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POLITE INTERACTION AS SOCIO-CULTURAL MANIFESTATION INSIDE THE CLASSROOM: A STUDY ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTION

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Abstract: The language and the society in which it is used are closely related. One can affect the other. In Asia with its Eastern cultures, the use of language becomes very considered in social life. Asian people are stereotyped as supremely polite, especially in verbal communication. This generalization is preserved from the habits of Asians for not speaking directly to their interlocutors. It is believed that Asians tend to generate indirect expressions to avoid conflicts with other people. Practically, this kind of courtesy is expected to be seen in the use of foreign languages, for example in English. English origins from Western cultures which is known for its directness. Although Asians have a different culture regarding the directness and indirectness in conversation, it is certainly good to show that Asians are valuing and exalting human relationships by managing their interaction. It is important to take the indirectness not as a weakness but a language variety. Looking at this issue, English teachers in Asia as the facilitators of second language learning need to teach how the choice of words can affect the whole interaction. If the teachers are required to teach the cross-cultural values of Western and Asian society behind the use of polite language, how do the students themselves view this phenomenon? This paper presents the students' perception on the teacher's language in the classroom and the uniformity on the use of polite language. Several ways for English teachers to teach polite language by integrating it into the teaching materials are also proposed. This paper aims at raising the awareness of the English teachers in Asia to preserve the Asian identity by introducing mannered English during the classroom interaction and to create effective communication using global language to take a hand in globalization.

Keywords: *politeness, interaction, socio-culture, classroom*

INTRODUCTION

A lot of topics about language use in society have been discussed by many linguists for years. One of the most exposed topics is the use of politeness. Grundy (2000) says that politeness principles have been considered for having wide descriptive power in regards to language use, to be major determinants of linguistic behavior, and to have universal status. In respect to language, politeness corresponds to the use of indirect speech acts, addressing others using respectful tone, or utilizing polite utterances such as *please, sorry, or thank you* (Watts, 2003).

Some researchers refer politeness in language as 'preserving face' (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Arndt & Janney, 1992). It is prescribed that individuals possess self-esteem which has to be credited and recognized by other people. Based on this concept, linguists categorize speech into two patterns: offending someone's 'face' or defending it.



Brown and Levinson's (1987) definition of face is "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself". 'Face' is differentiated from two types of esteem: positive and negative. The terms are viewed as two things which have two different understandings. The positive face refers to human's desire to be well thought, admired, respected, and considered as a good person. On the other side, the negative face refers to human's desire to be free from any burden. Regarding the concept of 'face', Yule (2010) considers politeness as a way to show awareness and consideration of another's person's face. Thus, every individual is described to have positive and negative face that interlocutors should recognize.

When an individual tries to do and say things which lead to other individual's face losing, Yule (2010) and Song (2012) call the action as face-threatening acts (FTAs). Whenever an individual performs positive or negative face-threatening, he or she will be considered impolite. It is almost impossible to avoid the acts of face-threatening. Accordingly, people can get the benefit from speech acts which are less threatening. The effort to minimize face loss hereinafter refers to face-saving acts (Yule, 2010). Face-saving acts also cover both positive and negative face. When an attempt is carried out to minimize the loss of positive face, it is called as positive face-saving act. Otherwise, negative face-saving act is an attempt to minimize the loss of negative face.

In regard to the study of politeness, Asian people are easily stereotyped as a social group which is very polite. Kádár & Mills (2011) even describe Asians overly polite than seems necessary. The reason is mostly because of the frequent use of indirect speech acts in verbal communication conducted by most Asians. The use of indirect speech act, better known as indirectness, in politeness refers to a way of conveying message implicitly. This indirectness is then attached to Asian people generally. Western people, who are known to be very direct, even consider the indirectness by most Asians as a cultural thing. Unfortunately, this indirectness leads Asian people to be misjudged. They are sometimes misunderstood as insincere, liars or hypocritical. In fact, indirectness should be seen as a communicative skill to maintain a harmonious interpersonal relationship (Zhang & You, 2009). Lakoff (1973, as cited in Song, 2012) also clarifies that by neglecting the needs of conveying clear messages, it is better to use indirect polite speech acts to avoid friction with other people in the society.

The prior study about politeness and power relation in EFL classroom interactions conducted by the researcher shows how most participated lecturers generated face-saving utterances more frequent than face-threatening utterances. It indicates that lecturers have already practiced politeness during the interaction with their students. The face-saving utterances describe how lecturers were showing awareness and consideration to the students in the classroom through the form of indirectness (lengthening the utterances using declarative and interrogative structures instead of direct imperative structure) and polite markers. Specifically, the lecturers made use of particular expressions (e.g. *you know, you mean, right?*), modality (e.g. *would you, could you*), appreciative expression (e.g. *thank you, good*), mentioning the students' name, and polite markers (e.g. *please, excuse me*).

Inside the classroom, students are encouraged to participate. As students are engaged in activities, the role of a teacher is facilitating, controlling, director managing, and resourcing the students to participate in the activities (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Brown, 2007). Dörnyei & Murphey (2003) then emphasize that crucial classroom achievement depends on the attainment of teacher-student interaction in



classroom. It is inevitable that every action and expression produced by teachers inside the classroom involves linguistic substance (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto & Stuart-Faris, 2005). In teacher-student case, language plays important role in class management and the acquisition process of students. It describes that classroom language determines the success of teaching and learning activities as well as the medium to enhance students' knowledge acquisition in the classroom (Nunan, 1991, as cited in Peng, Xie & Cai, 2014). Accordingly, as a main source of learning inside the classroom, teachers should notice that students need to learn pragmatic competence autonomously from their teachers. Polite language generated by teachers or lecturers in classroom will lead students to communicate in English more appropriately.

Acknowledging the polite interaction as a socio-cultural manifestation inside the classroom, the researcher is encouraged to do a survey about the students' perception toward their lecturers' expressions during the classroom interaction

METHOD

This survey was conducted as a part of a classroom interaction study, which focused on the speech acts generated by the lecturers implying face-threatening acts and face-saving acts, and correlating them to five bases of power proposed by French and Raven (1968). The current data from the survey were taken from the questionnaire result. Since all of data were in the form of words and explained descriptively, qualitative approach was used in the current study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006).

Participants

This study was conducted in Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia. The participants included 97 (ninety-seven) students from various classes taught by six different lecturers. The needs to observe the students were to see how those students responded to their lecturers' interactive utterances and viewed the relationship between the utterances with the power held by the lecturers in the classroom.

Procedures

In the current study, the researcher attended the intended classes and distributed the questionnaires for the participant students. The questionnaire consisted of 25 Likert-scale questions related to the lecturers' utterances production and power in the classroom. This questionnaire was aimed at seeing how the students perceive their lecturers' speech act during the teaching and learning process.

In analyzing the data, the researcher read the numerical scores from the students' questionnaire. The researcher, then, interpreted the numbers and frequency of the response. In informing the readers of the questionnaire results, the researcher formulated the number and frequency into a well-arranged explanation for better understanding

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part presents the data obtained from the students' questionnaire. After collecting the data, the questionnaire's scores of all students are measured. It is a way to find out the students' perception toward



their lecturers' utterances. The findings are presented into some sub-parts, regarding the indicator of a group of statements. The scale 1 to 5 tells the degree of strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, and strongly agree. The result of questionnaire in regard to the first indicator, language influences in many aspects of classroom, is shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 The Students' Perception on the Influence of Language in Some Aspects of Classroom

Item	Statement	Scale				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	The utterances generated by my lecturers influence my class' atmosphere.	1.03%	2.06%	5.15%	48.45%	43.30%
2	The utterances generated by my lecturers influence my academic achievement	2.06%	7.22%	21.65%	58.76%	10.31%
3	The utterances generated by my lecturers influence my self-esteem and self-confidence	1.03%	2.06%	15.46%	62.89%	18.56%

The result of questionnaire in regard to the second indicator, the practice of face-threatening acts and face-saving acts in the classroom, is shown in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 The Students' Perception on the Practice of Face-threatening Acts and face-saving acts in the classroom

Item	Statement	Scale				
		1	2	3	4	5
4	The utterances generated by my lecturers should not be offensive and humiliating.	2.06%	3.09%	16.49%	30.93%	46.39%
5	I feel uncomfortable when my lecturers ask me bluntly to do something in the classroom.	6.19%	15.46%	36.08%	29.90%	10.31%
6	I feel more comfortable if my lecturers give me an instruction using polite expression like " <i>please</i> " rather than without it.	2.06%	3.09%	16.49%	47.42%	30.93%
7	I feel more comfortable if my lecturers give me an instruction using indirect utterances such as " <i>can you...?</i> " or " <i>would you...?</i> " rather than direct utterances.	1.03%	6.19%	11.34%	63.92%	17.53%
8	I feel appreciated if my lecturers say " <i>thank you</i> " every time I finish doing their instructions.	0.00%	1.03%	3.09%	41.24%	53.61%
9	I feel uncomfortable when my lecturers interrupt my sentences during the discussion.	3.09%	23.71%	22.68%	42.27%	8.25%
10	I feel more comfortable if my lecturers interrupt my sentences using polite expressions such as " <i>sorry</i> " or " <i>excuse me</i> ".	0.00%	6.19%	12.37%	54.64%	26.80%
11	I feel uncomfortable when my lecturers could not remember my name.	8.25%	18.56%	35.05%	25.77%	10.31%



12	I feel more comfortable if my lecturers can mention my name before giving me an instruction.	1.03%	4.12%	12.37%	56.70%	24.74%
13	I feel uncomfortable when my lecturers frequently say "no" or "you are wrong" to respond to my answers/comments during the discussion.	6.19%	10.31%	19.59%	40.21%	23.71%
14	I feel more comfortable if my lecturers give positive feedbacks to respond to my answers/comments during the discussion.	1.03%	0.00%	4.12%	52.58%	42.27%

The result of questionnaire in regard to the third indicator, factors influencing the lecturers' utterances, is shown in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3 The Students' Perception on Factors Influencing the Lecturers' Utterances

Item	Statement	Scale				
		1	2	3	4	5
15	The utterances generated by my lecturers are affected by their gender.	3.09%	27.84%	36.08%	28.87%	4.12%
16	The utterances generated by my lecturers are affected by their teaching experiences.	1.03%	5.15%	20.62%	50.52%	22.68%
17	The utterances generated by my lecturers are affected by their educational background.	2.06%	6.19%	23.71%	45.36%	22.68%

The result of questionnaire in regard to the fourth indicator, the exercise of lecturers' power in the classroom, is as shown in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4 The Students' Perception on The Exercise of Power in the Classroom

Item	Statement	Scale				
		1	2	3	4	5
18	Generating clear and explicit utterances show that the lecturers have more power in the classroom.	0.00%	7.22%	29.90%	48.45%	14.43%
19	Generating polite utterances such as "please", "sorry", or "would you...?" shows that the lecturers do not have power in the classroom.	38.14%	44.33%	11.34%	4.12%	2.06%
20	Lecturers who frequently use polite utterances build more positive relationship with students.	1.03%	5.15%	7.22%	45.36%	40.21%



The result of questionnaire in regard to the fifth indicator, how students fulfil their obligation to their lecturers, is shown in Table 1.5.

Table 1.5 The Students' Perception on How Students Fulfil Their Obligation to Their Lecturers

Item	Statements	Scale				
		1	2	3	4	5
21	I obey my lecturers' instructions because of their role as teachers in the classroom.	2.06%	8.25%	19.59%	51.55%	17.53%
22	I obey my lecturers' instructions because I want to please them.	7.22%	13.40%	34.02%	40.21%	5.15%
23	I obey my lecturers' instructions because they are the most competent and knowledgeable persons in the classroom.	1.03%	9.28%	27.84%	49.48%	12.37%
24	I obey my lecturers' instructions because they will reward me with good scores.	5.15%	32.99%	28.87%	22.68%	10.31%
25	I obey my lecturers' instructions because I am afraid of punishment if disobeying them.	10.31%	29.90%	29.90%	19.59%	9.28%

After analyzing the percentage, the students' perception on each indicator of the questionnaire can be referred. According to the result of the questionnaire for students on their perception toward the lecturers' utterances, first of all, most students believe that the utterances generated by their lecturers are influencing some aspects in the classroom. More than a half of the respondents believe that the utterances generated by their lecturers are influencing their class atmosphere, academic achievement, and students' self-esteem and self-confidence.

Second, most students agree that lecturers should be polite in delivering the instructions or feedbacks for students and may use some polite strategies to lessen the effect of 'threat' to students. 46.39% students agreed on the statement "The utterances generated by my lecturers should not be offensive and humiliating" (Item 4). It means that the students expect polite words from their lecturers, and the result said that expressing *please*, *sorry*, and *thank you* are more favorable and make the students feel comfortable and appreciated. It supports Watts's (2003) statement that in order to be polite, people can utilize utterances such as *please*, *sorry*, or *thank you*. Moreover, 63.92% students agreed on the statement "I feel more comfortable if my lecturers give me an instruction using indirect utterances such as "can you...?" or "would you...?" rather than direct utterances" (Item 7). It shows that students also expect their lecturers to generate more indirect utterances to deliver the instructions, because according to Searle (1975, as cited in Song, 2012), "in order to be polite in ordinary conversations, people must avoid flat, imperative sentences or explicit performatives".

Third, the majority of the students were confident that the utterances generated by lecturers are affected by the teaching experience and educational background. The result was rather different from the previous study because the current researcher did not include aspects suggested by the previous researcher. The previous researcher, Senowarsito (2013) suggested social distance, age difference,



institutional setting, and power to contribute to the politeness strategy. However, another researcher, Xiaogui (2006) included gender as one factor that may affect power. In fact, 36.08% of representative Indonesian EFL students were undecided to say that the influence of gender is significant, although the finding said that different gender was proven to be distinct in generating utterances.

As a matter lecturers' power exercise in the classroom, most students are in agreement that lecturers who generate direct utterances are more powerful. However, most students were also certain that generating polite utterances does not correlate with being powerless. They also agreed on the idea that lecturers who frequently use polite utterances build more positive relationship with the students.

Eventually, regarding to the reason of students in obeying their lecturers, most students said that they obey their lecturers because of their role as teachers inside the classroom. The second popular reason is because the lecturers are the most competent and knowledgeable persons in the classroom. Surprisingly, the positive and negative reinforcement abide were not the reason why many students should obey their lecturers.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion to the results of analysis, some expressions generated by lecturers in the classroom are possibly implying threatening acts which may impose the students' esteem. Thus, EFL teachers and lecturers should be aware of using such expressions and should find more polite expressions to deliver instructions, requests, or orders. Many students agree that their lecturers should generate polite utterances and may utilize some strategies to make them feel more comfortable and appreciated inside the classroom. Students also believe that by generating polite utterances, lecturers can manage their power inside the classroom. Positively, politeness inside the classroom can lead to a better lecturer-student relationship.

Some suggestions in regard to this study are expected to give linguistic and pedagogical inputs for teachers or lecturers and future researchers. For teachers, it will broaden the pragmatic knowledge of EFL teachers and may be beneficial for a reference to teach pragmatics issues around the classroom environment, particularly politeness in English as a foreign language. For future researchers who are willing to conduct the similar research, they need to include a larger amount and variety of data so that generalization can be made more reliable. The future studies are also expected to manage more research subjects, in this case the lecturers, with more various backgrounds for comparison to figure out how far actually the different backgrounds of the interlocutors can affect their language.

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