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Written Speech Feedback in the Basic Communication Course: Are Instructors Too Polite to Students?

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Written feedback is one way in which instructors inform students on how to maintain, alter, or improve performance (Book & Wynkoop-Simmons, 1980). One of the goals of feedback is to facilitate learning by instructing students on where, why, and how to make improvements (Whitman, 1987). However, potential problems arise in the classroom when students view the instructor's feedback (either verbal or written) as face threatening. This is a particularly salient concern in the public speaking classroom where students find themselves the focus of everyone in the classroom.

According to Goffman (1967), the term "face" refers to the public self-identity that each person claims during a specific interaction and is comprised of two specific types of face wants: positive face and negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Positive face involves one's need to be liked, approved of, and appreciated. Negative face involves one's need for autonomy or claim to territory and possessions.

The college classroom contains several inherent threats to students' face. Instructors can help to mitigate these threats when commenting on a student's

work by balancing course content (informational expertise) and relational content (including use of facework strategies) (Frymier & Houser, 2000). In this study, we apply politeness theory to instructor written feedback in order to develop a more concrete understanding of the pedagogical utility of feedback practices in the basic public speaking course. Specifically, we explore the types of feedback that instructors use in the classroom as well as students' perceptions of the usefulness of such feedback. It is our contention that a better understanding of this pedagogical practice can assist instructors in their efforts to refine their feedback strategies and thus contribute to improved student learning and satisfaction. In order to understand the implications of politeness theory in terms of instructor feedback, it is first necessary to explore notions of face.

FACE AND FACEWORK

Face is comprised of two specific kinds of desires or face wants: positive and negative face. Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that all rational, willful, fluent speakers of a natural language have positive and negative face. Positive face is "the positive consistent self-image or personality (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants" (p. 61). To have concern for a person's positive face is to show approval of their accomplishments or character, or to demonstrate that they are considered likable and a worthy companion (Metts, 1997).

Brown and Levinson (1987) define negative face as "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights

to non-distraction — i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition" (p. 61). To have concern for a person's negative face is to avoid imposing on their time or belongings, to show respect for their privacy, to avoid intrusive behaviors, and to advocate their autonomy and independence (Metts, 1997). Brown and Levinson (1987) state that, in general, it is in everyone's mutual interest to maintain each other's face. However, some acts will intrinsically threaten face. Communicative acts that threaten face are known as face threatening acts (FTAs). Some of these inherent FTAs include requests, criticism, and advice (Metts, 1997).

Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that when there is a threat to the addressee's face, the speaker should seek to minimize the face threat of the FTA. Hodgins, Liebeskind and Schwartz (1996) argue that the one who initiates the FTA plays an important role in trying to restore and repair the damage done to the addressee's face. There are a variety of ways in which interactants can help to prevent the loss of face or help to restore face once lost (Metts, 1997). These communicative devices are known as facework. One way to try to minimize the loss of face when doing a FTA is by using positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness is oriented towards the addressee's positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). As Metts (1997) notes, positive politeness in manifested is such communicative acts as claiming common ground, indicating that the listener is admirable, being responsive to the listener's needs, exaggerating approval, including listener in activities, seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement, joking and giving gifts. Although each supportive message can

lessen the loss of face, too much support can do more harm than good (LaGaipa, 1990).

Negative politeness is oriented towards the addressee's negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Again, Metts (1997) describes negative politeness as being manifested in such communicative acts as providing a listener with several options, hedging while making a request, avoiding the use of coercion, showing deference, apologizing, and being vague or ambiguous. The notion of face has a direct application to the classroom given that feedback is potentially an FTA.

FEEDBACK IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

An instructor's written comments not only evaluate (or criticize) the student's work, but the instructor will also offer advice or make requests on how to improve. It seems as if a student's face is especially vulnerable or "exposed" in a speech communication classroom. Suddenly a student finds him or herself the focus of attention of not just the teacher, but twenty or so other students. In no other class should face concerns be more apparent than in a public speaking class. Those who have taught the basic course recognize that the fear of speaking in public is a common fear among students (Ellis, 1995). These anxieties or fears may stem from the fact that when a person is speaking in front of a group, their face becomes quite vulnerable in a very public setting. In the classroom, a student's face is left unguarded during the actual performance. In addition, the instructor threatens the student's face by writing comments about how the speech flowed, how well it was delivered,

how the speech was introduced, how interesting the topic was, and so on. Robinson (1997) states that it is crucial for instructors to find ways to help students manage their speech anxieties in a supportive atmosphere.

College instructors can create a climate ripe for learning by using feedback effectively (Whitman, 1987). Robinson (1997) suggests that providing feedback on students' work is one of the key elements to creating a positive, supportive classroom environment. Because feedback is such an intrinsic FTA, an instructor needs to write comments in a way that helps to mitigate the threat to face. Kerssen-Griep (2001) encourages teachers to be vigilant about face-support during all instructional interactions. Similarly, Frymier and Houser (2000) argue that ego support serves as a significant predictor of learning and motivation. Ego support involves encouragement and confirmation. Students look to their instructors for more than basic knowledge. They want their instructors to help them feel good about themselves and feel in control of their environment. In other words, students want teachers to support their positive face needs.

Whether an instructor uses feedback to facilitate learning, improve speech performance, reduce stress, or as a motivational tool, feedback is an essential part of the basic public speaking course. Rubin, Welch and Buerkel (1995) argue that learning has taken place in a speech communication classroom if students show improvement in speaking skills or knowledge. Feedback is one common method used by instructors to inform students what aspects of their performance were sufficient and what needs to be improved. Book and Wynkoop-

Simmons (1980) argue that feedback plays an important role when attempting to improve or modify a student's behavior.

Instructors commonly use some form of written feedback to improve performances in the basic public speaking course. This may best be accomplished by utilizing comments that would inherently threaten a student's face. An instructor could tell a student where their performance was lacking (e.g., you did not have enough eye contact, a positive face threat), and expect the student to know how to go about making improvements. Better yet, an instructor could specifically instruct the student on how to improve (e.g., try to practice looking at the entire audience, not just the right side of the room, a negative face threat).

McKeachie (1999) notes that, up to a point, the more specific feedback an instructor can give the student, the greater the learning that takes place. He goes on to qualify that statement by suggesting that a student can become overloaded if an overabundance of feedback is given. Book and Wynkoop-Simmons (1980) state that when compared to students who received no written teacher feedback, students who were given specific feedback showed significant improvement on pre- and post classroom tests. Their research demonstrates that automistic, impersonal, negative criticism is rated by students as being the most helpful type of feedback. Automistic feedback is given on specific elements of the speech, impersonal feedback deals with the principles of good speaking, and negative criticism points out weaknesses and suggests improvement (Book & Wynkoop-Simmons, 1980). In terms of face, automistic, impersonal, negative criticism would be classified as specific

comments that threaten the student's negative face. Holistic, personal, positive comments were rated by students as the least helpful type of feedback. Holistic feedback comments on the overall performance, personal feedback deals with that student's (or the instructor's) personal life or attitude, and positive comments tell the student what they did correctly (Book & Wynkoop-Simmons, 1980). Similarly, holistic, personal, positive feedback would be classified as general comments that either threaten the student's positive face or comments that would be classified as positive politeness. McKeachie (1999) suggests that helpful comments are an appropriate type of feedback when pointing out the errors in a student's speech. Helpful comments do not simply note that the error occurred, but also provide insight on how to improve. Importantly, positive and negative comments need to be balanced to motivate a student to improve (McKeachie, 1999).

Surprisingly, neither Goffman's (1967) notion of face nor Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory is utilized in the current research regarding teacher feedback. One of the goals of feedback is to help the student make improvements and facilitate learning. For a student to improve she/he has to make some changes before completing the next assignment. According to Wilson and Kunkel (2000), trying to alter another person's behavior is an intrinsic FTA.

STUDY ONE

It has been established that teacher feedback is potentially an FTA. However, it is not clear if instructors

find it necessary to use politeness to mitigate the FTA, since feedback is an expected occurrence in the class-room setting. Therefore, the following research question was posed:

> RQ1: How, if at all, will an instructor use positive or negative politeness when providing feed-back on students' speeches?

Although both positive and negative feedback is to be expected in a classroom setting, instructors must be able to balance the types of comments. Too much criti-cism or negative feedback (threats to positive and nega-tive face) might crush a student's motivation for trying to improve. On the other hand, too much social support or positive feedback (positive and negative politeness) may make a student with a less than perfect grade feel that the grade was unjustified. Thus, to determine the relationship that exists between these variables the fol-lowing research question was posited:

> RQ2: What is the relationship between the na-ture of the instructor's comments and the grades received on students' speeches?

When giving feedback, an instructor can write com-ments that threaten the student's positive or negative face. The instructor can also use positive and negative politeness to help mitigate the FTA. Regardless of the specific type of comment an instructor writes, it seems obvious that to help the student make improvements, the instructor would be more willing to threaten a stu-dent's negative face, rather than a student's positive face. It is unlikely that threatening a student's self-im-age would motivate them to improve, reduce their

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stress, or facilitate learning. However, students may give up some of their autonomy to make improvements for their next performance. In fact, many researchers suggest that negative face threats are the most helpful type of feedback, and this type of comment is the feedback that the student most desires (Book & Wynkoop-Simmons, 1980; McKeachie, 1999; Whitman, 1987). Importantly, research indicates that instructors should not overwhelm students with so many negative face threats that they become discouraged (Book & Wynkoop-Simmons, 1980). This leads to the following hypothesis:

> H_1: When giving written feedback on a speech performance, an instructor will write more comments that threaten the student's negative face than comments that threaten the student's positive face.

METHOD

Instructor evaluations for informative speeches (n=107) were extracted from a previously collected data set of 115 portfolios.[1] Seven of the instructor evaluations were excluded from this study due to illegible writing and poor copy quality. The original portfolios were collected at the end of the first full year of the General Education program at a large Midwestern university

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[1] These assessment portfolios include all of the students' written work and speech materials (instructor, peer, and self evaluation forms, speech lab documentation, speech outlines) for the three major speeches (informative, group, and persuasive) in the basic course.

during the spring of 1999. The portfolios represented a random sample of 10% of the population of students enrolled in the course during that semester. An additional fifty interviews with students who were enrolled in a basic public speaking course at the same university were conducted and their evaluation forms for the informative speech collected in the fall of 2000 were included.

Category Definitions

To answer the hypothesis and research questions, feedback on the instructor evaluation forms were coded into four feedback categories based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory: positive face threats, negative face threats, positive politeness, and negative politeness. Positive face threats included both negative personal comments about the student as a speaker as well as negative speech comments. Negative face threats are those comments which instruct the student what they need to do for next time and suggests areas of improvement.

Politeness messages include those comments in which instructors use feedback to meet student's face needs, as well as prevent some inherent damage in light of the criticisms and violations to face. Positive politeness includes those comments that mitigate positive face threats about the speech itself and the student's presentation of the speech. Negative politeness includes messages that acknowledge the students' negative face needs are being violated. These messages are a type of disclaimer.

Procedure

The researchers trained two coders (both male). Both of the coders were 'layperson' coders, meaning that neither of them are members of the communication or education disciplines. The coders independently analyzed 10% of the sample. Using Holsti's (1968) formula, the inter-coder reliability was .80. After establishing inter-coder reliability the data set was divided evenly between the coders.

To code the instructor evaluation forms, tally marks were used to represent each feedback message written in one of several speech sections (outline and references, introduction, body, conclusion, delivery, and overall impression). A coding form outlining each speech section was used to record the tally marks. Each tally mark represents the number of positive face threats, negative face threats, positive politeness comments and negative politeness comments in each speech section. These tally marks were counted to give total scores for each category on every section of the speech as well as an overall total for the speech. Mixed messages (i.e., a message that included both negative politeness, as well as a negative face threat) were broken up into their smallest possible units to prevent frequency counts for complicated combinations of messages. There was also a section for noting points received in each individual section of the speech as well as the overall grade. Any comments not addressing face were excluded from this study. For example, an instructor may jot down the outline of the speech as the student is speaking. This type of comment is more a note to one's self (the evaluator) than a comment to the student. However, if when jotting down the outline, the instructor would make a

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comment to the student (e.g., "oops, you forgot to justify your point"), the comment would be included in the body section of the speech as a threat to the student's positive face.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the students' grades on the informative speech (M = 80.63, SD = 6.83, n = 103). A frequency distribution was run to answer research question one (do instructors use positive politeness and negative politeness) and to provide an overview of the types of comments' instructors wrote on informative speech evaluations. The results are shown in Table 1.

Research question two examined the relationship between the nature of the comments and the grade the student received. A Pearson product-moment correlation

Table 1

Frequency of Instructor Comments By Type of Message

	Positive Face Threats	Negative Face Threats	Positive Politeness	Negative Politeness	Total
Outline	35	41	60	0	136
Introduction	80	65	221	1	368
Body	111	103	320	2	535
Conclusion	48	56	121	0	225
Delivery	125	247	166	0	538
Overall	87	74	231	0	392
Total	486	586	1119	3	

was run pairing the grades the student's received with each of the four types of instructor comments (i.e., raw speech grades were correlated with the number of comments provided in each category by the instructor). These results yielded three significant correlations. The student's grade held a negative relationship in regard to positive face threats ($r = -.51$, $p < .01$). As the student's grade increased, the instructor wrote fewer comments that threatened their positive face. The student's grade and negative face threats also shared an inverse relationship ($r = -.37$, $p < .01$). As the student's grade increased, the number of comments that threaten their negative face decreased. However, the results yielded a positive relationship between the student's grade and positive politeness ($r = .37$, $p < .01$). As the student's grade increased, so did the number of positive politeness comments. Given a lack of comments that utilized negative politeness, correlations could not be reported.

Hypothesis one suggested that an instructor would write more comments that threaten the student's negative face than comments that threatens the student's positive face. Results demonstrate that there was a difference between the number of comments that instructors wrote threatening students' negative face ($n = 586$) versus those threatening students' positive face ($n = 486$).

DISCUSSION

The goal of Study 1 was to examine the types of comments instructors offer to students when they provide written feedback and to explore the relationship

between these comments and students' grades. In terms of the first research question, the results indicate that positive politeness is the most common type of message the student receives. The results yielded more positive politeness messages than all other types of feedback combined. One possible reason for instructors choosing to use positive politeness messages is that instructors are trying to encourage their students by using ego (social) support. Frymier and Houser (2000) suggest that ego support serves as one communication skill that predicts learning and motivation, and that students look to their instructors for praise and encouragement. The instructors in this study may be trying to fulfill the student's positive face needs. Moreover, the instructors may have felt the need to exaggerate approval in some areas of the speech to mitigate other FTAs in the evaluation process. In addition, given that the informative speech was the first major graded speech completed by students, the instructors may have been more likely to provide students with more positive comments that encouraged them for continuation in the course.

Another potential explanation for the sheer volume of positive politeness messages would be that those were the comments the students deserved. However, upon further review of the results it is suggested that this former explanation is not the case considering the average grade in this study was a low B. With the overwhelming use of positive politeness messages, it is no wonder that the students' grades were so high. In fact, this may be a significant contributor to course grade inflation. Perhaps the instructors, unable or unwilling to give constructive feedback, were forced to assign high

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grades to speeches because they lacked the ability to justify negative criticism to their students.

Another interesting finding related to the delivery section of the speech. This is the only section of the speech where instructors felt it necessary to threaten the students' negative face. There were nearly twice as many negative face threats coded in the delivery section as positive face threats. One possible explanation for this finding is that instructors may have felt more comfortable making suggestions for improvement when they focused on delivery skills. Importantly, this finding may reflect the fact that much of current training for the basic course focuses on assessing student delivery. This implies that basic course directors should be careful to design training programs that prepare all who teach the course to assess all aspects of speech preparation and delivery.

Only three negative politeness comments were given as written feedback in this study. The most obvious explanation for this is the setting in which this study took place. Negative politeness is utilized when the act threatens the subject's negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In a classroom setting, it is unlikely that an instructor will feel the need to use communicative acts to restore a student's negative face. Students accept and encourage comments that threaten their negative face. Goldsmith (2000) suggests that when the recipient invites feedback (as is the case in a classroom setting), the feedback is likely to be viewed as constructive. She goes on to suggest that failing to give feedback when expected can be viewed as a lack of caring or concern (a threat to positive face). Because negative face threats are warranted in a classroom setting, it is not surprising

that instructors did not feel the need to "soften the blow" by using negative politeness.

The second research question examined the relationship between the nature of the comments and the grade the student received. The results yielded significant correlations for positive face, negative face, and positive politeness and the student's grade. The results suggest an inverse relationship between the students' grade and the number of comments that threaten the students' face. For example, the higher the grade the student received, the less likely it was for the instructor to point out what they did wrong. For students who received lower grades, there were more comments that threatened their positive face. The number of negative face threats was also inversely related to students' grades. Again, the higher the student's grade, the fewer comments that threaten the student's negative face (comments that instructed the student on how to improve). The result for the number of positive politeness messages and the students' grade yielded a positive relationship. The more positive politeness messages an instructor wrote on an evaluation, the higher the students' grade. The explanation for these results is really quite simple. The higher the grade the more praise the student received. As grades begin to fall, the instructor gives an increasing amount of feedback telling the student what they did wrong and suggesting ways to improve their speech.

The hypothesis posed in this study suggested that an instructor would write more comments that threaten the student's negative face than comments that threatens the student's positive face. There was support for this hypothesis. This is a refreshing discovery. In this

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study, instructors were more willing to threaten the student's face by suggesting how they should improve their speech versus just pointing out what they did wrong. The instructors in this study were willing to take the time to threaten the students' negative face instead of just writing negative comments. For example, it takes more effort on the instructors part to threaten a student's negative face by stating "Try looking at both sides of the room during your speech" than to threaten their positive face (e.g., "Poor eye contact"). When instructors suggest ways for the students to make improvements, they are creating positive stress. According to Book and Wynkoop-Simmons (1980), positive stress can motivate students to take action. By threatening students' negative face, the instructor is increasing their motivation to learn.

STUDY TWO

The type of comments an instructor writes on an evaluation is one way to use the notion of face to assess teacher feedback. But this information would only paint half of the picture. The types of feedback on an evaluation have little worth until it is known what types of comments students are seeking. Book and Wynkoop-Simmons (1980) found that students perceived automistic, impersonal, negative comments as being the most helpful. McKeachie (1999) suggested that students would show the greatest motivation to improve when suggestions on how to improve are indicated. It is reasonable for an instructor to expect a student to give up some of her/his autonomy to make improvements for

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their next performance. On the other hand, Frymier and Houser (2000) suggest that students want their instructors to help them feel good about themselves and in control of their environment. Because there appears to be some inconsistencies with this body of literature, there needs to be further research to explain how students perceive instructor comments. Study 2 extended the initial research project by exploring the following question:

RQ$_1$: How do students perceive the instructor's written speech comments?

METHOD

To answer this research question, interviews with students enrolled in the University's basic public speaking class were conducted. Instructors of a basic speech course were contacted via e-mail and asked if they would be interested in allowing their students to participate. Several instructors replied, and offered extra credit for those students willing to participate.

Students were asked to bring two photocopied forms of their instructor's feedback and their self evaluations (for the informative speech only) with their names redacted. Two different researchers conducted the interviews on alternating days. Signs were posted in two locations showing participants where to go. Upon a participants' arrival, she/he was first instructed to read and sign an informed consent form, and given a slip of paper to keep with the researchers' information on it. The participant was then asked for the photocopies of both the self-evaluation form as well as the instructor evaluation form.

A total of six instructors participated. All instructors offered extra credit to their students for participating. Although 93 students signed up, only 50 of these students actually participated. There were more females (*n* = 41) than males (*n* = 9) in the study and the average age was 18.14 (*SD* = .35). In order to distinguish between the research participants, each was given a number (R1 – R50) upon their arrival. These participant codes will be used to identify the research participants throughout the remaining sections of this manuscript.

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed to analyze the data and answer the research question. The instructor evaluations were coded in the same manner described earlier. The purpose of the interview was to evaluate the student's perceptions of the amount and type of feedback they received on their evaluation form by asking several probing questions.

Along with these open-ended questions, students were asked to rank the instructors' comments on several 5-point (5 = high, 1 = low), Likert-type scales. Four scales were used to allow the students to quantify their perception of how fair the grade was (fair/unfair), how accurate the grade was (accurate/inaccurate), how helpful the feedback was, (very helpful/not helpful), and how well the comments explained why the student received their grade (explained well/explained poorly).

The raw and reduced sets of data consisted of the instructors' evaluation forms, transcriptions of the interviews, and the semantic differential scales. The interpretive model suggested by Lindlof (1995), was used to

analyze the data. Emerging themes were identified after carefully reading through the interview transcripts.

RESULTS

Quantitative Data

The research question probed students' perceptions of the instructors' feedback. The analysis began by examining the 5-point, Likert-type scales and conducting a frequency distribution among the different grade variables: fairness ($M = 3.94$, $SD = .91$, $n = 50$), accuracy ($M = 3.84$, $SD = .96$, $n = 50$), helpfulness ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.09$, $n = 50$), and explanatory power ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.11$, $n = 49$).

To further quantify the research question, Pearson product-moment correlations were run pairing the four types of instructor comments and the student's grade on

Table 2

Correlations Between Instructor Comments, Students' Perceptions, and Speech Grade

	Positive Face Threats	Negative Face Threats	Positive Politeness	Grade
Fairness	.21	.21	−.10	−.31[a]
Accuracy	.21	.04	−.10	−.38[b]
Helpfulness	.07	−.13	.08	−.21
Explanatory Power	.16	.02	.01	−.15

Note: [a]Correlation is significant at the .05 level [b]Correlation is significant at the .01 level

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the informative speech among the perceptions of the four grade variables. Table 2 shows the results of these correlations. The only significant correlations occurred when the student's grade was paired with either fairness or accuracy. Specifically, as the student's grade increased, the student's perception of how fair and accurate the grade was decreased.

Qualitative Data

Interviews were conducted with the students in order to gain a more complete look at the student's perceptions of the instructor's written comments. Three reoccurring themes were identified. They are presented in this section, and supported with the interview data.

Students Desire More FTAs. The first theme that emerged from the interviews was that the students desired more comments that threatened their face. Book and Wynkoop-Simmons (1980) argue that feedback plays an important role when attempting to improve or modify a student's behavior. The students in this study agreed, asking for more comments that threaten their negative face. They wanted to know what they were missing, what could have made this speech better. For example, the following student noted that his instructor deducted points on the speech without providing a rationale or explaining what he should do differently in the future:

> I'd like specifics on what [I] did wrong. I would have liked a few more negatives, stuff to work on. (R19)

Students in this study wanted to have their autonomy violated. They would have liked for their instructor to

tell them what they need to improve to do better on future speeches.

Not only did the students in this study desire more comments that threatened their negative face, but they also wanted more positive face threats. When students received a grade lower than expected, they wanted to know why. One student felt her grade was unjustified. She had expected a higher grade and wanted her instructor to write more feedback about why she received a low grade:

> What I don't understand is her grading. The only thing I did wrong according to these comments is look at my note cards too much. Why would I get an 83% for that? I wish she would write more things I need to work on to justify the grade that I got. (R47)

For learning to take place, students have to know what they did wrong and more importantly, how to correct the mistake. Instructors need to threaten the students face for the students to learn. Instructors who are using positive face threats are stating what the student did wrong, but are not necessarily motivating the student to improve. However, if an instructor chooses to use negative face threats, not only are they stating where the mistake occurred, but they are also providing suggestions for improvement.

Students Become Frustrated with too many Positive Politeness Messages. Frymier and Houser (2000) suggest that students look to their instructors for more than basic knowledge. They want their instructors to help them feel good about themselves (support their positive face needs). However, a theme that emerged in this study was that instructors provided too many positive polite-

ness messages as feedback. This was a particularly salient issue for students when the grade did not reflect these comments. For example, some of the students focused on why individual points were being taken off. One student became frustrated when an instructor subtracted points, but only offered positive politeness as feedback. When positive politeness is the only type of comment written in a section, this student expected to receive the full amount of points available:

> I think it [the grade] is fair, but it's frustrating because it says "good, good, good," and I never get the full points on that. I don't understand how you get a twenty-four out of thirty even though everything is pretty much good. (R8)

Another student felt that the excess of positive politeness feedback should have resulted in a better grade:

> She said "good" on stuff, but then I got a lower grade than I expected. She put excellent here, and good here, and good here, and then took off five points and didn't explain why. (R11)

Students in this study suggested that there were too many positive politeness messages to justify the low grade they received.

Students Deem Specific Written Feedback as Most Helpful. The third re-occurring theme that emerged from the interviews with the students is that specific written feedback is the most helpful. The first set of data came from students who received vague comments. The meaning of a vague instructor comment confused the first student:

> I needed to know what he wanted specifically. I also needed to know what certain comments meant, like,

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"make it real." He needs to give comments that explain more, they need to be specific. (R10)

Another type of vague comment those students found as inadequate feedback were a system of pluses, minuses, and various other marks. One student wanted more concrete information from her instructor. She was unhappy with the obscure coding system the instructor used:

> There were just a lot of pluses, which is good, but in my mind he didn't give enough reinforcement. He really needs to elaborate in places. I want more than just a plus. (R26)

The meaning of the symbolic feedback also confused a second student. She desired a more specific type of feedback:

> The comments were not specific enough. [They needed to be] more specific or get a chance to explain what the pluses mean. (R29)

Students seemed most appreciative of instructor feedback that was directed at specific elements of the speech. For example, one student commented on the helpfulness of the specific comments as well as the nice balance between positive politeness messages and face threats. This student noted that the comments that were the most helpful told her specifically how to improve:

> My instructor's comments were very helpful. They tell me specifically what I need to work on and what my strengths and weaknesses were. (R12)

Some students gave examples of this type of comment. A motivated student discusses why she liked the specific feedback her instructor wrote:

> She pointed out specific examples, like she pointed out some of the vocal fillers that I used. [For example] there's a visual aid I didn't put the proper citation on. I'll do that next time. She gave me some examples of stuff I did like "you know." I'll try to avoid the phrase. (R39)

Students who received specific written feedback deemed it as the most helpful type of comment. Students also found it helpful when their instructor identified what the student did wrong and noted specifically how to correct the mistake in the future. Regardless of which type of comment the instructor is trying to convey, students deem specific suggestions as the most helpful.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of Study 2 was to examine students' perceptions of instructor feedback in order to determine the types of feedback students deem the most helpful. First, an attempt was made to determine how students perceived the grade they received on their speech. Seventy-six percent of the students felt that the grade they received on the speech was fair, and 70% perceived their grade to be accurate. The high percentages are encouraging because even though students may not have been happy with the grade they received, they, for the most part, still perceived the grade to be accurate and fair. Although the students' perception of the helpfulness of the comments they received on their speech was a lower

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percentage, the number is also promising. Sixty-eight percent of the students perceived the feedback they received on their speech to be helpful. However, only 46% of the students perceived their feedback as having explanatory power. This percentage is lower than it should be. Less than half of the students in this study felt that the feedback they received explained what they did wrong or how to improve. One of the goals of feedback is to encourage learning (McKeachie, 1999). When instructors give feedback that lacks explanatory power, they are denying the students their greatest potential to learn. This can also set up the potential for student-teacher conflict.

This study also examined the students' perception of the grade in light of the number of FTAs and positive politeness comments. Most of the correlations yielded insignificant results. The students' perception of the fairness, accuracy, helpfulness, and explanatory power did not change in terms of the number of positive face comments, negative face comments, or positive politeness comments. However, when correlating the students' grade with the fairness and accuracy constructs, significant results were found. In this study, both fairness and accuracy have an inverse relationship with the students' grade. While this finding cannot be fully understood by this research, it warrants further investigation in the future.

The interviews with the students provided further insight into the research question for Study 2. Three reoccurring themes were found: 1) students desire more FTAs, 2) students become frustrated with too much positive politeness, and 3) students deem specific written feedback as most helpful. The first of these themes

indicates that the instructors in this study needed to write more comments that threaten the students' face. This theme is consistent with extant literature indicating that feedback should challenge students to make improvements before their next performance (Book & Wynkoop-Simmons, 1980; Whitman, 1987). Students in this study wanted to know what they did wrong (positive face threats), and more importantly, how to improve (negative face threats). These types of comments are especially important when students receive a grade lower than expected. Instructors need to justify why points are being taken off, and make suggestions for improvements.

The second theme suggested that the instructors in this study were trying too hard to protect the students' face. Positive politeness messages should be used to note a high point in students' performance. However, this research suggests that students perceived the feedback they received as having too many positive politeness comments in light of the grade the received. Consistent with past research on teacher feedback, this type of comment was perceived as being the least helpful (Book & Wynkoop-Simmons, 1980). Although many of the students admit that they appreciate some positive politeness, too many comments do not justify a lower than expected grade. Again, in the students' perception, an overabundance of positive politeness comments should result in a high grade. When students receive overwhelmingly positive comments (e.g., "good," "great," "++," "wow!") they expect to receive a grade that reflects the comments. The students in this study received similar comments without a superior grade. This

led to the students feeling frustrated and may have decreased their motivation for learning.

The third theme uncovered by this study was that specific written feedback was the most helpful type of comment. This finding supports Book and Wynkoop-Simmons (1980) research that suggests students perceive automistic, impersonal, negative as being the most helpful. First, students reported that vague comments were not only confusing but also frustrating. Some of the comments that students were receiving were vague statements that lacked meaning. The most frustrating type of feedback was a system of pluses, minuses, check marks, and squiggly lines. None of the students in this study liked this type of comment, and most were discouraged that their instructor only offered this type of feedback on their speech. The most satisfied students were the ones who received specific comments, particularly those who received comments that told them how to make improvements before their next speech.

OVERALL CONSIDERATIONS

Taken together, the results of these two studies suggest that a student who receives a lower grade will also receive more face threats, and a student who receives a higher grade will receive more positive politeness. Students were also found to perceive their grade as fair, accurate, and the feedback as helpful. These results may lead readers to infer that instructors are doing a fine job of providing feedback to students. However, when interviews were conducted with the students, their perceptions of the feedback were less positive. Simply put, stu-

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dents felt their instructors were too polite in the feedback provided. Positive politeness was the most prevalent type of feedback given by the instructor. However, students desire specific feedback that threatens their face and, more specifically, suggests ways to improve.

To motivate learning, instructors need to increase the number of specific negative face threats while decreasing the number of positive politeness comments. Instructors need to be careful about using too many generic positive politeness statements (e.g., "good," "wow," "great job," and "super"). This type of feedback does not provide the student with new knowledge that they can use to improve their speech performances. For the most part, the students commented that they knew when they were doing something right. This research does not suggest that these types of comments are useless; however, they should be sincere and used in moderation. Positive politeness messages need to be given as feedback so students know when they are meeting (or exceeding) expectations. In fact, Goldsmith (2000) suggests that failing to give feedback when expected could be viewed as a lack of caring or concern (a threat to positive face). To better utilize positive politeness instructors need to answer the following question: Why was it good? The instructor needs to make specific positive politeness comments (e.g., "Your use of statistics really helped to clarify your argument," "You chose a good concrete organizational pattern for this speech, it helped your speech to flow beautifully," "Wow what a closing! It will really make your audience think"). By specifically addressing the student's speech, the student knows exactly what they did right and they can continue that course of action for the next speech.

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A student who improves from one speech performance to the next is a student who has engaged in learning. If an instructor wants their students to learn by giving a speech performance, she/he must provide written feedback that threatens the students' face. A positive face threat occurs when the instructor observes an "error" in the speech or in the performance. This type of feedback should not be degrading if it is to be effective (e.g., "You needed to have a more inviting attention getter," "Four sources are needed to meet the requirements of this speech," "You forgot to preview your close"). An even better strategy for instructors to use is to threaten students' negative face. This type of comment suggests specific ways for the student to improve, and thus learn (e.g., "You need try to have eye contact with your audience for longer periods of time," "Be sure that you cite information from a source with their name and the publication date," "Your next visual aid should be presented in at least a twenty point font so your audience can see it clearly").

It is also important to note that many of the students who participated in the interviews seemed overly concerned with why they lost points. These students assumed that they should have been awarded full points on a section unless they failed to include a required element (e.g., attention getter in the introduction). In other words, they indicated they should have been awarded full credit if they simply made a good faith effort to include all of the required elements in the speech. Students had a difficult time understanding that there are qualitative differences between an "A" and "B" for elements such as the attention getter in the introduction. As speech teachers, we expect our students to earn

the points that are given in each section. In light of this observation, a student whose instructor wrote, "good," "good," "good," in a particular section should have received a B on their speech. The student's speech was above average, but not superior. Most of the participants in this study were first year students and may have expected grades to be given instead of earned (see Leamnson, 1999 for a detailed description of this phenomenon). One student puts it best when she says, "I guess I'm just used to high school grading" (R41). This finding highlights the need for instructors to communicate their expectations to students—to let them know what it takes to earn an "A" on the speech.

The results of these two studies have clear implications for basic course directors. Training programs should be developed to teach instructors how to provide specific positive and negative face threats for students. This training could provide information on facework theory so that instructors feel more comfortable with providing this kind of feedback to students. In addition, training could focus on the relationship between the kinds of comments provided and grades received based on published criteria. This, in turn, could affect grade inflation practices in the basic communication course as well as increase rater reliability across sections.

No study is without limitations. One limitation of this study can be identified in the nature of those who participated in the interviews. First, the sample seems overly represented by women. Although we discovered no identifiable differences based on sex (the women and men in the sample offered the same types of comments), future studies should seek a more balanced sample. Similarly, we may have had a self-selection bias with

this sample. In other words, it is possible that many of those who showed up to be interviewed were students with a complaint about their grade. Again, this limitation should be taken with a grain of salt given that the vast majority of participants reported that they felt the grade they received was fair.

Another limitation is noted when examining the measures used in Study 2. The Likert-type items could not be tested for reliability because there was only one item for each construct. To correct this, future studies will need to develop measures with multiple items for each of the constructs.

The use of face in the college classroom warrants further research. The next logical step would be to train instructors to be face sensitive when giving written feedback to determine whether or not the students' perception of the feedback would change. This research could only take place provided that the students are aware of the instructors grading system, as discussed earlier. In future research, a group of instructors would be made aware of the conclusions drawn in this study, and trained how to give better written feedback. Instructors would be educated to give specific written feedback that violates the student's negative face when noting an error in the student's speech, and more complete positive politeness when complimenting the student for a job well done. The student's perceptions of the feedback would be recorded for the "trained" group of instructors as well as for an "untrained" group (control group) of instructors. These groups could then be compared and students' perceptions measured to test the effectiveness of the training.

Another area of future research that could extend these findings to determine how students would respond to negative politeness (that they suggest they want) would be to establish an experimental design in which instructors are asked to provide comments that represent negative politeness and then have another set of instructors provide nothing but positive politeness messages. Researchers could then look to see how students in each of the groups respond to the feedback they receive from instructors. Such a study would help scholars identify whether or not students would be truly satisfied with this level of feedback.

Beyond considering students' face needs in regards to written feedback, scholars should explore these needs in student/teacher face-to-face interaction. These interactions could occur during an in-class discussion, during a student/teacher conflict, or during the instructors' office hours. What face saving strategies, if any, do instructors utilize during face-to-face interaction with their students? Does the dynamic of the conversation determine what types of face management techniques are employed? Many questions remain.

This research provides a greater understanding of what types of written feedback instructors are providing their students, as well as the types of comments the students themselves would like to receive. Written feedback plays a crucial role in the learning process. Proper use of feedback can empower the student to make improvements and thus learn from the speaking experience. This research provides instructors with a good foundation to improve their ability to give students the kind of written feedback that promotes student learning.

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