CÁC CHIẾN LƯỢC DIỄN TẢ SỰ BẤT ĐỒNG TRONG TIẾNG ANH

Nguyễn Quang Ngoạn[*]

Bài viết giới thiệu và phân tích các chiến lược ngôn từ dùng để diễn đạt sự bất đồng trong tiếng Anh. Hai mươi tám chiến lược đã được nhận diện và phân tích dựa trên khung lý thuyết của Brown và Levinson (1987) và các kết quả nghiên cứu hành vi ngôn ngữ nêu trên. Chúng được hệ thống hóa và trình bày giản lược kèm với các ví dụ minh họa. Hệ thống các chiến lược diễn tả sự bất đồng như một hành vi đe dọa thể diện được mô tả từ việc không thực hiện hành vi đến việc thực hiện hành vi. Khi thực hiện hành vi, người nói có thể chọn cách nói thẳng, nói giảm nhẹ hoặc nhấn mạnh tùy mục đích của mình. Tuy nhiên, các chiến lược này được trình bày theo nguyên tắc nhẹ về lý thuyết, nặng về ứng dụng, giúp người đọc có thể cảm nhận dễ dàng khi giảng dạy, nghiên cứu hay vận dụng hành vi giao tiếp đã nêu.

Từ khoá: *người nói (S), người nghe (H), người nhận (A), hành động đe dọa thể diện (FTA).*

This paper discusses linguistic strategies for expressing disagreement in English. Twenty eight strategies were systemized and analyzed with illustrations based on the theoretical framework by Brown and Levinson (1987) and the findings in major studies on these linguistic behaviors. The system of strategies for expressing disagreement as a face threatening act (FTA) was describe in details, from not doing the act to doing the act. When performing FTA, the speaker (S) can choose a direct, softened or emphasized disagreement based on their purposes. However, it should be noted that the disagreeing strategies were presented in a practical rather than theoretical manner with the hope that they can be successfully applied to teaching, studying, and expressing disagreement in English.

Key words: *speaker (S), hearer (H), addressee (A), face threatening act (FTA).*

DISAGREEING STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH

1. Introduction

"In the case of disagreeing the emphasis seems to be more on saying that one doesn't think the same than on saying what one thinks" (Wierzbicka, 1987: 128).

Wierzbicka also argues that when a person disagrees, he wants to say that his own opinion is different and to imply that he thinks the first speaker was wrong or that his idea was not good.

Disagreeing is really a potential FTA as it reveals the contradiction between the speakers, as Rees-Miller (2000) explains,

---

[*] **TS., Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Quy Nhơn**

"A Speaker S disagrees when s/he considers untrue some Proposition P uttered or presumed to be espoused by an Addressee A and reacts with an utterance the propositional content or implicature of which is Not P" (2000: 1088).

In other words, disagreeing is a speech act which involves conflict between the speaker and the addressee. The conflict may lie in the interests of the two speakers (Watts, 2003: 214) or in trying to keep a balance between arguing one's point and protecting one's own and/or the addressee's face (Locher, 2004: 94).

As a matter of fact, to disagree with another person verbally is to threaten that person's face. Thus, a variety of verbal strategies may be employed to soften disagreement. Basically, one can use the super-strategies (e.g. positive politeness strategies or negative politeness strategies) outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987). For example, the speaker may use *partial agreement* and *first person plural* to redress to the threat to the addressee's

positive face (1987: 68-75), or use *interrogatives, hedges,* and *impersonal forms* to soften the threat to the addressee's negative face (1987: 131).

Many politeness strategies suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987) are realized from empirical studies, including studies of *intra-cultural communication* (Holtgraves, 1997; Locher, 2004; Rees-Miller, 2000), *inter-language pragmatics* (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989), and *cross-cultural communication* (Kieu, 2001; Nguyen, 2004).

2. Realizations of disagreeing strategies in English

In this part, all the disagreeing strategies realized from the major studies are presented. In case the same strategy is presented with different terms by different authors, one most appropriate term is suggested, with reference to the others. All the examples used to illustrate each strategy are taken from the data in the studies.
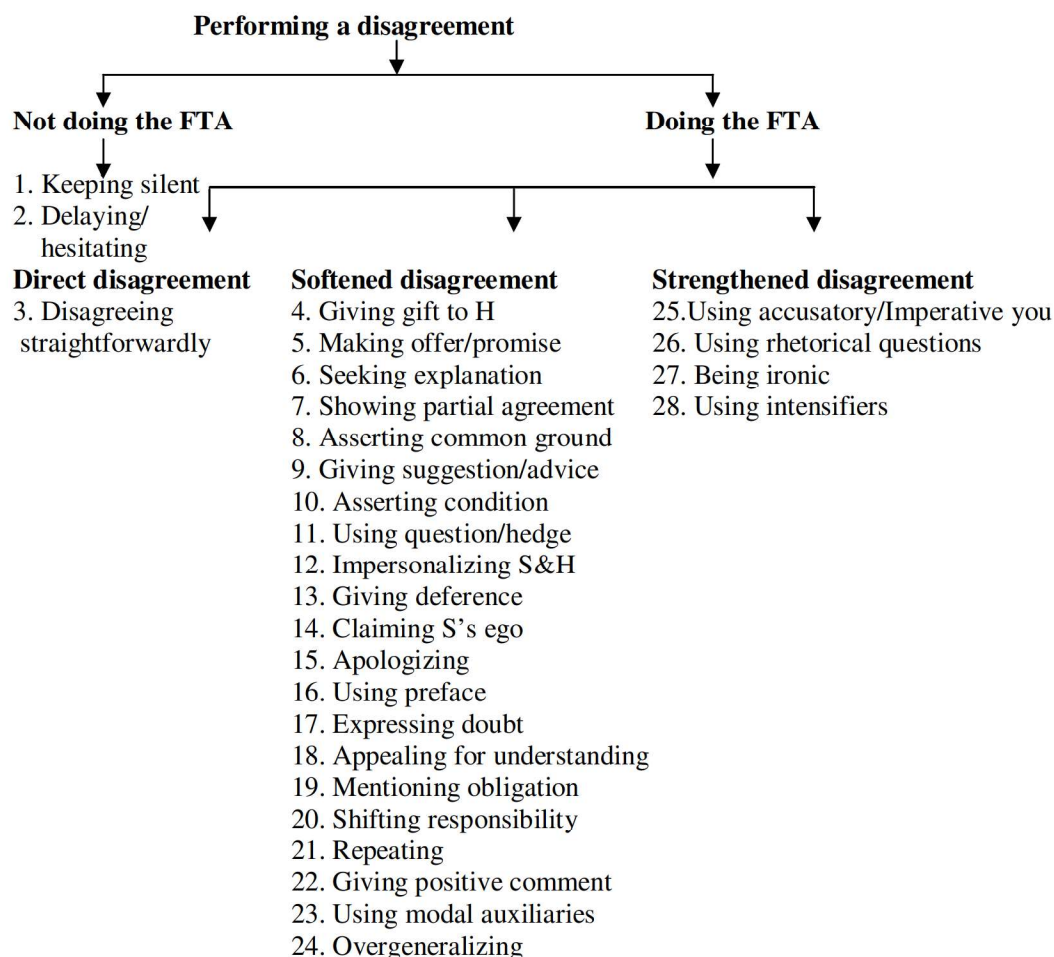
Performing a disagreement

Not doing the FTA

1. Keeping silent
2. Delaying/ hesitating

Doing the FTA

Direct disagreement

3. Disagreeing straightforwardly

Softened disagreement

4. Giving gift to H
5. Making offer/promise
6. Seeking explanation
7. Showing partial agreement
8. Asserting common ground
9. Giving suggestion/advice
10. Asserting condition
11. Using question/hedge
12. Impersonalizing S&H
13. Giving deference
14. Claiming S's ego
15. Apologizing
16. Using preface
17. Expressing doubt
18. Appealing for understanding
19. Mentioning obligation
20. Shifting responsibility
21. Repeating
22. Giving positive comment
23. Using modal auxiliaries
24. Overgeneralizing

Strengthened disagreement

25. Using accusatory/Imperative you
26. Using rhetorical questions
27. Being ironic
28. Using intensifiers

Figure 1: Strategies for performing a disagreement

As can be seen from Figure 1, to perform a disagreement, S can choose not to do the FTA (Strategies 1-2) or to do the FTA (Strategies 3-28). To do the FTA, S can perform a direct disagreement (Strategy 3), a softened disagreement (Strategies 4-24) or a strengthened disagreement (Strategies 25-28).

2.1. Keeping silent

Using this strategy, S decides not to do the FTA of disagreeing. Some informants explain that although they disagree with

the idea or assessment, they just ignore it. According to Sornig (1977: 368), *"maintaining silence is an act of communication; it may be taken as an extreme example of asymmetrical communication"*. This is, however, just an infrequent strategy in English (Nguyen, 2004: 30).

2.2. Delaying/hesitating

S can choose to delay his/her disagreement by pretending to think about the answer. During this time, S can pause

or use *"er"*, *"em"*, *"uhm"*, *"uh"*, *"ah"* to show that s/he is trying to find the correct words to express his/her idea. Of course, later S may just keep silent. This is a strategy realized by Yule (1997: 81).

2.3. Disagreeing straightforwardly

This is what Brown and Levinson (1987: 69) calls *"bald-on-record"* strategy or on record without redressive action. Another term which expresses the same nature of this strategy is *"contradictory statement"* (Rees-Miller, 2000: 1095). Disagreeing straightforwardly is to expresses S's point of view directly, and therefore generally an open FTA. In general, this strategy is frequently used by American speakers. It may be recognized with structures like *"No,…"*, *"I disagree …"*, *"I don't think …"*, *"I'm not …"*, *"It is not …"*. For example,

(1) <u>I disagree with you</u> but I like my living room. (Nguyen, 2004: 31)

(2) S1: None of this ever worked.

    S2: <u>Yes, it did</u>. (Rees-Miller, 2000: 1108)

2.4. Giving gift to H

Giving gifts (i.e. goods, sympathy, understanding, or cooperation) to H is a positive politeness strategy which S uses to imply that he hates to disagree with H and is willing to cooperate with H but he has to disagree because of the benefit of H. In this case, S knows some of H's wants (i.e. the wants to be liked, admired, cared about, understood, listened to, and so on)

and wants them to be fulfilled. Some examples are:

(3) <u>I know you need the money</u>, but consider your other options. (Nguyen, 2004: 32)

(4) <u>Thank you for your concern and efforts</u> to… but (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989: 205)

2.5. Making offer/promise

This is also a positive politeness strategy. In this strategy, in order to avoid the potential threat of the act of disagreeing, S may choose to stress his cooperation with H by claiming that whatever H wants, S wants for him and will help him to obtain. Offers and promises are the natural outcome of this strategy. Even if they are false, they demonstrate S's good intentions in satisfying H's positive-face wants. For example,

(5) I have plans and <u>I will be in early to finish it tomorrow</u>. (Nguyen, 2004: 33)

(6) <u>I'll try my best and complete it tomorrow</u>. (Nguyen, 2004: 33)

2.6. Seeking explanation

Seeking explanation or advice may also be considered a positive politeness strategy. Using this strategy, although S does not agree with H about what H assesses or proposes, S wants to show his good intentions in satisfying H's positive-face wants or in cooperating with H by asking him for explanation of or advice on

what he assesses or proposes. Locher (2004) names it as *"objections in the form of a question"*. This strategy is, in a way, a little bit similar to *pseudo-agreement* (with *"so"* or *"then"*) when avoiding disagreement. For example,

(7) *So what are you suggesting we do here?* (Nguyen, 2004:33)

(8) *How do you think it will work?* (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989: 208)

2.7. Showing partial agreement

By using this positive politeness strategy, the speaker can avoid direct disagreement. He pretends to agree so as to hide or soften his disagreement. Instead of making a blatant *"No"*, S can begin with *"Yes, but ..."*. This strategy can be realized with either *"token agreement"* (*e.g. Yes, perhaps, but...; Yes, may be, but...; I can see that, but...; Perhaps that's true, but...* [see Nguyễn, 2003: 39-41 for more examples]) or *"pseudo-agreement"* with the use of *"so"* or *"then"* as a conclusionary marker. For example,

(9) *That may be so, but we get along with it.* (Nguyen, 2004:32)

(10) *Yeah but, you know, there's plenty of people that put it up for adoption.*(Holtgraves,1997: 231)

2.8. Asserting common ground

Using this positive politeness strategy, S may soften the potential threat of his disagreement. In discussing general shared interests with H, S has ample opportunity to stress the common ground

he shares with H- common concerns about and common attitudes towards interesting events. This strategy also includes what Rees-Miller (2000: 1095) categorizes as *"Inclusive 1st person"*. Some examples are:

(11) *You and I both know that changes in our society are not always good. In my view that appeals to music.* (Nguyen, 2004: 34)

(12) *Well, we don't even need to do that* (Rees-Miller, 2000: 1108)

2.9. Giving suggestion/advice

Similar to making offer/promise, giving suggestions/advice is what S might choose to avoid doing the high FTA when disagreeing with H. It demonstrates that S really wants to cooperate with H because he intends to satisfy H's positive-face wants by suggesting an alternative option or by giving advice on how to fulfill a task better. In Nguyen's (2004) study, this strategy accounts for a rather high percentage in American English (8.11%) in comparison with other strategies. It is also a frequent strategy in Beebe & Takahashi's (1989) study. It can begin with structures for making suggestions or giving advice, such as: *"Let's ..."*, *"Why don't we...?"*, *"How about ...?"*. For example,

(13) *...Let's set aside some time to go through this.* (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989: 206)

(14) *What about if we tried working only during office hours?* (Nguyen, 2004: 34)

2.10. Asserting condition

Instead of disagreeing directly, S might choose to avoid this by asserting conditions of some kind. That means S is willing to do something if at least one condition is fulfilled. Of course that condition can hardly be met, and thus S does not have to do something without threatening H's negative-face much. This strategy is usually recognized with an "*If*" clause. For example,

(15) *I would be more willing to work if there was a real need*. (Nguyen, 2004: 34)

(16) *If you stay, I will stay*. (Nguyen, 2004: 34)

2.11. Using question/hedge

Hedging opinion with hedges is an efficient politeness strategy for avoiding direct disagreement. It is realized as a very common politeness strategy in many studies (Holtgaves, 1997; Locher, 2004; Nguyen, 2004; Rees-Miller, 2000). Some frequently used hedges are *actually, anyway, as it were, basically, a bit, certainly, honestly, I mean, I think, in a way, in fact, just, kind of, let me, little, maybe, more or less, of course, perhaps, probably, say, see, so-called, somehow, sort of, stuff, suppose, type of, whatever, what you call*. Opinion is usually hedged in the form of a question. Some examples are:

(17) *Oh, you really think so? I really like it*. (Nguyen, 2004: 35)

(18) *I mean, I don't know, I think everybody deserves to live, you know.* (Holtgraves, 1997: 232)

2.12. Impersonalizing S&H

Impersonalizing S and H is a negative-politeness strategy for indicating that S does not want to impinge on H. To do so, S chooses to phrase the FTA as if the agent were other than S, or at least possibly not S or not S alone, and the addressee were other than H, or only inclusive of H. That results in various ways of avoiding the pronouns "*I*" and "*you*". Passive structures are also commonly used in this strategy. Some examples are:

(19) *This can't be done until we discuss it together*. (Nguyen, 2004: 36)

(20) *Each person to his own choice.* (Nguyen, 2004: 36)

2.13. Giving deference

In terms of social factors, this negative-politeness strategy seems to be mainly affected by the relative power and social distance. In reality, this strategy is usually recognized with a variety of honorifics for H as well as dishonorifics for S. Following are some examples:

(21) *I support your decision and will do what you say, but will you consider not doing that for the following reasons: ...* (Nguyen, 2004:36)

(22) *I respect your opinion, but I think ...* (Wall, 1989: 230)

2.14. Claiming S's ego

This seems to be a negative-politeness strategy that appears in disagreeing

between Americans. Although this strategy is not noted by Brown & Levinson (1987), it appears popular in studies by Holtgraves (1997), Locher (2004), and Nguyen (2004). However, it is termed "*personal opinion*" by Holtgraves (1997) and "*giving personal or emotional reasons*" by Locher (2004). When using this strategy, S wants to claim that something (e.g. his living room or his hobby of listening to classical music) belongs to his own privacy or territory, and therefore should not be interfered with whatever assessment. This strategy is marked with the following examples:

(23) *That's just the way I feel.* *(Holtgraves, 1997: 233)*

(24) *It just makes me mad. I don't know why. (Locher, 2004: 128)*

2.15. Apologizing

Apologizing is a common negative-politeness strategy. By apologizing for doing an FTA, S can express his reluctance to impinge on H's negative face and thereby partially redress that impingement. In Nguyen's (2004), this is one of the four strategies that were used with a large proportion in American English (9.40%). It can be realized in at least four main ways: *(i) admitting the impingement, (ii) indicating reluctance, (iii) giving overwhelming reasons,* and *(iv) begging forgiveness.* Some commonly-used utterances are:

(25) *I am sorry, but I prefer to do otherwise. (Nguyen, 2004: 38)*

(26) *I'm sorry to disagree, but his so-called humor did nothing for me in that film. (Wall, 1989- 233)*

2.16. Using preface

This is one way of doing a dispreferred structure such as disagreeing suggested by Yule (1997: 81) and realized by Holtgraves (1987), Locher (2004), Nguyen (2004), although each author interpretes it in a more or less different way. This is similar to strategy 2 (*i.e. delaying/hesitating*) because it may begin with similar signals like "*Uhm*", or "*Uh*". The difference is that disagreements are performed but with a delay; that is, they occur after a delay, with false starts, hesitating prefaces and so on. Other common prefaces are "*Well*", "*Oh*", and "*I don't know*". They are used quite frequently and usually followed by a variety of other disagreeing strategies such as *apologizing, token agreement, giving deference, question/hedge, etc.* Following are some examples:

(27) *Well, I think because that time, it wasn't her who wanted to do something. (Holtgraves, 1997: 233)*

(28) *I don't know. I guess she's OK. (Wall, 1989: 234)*

2.17. Expressing doubt

This is another strategy to perform a dispreferred turn which is discussed in Wall (1989: 225-237) and suggested by Yule (1997: 81). It is also termed "*showing uncertainty*". In verbal

interactions, it is started with utterances like "*I'm not sure ...*", "*I don't know ...*", "*It seems to me that...*", "*I still have some doubts, but...*", or "*I'm not quite certain, but ...*". For example,

(29) *I still have some doubts, but my feeling is that … (Wall, 1989: 225)*

(30) *I'm not quite sure, but I believe … (Wall, 1989: 225)*

2.18. Appealing for understanding

The term used by Holtgraves (1997) for the strategy is, however, "*seek common ground-you know*". This strategy can be realized with structures like "*you know*", "*you see*", or "*as you know*". By using these expressions, S may show H that he is calling for H's understanding or sympathy and that his disagreement is unavoidable.

(31) *You know, I don't think I can this weekend. (Nguyen, 2004: 27)*

(32) *What about just a, you know, some girl screwed up, you know, her boyfriend moved out or something. (Holtgraves, 1997: 234)*

2.19. Mentioning obligation

This strategy, which can be considered a sub-strategy of apologizing (Nguyen, 2003: 158) is also commonly used in disagreeing. S usually mentions an obligation or a commitment because of which S cannot accept something or agree to do something. In reality, it is often combined with apologizing and/or making

offer/promise. It can be realized with structures like "*I must …*", "*I'm expected to …*" or "*I have to …*". Some examples are:

(33) *I really have to go home. (Nguyen, 2004: 27)*

(34) *… I have already had a commitment. (Nguyen, 2004: 27)*

2.20. Shifting responsibility

This is a strategy suggested by Locher (2004: 130). It allows interactants to portray themselves as not responsible for what they are reporting. This can be achieved by clearly marking an utterance as coming from a different source or by using nouns or pronouns such as "*they*", "*you*", or "*people*" to exclude oneself (to a certain extent). In the essence, it is similar to *impersonalizing S&H*, but the focus here is excluding only S from the responsibility of making a disagreement so that S is not exposed too much to criticism. For example,

(35) *… they told us very much what you have in … (Locher, 2004: 130)*

(36) *… you have to control for the innate abilities so the idea is you take two … (Locher, 2004: 132)*

2.21. Repeating

The repetition of previous words, phases, or entire sentences can fulfill various functions. One of the functions is to voice disagreement or to question the content of the utterance. The repetition can be realized with a question mark in

writing or a rising tone in speaking (Locher, 2004: 139). For example,

(37) S1 … it's not high enough

S2. Not high enough? (Locher, 2004:139)

(38) S1: He's mean.

S2: But if we…

S3: He's mean. (Locher, 2004: 139)

2.22. Giving positive comment

Using this strategy, S usually gives positive remarks which can be followed by a suggestion or request that looks very much like avoidance of direct disagreement (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989: 208). Positive comments are utterances like "*It has potential*", "*It has possibilities*", or "*It looks interesting*". Some examples are:

(39) It looks interesting. If you really want my opinion, I'd like to look it over more carefully, and maybe ask a few questions. (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989: 208)

(40) The kind of explanation you're giving is useful in some ways, but … (Rees-Miller, 2000: 1107)

2.23. Using modal auxiliaries

This is a strategy realized in Locher's (2004) study. "*May*", "*might*", "*could*", "*would*", and "*should*" can be used to soften FTA. In the appropriate context, "*may*", "*might*", and "*could*" carry the meaning of possibility or ask for permission, "*would*" expresses probability or hypothetical meaning and "*should*" can express hypothetical or tentative meaning. Some examples of this strategy are:

(41) S1: It means nothing

S2: It might mean something. (Locher, 2004: 129)

2.24. Overgeneralizing

This is a strategy that may leave the object of the FTA vaguely off-record. Thus H has the choice of deciding whether the general rule applies to him or not. Thus sometimes disagreeing in this way is a neutralized strategy but sometimes it is a strengthened one. The use of proverbs in a certain context may also be put into this strategy although their implicatures may be conventionalized to the extent of being on record. For example,

(42) It takes a trained ear to listen to classical music.(Nguyen, 2004: 39)

(43) Different strokes for different folks. (Nguyen, 2004: 39)

2.25. Using accusatory/imperative you

This is a strategy that can be used to strengthen one's disagreement. S usually criticizes H seriously. That explains why Beebe & Takahashi (1989) name this strategy "*criticism*". The language used in this strategy is sometimes very rude. Following are some examples,

(44) Common? You have no culture! (Nguyen, 2004: 31)

(45) I think to strengthen your claim, <u>you have to look at all these things</u>. (Rees-Miller, 2000: 1108)

2.26. Using rhetorical questions

This is an off-record strategy in which S asks a question with no intention of obtaining an answer. These rhetorical questions leave their answers hanging in the air, implicated. Although they are used as an off-record strategy, which is generally more indirect than on-record ones, we can hardly conclude that they are polite because most of them are used with ironical touch to strengthen a disagreement. Let's look at some interesting examples.

(46) <u>What makes you say that?</u> (Nguyen, 2004: 38)

(47) <u>What's not being made a movie?</u> Everything's being addressed. (Rees-Miller, 2000: 1108)

2.27. Being ironic

Being ironic is also an off-record strategy. Using this strategy, by saying the opposite of what he means, S can indirectly convey his intended meaning if there are clues that his intended meaning is being conveyed indirectly. Such clues may include those that are simply contextual. This is a potential way of strengthening an agreement. For example,

(48) <u>Don't you have enough money</u> (e.g. to someone richer)? (Nguyen, 2004: 39)

(49) <u>What kind of sunglasses are you wearing? (Nguyen</u>, 2004: 39)

2.28. Using intensifiers

This is a strategy that one can use to strengthen his disagreement with intensifiers. Some intensifiers can, of course, be hedges. The strategy can be realized with the following examples,

(50) <u>No way</u> … (Rees-Miller, 2000: 1108)

(51) <u>I don't at all</u> … (Wall, 1989: 234)

All in all, in this part, I have presented and explained twenty eight possible disagreeing strategies realized in studies on the topic with relevant examples. This should be noted that there is a tendency to combine several strategies in a disagreement turn (e.g. giving positive comment + making promise). Also the use of disagreeing strategies is contextualized. That is why one strategy that appears in one study at high frequency may not occur or just occasionally occurs in another.

3. Possible applications of the strategies in teaching and learning English

The twenty eight disagreeing strategies presented with necessary explanation and typical examples for illustration in this paper are hoped to contribute to the teaching and learning of language in use, especially in conversation analysis and debate.

- To begin with, teachers of English can apply them to teaching conversations in high school textbooks or other textbooks like *New Interchange* to make students more motivated and involved.

- Additionally, the disagreeing strategies in the paper can help students do a better job in debate classes where they are expected to use a variety of language expressions to express their opinions, agree, and disagree in the most convincing way.

- Finally, if students of English can master the disagreeing strategies, they can apply them to real life situations of discussion and debate when they are expected to be persuasive but polite so as not to hurt the communicating partner's feelings during the process of reaching a consensus in negotiations and debates.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, in this paper, the author has argued that because disagreeing involves conflict, it appears a potential FTA. Through the review of the major studies in the field, twenty eight disagreeing verbal strategies are realized with examples from the perspective of linguistic politeness for the purpose of teaching, studying, and performing the speech act in real life communication.

REFERENCES

1. Beebe, L. M. & Takahashi, T., Sociolinguistic variation in face-threatening speech acts - Chastisement and disagreement, In M. R. Eisenstein (Ed.), *The Dynamic Interlanguage: Empirical Studies in Second Language Variation,* Plenum Press, 1989, pp. 199-216.

2. Brown, P. & Levinson, C. S., *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage,* Cambridge University Press, 1987.

3. Holtgraves, T., Yes, but… positive politeness in conversation arguments, *Journal of Pragmatics,* 16 (2), 1997, pp. 222-239.

4. Kieu, T. T. H., *Disagreeing in English and Vietnamese.* Unpublished M.A. Thesis, VNU – CFL, 2001.

5. Leech, G., *Principles of Pragmatics,* Longman, 1983.

6. Levinson, S. C., *Pragmatics,* Cambridge University Press, 1983.

7. Locher, M. A., *Power and Politeness in Action - Disagreement in Oral Communication,* Mouton de Gruyter, 2004.

8. Nguyễn, Q., *Giao tiếp Nội văn hoá và Giao văn hoá,* Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội, 2003.

9. Nguyen, Q. N., *Some Vietnamese-American Cross-Cultural Similarities and Differences in Disagreeing with Power-Unequals.* Unpulished M.A. Thesis, VNU-CFL, 2004.

10. Rees-Miller, R., Power, severity, and context in disagreement, *Journal of Pragmatics,* 32, 2000, pp. 1087-1111.

11. Sornig, K., Disagreement and contradiction as communicative acts, *Journal of Pragmatics,* 1, 1976, pp. 347-374

12. Wall, A. P., *Say It Naturally - Verbal Strategies for Authentic Communication,* Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1989.

13. Watts, R. J., *Politeness,* Cambridge University Press, 2003.

14. Wierzbicka, A., *English Speech Act Verbs,* Academic Press, 1987.

15. Yule, G., *Pragmatics,* Oxford University Press, 1997.