



A Sociolinguistic Study of Mark Negotiation Discourse in Iranian Universities

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Abstract

Ideology, power, and identity are truly reflected in people's daily discourse including mark negotiation discourse of students. Peculiar power relations in Iranian academic settings and the unique features of politeness in Farsi extending up to Ta'arof motivated the researcher to statistically analyze a total of 50 mark negotiation discourse samples of Iranian university students from diverse disciplines. Data analysis revealed patterns of initiating and closing, persuading through lexical items, using politeness markers, intensifying, and consequencing. The goal is finding out how both male and female students from various disciplines buy their respective professors' favors in their online mark reconsideration appeal to increase their mark and avoid failure.

Keywords: Mark Negotiation Discourse, Persuasion, Power Relations, Thematization, Polite Language, Ta'arof, Clichés, Intensifying, and Consequencing

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“Speech is power: speech is to persuade, to convert, to compel.”
(Ralph Waldo Emerson,
American writer and
philosopher, 1802-1883)

Being able to speak “can mean talking the town council out of increasing your property taxes. It can mean talking top management into buying your plan.”
(*Select Readings*, p. 83)

Introduction

One of the goals of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an unbiased analysis of both oral and written discourse to highlight the underlying social power of the discourse under analysis in order to reveal its explicit and implicit power influences to the reader, not to find faults with it, as the term “critical” may literally imply (Rogers, 2004; Paltridge, 2006; Bloor & Bloor, 2007). Neither is the goal to accuse any writer or authority or power of intentional deception. According to Paltridge (2006), CDA connects the use of language to the social and political context in which it occurs. Moreover, sociolinguistics deals with the manifestation of the influence of social factors on the use of linguistic items. In other words, sociolinguistics attempts to delineate what should be said to whom, in which situation, and under which conditions. The present study aims to present a CDA and sociolinguistic study of mark reconsideration appeals by Iranian EFL students. The purpose of the present study is to investigate how Iranian university-level EFL learners used patterns of initiating and closing, persuasive lexical items, politeness markers, intensifiers, intertextuality justification, and consequencing in order to persuade their respective professors to reconsider their scores. Therefore, the present research questions were posed:

1. Is there any relationship between the range of score and the length of score reconsideration appeals?
2. How do Iranian EFL learners initiate, offer, and terminate their score reconsideration appeals?
3. How do Iranian EFL learners use polite language as a technique in persuading their addressee to reconsider the scores?
4. How do Iranian EFL learners use intertextuality, intensifiers, justification, and consequencing techniques in persuading their addressee to change their scores?

Review of Related Literature

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) came to the fore by Roger Fowler, as a way of studying the link between language and social meanings. In fact, during 1980's and 1990's, a need was felt for the addition of a critical component to the field of discourse analysis (Van Dijk 2004). CDA, according to Flowerdew (2008), views language as a form of social practice. "CDA includes not only a description and interpretation of discourse in context, but also offers an explanation of why and how discourse works" (Rogers 2004, as cited in Paltridge 2008, p. 185). Critical Discourse Analysis can be used for unveiling the hidden deep-level ideologies embodied in print media discourse. Paltridge (2008) speaks of doing CDA at three levels of discourse or genre, sentence, and word or phrase. At the level of discourse or genre, issues like framing, foregrounding, backgrounding, and the attitudes and points of view of the text are discussed. At sentence level, issues like topicalization and agent-patient relationships are under focus. At word and phrase levels, word connotations, degree of formality-informality, and technicality are discussed. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics proved so handy in CDA, helping the critical discourse analyst, according to Brooks (1995) to "uncover how language works to construct meanings that signify people, objects and events in the world in specific ways" (p. 462). Media discourse can be a tool of exercising power through the medium of ideology for "foregrounding" or backgrounding ideas (Paltridge, 2008).

Ideology, identity, and power

Ideology consists of a set of beliefs, doctrines, and concepts shared by the members of a society. Charteris-Black (2005) considers ideology as an attempt for "self-legitimization" or justifying its existence. He goes on to say that, "... ideology is a consciously formulated set of ideas that comprise an organized and systematic representation of the world, and therefore forms the basis for acting in the world. The social group tries to create, maintain, and justify its very existence by the use of ideology." Ideology is one of the determining factors in the formation of identities in the societies as well. However, identity is not a fixed phenomenon; it is constantly co-constructed and reconstructed by the interlocutors in their respective contexts. As such, different identities may be established within a single communicative event. According to Omoniyi and Goodith (2006):

Identity focuses on the ways in which people position or construct themselves and are positioned and constructed by others in socio-cultural situations through the instrumentality of language and with reference to all of those variables that are identity markers for each society in the speech of its members (p. 1).

Similarly Harrison (1998, as cited in Omoniyi & Goodith, 2006) refers to the construction of identity through culture that includes language as well, saying that "an individual can have an identity as a woman, a Briton, a Black, a Muslim" (p. 11). Identity may be constructed by the interlocutors dynamically in a variety of

ways including both verbal and non-verbal procedures without necessarily including a second party as the interlocutor. Moment-to-moment changes in the environment may help establish identity.

According to Fairclough (2010), discourse is ideologically invested, since it contributes to maintaining or undermining power relations. In some situations, power can be considered as something one group has, but of which the others are deprived. Johnstone (2008) believes that power has to do with the aspects in which relationships are asymmetrical with some participants more than the others. Language is an integral part of control and power by highly structured organizations like immigration office or institutions like weddings or funerals which control the way we live and think. These discourse practices may change in time with changing power relations.

According to Bloor and Bloor (2007), people engaged in a specific type of discourse such as speakers, listeners, readers, and writers, each plays different social roles in different situations. In some situations, social roles are relatively fixed and the interlocutors in an interaction are expected to follow a fixed routine in using and interpreting discourse. The teacher-student and parent-child relationship is of this sort, in nature. Forms of address are amongst the criteria for determining the type of power relations. Johnstone (2008) states that power relations or the use of pronouns may be reciprocal or non-reciprocal reflecting the type of power relationship that holds between the interlocutors. (This is amongst the criteria for data analysis in this study as well).

Persuasion

Persuasion has been an integral part of everyday life of human beings, since buying and selling began among them to advertise a product or service in order to get the other party's favor, pleasure, or possessions. In a sense, all language use is persuasive. Any language user attempts to persuade the other party in any act of communication. Halmari and Virtanen (2005, p. 3) define persuasion in the following way: "... all linguistic behavior that attempts to either change the thinking or behavior of an audience, or strengthen its belief" should the audience agree to this. They go on to emphasize the important role of situational and socio-cultural context of the act of persuasion. Similarly, Perelman (1982, p. 5) considers persuasion as an act of argumentation, saying, "argumentation covers the whole range of discourse that aims at persuasion and conviction, whatever the audience addresses and whatever the subject matter". From the definitions given above, we can understand that persuasion is context-dependent, genre-specific, and audience-geared.

Genre

Richards and Schmidt (2002) define genre as "a type of discourse that occurs in a particular setting, that has distinctive and recognizable patterns and norms of organization and structure, and that has particular communicative functions" (p. 224). De Beugrande and Dressler (1981) believe that genres are formed all the time to facilitate discourse processing and to monitor communication. Therefore, genres

are emerging all the time for new uses. They are flexible and vary from context to context including cultural contexts. Newly emerging genres may be understood in the light of previously established prototype genres. In other words, the new genres are based on already-established related genres. Halmari and Virtanen (1992) address this issue in the following way: “Instead of such unitype—or should we say, unigenre—texts, however, most texts are, in fact multi-type – or multigenre – in character”. In other words, in a single situation, we may detect a combination of different genres, and some sub-genres may be embedded into one prototype genre. When the new subgenre is frequently used in different situational and cultural contexts, gradually it becomes independent and develops into an independent genre, a process Bhatia called the *appropriation* of genres.

Genre-Based Persuasion

As was already discussed, persuasion, as a communicative purpose, is realized through genres which are, in return, developed for different communicative purposes that are common among the members of a particular speech community (Swales, 1990). As such, each genre develops its own lexicon and label, has its own members, is directed at different types of audience, and has its own social and cultural realizations. Moreover, our knowledge of genres is culture-specific (Halmari & Virtanen).

Intertextuality

According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), intertextuality refers to

... the factors that make the use of one text depend on the knowledge of other texts. ... The meaning a person derives from a text is thus said to result from the interaction between the readers’ knowledge of the social and literary conventions with the text and the genre to which it belongs, the content of the text itself, and its relationship with the other texts.

Method

Instrumentation

The data for the present study came from 50 items of mark reconsideration appeals filed online to university’s examination center, which are available in the researcher’s personal account page at two universities in Tabriz, Iran in a period of three academic terms. The appeals were copied and examined in the light of a sociolinguistic/discourse analysis in terms of patterns of initiating and terminating, the use of intensifiers and consequencing, item length, polite language, and persuasively loaded lexical items.

Data Analysis

The data from this study was analyzed using frequency counts and qualitative study of information structure, identity and power, persuasive language, lexical markers,

politeness, and markers and intertextuality. The mean length of the appeals was 20.04 words per appeal. Considering the fact that the official language of the country is Farsi, the language used in the appeals was mainly Farsi, but in some cases the use of English orthography was also observed. This latter practice was mainly followed by English majors who were more comfortable with typing in English orthography. Out of the whole data, 43 appeals came from students studying General English courses and 7 from English majors.

Table 1. General descriptive information about mark reconsideration appeals

	Eng.	G. Eng.	Intens.	Pol. Mark	Intertex	Justific	Conseq.
Frequency	7	43	83	256	31	35	27
Percentage/Mean	14%	86%	1.66 M.	5.12 M.	0.62 M.	70%	54%

Results and Discussion

Identity, Power, and Ideology in Mark Reconsideration Appeals

Identity is established by the interlocutors with the progression of discourse in a speech community. Identity markers help the message recipient delineate some identity features in his mind about the sender. Some discourse markers in the data for the present study helped the researcher to identify a set of identity markers used by the students who had sent online score reconsideration appeals. They used the markers to establish themselves as the members of the discourse community of students who had received failing marks. The appeals in the data for the present study revealed the following discourse markers for delineating a non-reciprocal teacher-student relationship in which the teacher is at a more powerful pole and the student is at a low-power pole.

- *Ostad (professor)*
- *mojaddadan Barresi konid (reconsider the paper content again)*
- *man daneshjuye . . . Hastam (I am a student of . . .)*
- *nomre bedahid (raise my grade)*
- *mojaddan eslah konid (remark my paper)*
- *man faaltarin shagerde kelas budam (I was the most active student in the class)*
- *Tu daneshgahe daneshjutan hastam (I am a student of yours at University of Tabriz)*
- *Barahye inke mashrut nasham (to avoid being placed on academic suspension)*

- *Dar konkure arshad ghabul shodam (I passed the MA Entrance Exam (the Concours))*
- *Chaharromin terme in vahedo migiram (It's the fourth time I'm taking this course)*
- *Ostad, midunam bargamo khub naneveshtam, vali mishe ye khordeh nomramo bishtar konid? (Professor, I know I haven't done very well, but would you please increase my mark).*

استاد می دونم برگموی خوب ننوشتتم ولی همیشه بیک خرده نمرمو بیشتر کنید؟

In addition, the religious ideology of the country was revealed by the use of 10 cases of ideologically loaded lexical items including the following:

- *To ro Khoda (Oh, by God)*
- *Be khoda nemidunestam (I swear By God, I wasn't aware of it)*
- *Khoda shahede (God Knows)*

• سلام استاد. خواهش می کنم دو نمره ارفاق کنین قبول شم ترم بعد به خدا این مسائل پیش نیاید.

- (Hello professor. Please raise my mark by two points so that I pass the exam. I swear by God that no such problems will occur next semester.

The Relationship between Item Length and Score Range

The well-known sentence, "Brevity is an asset" seems to be a misnomer in the case of the data for the present study. Although short online digital messages - similar to short mobile messages - for short online score reconsideration appeals are expected to convey brief necessary pieces of information, the appeals in the data for the present study were not short. The longest message contained 60 words and the shortest 7. The average length of the messages was 12.04. Seventy eight percent of the messages contained 15 to 60 words. However, in 22 percent of the items the number of words ranged between 7 and 15.

Table 2. The percentage of appeal length based on the obtained score

Length	7-15	15-60
Percentage	22	78
Frequency	11	39

From another perspective, there was a direct relationship between the number of words in an item and the score in the respective test. Generally, the less the score range in a scale of 20 was, the more the number of words was in the appeals. For example, the following message from item number 20, containing 60 words, was sent by a student that had obtained a score of 7 in the test:

Sharmande nemikhastam mozahem besham, vagt be kheir . . . too daneshgahe Tabriz daneshjutun hastam. Garaz az mozahemat in term ye kami moshkel dashtam vase hamin too astaneye mashroot budanam, age zahmati baratun nist ye kami tu nomre ye zaban komakam konid. Mian termo ham garar bud 7 begiram. 13 daneshgaha ro taatil kardan be khoda nemidunestam kelasa tashkil mishe (I'm sorry to bother you. Good time... I am a student of yours at Tabriz University, I'd like to say that this term I was facing some problems so that I'm about to be placed on Academic Suspension. I wonder if you could help me with my English score. I was supposed to get 7 for my midterm. The universities were off on the 13th, I swear by God I did not know that the classes would be held)

But another student with a gained score of 14 used the following appeal with 8 words:

لطفاً ۲ نمره ارفاق بفرمایید، با تشکر، خواهشمندم.
Thank you)

Patterns of Initiation, Maintenance, and Termination

Appeals were analyzed based on theme-rheme structure of information. The information structure of the appeals generally consisted of three parts: 1. a polite opening that generally included a polite greeting and justification, b. statement of the problem, labeled as body here, and c. a rather shorter closing with either appreciation or consequencing note.

Table 3. Patterns of initiating, maintaining, and closing the appeals

Pattern	Op-body-clos	Opening-body	body
Frequency	35	11	3
Percentage	72	22	6

With this in mind, the data for the study revealed three patterns:

Opening-Body-Closing

Out of 50 items, 36 items or 72 percent of the whole data followed pattern one in which the appeal starts with a polite address marker or foregrounder leading to the body or the purpose behind the appeal and ending in another polite closing. The openings of the appeals are usually longer than the body and the closing parts. The openings usually contain a polite address form like, “professor,” and face saving description of the present state of the problem followed by the body or main part of

the appeal and ending in usually short closing like “thanks”. This pattern was mainly seen with low score students. The following two items illustrate the point:

استاد خسته نباشید می دونم برگمو خوب ننوشتم ولی میشه یک خورده نمره مو بیشتر کنید!
مرسی*

(More power to your elbow, Professor. I know that my exam didn't go well, but can you raise my score! Thanks)

سلام استاد عزیز تو رو خدا اگه میشه یکی دو نمره ارفاق کنید. می خوام انتقالی بگیرم به مشهد
معلمم خوب بشه. ممنون.

(Hello dear professor, by God, if possible, please raise my mark by one or two points. I want to move permanently to Meshad and I must have a good GPA. Thanks)

Opening-Body

Out of the whole data, 11 items or 22 percent of the whole data followed the pattern in which there was a polite address form followed by a foregrounding about the problem and concluding with a description of the main point in the appeal. The following two examples illustrate the point:

*سلام استاد ترم اولم است. زیاد با امتحان آشنا نبودم. اگر امکان دارد تجدید نظر کنید.

(Hello, Professor. I am in my first semester. I was no familiar with the examination structure. If possible, please reconsider my mark)

*با سلام خدمت استاد اگر ممکن است یک نمره ارفاق کنید.

(Dear professor, if possible, please raise my mark by one point)

Body

The next pattern observed in the data is direct statement of the problem with a brief justification at the start, without any closing note. Upon analysis, it became clear that the students who had filed these kinds of appeals had got a passing mark, and a reconsidered mark was not so much vital for them. Although the students in this group tried to soften their appeals with “لطفاً” (please) in the body, this type of appeal did not look common because of breaching politeness maxims and its face threatening nature. Upon the analysis of the data for the study, 3 cases or 6 percent of this category were found. The following messages are of this type:

تمام سوالات را جواب داده بودم لطفاً تجدید نظر بفرمایید.

(I answered all the questions, please reconsider my grade)

به ما ۱۴ دادین. از ۵ نمره چند دادین؟ لطفاً تجدید نظر کنید.

(I was assigned a 14. What grade was I granted out of five? Please reconsider my grade)

Polite Language and Persuasion

One of the tools of persuasive discourse is the use of polite language. The “approbation maxim” of politeness principle recommends that discourse users please the others and do something for which the interlocutors would be pleased. Polite language is also face saving and does not threaten the face of the other party in the conversation. Polite language emphasizes negative face or the addressee’s right to be independent (Yule, 2007). Moreover, the Iranian culture is highly loaded with the pragmatic feature of politeness, extending up to the borders of Ta’arof (Sahragard, 2000). The polite features are manifested in the discourse used by the interlocutors. The data for this study is no exception. As an act of survival, the students in this study who send on-line score reconsideration appeals use extreme politeness features that are linguistically manifested. Upon analysis, the linguistic manifestations of polite discourse were counted in each item. A total of 256 polite linguistic features were investigated in the data. In average, each message contained 5.12 politeness features. The following are the linguistic features of politeness observed in the data:

1. The use of the university title of “Ostad” (professor) as a polite address form. The data revealed 28 cases of the uses of this title.
2. The use of greeting mostly with “Salam” (hello) which is ideologically loaded. The data revealed 21 cases of the use of this word. Also other greetings such as the following were used:
 - “*Ba arze adab o ehteram*”
 - “*khaste nabashid*”
 - “*shabetun be kheir*”
3. The use of softeners that make the appeals seem less imposing, which provides the addressee with choices:
 - “*agar momkene*” (*if possible*)
 - “*agar eshtebah nakonam hame ro doros javab dadam*” (*If I am not mistaken, I have answered all the questions correctly*)
 - “*midunam bargamo khub naneveshtam*” (*I know I have not done well enough in the paper*)
 - “*tagsire khodam bud*” (*it was my fault*)
 - “*age mishe*” (*if possible*)

- *“be nomre eterazi nadaram, vali ...” (I have no objection to my score, but...)*
 - *Sharmande nemi khastam mozahem shavam, amma ... (I am sorry, I did not want to disturb you, but)*
 - *khejalat keshidam zang nazadam (I felt shy to call you ...)*
 - *dar surate salahdid (if you deem it wise)*
 - *in haghir (in my humble opinion; a reference to the student himself)*
 - *loftan komak konid (Please help me)*
 - *erfagh befarmayid (raise my grade)*
 - *in bozorgvari ra dar haghham mabzul darid (do this great favor for me)*
 - *age ja dare (If possible)*
 - *fekr mikonam eshtebah shode (I think there has been a mistake)*
 - *chi mishe yeki do nomreh bedin (please do me the favour of raising my mark by two-three points)*
4. The use of second person plural suffix as a reference to the addressee (Professor), which is considered to be more polite in Iranian culture, like the following cases of:
- *Erfagh konid instead of erfagh kon (improve my mark)*
 - *Mojaddadan Barresi konid (reconsider)*
 - *Nomramo bishtar konid (increase my score)*
 - *Tajdide nazar befarmayid (reconsider again)*
 - *Khaste nabashid (more power)*
 - *Nomre bedid (consider more marks)*
 - *Bazam tashih konid (mark the paper again)*
 - *Darigh nafarmayid (please don't deprive)*
5. The use of emphatic polite request markers and intensifiers: Some lexical items seem to be more persuasive if placed before the request itself. Such

linguistic elements take the imposing edge off the request and at the same time make the request both polite and demanding. Totally, 21 emphatic polite request elements were observed in the study including the following:

- *Khaheshan (I implore you)*
- *Khahesh mikonam (Please)*
- *Khaheshmandam (I beseech you)*
- *Lotfan (Please)*

Moreover, the data for the study revealed the use of 83 intensifiers that the students used to highlight the gravity of the need for mark reconsideration by the professor in an attempt to convince their professor of the need to reconsider their marks. The following intensifiers were found in the data for the present study:

- *Had aghal nim nomre (at least by 0.5 mark)*
- *16.5 na! (16.5, NO!)*
- *Yek bare digar tashih konid (consider marking the papers again)*
- *Yek khorde **bishtar** bedid (bring up my mark)*
- *Avvalin (this is my first semester; I may be placed on academic suspension)*
- *Faghat ino oftadam (I failed only in this course)*
- *Terme akharam (it's my last term)*
- *Charromin terme zabane omumie man ast (it is my fourth term in General English)*
- *Kheili behtar neveshte budam (I had done much better)*
- *Hatta /25 be dardam mikhore (even an increase by 0.25 point is important for me)*
- *In term man mashrutam va faghat be nomre shoma bastegi darad (This term, I was placed on Academic Suspension and it only depends on the score assigned to me by you).*

Justification, and Consequencing in Persuasive Discourse

The appeals filed online for mark reconsideration typically consisted of a justification for the failure in getting a passing mark; the body of the message followed by a consequence if the appeal was not met. However, not all parts consisted of the mentioned three parts. In some messages, there was only justification, but in some others only a consequence was mentioned. Generally, the data included 35 cases of justification and 27 cases of consequencing, all of which were aimed at convincing the professor of a score change. The following is an appeal containing both justification and consequencing:

سلام استاد ...

من ... دانشجوی تربیت بدنی گرایش فیزیولوژی هستم متأسفانه نتوانستم نمره خوبی در درس زبان خارجه بگیرم آگه ممکنه لطف کنین ۲ نمره به ۱۱ اضافه کنین تا اولین ترم مشروط نشوم تقصیر خودم بود اما استاد لطفا کمک کنید.

(Dear professor, this is majoring in physical education. Unfortunately, I couldn't obtain a good grade in English (justification). If possible, add two points to my mark of 11, so that I wouldn't be placed on academic suspension in my first term (consequencing). It was all my fault (justification), but please help me.

The following message, however, contains only justification without any mention of consequencing:

سلام. من فعالترین شاگرد کلاس بودم. حداقل به حاضر جوابی تو کلاس و مقالیم یکی دو نمره ارفاق کنین خواهشاً استاد

(Hello, I was the most active student in the class. At least, you could have allocated one or two marks to my readiness in answering the questions and to my paper (justification). Please, professor.

Finally, the following appeal contains consequencing:

ostad migan har ki mashrut beshe nomrehasho miferestan khunashun. Be khoda pedar bozorgam 3-4 ruze fot karde vase hamin nemikham babam bedune va narahat beshe, sharmande mozahem shodam.

(Professor, I hear that the exam results of those placed on Adademic Suspension will be sent to their homes. My grandfather died 3-4 days ago and so I don't want my dad to know about my grades and get disturbed (consequencing). Sorry for disturbing you)

In all three examples mentioned above the appeal writers were using justification and consequencing to buy the teacher's favor in changing the marks.

Intertextuality

It means a reference to another event in the progression of discourse by the interlocutors. The data for the present study indicated the use of 31 cases of intertextuality mostly in justification for low marks. The following examples illustrate the point:

- استاد من این درس را پاس کردم برام تطبیق ندادند. آگه میشه نمره قبولی بدید. من ترم ۲ ام.

(Professor, **I have already passed this course [elsewhere]; they didn't accept it.**
If possible, grant me a pass mark. I'm in my second term)

استاد، خواهش می کنم شرایط بنده را در نظر بگیرید و بدلیل اینکه در کنکور ارشد خارج از کشور قبول شده ام خواهشمند است لطفتان را در حق بنده کم نکنید.

(Professor, please consider my situation and give me a pass, because **I have passed the MA Entrance Exam abroad**, please do not deprive me of your special favor)

The Use of Non-Verbal Language

As a final note, although it is so common to use nonverbal language in digital messaging systems like mobile SMSing, the data for this study included just one case of the use of exclamation mark and one question mark. This is justified considering the peculiar highly formal non-reciprocal teacher-student relationship with an unbalanced power relationship in Iranian environment. The students naturally shun away from the use of non-verbal language that is among the characteristics of informal situations.

Conclusion

The researcher set about analyzing 50 cases of online mark reconsideration appeals in an attempt to understand how discourse producers establish their identity in the appeals, how the data manifests the dominant ideology of the discourse community, and how the power relationship between the two sides of the discourse exchange in Iranian academic setting is linguistically manifested. Data analysis revealed three patterns of initiating, maintaining, and closing the appeals as well as persuading through lexical items, politeness markers, intensifying, justifying, and consequencing. The purpose indicates how the students from various disciplines attempt to buy their respective professors' favor in their online mark reconsideration appeal to increase their mark and avoid the unfavorable consequences of failing.

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