

EFL RESEARCH ARTICLES THROUGH THE LENS OF PRAGMATIC POLITENESS

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Abstract: This analysis examines how four Research Articles in the field of English Language Teaching represent the teaching – learning context they investigate. Using the concepts and categories of pragmatic politeness, it examines how participants’ ‘face’ is considered in the description of their practice and in the formulation of the authors’ claims, and how the authors position themselves with respect to the *research* and *practice* contexts represented in their texts. The analysis indicates a systematic process at work in dealing with the face needs of practitioners in these kinds of research reports. At the same time it also points to differences in the weighting the authors give to the *research* and *practice* contexts in their texts, revealing differences in their approach to research.

Keywords: EFL Research Articles, qualitative research, pragmatic politeness, face threatening acts, recontextualisation

1 Introduction

1.1 Pragmatic politeness as a research tool

The present analysis examines how articles in the field of EFL research represent the teaching – learning context they investigate, and this is explored focusing on the writers’ use of pragmatic politeness in the examined texts.

The analysis relies on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) concept of pragmatic politeness, which explains the use of indirectness in spoken interactions as a systematic way of attending to listeners’ (or speakers’) *face wants*. In Brown and Levinson’s explanation, certain kinds of social acts (such as, e.g., criticism or requests) by their nature run against these wants and threaten either our *positive face*, i.e. our desire to be approved of, or our *negative face*, i.e. our desire to be unimpeded. In redressing such impositions, or *Face Threatening Acts* (FTAs) speakers systematically resort to a range of strategies. These, in Brown and Levinson’s (ibid.) categorisation, constitute a hierarchy: speakers might “go bald on record” with the FTA, i.e. do it without any redress; they may employ *positive* or *negative* politeness strategies, the former emphasising *solidarity*, *common ground* or *agreement* with the other interactant, the latter attempting to *distance* or *minimise* the imposition by, for instance, impersonalisation or hedging; they might choose to do the FTA “off record”, i.e. implicitly, or – if the FTA is perceived as too great – they might not do it at all.

These principles and categories were extended to the analysis of written discourse by Myers (1989), showing that politeness strategies operate in written texts similarly to the way they do in spoken discourse, and account for many ‘conventional’ features in Research Articles.

The nature of the impositions, or Face Threatening Acts, in this genre is constituted by the claim the researcher makes, and his/her denial of others' claims. Myers (ibid.) defines the concept of 'claim' in the following way:

Every scientific report states a claim: in other words, it makes a statement that is to be taken as the article's contribution to knowledge. This is the statement that is implied when one cites the article. Most reports, in stating a claim, deny or supersede the claims of others. (p. 5)

In his analysis Myers focuses on how claims are redressed by the authors' use of both positive and negative politeness strategies, i.e., by different ways of emphasising solidarity or common ground with the reader and by various kinds of impersonalisation and hedging. This analysis of the way politeness strategies are employed to mitigate the imposition caused by the article's claims provides a lens through which important characteristics of the practices represented in the article (i.e. the practice of doing research and that of reporting on it in the form of an article) can be revealed. On the basis of his analysis of Research Articles within the 'hard' discipline of molecular biology, Myers describes a two-part audience structure consisting of an 'exoteric community', i.e., members of the discipline in the more general sense, to whom the article is overtly addressed, and an 'esoteric community', i.e. the researchers more closely involved in the particular field, "who, in a sense, 'overhear'" (Myers, 1989, p. 3). He shows how the face needs of the first group are in the foreground of the authors' use of pragmatic politeness even though the more important – and possibly only – readers of their texts are the 'narrower' group of researchers who are doing similar work.

The present study applies this lens to the 'soft' field of EFL research, with a special focus on the ways the investigated teaching practice is represented in the analysed texts. It aims to discover how politeness strategies are used to redress the impositions caused by the claims on the participants of this practice, and what this reveals about the authors' approach to research.

This focus entails two kinds of limitations on the concept and scope of pragmatic politeness, both resulting from the fact that politeness 'per se' is not the topic of the present analysis. Firstly, it applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) categories and their extension to written discourse by Myers (1989) without dealing with the debates in politeness theory concerning Brown and Levinson's model. Secondly, since politeness in the broader and perhaps more interesting sense of how writers construct their relationship with their actual readers throughout the text is not the primary focus of this chapter, issues of face other than those relating to the writers' claims and to the participants in the represented contexts are not dealt with. In other words, the scope of pragmatic politeness is narrowed, on the one hand, to Myers' (1989) framework focusing on the imposition caused by the authors' claims; on the other hand, by modifying this framework to include a focus on the 'investigated practice' – an aspect which is new and additional as compared with Myers' (1989) analysis – the scope is, in a sense, further narrowed so that the representation of the investigated practice receives the major emphasis.

1.2 Three levels of context in EFL Research Articles (RA)

The distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' disciplines (Hyland, 1998, 1999, 2000) is of special importance when looking at research reports as representations of different levels of context, or social practice (cf. Fairclough, 1992, 2003; van Leeuwen, 1993). Viewed from this perspective, RAs in the 'hard' sciences, concerned with *phenomena* of the natural world, include two kinds of social practice, or two levels of context: the (literacy) practice of writing

RAs, within which the practice of doing research is represented. This highly conventionalised genre has been studied from a variety of perspectives focusing on its origins, development, textual and socio-rhetorical characteristics (cf. e.g. Bazerman, 1988; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Myers, 1985, 1989; Swales, 1990; Dudley-Evans, 1988, 1994, 1997), highlighting the complex, dynamic relationships within and across these two levels of represented context.

In research reports in the ‘soft’ domains, however, – in Hyland’s (1998) terms, in “*human action*” research – the investigated phenomena are social practices in their own right, and as such constitute a further, third level of represented practice. This level of the representation, that is, the investigated practice, receives special emphasis in the research approaches grouped together under the heading of qualitative or ‘naturalistic’ (cf. Watson-Gegeo, 1988; Davis, 1995; McDonough & McDonough, 1997; Edge & Richards, 1998; Holliday, 2002). Within the qualitative orientation, individual approaches differ in the kind of weighting they give to the ‘research’ and ‘investigated’ practice in the representation, in other words, to ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ perspectives, or generalisable and idiosyncratic aspects of the research (Edge & Richards, 1998).

The present analysis aims to discover such differences of stance by examining four articles reporting on research in the field of ELT, all of which use a qualitative approach. All four articles appeared in the *TESOL Quarterly*, and rely on the clearly defined criteria for qualitative research published in the journal (*TESOL Quarterly*, 1995; Davis, 1995). These criteria emphasize an explicit conceptual framework for the research, a contextualised and holistic representation of the researched phenomenon (“thick description”), a balance of insider and outsider perspectives and the formulation of “grounded theory” emerging from the research. Notwithstanding these explicit requirements, there are still significant differences of stance between the individual research reports adopting them.

The focus of the present analysis of the chosen texts is on discovering how the four authors position themselves vis-à-vis the specific teaching – learning context(s) they are investigating; to what extent the members of their investigated practice are included as expected readers of their articles, and what this reveals about the “researcher’s stance” the authors take in their reports.

1.3 Description of the texts and the nature of imposition constituted by the claims

The four research articles analysed below investigate some aspect of classroom practice, three of them through direct observation and analysis of classroom discourse, and one (Text 3) by exploring students’ opinions through interviews. They all start by locating the problem area within the background of previous research, then proceed to the description of the specific context of the investigation, and broaden the specific focus again towards the end of the texts, where the contextualised claims of the research emerge as “grounded theory”. From this, two characteristics of the claims made in studies can be inferred: that they emerge and strengthen gradually, as is inherent in the nature of qualitative research, and – since research of this kind is normally directed at uncovering some controversial or problematic aspect of the investigated practice – that they contain at least as much, if not more, of an imposition for the participants in the observed practice and other practitioners operating in similar contexts as for the ‘research community’ in the traditional sense. The way the authors deal with these impositions on members of the investigated practice throughout their texts is expected to indicate – at the level of a hypothesis – possible tendencies in the representation of participants and investigated

contexts in such texts; at the same time, it is also expected to reveal the kind of weighting the authors give to the ‘researcher’s’ and ‘practitioner’s’ perspective within a broadly formulated qualitative orientation to research.

Figures 1 to 4 below provide a brief summary of the four articles and their major claims.

Figure 1: Summary of Text 1 (“Performed conversations in an ESL classroom”)

This article analyses a dialogue between the teacher and one of her students in class and examines how effectively this “performed conversation” serves its dual purpose of *communication in* and *information about* the language. During the observed interaction the teacher initiates a conversation with a student about her weekend, but interrupts her several times to correct errors, to provide correct structures and vocabulary and to involve the class in repetition drills. The article focuses on the multiple roles performed by the teacher and the other participants in the dialogue, explores the various functions such interactions fulfil in the class and, based on the analysis, critiques the effectiveness of this type of activity for learners.

The major claim of the article, namely that this kind of interaction does not promote the improvement of speaking skills, is clearly face-threatening for the observed teacher and for other practitioners engaging in similar practices. The claim emerges gradually in the text, reaching its weightiest and most explicit formulation at the end of the article.

Figure 2: Summary of Text 2 (“Cooperative learning: Context and opportunities for acquiring academic English”)

This article contains a number of similarities with Text 1, concerning its topic (evaluation of the effectiveness of a particular teaching approach), the method used (analysis of classroom discourse) and the approach taken to research. It investigates how successfully the principles of Cooperative Learning, a method of instruction based on problem-solving in groupwork in the classroom, are used to promote non-native learners’ acquisition of academic English in a social studies class. First the authors discuss the observed benefits of the method, then they focus on the potential learning opportunities which were not taken advantage of, and finally on forms of cooperation which provided negative results. The instances where the method did not prove successful receive the major emphasis in the final sections of the article.

The authors point out that the results concern both researchers, who are responsible for developing this teaching method, and practitioners who want to make best use of it. This indicates that the claims involve two kinds of impositions to be handled: first of all on practitioners, especially on the teacher observed and her class, but also on the research community, in emphasising the importance of investigating the local context of the classroom when implementing new teaching methods.

Figure 3: Summary of Text 3 (““Completely different worlds’: EAP and the writing experiences of ESL students in university courses”)

The authors explore university students’ perceptions of the kind of academic writing done in EAP writing classes and in disciplinary courses, focussing on the function that source texts fulfil in the two kinds of writing situations. Based on this, they distinguish between ‘text-responsible’ and ‘non-text-responsible’ writing, and criticise the latter kind, commonly associated with EAP classes, for not providing a meaningful degree of linguistic and intellectual challenge. This very forceful claim, questioning of the validity of these common types of writing tasks clearly constitutes an FTA for many practitioners involved in EAP instruction. In this article, too, the claim reaches its weightiest formulation at the end of the text.

Figure 4: Summary of Text 4 (“An ethnography of communication in immersion classrooms in Hungary”)

This text is an ethnographic study of some aspects of Hungarian education by a Canadian researcher. It analyses changing discourse practices in Hungarian schools at the beginning of the 1990s, occurring in the wake of the large-scale socio-political changes taking place at that time. The article examines the breakdown of the traditional genre of oral assessment referred to as ‘recitation’ and its replacement by short student lectures and more open-ended discussion activities in English-medium history classes in a dual language secondary school. The two kinds of discourse practices and their sociocultural background are directly compared, and participants’ experience of both are discussed.

An ethnographic study of this kind, investigating a sociocultural context different from the author’s own and analysing a traditional practice which is in the process of being phased out contains a number of inherent FTAs and requires a systematic use of strategic politeness towards practitioners operating within the described system.

2 Four stages in the development of claims and their redress

The analysis of the use of politeness strategies in the examined texts enabled the construction of a tentative, four-stage model (see Chart 1 in the Appendix). This model shows that the systematic use of pragmatic politeness highlights basic characteristics of qualitative research reports, such as the shifts of focus between the ‘research’ and ‘practice’ contexts and the process of the gradual emergence of the major claims. These stages are described in detail below.

It is an interesting characteristic of the analysed texts that they contain two kinds of claims. There is a ‘general claim’, stressing the lack and therefore the necessity of context-based, qualitative studies in the investigated topic, focused on in the introductory sections and to some extent in the final sections of the texts as part of the conceptual framework of the investigation. This kind of claim is clearly directed at the research community, and is in most cases redressed in the ways described by Myers (1989). The other, major and more ‘specific’ claim is represented by the answers to the particular research questions posed.

3 Stage I: Establishing the conceptual framework

The passages identified as Stage I comprise the ‘Introduction’ and ‘Methods’ sections of the articles. These contain extensive reviews of previous research, the citations themselves functioning as positive politeness towards the research community (Myers, 1989), while the impositions constituted by the identified ‘gaps’ and ‘counter-claims’ (Swales, 1990) are redressed by impersonalisation and hedging. In Text 1, for example, the review of previous research is concluded by a statement pointing out that researchers who do not pay attention to the meaning making processes in foreign language classrooms “may be ignoring important insights into improving instructional environments” (p. 740). This contains an indication of a ‘gap’ in Swales’ (1990) sense, and also constitutes a face threat which is redressed by reducing the certainty of the statement through hedging and by impersonalisation (in the sense that no such researchers are named).

In Text 3, interestingly, the extensive use of such cautious formulations referring to the authors’ own previous research indicates that the article ‘takes over’ and intends to substantiate

the authors' previous claims. The major outcome of this previous study, serving as the initial claim of the text, is very cautiously formulated:

Thus, the 1994 study *suggests* that some ESL writing classes *may* require *little* of the type of writing that students will be expected to do in their content courses. Yet the assumption in these ESL writing classes *seems to be* [...] (p. 42)

4 Stage II: Describing the setting and the participants

In Stage II, the focus shifts from the theoretical framework and the research community to the description of the investigated practice. In the three articles based on direct classroom observation (Texts 1, 2 and 4) there is a very noticeable emphasis at this stage on showing this practice in a positive light by expressing appreciation, sympathy, solidarity or gratitude and/or by accentuating common ground with the participating teachers. These descriptions of the context, therefore, rely predominantly on positive politeness strategies, but also on some degree of indirectness in 'toning down' less positive characteristics. This emphasis on solidarity and common ground with the participants is most characteristic of Text 4, the ethnographic study, as shown by the following extracts:

[...] after class or whenever the teachers were free, they *graciously entertained my questions*¹ about content, materials or events that had transpired in class [...] Time was always at a premium, though, as *Hungarian teachers had heavy teaching loads at school* – and D[ual] L[anguage] teachers had *the added burden* of preparing materials and lessons in English; many also had other jobs and family responsibilities. (p. 511)

The DL headmaster was *extremely helpful and supportive* of my presence and work at that school, and *we frequently discussed issues of common interest* related to language education, acquisition and testing. (p. 511)

The secondary school where the ethnographic study was carried out is described as a “spacious, bright, modern two-storey facility”, which “enjoyed some of the best resources – teachers, materials and equipment” (p. 511). These details with the primary purpose of setting the scene also function as pre-emptive redress of less positive features mentioned later on in the text, such as the description of the history textbook:

[...] a soft-cover, monochromatic Hungarian publication made with low-grade paper and binding; the English versions [...] contain numerous typographical and translation errors. (p. 516).

The ‘protagonist’ of the study, the history teacher, is also described in appreciative terms, as someone “with a passion for history”, considered by the students “to be the best history teacher at the school” (p. 512). The emphasis on these qualities ‘cushion’ the FTA constituted by the mention of her less than perfect English pronunciation, which is also redressed in the following way:

Kati’s English pronunciation was somewhat accented, influenced by Hungarian first-syllable word stress, intonation contours, and vowels, and she had spent only a matter of weeks in any English-speaking country; *that being the case, her EFL was quite remarkable*. (p. 512)

¹ Emphasis (italics) added throughout.

In describing the investigated context Text 1 also expresses solidarity and sympathy with language teachers, as it appears from the choice of lexis in the following description of the complex and difficult tasks they are faced with:

Language teachers *wrestle with the dual demands* of their students – demands for opportunities to negotiate meaning authentically [...] and for explicit instruction and controlled practice. (p. 741)

As I argue below, the resolution to the problem of *accommodating these multiple goals* in the classroom is apparent in the discourse patterns of the lessons [...] (p. 741)

The description of the students, too, has a positive overtone, with an indirect indication that some of them are not very fluent speakers:

The teacher described the students as knowing a lot about English grammar from previous foreign language instruction in their home countries but having had little opportunity to actually use English. (p. 742)

It is interesting to compare this with another, more direct reference to the students' language competence later on in the text:

Their task is not an easy one, particularly if *their English proficiency is rather low*, as is the case for a few of the students. (p. 758)

This example shows how the writer's focus changes as the text progresses, the discussion gains depth and points become more specific, as the second statement also expresses solidarity with students by highlighting the difficulty of the task they are faced with.

In Text 2, the description of the setting contains both positive and negative politeness strategies towards the participants. The research, as the authors describe, was carried out in a "culturally diverse elementary school", where "more than one third of the students received a free or reduced price lunch and breakfast". The students "exhibited few problems with their morphosyntactic command of basic English"; some were "fluent" speakers, while others were "limited" and one "a non-English speaker" (pp. 258-59). The sociological and linguistic terminology used here displays a certain degree of indirectness (i.e. a distancing strategy) concerning qualities with negative connotations, such as poverty or problems with the language. In the same section, the teacher is also briefly described and given acknowledgement:

[...] the social studies teacher whose class is examined here [...] was recognized as a good teacher (p. 258).

These emphatically positive descriptions of the setting at the outset have a redressive function in later parts of the texts where the claims, and their inherent impositions, are formulated more explicitly.

5 Stage III: Working towards the claims

The explicit formulation of the major claims takes place in a step-by-step process throughout the ‘Data analysis’ and ‘Discussion’ sections of the articles. Viewed through the lens of pragmatic politeness, this gradual emergence of the claims as “grounded theory” involves an increasing tension between the need to go “bald on record” with the claim (cf. Brown & Levinson, 1987; Myers, 1989) and mitigating the imposition entailed. Therefore, politeness strategies are also used in a step-by-step fashion, with earlier, more cautious formulations ‘cushioning’, and in this way enabling more explicit statements in later parts of the texts. The examples below show how the use of politeness in Stage III prepares the ground for the overt and emphatic formulation of the claims in the final parts of the texts. The first three examples illustrate how the FTA becomes increasingly explicit, or how it is kept implicit, primarily through the authors’ lexical choices; the rest of the examples show the use of negative politeness strategies in distancing the FTA from the author and from participants.

5.1 Increasing explicitness of the FTA expressed by lexical choice

In Text 1 the analysis of the conversation in focus between the teacher and the student illustrates the growing tension and the student’s frustration as the teacher’s corrections and grammar drills get in the way of the interaction. The author’s reporting of the conversation parallels this process: the tone of the report changes from neutral and factual to more and more openly critical. At the beginning, the student “says” something, the teacher “responds” (p. 745), and “brings in the rest of the class as audience” (ibid.), later she “interjects herself into the conversation” (p. 753), and the student’s answer “implies irritation at having to repeat the same information” (ibid.). The teacher “continues to probe [the student] for story details” and she has “basically taken over the telling of her story” (ibid.). The student is “balking at not being able to tell the story without being interrupted” (pp. 753-754). At this point the author includes a comment made to her by the student at a different time about her impatience with this class. The analysed interaction ends with the teacher expressing her disappointment that the student did not get much chance to practice her English over the weekend. The author adds: “Ironically, the same could be said about this lengthy conversation”. (p. 755).

In interpreting her data, and taking the discussion one step further towards theory, the author makes the above statement even more explicitly:

[...] this kind of discourse does not allow the students much opportunity for practicing conversational skills (p. 757).

This leads to the Conclusions, where the claim reaches its strongest and most explicit formulation.

In a similar example of describing a problem in increasingly explicit terms in Text 2 the authors describe group work in the observed class not functioning as intended. They first point out:

[...] the way the teacher structured the groups *was not always how the groups functioned*. (p. 272)

A few lines further there is a more specific formulation:

[...] completely cooperative structures [...] *were not fully enacted* (p. 272)

Somewhat later in the text, it is stated explicitly that on several occasions this set-up did not work at all:

There was variability in the degree to which the completely cooperative structures *broke down* [...]; there were “*partial breakdowns*” and “*complete breakdowns*”. (p. 273)

5.2 Off-record FTA expressed by lexical choice

In Text 4, implicit evaluation of the traditional classroom practice of recitation (“felelés” in Hungarian) representing an off-record FTA for the proponents of this practice, is present throughout the comparison of the two kinds of speech events in the focus of the article. The imposition is present by connotation, i.e. through the lexical choices associated with discipline and authoritarianism in the case of recitation, and with interest and motivation in the case of the more recently adopted practice of student lectures. During recitation, as the author describes, students are “normally *restricted* to their textbook” (p. 519), “*not [...] at liberty* to consult just any reference materials” (ibid.), they should “speak in a[n] [...] *unfaltering* manner” (p. 521), the teacher’s role is “to *interrogate* the reciter” (p. 522) and the student is “required to [...] *ignore* the rest of the class” (p. 523). In the student lectures, by contrast, “control over information sources was somewhat *relaxed*” (p. 519), “access to *interesting* source materials on loan [...] *motivated* students to volunteer [...]” (ibid.), the students have “*more control* over the event and *less at stake*” (p. 522) and during the lecture they are “*bombarded* with interventions from *eager classmates*” (ibid.).

In Text 3, an article characterised by the gradual unfolding of an especially forceful claim (see Figure 3 above), the first sign of the coming criticism of ‘non-text responsible’ writing tasks so commonly used in EAP classes is also formulated in an off-record manner, by referring to these tasks as requiring students to produce “long, flashy sentences or stylish turns of phrase” (p. 54). After this, the criticism becomes stronger but is still indirect. The students’ perception of having to produce content that is both clear and interesting to the readers is described in the following way:

Pleasing readers and providing just enough information for them to understand [...] sometimes proved *baffling and mysterious*. Some writers seemed to feel *they were operating in the dark*. (p. 55)

The shift of focus in the text towards the shortcomings of the described practice becomes more and more noticeable, but critical statements are still carefully redressed. The positive experiences described in the interviews are referred to as “[students] feeling pleased that *at least some* of what they were learning [...] was proving to be useful” (p. 55).

In the next section of the article, moving from data analysis to pedagogical implications, the authors’ focus shifts further towards overt criticism, but redress, including a high degree of indirectness and hedging, is still present:

The students we interviewed *appeared to perceive* their EAP writing classes as helping them develop linguistically, but *it is difficult to see* how they helped these ESL students produce writing based on a reality external to their own thoughts [...] [p. 61].

This is followed by overt and emphatic statements in the final chapter in which the authors “question the validity” of these tasks which “infantilise” students (p. 63).

5.3 Distancing negative content from the participants

The major FTA for the observed practitioners, constituted by the description and interpretation of problematic or unsuccessful aspects of the investigated practice, needs a consistent way of redress. One such strategy employed in all of the examined texts is that the teacher is either completely removed from the description, or is impersonalised into a ‘general agent’ (e.g. “teachers”) when unsuccessful outcomes are described. At the same time, s/he is specifically mentioned in positive contexts, these positive contexts themselves sometimes being included with a clearly redressive purpose.

In Text 2, in the analysis of the instances when students did not cooperate successfully or did not work together at all during the observed activities, the authors remove the agent who set up the tasks:

Students’ focus on completing tasks [as opposed to checking the appropriacy of their solutions] can be understood *in the larger context of the assignments, which tended to emphasize finishing the tasks* (p. 271).

A few lines further down, however, in a different context, the teacher is mentioned specifically:

Mrs. Parker collected the notebooks at the end of each grading period (ibid.).

In a footnote her intentions in doing so are also given acknowledgement:

She felt that the emphasis on order and maintaining the notebook for a grading period would help the students learn a skill that would serve them well [...] (ibid.).

Similarly, another observed reason for the breakdown of cooperation in the lessons is first described impersonally:

[...] the content *was experienced by the students as difficult* [...] (p. 273)

On the same page, the difficulty of tasks is mentioned in a more positive context and the teacher is personalised:

Difficult tasks that Mrs Parker asked the student to carry out in challenging ways [...] seemed to provide high potential/ high risk opportunities.

In Text 3, when describing the different kinds of writing tasks examined, the agent behind these tasks – i.e. the teacher – is consistently kept out of focus. This distancing is most conspicuous in the description of tasks where a source text is used as a springboard of ideas. ‘Having a source text’ takes on the role of agent in the passage: “*it* stirred strong emotional or intellectual reactions”, “*it* allowed them to write a longer text” (p. 51), to the point of becoming completely personalised:

Even if the students understood the source texts, *they* created other restrictions. (p. 51.)

At the same time, the positive qualities the students associate with the writing class and the teacher are given a lot of emphasis: “a friendly place”, “the teacher is sympathetic to and knowledgeable about [students’] problems”, “a valuable experience” (pp. 52-53); and the mention of the arbitrariness and lack of relevance of the writing topics is redressed by an overt apology: “but these characterizations should not be construed as complaints [...]” (p. 53).

5.4 Distancing negative content from author

Making participants' voices immediately present in the text through direct quotes provides a further strategy of mitigating impositions, since this allows authors to distance themselves from evaluative comments that would constitute an FTA, or to tone these down by referring to them in more moderate terms. In Text 4, for instance, when discussing teachers' views of recitation, the author points out that "even some of its enthusiastic proponents considered it stressful but nonetheless necessary", while a teacher is quoted as saying that "it's something like an inquisition" (p. 516).

In the same text, students are also described as "clearly disliking" recitation, "although they sometimes acknowledged [its] utility", while a quoted student says:

It's terrible. [...] everyone is afraid of it. (p. 517)

In Text 3, as students' perception of the different kinds of writing tasks are described, the experienced disadvantages are always supported with quotes from the interviews, which allows the authors to distance themselves from the criticism to some extent, leaving the more direct formulation to the students. In one such example the authors cautiously point out:

[...] the crucial variables for writing without a text as support were the familiarity with the topic and [...] the degree to which the writers were likely to have been thinking about the topic recently or to have it in the forefront of their minds. (p. 49)

To support this, a student is quoted as saying, much more directly:

[...] sometimes that kind of thing is no important ...; I think it is no important in your life. You know that thing but you don't receive that kind of question every day (p. 49).

Positive experiences, on the other hand, are usually listed without quotes from the interview data.

6 Stage IV: Formulating conclusions

In this final stage of the gradual unfolding of claims and their systematic redress the focus of the discussion broadens to include theoretical perspectives. In Texts 1 and 2 this means a clear shift away from the investigated practice. In these symmetrically structured texts the attention at the end turns back to the 'general' research question of the necessity of context-based investigations and to recommendations for practitioners from the outside researcher's perspective. These concern ways of "optimising" classroom instruction (Text 1, p. 762) or the "dissemination" of new approaches by researchers and their "implementation" by practitioners (Text 2, pp. 274-275). Texts 3 and 4, though very different kinds of investigations in themselves, share the common feature of not drawing such a clear conceptual dividing line between the spheres of 'research' and 'practice', and the authors' role as 'outsider researcher' is not given the kind of emphasis it receives in the other two texts. The authors of Text 3 repeatedly identify themselves with the teachers – and therefore with the kind of practice they criticise. This is evident from the following extracts:

[...] springboard readings to which writers merely react in order to agree or disagree or to recount related personal experiences function to infantilise *our students* [...] (p. 63).

Students' description of writing classes as friendly but not intellectually challenging] calls for [...] deeper reflection on how *we as teachers ask our students* to spend their time. (p. 64).

In Text 4 there is a special emphasis on the author's close contact with the investigated practice and, owing to the ethnographic nature of the investigation, there is no attempt at generalising the outcomes in the form of teaching implications.

The shift of focus towards the research context in the final parts of the texts is also evident in the amount of impersonalisation and hedging in the formulation of the claims. In some cases this serves the double function of mitigating two kinds of imposition: on the participants, whose practice provided the research data, and on the members of the research community, who are expected to adopt its results. This double focus can be seen in the example below:

[...] *in spite of all the effort the teacher invests in this activity, it may benefit most of the students only modestly.* (Text 1, p. 759.)

In this statement the author's critique of the observed practice is mitigated on the one hand by the positive strategy of acknowledging the teacher's "effort", on the other hand by hedging the criticism itself. Apart from attending to the face wants of the observed teacher (and of others who follow similar routines), this highly cautious formulation marks the statement as a claim in its 'traditional' sense of being addressed to the research community.

Towards the end of the final chapter of the articles the claims find their weightiest and most overt way of expression. At this point the discussion reaches more basic and general dimensions and impositions seem to have much less weight or significance. In fact, the outcomes of the research appear to be *based on the foregoing stages* in every sense, including participants' face needs, which have been dealt with conscientiously in earlier sections so that the discussion is now unhindered. There seems to be a noticeable link between the explicit formulations at this stage and earlier, less direct phrasings in the texts. In Text 1, for example, the hedged formulation quoted above is followed by this much less cautiously worded statement a few paragraphs later:

It [the analysis] shows, in fact, that the priority a teacher gives to correction *can completely subvert the communicative task at hand.* (p. 761)

Several of these explicit statements refer back to points made earlier, in a much more overtly critical vein. In Text 3, the friendly atmosphere of writing classes pointed out by students is mentioned again at the end of the article in a strongly negative context:

Hearing ESL students describe writing classes as *friendly but not intellectually challenging* [...] *is alarming and disheartening and calls for [...] deeper reflection on how we as teachers expect our students to spend their time.* (p. 64)

In the final chapter of Text 4 there are three cases of such changes of emphasis in referring to previously made points. In one such example the practice of recitation is described in the following way:

[...] the utility of a rigorous genre of oral assessment known as the *felelés* (recitation) – *the Prussian cornerstone of instructional discourse* in many schools in Eastern Europe – was being called into question [...] (pp. 529-30).

This echoes the definition of this practice used earlier in the text:

This originally Prussian [Herbartian] practice [...] (p. 514)

It is noticeable that in the later formulation, where the inserted explanation equates the concept of “rigour” with that of “Prussian instructional discourse”, the tone is changed from informative to evaluative. Another such instance is the reference to participants viewing “recitation activity *with disdain*” (p. 530), rephrasing the earlier observation that students “clearly disliked recitation [...] although they sometimes recognised its utility” (p. 517) in a more evaluative manner. The third, and weightiest, of these explicit claims refers to problems with teachers’ language proficiency at the school:

There is a concern that the FL used by Hungarian teachers [...] *might obstruct rather than mediate* student learning in some cases. (pp. 530-531)

This clearly critical formulation differs significantly from the earlier wording of this problem in the article as “an interesting paradox” (p. 525).

7 Conclusions and implications

The scope of the present analysis, including its results, is obviously limited to the four texts examined. Nevertheless, it has revealed some characteristic ways in which claims are made and redressed in these texts, on the basis of which it was possible to set up some hypotheses about the use of pragmatic politeness in these kinds of research reports in general. At the same time, it also points to some characteristic differences in the weighting the authors give to the ‘research’ and ‘practice’ contexts, in other words to the ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ perspectives of the investigation. These two kinds of conclusions will be discussed here.

One interesting characteristic of these texts, as pointed out earlier, seems to be that they contain both a ‘general’ claim directed at the research community, stressing the necessity of context-based, qualitative studies of classrooms, and a major, more ‘specific’ claim emerging from the particular focus of the research. The ‘specific’ claims constitute impositions on the participants (primarily the practitioners) within the investigated practice, and the politeness strategies are also directed at the members of this context. These major claims develop gradually, are made with increasing explicitness and decreasing redress throughout the text, and reach their most direct way of expression in the final section(s) of the article. This means that redress operates not only *locally*, to mitigate the imposition where it occurs, but also *across the text*, and redress of the more direct formulation of the claim made towards the end of the text is sometimes used *pre-emptively* in earlier sections.

Based on the use of pragmatic politeness in the analysed articles, four tentative stages were established (see Chart 1 in the Appendix). This four-step structure shows a shift of focus in the texts from the *research context* (Stage I) to the *investigated practice* (Stages II, III, and sometimes IV), as well as characteristic means of redress used in each stage. One such characteristic feature is the emphasis on appreciation, sympathy and solidarity with the participants of the investigated practice in Stage II, i.e., at the outset of the investigation itself,

functioning as pre-emptive redress of the claims formulated later on in the text. Another recurrent feature is represented by the ‘distancing strategies’ used in the texts: doing the FTA implicitly (‘off-record’) by lexical choice, or distancing the negative content from the participants, and/ or from the author. In several cases, the overt formulation of the claim in the Conclusion refers back to and puts a critical edge on statements made before.

In this way the present analysis has shown that the impositions the researchers’ claims entail for the members of the investigated practice require a systematic use of redress throughout the text, and this process parallels – or rather, represents the inverse of – the gradual unfolding and strengthening of the claims of the research in the articles. If confirmed by an analysis of a larger corpus of similar texts, the systematic use of pragmatic politeness outlined in the four-stage model of the present study could usefully contribute to our knowledge of the genre of qualitative EFL Research Articles, and serve as guidance for novice writers of such texts. It might also be worth examining how the observed processes operate in the representation of practice in other fields of “human action” (cf. Hyland, 1998) research.

The four-stage structure also highlighted some differences between the analysed articles concerning the authors’ approach to research. In Texts 1 and 2 – and possibly many other research reports of this kind – the authors clearly position themselves as outsiders to the practice they are investigating. Research and practice are viewed as *two separate spheres of activity*, and the role of the researcher is that of ‘*provider of theory*’ which is to be *implemented* in the local context. Texts 3 and 4, on the other hand, address both researchers and practitioners without drawing a clear dividing line between these two kinds of practice, or between these two expected groups of readers of the articles. Therefore, the analysis has served to illustrate that while a qualitative orientation to research accounts for a number of common features and similarities, apparent in the way participants are represented in these texts, it also allows for very different kinds of individual conceptual frameworks (cf. Edge & Richards, 1998), revealing a variety of stances researchers can adopt vis-à-vis the research context and the investigated practice represented in their texts.

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APPENDIX

Chart 1: The use of politeness strategies in Research Articles

STAGES	FOCUS	CHARACTERISTICS	POLITENESS STRATEGIES
I. ESTABLISHING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK (INTRODUCTION, RATIONALE, METHODS)	RESEARCH CONTEXT	Describing shared understandings. Indicating gap concerning both general claims (importance of a context-based, qualitative approach) and specific claims (specific topic).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive politeness: giving credit (citations); • Negative politeness: indirectness, hedging.
II. DESCRIBING SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS	INVESTIGATED CONTEXT		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive politeness (expressing solidarity, common ground, appreciation) functioning as pre-emptive redress.
III. DATA ANALYSIS	INVESTIGATED CONTEXT	Gradually increasing explicitness of specific claims and of FTA on participants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'off-record' (implicit) FTA expressed by lexical choice, • distancing negative content from participants, • distancing negative content from author.
IV. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS			
TEXTS 1 & 2:	RESEARCH CONTEXT	Symmetrical structure: 'common ground' re-established. Outcomes of research process 'feed back' into shared knowledge. Teachers: implementers' of theory.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific claims reach their most explicit formulation. • General claims redressed like in Stage I.
TEXTS 3 & 4:	INVESTIGATED (& RESEARCH) CONTEXT	Focus does not shift away completely from investigated practice; discussion goes beyond re-establishing consensus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overt & emphatic formulation of specific claims, relying completely on pre-emptive redress; • Putting a critical edge on points made before.