

# FACE-DIRECTED BEHAVIOUR IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Jonathan Clarke  
International Pacific College  
Palmerston North

## INTRODUCTION

The language classroom is not a polite place. Lorsch and Schulze (1988) note that the common forms of politeness expressions, those 'magic words' which litter our daily communication are noticeable by their absence in many language classrooms. Fortunately this may not be due purely to a concentration of anti-social behaviour among ESL teachers but rather to an existent power differential around which classroom language is constructed.

Power differentials, whether due to gender (Brown and Gilman, 1972; Lakoff, 1975), or profession (Cricourel, 1980), lead to variations from the norms of social discourse, for example the lack of use of politeness expressions, but also variations in turn taking sequences and address forms. In the classroom the power differential is held, to a large extent, by the teacher with the consent of the learners (Reynolds, 1990). In order to maintain a good social relationship in this context, without access to common politeness expressions, necessitates the use of alternative politeness strategies. To consider these alternative strategies involves examining the root of politeness behaviour, the mutual awareness of face.

*Face* represents the concern for a person's self-esteem or self image and is addressed, directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally in all social interactions (Goffman, 1967). Our concern for maintaining face, both our own and that of others, dictates what we say and how we say it. In interactions, an individual is continually aware of the potential damage he or she may commit to another individual's face and vice versa. It is in the participants' mutual interest to avoid behaviour which may threaten or damage face, and to avoid situations in which a potential for damage exists. This cat and mouse game of avoiding potentially damaging situations is manifested in language as *politeness* and the means of avoidance are *politeness strategies*.

Individuals are considered to possess both a positive and a negative face (Brown and Levinson, 1987, pp. 61-62). *Positive face* refers to a person's self image, and the desirability of this image and *positive politeness strategies* communicate the similarity and mutual desirability of addresser's and addressee's wants through displays of common interest. A speaker's positive face is threatened by acts such as apologising or accepting compliments, while expressions of disapproval or disagreements threaten a hearer's positive face.

*Negative face* is the basic claim to an individual's own territory and the freedom to be or to act. A speaker's negative face is threatened in acts of accepting an offer, or expressing thanks. In contrast, a hearer's negative face may be threatened by for example ordering or advising. *Negative politeness strategies* address the hearer's desire to be unimpeded by indicating restraint by the speaker. It is these that are basic to conventionalised Western politeness.

Although face address is considered a universal phenomena (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61) there are cultural variations in terms of what is considered appropriate politeness behaviour, and in terms of what constitutes a face threatening act. This has been illustrated in Chinese by Gu (1990) and Chen (1993), in Korean by Clancy (1989), in Polish by Wierzbicka (1985), in Igbo by Nwoye (1992) and in Japanese by Hill et al. (1986), Matsumoto (1988, 1989) and Ide (1989, 1993).

## ANALYSING INTERACTION

In the inter-cultural environment of the language classroom where there will undoubtedly be different perceptions of appropriate politeness behaviour, politeness strategies may be misinterpreted and communication conflicts may unwittingly occur. This paper examines instances of conflicts and analyses the development of breakdowns in teacher-student communication in transcript data taken from an EFL classrooms in Japan. The students were from a girls' junior college in Tokyo while the two teachers are European males. The sections of transcripts are analysed as sequences of face-directed moves.

### A general analysis of face-directed behaviour.

This section describes in detail the moves in a fairly typical example of classroom interaction in which little occurs that creates significant conflict. As such this transcript provides an introduction to the analysis. The topic of the lesson is holidays and the students are composing questions related to this topic. T indicates the teacher, while S, and its associated number, indicates particular students.

- 1 T : *indicates speaker*
- 2 S1: When
- 3 T : When (*writes on board*)
- 4 S1: When . will you go . to Hawaii?
- 5 T : OK . When will you go to Hawaii? Good question . Miho (S2)

In turn 1, the teacher uses eye contact and gesture to identify student 1. The act of allocating a turn to a student creates the potential for a threat, as it represents a request for cooperation from the student. Any request for cooperation involves a potential positive face loss situation if that cooperation should not be forthcoming. The act of allocating a speaker could have been done with greater baldness, use of name, direct request, pointing. The more direct the request for cooperation however the greater potential for loss of face.

Passive student allocation by the teacher, as evidenced here, therefore represents a face protective hedging strategy by the teacher.

The student's negative face wants are threatened by being told to do something that impinges on their wants for freedom of action. Their positive face wants are threatened by being singled out from the rest of the class. This threat is strengthened by the other students as the more spectators there are to a face loss situation, the greater the accumulative loss of face. Whether face loss to the teacher materialises will depend on the student's response. To not respond would threaten the teacher's positive face wants for cooperation, which may in turn lead to the teacher taking action to protect his face at the expense of the student's face. To respond correctly would lead to the student's face being enhanced. However an incorrect response, negatively evaluated by the teacher, would carry a high potential for loss of face. The student gives a one word response in turn 2. This minimises the possible extent of the mistake, and thereby minimises the extent of the loss of face should it be incorrect.

Having received a response the teacher is indebted to the student. The teacher is also aware of the potential face loss situation the student has entered into by offering the response and is therefore necessitated to express some form of gratitude. Any debt represents a threat to the negative face of the debtee. The social distance between teacher and student and the relative power of the act of expressing a debt gives the act a potentially high face loss weighting. Furthermore, an expression of gratitude as a means of repaying the debt would further emphasise to the student that the teacher was aware of the potential loss of face she may have incurred in responding. Having to accept a gratitude from the teacher would represent an act threatening the student's positive face. The aim of the teacher's in turn 3 is to address their state of debt without indicating such a debt. Repetition and writing the utterance on the board emphasises social distance and the institutionalised nature of the interaction and de-emphasises the intimacy and debt incurred in the interaction. This method of evaluation therefore represents a conventionalised politeness strategy. As an abstracted expression of gratitude, it is a means by which the teacher can express his gratitude to the student and a means by which the student can feel her response was appropriate.

The student continues her response in turn 4. The unfilled pauses during her response represent hesitation as a hedging strategy, giving opportunities for the teacher to enter the turn should any mistakes occur, and thus minimise the extent of the error and associated face loss.

The teacher, aware of the extent of the face loss concern the student is exhibiting, addresses her positive face wants for acceptance with extensive positive evaluation in turn 5. To receive a compliment though, represents a potential threat to the student's face as it usually necessitates an acceptance of the compliment. The teacher signals that no response is expected by signaling the discourse is complete through allocation of the next speaker.

This section has described a fairly standard pattern of interaction in classrooms, with the teacher initiating by calling on a particular student. The student responds with a fairly minimal response and this is briefly evaluated by the teacher. The following sections deal with interaction patterns that are more likely to cause conflict. They identify a number of strategies that students make use of in such contexts. These include progressive simplification, repetition and negative responses. The transcripts and discussion also look at how the teacher responds to the strategies used by the students.

### **Progressive simplification**

The following sequence comes from the same lesson as above. This sequence sees a student progressively simplifying utterances offered in response to the teacher's call for an answer.

- 1 T : Anybody got any different kinds of questions. Yeah . yes Michiko (S8) go on
- 2 S8: Is it possible for you to work in there six months?
- 3 T : Ahh . . Sorry?
- 4 S8: Uhh? . . Can you work there six months?
- 5 T : Uhh . . . . . Uhh
- 6 S8: Ahh . Time? . . Gomennasi tondemo nandemonai (I'm sorry, it was nothing)
- 7 T : Why? Why? . . No . I'm trying to think of how you would say it . So it's like huh . . . . OK. anything else Michiko?
- 8 S8: I have no idea
- 9 T : No? No others? Shoko?
- 10 S9: Why do you want to do this job?
- 11 T : Ohh yes {laughs}
- 12 Ss: {laughter}

Student 8 requests a turn by raising her hand. This creates a potentially face threatening situation for herself as she has claimed speaking rights over other students. She offers a response to the teacher. The high degree of linguistic confidence in the response is significant for the other students. This situation creates a high potential for face loss. In turn 3, the teacher appears momentarily distracted, signaled by a pause. He then uses a ritualised politeness expression, "Sorry?". The student unsure of how to interpret his response, uses face protective strategies, by simplifying the utterance from "Is it possible for you to work in there six months?" to "Can you work there six months?".

The teacher's utterance that followed turn 4 was punctuated by a long pause as if he was trying to evaluate the utterance. It would appear that the student recognised her response to be in limbo, between an offer and an acceptance. Aware not only of her own potential face loss, but aware also of the fact that other class members are sensitive to this, she firstly simplified the utterance to a single word "Time?", then rapidly attempted to deny the utterance altogether by means of a polite formal Japanese phrase. This suggests that the

comment was addressed to the other class members, not the teacher. Formal self-denigration to save face in front of the group appears to be an acceptable politeness strategy among Japanese.

The teacher, believing the student has interpreted the silence as a negative evaluation, denies that it was meant to be so, "Why? Why? No". This suggests that he believes that the student must now be considering herself subject to a loss of face due to his response, or lack of it. The teacher attempts to justify his response and thereby redress the student's loss of face in turn 7. The student, now sensitive to her loss of face resorts to a formula in response to his turn allocation by saying, "I have no idea". The teacher responds to the next student's response in turn 11 with exaggerated emphasis, aware of the negative evaluation given to his previous limited responses.

### **Repetition**

As seen above, students are aware of the potential face loss of giving incorrect answers and thus simplify responses to minimise the likelihood of such negative evaluation. A related strategy is to structure a response so as to be similar to a previously accepted form.

- 1 T : OK. Quickly decide which job do you want to do . Which job would you do and why? . which one would you do and why? . Yuko (S4) . Which one would you do?
- 2 S4: Three
- 3 T : Three. Why?
- 4 S4: . . This one is interesting
- 5 T : Interesting . Grape picking in France . . OK . Umm Yuko Yokota (S1) which one would you pick?
- 6 S1: Yes Waitress
- 7 T : Waitress . Number one . Yes Why? . . Don't say this job is very interesting (*T and S1 laugh*)
- 8 S1: I think I can learn about the customs
- 9 T : Umm . Miki (S5) Which one would you do?
- 10 S5: Number . number four
- 11 T : Four. Why?
- 12 S5: Because it sounds interesting
- 13 T : Yuko (S6) Which would you do?

The teacher gives a mediocre evaluation to the student's response in turn 3. By turn 7, he takes explicit action to discourage repetition. In turns 10 and 12, Student 5 gives a repeated version of Student 4's response. The teacher interpreting this as a disregard for his positive face wants, offers no form of evaluation, effectively ignoring the response and immediately moves to address a different student.

The teacher's responses in this sequence can be interpreted in terms of Western cultural assumptions regarding the one's assertion of individuality. In Western cultures, a speaker's negative face desires that utterances be perceived as an extension of his/her individuality. To adopt and repeat verbatim another's response indicates a subjection of this face want and so represents a self-inflicted negative face loss which implies that the act of avoiding cooperation is an intentional one. The student's reliance upon repetitious patterns to form a response in this sequence is clearly interpreted by the teacher as an act in defiance to his positive face wants. However, the students using the repetition strategy do so, not only because they wish to respond to the teacher, but also to convey a sense of belonging to the group. Repetition represents sharing and therefore addresses the positive face wants of the group members for displays of solidarity.

### **Negative responses and silence**

Negative responses by the students, which are used to indicate that the student is unable to answer, frequently occur in 'ritualised' forms. These institutionalised responses are often taught or encouraged by teachers, so as to discourage the use of silence as a response. For the Western teacher, silence signals non-cooperation and thus a threat to positive face wants.

Among the Japanese, silence represents a significant face-saving device as it effectively replaces the verbalisation of the negative (Sugiyama Lebra, 1987). In personal interaction, negative statements operate against the solidarity of the group and the search for empathy between interactants. They also threaten the positive face of addressee and raise the possibility of incurring threats to own face from the addressee or their associates. To explicitly state an inability to respond for the Japanese implies a lack of necessary intelligence (Noguchi, 1987, p 22-23) and is therefore a potential source of personal face loss. In encouraging the use of negative response forms, the teacher causes the students to choose between accepting personal loss of face or threatening the teacher's face. The following sections of transcript examine this.

- 1 T : OK. So Umm . . . so . . . Yuko (S1) Why doesn't Judith want to take the job in Morocco?
- 2 S1: I don't remember
- 3 T : You don't remember Yuko (S4) . Why doesn't Judith want to take the job in Morocco?
- 4 S4: I have no idea
- 5 T : You have no idea Yuko (S7) Why doesn't Judith want to take the job in Morocco?
- 6 S7: No idea
  
- 17 T : Why is Sharon worried about going to Germany? Umm . . . Chinatsu (S6)
- 18 S6: No idea
- 19 T : No idea? Miki Ogura (S5) Why is Sharon worried about going to Germany?



20 S5: I can't remember

21 T : No?

22 S5: No

This section of transcript shows the students using a strategy of reducing their responses so that they are as close to silence as possible. This is achieved by a monotone delivery, and simplification, "I have no idea", "No idea" and abrupt, unbroken repetition. This strategy effectively depersonalises the response, disguising its implicit meanings as silence would have done. In response to this perceived face threatening behaviour, the teacher appears to mimic the students' repetition with his own repetition, choosing the four students with the same name, repeating the question and repeating their answers.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has considered just a few of the strategies employed by Japanese students to either protect or display their concern for face during classroom interactions. These include minimal responses and an avoidance of taking extended turns; the repetition and simplification of utterances; the use of formulaic responses. It has also looked at how the two teachers in this situation responded to the students' strategies. Classrooms and classroom interaction, are so often analysed pedagogically so that the essentially human nature of the interaction is not often scrutinised. It should be. Classroom discourse, like any other form of social discourse, is influenced directly by culturally appropriate modes of behaviour. It follows that if participants in this discourse are not sensitive to socio-cultural expectations, then communication can suffer. This has a direct bearing on the pedagogic success of the class. Teachers therefore need to be pro-active in avoiding the development of communication conflicts. By increasing the quality of interaction through cultural awareness, teachers may well improve the quality of the students' learning opportunities.

## REFERENCES

- Brown, R. and Gilman, A. (1972). The pronouns of power and solidarity. In P.P. Giglioli, (Ed.), *Language and social context*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Brown, P. and Levinson, S.C. (1987). *Politeness: some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, R. (1993). Responding to compliments: A contrastive study of politeness strategies between American English and Chinese speakers. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 20, 49-75.
- Clancy, P.M. (1989). A case study in language socialization: Korean WH questions. *Discourse Processes*, 12, 169-191.

Cricourel, A. (1980). Language and medicine. In C. Ferguson and S.B. Heath, (Eds.), *Language in the USA*. (pp 407-429). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Gu, Y. (1990). Politeness phenomena in modern Chinese. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14, 237-257.

Hill, B., Ide, S., Ikuta, S., Kawasaki, A. and Ogino, T. (1986). Universals of linguistic politeness. Quantitative evidence from Japanese and American English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 10, 347-371.

Ide, S. (1989). Formal forms and discernment: Two neglected aspects of universals of linguistic politeness. *Multilingua*, 8, 223-248.

Ide, S. (1993). The search for integrated universals of linguistic politeness. *Multilingua*, 12, 7-11.

Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and women's place*. Harper and Row. New York.

Lorscher, W. and Schulze, R. (1988). On polite speaking and foreign language classroom discourse. *IRAL*, 26, 184-199.

Matsumoto, Y. (1988). Reexamination of the universality of face: Politeness phenomena in Japanese. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 12, 403-426.

Matsumoto, Y. (1989). Politeness and conversational universals: Observations from Japanese. *Multilingua*, 8, 207-221.

Noguchi, R. R. (1987). The dynamics of rule conflict in English and Japanese conversation. *IRAL*, 26, 15-23.

Nwoye, O. G. (1992). Linguistic politeness and socio-cultural variations of the notion of face. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 18, 309-328.

Reynolds, M. (1990). Classroom power: Some dynamics of classroom talk. *Language and Power. British Studies in Applied Linguistics*, 5, 122-136.

Sugiyama Lebra, T. (1987). The cultural significance of silence in Japanese communication. *Multilingua*, 6, 343-357.

Wierzbicka, A. (1985). Different cultures, different languages different speech acts. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 9, 145-161.