

Teaching Pragmatics: (im)politeness in an EFL classroom

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Abstract: The main purpose of this paper is to discuss theories of politeness and impoliteness and the teaching of pragmatics in an English as a Second Language (EFL) classroom. An analysis of a brief conversation taken from an American sitcom will be proposed as a tool for teaching matters of (im)politeness in class. Brown and Levinson's theory has been among the most influential and controversial studies in this area. There are many current issues being discussed that revolve around their theory and the fact that it does not account for cultural diversity. Therefore, the insertion of this subject in the EFL classroom is extremely important in the sense that it makes students aware of the social and cultural diversity that is involved in learning English as a second language.

Keywords: *Pragmatics, EFL, Teaching.*

1. Introduction

There are many definitions for the term *pragmatics*. The majority of them revolve around the interpretation of meaning. In spite of the lack of definition, it is clear that there is a huge applicability of pragmatics in the language classroom. According to Bardovi-Harlig (2001), without instruction, differences in pragmatics show up in the English of learners regardless of their first language background or language proficiency. Among many research objects in linguistic pragmatics, politeness stands out as a controversial subject.

In the late 1970's, the subject of politeness became a major concern in the field of pragmatics and it has been widely discussed among pragmaticists ever since. Although there is yet to be an agreement on what would be the best definition for the term, many studies have been focusing on a new and revised approach to the matter, including the concept of impoliteness. In the light of current research, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1978), along with other models such as Lakoff's (1973, 1975) and Leech's (1983), has been targeted, according to Kasper (1990), as over-simplistic because its conception of universality does not account for cultural differences.

Based on the latest criticism of early theories of politeness, it is possible to establish a context for the teaching of (im)politeness in an English as a Foreign Language classroom. Brown and Levinson's theory, for example, did not attend explicitly to the study of impoliteness. For them impoliteness was simply an absence of politeness and, therefore, was seen as exceptional (Keinpointner, 1997). Authors such as Culpeper (2005) argue that it is not sufficient to assume that impoliteness can be characterized as 'communicative strategies

designed to attack face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony' (Culpeper et al., 2003:1546). Also, Bousfield (2008:72) says that 'rather than seeking to mitigate face threatening acts, impoliteness constitutes the communication of intentionally gratuitous and conflictive verbal face-threatening acts which are purposefully delivered.'

The teaching of pragmatics has been proven to be effective. Studies such as Takimoto's (2009) proved the effectiveness of instruction for teaching polite requests to Japanese learners of English. She found that English polite request forms could be effectively targeted by different input-based tasks and that completing these tasks resulted in learners improving their pragmatic proficiency as measured in pre-, post- and follow-up tests. Mackey (1999) reported similar success using tasks to target various question forms with learners in an ESL classroom setting.

Therefore, based on this and other current studies, this article intends to propose some material for the teaching of pragmatics with a focus on the theory of politeness as well as on recent studies on impoliteness and their applicability in an EFL classroom context, through the use of situation comedies.

2. Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's, Lakoff's and Leech's theories of politeness are considered to be the most influential works in this area of study. The origins for the study of politeness could be traced back to H. P. Grice's paper 'Logic and conversation' (1975). In this paper Grice proposed a Cooperative Principle and four maxims of discourse. He also noted that additional maxims were necessary in order to account for other aspects of language use. These additional maxims were further elaborated by Lakoff (1973, 1979), Leech (1977, 1983), and Edmonson (1979, 1981). These proposals view politeness in terms of maxims or rules.

A different approach was proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978/87), who elaborated on the notion of face proposed by Goffman (1971). For Brown and Levinson (1987:61) face, being the 'public self-image that every member [of society] wants to claim for himself', consists of two aspects: positive face and negative face. The first acknowledges the fact that we want others to show us we are liked, accepted and understood. The latter refers to people wanting to be independent and not having their actions imposed on by others. When neither the positive or negative face is respected we have a communicative act referred to as Face Threatening Acts (FTAs).

Parallel but opposite to Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness is Culpeper's theory of impoliteness, which is defined by an intentional and purposeful attack on a hearer's face. His interpretation focuses mainly on the context of the conversation. There are two different types of impoliteness for him: mock impoliteness and inherent or genuine impoliteness.

Another final and important theory worth mentioning is Richard Watts's theory. For him, politeness is a dynamic process by which 'being polite' is connected to the individual's

interpretation of linguistic structures as polite or impolite during a conversation. He distinguishes politeness¹ and politeness², the first being commonsense interpretations of politeness, and the second the technical term used by pragmaticists and sociolinguists.

2.1 Politeness theory: current issues

As mentioned before, early theories of politeness have been largely questioned by some pragmaticists. Brown and Levinson's view of positive and negative face, which they claim to be universal, has been contested by researchers studying politeness in non-Western societies, because, according to them, it is very difficult to apply this theory to their own cultures. The Japanese, for instance, have a more collective rather than individual orientation, which contrasts with the concept of negative face that implies certain individuality. According to Janney and Arndt (1993) Brown and Levinson's theory lacks a culturally unbiased conceptual framework for evaluating their politeness universals in an objective and empirical way. So, the theory operates at a high level of idealization and requires a great degree of reduction.

The general understanding seems to be that it is impossible to discuss polite or impolite behavior without taking into account the social aspects of different cultures. Eelen (1999: 170) provides an insight on politeness as an 'inherently ethical' phenomenon, which shows that human values and social norms cannot be taken for granted when discussing theories of politeness in the field of pragmatics.

3. Teaching pragmatics: (im)politeness in the classroom

The teaching of pragmatics in the language classroom is important because it has been demonstrated that there is a need for it; and because it has proven to be effective (O'Keeffe, Clancy & Adolphs, 2012). Many authors highlight the importance of instruction in pragmatics, which help prevent the consequences of pragmatic failure in a foreign language context.

Although not all aspects of pragmatics are easily applied to the language classroom, many are. One aspect that can be considered relevant and teachable is (im)politeness, which is the main focus of this paper. Many teachers already cover matters of politeness or impoliteness in their classes without even realizing it. The teaching of the use of formal or informal language in different contexts, direct or indirect speech, hedging, vague language, approximation and pragmatic markings, greetings, farewells, requests, forms of addressing, and so on, are good examples on how to approach both positive and negative politeness in class.

The teaching of (im)politeness can be assessed by the use of many learning tools. It is known that the media plays an important role in any student's background, and it offers a wide range of options for English Language Teachers to use in their classes. For instance, situation comedies can be very useful in an EFL classroom, since they provide an idea of cultural, social and linguistic aspects related to the target language by showing native speakers in a real

language use context. Considering Michael Lewis's (1996:2) assumption that "it is the quality and quantity of the input to which the learners are exposed which is the single most important factor in their progress", it is possible to find a great support for working with materials such as situation comedies in order to provide the students with authentic input and, therefore, improve their learning process.

4. Analysis and applicability

In this paper, I will analyze a conversation in the light of politeness theory and recent discussions about impoliteness as well, by calling attention to the linguistic elements used by its participants and how the choosing of these elements can lead to polite or impolite interpretations.

The dialogue to be analyzed was taken from an American sitcom called *The Big Bang Theory*, and it shows a situation involving a university physicist and the head of the Human Resources Department (HR).

First of all, when analyzing a sitcom, it is important to set the context in which the interaction is taking place. This particular conversation is taking place in a university, more specifically, in the Human Resources Department (HR), and it involves two people: a university physicist and the head of the department. The HR deals directly with employees and, among other things, with their behavior in the workplace. The fact that the character is in this place opens our interpretation to the fact that there might have been some misconduct in the academic environment.

5. Analysis

To analyze the conversation of the video I will focus on its transcription and comment mainly on the linguistic elements that are relevant for the analysis of politeness.

S = Sheldon Cooper

HRD = Human Resources Department

1. **S:** *Human Resources Department (knock, knock), Human Resources Department (knock, knock), Human Resources Department (knock, knock)...*
2. **HRD:** *Come in?*
3. **S:** *Hello.*
4. **HRD:** *Ah, Dr. Cooper. Have a seat.*
5. **S:** *Thank you.*
6. **HRD:** *I called you in today because your assistant Alex Jensen has lodged a complaint against you.*

7. *S: So I've been told. But I can't understand what she has to complain about. I mean, she has a front row seat as I make scientific history. There's a string cheese in my mini fridge, and that's for anyone. Yeah, and just yesterday I led her away from a life of sexual promiscuity by making her look at pictures of disease ridden genitalia.*
8. *HRD: (to someone on the phone) Cancel my next appointment. This is going to take a while. (to Sheldon) Dr. Cooper, you said things to your employee that you just cannot say in the workplace.*
9. *S: Like what?*
10. *HRD: Well, according to Ms. Jensen you said that she was a slave to her biological urges and called her an egg salad sandwich. I don't even know what that means but I'm gonna go ahead and tell you can't say it.*
11. *S: Oh, I see the confusion here. No, no, Alex thought I was singling her out. No. I meant that all women are slaves to their biological urges, you know. Even you. You're a slave.*
12. *HRD: I'm a what?*
13. *S: I'm just saying, at a certain point in a woman's menstrual cycle...*
14. *HRD: No, No! You can't talk about that either, Dr. Cooper! Your language is entirely inappropriate and I'm gonna advise that you shut your mouth right now.*
15. *S: I don't see why I'm the one being persecuted here. Dr. Hofstadter, he was bragging about his sexual desirability to anyone who would listen. And Howard Wolowitz, he spent two years using university resources building a six-breasted sex robot. And at the office Christmas party I heard Rajesh Koothrappali refer to you several times as brown sugar.*
16. *HRD: Hofstadter, Wolowitz, and the last one was Rajesh Koothrappali?*
17. *S: Yes, but in his defense, that wasn't racist, he is also brown.*

In the beginning of their interaction it is possible to notice many linguistic elements that indicate certain degree of formality and mutual respect between the two participants. Their engagement in the conversation satisfies the positive face of both. The invitation to come in, the greeting 'hello', the addressing of the title of Doctor, the request for him to sit and his thanking of the gesture (lines 1 to 5) are also examples of positive politeness.

At first, they both satisfy each other's negative face by respecting the turns of the conversation. It is also possible to point out examples of negative politeness such as the words and expressions 'I mean' (l. 7) and 'you know' (l.11) that, based on the framework of Carter and McCarthy (2006), are categorized as interactional markers, which the speaker uses in an attempt to make the message clearer.

By explaining to Sheldon the reason for him being there, the woman threatens his face. Even though he understands why he is there, he does not understand the reason of the

complaint. Throughout the conversation, the physicist comments on subjects that are considered to be inappropriate in social conventions. For example, talking about sexual promiscuity, a woman's menstrual cycle and their biological urges are not subjects to be discussed in the workplace.

At a certain point the turns of the conversation overlap when the woman stops Sheldon from what he is saying, because his comments are inappropriate. There are also some social aspects that are not respected. The physicist says that all women are slaves to their biological urges, even the woman in front of him. The impoliteness lies on the fact that she is an afro-American woman, and the fact that he is calling her a slave sounds completely inappropriate due to the history of slavery of black people. Another racial comment is made by the end of the conversation, with the use of the expression "brown sugar" and the explanation that the person who said that is also "brown" and, therefore, his statement was not racist. Calling a co-worker "brown sugar" is considered a form of disrespect in the working environment.

Line 14 is an example of a paradoxal sentence. By using the words "I'm going to advise that..." she is using indirect speech which is considered to be more polite. However the rest of the sentence contradicts any intention of politeness when she says "that you shut your mouth right now". It is never polite to tell someone to shut his/her mouth, as social convention dictates. So, by using indirect speech the woman is trying to attenuate her order, since there is a matter of power involving them in the sense that they are both members of the university and are required to respect each other.

6. In the classroom

For EFL teachers, the analyzed conversation is a rich tool for teaching students many pragmatic aspects. The first lines, for instance, open the possibility for the study of introductions, greetings and etc. The rest of the interaction opens a discussion to the appropriateness of what to say, when and where to say it and also some strategies to make our speech sound more polite. It is also possible to use this material to discuss some social issues and cultural differences, since the scene being analyzed is happening in a specific setting, with specific people at an American university, with an afro-American female and a white male.

The written transcription also allows a wide variety of possibilities in the classroom for both teachers and students. By analyzing the written conversation the teacher can call students' attention to many aspects related to the vocabulary used. For example, the use of "gonna" instead of "going to" opens a discussion to matters of formality: should students use the informal form in written speech? Which contexts allow this form of speech? Is it okay to use this form in everyday conversation? And in formal conversation? Questions such as the previous ones offer a possibility of pragmatic reflection in the EFL classroom.

7. Conclusion

The teaching of pragmatics has proven to be effective in the context of the classroom, especially in an EFL one. Learning a second language involves a lot more than simply learning its vocabulary and grammar rules. Among many subjects within the field of pragmatics one stands out as maybe one of the most important in teaching: politeness/impoliteness. Theorists such as Brown and Levinson, Lakoff and Leech were pioneers on the matter, but latest criticism has brought to our attention the importance of considering cultural diversity and social conventions. By analyzing an excerpt from a sitcom, I discussed how authentic material such as this can offer a variety of options for the EFL teacher. The analysis presented and the aspects pointed out are merely a tool for teachers and need further development.

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