

ATIVIDADE DIDÁTICA

Help the newbie! Bringing politeness theory and netiquette together in the EAL classroom

Ajude o novato! Juntando a teoria da polidez à netiqueta na aula de inglês como língua adicional

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1. INTRODUCTION

As the title suggests, it is our objective with this teaching activity to bring together politeness theory and netiquette in the English as an additional language classroom. In order to do so, we believe that some background information on these must be provided.

Politeness theory was introduced by Brown & Levinson (henceforth B&L) in their seminal book “Politeness: Some universals in language usage” (1978, 1987). Politeness is defined by Brown (2015, p. 326) as “[...] essentially a matter of taking into account the feelings of others as to how they should be interactionally treated, including behaving in a manner that demonstrates appropriate concern for interactors’ social status and their social relationship”. B&L suggest that a need to be polite is common to all cultures and that, in this sense, “politeness (...) is ubiquitous in language use” (ibid.).

The authors built their theory on the Co-Operative Principle by Paul Grice and on the notion of face developed by Erwin Goffman. For Grice, verbal interactions are “characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognises in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction” (1975, p. 45), i.e., people cooperate with the intent to achieve “maximally efficient” interactions. Grice then establishes four maxims, which are at the core of his Co-Operative Principle: quantity, quality, relation and manner.

While Grice relied on the philosophy of language to develop his work, Goffman (1967) made use of his background in sociology to create the concept

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of “face” (O’Keeffe, Clancy & Adolphs, 2011). For our purposes, it becomes necessary to understand this notion and how it was later systematized in B&L’s model.

“Face” is an expression which is said to have been imported from Chinese from half of the XIX century, having the sense of prestige, honor or dignity (Charaudeau & Maingueneau, 2014). In order to coin the concept he was creating, Goffman explored the metaphors of commonly used English idiomatic expressions such as “to lose face” and “to save face”. He then stated that “face” stands for “the positive social value a person effectively claims for [him/herself]” (1967, p. 5).

Politeness can thus be seen as an expression of people’s face needs; as these needs are universal, so is politeness, claim B&L. For them, there are two kinds of face: positive, which has to do with the desire to be liked, admired and so on; and negative, the desire not to be intruded or to be imposed upon; it is a claim for personal privacy and preservation. “For both of these aspects of face, our essential needs are the same - we want people to like us - and this impacts on our linguistic behaviour” (O’Keeffe et al., 2011, p. 63).

Following this direction, B&L (1978, 1987) advocate that there are face-threatening acts (FTAs) and face-saving acts (FSAs). An FTA is a behavior that makes the interactant lose face by suffering an embarrassment or public humiliation; it does not take into consideration the interlocutor’s negative face, that is, his “freedom of action and freedom from imposition” (p. 61). It is also a way of disrespecting the hearer’s positive face, considered as the wish to be “appreciated and approved of” (ibid.). Therefore, politeness can be seen as a way of softening FTAs.

An FSA, on the other hand, is a behavior that avoids or eliminates the risk of losing face; in other words, it lessens a possible face-threat, by making the interlocutor keep a good self-image.

One consistent critique of B&L’s model is that it doesn’t account for acts which are deliberately meant to be impolite. According to Culpeper, impoliteness is a “communicative strategy designed to attack face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony” (2011, p. 19); the author also states that “[it] comes about when: (1) the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behaviour as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2)” (ibid.). Consequently, one must consider that this kind of verbal behavior has its significance in everyday communication and must not be considered as a deviation or marginal language fact.

At this point we should emphasize that our goal is to approach FTAs which are not meant to be rude or offensive, but that, due to students’ (ss) diminished command of English or lack of ability on how to operate with the idiosyncrasies of internet discourse, may come across as impolite. We understand that being impolite may be at times the speaker’s intention, but we will not address this kind of utterance in this class plan; our aim is to focus on good netiquette rather than on poor.

In order to achieve our goals, it is not necessary that ss are familiar with the nomenclature related to politeness theory, it is enough that they can recognize a speech act that is meant to be rude - or not - and the ways that they can make it less offensive.

Apart from politeness and its derived concepts, also the notion of netiquette must be brought to light. It consists in the rules of politeness one must observe when in internet-mediated communication; it can also be referred to as “cyberpoliteness”.

According to Yus (2011), “politeness is essential to keep relationships on the Internet within acceptable margins” (p. 285). The author calls attention to the fact that, for internet users who are in physically distant locations, this process can be “particularly delicate” (ibid.), because different speech communities frequently do not share the same politeness strategies. The author argues that these communities often abandon specific traces of their local culture and politeness code in order to ensure effective communication. This is what

Yus defines as a “default level of politeness”; hence the need of common ground rules among users on what is acceptable or not in online interactions.

Computer-mediated communication is a global phenomenon and English has become internet’s lingua franca. Teachers can collect excerpts found online and use them as authentic pieces of language, which make learning and teaching richer and more meaningful. Internet discourse can be perceived as consisting of multiple speech genres, each with special characteristics; to better understand these, items such as intended audience and the social relation between interlocutors must be considered. Internet discourse is thus hard to be precisely defined, as some consider it to be an oral conversation that takes place through writing, or as a sort of dialogue in written form.

It is our duty, as language teachers, to make ss proficient in the use of this kind of communication, raising their awareness so that they are able to properly make use of, for instance, semiotic signs (like asterisks, emoticons and *emojis*), avoiding misunderstandings or being recognized as impolite or rude. As it is not our objective to deal with statements that are openly meant to be aggressive, insulting etc., we believe that items such as how to convey intonation, emphasis, mood and prosodic attributes should also be addressed; as well as when it is ok to use informal language and careless spelling - that is, when spelling mistakes can be tolerated -, and when it is not. As Averianova points out, “teachers (...) need to explain to their students the linguistic conventions of electronic discourse and the communicative effects of their correct or inappropriate usage” (2007, p. 33). With this lesson, we expect ss to become aware of how their online writing style can, even when it’s not intended, be interpreted as disrespectful or bad-mannered, and then provide them with possible ways to make their writing more straightforward, concise, clear and, most of all, friendlier, acceptable and adequate.

2. EXPECTED LEARNING OUTCOMES

2.1. GENERAL

Ss should be capable to identify possible FTAs in written form in online interaction and how to soften these with the aid of netiquette.

2.2. SPECIFIC

By the end of this teaching activity ss are expected to:

- have their online reading abilities improved
- make autonomous use of their linguistic competence in online writing.

3. TARGET AUDIENCE AND TEACHING SITUATION

This teaching activity is designed to be worked mainly with young adults, due to the fact that, even though they may be quite familiar with the use of technology involved in online interaction, they might lack the subtleties involved in the process of expressing themselves courteously through these means. In this sense, this is a lesson targeted at raising ss’ awareness regarding the ways they can communicate politely on the internet, cell phone apps etc. The level is intermediate.

4. CLASSROOM TIME REQUIRED

This lesson should take from 70 - 80 min.

5. MATERIALS NEEDED AND TECHNOLOGY RESOURCES

To conduct this teaching activity, the teacher will need stripes of paper (as explained in item 6, step 4). Internet access is needed. If no computers are available, ss can use their cell phones instead.

6. ACTIVITIES

This lesson is to be conducted in 7 steps, as follows.

Step 1. As a warm-up, the teacher introduces the term “netiquette”, and asks ss if any of them is familiar with the word. If so, the teacher can ask him/her to make their contribution. If not, the teacher explains that netiquette is made of two words, net and etiquette (YUS, 2011, p. 256) and, facing this new information, again asks ss to share what they think this could be.

Step 2. Once the meaning is set, ss are asked to go online and google the do’s and don’ts of good netiquette. It should be stressed that, at this stage, they should look for written information, not videos, as this will be approached in step 3. Later on, ss are encouraged to contribute with their findings and the teacher writes these on the board. Possible answers may include: (do’s) using good grammar and spelling, being respectful etc. (don’ts) flaming, writing in all capital letters (looks like one shouting), spamming, using offensive language etc. Steps 1 and 2 together should take about 15 min.

Step 3. Ss watch a video/videos chosen by the teacher from youtube.com, or any other source he/she finds useful and appropriate, about netiquette. Ss’s task is to compare the items they mentioned before (and that had been written on the board) to what is mentioned in the video/videos. The goal is to make them reinforce what they already knew about the topic and increase their knowledge with the additional information they have just been exposed to. This could take from 5 to 10 minutes.

Step 4. The group is broken into pairs or trios and each is given a card that contains questions such as found in the appendix. Ss talk about the topics; after that, they are invited to share their thoughts and opinions. This will most certainly lead to group discussion; it is a moment when ss are free to talk and express themselves without worrying if their grammar or pronunciation is correct. But, as an alternative, the teacher can write down the mistakes ss make and properly address them in another future opportunity.

Step 5. After the group discussion, the teacher shows ss selected examples of poor netiquette and asks them what is wrong with those, and what could be done to make them more friendly – always having in mind that the objective is to turn the FTAs into FSAs. This activity is to be conducted orally, as ss will have a chance to practice writing in step 6 and in the homework. Steps 4 and 5, together, will require about 30 min to be executed.

Step 6. For this stage of the lesson, a whatsapp group and/or an email account must have been previously created. Sitting in pairs or groups, ss’ task is to come up with one possible FTA expressed in written utterances. The context is that they are “newbies” (a person that is new in the cyberspace) and don’t really understand how this kind of communication works. So the sentences they have to produce can either be inappropriate, sound aggressive, have emoticons/emojis used in a way that they shouldn’t, be rude, offensive, annoying or truncated, along with others. After ss are done, they share their writing with the group, either by texting or emailing.

Step 7. Once ss have access to their colleagues' written production, the teacher asks: "How could you help the newbie come across as more polite?" (or, in our terms, how could you make these speech acts less face-threatening, and more face-saving?). Ss then take notes of strategies that could be used in order to make the utterances softer and more acceptable. As a wrap-up, these notes are shared with the group and discussed. 20-25 min should be allowed to steps 6 and 7.

8. ASSESSMENT

As homework, ss are encouraged to go online again and choose a print of a post/instant message/email/tweet which they consider fairly inappropriate or impolite. They identify what is wrong and rewrite the sentences, in order to make them more palatable, taking into account both language and adequacy. This has the potential of turning into one more activity capable of raising awareness about how to make use of good netiquette.

9. POSSIBLE MODIFICATIONS

As an alternative to the homework proposed, the teacher can use the questions from the appendix as subjects for a short paragraph in which ss have to make explicit what they think about the topic and justify their answers, when needed. Each student chooses their own topic, among those talked about.

APPENDIX: CARDS FOR STEP 4 (TO BE CUT OUT AND DISTRIBUTED)

How is internet communication different from face-to-face interaction?
Do you think internet communication can raise problems (such as misunderstandings)? Give examples.
How can you convey meaning in your text messages other than writing words?
What are some of the advantages of using instant message apps in the workplace?
Is knowing spelling and grammar relevant in the cyberspace? Why or why not?
Can swearing, for instance, be acceptable? In what cases?
When people are online, their looks don't really matter that much. What then can make them look good in the cyberspace?

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