

# Deconstructing the Discourse: Mitigation in the Supervisory Discourse of Language Teacher Supervisors in Iran

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## Abstract

This study investigated mitigation in the supervisory discourse of Iranian language teacher supervisors to see what mitigation devices these language teacher supervisors in Iran used to achieve a balance between message clarity and politeness when delivering negative feedback. Using convenient sampling, 10 post-observation feedback conferences from Iran Language Institute, Shiraz University Language Center and Safir English Language Academy in Shiraz, Tehran, and Mashhad were recorded and transcribed. The data were examined using Wajnryb's (1994) typology of mitigation devices. The findings of the study indicated that Iranian language teacher supervisors tended to use what Wajnryb (1994) called "above-the-utterance-level" mitigation, something between "hyper-mitigation" (highly mitigated language) and "hypo-mitigation" (hardly mitigated language) though they could have made more appropriate use of the host of possible mitigation devices to further soften their rather directive language thereby promoting reflection on the part of the teachers. The most frequently used mitigation devices included qualm indicators, modal verbs, interrogatives, clause structures, and hedging modifiers respectively with the rest of the mitigation devices considerably underused indicating that training in supervisory discourse is essential for Iranian language teacher supervisors. The findings hold implications for teacher education programs, language teaching institutes, and language teacher supervisors to consider and work on mitigation devices to be able to deliver negative feedback both clearly and politely.

**Keywords:** Mitigation, politeness, supervision and supervisory discourse

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## INTRODUCTION

Teacher education is one of the most central issues in the language teaching profession today. To enhance EFL/ESL teachers' professional practice, different approaches such as coaching (Bailey, 2006), mentoring (Malderez, 2009), reflective practice (Burton, 2009), and action research (Burns, 2009) were proposed. Still, as stressed by Bailey (2006, 2009) and Nolan and Hoover (2011), language teacher supervision with classroom observation as its most important part plays a significant role in teachers' professional development. Despite its pivotal role, however, language teacher supervision faces many complexities and remains underexplored and problematic especially in non-North American contexts (Bailey, 2006).

One persistent problem in language teacher supervision, as Bailey (2009) argues, is to analyze and improve the speech event of the post-observation feedback conferences. The challenge language teacher supervisors face in the post-observation feedback conference, as Bailey (2006) further argues, is to voice criticism "gently enough that teachers can listen to it but enough that they can hear it" (p. 170).

To handle this challenge, language teacher supervisors, according to Wajnryb (1994), mitigate their speech to supervisees upon committing face-threatening acts (FTA) (See Brown & Levinson, 1987). Mitigation, according to Wajnryb (1995, p. 71), is the "linguistic means by which a speaker deliberately hedges what he/she is saying by taking into account the reactions of the hearer." In her analysis of the supervisory discourse of TESOL language supervisors, Wajnryb (1994) identified three major types of mitigation. The first one, "hyper-mitigation", is a heavily mitigated language used probably at the expense of message clarity. The second one, "hypo-mitigation", is bluntly direct language in which there is too little mitigation. This latter one may put the teacher on the defensive making the teacher adopt the passive or the adversarial role and not the collaborative one (Waite, 1993). In both cases, the desired change (s) in teacher behavior and development will be seriously impeded. The last one, something between hyper- and hypo-

mitigation, is “above-the-utterance-level mitigation” in which the softened criticism is expressed at the discourse level. Here the supervisor somehow prepares the supervisee for the forthcoming criticism usually by first highlighting the supervisee’s strengths and carefully managing the criticism using mitigating devices.

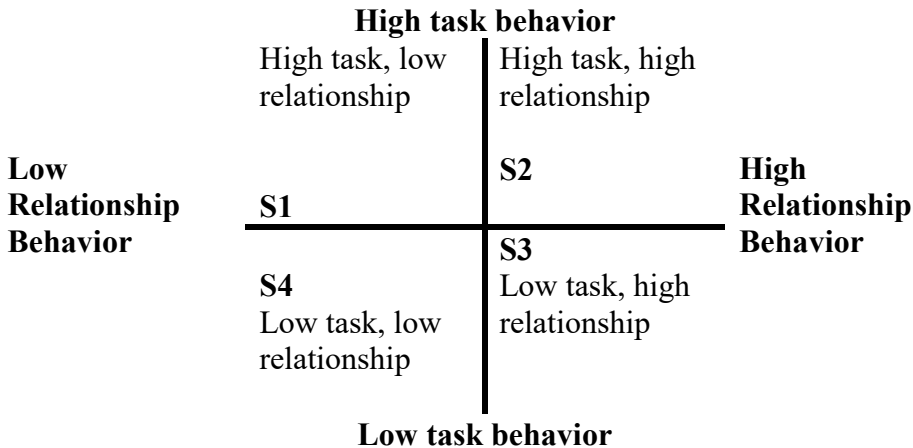
Despite its important role, mitigation in language teacher supervision in Iran has been entirely ignored. The question remains as to what type of mitigation and mitigation devices Iranian language teacher supervisors use to deliver negative criticism. Drawing on Wajnryb's (1994) typology of mitigation, the present study intends to improve the speech event of the Iranian language teacher supervisors by shedding some light on the mitigation types and devices they use and the ones they can use to better manage negative feedback.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

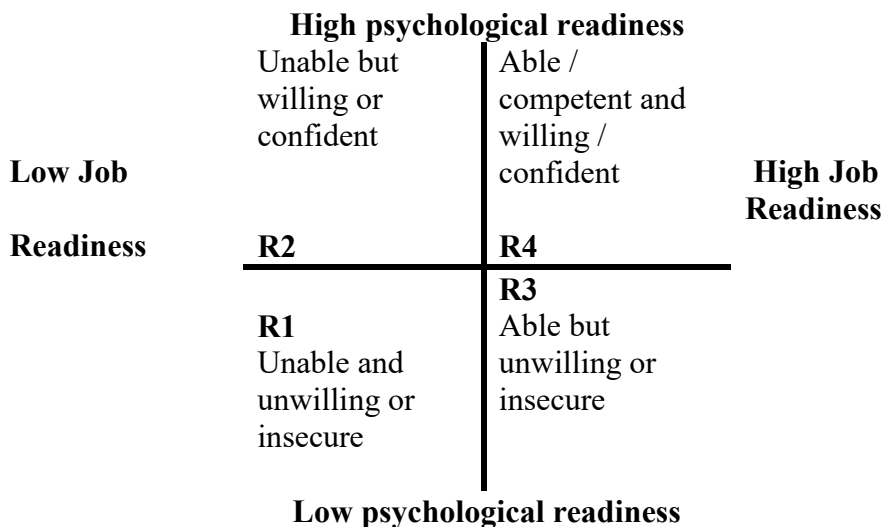
One of the most important issues in any supervision context is the speech event of the post-observation feedback conference, which is, before anything, affected by the supervision approach the language teacher supervisors adopt to observe their teachers. The existing supervisory approaches in teacher education, as argued by Wallace (1991), are classified from classic prescriptive to classic collaborative approaches, each with its supervisory discourse. Challenged by Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivism, according to which, dialogic interactions play an important role in the construction of meaning (Herschensohn & Young-Scholten, 2013), the general trend in the North American context, as argued by Bailey (2006, 2009), is moving towards more collaborative ones. This, however, seems to contradict Copland (2008, 2010), Ma (2009) and Copland, Ma, and Mann’s (2009) findings, according to which, supervisors in TESOL tended to dominate the post-observation feedback conferences squeezing reflection and deliberation out of the process. This is why Copland et al. (2009) call for a move towards more

reflective approaches to supervision, something which has already been voiced by Brandt (2006) and Mann (2004), too.

Bedford and Gehlert (2013), however, discuss a model in clinical supervision based on the supervisees' readiness level i.e. the social constructivists' concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) which requires the supervisors to move between directive and collaborative approaches to supervision. Bailey (2006) presents the four supervisory styles and the four readiness levels that the model draws on to define language teacher supervisors' roles (Figures 1 and 2).



**Figure 1:** Continua of relationship and task behavior in situational leadership (Bailey, 2006, p. 228)



**Figure 2:** Continua of job and psychological readiness in situational leadership (Bailey, 2006, p. 230)

In Figure 1, task behavior refers to how much directive the supervisor decides to be while relationship behavior refers to the amount of close rapport the supervisors decide to engage in (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2001). In Figure 2, job readiness refers to the supervisees’ ability to change while psychological readiness refers to their willingness to change (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982).

Based on the supervisory styles and the readiness levels discussed above, Bedford and Gehlert (2013) present the situational supervision model, according to which, supervisors can take four different roles i.e. teaching, consulting, counseling and evaluating, with teaching the most directive role used with unable- and unwilling-to-change supervisees and evaluating the least directive role used with both able- and willing-to-change supervisees.

Besides the adopted supervision approach discussed above, politeness issues can also heavily affect the supervisory discourse of language teacher supervisors (Farr, 2011; Nolan & Hoover, 2011). One study with direct

implications for supervisory discourse is Brown and Levinson's (1987) work on politeness issues where they extensively examined FTAs. Based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, supervisors need to decide whether to launch an FTA or not. If they decide to engage in one, they have to choose whether they want to be "on-record" (direct) or "off-record" (indirect). The former is unambiguous and possibly more efficient but more face-threatening. The latter, however, is politer and thus less face-threatening though a bit ambiguous. If they decide to go on-record, supervisors also need to choose if they want to have it with or without redressive action. The social circumstances in which we can go on-record "without any redressive action" (Bailey, 2006), are very limited, and we will have to go on-record but "with redressive action" to be able to strike a balance between politeness and clarity. This option, Brown, and Levinson (1987, pp. 69-70) argue, "attempts to counteract the potential face damage of the FTA by doing it in such a way, or with such modifications or additions, that indicate clearly that no such face threat is intended or desired." Therefore, many supervisors, as Bailey (2006, p. 165) says, "use on-record FTAs with redressive action to support teachers in conferences and sustain positive working relationships." Having chosen an on-record FTA with redressive action, the supervisor is left to choose between positive politeness or negative politeness. The former, intended for the "positive self-image that the [hearer] claims for himself" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 70), conveys to the teacher that the FTA does not suggest a generally negative evaluation of the teachers' face. The latter, intended to satisfy or redress the hearers' "basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 70), is characterized by apologies, deference, and other softening mechanisms which give the supervisee "a face-saving line of escape" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 70). Although positive and negative politeness strategies can tremendously help especially in asymmetrical power relationships like post-observation feedback conferences (Harris, 2003), they must be used judiciously because, as found by Vásquez (2004), too many positive and negative politeness

strategies can lead to the subsequent impression that teachers got no serious suggestions and criticism during the post-observation feedback conferences.

Inspired by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and analyzing the post-observation feedback conferences of TESOL teacher educators working in North America and Europe, Wajnryb (1994) also developed a typology of mitigation, according to which, mitigation used by TESOL teacher educators are divided into syntactic, semantic, and indirect mitigating devices with each one having its subdivisions and subcategories (See Figure 3). According to Wajnryb (1994), TESOL language teacher educators and supervisors extensively use different kinds of mitigation devices to properly protect their supervisees' negative and positive face. The mitigation devices are discussed below using examples from Wajnryb's (1994) own data.

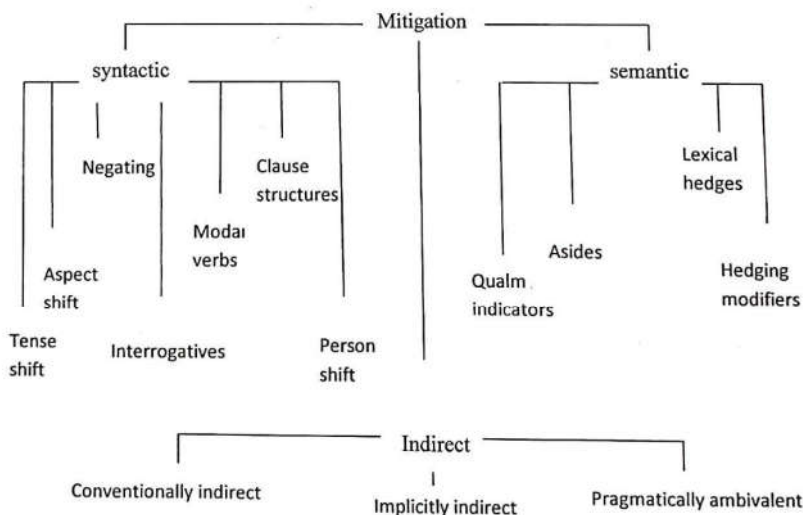


Figure 3: A typology of utterance-level mitigation in supervisory discourse (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 230)

Shifts in tense, as Wajnryb (1994, p. 236) argues, suggest “collegiality, symmetry, and seeking of harmony.” A supervisor shifting from the present to the past and saying, “I was worried about your classroom management,” instead of “I’m worried about your classroom management,” separates the participants temporally from the teaching event and thereby softens his or her criticism. Shifts in aspect also seem to soften criticism. “The instructions were confusing your students,” instead of “The instructions confused your students,” is less direct and face-threatening.

Negating as denials like “It wasn’t always consistent,” indirectly suggests that something should have been consistent, and thereby, softens criticism. Negative transportations such as “I don’t think you were sure of yourself during the grammar explanation,” instead of “I think you weren’t sure of yourself during the grammar explanation,” are to “implicate rather than assert, thereby weakening or hedging the claim being made” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 243). In negative pessimism, supervisors use adverbs and modals to express doubt. “I wouldn’t use that sequence myself,” instead of “Don’t use that sequence,” takes the sharp edge of the criticism away.

Questions like “Why did you decide to postpone your correction of the students’ errors?”, as Wajnryb (1994, p. 246) asserts, “convert a potential statement of criticism into an apparent inquiry.” Tag questions such as “You were a bit rushed at the end of the lesson, weren’t you?” hedge the criticism by “seeking cooperation rather than obedience” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 247). Embedded questions like “I was wondering why you used that particular exercise?”, as Bailey (2006, p. 173) says, “implies the speaker’s doubt or curiosity, since the already-mitigated question form is further distanced through embedding.”

Modals like “You might try giving the instructions in writing as well as orally,” instead of “Try giving the instructions in writing as well as orally,” can also soften directives (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 173).

Clause structures such as “I noticed that you seemed a bit rushed at the end,” instead of “You seemed rushed at the end,” properly introduces “subjectivity into the speaker’s assertion, giving the hearer room to express



an opinion or disagree” (Bailey, 2006, p. 173). “If you cue up the audiotape before you come to class, it will go more smoothly,” instead of “Cue up the audiotape before you come to class,” on the other hand, turns “blunt directives into more indirect suggestions” carefully and effectively protecting the teachers’ face (Bailey, 2006, p. 174).

Person shifts in comments like “It’s important to finish one task before moving on to the next,” instead of “You should finish one task before moving on to the next,” soften the criticism because the false subject *it* depersonalizes the event taking the sharp hedge of criticism away from the teacher (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 259).

Qualm indicators are insertions like *uh, er, uhm, well, you know*, and hesitations including both silent and filled pauses, reformulations, and false starts which “tell the listener that the speaker is somewhat hesitant, even uneasy” and “make the forthcoming assertion more tentative and equivocal” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 267).

Minimizing asides like “The only problem I saw was ...,” “minimizes the harshness” of the criticism (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 277). Stroking asides such as “During the dialog, and it was a great dialog, I felt that ...,” provides compliment that counteracts “the sting of the face-threatening act ...” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 278). Excusing asides such as “Maybe the activity didn’t work because the students hadn’t all done their homework,” “make allowances for whatever is being criticized (Bailey, 2006, p. 176). Negating asides as in “Don’t get me wrong, I just think that you could ...,” “deny the critical nature of the criticism, and show the supervisor’s reluctance to being perceived as critical” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 280). Conceding asides in comments such as “I know you put a lot of effort into your quiz, but ...,” “acknowledge the teacher’s efforts, even if the results weren’t entirely satisfactory (Bailey, 2006, p. 176). Justifying asides as in “I think you could go more quickly, as you yourself said,” “make excuses for the supervisors own behavior, rather than the teacher’s” (Bailey, 2006, p. 176). “Once when I was teaching modals, I ran into this problem ...,” as an example of deflecting asides, shifts “the

focus from hearer to elsewhere, usually to the speaker” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 280). Delaying asides as in “I thought it was really great that you got all the students involved, but I just wondered ...,” “announce that a criticism is forthcoming” (Bailey, 2006, p. 176) but the supervisor is “loath to get to the point” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 283).

In “It’s very important to let [make] people realize that one thing is finished and the next one is starting,” the diluted lexeme ‘let’ is used over ‘make’, for “its softened or attenuated meaning” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 284). Metaphorical lexemes as in “People can’t sort of slip through the net,” signal “an appeal to intimacy, establishing solidarity through the presumption of shared ground” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 284). Style-shifted lexemes as in “The timing was a bit out,” instead of “The timing was a bit wrong,” soften criticism by using colloquial language to “reduce distance, increase solidarity, and level out the asymmetry” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 288).

Specification hedges, devices such as ‘kind of’, ‘sort of’, ‘type of’, ‘like’, as Wajnryb (1994, p. 290) asserts, “reduce the ‘nouniness’ or ‘verbiness’ of the subsequent item.” Thus, “It was a sort of problem,” is less a problem than “It was a problem,” and “I sort of felt,” signals less weight of feeling than “I felt.” Minimizing adjuncts like ‘just’, ‘a bit’, ‘a little’, ‘a touch’, ‘not quite’ - “serve as hedging particles by reducing the amount of some related item” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 292). Modal Adverbs including ‘perhaps’, ‘possibly’, ‘probably’ and the like “serve as hedging particles by reducing certainty and obligation; by increasing optionality ... ” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 293). Authority hedges as in “I think it helps them get the intonation of the whole question,” instead of “It helps them get the intonation of the whole question,” offers options and reduces imposition (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 295). Commitment hedges suggest instead of ‘I think’ which is a statement of cognition, there may be an expression of affective state (‘I feel...’); of doubt (‘I guess ...’; ‘I suppose ...’; ‘I’m not sure’); or of denied knowledge (‘I don’t know ...’). Each of these hedges “carries a particular hit-and-miss quality and hedges the commitment of the speaker to the proposition projected in the accompanying clause” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 297).

Conventionally indirect mitigation, as the most direct of indirect mitigation, builds the criticism “into the surface level meaning of the utterance” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 304). The answer to “Can you think of a way you might have been able to address that?” is not “Yes, I can.” This is because they are not questions but requests, and are used to be less direct and politer. Implicitly indirect mitigation is even less direct than the previous one. Here, the teacher is supposed to infer what the supervisor means by “forcing an interaction between what is said and the context in which it is said” (Wajnryb, 1994, p. 312). If taken to an extreme, “the message can get lost or softened out of existence” (Bailey, 2006, p. 178). The example given by Wajnryb (1994, p. 315) may help clarify this point. “Do you think perhaps it might have been good if they had known a little bit about the context of the dialogue?” And finally, pragmatic ambivalence, as the most indirect, veils or even masks the illocutionary force of the utterance. According to Wajnryb (1994, p. 317), “an utterance is ambivalent when the hearer cannot be certain of its intended force, as this force is not available from the sense and context.” She gives the example of “Do you think the kids like the book?” in which the teacher may simply say “Yes, the kids like the book,” Or may wonder “Is my supervisor suggesting that the children don’t like the book, or that it’s not appropriate for them, or I should have chosen another?”

If used appropriately, the mitigation devices discussed by Wajnryb (1994) can substantially promote teacher reflection, something which is missing in post-observation feedback conferences. Studying the nature of post-observation feedback conferences in certificate courses in TESOL, Copland et al. (2009) examined evidence from two studies, i.e., Copland (2008) and Ma (2009), and showed how focus on the performance assessment criteria dominated the post-observation feedback conferences squeezing reflection out. Focusing on both the concerned organizations’ explicit assessment criteria and their assessment criteria, which comprised what Copland (2008, p. 34) called “hidden curriculum” or what Bernstein (2000, p. 109) called “invisible pedagogies”, supervisors strongly tended to

dominate the feedback sessions doing most of the talk and devaluing the trainees' suggestions when they were against those assessment criteria. This might, however, be changing as Bailey (2006, 2009) argues that the supervision trend in North America is moving towards more collaborative ones where mitigation devices play a key role in promoting teacher autonomy.

Although mitigation in post-observation feedback conferences has been investigated in the North American context, it has been ignored in the Iranian EFL context. The need for mitigation in the supervisory discourse of Iranian supervisors, however, has been voiced by the participants in Mehrpour and Agheshteh's (2017) and Razmjoo and Rasti's (2014) studies. As found by Mehrpour and Agheshteh (2017), above-the-utterance mitigation is an indispensable component of effective supervisory feedback, and supervisors' ability to use appropriate supervisory discourse, according to Razmjoo and Rasti (2014), is an essential part of supervisors' knowledge base, a point which has been ignored in the Iranian language teacher supervision. The present study was, then, an attempt to fill this gap on supervisory discourse and see what type of mitigation and mitigation devices are used or might be used to deliver negative feedback.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Since no research study in Iran has so far addressed the speech event of Iranian language teacher supervisors, the present study can substantially add to our knowledge of how supervisors in the country manage to deliver negative supervisory feedback. The study will then seek to answer the following questions:

1. Do Iranian language teacher supervisors make use of mitigation devices?
2. What kinds of mitigation devices do they use and need to use to deliver the negative supervisory feedback?

It must be noted, however, that the present study is limited to the speech event of in-service teachers in an EFL context only, and the results should be approached more cautiously with pre-service teachers where the

supervisory approaches adopted are different (Rashidi & Forutan, 2015) or with Ministry of Education teachers where the supervision model employed is mostly nominal (Razmjoo & Rasti, 2014).

## **METHOD**

### **Participants and Sources of Data**

Privacy issues and the FTAs included in the post-observation feedback conference made data collection a demanding job. Disagreements sometimes came from teachers and sometimes from supervisors. This is while supervision in some language schools in the country is absent, or the only nominal especially in the Ministry of Education. More surprising of all is the fact that sometimes for some classroom observations supervisors don't have any post-observation conferences (personal communication with some colleagues) and simply fill out some checklists which contain very few notes and comments. This is why the researcher decided to use convenient sampling to gather data.

Having decided on convenient sampling and with data saturation in mind, the researcher managed to record 10 post-observation feedback conferences from 10 supervisors and teachers who kindly decided to cooperate and help with the project. The teachers consisted of 5 males and five females, aged 24 to 45, who held BA (6 people), and MA (4 people) in English literature (3 people), translation studies (3 people), and English teaching (4 people). The supervisors consisted of 7 males and 3 females, aged 40 to 50, who held MA in either TEFL (6 people) or literature (4 people). The post-observation conferences - along with the observation forms and notes if any - came from three different language institutes including Iran Language Institute, Shiraz University Language Center, and Safir English Language Academy from three different cities i.e. Tehran, Shiraz, and Mashhad.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

Having gotten permission from the language institutes to conduct the study, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to the teachers and supervisors and ensured them that the data would be kept strictly confidential. Some teachers and supervisors agreed to cooperate but some strongly disagreed believing that the data were personal and could not be shared. The teachers and supervisors who agreed to cooperate were told to record the post-observation feedback conferences using their cell phones and hand in a copy of the observation forms and notes if any. The data were sent to the researcher on Telegram and WhatsApp. The post-observation feedback conferences which lasted from 15 to 35 minutes were all transcribed and put to analysis along with the observation forms and notes.

## **Data Analysis**

Using the typology developed by Wajnryb (1994), the post-observation feedback conferences which were all transcribed were examined for the possible criticisms and the mitigation devices included in the supervisory discourse. The mitigation devices employed by the Iranian supervisors were, then, classified according to Wajnryb's (1994) typology until the most frequently used ones started to emerge.

Having come up with the most recurring mitigation devices, the researcher checked the credibility of the results using 'member checks', according to which, "the researcher may ask the participants to review and critique ... tape recordings for accuracy and meaning" (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2010, p. 500). After classifying the most frequently used mitigating devices, the researcher sent five of them to the same supervisors to see if they agreed with the emergent patterns or not. If there were any inconsistencies, they were all put to negotiation. The researcher also used 'peer review' with five of the transcriptions, in which, the researcher gave the colleagues the raw data along with his interpretations or explanations. Discussions then

determined whether the colleagues considered the classifications and the interpretations made by the researcher to be reasonable or not.

Dependability was assessed using the inter-coder agreement. The codes (the mitigation devices) which were specified by two coders were compared using “Reliability=No. of agreements/total number of agreements + disagreements\*100” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 64). The obtained index was 89.28 % which meets the general coding standard.

## **RESULTS**

Despite fully dominating the post-observation conferences, language teacher supervisors in Iran tended to use Wajnryb’s (1994) above-the-utterance-level mitigation but fell short of making appropriate use of the host of possible mitigation devices, overusing some and underusing some other. The most frequently used mitigation devices were qualm indicators, modal verbs, interrogatives, clause structures, and hedging modifiers respectively with the rest of the mitigation devices considerably underused. Also, supervisors sometimes resorted to directive language which was itself mitigated, too. So the findings of the study will be presented in three different parts, i.e. above-the-utterance-level mitigation, utterance-level mitigation, and directive language.

### **Above-the-Utterance-Level Mitigation**

Although not able to make appropriate use of the mitigation devices available, most of the supervisors in the study seemed to use Wajnryb’s (1994) above-the-utterance-level mitigation where the negative feedback is neither too soft at the expense of clarity (hypermitigation), nor too direct that might offend the supervisees (hypomitigation). As Wajnryb (1994, p. 74) stresses, above-the-utterance-level mitigation “seeks to prepare the teacher for the forthcoming criticism by ... building on her strengths, affirming the positive side of her teaching, engaging in interaction, and setting a tone of trust and

professionalism.” Highlighting the teacher’s strengths (the names are not real), one supervisor [S2] commented:

*You are, honestly, a great teacher, highly motivated, interested, and enthusiastic. You know ... You care ... care about your job, your students ... you put a lot of energy, love, and eh hh .... into your job. I really appreciate all these. There is, however, one point you might reflect on a bit more. How do you think you could reduce your role and maximize that of your students especially when having a warm-up or communication activity or ...* [2]

Another supervisor [S5] said:

*Ok! You know, Saeed, you know eh hh you acted very energetically. You never went to your desk to take a rest. You stood in front of the class all the time and never went to your desk but ... Why do you think you didn’t move around the class? Sometimes the back of the class; sometimes the right, and sometimes the left?*[S5]

Another supervisor [S6], however, set out in the opposite pattern criticizing the teacher first and then pointing out her strengths and then again moving to another point of criticism:

*Supervisor: As suggested before by my colleagues, Mr. Talebi and, I think, Mr. Javadi, you need to reconsider your techniques of classroom management.*

*Teacher: Ah-huh.*

*Supervisor: You know ... you teach very well, you’re capable to impart knowledge very well, and you use good techniques and you use the words very well in order to put the points across, but there is a big [cannot be heard], however. There is not enough order and attention in your class for the students to learn the materials.* [S6]



## Utterance-Level Mitigation

Although the supervisors made good use of some mitigation devices, they could not make appropriate use of the rest of the devices which were also at their disposal. The most frequently used mitigation devices along with the ones which might have been used more are presented based on Wajnryb's (1994) typology.

## Syntactic Mitigation Devices

The most frequently used syntactic mitigation devices were modal verbs, interrogatives, and clause structure respectively. Less frequently used syntactic mitigation devices included shifts in tense, shifts in aspect, person shift, and negating devices respectively. Here follow some examples from the data.

### Modal verbs

*"It could be used while paraphrasing too"* [S1]

*"You can work on your intonation a little bit"* [S4]

*"You may have elicited some examples from your students"* [S7]

*"You could've done that physically"* [S9].

### Interrogatives

Supervisors used more lexical tag questions than wh- or yes/no questions. Some examples from the data include:

*... and teacher correction is the last resort, ok?* [S2]

*Even you can speak to them the next session, huh?* [S3]

*A couple of them were talking. You had to approach them, ok?* [S1]

### Clause Structures

*“If you make them believe that they’re not allowed to speak while you’re teaching, little by little they learn your classroom discipline” [S1]*

*“I think ... If you had moved around the class ... If you had spoken a bit louder, maybe you could’ve done a better job”[S2]*

### Semantic Mitigation Devices

The most frequently used semantic mitigation devices included qualm indicators, and hedging modifiers with the rest of the semantic mitigation devices used much less frequently.

#### Qualm Indicators

The supervisors repeatedly used insertions like “eh”, “uhm”, “well”, “you know”, and pauses, reformulations, and false starts to imply that the supervisor is hesitant or even uneasy criticizing the supervisee. Some of the examples observed in the data include:

*You know er... er ... er ... they can also have eh ... student to student interactions. [S10]*

*I think uh ... if the question is ok, well uh we don’t interrupt the students. [S6]*

*You know ... [Unclear] and ... ahh ... and they can also have student to student interaction. [S2]*

#### Hedging modifiers: Minimizing adjuncts

*You were a little bit too lenient. [S1]*

*It’s just a reminder, a little reminder, ok? [S2]*

*To me ... ah ... what you did looked a bit abrupt. [S9]*

### **Hedging modifiers: Authority hedges**

*I believe it can make the students study the meanings of the words. [S3]*

*... and your voice... you know you speak a bit quietly, I think, and again you speak in a monotone. [S5]*

*So I think ... if the question is ok, we don't interrupt. [S2]*

### **Hedging modifiers: Modal adverbs**

*If you had spoken a bit louder, maybe you could've done a better job. [S2]*

*I think it's ok ... maybe it could be less. [S5]*

## **Indirect Mitigation Devices**

These types of devices were not as frequent as syntactic and semantic mitigation devices. They were, in fact, the least frequently used mitigation devices. One supervisor [S2] asked

*Do you know how long you spent on the dialog? [S2]*

The answer to this question is not "Yes, I do." The supervisor is indirectly asking the supervisee to distribute his time more appropriately and thereby mitigating his advice.

## **Directive Language**

Although Iranian language teacher supervisors highlighted the teachers' strengths using mitigation devices, they still tended to resort to directive language during the post-observation feedback conferences. Here are some examples of the Iranian language teacher supervisors' directive language, some of which contain mitigation devices themselves.

*If sometimes the students cannot hear the questions, well, if they cannot here the questions, make them ask for clarification themselves, ok? Do not repeat the questions for your students. Just keep silent. Keep silent. If you keep silent, they will get it that they're required to ask for clarification themselves, ok?*  
[S2]

*Do not interrupt them. Do not correct them while they're at the board. Just let them have their seats first.* [S1]

*Let them interact with one another. Do not interrupt them unless there is a serious problem, ok? This is the first point. It's here.* [S2]

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the study will be discussed in light of the literature especially drawing on Wajnryb's (1994, 1995) studies on mitigation in supervisory discourse. To meet the competing demands of message clarity and politeness, language teacher supervisors in Iran, as found by the study, engaged in what Wajnryb (1994) called above-the-utterance-mitigation highlighting the teachers' strengths first to set the scene for the upcoming negative feedback. This supports Mehrpour and Agheshteh's (2017) finding, according to which, above-the-utterance-level mitigation was one of the essential components of effective supervisory feedback. It also gives support to Razmjoo and Rasti's (2014) research study where they argued that the supervisors' ability to use hedging expressions was one of the key elements of supervisors' knowledge base. Analyzing the nature of the suggestions made by mentors, Strong and Baron (2004) also indicated the great and deliberate efforts the mentors made to avoid giving direct advice to protect the mentees' face. This is, according to Vásquez (2004), a part of the supervisors' effort to protect the supervisees' negative face in a context of asymmetrical power discourse.

Despite using above-the-utterance-level mitigation, however, language teacher supervisors in Iran could not make appropriate use of the

host of possible mitigation devices overusing some and underusing some other indicating the fact that Iranian language teacher supervisors need to be trained in the relevant supervisory discourse to be able to use all the possible mitigation devices especially those which can substantially promote dialogic interactions which constitute the building blocks of the social constructivist perspective (Herschensohn & Young-Scholten, 2013). Copland et al. (2009) call for awareness-raising activities in which supervisors can explore the feedback possibilities merging the role of the assessor and developer each with its discourse. Criticizing teacher education programs, Bailey (2006, 2009) also calls for supervisor training saying that currently, supervisors become supervisors just by supervising and lack the necessary skills.

Language teacher supervisors in Iran, for instance, could not make appropriate use of *wh*-questions which, according to Wajnryb (1994, p. 246), “convert a potential statement of criticism into an apparent inquiry.” The tag questions used by the supervisors did not lead to the teachers’ taking the turn, either. These made the post-observation feedback conferences more monologic than dialogic squeezing the conference out of collaboration and reflection. This is in line with Copland et al.’s (2009) finding, according to which, TESOL supervisors also squeezed reflection out of the post-observation feedback conference possibly focusing on either the organization’s explicit assessment criteria or their performance assessment criteria which Copland (2008, p. 34) calls it the supervisors’ “hidden curriculum.” This supports most of the findings in the field which have also indicated the supervisors’ strong tendency to fully dominate the feedback session seldom letting the teachers take turns to express their ideas and opinions (e.g. Copland, 2008, 2010; Ma, 2009; Roberts, 1991; Vásquez, 2004; Waite, 1991, 1993).

The reason why the Iranian language teacher supervisors dominated the post-observation feedback conferences and failed to appropriately use all the possible mitigation devices might be, as discussed above, because of the lack of supervisor training. It might be also affected by either the assessment

criteria imposed by the language institutes or the supervisors' criteria which constitute their "hidden curriculum" (Copland, 2008, p. 34) or "invisible pedagogies" (2000, p. 109). Sociocultural factors including the supervisors' and the supervisees' age, sex, degree, experience, and social background can also cause this problem because as found by Mehrpour and Agheshteh (2017) and Razmjoo and Rasti (2014) sociocultural sensitivity is an indispensable part of any supervision work. These, however, need to be confirmed by future studies on the dynamics of post-observation feedback conferences.

Despite the supervisors' dominance over the post-observation feedback conferences (Copland et al., 2009; Vásquez, 2004), the trend in the North American context, as argued by Bailey (2006, 2009) and as required by Brandt (2006) and Mann (2004), is moving towards more collaborative approaches to supervision which is characterized by more power-sharing dialogic interactions in which teacher supervisors strive to promote reflection and collaboration. The trend in the Iranian EFL context, however, remains underexplored.

Finally, the Iranian supervisors' tendency to resort to directive language, which as shown above are themselves mitigated, could be accounted for by the sociocontextual variability involved in the supervision process including the teachers' age, sex, degree, experience, and social background. It might be also a function of the teachers' readiness level or ZPD, according to which, supervisors will move from more collaborative approaches to more directive ones if they found teachers unable and/or unwilling to change (Bedford & Gehlert, 2013). These, however, need to be explored by future studies, too.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Characterized by asymmetrical power relations, the post-observation feedback conference as one of the most complex types of institutional speech activity typically requires the language teacher supervisors to delicately balance the competing demands of message clarity and politeness. To meet

this, language teacher supervisors in Iran engaged in above-the-utterance-level mitigation though they dominated the post-observation feedback conferences and could not make appropriate use of the host of mitigation devices available especially wh- and yes/no questions which can substantially promote dialogic interactions as required by social constructivism.

Implications hold for teacher education programs to include supervisor training courses to teach supervisors how to make the best use of mitigation devices to deliver criticism in a way that is neither too soft nor too direct. Implications also hold for language teacher supervisors to properly protect their teachers' faces by appropriately making a balance between message clarity and politeness.

Future studies might examine the effects of sociocultural factors, organizations' assessment criteria, and supervisors' hidden curriculum on the supervisors' discourse and the mitigation devices they employ to soften their criticism. Since supervisory discourse is an asymmetrical power discourse, future studies might also address supervisor authority and teacher autonomy and the power dynamics therein. Politeness issues might be also explored to see what strategies Iranian teacher supervisors employ to protect their teachers' positive and negative face. All these suggestions for further research might be conducted in both pre- and in-service contexts in Iran as they may yield different results.

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