nervous, specifically in anticipation of the observer's response, evaluation or judgment of their teaching. Individual TA responses are summarized in Table 6.

TAs were also asked if their expectations were met during their post-observation meetings. Their responses are summarized in Table 7. A theme that emerged consistently from the written questionnaires as well as the interviews was that while TAs felt they received a great deal of positive feedback, they felt there was a lack of "constructive criticism" in the post-observation meetings, as Anne and Sara's responses clearly illustrate.

Yet, both Sara and Anne *did* receive advice or suggestions (as illustrated by Excerpts 3, 1, and 5, respectively). The transcript data show that although negative evaluations were conspicuously absent in these meetings, program administrators *did* provide suggestions

Table 6

TAs' responses to prompt: "Briefly describe your feelings about being observed this semester—before, during and after the observation"

Teacher	Response
Anne	<p>Before: Mostly <u>nervousness</u>. I'm always struggling with my confidence as a teacher (is this what students need/want, am I presenting it in an effective manner, etc.) and so being observed just intensifies those worries, as your teaching is under the magnifying glass.</p> <p>During: Wasn't so bad, because when I'm teaching, I'm teaching. It isn't any different if someone is observing. It's just business as usual.</p> <p>After: I'm <u>nervous</u> again—What could I have done better? Did I keep calling on the same person? Do I have unconscious habits that distract from my teaching, etc. etc. etc.</p>
Maya	<p>Before: I was a <u>little nervous</u> before both the observations, as I didn't know how the presence of somebody new in the classroom would affect the students.</p> <p>During: I felt pretty confident, and the students acted as in any other regular class.</p> <p>After: I felt a <u>little relieved</u> and I was glad that my classes went okay.</p>
Sara	<p>Before: I felt a <u>little bit nervous</u>, but didn't alter any activities or change anything due to the fact that I was being observed.</p> <p>During: I was a <u>little bit nervous</u> just because the observer had never seen me teach before.</p> <p>After: [no response given]</p>
Michelle	<p>Before: <u>I always get nervous</u> for an observation so that is how I felt for this observation. I usually prepare a little extra.</p> <p>During: I hardly notice that the observer is there.</p> <p>After: I am <u>most nervous</u> to hear what the person will say, but usually, as I said before, I want more constructive criticism.</p>

– both direct and indirect, as well as solicited and unsolicited – and *did* offer alternative suggestions for implementing activities; and most meetings included more than one instance. What, then, accounts for participants' recalled perceptions of not having their expectations met?

It is certainly likely that because positive feedback was so abundant, it was much more perceptually salient to the TAs retrospectively. Another plausible explanation for the TA's recalled perceptions that they received no (or minimal) suggestions or advice, is the fact that – as has already been observed in the analysis of the excerpts from the post-observation meetings – this type of commentary produced by the program supervisors was often so indirect and attenuated that it failed to leave any lasting impression on the TAs. Both

Table 7

TAs responses to "What were your expectations about the whole observation/post-observation process? Do you feel those expectations were met?"

Teacher	Response
Anne	I expected more <u>constructive criticism</u> . I know I am not a perfect teacher, and <u>more feedback regarding what could have been done differently, or different approaches, different activity ideas, etc. would have been helpful</u> .
Maya	My expectations were met. I expected to receive some approval and reinforcement of my teaching techniques along with some useful ideas and I did. It made me more confident in my teaching.
Sara	I expected to hear more positive feedback along with some <u>constructive criticism</u> to improve my teaching. <u>I didn't receive any advice on how I could improve my teaching</u> .
Michelle	I think the positive feedback was good, but I still wish for more encouragement to do more.

supervisors were aware of the TAs' potential anxiety during the observations as well as the post-observation meetings, and consequently, used a number of different politeness strategies in delivering suggestions or advice, thus adhering to Murdoch's suggestion that "the process of providing feedback to teachers needs to be *very carefully managed*. . ." (p. 58). A final possibility relates to perhaps different understandings between teachers and supervisors about what exactly is meant by "constructive criticism"—a somewhat elusive concept, as I noted earlier.

#### 4. Conclusions and implications

This study focused on the construction of locally-produced meaning, in which situational context – including participants' institutional roles, identities and relationships – played a significant role. During the post-observation meetings, TAs' utterances often oriented to the program administrators' positions of expert power, while program administrators often downplayed that power through the use of different types of politeness strategies. Negative politeness strategies minimized the imposition of administrators' suggestions and advice, whereas positive politeness strategies functioned to create a sense of collegiality or solidarity among participants. Retrospective interviews indicated that some of the teacher participants were disappointed to receive little or no "constructive criticism," which suggests that supervisors' advice and suggestions were perhaps *too* "carefully managed."

The conversations presented here will no doubt look familiar to teachers and supervisors in other teaching contexts, and therefore, the findings of this study may be relevant to supervisors/mentors at the K-12 level in teacher education programs. However, it is also important to note a number of limitations of the present study. First, I have only examined a small set of data taken from one specific educational context. Further research on post-observation meetings (as well as other types of teacher/supervisor interactions) in different settings is needed to determine whether advice, suggestions, and "constructive criticism," are delivered and received in similar (or different) ways across educational contexts. In particular, it would be useful to further explore – as I have attempted to do, by asking participants questions on retrospective questionnaires and interviews – the ways in which teachers make sense of their post-observation experiences, so that we can better understand and eventually improve our own supervision practices.

Additional studies of this type of discourse would help shed light on what contribution the variable of gender makes in the ways in which advice and suggestions are given and received. It may be that, in the present study, gender played some role in the amount of mitigation (i.e., all of the participants were female) in delivering FTAs. Closer examination of this potentially important factor was, unfortunately, beyond the scope of the present study. Moreover, I have noted that in response to suggestions and advice, the TAs often produced minimal responses. In order to more precisely determine what types of supervisor comments are followed by minimal responses, further examination of the TAs' response utterances might also represent a productive direction for future research.

The post-observation meeting is a complex type of institutional speech activity. Supervisors must balance the competing demands of addressing teachers' positive and nega-

tive face wants, with providing guidance (i.e., often in the form of advice, suggestions, and constructive criticism) in a way that will be clear and that will foster teachers' professional growth and development.<sup>13</sup> In most teaching supervision situations, it is often difficult to balance these tensions. When supervisors demonstrate excessive awareness of the anxiety these events can produce in teachers, they may be guilty of "sugar-coating" their feedback, leaving teachers thinking there is no room for improvement. Conversely, supervisors who focus exclusively on what teachers need to improve on, often leave teachers thinking they did a horrible job. Clearly, more work is needed in this area, in order to determine how to most effectively balance these competing demands. Future work would not only contribute to the field of teacher education but also to other disciplines in which training involves similar expert/novice relationships and interactions.

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### Appendix A. Questionnaire administered to TA participants

Dear TA,

You are being asked to participate in a study of IEP. Please be aware that your participation is strictly voluntary. Should you decide to participate, you will be assigned a pseudonym in the written results of the research. There are two parts—the first part involves written completion of this questionnaire. (Your answers do not have to be terribly lengthy—3–4 sentences per question should be sufficient. Of course, you are certainly welcome to write as much as you wish to write.) The second is to participate in a brief (10–15 minutes) follow-up interview, which will be audio-taped, and which will focus on only a few questions in the questionnaire. The interviews will be scheduled for a time that is convenient for you.

#### *Demographics*

1. Age
2. How many semesters have you been in the MA-TESL program?

<sup>13</sup> An additional source of tension in the meetings is the role/degree of evaluation that is expected by each participant. As much as supervisors may wish to cast observations in a non-evaluative light, some degree of evaluation seems to be implicated in observations/post-observation meetings. Even if the stated purpose of the observation is "to get a sense of the teacher's classroom," this activity usually also entails judgments about what the teacher is doing right/wrong. While, in this study, supervisors may have sent a "mixed message," about the evaluative/non-evaluative function of these activities, the TAs' questionnaire responses also send a somewhat mixed message; they reported being anxious about the observations and about the judgment they expected would follow, yet when they received predominantly positive feedback, they expressed their desire to receive more critical comments.

3. How many semesters have you been teaching in IEP?
4. Briefly describe any teaching experience prior to IEP.

#### *Teaching*

1. How did you feel about teaching in IEP last semester?
2. Did you like the classes you taught? (briefly explain your answer)
3. Can you think of anything that you discovered/learned about yourself as a teacher last semester? (please explain)
4. What was the most difficult/most challenging thing for you as teacher last semester?
5. What has been the best thing about teaching (in general)?

#### *Observation*

1. Prior to last semester in IEP, had you ever been observed in your teaching before? (If so, please explain what happened during that observation. Also please indicate if there was a pre-observation and/or post-observation meeting.)
2. Briefly describe your feelings about being observed last semester—prior to, during, and after the observation. (Note: if you were observed twice, please discuss both experiences.)
3. What do you think is the purpose of observations?

#### *Post-observation meeting*

1. Briefly describe what happened in your one-on-one post-observation meeting(s). (Note: if you had two meetings, please discuss both experiences.)
2. What, in your opinion, was the *most* useful thing about that meeting?
3. What were your expectations about the whole observation/post-observation process? Do you feel those expectations were met?

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