A Preliminary Examination of Teaching Politeness Theory in the EFL Classroom

Aidan Hammond

(Cheju National University)

> "I thought you said it wasn't any good."
> "I said it wasn't 'bad.'" Peter Marlow hesitated. "Look. Saying it's 'not bad' means that it's exceptional. That's a way of paying a chap a compliment without embarrassing him."
>
> *King Rat*, James Clavell, pg 45

1. Introduction

As the quote above illustrates, notions of politeness are not polarized into polite and impolite utterances, but are very fluid concepts, encompassing various linguistic, pragmatic, social, cultural and non-linguistic concepts. Different discourse types and social situations "require different forms of social relations and hence different linguistic means of politeness" (Bou-Franch and Garcès-Conejos 2003, pg 5). Knowledge of these social relations and linguistic means falls under the theory of pragmatic competence. Simply put, politeness has to be communicated and interpreted by the audience as such. In an ESL context, the communication and interpretation of politeness can occasionally be misinterpreted or deemed inappropriate in a particular context, due to learners' incomplete or insufficient pragmatic knowledge and execution of this knowledge. Improving ESL learners' awareness of pragmatics and the role that politeness plays in communication will improve their pragmatic competence. Looking at politeness theory from the point of view of social interaction taking place allows the

awareness of the pragmatic forms of the language, the students will be able to form concepts about the appropriate use of the language across a variety of genres and situations.

This paper presents outlines several basic theories of pragmatic competence, pragmatic failure and politeness, within the ESL context. It seeks to explore some of these theories and how they can be incorporated into the ESL classroom context and will examine a proposed framework for implementing these theories into the ESL classroom.

2. Pragmatic competence

Whether or not one makes appropriate choices in language use depends on their level of communicative competence, and more specifically, their pragmatic competence. Knowledge of these constraints on communication, the resulting illocutionary force of the utterances on the hearer, and the ability to use and recognize these forms in appropriate situations is what makes up a person's pragmatic competence. Thus, pragmatic competence can be considered to encompass:

> language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication.
>
> Crystal, 1995

Barron (2003, pg 10) outlines pragmatic competence further by defining it as:

> ...knowledge of the linguistic resources available in a given language for realizing particular illocutions, knowledge of the sequential aspects of speech acts and finally, knowledge of the appropriate use of the particular languages' resources.

Pragmatic competence is the knowledge of how to use the linguistic resources available to accomplish a particular task or function, and to use these resources in

correctly or appropriately. ESL learners must use their pragmatic knowledge to produce and interpret speech acts and utterances appropriately, however if their L2 pragmatic knowledge is insufficient or incorrect, miscommunication and pragmatic failure occurs.

This kind of failure can be range from the relatively harmless, such as [1] below where "yes" would be more appropriate:

[1]   A: Are you 10 years old?
      B: Okay.

to social interactions that could take a turn for the worst:

[2]   A: Can you give me a ride home after class, if it's not too much trouble?
      B: Absolutely not!

While grammatical failure is recognized and easily compensated for through various conversation strategies by hearers, pragmatic failure, particularly with regards to notions of politeness, is not so easily 'forgiven' by hearers. In the case of grammatical failure hearers are likely to make a judgment of the speaker's language ability, but in the case of pragmatic failure, a judgment of the personal qualities of the speaker takes place. For instance, consider the request of a ride home after class from a fellow student. An appropriate request might take the form of:

[3]   Hey William, if you're going my way, can you give me a ride home.

A request that exhibits grammatical failure, but can still be interpreted by the hearer as appropriate might be:

[4]   William, Going to home? Can you give me a ride some way? Is it okay?

While a request that is grammatically correct but lacking phrases that mitigate the force of the request, could cause the hearer to think the speaker of being rude, boorish or impolite, such as:

Thomas (1983, pg 96-97) emphasizes the importance of the negative consequences of pragmatic failure as it relates to a second language learner's ability to project their desired image:

Pragmatic failure, on the other hand, is rarely recognized as such by non-linguists. If a non-native speaker appears to speak fluently (i.e. grammatically competent), a native speaker is likely to attribute his/her apparent impoliteness or unfriendliness, not to any linguistic deficiency, but to boorishness or ill-will. While grammatical errors may reveal a speaker to be a less than proficient language-user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a *person.*

3. Pragmatic Failure

Pragmatic failure can occur due to several factors. Most commonly, insufficient pragmatic competence in a learner's L2 can contribute to pragmatic failure - the learner simply is not equipped with the linguistic means to participate appropriately in a given pragmatic context. Failure to respond to a compliment in a North American English context is one such example:

[6]   NS: Those are great pants. They look really good on you.
      NNS: [no response]

L2 learners may also transfer some pragmatic features or characteristics from their L1 into their L2 discourse. This kind of transfer can range from forms of politeness that are considered too polite or verbose in the target language, to deference strategies based on social distance, status, or hierarchy that diverge from native speaker norms, to the nature of refusing (Thomas, 1983, pg 102). Ellis (1994, p .180) cites a study by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz(1990) whose research showed that while Japanese ESL learners in America used the same range of semantic formulas as native speakers, they differed in the order they applied these formulas. When refusing an invitation, Japanese speakers typically

They reacted differently according to whether the invitation originated from a higher- or lower-status person, whereas the native speakers responded according to how familiar they were with their interlocutors.

(Ellis, 1994, pg 180)

Teaching errors and cultural stereotypes can also contribute to pragmatic failure. Learners might be encouraged to be 'direct' when interacting with North American speakers of English, leading to utterances such as:

[7]   NS: Could you help me with this math problem?
      NNS: Hell no!

EFL teaching environments and texts may also over-emphasize formal language or the use of particular politeness strategies as a way of ensuring that learners are not perceived as rude by target language interlocutors. Learners then form the assumption that this type of pragmatic behavior is appropriate and safe in any context. For instance, learners may have been taught that when asking a question of a complete stranger it is best to be polite. Students then form, or are taught, an utterance that may be considered overly polite or verbose for the given context. For example, enquiring at a bus kiosk, an ESL speaker might produce the following utterance:

[8]   Excuse me, do you mind if I ask you a question? Could you please tell me what time the bus leaves?

In this context, the phrase "excuse me, do you mind if I ask you a question?" could be considered unnecessary and verbose. A native speaker in the same context might do away with the 'polite' language forms and use a much more direct form, such as:

[9]   What time is the next bus?

4. General Overview of Politeness Theory

learners' pragmatic awareness are the theories of face management put forward by Brown and Levinson (1987) and the classification of face politeness systems and the social variables across cultures outlined by Scollon and Scollon (1995).

A major component of politeness theory is that of face, "the public self-image, the sense of self, of the people that we address" (Cutting, 2002, pg 45). Brown and Levinson (1985, pg 65) maintain that in order to enter into any social relationship, one must show an awareness of face. Face, according to Brown and Levinson (and Bou-Franch and Garcès-Conejos 2003, pg 6, and Cutting, 2002, pg 45) consists of positive face and negative face. Positive face is the need to be accepted and liked by others, to be part of a group. Negative face is the need to be independent, to have freedom of choice. From these two concepts of face, we can apply positive politeness strategies that attend to positive face needs, and negative politeness strategies that attend to negative face needs. If a speaker says something that might be deemed to threaten the hearer's face, this is called a Face Threatening Act (FTA). Alternatively, showing awareness that a speech act may threaten a hearer's face, the speaker can perform a Face Saving Act (FSA) to mitigate the illocutionary force. In the example below the speaker (A) considers making a FTA to quiet some children playing outside, but the second participant (B) suggests mitigating this request with a FSA:

[10] A: I'm going to tell those kids to quit making so much noise.
      B: How about suggesting that they play their game at the park because there is more room there?

In any social interaction, the speaker usually attempts to minimize the threat to face by using politeness strategies that address the hearer's positive and/or negative face needs. Brown and Levinson identified these strategies as consisting of 5 super-strategies that the speaker can adopt in performing a FTA:

1. Refrain from doing the FTA
2. Doing the FTA off record using an indirect request

5. Doing the FTA with redressive action using negative politeness

To examine these super-strategies, one could take the example of a student desiring a ride home because it is raining. If the student wishes to avoid an FTA altogether, they could simply not mention their desire and walk home in the rain. However, the student could utter within hearing distance of their friend,

[11] "Oh, it's raining, and I forgot my umbrella."

The friend can then choose to ignore this indirect request, or respond with an offer of a ride. By stating their request indirectly, the speaker is attempting an FTA off record. This type of FTA allows the hearer to choose whether to interpret the utterance literally, or to respond to the illocutionary force of the utterance. If on the other hand the student made a direct request such as

[12] "Drive me home,"

they are initiating an FTA baldly on record, without any redressive action to mitigate the request. Between the extremes of a bald request and an indirect request are the strategies that make use of negative and positive politeness. Negative politeness strategies emphasise the desire of the speaker not to intrude on the hearer's territory or freedom and underline the distance or space between the interlocutors. Utterances of this type make use of apologies, hesitations and provide the option of refusing, such as:

[13] I'm sorry to bother you, uhm, but if you are not too busy, could you give me a ride home? I'll understand if you say no.

This type of utterance emphasizes the importance of the hearer's time, "if you are not too busy," and provides the hearer with the option of refusing, "I'll understand if you say no." A positive politeness strategy, on the other hand, will emphasize the closeness between the interlocutors and seek to mitigate the FTA

[14]   "Hey, how about catching a ride with you after class?"

In this example the speaker appeals to the hearer's membership in the same group (students), a common need (going home), and also emphasizes this shared closeness through the use of slang such as "hey" and "catching a ride" (Yule 1996, pg 45).
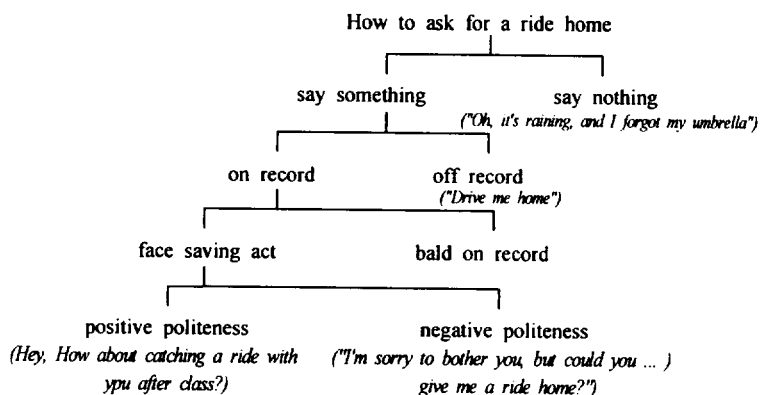

Figure 1: *How to ask for a ride home* after Brown and Levinson (1987) and Yule (1996)

The choice of what form of super-strategy to use is dependent on several factors that the speaker must take into account: the social distance between the interlocutors, the degree of familiarity between the interlocutors; the social power of the interlocutor, the degree to which the speaker can impose their will or request upon the hearer, "...the degree to which H can impose his own plans and his own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of S's plans and self-evaluation" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, pg 77); and the relative degree of imposition of the speech act, the ease with which the hearer can comply (Barron, 2003, pg 18).

An important thing to note is that simply raising the formality of an utterance by using negative politeness strategies is not always appropriate in every context, and does not guarantee that the speaker will be perceived as being polite. In some contexts, being polite might be perceived as being too polite, and one can

[15]   A: I'm sorry to bother you, uhm, but if you are not too busy, could you
              give me a ride home? I'll understand if you say no.
        B: You don't have to ask like that. I'd be happy to. Anytime, just ASK.

Likewise a request using negative politeness, rather than mitigating the illocutionary force of the request can in some cases increase it. In a typical interaction between a superior and an employee, the following request by the superior might be appropriate:

[16]   If you're not too busy could you type this letter?

However, if the superior suspects that the employee has been wasting time and neglecting their duties, the same request takes on a much stronger illocutionary force, conveying through sarcasm the superior's negative view of the employee's time management skills.

Complimenting Brown and Levinson's approach to face and face management are Scollon and Scollon's (1995) definitions of face relationships. These fall into three categories: deference politeness systems, solidarity politeness systems, and hierarchical politeness systems. Deference politeness systems consider that social relations between participants are symmetrical and that they "regard each other as equals" (Bou-Franch and Garcès-Conejos 2003, pg 15) but they are not close, such as two doctors from different hospitals discussing the same patient. As such, participants will use strategies that emphasize independence when interacting with each other (negative politeness strategies.) Solidarity politeness systems also describe symmetrical relationships between the participants, but emphasize the closeness and solidarity between the interlocutors, making use of positive politeness strategies to do so, typical of friendships:

[17]   It's a great movie. You'll love it. Let's go!

Hierarchical politeness systems are not symmetrical and describe the relationship between people who are not equals where each person uses different linguistic

hierarchical relationship. The employer [S] does not use any honorifics and their response takes the form of a directive without any linguistic forms to mitigate the illocutionary force:

[18]   E: Excuse me, Sir. Is there anything else you need before I leave for the day?
       S: Yes. Bring me the tax files.

Combining these theories of face management and Brown and Levinson's theories of negative and positive politeness together provides the language teacher and L2 student with useful tools for analyzing social interactions and the pragmatic functions associated with them. These tools can assist the learner in raising their pragmatic awareness

5. Awareness Raising

If we map communicative actions in classic language classroom discourse against pragmatic competence that nonnative speakers need to communicate in the outside world, it becomes immediately obvious that the language classroom in its classical format does not offer students what they need - not in terms of teacher's input, nor in students' productive language use.

Kasper, 1997, pg 7

The above quote outlines one of the main difficulties in improving ESL students' pragmatic awareness. Increasing pragmatic awareness is not simply a matter of explaining the correct way to interact in a language or culture. Rather, building pragmatic awareness involves equipping learners with the skills necessary to observe and process situations and language, and understand the context of the interactions and the accepted norms that accompany a particular context. Ellis (1994, pg 181), citing a study by Takahashi and Beebe, suggests that without any sociolinguist need, students will not build upon their pragmatic competence.

Providing students with the sociolinguistic need, as well as the means to analyze this need should be one of the goals of increasing pragmatic competence.

There has been some discussion in the literature about the importance of awareness-raising tasks and whether or not they can and should be taught in the ESL classroom. Generally, it is agreed that awareness-raising tasks can be taught and that students' pragmatic competence benefits from this teaching (Kasper 1997, pg 4). Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos(2003) in particular, also maintain that the application of theories of politeness to descriptions of genres and speech acts will help students identify and observe how different degrees of formality apply to particular situations and contexts:

> Once learners become aware of the different social relations in various genres, and of the types of linguistic differences that can be expected across genres, their ability to observe and analyze new situations should be exploited.
> (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos 2003, pg 16)

Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos outline 6 methodological steps to increasing language students' awareness of politeness. The first is to define for students what politeness in linguistic terms is. May people outside of the linguistic profession consider politeness to involve 'good manners' and 'etiquette' and are unaware of its social or cultural context. Using Brown and Levinson's model of negative and positive politeness, students could then analyze linguistic politeness in their own culture and language and begin to understand the role linguistic politeness plays in their own language. Next, students could discuss these kinds of interactions in their own culture using the model of deference proposed by Scollon and Scollon. By analyzing a variety of authentic texts, across a range of genres, students can be made aware of the different linguistic forms used in a given genre. Students' attention should be directed to how Brown and Levinson's and Scollon and Scollon's theories are related to their observations. Politeness does not only involve polite utterances but also polite responses by listeners with regard to

building up their awareness of their role in conversational interaction. Finally, pointing out the "politeness realizations are culture bound," (2003, pg 18) Bou-Franch and Garcès-Conejos emphasizes the importance of making students aware of differing politeness strategies across cultures:

> ...students are made aware that there are not more or less polite societies and languages but just difference means to achieve the same ends.
>
> (2003, pg 18)

6. Politeness Theory in the Classroom

Lessons based using these theories have been taught at a variety of levels of English Conversation classes at the Foreign Language Institute. These lessons follow the framework outlined above, giving students about 4 hours of class time devoted to these topics and exercises. Preliminary implementation of these theories in the classroom has had interesting results.

While students generally easily understand the concepts of face, positive politeness and negative politeness, there are some areas that present problems to them. Most notably, students express a reluctance or reticence to use positive politeness strategies, particularly with strangers. They are more comfortable using negative politeness strategies, because they feel that this is safer and more acceptable. While they realize that this is not always necessary, they often find using positive politeness uncomfortable. Frequent comments in this vein by students were:

> When we are taught about politeness in school, our teachers teach us to use polite forms of language. They only teach us that. They were taught that by their teachers, so they teach us that. We don't really learn about the other kinds of politeness or when it is okay to use. So we are always polite.
>
> K.S.H.

politeness forms more than positive ones. So I know that I will be okay, whatever
I say.

P.H.J

The above comments point out that much of the students' comfort in using
negative politeness strategies over positive ones is due to the teaching, or over
teaching, of negative politeness strategies in English conversation classes. Another
point raised by students was that the use of positive politeness is not as clear-cut
or teachable as negative politeness strategies. Students are comfortable relying on
formulaic linguistic structures (*Would you..., Do you mind..*) instead of the less
formulaic, and sometimes idiomatic linguistic forms (*Hey, let's catch a movie*).
Their learning in the past has emphasized these formulaic structures as acceptable
means of communicating requests. But the context of these requests or the
examination of forms that make use of positive politeness has not received as
much attention. Students expressed a fear of lack of experience or confidence in
using these kinds of forms.

7. Conclusion

This awareness of the differences between genres and their corresponding social
relations will allow learners to develop autonomy in their language learning.
Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos believe that it is important to encourage learners
to "become observers and ethnographers," (2003, pg 16) thus making them more
aware of the language and social constraints they are observing and increasing
their pragmatic competence. This type of awareness-raising provides the students
with sociopragmatic information, 'when to say something', and pragmalinguistic
information, 'what to say'. This claim is also supported by Kasper (1997, pg 8):

By focusing students' attention on relevant features of the input, such observation
tasks help students make connections between linguistic forms, pragmatic functions,
their occurrence in different social contexts, and their cultural meanings.

will better equip students to handle communicative situations. Providing these skills to students is important because students need to articulate and present the view of themselves that they wish. By being aware of the factors that influence politeness, and to be able to exert some control over them, students will build their pragmatic competence.

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Aian Hammond
Foreign Language Institute
Cheju National University
66 Jejudaehakno, Jeju-shi
E-mail: aidan_hammond@yahoo.com