Article

Understanding Politeness in an Online Community of Practice for Chinese ESL Teachers: Implications for Sustainable Professional Development in the Digital Era

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Abstract: Although politeness contributes to the effectiveness and sustainable development of online learning communities, it remains unclear how Chinese teachers of English as a second language (ESL), with differing social statuses, use varying levels of politeness when engaging in such communities. Accordingly, this paper analyses how Hong Kong ESL teachers, who tend to observe hierarchical relationships and the idiosyncrasies of "face", conveyed politeness in an online professional community when making positive and negative evaluations and suggestions. A total of 174 interactive comments offered by 24 student teachers and 8 mentors were coded under three discourse functions and 15 types of politeness markers. Interviews with six participants indicated that, through their role in the community, they adopted ways of thinking and linguistic knowledge that influenced their choice and frequency of the politeness markers. Despite having different roles in the hierarchy, the participants exhibited similar patterns of politeness marker choice, implying that their language and cultural background influenced how they chose to convey politeness in the absence of face-to-face cues; however, their role in the community seemed to have affected the frequency of using the politeness markers. These results shed light on politeness from the perspective of the culture, language, and online community membership.

Keywords: politeness markers; discourse functions; community of practice; online interaction; second language learners; cultural awareness

1. Introduction

In Confucian philosophy 2000 years ago, politeness, (or *li*), served as a form of propriety to show respect and manage hierarchical relationships within the family and society (Analect 3.3), and it continues to influence Chinese and East Asian thought and values today. Pan [1] suggested, in her book on politeness in Chinese face-to-face interactions, that discursive features contribute more to the signalling of politeness than syntactic or lexical items do; however, politeness is likely to be less predictable and interpretative during non-face-to-face communication, which is increasingly common in online settings. For example, the absence of non-verbal cues when communicating online may constrain emotional utterances, thereby hindering one's ability to convey and interpret a message accurately and effectively [2]. Given that text-based messages can be revisited, interlocutors cannot refine or retract a position, and nuances of their meaning may thus be misconstrued. Further, in their investigation of interactive, online teacher development exchanges, Tang and Chung [3] found that Chinese learners of English tended to post affirmative comments, while excluding negative evaluations, to avoid anything their interlocutors might find intimidating, possibly because they lacked confidence in choosing the appropriate words, even after years of English language education. This concern has taken on particular

importance since the outbreak of COVID-19, due to the increasing need for individuals to communicate and collaborate online [4]. Given the important learning-support role that politeness plays in promoting effective and sustainable online learning communities [3], examining how interlocutors convey politeness when using a second or foreign language appears necessary for greater language and cultural awareness.

In the present study, the participants were a group of pre-service and in-service Chinese teachers of English who interacted regularly in a community of practice (CoP) during a teaching practicum. Their interactions, in the form of commentaries on teaching plans, were extracted and categorised into three discourse functions: making suggestions, positive evaluations, and negative evaluations. The commentaries were then coded with reference to a set of politeness markers to explore features that constitute the signalling of politeness by Chinese speakers of English in non-face-to-face interactions involving hierarchical relationships in the CoP, which adopted English as the medium of communication. The findings reveal an association between the social relationships and the characteristics of interactions regarding politeness.

2. Research Background

2.1. Teacher Development through Online Communities

Spalding et al. [5] defined "teacher learning" as a slow, complicated, and uncertain process for the teachers and students alike. Given that the problems of real-world practice can be challenging and ever-changing, a technical–rational model that applies a body of expert knowledge to known situations to produce rational solutions to problems is inadequate for addressing the practitioners' professional needs [6]. Professional development for teachers needs to be based on the teachers' own artistry and competence, while affording opportunities for teacher exchanges to encourage multiple perspectives. Over the past few decades, the shift in emphasis in teacher professional development from formal training to "learning in practice" has resulted in many studies investigating the role of CoPs. CoPs comprise members with a range of levels and expertise, with shared interests, who "interact, learn together, build relationships, and, in the process, develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment" [7] (p. 34), which enable them to participate in professional exchanges as part of their daily activities. With the rapid development of the Internet and globalisation, CoPs have gone "virtual", although the CoP concept was originally premised on situated learning in a face-to-face setting. There has been growing interest in the value of the online CoP as a model for teacher development, especially after the onset of COVID-19, which has clearly pointed to a need to establish new, robust professional networks among teachers for social connections and meaningful communication online [4].

Owing to the potential of online CoPs for fostering professional development [3], considerable scholarly attention has focused on how teachers share ideas and practice to create meaningful learning experiences during online interactions. Irwin and Hramiak [8], for instance, who analysed the discourse of an online discussion between 17 prospective teachers and their tutor, found that experienced teachers should not only strive to convey how to teach, but should also be aware of how their language use shapes trainee teachers' identities. Çelik [9] explored the role of social and affective factors in shaping the group dynamics of an online teacher education CoP, formed by graduate students holding English language teaching positions in Turkey. A discourse analysis of the messages posted online and in self-administered interviews revealed the participants to be reluctant to openly express negative attitudes in the online forum, possibly because of the Turkish culture's promotion of social harmony. This conclusion aligns with Tang and Chung's [3] findings in the Chinese context. The members of the online CoP they investigated gave mostly positive feedback during social interactions, owing to the perceived need to maintain social harmony, a central feature of Chinese culture. In general, studies suggest that collaborative learning in an online environment has a substantial impact on teachers' identity construction and idea exchange for professional growth, while highlighting the importance of language awareness and relationship building. Because the ability to consider

courtesy when interacting in cyberspace is an important element of online learning [10], more empirical research on politeness during online interactions between teachers appears timely for understanding how teachers with differing social statuses express politeness for meaningful communication, so that professional development can be facilitated.

2.2. Conveyance of Politeness

Politeness has long been considered a major determinant of linguistic behaviour, with wide descriptive power [11]. As Yang et al. [12] claim, politeness in discourse is more than just an additional veneer to make one's words "nicer". It serves to reflect the relationship between interlocutors. Goffman's [13] construct of "face" is one of the best-known models for analysing politeness [14]. Building on Goffman's [13] work, Brown and Levinson [15] define face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (p. 61). In this context, it is assumed that individuals have two desires: a desire to be approved of by others (termed "positive face"), and a desire to be unimpeded by others in one's actions (termed "negative face"). Politeness strategies come into play to support or enhance an addressee's positive face, while avoiding potentially face-threatening acts. Positive politeness strategies are similar to House and Kasper's [16] "upgraders", i.e., modality markers that strengthen an utterance's likely impact on an addressee and establish between-interlocutor harmony, whereas negative politeness strategies are akin to "downgraders", which diminish the likely impact of a speaker or writer's utterance on the listener or reader. However, Brown and Levinson's [15] interpretation of a strategic speaker attempting to achieve communicative goals, while evaluating and selecting strategies to minimise face threats, has been criticised as overly deterministic, because their work sees politeness as a question of judgements concerning appropriate norms, and considers "sociological" variables to be "static social entities", determining the extent of the politeness offered, thereby reifying power and social distance [14] (p. 114). As Watts [14] suggested, linguistic utterances are "not just actions" but "social actions" (p. 103). The reasons why such behaviour occurs in a given social interaction should thus not be overlooked. For example, Sjöström et al. [17] observed that people often behave very differently in cyberspace than in face-to-face interactions. The emergence of the word "netiquette", a blend of "network" and "etiquette", to describe the proper manners for online communication indicates the importance of taking politeness into consideration when interacting online.

To date, only a handful of studies have examined politeness in interactions between teachers, despite the important learning-support role politeness plays in professional development. Copland [18] explored face and face-threatening acts in feedback conferences through talk-in-interaction focus groups and interviews. Analysing the data collected from four teachers and nine students enrolled in an initial teacher education programme in the United Kingdom, the researcher found group feedback to have its own norms of interaction; such face-threatening talk as negative evaluations were acceptable, because face threats could be mitigated or contested via the use of humour and metaphor, or simply be accepted as useful criticism. Donaghue [19] examined how an English-language teacher and his supervisors in the United Arab Emirates engaged in feedback meetings after lesson observations, with a focus on the participants' relational work pertinent to their identity construction. She found the supervisors' identity as expert/advisor to be constructed, in part, by ascribing such negative identities as "unaware teacher" and "poor instruction giver" to the teacher, using both politeness strategies and critical behaviour that displayed little concern for his face needs (p. 114). Evidently, those in positions of authority may not always consider politeness necessary but, instead, use language as a manipulative tool to control discussions and/or suppress others' views [20]. Although studies conducted in Western contexts offer a "sufficiently stable basis" for analyses of politeness and serve as a "powerful way of predicting" how words are chosen in the event of a threat to an interlocutor's face [14] (pp. 250–251), researchers have argued that, unlike Asian cultures, which are more collectivist, Western cultures tend to be individualistic. Although it has been shown that teachers in the West appear to find negative evaluations

acceptable, language teachers in the Chinese context may avoid face-threatening talk and rely on positive politeness strategies to foster a sense of community by creating a comfort zone in which to exchange ideas while encouraging the co-construction of knowledge [3,12]. Further exploration of how language teachers manage identity in professional interactions involving critical feedback in the Chinese context appears useful, for it can enhance our understanding of the interactions that are culturally situated within a wider network of institutional processes and goals.

Whilst this literature review reveals the ways that politeness may influence teachers' professional learning, several issues merit attention. First, it remains unclear how interlocutors of differing social statuses express politeness when communicating online, and how they convey politeness strategies in non-face-to-face interactions in a non-native language environment. Second, no studies we are aware of have examined the factors contributing to the conveyance of politeness in online interactions for teacher development regarding social relationships, with a focus on interlocutors' linguistic elements and their relation to social practices in a Chinese context. Chinese societies have respected hierarchical relationships and upheld traditional Chinese norms of politeness for thousands of years. Hence, the way in which Chinese teachers interact in an online community using a non-native language, i.e., English, has important implications for professional development in the digital era.

3. The Study

This research took the form of an interpretive study focusing on the association between the use of politeness markers and social relationships. Predominately qualitative in nature, the study analysed (1) the interactive commentaries among the student teachers, and between the student teachers and experienced teachers, within an online CoP, and (2) the transcripts of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six participants. While the interactive commentaries were quantitatively analysed, the analysis was conducted primarily to provide a general picture of politeness marker use and to elicit views on the conveyance of politeness in a blog. Accordingly, the study was guided by two questions:
RQ1. How do student teachers and their mentors convey politeness when making suggestions and offering positive and negative evaluations in an online CoP?
RQ2. What factors contribute to the conveyance of politeness in interactive commentaries?

3.1. Context of the Study

The online CoP was established for students, graduates, and teachers of an English language teacher education programme offered by a university in Hong Kong, with the aim of providing professional support. It was hosted on an open-source, blog-based platform, developed with the Web 2.0 concept with publishing tools that provide a dialogic, collaborative environment to facilitate interactive exchanges. Participants of the online CoP could freely edit their posts and comments using different font sizes, colours, emoticons, and images. The online CoP also functioned as a bank of personalised blog-based teaching portfolios that recorded the student teachers' work and reflections. The student teachers were required to upload their lesson plans, teaching materials, reflective entries, and videotaped lessons during the teaching practicum. They were also expected to interact with the other blog members in English. The online CoP is a closed group that requires authentication, although the members enjoy lifelong membership. At the time of writing, there were 425 members with 13,344 posts, 15,288 comments, and 599 recorded lessons.

3.2. Participants

A cohort of 24 student teachers (19 of them women) were selected for the study, due to their active participation in the online CoP. During their six-week teaching practicum, the student teachers worked closely with eight frontline teachers of English (seven of them women), who served as their mentors on the blog. The mentors were invited to join the online CoP as they were enthusiastic teachers with extensive experience in English language teaching. Eager to promote quality teaching, they provided the student teachers

with guidance and support, by commenting on their lesson plans and reflections, and gave them advice on such teaching-related issues as instructional skills and classroom management. Cantonese was the mother tongue of all participants, but they were also competent in English, reaching IELTS Level 7 or above. They also had experience living in an English-speaking country, which was one of the requirements of the teacher education programme. It was thus reasonable to expect the participants to be capable of using appropriate language to express their views when interacting with others online in their second language. To facilitate the interaction and monitoring during the teaching practicum, the participating student teachers were divided into groups of four or five, with each group attached to two mentors. However, the group boundaries were loose, as all the CoP members could read and comment on any posts that interested them. The participants are referred to throughout the paper by pseudonyms. The pseudonyms assigned to the mentors all begin with the letter "M", and those assigned to the prospective teachers with "S".

3.3. Data Sources

The data came from the naturally occurring exchanges collected from the blog and the interviews with six participants. During the practicum, the participants uploaded 452 posts and made 570 comments. Two major types of content dominated the posts: (1) lessons and materials design, and (2) reflections on teaching. To answer the research questions, the scope of analysis was confined to posts that included interactions. Posts that attracted less than two comments were excluded. Hence, the dataset for analysis comprised 174 interactive comments by 21 participants, totalling 26,500+ words. In addition to the data collected from the blog, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The researchers regarded the interviews as useful for enabling them to "press not only for complete answers but for responses about complex and deep issues" [21] (p. 409). They also believed that the interviews would aid both the analysis of the participants' personal experiences in interacting with others on the blog, and an understanding of the motivations behind their linguistic choices.

The three mentors (Macy, Melissa, and Michael) and three student teachers (Sandy, Sophia, and Steve), responsible for the largest number of comments in the analysed posts, were selected for the interviews because they were considered to be information-rich informants who could provide qualitative evidence to further explain and interpret the findings from the selected posts. All the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, as per the participants' preference and to ensure more open communication. As shown in Appendix A, the interviews began with general questions concerning the participants' perceived role in the online community and views on the importance of conveying politeness in the blog. Subsequent questions were individualised, soliciting the participants' explanations for the language they used (see questions 8 and 9 for examples). Follow-up questions were raised where necessary.

3.4. Procedure, Analytical Framework and Method of Analysis

Prior to the data analysis, the researchers read the participants' comments repeatedly, to develop a thorough understanding of the content, and to discern recurring patterns of politeness markers from the interlocutory moves, with reference to the discourse functions presented in Tang and Chung [3], one of the few studies exploring the discourse features of an online CoP in an Asian context. The comments with the discourse functions identified as providing either positive or negative evaluation, or making suggestions, were extracted for the analysis, based on the researchers' views that these functions frequently involve the use of politeness markers. The definition of each function and an example for each from the participants' posts, cited verbatim from the blog, are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Definition and examples of the three discourse functions.

	Discourse Function	Definition	Example
1	Positive evaluation	The writer agrees with or expresses appreciation for a previous message.	I do think your PPT files are nicely designed. (Minnie)
2	Negative evaluation	The writer disagrees with a previous post.	I am not sure if they could produce a poem individually. (Steve)
3	Making suggestions	The writer makes suggestions on how to improve teaching and learning.	I'd suggest you lead the whole class to read one to two paragraphs together. (Macy)

After selecting the comments for analysis, the participants' use of politeness markers was analysed using a coding scheme modified from that in House and Kasper [16] (see Table 2). Their scheme offers a typology of linguistic expressions commonly used to signal politeness [14] and is frequently used or referred to in the literature (see, e.g., [22]). Three major amendments were made to the original scheme. First, three categories of upgraders (i.e., lexical intensifiers, aggressive interrogatives and rhetorical appeal) were omitted, as they contribute little to the politeness of an interaction [14]. Second, the "politeness markers" that appear as the first type of downgraders in House and Kasper's [16] scheme were renamed "politeness expressions" to avoid confusion. The term "play-down" was also changed to "softeners" to avoid confusion, as the former is often used as a phrasal verb referring to an attempt to make light of something or dismiss its significance. "Softeners" was considered to better represent syntactic devices used to tone down an utterance's likely perlocutionary effect. Third, the authors added emoticons to the scheme to permit a more comprehensive analysis of politeness in the CoP, as they are commonly recognised indicators of politeness in online communication [23–25]. More importantly, they can function as upgraders when making positive evaluations, or as downgraders when making negative evaluations or suggestions.

Table 2. Codes for and examples of the politeness markers considered.

A.	**Different types of downgraders that soften the impact a speaker's utterance is likely to have on his interlocutor:**
1.	**Politeness expressions** Optional elements added to an utterance to show deference to the interlocutor and to make a bid for cooperative behavior, e.g., *please*.
2.	**Softeners** Syntactical devices used to tone down the perlocutionary effect an utterance is likely to have on the addressee, e.g., a. Past tense: *I wondered whether* . . . b. Durative aspect markers: *I was wondering* . . . c. Negation: *It might not be a good idea*. d. Interrogative: *Mightn't it be a good idea?* e. Modals: *may, might, can, could, shall*, etc.
3.	**Consultative devices** Optional devices, mostly ritualised formulas, by means of which speakers seek to involve their interlocutor and solicit their cooperation, e.g., *Would you mind if* . . . , etc.
4.	**Hedges** Adverbials (excluding sentence adverbials) by means of which a speaker avoids a precise propositional specification in order to circumvent the potential provocation such a specification might entail; the speaker affords his or her interlocutor the option of completing the utterance, thereby imposing his or her own intent less forcefully on the interlocutor, e.g., *kind of, sort of, somehow, rather*, etc.

Table 2. *Cont.*

5.	**Understaters** Adverbial modifiers by means of which a speaker underrepresents the state of affairs denoted in the proposition, e.g., *a little bit*, *not very much*, etc.
6.	**Downtoners** Sentence modifiers that modulate the impact of the speaker's utterance, e.g., *maybe*, *perhaps*, *probably*, *possibly*, etc.
7.	**Committers** Sentence modifiers that explicitly characterise the utterance as a personal remark and lessen the degree to which the speaker commits themselves to the propositional content of the utterance, e.g., *In my opinion, I think, I guess, I believe, I suppose*, etc.
8.	**Forewarning** Linguistic structures that express a metacomment on a face-threatening act, e.g., *This may be a bit boring to you, but . . .* , etc.
9.	**Hesitators** Pauses filled in with non-lexical phonetic material or instances of stuttering, e.g., *erm*, *er*, etc.
10.	**Scope-staters** Elements in which the speaker explicitly expresses their subjective opinion, e.g., *I'm not happy about the fact that you . . . , I'm afraid . . .* , etc.
11.	**Agent avoiders** Syntactic devices by means of which it is possible for the speaker not to mention themselves or their interlocutor as agents, thereby avoiding a direct attack, for instance, e.g., passive, impersonal constructions using *they*, *one*, etc.
B.	**Different types of upgraders that strengthen the impact an utterance is likely to have on the addressee:**
12.	**Overstaters** Adverbial modifiers through which the speaker's proposition is stated in an exaggerated manner, e.g., *definitely*, *totally*, *of course*, *absolutely*, etc.
13.	**Intensifiers** Adverbial modifiers used by the speaker to intensify certain elements of the proposition made in their utterance, e.g., *very*, *indeed*, *really*, *actually*, *do* (auxiliary)
14	**Committers** Modifiers that help the speaker show their strong degree of commitment to a proposition, e.g., *I'm sure*, *surely*, *certainly*, etc.
C.	**Other:**
15.	**Emoticons** Facial expressions pictorially represented by punctuation, letters or images to express the writer's mood. They serve as upgraders for a positive evaluation and as downgraders for a negative evaluation or suggestion, e.g., *I think there is room for improvement* ☺.

Following an analysis of the politeness markers, with reference to the three discourse functions, and the hierarchical relationship between the participants identified in the selected written communicative data, the interviews were transcribed, with the transcripts then coded for content analysis using word tables. This analysis started with reading and rereading the transcripts to familiarise ourselves with the data, followed by identifying, selecting and coding the information relevant to the research questions through an iterative process.

To ensure the study's reliability, 25% of the analysed comments and interview transcripts were coded by an assistant to check that the researchers' interpretation was generally

acceptable. The interrater reliability, calculated using Miles and Huberman's [26] technique, was 95%; the coding disagreements were discussed until a consensus was reached. Further, the relevant interview excerpts were translated into English. Given that politeness depends on the situational context, both the preliminary analysis of the politeness marker use and the relevant sections of the initial draft of this paper were sent to the participants for member-checking to prevent researcher bias, and the informants confirmed that their data were interpreted correctly by the researchers.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study without consequence at any time, and the interviewees were assured that they could refuse to answer any questions they did not wish to respond to. All the collected data were kept secure to ensure confidentiality.

4. Findings

The 174 interactive comments made by the 21 participants were categorised under the three discourse functions presented in Table 1 and coded using the politeness marker framework in Table 2. Section 4.1 focuses on the use of politeness markers, and Section 4.2 highlights the salient findings of the factors contributing to such use, based on the interviews.

4.1. RQ1: Use of Politeness Markers by the Student Teachers and Their Mentors When Giving Suggestions and Making Evaluations

Figure 1, which presents an overview of the politeness markers identified in the comments posted by the student teachers and mentors, based on a frequency count, reveals that the markers are diverse. In terms of quantity and variety, the mentors tended to use more markers than the student teachers, especially the interrogatives (A2d), modals (A2e), downtoners (A6), overstaters (B12), committers as upgraders (B14), and emoticons (C15). The examples below illustrate each category:
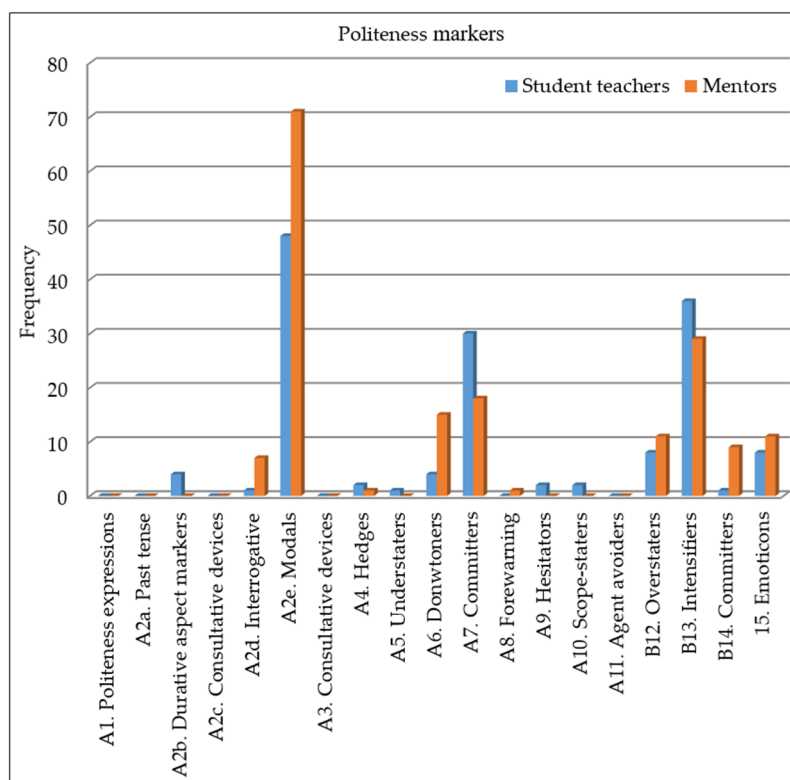

Figure 1. Overview of politeness markers derived from comments in the selected posts.

Interrogative (A2d)

Example 1. Do you enjoy chatting with your students?
Example 2. Can you share with me some questions that you plan to ask your students in the reading lesson?

Modals (A2e)

Example 3. You *may* introduce a few sample sentences to your students and let them learn more about this text type.
Example 4. You *can* give your students more 'freedom' to work on their own.

Downtoners (A6)

Example 5. *Maybe* it turned out that students' ability was a bit higher and your lesson was not challenging enough.
Example 6. *Perhaps* you can teach them Phonics. I believe it is fundamental to spelling.

Overstaters (B12)

Example 7. I *totally* agree with you.
Example 8. You're *absolutely* right in suggesting that we shouldn't give up the students who are 'temporarily' not very proficient in English.

Upgraders (B14)

Example 9. *I'm sure* your students can earn a lot from your teaching!
Example 10. We *certainly* need to take different issues into consideration to cater for learner diversity in the English language classroom.

Emoticons (C15)

Example 11. Hang in there! ☺
Example 12. Feel free to talk to me if you need more advice! ☺

The student teachers, in contrast, demonstrated greater use of the durative aspect markers (A2b), committers as downgraders (A7), and intensifiers (B13):

Durative aspect markers (A2b)

Example 13. I *was wondering* if I should have chit chats with my students in Cantonese.
Example 14. I *was wondering* if you could assign some teaching roles to capable students.

Committers as downgraders (A7)

Example 15. *I guess* we can prepare some challenging tasks for our students.
Example 16. *I believe* we have to be quite strict at the very beginning.

Intensifiers (B13)

Example 17. I am *really* impressed to learn that you have adopted different ways to praise your students.
Example 18. *Do* take it as a golden opportunity to know more about the school.

Notably, both the student teachers and mentors frequently relied on certain politeness markers, including the modals (A2e), downtoners (A6), committers as downgraders, (A7), overstaters (B12), and intensifiers (B13), to demonstrate politeness, as written communication lacks paralinguistic features. None of the selected comments featured politeness expressions (A1), consultative devices (A3), or agent avoiders (A11).

In addition to the greater usage and range of politeness markers among the mentors, the results also show the relationship between the use of politeness markers, specific discourse functions, and the hierarchical role of the poster in question, i.e., the mentor or

mentee. Table 3 shows that the mentors and student teachers often used intensifiers (B13), including "really", "actually" and "do", when making positive evaluations.

In the case of negative evaluations, a different set of politeness markers, as well as a greater divergence between the mentors and student teachers, was evident. Although it comes as little surprise that almost all the politeness markers used in this case were downgraders, the differing preferences displayed by the two participant groups is notable. The mentors favoured the modals (A2e), downtoners (A5), and intensifiers (B13), whilst the student teachers preferred the durative aspect markers (A2b), hedges (A4), and scope-staters (A10). None of the participants used emoticons in this discussion context. In terms of making suggestions, the modals (A2e) stood out as the dominant politeness marker. As for the negative evaluations, both the mentors and student teachers used committers as downgraders (A7) more often than the other markers when offering suggestions.

Table 3. Discourse functions and use of politeness markers.

Politeness Markers		Positive Evaluation		Negative Evaluation		Suggestions	
		S	M	S	M	S	M
		%	%	%	%	%	%
A. Downgraders							
1	Politeness expressions	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
2	Play-downs						
a.	Past tense	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
b.	Durative aspect markers	0.0	0.0	9.1	0.0	4.7	0.0
c.	Negation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
d.	Interrogative	0.0	0.0	9.1	9.1	0.0	5.7
e.	Modals	12.6	16.2	0.0	36.4	60.9	54.6
3	Consultative devices	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
4	Hedges	0.0	0.0	18.2	9.1	0.0	0.0
5	Understaters	0.0	0.0	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
6	Downtoners	4.2	0.0	0.0	18.2	1.6	12.3
7	Committers	23.6	8.9	36.4	18.2	14.1	10.4
8	Forewarning	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9
9	Hesitators	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.1	0.0
10	Scope-staters	0.0	0.0	18.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
B. Upgraders							
11	Agent avoiders	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
12	Overstaters	8.3	16.1	0.0	0.0	3.1	1.9
13	Intensifiers	41.7	37.5	0.0	9.1	9.4	6.6
14	Committers	1.4	10.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.8
C. Other							
15	Emoticons	8.3	10.7	0.0	0.0	3.1	4.7
	Total *	100.1	100.1	100.1	100.1	100	99.9

Remarks: S = student teachers; M = mentors. The percentages may not total 100% due to rounding *.

4.2. RQ2: Factors Contributing to the Signalling of Politeness in Interactive Commentaries of the Online CoP for Teachers

As noted, three student teachers and three mentors were asked to further explain and interpret the findings from the selected posts. The major factors contributing to the signalling of politeness in their interactive commentaries are presented in this section.

4.2.1. Perceived Need for Relationship Building in the Online Community

The remarks made by the student teachers and mentors make it evident that the purpose of using upgraders when making positive evaluations was relationship-building in the online community. Sophia and Sandy claimed that they made use of intensifiers (B13) to emphasise their agreement with what other participants posted on the blog, with the aim of fostering good relationships with their fellow online CoP members. Specifically, Sophia claimed that she added "do" before the verb "agree" to emphasise her agreement with her peers or mentors, and to demonstrate her happiness at finding someone who shared a similar viewpoint. In Sandy's case, the intensifier "really" was used when making a positive evaluation to build a relationship with her peers by showing them recognition. She commented: "I like using 'really', especially when making positive evaluations of my

peers' work, as it helps to boost their confidence. Some of my peers were frustrated in the teaching practice. I wanted to give them my recognition and develop a good relationship with them by showing them my agreement".

Similarly, two of the mentors, Macy and Melissa, claimed that they tried to develop a good relationship with the student teachers by showing their appreciation for their work. While Macy said that she deliberately used the intensifiers (B13) "really" and "very" to provide her mentees with assurance and improve her relationship with them by offering genuinely positive feedback, Melissa said that it was her intention to use politeness markers to encourage and instil confidence in the student teachers. Her common use of such expressions as, "I totally agree with you" and "You're absolutely right", when providing positive evaluations, showed that she considered overstaters (B12) an effective means of agreeing with them.

4.2.2. The Hierarchical Relationship between Mentors and Mentees

According to both the mentors and student teachers, the politeness markers were used to avoid face-threatening utterances and tone down any feeling of negativity. The student teachers (Sandy and Sophia) reported considering it important to interact with their mentors in a polite manner, because the latter had offered help to them and their peers in the online community on a voluntary basis. Sandy said: "I proofread what I type, particularly the tone of my messages and the wording, when interacting with the mentors on the blog as I hope that they can feel my politeness, humbleness, and sincerity. However, I might not do so when interacting with peers, as I think our conversations can be more casual". Further, it is clear from Sophia's remarks that her decision about politeness marker use depended on the status of the message recipient: "I tried my best to be polite when interacting with the mentors but paid relatively little attention to how I conveyed my messages when leaving comments for my peers. This was because the mentors were there on the blog to help us on a voluntary basis. I didn't want them to think that I'm impolite, question why students do not respect their seniors nowadays, and refuse to help us in the future". Steve, in contrast, did not seem particularly concerned about politeness when interacting with the mentors in the online community. He commented: "I don't think the mentors are superior. As I'd never met the mentors, interacting with them was like waiting for someone's reply after typing questions on Yahoo. I wasn't concerned about being polite when interacting with them".

All the mentor interviewees agreed that they had intentionally used politeness markers to tone down their views when interacting with the student teachers online. Macy, when asked to explain her frequent use of "maybe" in relation to making suggestions, replied: "I wanted to tone down my opinions. Although I could simply have written 'you can', I added 'maybe' in front to make my suggestions milder. If I had used 'should', that'd be a big problem. I also avoided using 'must' to downplay my authoritative role, as I wanted to show the student teachers my respect and let them know that they could make their own judgments about my suggestions". For Melissa, "may" should be used to convey politeness when making suggestions. In her words, "I paid attention to my language use because I hope that my student teachers will not treat me as an authority figure but consider me to be a polite person". Similarly, Michael's comments suggested that his use of committers as downgraders (A7) to offer suggestions in a rather indirect manner was associated with his desire not to come across as authoritative: "I didn't want to portray myself as an authority figure. Therefore, I typed "I think" before my suggestions to make them less direct. I preferred using "I think" to show my student teachers that it was not a must to follow my advice. Yet, I used "need" when talking about something that a teacher has to do because of school policies. To be honest, I don't think 'need' or 'should' are very strong words. 'Must' is strong, however, and I thus avoid using it". Evidently, the mentors' attempts to soften their suggestions and show their mentees respect via the use of politeness markers indicated that they were conscious of their hierarchical relationship with the mentees.

4.2.3. The Complex Nature of Teaching and Learning

For the mentors and student teachers, the complicated nature of teaching and learning also played a role in their use of politeness markers. Sandy said she prefers "can" and "may", modals that express possibility, but she avoids "should" and "must", modals that express relatively strong propositions, based on the belief that her suggestions may not be appropriate, as "every teacher has his or her own teaching style". Likewise, Sophia used committers such as "I think" to reduce the assertiveness of her suggestions on teaching and encourage further exploration when she was uncertain about their appropriateness or feasibility. She explained: "When I'm not 100% sure that my suggestion is right, I use 'I think'." Steve commented in the interview that he seldom used "can" or "may" when interacting with his peers on the blog as he preferred using "have to" and "should" to make suggestions on teaching with a high degree of certainty: "I use 'should' or 'have to' when making suggestions, as I like to show my peers how certain I am and convince them to follow my advice because I have acted on my suggestions before and found them to work. If my peers have room for improvement, I will simply tell them so".

Although the mentors had more teaching experience than the student teachers, they indicated that their use of politeness markers resulted from their uncertainty over the suggestions they made regarding teaching quality, which they believed depended on variables such as the class size and students' proficiency level. Like the two student teachers, Michael said he often uses "can" and "may" but avoids "must" because he considers it to be too strong. He further expressed the belief that "student teachers know their own teaching context the best, and they are the people who have the final say about the different decisions relating to their teaching". Accordingly, he intends his suggestions only as a reference. His views were shared by Macy, who said she prefers using "maybe" when making suggestions to soften them, as she believes she may lack a comprehensive picture of some of the factors that pre-service teachers face in their schools, such as the class size, student ability, and the classroom environment. Similarly, Melissa suggested that she prefers using "may" to avoid giving absolute answers that some strong terms imply, as she cannot identify the "best" ways to teach, even with all her experience. Having said that, she claimed that she often uses "should" when interacting with student teachers because she would like them to take her advice to avoid the disappointment resulting from ineffective teaching. In Melissa's view, "should" is used to convey certainty and to console student teachers by assuring them of their ability to improve their teaching. She said, "I sometimes use "should" because I'm quite certain about what I'm saying. For instance, I won't say "you may want to get the students' attention before you start teaching" because I'm quite certain that it is important to do so. I also use "should" to give student teachers assurance. Because they (the participating student teachers) weren't satisfied with their teaching (in the teaching practicum), I deliberately chose to use it to tell them my advice to cheer them up by convincing them that they are capable of making improvements".

4.2.4. Academic Nature of the Online CoP

Whilst we expected that emoticons (C15) would often be used to compensate for the lack of non-verbal cues in the online CoP, in fact, only 11 emoticons were identified in the mentors' commentaries, nine of which were used by Melissa. From the viewpoint of Sophia, Steve and Michael, the use of emoticons should be minimised, due to the "academic nature" of the online CoP.

Melissa, however, offered the view that pictorial representations of facial expressions may encourage people to share their feelings: "Using emoticons seems to be a way of making myself more approachable. I like to portray myself as a friendly mentor so that student teachers are more willing to take my advice . . . . Sometimes, I also add a smiley face after making a positive evaluation to show that I am happy to share similar thoughts with the student teachers. Hopefully, I can encourage them to share their experiences with me by doing so". This view coincides with that of Skovholt et al. [27], who argue that emoticons in written interactions function as contextualisation cues to enhance interpersonal relations

and help to intensify such expressive speech acts as greetings, gratitude, compliments, and appraisals, expressing interest in and approval of the addressee's positive face.

In Melissa's case, she often used emoticons to signal sincerity and support. They can also be perceived as an expression of solidarity and desire to be closer to mentees. Despite her use of emoticons, Melissa observed the academic nature of the online CoP when using politeness markers for interactions with fellow blog members, as Sophia, Steve and Michael did. Melissa said she frequently uses "I wonder whether" (A2) when conveying messages on the blog but avoids using it with people she is very familiar with. She considers the phrase to be "formal and appropriate for use in the online CoP, which encourages academic discussion".

4.2.5. Lack of Non-Verbal Cues in Online Discussions

The data analysis also indicated that politeness markers were sometimes used to compensate for the lack of non-verbal cues. Noting that the interactions in question were not face-to-face, two of the mentors said they made use of the politeness markers to enhance the clarity of their messages. To illustrate, Michael claimed that he used intensifiers (B13) to "strengthen (his) views, express appreciation, and show agreement as (his) interactions with the student teachers in the practicum were not face-to-face". Macy also reported using intensifiers (B13), when offering a positive evaluation, and downtoners (A6) when making suggestions, to avoid any misunderstanding owing to the nature of the blog: "Since the student teachers couldn't see my facial expressions, I worried that they might misinterpret my words. So, I deliberately used 'do', 'really' and 'very' when making a positive evaluation to show my agreement or 'maybe' when making suggestions to soften my tone".

4.2.6. Semantic Knowledge and Writing Style of Second Language Learners

Finally, findings from the interview suggest that one's semantic knowledge and personal writing style affect the use of politeness markers. Although the need to place a high value on politeness when making suggestions and negative evaluations to avoid any offence was repeatedly mentioned by Sandy and Sophia, Steve indicated that he tends not to think much about an interlocutor's feelings when offering suggestions, as doing so is "too complicated". To him, being "straightforward" is important, and the use of "should" to make suggestions is "somehow similar to 'may', as both of them are not too strong". All the mentors claimed that they were aware of their choice of words when conversing with the student teachers on the blog. They explained that both the accuracy and tone of the messages they conveyed warranted attention when expressing ideas in English, which is their second language. Macy, for example, explained that she uses "maybe" (A6) when making negative evaluations because she worries that she may not always express her ideas very clearly in English and may offend student teachers and/or discourage them from sharing their experiences with her.

Further, it appears that both politeness and language accuracy were highly valued in online interactions by the second language users in this study. Writing online posts and comments was treated as an English writing task by most of the mentors and student teachers. Two of the student teachers (Sandy and Sophia) and two of the mentors (Macy and Michael) said that they usually prepare a draft of their posts instead of typing it directly onto the blog. Sandy, Sophia, and Macy stated that they proofread their comments before posting them to "avoid grammatical mistakes" and "ensure politeness". Michael said that he proofreads what he types before posting it on the blog and changes his diction if he feels the tone is impolite. He reasoned: "I paid attention to my language use not only because of the mentorship programme but also because of the fact that I'm a teacher. I always think about my language accuracy while using English. Very often, I also check whether my tone is polite or not." Michael's explanation suggests that the higher frequency and wider range of politeness markers found in the mentors' comments may be the result of their perceived dual role as English teacher and mentor.

5. Discussion and Implications

The study investigated how a group of Chinese student teachers and their mentors conveyed politeness when making suggestions and offering positive and negative evaluations in a non-face-to-face, non-native language environment, with reference to the social relationship between them.

5.1. Politeness and Chinese Culture

While the conveyance of politeness was evident in the online CoP for teacher development, the mentors and student teachers used different politeness markers when posting comments on the blog concerned. Downgraders were used frequently in negative evaluations to avoid causing offence and for face-saving purposes, whilst upgraders were used frequently in positive evaluations to strengthen the degree of appreciation and facilitate relationship-building. Downgraders featured prominently in the participants' suggestions when they were uncertain about the feasibility or effectiveness of the propositions therein. Although that finding appears commonsensical on the surface, its significance lies in its support for the underlying purpose of politeness proposed by Goffman [13], namely, to enhance the addressee's positive face and avoid possible face-threatening acts.

The politeness observed in the online CoP may be related to Chinese culture, in which, according to Gao (1998) [28], politeness is deeply rooted with modesty and considered an essential part of the socialisation process. As noted, the participating student teachers often used upgraders to convey their appreciation for the others' work, which is consistent with the frequent use of such expressions as *da zuo* (大作; 'masterpiece'), *gao jian* (高見; 'high opinion') and *wei lun* (偉論; 'excellent speech') by the Chinese to compliment others. In addition, the Chinese ritualise public conversations to prevent face-threatening situations, as most regard conflict and confrontation as unpleasant and undesirable [6,29], which probably explains why most of the mentors and student teachers often used downgraders in making suggestions or negative evaluations. Although some of the latter mentioned paying extra attention to politeness when interacting with their mentors, to demonstrate respect, the politeness markers they used in their comments to the mentors and their peers were similar. It appears that politeness is valued in interactions in Chinese contexts regardless of the social relationship concerned.

An interesting finding is that the characteristics of the interactions differed according to the participants' social statuses. Whilst the student teachers were found to be aware of their having a lower status than their mentors and thus avoided confronting them by using politeness markers, some of the mentors deliberately downplayed their role as authority figures by being highly polite. This finding contradicts Donaghue [19] and Sikandar and Hussain [20], who found that those in positions of authority use language as a manipulative tool to demonstrate power, control discussions, and/or suppress others' views. It seems that the mentors in the current study, despite being more experienced than the student teachers, wanted to establish a close relationship with them as they perceived the online platform to be a community in which to co-construct knowledge and exchange ideas.

5.2. Instilling L1 Culture in an L2 Online CoP for Teacher Development

In addition to suggesting an association among the use of politeness markers, social relationships, and the value of "face" in Chinese culture, the findings also affirm that the professional and academic nature of an online CoP, along with its lack of non-verbal cues, are related to the use of such markers in online comments. Given the absence of non-verbal cues and sound inflections, i.e., two important qualities of communication, one would expect a greater use of emoticons to convey expressions [23–25]. The student teachers and mentors, however, tended to avoid using them because they associated them with casual conversations in an instant-messaging environment, inappropriate for academic and intellectual exchange. As Phirangee and Hewitt [30] suggest, it seems odd for one to value discussion with emoticons but avoid using them just because of an academic setting. This

is because one would not expect to be criticised for smiling or nodding while talking in a face-to-face lesson.

Notably, the data collected in this study suggest that it is a lack of semantic rather than syntactic knowledge among second language learners that affected their choice of wording to convey politeness. For instance, one of the mentors suggested that he uses "should" and "need to" when making suggestions because they are milder in tone than "must". In fact, however, these modals may not convey politeness, as they are expressions used to indicate a requirement or obligation [31]. In addition, several of the mentors and student teachers avoided negative evaluations altogether because they worried about intimidating their interlocutors, even though they used politeness markers to reduce the potential face-threats caused by disagreements or negative comments, and to strengthen the degree of appreciation or agreement when making positive evaluations. It is possible that the participants, as second language learners, lacked confidence in their English to evaluate their peers negatively.

Clearly, the findings offer insight into the significance of language and cultural awareness in an online environment. The dubious claim made by one mentor that "should" and "need to" are mild expressions for making suggestions indicates the importance of language awareness when conversing with others, as differing interpretations of a message can lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication, especially in a context such as the one in this study, where all members of the CoP were second language-users with differing degrees of communicative competence. As Tang and Chung [3] suggested, it is of pivotal importance that the members of online CoPs develop the necessary linguistic competence to establish and maintain genuine communication that promotes learning. They should also be made aware that emoticons can be employed to reduce the ambiguity of an online text passage or convey the emotional intent, despite the academic and professional content, and that different conversational strategies (e.g., the use of humour and co-switching) can be used to achieve solidarity and convey politeness (see e.g., [18,32]). Using such strategies can help enhance the language awareness of those who engage in online teaching CoPs and alleviate their concerns about giving constructive feedback that may be considered intimidating, thereby encouraging meaningful discussion that facilitates teacher development.

6. Conclusions

The findings have uncovered the use of politeness markers in an online professional community, with reference to three discourse functions. The distribution and frequency of the politeness markers used also shed light on the impact of the community members' cultural background and identity as second language users. Whilst the findings have important implications regarding online communication with second language users and the hierarchical layers of membership, the reported associations among politeness marker use, social relationships, and the factors affecting communication are correlational rather than causal. The quantitative data provide only a general picture of politeness marker use and should not be generalized to other contexts, as they may have been influenced by the number of the interactive posts selected, length of the comments, and variations among participants.

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Appendix A. Sample Interview Questions

1. How would you define your role or responsibilities in the blog? How about the roles of the other blog members?
2. What kind of image do you like to project when interacting with other members of the blog? Why?
3. How would you describe your relationship with the other members of the blog?
4. Do you think your status is different from that of your fellow student teachers/mentors? Why or why not?
5. What are some of the important issues to consider when it comes to interacting with others in the blog?
6. Do you think it is important to pay special attention to word choice when interacting with others in the blog? Why or why not?
7. How do you usually evaluate the ideas posted by other members of the blog? How do you go about making suggestions?
8. It seems to me that modals such as "may" and "can" are often seen in the comments and responses you posted. Why is that?
9. It is interesting to note that you often use such expressions as "maybe" and "perhaps" when making suggestions on the blog. Examples include "Maybe you can consider giving them some challenging topics?", and "Perhaps you can write down some vocabulary items on the board?" Why did you choose these expressions?
10. Are there any other comments you would like to add?

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