

Investigating disagreements through a context-specific approach: A case of Iranian L2 speakers

Reza Ghafar Samar

(Associate Professor, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran)

Afsaneh Abaszadeh

(MA, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran)

Corresponding author's email: afs_abaszadeh@yahoo.com

Fatemeh Pourmohamadi

(MA, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran)

(Received: 18.09.2013, Accepted: 27.11.2013)

Abstract

The current study investigated the expression of disagreement by Iranian advanced English learners. The data for the study comprised the recorded discussions of 26 male and female interlocutors in three different settings: 1) language institute, 2) home environment, and 3) university setting. Analysis of the arguments pointed to the influence of contextual factors. More precisely, disagreements were found to be complex and multidirectional speech acts and thus various factors, including the interlocutors' power, relationships, background, and the situational context, influence their realization as face-threatening or face-enhancing speech acts. Therefore, the linguistic markers cannot safely categorize disagreement turns into polite/impolite or preferred/dispreferred acts.

Keywords: argument, disagreement, politeness strategies, speech acts, conversation analysis

Introduction

The importance of developing pragmatic competence has long been acknowledged by researchers in the field of second language acquisition (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper & Rose, 1999; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). In fact, successful communication requires the mastery of social usage as well as linguistic forms (Glaser, 2009).

Among all communicative activities, argumentative discourse is one that permeates all aspects of life, and performing well in this discourse domain is an important pragmatic skill for every person, either in the first (L1) or second language (L2) (Dippold, 2011). To negotiate ones' own ideas successfully and perform well in

argumentation, a person should acquire this important pragmatic skill. Therefore, understanding of how arguing is accomplished would contribute to the understanding of the negotiation of social structures and vice-versa.

Most of the research on argumentative discourse focuses on the expression of disagreement (Hayashi, 1996; Holtgraves, 1997; Locher, 2004; Rees-Miller, 2000). This is because conversation analytic approaches to the study of argument see disagreement as the 'marked answer' (Dippold, 2011). Disagreement is defined as "the expression of a view that differs from that expressed by another speaker" (Sifianou, 2012, p. 1). This speech act is

generally considered dispreferred (Pomerantz, 1984) because it threatens the speaker's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

However, researchers studying argument and conflict talk in interaction have illustrated that, in arguments, ordinary preference structures are sometimes removed or even reversed; that is, disagreements may take preferred forms, while agreements are produced as dispreferred (Kotthoff, 1993). Disagreement has also been observed to enhance sociability and relationship in some contexts (Angouri & Tseliga, 2010; Georgakopoulou, 2001; Kakavá, 2002). In recent research on disagreement, it is believed that disagreement is an "everyday phenomenon" that is needed in decision making and problem solving interactions (Angouri & Locher, 2012, p.1). It is suggested that context plays an important role in the acceptance of disagreement as a preferred speech act.

Due to such conflicting views on the nature of disagreement as preferred or dispreferred, and in order to investigate possible effects of context on the expression of disagreement, the present study investigates disagreement strategies used in arguments in the context of English as foreign language.

Background

Disagreement: A multidirectional and multifunctional act

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory has been applied to various studies of speech act realization and conversational interaction (Garcia, 1989). Brown and Levinson (1987) considered disagreements as acts which threaten the addressee's negative face when "a speaker is imposing her/his will on the hearer" (Sifianou, 2012, p. 65).

Due to this negative-face threatening aspect of disagreements, Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed two positive politeness strategies to avoid this threat: 1. 'Seek agreement' (e.g., by engaging in safe topics), and 2. 'Avoid disagreement' (e.g., by using token agreement, hedging, and white lies) (p. 112–113). They suggested that more direct strategies of disagreement are preferred to less direct strategies in three situations: 1. when there is less social distance between the speaker and addressee, 2. when the speaker has greater power than the addressee, and 3. when the severity of disagreement is less.

The notion of preference can best be explained by conversation analytic work of Pomerantz's (1984), according to which participation in speech act involves making assessments, "with an assessment a speaker claims knowledge of that which he or she is assessing" (p. 57). Initial assessments are followed by second assessments which are "subsequent assessments that refer to the same referents as in the prior assessments" (Pomerantz, 1984, p.62). Pomerantz viewed disagreements as dispreferred second assessments; therefore, turns and sequences in talk should be structured so as to soften the disagreement. As a result, disagreements are expressed with delayed components and in a way that they are not positioned early within turns. To redress the threats to the addressee's positive face the speaker may use partial agreement, colloquial language, and first person plural. The use of interrogatives, hedges, and impersonal forms can soften the threat to the addressee's negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

All in all, the above theories view disagreement as "a form of conflict . . . taxing communication events" (Waldron & Applegate, cited in Locher, 2004, p. 94), dispreferred second (Pomerantz, 1984;

Sacks, 1987), which 'is largely destructive for social solidarity' (Heritage, 1984, p. 268) and should, therefore, be avoided in the interest of interlocutors' face (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983). However, recent studies have led to new and somehow contradictory findings regarding the expression of disagreement.

Angouri and Locher (2012), in their review of the literature on disagreement, provided new insights for future research on disagreement. They proposed that disagreement is an everyday speech act which is expected in certain interactional practices such as problem solving and decision making. According to them, it is erroneous to consider disagreements as primarily negative; various aspects of context, culture and social norms and practices determine the nature of disagreement as a preferred or dispreferred speech act.

Sifianou (2012) describes disagreement as "a situated activity, interactionally managed by interlocutors" (p.4), which is a multidirectional (i.e. disagreements can affect either or both positive and negative face of the interlocutors) and multifunctional (i.e. disagreements can serve various functions such as establishing hostility or solidarity) speech act. She believes that the conceptualization of disagreements primarily as face-threatening acts which should be avoided in favor of agreements is only a part of the story. She argues against such views as follows:

they ignore the possibility that even agreements may be face threatening if, for instance, they are interpreted as insincere, manipulative or ingratiating. Moreover, agreements may also be self-face threatening acts if

one feels impeded in voicing one's own views openly and freely. (Sifianou, 2012, p. 6)

On the other hand, she emphasizes on the face-enhancing function that disagreements may play in various situations. For example, the speaker may display interest in his/her interlocutor's argument through disagreement (i.e. through involvement in interaction rather than indifference by just agreeing or being silent) or help in investigating different perspectives in a discussion to find a solution which is helpful to the addressee (Georgakopoulou, cited in Sifianou, 2012). Disagreements can also be face enhancing in the case of self-belittling statements or even compliments. In these cases, the speakers protect their face through disagreement as agreeing with self-praise is face-threatening (Pomerantz, 1984). Disagreement may also enhance one's face when speakers disagree to present themselves as skillful contesters (Hernandez-Flores, 2008; see, also, Angouri & Tseliga, 2010; Corsaro & Maynard, 1996; Kakavá, 2002; Locher, 2004; Tannen, 1984).

Therefore, recent studies on disagreement can help us to view this speech act not simply as a threat to our interlocutors' face, but as a multidimensional act which may foster solidarity among people in their interactions.

Disagreement and context of interaction

Viewing disagreement as a multidimensional and multifunctional act has led researchers to investigate the expression of this speech act in relation to the context of interaction. They have tried to explore the possible effects of contextual variables such as age, gender, power, solidarity, personal traits, and the degree of

formality of the interaction on the expression of disagreement.

Sifianou (2012) believes that context is not static and simple and disagreement is not by itself impolite or self-threatening; rather, it is the context of interaction which makes disagreement face threatening or face enhancing. She views interlocutors' personal traits and relational histories as influential in predisposing them to particular strategies:

Some individuals are more argumentative than others, and some may be aversive to any kind of opposition...some people object to certain kinds of FTAs [face-threatening acts] more than others. It is highly likely that such personal traits will influence both interlocutors' linguistic behavior. (Sifianou, 2012, p. 5)

Parvaresh and Eslamirasekh (2009) investigated the effects of contextual variables of solidarity and deference on the ways in which young women in Iran argue in their first language (i.e. Persian). They have concluded that the non-western culture of Iran causes the interlocutors to seek deference rather than solidarity while disagreeing with their close male friends. However, they observed that their participants used 'conflictives' in cases where their interlocutor was of the same gender.

In another study, Mehregan, Eslamirasekh, Dabaghi, and Jafari Seresht (2013) explored the effect of gender and the degree of formality of situation on the expression of the speech act of disagreement in Persian. They observed that the degree of formality

of the situation causes their participants to disagree conservatively.

In another study on the effect of context on the production of disagreement, Netz (in press) supported the claim that disagreement is not inherently face-threatening and needs to be contextualized. The author studied disagreements in the gifted classes and found that in this context disagreement was unmarked and less mitigated and did not undermine solidarity among interlocutors.

Georgakopoulou (2001, p. 1881) argues that future research on disagreement should be "context-sensitive". In his study of Greek conversations between young people, he found that disagreements were implied and indirectly constructed through a) turn-initial markers, b) stories used as analogies for the debated issues, and c) questions. However, he argued that this indirectness in the expression of disagreement was neither an indication of sociability nor was due to increased politeness. Instead, he demonstrated that disagreements in his data were shaped by contextual factors such as the participants' relationship, their shared background information, type of activity and the norms of argumentation.

Other studies have considered contextual factors like power, severity of disagreement, ethnicity, personal traits, relational histories (Rees-Miller, 2000; Sifianou, 2012), and professional training (Edstrom, 2004) important in the expression of disagreement in interaction. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009, p. 282) argues for the importance of interlocutor's identity in the interpretation of what is said.

The above findings call for further context-sensitive research on disagreement in natural settings. Therefore, the present study tries to investigate the expression of disagreement

in arguments through conversation analysis techniques in various contexts of interaction.

Theoretical framework

In this study the argument transcripts were analyzed according to Rees-Miller's (2000) taxonomy. Rees Miller categorized the expression of disagreement as softened disagreement, aggravated or strengthened disagreement and disagreement which is neither softened nor aggravated (see Table 1). She justified the use of this taxonomy in contrast to the existing taxonomies by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Blum-Kulka, Shoshana, House, and Kasper (1989) and argued that description of the content of interaction by using terms like '*head act and adjunct*' (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) presupposes a discrete speech act which is accomplished in one adjacency pair and does not apply to the natural data of disagreement.

On the other hand, she argues against using ambiguous terms such as '*direct and indirect*' (Brown & Levinson, 1987) as a particular disagreement turn may appear direct or indirect to different observers. In her taxonomy, the category of softened disagreement is divided into positive and negative politeness. In positive politeness, the speaker uses some softeners and linguistic markers that increase solidarity with the addressee, such as positive comment and inclusive first person pronoun (*we, us*). In negative politeness, the speaker avoids imposing on the addressees' autonomy and uses softeners such as questions or verbs of uncertainty (Rees-Miller, 2000).

On the other hand, some turns of disagreement are considered as neither softened nor strengthened by explicit linguistic markers. These turns were recognized as disagreement because they contradicted their previous utterance by

using a negative, the words '*yes*' or '*no*', or repeating a previous speaker's utterance with altered words or intonation ('verbal shadowing') (Rees Miller, 2000, p. 1094). The other type of disagreement is aggravated disagreement in which the disagreement is strengthened by the use of rhetorical questions, intensifiers, the personal accusatory *you*, or judgmental vocabulary.

Table 1: Taxonomy of disagreements by Rees-Miller (2000)

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1. *Softened disagreement*
 - a. Positive politeness
 - Positive comment
 - Humor
 - Inclusive 1st person
 - Partial agreement
 - b. Negative politeness
 - Questions
 - I think/I don't know
 - Down-toners (maybe, sort of)
 - Verbs of uncertainty (seems)
 2. *Disagreement not softened or strengthened*
 - Contradictory statement
 - Verbal shadowing
 3. *Aggravated disagreement*
 - Rhetorical questions
 - Intensifiers
 - Personal, accusatory you
 - Judgmental vocabulary
-

Method

The study of speech acts has gained much attention in analyzing pragmatic competence of L2 users. However, the method of analysis has often been discourse completion tests (DCT) which fail to provide natural discourse data (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993; Bardovi-Harlig &

Salsbury, 2004; Johnston, Kasper, & Ross 1998; Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Rose, 1992; Rose & Ono, 1995). These written tests are of limited use in the analysis of talk in interaction (i.e. discourse) since written production differs from the actual conversation in that it allows planning time and it is non-interactional (Bardovi-Harlig & Salsbury, 2004). As the study of talk in actual interaction provides a deeper insight into what people do with talk, in this study natural arguments were used instead of written tests.

Data Collection

All of the participants were informed of the research purpose before the discussions and they were asked to express their arguments on different aspects of the mentioned issues. The researchers participated in all the discussions as participant observers. The recordings were then transcribed by the researchers. The analysis of the arguments was focused on the disagreement turns following Rees-Miller's (2000) taxonomy of linguistic markers of disagreement.

Participants

The participants in this study were 26 Iranian English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners within the age range of 18-50 (see Table 2). As the context of interaction is an important factor which influences the ways disagreement is expressed, the researchers collected the data in three different settings to see the relationship between the expression of disagreement and contextual factors. The three settings were chosen by following these criteria: 1. the settings should have differing degree of formality (to investigate disagreement in formal versus informal interactions), 2. There should be both male and female participants to see the effect of gender, 3. The participants should have different relationships (e.g. family, friends, classmates) to see the effect of

interlocutors' relationship on the ways they disagree.

A private language institute in Tehran provided the first setting for the collection of the data. Fifteen female students who had enrolled in FCE (First Certificate in English) and IELTS exam-preparation courses participated in this setting. The students had been put in these exam-preparation classes through a placement test. Their proficiency levels were B2 and C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). They had learned English through communicative methods in private language schools. A total of 70 minutes of argument were recorded on the topic of male and female roles in society and the educational system.

In the second setting that was home environment, there were 5 participants. Three of them were female and the other two were male. Two of the participants were close friends, and the remaining three were family members. Two of these participants (family members) had lived in English speaking countries for 6 years. Arguments took place in the participants' personal dwellings. A total of 70 minutes of argument on the topic of mixed or single-sex schools and the advantages and disadvantages of education abroad was recorded in this setting.

The third setting was a Graduate University in Tehran. Six MA students of TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) took part in this environment. Of the six participants three were male and three were female. They had a 40-minute discussion on the topic of male and female roles in society and their cultural background.

Table 2: Information about participants of the study

	Setting 1	Setting 2	Setting 3
Number of participants	15	5	6
Age Range	18-25	23-50	23-25
Gender	F: 15 M: 0	F:3 M:2	F:3 M:3
Relationship	Classmates	Friends, family members	Classmates

F: Female, M: Male

Results and discussion

Disagreement turns were identified according to the definition of this speech act as an utterance which is ‘Not P’ (i.e. proposition) in response to a proposition which is P (Sornig, cited in Rees-Miller, 2000, p. 1088).

The linguistic markers which identify the type of disagreements were located and the frequency of each type in the three settings was found. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Frequency for each type of disagreement in the three settings

	Setting 1 (language learners:70 minutes of argument)	
Softened	10 (40%)	Positive politeness: 6 (60%) Negative politeness: 4(40%)

Aggravated (strengthened)	7 (28%)	
Neither softened nor aggravated	8 (32%)	
Total	25 (100%)	Setting 2 (friends and family:70 minutes of argument)
Softened	11 (73.5%)	Positive politeness: 3(27.5%) Negative politeness: 8(72.5%)
Aggravated (strengthened)	3 (20%)	
Neither softened nor aggravated	1(6.5%)	
Total	15 (100%)	Setting 3 (graduate students:40 minutes of argument)
Softened	15 (39.5%)	Positive politeness: 5(33.5%) Negative politeness: 10(66.5%)
Aggravated (strengthened)	15(39.5%)	
Neither softened nor aggravated	8 (21%)	
Total	38 (100%)	

It has been argued that as learners develop their pragmatic competence they use more native-like disagreement strategies; that is they move toward using more mitigation strategies and avoiding more direct forms of disagreement to save both aspects of face (Bardovi-Harlig & Salsbury, 2004; Behnam & Niroomand, 2011; Dippold, 2011). In setting 1, in which participants are preparing themselves for proficiency exams, there is little difference in the frequency of different types of disagreement. However, in

comparison with the other two settings, there is a higher number of 'neither softened nor aggravated disagreements' (32 %).

A closer look at the data reveals that the participants in setting 1 have used more contradictory statements than disagreements which are neither softened nor aggravated. This may account for the fact that their interlanguage competence is developing and they have not yet mastered strategies to mitigate disagreement to save the addressee's face or their own face. Example 1 shows one instance of direct disagreement:

Example 1

- 1 S: *I think e(hh) men and women equal to each other in most of the situations because*
 2 *e(hh)I think that e(hh) they have e(hh) they have some capacity (.) they have some*
 3 *abilities that they are same to each other and they can e(hh) somehow they can*
 4 *complete to each other*
 5 M: *Yes (.) but (.) do you think in our society men and women are equal ↑? they are*
 6 *not (.)because we- when we are child (.)when we want to do something they say*
 7 *that let your father or brother do it he is stronger ↑(.) he can do it better, and*
 8 *we believe that we are weak in these things and when we grow up we believe*
 9 *that OK↑ we cannot do these things I have my father he can do it better than me*
 10 S: *So if we (.) OK maybe it's wrong e(hh) – I don't know- it's a wrong opinion if*
 11 *we accept these things OK in the future all girls should think like this and after*
 12 *sometimes after some years nothing change. So we should start from ourselves*
 13 *- we should start- [we*
 14 M: *[They won't they won't let us to start*
 15 *.....*
 16 S: *OK we should change [these things*
 17 M: *[we can't change (.) Our father says let me talk with*
 18 *this man or the teacher we can't say anything*

In this example the speakers expand their disagreement over a number of turns which is a sign of higher proficiency level (Dippold, 2011); however, the use of contradictory statements as direct disagreement may be due to their lower pragmatic competence.

Georgakopoulou (2001) found the type of activity as an influential factor in shaping disagreements as face-threatening or face-enhancing. Dippold (2008, p.147) distinguishes between the 'argument/discussion frame' and 'language task frame'. In the language task frame learners try to display their accuracy and fluency and do not care much about face requirements. As it was observed, learners used direct and 'yes, but' disagreement strategies more than complex and indirect strategies. It is assumed that in this setting the participants may have considered the argument as a language task. However, in the other settings, which included natural arguments between friends and family members and graduate students, the interlocutors argued in the discussion frame.

The interlocutors' relational history is also considered influential in the amount and types of disagreements expressed in arguments (Georgakopoulou, 2001; Sifianou, 2012).

In the first setting, participants were classmates and they knew each other well. The outstanding point was that although there was not any significant difference among the three types of disagreements expressed by the participant, softened disagreement was the most employed type (40%). Interestingly enough, positive politeness strategies were employed more than negative ones (see Table 2). The participants sought solidarity through using positive strategies in the expression of

disagreement. On the other hand, the percentage of expressing softened disagreements in setting 3 (39.5%) was very much similar to that of setting 1 (40%). This can be due to the same relational histories among the participants of these two settings. In setting 3 all the participants were classmates and knew each other for two years.

In setting 2, in which family members and friends were present, the lowest total number of disagreements (15) occurred. This implies that in this setting disagreement is considered as a more face-threatening act. Most of these disagreements (73.5 %) were softened and more politeness markers were used to maintain social harmony (Rees-Miller, 2000). Unlike setting 1 in which positive politeness strategies were employed more than the negative ones, in setting 2 the use of negative politeness strategies was significant (72%). The influence of participant relationships on the expression of disagreement is clear here. By using these negative politeness strategies the speakers try to avoid direct disagreement. Members of the family who participated in arguments were a couple and the wife's father-in-law. The relationship among these participants in the Iranian culture may have contributed to the use of more negative politeness strategies by the son and her wife to avoid imposing their ideas on their interlocutor (father in law).

In the following example the son of the family starts disagreeing indirectly with what his father has said by asking a question and using phrases like *'I don't know'* which are negative politeness strategies.

Example 2

1 Son: *well (.) just before you go to the next topic speaking about critical thinking*
2 *and other things ... (.) ok for example something which is not available*

3 *here in our country but is more valued in Europe or in I don't know*
4 *English system countries is critical thinking ok but the question I have is*
5 *that so (.) what is the benefit of going abroad and doing this critical*
6 *thinking↓ is it just having a short experience of being in an*
7 *environment in which critical thinking is fostered and you know > what*
8 *I wanna say is that ok you go there and stay there for 4 or 5years you do*
9 *your phd< and when you are back here I mean at the end of the day*
10 *you wanna come back to your own country for example.....*
11 *they still don't have (.) I don't know (.) that they don't have the chance*
12 *for preparing an environment for critical thinking one question I have*
13 *from dad is that do you really believe that the critical thinking is*
14 *something that comes with system or is it dependent on professors or*
15 *individuals↑*
16 *Dad: (it's the system) let me give you an example...*

Among the politeness strategies used in this context, downtoners such as *'maybe'* and verbs of uncertainty such as *'seems'* and *'may'* and the preface *'I think'* were used more than the others. In the following example two friends are discussing the issue of mixed schools. In the disagreement turn, speaker A uses *'you know'*, *'I think'* and *'may'* to soften the disagreement and avoid imposing her personal view on the addressee.

Example 3

1S: *Because two genders should have some experience living together growing*
2 *up and there is no problem (.) it seems there is no problem if they grow up*
3 *together (.) but in high school level it seems it distracts them and=*
4 A: *=you know (.) I think that it's just more things about this separation and*

5 *mixing sexes I think that if we want to segregate schools or universities or to*
 6 *mix them we should do something basic ...*

The significant finding in setting 3 was that the total number of disagreements in this setting was higher than the other two, though they took place in a shorter time period (40 minutes). This may be due to the fact that graduate students know how to delve into academic topics. Despite Brown and Levinson's conceptualization that all disagreement acts are face threatening acts (FTAs), Sifianou (2012) argues that the context determines if disagreements are polite or impolite acts. In some contexts disagreements threaten the addressee's positive face to claim solidarity with the speaker, but in some other contexts such as political debates or social science discussions, disagreements present the speaker as a skillful contestor, so it is face-enhancing.

In setting 3 the frequency of aggravated disagreements is higher than the other two settings and rhetorical question was the most often used linguistic marker by the interlocutors. The use of linguistic markers which strengthened the disagreement in this setting can be attributed to the severity of disagreements. According to Rees-Miller (2000, p. 1098), severe disagreements "threaten the personal or professional identity, worth, beliefs, or values of the interlocutors. The more personally threatened the interlocutors feel, the more severe the disagreement." In this setting the topic of argument was people's 'cultural background' and as participants were of both male and female genders, disagreements were expressed severely. The following example shows a rhetorical question to aggravate the disagreement.

Example 4

1 M: *Ali says that cultural backgrounds somehow fueling this trend of thought =*
 2 A: *=a (hh) cultural backgrounds say that that women are weak!?! and women cannot*
 3 *be for example in this position↑?*

In some contexts a severe disagreement that threatens the speaker's beliefs and identity may attract more aggravated disagreement. In these cases one's own face is more important than the addressee's face. This was again the case in the third setting in which graduate students are talking about people's 'cultural background'. The topic threatens some participants' beliefs and makes them use strong disagreements such as using the personal accusatory 'you' and a verb like 'must' in the following example.

Example 5

1 A: *yes we are just drawing circle around the wrong I don't know e(hh) – negative*
 2 *points and if you do not look at the context and around that yes cultural background*
 3 *would be the worst thing in our all life so we should omit it!*
 5 M: *if you say that cultural background is a complete thing that for example leads you to*
 6 *perfection so you mustn't ignore the negative things (.) you know (.)*
 7 *if there is a negative thing*

In this example speaker A tries to defend her opinion, so uses 'we' to soften her disagreement. However, M uses 'you' to force A to consider negative aspects of one's cultural background too.

Use of disagreement generally has been considered a dispreferred second pair part that is likely to be delayed and elaborated to enhance politeness. However, in many situations like the academic setting, disagreement has been viewed as a preferred act (Tannen, 2002). In this setting, as suggested by data, disagreement is a means

of “sociability rather than disaffiliation” (Sifianou, 2012, p. 11) and the number of disagreement turns (38) is much higher than the other two settings.

Another point worthy to be mentioned here is that participants in setting 3 used softened disagreements (39.5 %) to the same degree as aggravated types of disagreement (39.5 %). This may be due to the influence of their relationship on the expression of disagreement. As participants in this setting were classmates and friends, in some parts they tried to soften their disagreement to avoid threatening their interlocutors' face. Furthermore, similar to setting 2, the proportion of negative politeness strategies employed in this setting is more than that of positive politeness strategies. Also, in setting 2 the proportion of softened disagreements was much higher than that of aggravated disagreements. This finding again reminds us of the argument over face threatening nature of disagreement and the belief that as learners develop their pragmatic competence to the level of native speakers, they move toward using more mitigation strategies and avoiding more direct forms of disagreement to save their interlocutors' face (Bardovi-Harlig & Salsbury, 2004; Behnam & Niroomand, 2011; Dippold, 2011). Participants in setting 2 learnt English in an English environment and were more native-like; similarly, in setting 3 participants were highly proficient in the pragmatic sense.

Conclusion

The findings of the current study suggest that disagreement cannot be studied without consideration of context, and that the linguistic markers cannot simply categorize disagreement turns into polite/impolite or preferred-dispreferred acts.

This paper had the advantage of analyzing longer discourse in natural settings;

however, it was not without limitations. According to Sifianou, (2012) “our daily encounters are not finished products but processes related to previous and future ones” (p. 8), and that being preferred or dispreferred acts for disagreements may also depend on previous encounters of interlocutors. Sifianou further argued that controlling the effect of all these factors may not be possible. Not being an exception, in our study, some intervening contextual variables unknown to the researchers might have influenced our participants' use of linguistic markers.

Future studies are therefore suggested with a larger sample size merging various methods of data collection such as discourse completion tests and conversation analysis to gain richer data. As the literature on disagreement has shown, L1 culture and social norms (Angouri & Locher, 2012) may influence the way people disagree. This study, therefore, suggests future comparative research to investigate firstly how the speech act of disagreement is expressed in different languages and secondly to what extent one's practice of disagreement in L1 can have effects on L2.

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Appendix A: Transcription key (from Hyland & Paltridge, 2011, p. 36-37)

e(hh)	hesitation marker
(.)	Pause
[]	overlapping talk
=	no discernible interval between turns
.	closing intonation
,	slightly upward 'continuing' intonation
?	rising intonation
!	animated tone
-	abrupt cut off of sound
↑↓	marked rise or fall in intonation
()	transcriber unable to hear word
(word)	transcriber uncertain of hearing

