

## EFL Agreeing and Disagreeing Discourses in Facebook

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### Abstract

Agreeing and disagreeing are two common speech acts that occur in social conversations. Driven by the fact that there are direct and indirect way for expressing agreement and disagreement, and there are also mitigating strategies to protect interlocutors from face-threatening in disagreeing discourses, this study examined EFL students' use of discourse strategies in their Facebook interaction. Thirty-four pre-intermediate EFL students at a university in Vietnam took part in this study. Data analysis shows that direct discourses is linguistically limited while indirect ones exhibit wider language use. Students also demonstrate two different directions of using mitigating strategies for their disagreeing discourses. Some pedagogical implications are also suggested in this study.

**Keywords:** agreeing, disagreeing, direct, indirect, strategies

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### 1. Introduction

The development of Facebook has led to the freedom of communication where users can share their viewpoints much easier than before. For language educators, this tool allows students to share their opinions in an authentic way (Chartrand, 2012) in addition to traditional classrooms. Agreeing and disagreeing are two types of speech act that commonly occur in daily conversations and involve speakers' expression of whether they are in the same or different stance on the previous statements or comments. Much research has been done to explore the discourse strategies for these two speech acts in social situations. However, in English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, not many studies have been done to examine learners' discourse strategies for agreement or disagreement, especially in Facebook platform. This study attempts to explore this topic and recommends some pedagogical implications.

### 2. Theoretical Framework

#### Conversation analysis (CA)

Research in online communication, especially in social media, has received great attention in many recent years (Thornborrow, 2001). Social media discourses have been commonly analyzed through the lens of CA with an aim to identify the structure of conversations and sequential order of interactions in a particular setting (Nor, 2014). Originally developed in the early 1970s, CA emphasized social orders and structures which were reflected in our conversation (Li, 2002). To comprehend such orders and structures, it is necessary to examine how participants in a conversation are systematically in control of their talk such as initiating or responding to an utterance (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). As Hutchby (2006) posited, focusing on sequences is the key method in CA, and identifying how utterances are made within interactional sequences help understand how well one participant can comprehend their interlocutor's actions and social context.

In daily conversation, people use language to have conversation with other people. To clarify the notion of *sequences* in CA, Crystal (2003) stated that, "*conversation is seen as a sequence of conversational turns, in which the contribution of each participant is seen as part of a coordinated and rule-governed behavioural interaction*" (p. 47). The notion of *pairs* and *adjacency pairs* introduced by Sack (1992) supported the examination of sequences and turns in conversational interactions. The first-turn action serves as the basis for the second one, and these two terms often go in pairs. These pairs can be found frequently in daily conversations, such as questioning - answering or giving opinion – disagreeing.

#### Conversation analysis for online discourses

With the development of Web 2.0 platforms, more discourses have been made in the online environment, either synchronously or asynchronously. Among several approaches for analyzing online discourses, Have (1999) believed that CA could be helpful for examining discourse structures of posting. However, applying CA for online should proceed with caution, due to some differences between face-to-face and online discourses.

Sacks (1992) mentioned three basic maxims that can be found in spoken interactions, including (a) one person speaking at a time; (b) conversational turns not overlapping and (c) people taking turn at producing turns. These maxims, however, may be violated in online interactions. When examining online discourses, Gibson (2009)

discovered that online conversations may not happen at the same time in an asynchronous forum or many people within a synchronous discussion can respond to an initiating post simultaneously. Hence, the maxim (a) and (b) may not fully reflect the natures of online interactions. In spoken interactions, it is easy to maintain the turns in conversations. However, online interactions can be different because participants do not always follow their turn appropriately when replying to multiple posts. Therefore, the maxim (c) may be flouted in some cases.

To resolve the issues of these maxims in online talks, Gibson (2009) referred back to the concept of *adjacency pairs* when analyzing online interactions. He believed that a readable turn of the first pair can create a “*strong interactional preference that is followed by the second part of a pair*” (p. 6).

### **Directness and indirectness in discourses**

Searle (1979) defined indirectness as a case when “*one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another*” (p. 31). To be specific, during a conversation, an indirect speaker may have other or even different meanings from what he or she says. Indirectness has been criticized by Dascal (1983) because it requires more time for an indirect speech act to be produced. In addition, indirectness may be confusing for interlocutors, as the actual meaning may not be easy to be interpreted.

Direct and indirect utterances have been used differently, depending on the social contexts. Kaplan (1972) noticed that native speakers of English prefer direct speech in their conversations, and the speech act can be interpreted without much challenge. Vietnamese people, however, considered directness in conversation as somewhat impolite and hence, they prefer indirectness in their speech.

The above assumption was confirmed by Chan (2004) who investigated Chinese social behaviors. As he posited, social harmony played a crucial role in China, and each speaker in a conversation should avoid making conflict with their direct speech act. Gunthner (2002) conducted a comparative study on the linguistic practices between Chinese and German students. The major finding was, while German students believed direct speech as a good way to develop good rapport with their peers, Chinese students considered such type of speech as aggressive and unacceptable. Similar results could be found in Carson and Nelson’s (1996) study in an English writing class. Chinese students in this class tended to be careful when they left comments for their peers during discussion.

### **Politeness in discourses**

From Searle’s (1979) perspectives, indirectness was considered as “*the chief motivation for politeness*” (p. 36). Brown and Levinson (1987) believed that there is a strong correlation between politeness and indirectness, and explained that in many situations, indirect speech acts are used as a good strategy to show their politeness and tactfulness in daily conversation. They also assumed that there are two types of face that humans experience in daily interaction: positive and negative. While positive face refers to a state in which people want to be appreciated, negative face is more concerned with how to keep their action from being noticed.

It should be pointed out that, in English, there is a correlation between indirectness and politeness; however, this assumption may not apply in other languages. Contrary to Brown and Levinson’s (1987) belief, Tannen (1981) found that while Americans tend to be more indirect in their linguistic practice than Greeks, it does not mean that they are more polite than Greek people. These opposing viewpoints caution the interpretation of politeness from indirectness. In other words, it may not be convincing to judge the level of politeness of a group of people based on their indirectness in linguistic behaviors.

### **Strategies for negotiation of disagreement**

Disagreement occurs when a speaker has a different viewpoint from what has been stated previously. Brown and Levinson (1978) considered disagreeing as a face-threatening act for the interlocutors and they posited four strategies to alleviate the threat imposed on the hearer, which can be seen in Table 1.

The concept of mitigation for face-threatening acts has been examined in Behnam and Niroomand’s (2011) study. In this study, the researchers were interested in finding the correlation between English language learners’ proficiency and their ability to mitigate for disagreement utterances. The results have shown that, when learners are more proficient, they tend to use mitigating devices to express their disagreement. Learners with lower language proficiency, however, have more challenges of using mitigating strategies when they want to express their different viewpoints.

Table 1: Types of face-threatening act and how to mitigate

Type of face-threatening act	How to mitigate	Example
Least	Express disagreement explicitly	<i>It does not make sense in this case.</i>
Less	Express disagreement with consideration	<i>I don't think your solution will help.</i>
More	Express disagreement with more consideration	<i>I think you may want to do a bit different.</i>
Most	Express disagreement indirectly	<i>That's a good idea, but how about doing like this.</i>

Behnam and Niroomand (2011) also categorized strategies that create disagreement speech acts into two main groups: macro and micro level. At the macro level, speakers will perform their speech acts to express disagreement in a direct or indirect manner. There are also some linguistic strategies that can be used to express disagreement. Kreutel's (2007) and Scott's (1998) studies have shown that the verb "disagree", the phrase "not agree", the adverb "not" and negation are among the most frequently-used strategies by the addressors. At the micro level, there are different types of speech act for expressing disagreement, either directly or indirectly. Indirect speech acts found in Pomerantz (1984) include *contrasting with other facts, keeping silence and requesting clarification*. Some other strategies that can be found in Kamisili and Dogancay-Atkuna (1996) and Holmes (2006) are *suggestion, criticism, gratitude, empathy, conflict avoidance, resolution, negotiation* and so forth.

Drawing from the aforementioned literature, Choyimah and Latief's (2014) came up with a theoretical framework for analyzing disagreeing strategies in university classroom discussions among Indonesian EFL learners, as displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Disagreeing strategies used in an EFL classroom - adapted from Choyimah and Latief's (2014)

Discourse	Macro Level	Micro Level
Agreeing	Direct	
	Indirect	
Disagreeing	Direct	Refusal Denial Correction Strong Criticism
	Indirect	Mild Criticism Internal Contrast Reminding Strategy Suggestion

Driven by the fact that agreeing and disagreeing speech act can be performed in a direct or indirect manner, and students' language proficiency can inform their ability to use mitigating strategies for disagreeing discourses (Brown & Levinson, 1978), this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. In what manner do EFL students perform their agreeing speech act?
2. What type of discourse strategies have been used by EFL students to show their disagreement?
3. What mitigating strategies do pre-intermediate students use for expressing their disagreement?

### 3. Methodology

This study attempts to explore students' discourse strategies for expressing agreement and disagreement in the social media. The data collected are analyzed through the lens of Conversation Analysis. In addition, descriptive statistics is used to displayed the findings of the study.

#### Participants

This study was conducted on a group of thirty-four students enrolling in an English for Academic (EAP) class in Fall 2016 at the University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Vietnam. The purpose of EAP courses at this university is to prepare students with necessary language skills in academic settings. Specifically, students will learn how to engage conversations between doctors and patients, how to read medical texts and how to write medical documents in different genres.

It is the policy of this university that requires students enrolling in EAP classes to possess an IELTS score of 5.0 or higher. Alternatively, students must successfully complete three general English courses with a cumulative grade of B or higher. Hence, all participants in this study are at least pre-intermediate learners of English.

#### Data collection procedures

This study focuses on students' discourse strategies when they have to express their agreement or disagreement for a post or comment on Facebook. To collect students' discourses, the classroom teacher created a discussion

page on Facebook and post the following question: “*Film stars and celebrities earn a large amount of money and own luxurious properties, but their lives may not be happy. Do you agree and why?*”

All participants were sent a link to the discussion page and each entered with their own Facebook account. Then, each of them created their original post to indicate whether they *agree or disagree with the given statement* and provided reasons for their choice. Afterwards, each participant had to review their friends’ post and leave comments on peers. In their comments, they also indicated whether they *agree or disagree with their friends’ reasons* and provided evidence for their argument. Finally, each participant had to check their own post and reply to their friends’ comment. In their replies, they expressed whether they *agree or disagree with comments* and challenge the argument. After participants finished leaving comments, the researcher printed out the whole discussion page for coding and analyzing the data.

### Data analysis

The coding of data went through four steps with the following coding scheme:

**Step 1.** The researcher read through original posts, comments and replies. A total number of 251 discourses were made by thirty-four students. These discourses were categorized based on their speech act (agreeing / disagreeing / appreciation / promises and so on). To focus on the research topic, discourses that do not indicate agreeing / disagree speech act were excluded. A number of 120 agreeing and 91 disagreeing discourses remained at the end of step 1.

**Step 2.** The researcher focuses on agreeing discourses and categorized them based on the manner that speakers produced (direct and indirect).

The coding scheme and examples are displayed in Table 3. Examples are taken directly from discussion page and language errors are not removed.

Table 3: Coding schemes for agreeing discourses

Type of discourse	Manner	Definition	Examples
Agreeing	Direct	Participants expressed their agreement explicitly.	I agree with ...
	Indirect	Participants expressed their agreement inexplicitly.	<i>In my opinion, there are still some celebrities living in uncomfortable lives and facing my problems.</i>

**Step 3:** The researcher examined all disagreeing discourses and categorized them into two different levels. At the macro level, each discourse is identified as direct or indirect while at the micro level, it is classified based on its linguistic functions (Pomerantz, 1984; Kamisili and Dogancay-Atkuna, 1996; Holmes, 2006; Choyimah and Latief, 2014). The coding schemes and examples are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4: Coding schemes for disagreeing discourses

Type of discourse	Macro Level		Microlevel		Example
	Manner	Definition	Linguistic function	Definition	
Disagreeing	Direct	Participants expressed disagreement in an explicit manner.	Denial	The speakers refused to accept an idea / opinion stated previously.	<i>I don't agree with you.</i>
			Correction	The speakers corrected what someone just mentioned.	<i>Yes, but not everyone can do what they want.</i>
			Strong Criticism	The speakers strongly criticized what someone just mentioned.	<i>I still don't understand your opinion.</i>
	Indirect	Participants expressed disagreement in an inexplicit manner.	Remind	The speakers gently asked someone to reconsider their opinion.	<i>Famous people always have many anti-fans, you know?</i>
			Mild Criticism	The speakers gently criticized what someone just mentioned.	<i>You cannot judge them when not in their circumstances.</i>
			Contrast	The speakers contrasted someone's opinion with another one.	<i>In fact, there are always two faces in a fact.</i>
			Suggestion	The speakers request someone to think in a different way.	<i>What do you think if ...</i>
			Request Clarification	The speakers asked someone to clarify their opinion.	<i>What do you mean by ...</i>

**Step 4.** To explore students' mitigating strategies for face-threatening act, the researcher re-visited all disagreeing discourses and coded with schemes found in Table 1.

#### 4. Results

The results collected after all discourses were categorized and coded based on their speech act and manner are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Results of discourse coding

Level	Total discourses	Speech Act	Manner
Original post	34	Agree: 31	Direct: 26 Indirect: 5
		Disagree: 3	Direct: 3 Indirect: 0
Comment on peers	136	Agree: 72	Direct: 69 Indirect: 3
		Disagree: 40	Direct: 21 Indirect: 19
Reply to comment	81	Agree: 17	Direct: 13 Indirect: 4
		Disagree: 48	Direct: 16 Indirect: 32

It should be noted that *original post* is discourses that students produced to respond to the question given by the classroom teacher. *Comment on peers* is discourses that students made to state whether they agree or disagree with the reasons found in their friends' original post. *Reply to comment* is discourses made when students tagged their friend and responded to his or her comments.

To explore strategies when students commented and replied their peers, the researcher looked deeper into 88 disagreeing discourse and categorized based on their linguistic functions. The results are displayed in Table 6.

Table 6: Results of disagreeing discourse strategies

	Linguistic function	Comments on peers	Replies
Direct	Denial	14	7
	Correction	6	8
	Strong Criticism	1	1
Indirect	Remind	3	9
	Mild Criticism	1	6
	Contrast	6	7
	Suggestion	1	2
	Request Clarification	8	8
<b>Total</b>		<b>40</b>	<b>48</b>

The result of mitigating strategies used for face-threatening act is displayed in Table 7.

Table 7: Results of mitigating strategies

Type of face-threatening act	Least	Less	More	Most
Strategy	Express disagreement explicitly	Express disagreement with consideration	Express disagreement with more consideration	Express disagreement inexplicitly
Number observed	26	12	17	33
Total	88			

#### 5. Discussion

Some interpretations and implication can be made based on the results displayed in Table 5, 6 and 7.

##### **RQ1. In what manner do EFL students perform their agreeing speech act?**

As shown in Table 5, students tend to express their agreement in a direct manner when they comment or reply to an opinion of the previous interlocutor (a larger number if direct discourses were made throughout discussion). Not many indirect agreeing speech acts can be found across all discourses. While students prefer direct expression, they did not vary their lexical resources. The majority of discourses beginning with "I agree with ..." have been noticed from students' discourses. Some other phrases for explicit statement such as "that's a good idea" or "interesting point" are less likely to be found.

However, students who can perform indirect agreeing discourse are likely to be linguistically competent. The example below shows how one student interacted and agreed with his interlocutor:

Student A: **I agree with you that celebrities may receive lots of pressure from their fans as they do not want to disappoint the ones who support them.**

Student B: **Of course, there are many stars always thinking about their fans, so that they can improve or adjust their manner, their actions whenever they appears in the public.**

In this example, Student B expressed his agreement with the viewpoint Student A mentioned previously. He performed his discourse in an inexplicit manner by saying “of course” and paraphrasing what Student A mentioned in his comment. Pedagogically, to encourage students’ usage of diverse structures and vocabulary in spoken interaction, it is necessary that more language input should be provided before the activity. In this case, classroom teachers can provide some structures for expressing agreement that native speakers of English frequently use.

### **RQ2. What type of discourse strategies have been used by EFL students to show their disagreement?**

Table 5 also displays a wider range of direct and indirect speech act used by EFL students for their disagreeing discourses. More direct statement for disagreeing have been made when students commented on their friends’ original post. However, when they tagged and replied to their friend, students demonstrated an indirect pattern of showing disagreement.

Among some linguistic functions examined in this study, *denial* and *correction* are frequently used by EFL students for their direct disagreeing discourses. Similar to agreeing discourses, students tend to begin their interaction with some common phrases such as “*I don’t agree with ...*” or “*I disagree with ...*”. However, wider lexical resources can be found in their indirect disagreeing speech act. Table 6 exhibits a diverse pattern of linguistic functions that EFL students performed for their indirect disagreement. When replying to their interlocutors’ comments, students produced utterances in a careful manner. Specifically, students preferred to remind their friend to reconsider their viewpoint, to contrast their friends’ opinion with other facts, to show disagreement by requesting clarification for a previous interaction.

The following example demonstrates how students used their own linguistic resources to interact and express their disagreement in an indirect manner:

Student C: **I agree with you about the unhappy life of many stars but in my opinion, there are still many celebrities have a rally comfortable and happy life. Do you know Will Smith? He is really happy with his family.**

Student D: **Thanks for your opinion. In fact, there are always two faces in a fact. There are always those who can arrange time well and have happy life, while others can’t and have to suffer.**

In this adjacency pair, Student C agreed with one point while disagreed with the other opinion that his interlocutor argued. Two different phrases “*I agree*” and “*but in my opinion*” have been used appropriately. In response to this comment, Student D gently disagreed with her tactful utterance “*In fact, there are always two faces in a fact*”.

To enhance students’ linguistic and communicative competence in producing disagreeing discourses, classroom teachers may provide common conversational structures to express disagreement, which serve as the input before language practice. Moreover, students should be aware of situations in which direct or indirect disagreeing statement is more appropriate.

### **RQ3. What mitigating strategies do pre-intermediate students use for expressing their disagreement?**

Table 7 demonstrates EFL students’ tendency to mitigate disagreeing discourses. It is likely that students exhibited two different patterns of using mitigating strategies in their disagreeing discourses. While some students produced disagreeing discourses with the most consideration (33 discourses), others interacted with their interlocutors with little or no consideration (26 discourses). These two different patterns can be illustrated in two examples below.

Example 1: Disagreeing discourse with most consideration

Student E: **Since they don’t even have time for their family when they are too busy, they day by day create an invisible wall between them and family.**

Student F: **I think the famous will have enough time for their family if they arrange rationally. and family always close them though they do any work**

Student E: **It depends on different family situations. sometimes, family becomes a burden to celebrities.**

As can be seen from the example, instead of showing disagreement directly, student E refused students F’s argument with “*It depends on different family and situations*”. This utterance acts to alleviate tensions in conversation and protect the interlocutor from face-threatening.

Example 2: Disagreeing discourse with little or no consideration

Student G: **Their daily schedules are usually filled with work, meetings, appointments, their lives are filled with stress but they can hardly have free time for their families, friends and even for themselves.**

Student H: **I disagree with your comments section. With famous people, if they know the sort of time, they will still have an interest in the family and their friends.**

In stark contrast with the first example, the interaction between student G and H exhibits no consideration in

conversation. Student H immediately and explicitly rejected student H's opinion and continued with his own viewpoint. No mitigating strategy was used to save student G from face-threatening.

While there are two distinct directions of using mitigating strategies, there are also some disagreeing discourses produced with consideration or more. There are two possible reasons for this trend. The most important factor that informs students' preferences of using mitigating strategies in spoken interaction is the relationship with the interlocutors. Not all participants in this study are close friends; some even have not talked to each other in daily settings. Another factor is students' language proficiency. As stated previously, participants in this study are at pre-intermediate level of English or higher. Based on Behnam and Niroomand's (2011) conclusion, it can be inferred that the higher students' language proficiency is, the more mitigating strategies can be used in spoken interactions.

## 6. Conclusion

This study was conducted in a short period of time; therefore, it may not fully capture all types of discourses, speech acts or linguistic functions that EFL students can produce to express their agreement or disagreement. In addition, there is only one person in the coding process, which can make the results of the study less objective. The study's findings can be strengthened with two or more people involved in the data coding and inter-rater agreement be calculated.

Future research may explore EFL students' discourse strategies for agreeing and disagreeing with a larger sample size. Moreover, to discover how mitigating strategies are used in disagreement discourses, research can be conducted on two different groups: either non-native versus native speakers of English or pre-intermediate versus upper-intermediate learners of English.

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