

The Role of Politeness in Language Teaching: A Study of Face-Saving Strategies



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ABSTRACT

Politeness is a way of using language or actions to uphold social identity and dignity, especially in challenging situations. Brown and Levinson's theory introduces the concepts of positive face, representing the desire for acceptance and approval, and negative face, relating to the desire for independence and autonomy. This study examines how the Real Listening and Speaking books, used in English conversation teaching curricula in Iraqi universities, prioritize polite language usage. The study analyzes strategies used in conversations in the book that promote politeness, illustrating the connection between pragmatics knowledge and second language acquisition. The results highlight the use of face-saving strategies in various contexts, including defending a point of view, making complaints, requests, and compliments without offending others. Indirect speech acts are used as a face-saving strategy to preserve negative face, acknowledging the other person's time or concerns and apologizing for any inconvenience or interruption.

Keywords: Politeness, positive face, negative face, indirect speech acts

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1. Introduction

Language is a means through which a person can do essential daily activities, such as expressing himself, writing, and problem-solving. The most important use of language for humankind, however, can be considered to be for communication. Enabling students to use language appropriately in various social situations is crucial, and one way to achieve this is by teaching them pragmatic strategies [1].

The field of linguistics known as pragmatics concerns how the context in which an utterance is made influences its meaning. There have been different theories related to this aspect of language. One of the most prominent theories is the Politeness theory presented by Brown and Stephen in 1978. This theory relates linguistic utterances to social behaviors. It aims to provide scientific explanations for the intuitive concept of politeness. Politeness can be considered as a set of social values that instruct speakers to consider the other participants of an interaction by satisfying their expectations. That is, by attempting to always act appropriately and to avoid threatening the hearer's self-image [2].

This study aims to investigate the extent to which the Real Listening and Speaking books prioritize this language aspect. This book can be referred to as one of the English conversation teaching curricula in the English department within the College of Education for Human Sciences at Al-Muthanna University and many other Iraqi universities. The study will analyze the different strategies used in the utterances of the conversations of this book that lead to a polite usage of language in interactions and which indicates how pragmatics knowledge and second language acquisition are related.

2. Literature review

Researchers conduct studies of various kinds analyzing pragmatic strategies, particularly the Politeness theory, in different teaching curricula. These researchers are concerned with analyzing the usage of the pragmatic strategies in certain curricula, textbooks, and class interactions to assess how effective these books are regarding teaching these conversational strategies. Pearson et al. [15] examined the implementation of Grice's conversational rules and Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies in classroom interactions. The study launched two groups of data. One was from research methods teachings, while the other was from algebra teaching classes. The aim was to find out how these rules and strategies can be effective in enhancing the learning process. The study's results found that the politeness strategies were used differently in these two classes. The researchers also reached a conclusion that these strategies interfere with effective tutoring.

Elmianvari and Kheirabadi [10] investigated whether politeness strategies are found in emails written by Iranian EFL students who were taking language classes. The students were asked to write emails in which they would make requests for something from their teacher. It turned out that most of the students expressed their requests using lengthy and polite formally and indirectly, and this helped them save their negative faces.

El-Dakhs et al. [9] aimed to investigate how university teachers at a private Saudi university use criticizing speech acts when communicating with their students, with a focus on strategies for direct and indirect criticism as well as the usage of modifiers.

The study involved 60 university teachers in role-playing scenarios. The results shows that university teachers generally preferred to use indirect criticism strategies more than direct strategies. It also shows that teachers' gender or teaching experience over many years have a minimal influence on their choice of criticism strategies. The severity of the situation is a crucial factor in determining the suitable strategies to use.

3. Communicative competence

Effective communication is crucial in any community setting where learners need to interact with each other to achieve certain goals. Language serves as the tool that enables learners to communicate with different individuals in various contexts. Communication, though, goes beyond just the words used, but also involves understanding the purpose of the message, when and where to say it, and to whom it should be directed. So, communication is not just about stringing words together to form a sentence, but also about understanding the conventions of appropriate language use. This understanding of language usage in different contexts is known as pragmatics. To determine the overall meaning of a statement, pragmatics looks beyond the literal meanings of words and considers the social factors of a given situation. This leads to a better ability for language learners to communicate with others efficiently and understandably by having a solid grasp of certain conventions [12].

Accordingly, it is assumed that the language teaching process has to be classified into two types, which are considered to be important to acquisition. The first is organizational knowledge, which is related to comprehending the formal structure of the language to produce accurate sentences. The second type is pragmatic knowledge, which is about relating how words and sentences can be used to convey different meanings in various contexts and how they can serve many purposes based on the speaker's internal thoughts [8]. So a person who has a good understanding of a language knows the appropriate conditions under which to use a sentence. and the intended purpose it serves under specific social circumstances. While the grammatical competence, is considered as knowledge of the form and meaning of language, the pragmatic competence is referred to as "knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use, in conformity with various purposes" [6, p. 224]. Bachman believes that pragmatic competence involves two proficiencies: "illocutionary competence, or the knowledge of how to perform speech acts, and sociolinguistic competence, or the knowledge of the sociolinguistic conventions which govern language use" [3, p. 42].

The process of teaching pragmatics presents distinctive challenges when contrasted with other domains of linguistics. Due to the contextual and cultural dimensions inherent in pragmatics, pedagogical strategies must be cognizant of sociocultural factors. Unfortunately, the majority of classroom settings are ill-equipped to meet such demands. Therefore, the question of feasibility arises regarding teaching pragmatics in classrooms. Although it is possible to teach pragmatics in the classroom, certain facets of the subject are more amenable to instruction than others [18].

4. The concept of 'Face'

Brown and Levinson [4] suggest that 'face' as a concept comes from the English term 'losing face', which is connected to the feelings of embarrassment and humiliation. They argue that face can be gained, lost, or maintained through social interaction.

People typically work together to maintain each other's face because they are mutually vulnerable to losing it. This means that everyone's best interest is to act in ways that show they are aware of the importance of face. While the interpretation of face may vary among different cultures, the recognition of the importance of public self-image and its consideration in social interactions is a universal concept. Brown and Levinson recognize that they developed their concept of face based on Erving Goffman's well-known explanation of face. Goffman [11, p. 453] considers face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact".

Recognizing the significance of face in social interactions, it is crucial to comprehend its various components and the underlying motivations behind them. Essentially, face can be defined as the way we want others to perceive and behave towards us, as well as how we behave towards others based on their social expectations. This involves both ourselves and others, as well as our behavior towards them. Additionally, the concept of face is linked to emotional vulnerability, as it can be at risk of being undermined, threatened, or improved. It is associated with positive attributes we desire for others to acknowledge and negative attributes we wish to avoid. The perception of a threat or gain to one's face occurs when there is a discrepancy between the attributes one claims and those perceived by others. An important issue to consider is determining which attributes are sensitive to one's face. To explain this, different types of face have been suggested by various theorists [19].

There are various viewpoints on the meaning of the term 'face'. According to certain theories, Face pertains to the image that every member of a society desires to project to the public. These theories see face as a representation of oneself that is defined in terms of accepted social attributes. This image may be shared with others, such as when someone performs well in their profession or demonstrates their commitment to their religion. Essentially, face is the self-image that a person perceives himself to be, but this image is subjective and not necessarily an objective category. In other words, a person's real self may not fully align with their self-image, and this discrepancy can lead to issues with self-perception or the attribution of social characteristics [13].

Other theorists consider that face is not solely about personal desire, but rather it is mainly a social standard and convention. The loss of face may result in an individual being anxious about experiencing a decline in reputation, social status, respect, or other types of social retribution. This anxiousness is caused by the thought that the damage of the public self-image may cause more harm to people than not achieving their personal desires. Consequently, the notion of face is considered to be a complex concept that includes personal self-image besides social values and norms [13].

face. The former refers to a person's wants and desires to be accepted by others during an interaction. The latter, on the other hand, refers to a person's desires to be independent. This leads for a person to prefer not to be imposed upon doing certain things and to have more control over the conversation. This, according to Brown and Levinson, leads to an understanding that some of the speech acts as requests, offers, and compliments, can cause a threat to the speaker's or listener's face. A request, for example, can threaten the hearer's negative face when it indicates that the hearer is not able to produce help without getting assistance.

A compliment, in certain occasions, can cause a threat to the speaker's negative face if it causes devaluation to the speaker's place. To avoid situations in which face is threatened. Politeness seems to be a good orientation to decrease the threat and keep the positive face of all involved parties. This may be done by using indirect language, showing differences, or using other strategies to minimize the potential threat to face [20].

5. Politeness theory

Politeness is a way of using language to maintain the social identity and dignity of both the speaker and the listener when situations that may challenge their sense of dignity occur. There are numerous theories that deal with politeness in an attempt to explain and conceptualize the notion. However, throughout the years, Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness is considered to be one of the most prominent and well-known theories. The distinguishing aspect of this theory is that it has developed a terminology that enables a more detailed analysis of the phenomenon. Also, this theory provides a framework that can be used to theorize and analyze everyday conversations besides literary works [21].

The main concepts of Brown and Levinson's 1978 theory, as many scholars consider, are still valid to be used in analyzing texts. Although the theory faced certain criticisms throughout the years, it has been considered to be influential in the vast body of current politeness research. The theory proposes that in conversations, the two sides may engage in behaviors to lessen the face-threatening acts like requests or criticisms that may cause damage to a person's sense of dignity and social identity. Politeness is considered to be a social element to help provide social harmony and prevent conflicts [21].

Brown and Levinson's theory on politeness, which was first published in 1978 and later in 1987 in their book *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, is widely recognized as the most prominent and influential theory in this area. The authors indicate that they developed their theory during a time when linguistics, anthropology, and micro-sociology were beginning to overlap. They drew inspiration from Speech Act Theory and transformational grammar, and rooted their theory in Gricean pragmatics. The authors express a particular interest in the relationship between language form and complex inferences, as well as cultural differences. They argue that language usage, or "ways of putting things," is integral to social relationships. Their theory also emphasizes the relational aspect of communication, focusing on the verbal interactions between individuals as expressions of their social relationships (Locher, 2012).

Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness, known as the Face theory, is highly influential in the field of speech act studies. The theory is built around three main concepts: face, face-threatening acts (FTAs), and politeness strategies. According to this theory, face refers to a public image that people strive to maintain, consisting of both negative and positive face wants. Negative face represents the wish for unrestricted behavior and minimal interference, whereas positive face denotes the aspiration for a positive self-image that is valued and acknowledged by the people around. Any utterance can potentially

jeopardize either the negative or positive face. The theory put forth by Brown and Levinson posits that a majority of speech acts, like requests, offers, disagreements, and compliments, have an innate capacity to threaten the face-wants of a speaker or a hearer. Therefore, politeness becomes crucial in mitigating these face-threatening acts (FTAs) [16].

Brown and Levinson identified face-threatening acts (FTAs) by considering two main factors: (1) which person's face is at risk, the speaker or the listener, and (2) which dimension of face is being threatened, positive or negative. Examples of acts that threaten the positive face of the listener include complaints, criticisms, accusations, bringing up taboo topics, and interruptions, as they suggest that a speaker does not support an addressee's self-image. On the other hand, the speaker can threaten the addressee's negative face by exerting pressure to accept or reject a future act (such as offers or promises) or when the addressee perceives that the speaker is coveting their belongings. Speaker's positive face's FTAs include confessions, apologies, acceptance of compliments, and self-humiliation. Meanwhile, making promises, accepting a thank-you, expressing gratitude, and apologizing are some examples of Face Threatening Acts that can potentially threaten the negative face of the speaker [16].

Politeness theory also presents the notion of 'redressive action', which indicates the act that 'give face' to the addressee. This can take two forms regarding the notion of face that is being stressed. The first one is 'Positive politeness', which focuses on making the other person feel good about themselves by showing that their wants and needs are valued. A speaker can achieve that by treating the other person as a friend or a member of a group and by indicating that the speaker likes and respects them. By doing this, the potential for offending is reduced. The other form is 'Negative politeness', which is about respecting the other person's desire to be in control of their own actions and decisions. This is achieved by being formal and restrained and by using language that shows respect for their autonomy. If a face-threatening act does occur, it can be addressed through apologies, deference, and other techniques that allow the other person to maintain their sense of control [4]. Politeness theory also presents the notion of 'redressive action', which indicates the act that 'give face' to the addressee. This can take two forms regarding the notion of face that is being stressed. The first one is 'Positive politeness', which focuses on making the other person feel good about themselves by showing that their wants and needs are valued. A speaker can achieve that by treating the other person as a friend or a member of a group and by indicating that the speaker likes and respects them. By doing this, the potential for offending is reduced. The other form is 'Negative politeness', which is about respecting the other person's desire to be in control of their own actions and decisions. This is achieved by being formal and restrained and by using language that shows respect for their autonomy. If a face-threatening act does occur, it can be addressed through apologies, deference, and other techniques that allow the other person to maintain their sense of control [4].

6. Indirect speech act as a politeness strategy

Negative politeness involves a conflicting desire between (a) expressing oneself clearly to maintain social face, and (b) avoiding imposing on others by being indirect. To resolve this conflict, people use conventional indirectness, which means that once a certain indirect way of expressing a request becomes widely accepted and understood by everyone, it is no longer off record. For example, phrases such as "Can you pass the salt?" or "Would you mind turning down the music?" are now widely recognized as indirect requests, and the speaker's intended meaning is usually understood without confusion [4].

John Searle, as cited in [17], in his speech act theory, has presented the term 'indirect speech act' which refers to a situation where the speaker conveys more meaning to the

listener than what is literally said. To achieve this, one relies on the listener's ability to reason and infer, as well as their knowledge of commonly held information. Imperatives, such as commands, can be used as indirect speech acts to express various meanings like advice, offers, suggestions, invitations, gratitude, warnings, threats, resentment, persuasion, and prohibition.

Employing indirect language is a widely used communication strategy. It is often employed to be more polite and reduce the negative impact of direct requests or orders. For instance, when someone says, 'It's very hot in here,' they may follow up with an indirect request to open a window. This indirect approach is used because direct requests can come across as impolite in some situations, such as saying 'Lend me some money!' instead of 'Would you lend me some money?' The second utterance can be considered to be more appropriate in many situations [17].

7. Real Listening and Speaking textbook

Real Listening & Speaking is a series of books of four levels, designed for adults who seek to improve their English language while communicating in different contexts. This series contains a group of units that are divided into two themes of 'work and study' and 'social and travel'. The content of the book aims at improving the learners' language understanding and speaking skills on real-life scenarios. To

monitor students' progress, the books include learning advice, exercises, and unit-by-unit checklists. This book is internationally considered as a valid guide for students who wish to advance their English language proficiency and equip themselves for daily living in an English-speaking society [5].

Real Listening & Speaking 3 is one of the books of a broader collection of twelve books that are known as the Cambridge English Skills series. This book is meant to cover the needs of intermediate to upper-intermediate level students. The main aim is to develop these students' English speaking and listening skills. It provides reliable support for learners who are after their skills in comprehending spoken English, expressing themselves correctly, and participating effectively in English-speaking settings. Real Listening & Speaking 3 teaches a group of techniques and exercises that would help learners achieve their language goals [7].

The book includes practical tasks that apply to everyday listening and speaking situations, such as in a restaurant, while shopping, or while traveling away from home. Also, it provides practice exercises that cover different work and study scenarios. The main aim of it is to help learners with listening and speaking tasks that are essential for communicating in English, both at home and abroad. In every chapter, there are activities designed to motivate valuable abilities such as expressing opinions, specifics, and central concepts through listening exercises. Furthermore, a range of pragmatic speaking techniques and assignments are included, that may aid students in advancing their communication skills [7].

The book is divided into two sections, containing a total of 16 units. The first section, consisting of eight units, focuses on social or travel situations, while the second section, comprising units 9-16, focuses on work and study situations. Each unit, in its start, contains a 'Get ready to listen and speak' section that introduces the unit's topic. It is followed by a 'Learning tip' section that guides enhancing learning, and a 'Class bonus' section that is an exercise to be done with peers. The 'Speaking strategy' section, afterward, elucidates a helpful strategy, and the 'Speak up!' section offers practice opportunities. The unit also includes an 'Extra practice' section that offers additional

exercises for further practice, and a 'Can-do checklist' section that assists learners in evaluating what they have learned from the unit [7].

8. Methodology

This study mainly attempts to examine the employment of face-saving strategies in the Real Listening and Speaking 3 Textbook. The analysis is done on the conversations, which are selectively picked from the texts and exercises included in this textbook. Encompassing conversations related to diverse topics, the textbook also features specific sections dedicated to speaking strategies, which advise on appropriate language usage in different real-life situations while emphasizing on the importance of politeness.

9. Data analysis

9.1 Utterance one

On page 13 of the book, an exercise introduces a speaking strategy about how to defend a point of view. The exercise presents certain strategies through which one can give a conflicting opinion without threatening the other person's face. The book presents a matching exercise that includes sentences demonstrating face-saving strategies. In this exercise, the objective is to choose sentences from one list that express a conflicting opinion and match as a response to the other person's opinion presented in the first list.

The sentences provided as a response to someone's opinion include bolded words that are considered essential terms. These words can be used to begin an utterance expressing a conflicting idea while still being mindful of the other person's feelings. The phrases 'you may have a point, but...' and 'I could be mistaken, but...' utilized in these statements function as acts of face-saving towards positive face by demonstrating solidarity. They highlight the shared goal and mutual desire of both speakers to achieve the same outcome. So, to politely express an opposing viewpoint, the response 'you may have a point, but a lot of people enjoy hunting' is used as a reply to the statement 'From my perspective, killing animals for sport is unethical'.

9.2 Utterance two

The exercise in page 16 of the Speaking Strategy section in Unit Two is similar to the previous one, as it also requires matching utterances. This time, the interaction is between a customer and a waiter, where the customer complains about poor service. The focus of the exercise is to identify the most polite utterances that can be used to make a compliment without offending the waiter. The utterances include phrases like 'Sorry, but I have been waiting for the main course for twenty minutes' and 'Excuse me, I asked for sparkling mineral water, but this is still'. Even though these sentences are in the form of statements, they function as imperative sentences because they use indirect speech acts to make a request or demand. This strategy of apologizing and making a request using indirect speech acts is used as a face-saving strategy towards negative face. It emphasizes the importance of the other person's time or concerns and includes an apology for any inconvenience or interruption.

In addition, the exercise contains responses from the waiter, which predominantly commence with terms of apology. As an illustration, the phrase "Sorry, I'll bring them to you now" is used as a retort to the grievance "We've been waiting for our drinks for half an hour." In this instance, the waiter endeavors to preserve a favorable social connection and reduce any potential adverse effects by apologizing and presenting a solution.

9.3 Utterance three

Another speaking strategy occurs in Unit 3 on page 20 of this book. This time, the exercise is about how to make a request or ask for permission. The utterances used to express making a request include indirect speech act sentences like 'Would you mind fixing the tap in the bathroom', and utterances of indirect speech act to ask for permission like 'I was wondering if I could paint the kitchen in a different color'. These utterances are considered to be more polite than direct utterances like 'Fix the tap in the bathroom' or 'Let me paint the kitchen in a different color'.

The utterances used in this exercise aim to deliver what is wanted in the most polite way possible. Unlike the direct speech act, which may inherently damage the face of the addressee or the speaker by acting in opposition to the wants and desires of the other, the indirect speech act is used as a request without putting the other person in a position where they feel obligated to comply. Additionally, it allows the other person to save face by allowing them to comply with the request without feeling pressured or embarrassed.

9.4 Utterance four

At the end of the book, on page 90, there is a transcription of an audio conversation that appears in unit four. This conversation is between a shop assistant and a customer called Maribel. In this conversation, Maribel complains about a blouse she bought. She starts her complaint by stating that 'I'm afraid there is a problem with this blouse' and 'I washed it once and it's shrunk'. The sentences she uttered indicate that she wants a refund using a language that shows respect for the assistant's autonomy and avoids imposing. Maribel uses indirect speech acts as a negative politeness strategy to be polite by avoiding imposing one's will or desires on others. She uses this strategy as a way of showing respect for the other person's face needs, or their need to maintain a positive self-image.

Despite Maribel's request for a refund, the assistant refuses the idea and instead places the responsibility for the situation on Maribel. In response, Maribel becomes more assertive and directly states, 'I want my money back, please'. Although the speaker's statement is indirect, it still poses a threat to the listener's positive face and self-image by displaying disapproval and disagreement. This act of threatening the listener's face suggests that the speaker is not concerned about maintaining a positive relationship. As the disagreement persists, Maribel asserts that the situation is unsatisfactory and expresses her desire to file a complaint by saying 'Well, that's not good enough. I want to make a complaint'. This threatens the listener's face as it is perceived as an emotional outburst. When the conversation reaches a point of disagreement, it progresses from initially caring about the other person's face needs to eventually using face-threatening acts. The use of face-threatening acts, such as criticism or demands, can make other people feel that their positive face is being threatened. As the conversation continues, the parties involved may become more direct in their communication style, which can further cause disagreement.

10. Conclusion

The study attempts to investigate the employment of face-saving strategies in the 'Real Listening and Speaking 3' textbook. The analysis includes conversations related to various topics and specific sections referring to speaking strategies. The four chosen utterances analyzed in the study illustrate the use of face-saving strategies in different contexts, including how to defend a point of view, how to make a complaint, how to make a

request, and how to make a compliment without offending someone. Indirect speech acts are one of the strategies used as a face-saving strategy towards negative face, emphasizing the importance of the other person's time or concerns, and including apologies for any inconvenience. The use of indirect speech acts in this book is also related to making requests without putting other people in a position where they feel obligated to comply, allowing them to save face. On the other hand, direct speech acts, although sometimes necessary, can threaten the listener's face and should be used with caution.

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