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## TEACHER'S POLITENESS IN EFL CLASS

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### Abstract

Politeness is considered to promote effective interaction between people. In the context of language teaching, it is believed to enhance learning by providing a lively and friendly atmosphere in classroom (Jiang, 2010). This study investigates an EFL classroom in terms of interaction between English learners and a native English speaking teacher. The aim of the study is to see whether the effects of politeness strategies differ when students and teacher do not share the same culture and native language. Two hours of classes were observed and tape-recorded by the researcher. The recordings were transcribed and analyzed by making use of related politeness strategies and functions of speech. Also, three randomly chosen students were interviewed after the class. The findings showed that politeness existed in that EFL classroom and it helped students to have positive feelings towards the lesson and motivated them to participate more in classes.

*Keywords:* politeness strategies, politeness theory, functions of speech

### 1. Introduction

Politeness is one of the basics of human interaction. For that reason, many researchers such as Leech, Brown and Levinson, and Austin and Searle focused on politeness in their studies and proposed different theories about politeness (as cited in Jiang, 2010). It is assumed that just like any other interaction, teacher-student interaction is also positively affected by politeness. In order to investigate teachers' politeness in an EFL classroom, Jiang (2010) carried out a study and found that "politeness enhances teaching, benefits the students, contributes to the effective interaction and friendly, lively atmosphere in an EFL classroom". (p.655) In her study, both the teacher and learners were Chinese with Chinese culture. However, it is possible that the results may differ if the study is repeated in a different context in which the teacher and the students do not share the same culture.

This study aims to investigate whether cultural and contextual differences in communication make any change in terms of politeness in class and its effects on the interaction between students and the teacher.

### 2. Related Theories

In this paper, Brown and Levinson's face theory and politeness strategy will be employed while analyzing the teacher's politeness in class. The functions of the teacher's speech will be categorized according to the classroom speech functions suggested by Jiang (2010).

#### 2.1. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Politeness is defined as redressive action taken to counter-balance the disruptive effect of *face-threatening acts (FTAs)* (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Brown and Levinson (1987) describe "face" as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects: negative face and positive face. Negative face is the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others. Positive face is the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others. Brown and Levinson (1987) also state that in human communication, either spoken or written, people tend to maintain one another's face continuously, and this tendency adds up to politeness. If

the hearers' need to maintain his/her self-esteem, and be respected is violated by an act during conversation, they call these acts as "Face Threatening Acts" (FTAs). Brown and Levinson (1987, p.60) offer four politeness strategies in order to deal with these FTAs: "bald on record, negative politeness, positive politeness and off-record indirect".

*Bald on-record strategies* focus on clarity and efficiency, and does nothing to minimize threats to the hearer's "face" (e.g. I want some water). These strategies are similar to Grice's conversational maxims, which are 'maxim of quality (be sincere) , maxim of quantity (don't say less/more than required), maxim of relevance (be relevant), and maxim of manner (avoid ambiguity)' (Grice, 1989). *Positive politeness strategies* give importance to the hearers' face, minimize the potential threat of an FTA and the relationship is friendly (e.g. Is it ok for me to have some water?). Positive politeness could be defined as an involvement-based approach made by the speaker for understanding, approving of, and admiring the positive image of the hearer (Wagner, 2004). *Negative politeness* strategy recognizes the hearer's face, as well, but it also admits that you are in some way imposing on the hearer (e.g. I don't want to bother you but, would it be possible for me to have some water?). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), negative politeness strategies are universally more preferred since it is safer to assure the addressee's peace and determination rather than the speaker's expressions of regard. However, some scholars such as Ho (1994), Lavandera (1988), Márquez Reiter (2000), Nwoye (1992), and Wagner (2004) do not support this assumption. According to these scholars, negative politeness does not have value over positive politeness. Reversely, positive politeness could be preferred more because of its avoidance-based, off-record verbal behaviour or other means of addressing face. The last strategy is *off-record indirect*. It is done in such a way that it is impossible to ascribe only one clear communicative intention to the act. The speaker leaves himself/herself 'out' by trying to avoid the direct FTA of asking for water (e.g. It's so hot, it makes you really thirsty). They are essentially indirect uses of language.

## 2.2. The Functions of Speech

Holmes (2008) gives six different categories for functions of speech: expressive, directive, referential, metalinguistic, poetic and phatic utterances. Utterances in each category have different functions in speech; however, it is important to remember that the meaning of language depends on its actual use, and may not exactly coincide with an utterance.

The interaction between the teacher and students is different from the usual interaction in daily life, and thus needs to be investigated under different categories. Jiang (2010) states that teachers have different roles in class, and suggests the following functions for classroom speech of teachers: instructional, motivational, evaluative, and managerial. In this paper, these roles of classroom speech will be investigated in terms of the politeness strategies used by the teacher.

## 3. Methodology

This is a qualitative study, and observation and interview were used for data collection. The participants were a 25-year old American teacher of English and 22 Turkish students of an English preparatory program at a university in Turkey. The teacher has been in Turkey for about 6 months and has not been familiar with Turkish culture before. Students were all at pre-intermediate level of English and they all have been taught by the teacher for nearly 5 months.

The interaction between the students and the teacher was observed and tape-recorded for two hours of class. After the observation, 3 randomly chosen students were asked for a group

interview in order to get a deeper insight into the results. All the data were transcribed and analyzed by making use of related politeness strategies and functions of speech.

#### 4. Data Analysis

In this study, any classroom speech that fostered the process of teaching and contributed to the interaction between teacher and students is regarded as politeness. In this part, the teacher's speech is categorized according to its functions and is analyzed by making use of politeness strategies mentioned above.

For analysis, teacher's speech is evaluated under four categories: instruction, motivation, classroom management and evaluation.

##### 4.1. Instruction

Instruction refers to teacher's academic instructions, answering students' academic questions, and giving supportive and corrective feedback (Jiang, 2010). Here are some examples of teacher's speech:

1. Today, we're gonna focus on a model debate, OK?
2. With your partner, I want you to discuss your favorite school subject and why? OK?
3. Discuss in English.
4. Yiğit, what is Kenan's favorite school subject?
5. Write your name on your sheet of paper.
6. You all will do the same thing.
7. You can read along with it if you want.
8. Ask him, say why?
9. Who wants to read?
10. Let's go over.
11. Listen, take notes, tell me the notes and then we will pick the picture.
12. You just have to argue your point.
13. If you have any questions, bring them to class, and I'll answer them. Ok?
14. If any of you want this PowerPoint, just e-mail me. Ok?
15. Do we know what a role model is?
16. Ok? We understand that?

Within Brown and Levinson's theory, when you speak to someone, you may orient yourself towards that individual's positive face, and employ positive politeness, which appeals to the hearer's desire to be liked and approved of. In sentences 1, 10, 15 and 16, one of the positive strategies—in-group marker is used, that is, the teacher includes himself in the learning process, which will shorten the distance from the students.

Sentences 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 12 appear in the form of imperative sentences. This is a direct strategy of politeness. In such kind of strategy, the request is expressed clearly through language forms. Among these forms, imperative sentences are the most commonly used ones, or other similar sentences like performatives (S3, S5, S8), obligation statements (S8, S12), want statements (S2, S6) could also be used. This usage can be classified as one of the negative politeness strategies.

In classroom, modal verbs such as shall, would, can, want etc. are often used to maintain the students' negative face. S7 shows such kind of a usage. S9 shows another strategy of negative politeness—conventional indirectness. Negative politeness is oriented towards a hearer's negative face, which appeals to the hearer's desire not to be impeded or put upon, to be left free to act as they choose.

Sentences 11, 13 and 14 appear to be very common sentences and they show another politeness strategy—bold on record. This type of strategy is commonly found with people who know each other very well, and very comfortable in their environment, such as close friends and family. Also in some situations like external factors constrain a person to speak very directly, for example, there is an emergency of some sort, or where there is a major time constraint or where there is some form of channel limitation.

#### **4.2. Motivation**

Motivation refers to illocutionary acts aimed at activating students such as their participation, academic questions, and initiative feedback (Jiang, 2010). The following sentences are among the ones which the teacher used frequently to motivate students.

1. I think all of you will do well and I think you'll like it. It should be fine.
2. You will be ok, you can do it.
3. OK, anybody else?
4. Bamboo is a plant and you should know the rest. That is the vocabulary of two weeks ago.
5. Ok, tell me some of the notes you took.
6. It will be great.
7. Here we go.

In sentences 3 and 5, “ok” is used as a filler to mitigate the expression. It can be said that only when the speaker is polite, mitigation exists. This can also be a kind of positive politeness strategy.

In sentence 7, one of the positive strategies—in-group marker is used, that is, the teacher includes himself in the learning process, which will shorten the distance from the students.

The teacher uttered sentences 1, 2, and 6 before some requests. It can be said that these sentences also mitigate the following request and motivate students. It is a kind of positive politeness strategy.

Sentence 4 contains one of the negative politeness strategies—impersonalizes speaker and hearer. Here, no specific student is mentioned, the teacher is activating all the students by maintaining the students' negative face.

#### **4.3. Evaluation**

Evaluation refers to teacher's positive and negative feedback which is very important to students. It can encourage as well as discourage the students. For that reason, politeness in evaluation is particularly important to both learning and teaching. The following sentences are the ones which the teacher used for evaluation.

1. Ok,
2. OK, good.
3. Good job!
4. Good, all right.
5. I saw everyone was writing. That's good.
6. A? 25. Great!
7. Very good.
8. Well, it is OK.

In all the sentences above, the teacher shows a positive politeness strategy. Sentences from 1 to 7 are praises. It's easily seen that in saying these sentences, the teacher is employing the positive politeness strategy, the approbation principle, agreement principle and sympathy principle to maintain the students' positive face. In the last sentence, though, the teacher is

being ambiguous by using “Well” to show indirectly that there’s something wrong with the student’s answers. And here, the tact principle and agreement principle is reflected.

#### **4.4. Management**

Management refers to discipline instructions, discipline directives (orders, requests, questions, and calls), procedural instructions, and procedural directives (Jiang, 2010). The following are examples of management sentences:

1. Cell phones? No cell phones, OK?
2. No dictionary. If I’m speaking, when I am speaking, no cell phones. Raise your hand.
3. Everyone writing. Ok?
4. Sssssh!
5. Don’t get the answers of each other. Wait.
6. Everybody. Take notes.
7. Please no talking, just listen.
8. No talking, just listen.
9. So, take a break.
10. Ok, let’s listen again.

In sentences from 1 to 6, the teacher uses bald-on-record strategy by ordering the students directly to maintain classroom order in the shortest possible time. In sentences 7 to 10, several politeness strategies are used together. First, imperative sentences of the direct politeness are used (S7, S8, S9); then, one of the positive politeness strategies—in group identity marker is used (S10). The purpose of teacher’s using this is to get the students’ understanding and cooperation.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Holmes (2008) states that even though we can say that in general interrogative and declarative sentences are more polite than imperatives, a great deal of politeness depends on intonation, tone of voice and context. According to her, an imperative sentence which is said gently may be far more polite than a thundered declarative sentence. The findings of this study also support Holmes’ (2008) comments on the topic. When the teacher’s speech in the class is observed, it can be said that the teacher used imperative sentences more than any other sentence type, which seems impolite in the first impression. However, when the students were interviewed about teacher’s politeness in the class, they all said that the teacher is very polite. From the observation as well, it can be concluded that even though most of the sentences were in imperative form, the teacher was acting as if he was one of the students and the students felt very relaxed all through the class. Therefore, from the analysis above, also from my observation and interview with the students, a conclusion can be drawn that politeness exists in this EFL class and it promotes the mutual understanding and harmonious relationship between teacher and students. Politeness also contributes to the effective interaction and friendly, lively atmosphere in an EFL classroom. From the findings, it could be said that cultural or contextual differences do not make any change in the effects of politeness in class.

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