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How do USA university students evaluate the pragmatic appropriateness of peer corrective feedback?

1. *Introduction*

This study aims to explore how native or near-native speakers of US English[1] evaluate the pragmatic appropriateness of peer corrective feedback provided in English within the context of tandem telecollaborative exchanges.

Tandem telecollaboration, or e-tandem[2], is a virtual exchange environment that links L2 learners with proficient speakers of the target language, creating authentic interactions that foster L2 pragmatic development (González-Lloret, 2021). This development pertains to the ability to appropriately produce and understand discourse within a given socio-cultural context. In telecollaborative environments, participants are expected to offer reciprocal corrective feedback, involving speech acts that may threaten face (Brown & Levinson, 1987), such as criticizing or suggesting, necessitating mastery of linguistic politeness. Therefore, analyzing L2 peer feedback in e-tandem programs offers an excellent opportunity to observe learners' pragmatic competence.

Assessing pragmatic competence presents a challenge because pragmatics prioritizes appropriateness over mere correctness. As a result, researchers often turn to judgments of appropriateness from native speakers, who represent the potential recipients of speech acts from L2 speakers. In a prior study conducted by the author of this contribution

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[1] Two out of the five raters (cf. Section 3.2) had an immigrant background, so that English was not their first language. However, they were highly proficient users of English which was the language of instruction and daily interaction with teachers and peers.

[2] E-tandem and tandem telecollaboration are used interchangeably throughout the paper. For a discussion on the different terms used to refer to the variety of language exchange experiences available through CMC see Dooly & Smith (2020).

and a co-author (Nuzzo & Donato, 2023), five raters were selected from a California university and trained to specifically evaluate the pragmatic aspects of L2 learners' expressions using a pragmatic assessment questionnaire. Quantitative analysis of this data revealed no substantial differences in the assessments of appropriateness between the learners and a baseline of L1 speakers[3]. There was also no perceived development in the learners across sessions in the telecollaboration program.

The present study aims to expand this investigation by taking a different approach, specifically through qualitative analysis of raters' justifications provided in response to the open-ended questions within the pragmatic assessment questionnaire. The goal is to comprehend why native speaker raters perceive feedback as either appropriate or inappropriate. Essentially, this involves identifying what factors they consider relevant in determining the appropriateness of linguistic behavior when providing feedback to a peer. In terms of teaching implications, this study can offer valuable insights into preparing students for telecollaborative projects with partners from the USA.

The contribution is structured as follows: Section 2 offers background information on e-tandem learning environments, peer corrective feedback, and the associated politeness issues. Section 3 details the study's methodology, while Section 4 presents the findings. Finally, Section 5 contains the concluding remarks.

2. *Background*

2.1 *Peer Corrective Feedback in e-Tandem Environments*

A language tandem is an educational setup where two individuals, each with different native languages (L1), collaborate to learn each other's languages in a mutually beneficial manner (Brammerts & Calvert, 2003). Within this arrangement, the tandem partners take on dual roles: one as a second language learner and the other as an expert in their own first (or proficiently spoken) language. Their shared objective is to improve their proficiency in the second language (Brammerts, 1996; Brammerts & Calvert, 2003; Little & Brammerts, 1996). This

[3] As for the raters, some of the participants who provided the baseline data for the study were near-native speakers of US English (cf. footnote 1).

partnership involves a dynamic asymmetry, with roles shifting between learner and expert as the conversation's language changes. Face-to-face tandem learning has been a fixture in European foreign language education for around fifty years. The proliferation of video conferencing tools has significantly expanded opportunities for language students to engage in e-tandem programs over the past two decades.

Tandem telecollaboration programs provide students with a valuable opportunity to engage in purposeful, goal-driven communication in the second language while fostering connections with individuals from diverse cultures, facilitating the development of intercultural competencies (Belz, 2007). Additionally, these programs facilitate support in using the target language. In this regard, peer corrective feedback assumes a pivotal role within e-tandem partnerships, with participants often encouraged, and at times instructed, to provide corrective feedback to their language partners (e.g., Akiyama, 2014; Nuzzo & Cortés Velásquez, 2021; Saito & Akiyama, 2017; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). The reliability of corrective feedback from tandem participants can vary since learners possess different capabilities to assist in their own native language (Bower & Kawaguchi, 2011; Scheuer & Horgues, 2020). However, despite this variability, learners engaged in tandem exchanges generally anticipate and value corrective feedback from their partners (Akiyama, 2016). In practice, non-native participants often actively seek or appreciate corrective feedback during conversations, whether it is expressed directly or indirectly (Debras *et al.*, 2015; Scheuer & Horgues, 2020).

Integrating feedback practices within tandem telecollaboration presents intriguing prospects for pragmatic skill development as well. While the main objective of promoting peer feedback in e-tandem exchanges is to incorporate a focus on form in these learning contexts (Nuzzo, 2022), participants who offer feedback in the target language may encounter what Taguchi and Roever (2017: 191) describe as «incidental pragmatics learning» – a form of learning «in which pragmatic features are not the focus of instruction but are learned incidentally from naturalistic input and output opportunities». Indeed, providing feedback inherently involves matters of pragmatics, particularly in terms of politeness, as elucidated in the forthcoming paragraph.

2.2 *The Pragmatics of Peer Feedback*

Providing feedback to a peer involves employing potentially face-threatening speech acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which might pose a risk to the addressees' self-image. Hyland & Hyland (2006: 86) suggest that giving corrective feedback encompasses both suggestion and criticism, representing the extremes of a spectrum that spans from highlighting inadequacies to proposing strategies for improvement. Consequently, participants in e-tandem learning engaged in peer-feedback activities need to leverage their pragmatic skills to execute these speech acts in an effective and polite manner.

It is crucial to emphasize that the nature of criticism conveyed in peer review significantly differs from other forms of criticism. Firstly, the participants do not opt to engage in a potentially face-threatening act in this context; instead, they are compelled to do so as part of meeting educational course obligations (Dalziel, 2022). Secondly, the criticism is inherently constructive, aiming to assist a peer in enhancing their written work based on the feedback provided (O'Donnell Christoffersen, 2015: 51). Moreover, provider and recipient are of equal status and limited social distance. Nevertheless, offering corrective feedback to peers is often viewed as a potential threat to the recipient's face, prompting feedback providers to counterbalance criticism by incorporating compliments (Amores, 2001; Johnson, 1992), or employing various mitigation strategies like hedging and prefacing positive comments (O'Donnell Christoffersen, 2015).

The nature and distribution of mitigation devices can differ across languages and cultures, making the task of offering peer feedback appropriately in a second language challenging even for proficient learners. Understanding the expectations of recipients regarding peer feedback in a tandem context can better prepare participants for this task.

3. *Method*

Five individuals, all native or near-native speakers of English (cf. footnote 1), were tasked with evaluating the pragmatic suitability of three Italian learners and four native or near-native speakers of US English (cf. footnote 3) while providing feedback in English to their e-tandem partners. To facilitate this assessment, a specialized pragmatic

evaluation questionnaire was specifically designed, and the raters underwent training to emphasize and evaluate the pragmatic elements within the speakers' communication. Details regarding the data employed for the assessment, the characteristics of the raters, specifics of the questionnaire, the training protocol, the assessment methodology, and the subsequent data analysis will be outlined in the following sections.

3.1 *The Data Used for the Rating*

The peer feedback activities were videorecorded during a task-based e-tandem program between two universities, one in Italy and one in California. The program spanned a semester and involved a series of macro tasks to be collaboratively completed during video calls, along with individual assignments between each virtual meeting. Each macro task comprised various subtasks: students conducted interviews, composed a text in the L2, reviewed their partner's text, and subsequently provided feedback during a video call. The virtual meetings were recorded with participants' consent. The videorecorded data used for the pragmatic assessment questionnaire in this study (refer to Section 3.3) were derived from the feedback sessions conducted in English.

3.2 *The Raters*

The five raters were students from the same California university where the e-tandem program took place. While they had not personally taken part in the program, their backgrounds closely resembled those of the participating students, making them well-suited assessors for the study. Nonetheless, it was deemed essential to equip them with foundational knowledge in pragmatics and aspects related to politeness. This approach ensured that their assessments centered on pragmatic appropriateness rather than fixating on phonological, grammatical, or lexical accuracy. To achieve this, a tailored training protocol was developed, followed by dedicated training sessions (refer to Section 3.3 for further details).

The evaluators possessed varied backgrounds, yet shared a common interest in linguistics and the realms of second language learning and teaching. Each had varying degrees of involvement in second language instruction or tutoring, contributing to their diverse experiences. Their collective enthusiasm to engage in the research project was evident; they eagerly volunteered to enroll in the one academic unit (in line with

the US academic credit system) that encompassed both the training sessions and the evaluation process (see Section 3.3).

Table 1 provides information about the raters' backgrounds, respectively age, gender, proficiency in US English, education and work experience in the area of language teaching.

Rater 1	
Age & Gender	20, Female
Proficiency	L1 speaker
Education	Completing BA in Liberal Arts
Work experience	ESL Writing Tutor
Rater 2	
Age & Gender	30, Female
Proficiency	L1 speaker
Education	MA in Italian, BA in Spanish, Certificate in Translation Studies
Work experience	Teacher Assistant in Italian
Rater 3	
Age & Gender	21, Female
Proficiency	L1 speaker
Education	Completing BA in Linguistics
Work experience	English Conversation Partner and Tutor
Rater 4	
Age & Gender	23, Female
Proficiency	Highly proficient
Education	Completing MA in Linguistics (TESOL), BA in Psychology, Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)
Work experience	ESL Specialist at the Learning Center
Rater 5	
Age & Gender	23, Male
Proficiency	Highly proficient
Education	Completing MA in Linguistics (TESOL), BA in Business Management, Certificate in Translation and Interpretation
Work experience	TESOL Practicum

Table 1: The raters' backgrounds.

3.3 *The Pragmatic Assessment*

Assessing pragmatic competence poses a challenge due to its focus on appropriateness rather than mere correctness. Consequently, researchers frequently rely on judgments of appropriateness from native speakers, who serve as the potential recipients of speech acts from L2 speakers. However, this also presents its own difficulties. The literature often underscores the challenge of establishing rating criteria for evaluating speech act ability (Cohen, 2004; 2019). Gauci *et al.* (2017) highlight that pragmatic assessment inherently demands that «raters have some knowledge of pragmatics, and the predisposition to not rate on the basis of grammatical correctness but rather in terms of what is appropriate or inappropriate within a speech act». Additionally, aiding raters in familiarizing themselves with the assessment instrument and its criteria becomes crucial to mitigate the somewhat inevitable risk of varied interpretations. Disagreements among raters regarding what constitutes appropriateness have been documented (Alcón-Soler, 2015), leading to variations in severity across tasks, rating criteria, or learners' proficiency levels (Youn, 2018). Raters might be attuned to diverse assessment criteria corresponding to different levels of learners' proficiency (Härmälä, 2010). Some might consider specific forms of interactional behavior acceptable only if displayed by L1 speakers (Hacking, 2008), while others might exhibit leniency toward non-L1 speakers compared to L1 speakers for similar linguistic behavior (Sydorenko *et al.*, 2014).

The pragmatic assessment instrument for the present study was created using Google Forms and comprised ten video clips, each accompanied by an identical set of questions. As mentioned earlier (refer to Section 3.1), these video clips were extracted from the recorded English feedback sessions. The questionnaire featured two video clips for each learner, one captured at the beginning and another at the conclusion of the e-tandem program, and one for each native speaker. The sequence of the ten video clips was arranged using an online randomizer.

The questionnaire, partially influenced by the format used by Gauci *et al.* (2017), comprised five Likert-scale questions for each of the ten video extracts. The initial question evaluated overall pragmatic appropriateness, while the subsequent four questions delved into more specific facets: directness, formality, politeness, and effectiveness. To conclude, an open-ended question prompted raters to briefly explain their ratings by providing examples.

As anticipated, the raters underwent training to enhance their focus on the pragmatic aspects of English language usage while evaluating the subjects' performances. This training was integrated into a 15-hour independent study module which allowed students to earn one unit of credit. The independent learning unit encompassed preliminary readings on fundamental pragmatics concepts (such as speech act theory, politeness, and conversation maxims), interactive group discussions facilitated via video conferencing, a presentation detailing the questionnaire (illustrating the questions and expected response approaches without allowing practice with the instrument), and concluded with retrospective reflection.

3.4 *Procedures of Data Analysis*

The responses to the open-ended questions (justification of the rating) were selected for analysis in this study with the aim to understand the reasons underlying the raters' scores and the linguistic behaviors associated with more or less positive evaluations. A total of fifty answers (one for each of the ten video clips, for each of the five raters) were analyzed. The responses exhibited considerable variability in length, spanning from brief expressions to several lines of text. Overall, the corpus analyzed consisted of 5064 words, that is an average length of approximately 100 words for response. Qualitative content analysis methods, as outlined by Mayring (2022), were implemented using the web application QCAmap (www.qcamap.org). The analysis predominantly followed an inductive approach to category formation, where predefined categories were not used. Instead, codes were generated based on the emerging themes found within the texts.

4. *Results*

The analysis revealed seven primary categories within the data, as illustrated in Table 2. The absolute numbers in the second column represent the total instances of each category found in the data. The percentage is calculated based on the cumulative occurrences of all strategies. Some responses focused on a single category, while others mentioned two or more categories. In a few instances, the same sentence

or phrase received multiple tags because it simultaneously encompassed two categories.

Category Name	N	%
Pragmalinguistic Strategies	50	34.72
Turn-Taking Management	21	14.58
Positive Feedback	16	11.11
Showing Empathy / Solidarity	16	11.11
Providing Explanations	15	10.42
Tone of Voice	15	10.42
Providing Examples / Alternatives	11	7.64
TOT	144	100

Table 2: Categories identified in the data.

The most frequently referenced category was Pragmalinguistic Strategies, encompassing comments that addressed the use or absence of linguistic tools intended to convey particular pragmatic meanings. These strategies primarily aimed to mitigate potentially face-threatening acts within the communication. In examples (1) and (2), the commenters emphasize the feedback providers' inability to employ these strategies, while in examples (3) - (6), the feedback providers receive praise for effectively using them.

(1) At 2:20 the receiver was going to ask a question, but stopped himself and the feedback provider responds with "tell me tell me." This seemed extremely direct and informal where it would appear more formal to say something along the lines of "go ahead, what was your question?" I think usually we usually will try to affirm the receiver and give permission to ask their question by saying it's okay, it's fine, ask your question.

(2) This was an appropriate way to give feedback, however instead of phrasing her corrections with "you HAVE to say…" it would have been more appropriate to suggest by saying "you SHOULD say".

(3) He is able to soften his delivery when making correcting by saying phrases like "I would personally say", "it would be best to use".

(4) She does not phrase her corrections with “this is wrong/ incorrect”, but offers suggestions by using statements beginning with “I would say… it is better to say…”.

(5) She uses appropriate modal phrases in terms of “I would say” and “I think”.

(6) He also softened the delivery by using phrases like “my choice would be”, “I would say”, or “I would suggest a different word”.

The evaluators highlighted modals like *would* and *should* as effective and polite pragmalinguistic tools to soften corrective feedback, as evidenced in examples (2) - (6). Additionally, they underscored the significance of lexical softeners such as *personally* (cf. example 3). Imperative and directive forms were negatively evaluated, as exemplified in (1) and (2). At times, the raters referred in a more general sense to aspects of directness or informality, as observed in example (1). Overall, the prevailing notion indicates that feedback is better received when presented as a suggestion rather than as criticism or an indication of error.

Another frequently cited category was Turn-Taking Management, addressing how the feedback provider navigates the conversation concerning the exchange of turns. Specifically, raters valued a deliberate pace where the feedback provider frequently paused to ensure comprehension from the recipient, as reported in (7) and (8). The opposite attitude was regarded as less appropriate, as highlighted in example (9).

(7) Turns with confirmation from feedback recipient seem balanced enough for discussion.

(8) The feedback provider also paused to make sure the receiver could hear her properly before continuing with the feedback.

(9) She continued her feedback without taking breaks to see if the other person understood why she made the change or if they had any questions.

The evaluators demonstrated a keen awareness of the presence of positive feedback, evident in examples (10) and (11). Additionally, they observed the feedback provider’s inclination toward displaying empathy

or solidarity by drawing comparisons between the recipient's situation and their own or acknowledging the difficulties of learning certain aspects of the target language, as exemplified in (12) and (13).

(10) There also wasn't much positive feedback given.

(11) She also comments positively on sentences that she feels are correct, instead of just pointing out errors.

(12) She also related the feedback to her experience with learning Italian and said that she also "gets confused" in regards to certain Italian word uses.

(13) The feedback provider is always very friendly and sympathetic to her partner. She starts by commiserating with her partner explaining that "the use of articles, I know that they are quite difficult to use for an English speaker or any foreign speaker" which helps her partner feel better about making these mistakes.

Another factor influencing the evaluators' assessments was the inclination of feedback providers to offer explanations, as demonstrated in (14) and (15), as well as providing examples or alternatives for incorrect forms, as seen in (16) and (17).

(14) She went through every sentence telling him it was "better to say" something else, but she often did not include any explanation of why his choices were wrong or why she would choose something different.

(15) Instead of just stating this is right and this is wrong, she offered explanations for why something else was correct.

(16) She also offers him several ways he could re-word phrases so that he can choose for himself like saying "supporting and helping each other" or "helping each other out".

(17) He also provides her with alternative options, as in "You could end the sentence after 'travel' or you could end the sentence after 'friend', but I wouldn't put all three of those sentences together".

Finally, a recurring theme centers around the tone of voice, widely regarded as a crucial factor in assessing the appropriateness of providing feedback. A negative comment and a positive comment on the tone of

the feedback providers' voice are reported in (18) and (19) respectively.

(18) Most of the time the feedback provider's tone seemed uninterested, which almost sounded rude. Compared to the receiver, the feedback provider lacked energy which was extremely evident in the way she was talking.

(19) The feedback provider also did very well in changing the tone of her voice throughout the session by keeping the receiver engaged and also sounding personally interested in what was being discussed.

In summary, the raters primarily focused on the use of pragmalinguistic means to soften the potential impact of corrective feedback on one's face, stressing the significance of framing feedback as a suggestion rather than criticism, and avoiding directive expressions like *you have to say X instead of Y*. They also highlighted the importance of feedback providers offering positive feedback to balance any negative aspects, and allowing the recipient to respond, seek clarification, and express comprehension. Additionally, they valued the inclusion of examples and explanations, an engaging tone of voice, and a sympathetic demeanor as crucial components for feedback to be deemed appropriate.

5. *Conclusions*

This study aimed to identify the factors that students from a California university consider significant when evaluating appropriate linguistic behavior while providing feedback to peers. A pragmatic assessment tool was employed with five raters specifically trained to focus on the pragmatic aspects of English usage. These raters assessed both learners and native or near-native speakers engaged in delivering corrective feedback to peers through video extracts. The scores were examined in a previous study, investigating any distinctions between first and second language use, as well as longitudinal shifts in learners' linguistic behavior. In the present study, the focus was on analyzing the open-ended questions of the questionnaire, prompting the raters to justify the scores assigned to the video excerpts.

The results highlighted a distinct sensitivity towards hedging,

observing a prevalence of negative politeness strategies over positive ones. Specifically, the raters unanimously stressed the significance of employing modal verbs and lexical items expressing opinion to present feedback as a mild suggestion rather than criticism or imposition, as well as of providing explanation to sustain the claim that something in incorrect. All this can be considered as «redressive facework,» which aims «to maintain or support face by counteracting threats, or potential threats, to face» (Culpeper, 2011: 400). However, they also acknowledged the value of positive politeness strategies, such as praising the language partner's writing alongside corrective feedback and showing a sympathetic attitude toward the partner's efforts. Also, they emphasized the importance of an engaging tone of voice, which can be seen as a positive politeness strategy as well, that is showing some kind of solidarity between speakers and hearers, «making other people feel good» (Cutting, 2015: 36).

These findings are consistent with prior analyses of peer reviewing in English, such as those carried out by O'Donnell Christoffersen (2015) and Dalziel (2022). They confirm that English-speaking students within the cultural context of a US university perceive giving feedback as a face threatening act and place significance on «sugaring the pill» (Hyland & Hyland, 2001), even in situations where corrective feedback is explicitly sought as part of the activity and where the recipient is a peer of equal status and limited social distance.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings offer valuable insights for enhancing the pragmatic awareness of participants engaged in e-tandem programs, especially involving partners from English-speaking institutions, notably those from US universities. Future research could expand upon this investigation by comparing the perspectives of native and near-native English speakers with those of English learners residing in non-English speaking environments. This exploration would help discern potential cross-cultural differences in the pragmatic aspects of peer corrective feedback.

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