

POLITENESS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

The purposes of this paper are: (1) to investigate the production of politeness in English by Japanese advanced EFL students and (2) to point out the difficulties even advanced students have in producing polite expressions in English. First the experiment which was undertaken is described. The results showed that even advanced EFL students have difficulties in producing polite expressions in speech. The results were then analyzed by contrasting the way native English speakers made requests and invitations with the way Japanese EFL students produced them.

Introduction

As graduate students in a graduate linguistics program at an American university, the authors thought that they would not have much difficulty in communicating in English. However, we soon became aware of the different degrees of English formality when our American counterparts talked with their friends and when they talked with their teachers. As a result,

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despite our knowledge of English grammar and our awareness of informal spoken English, we did not feel comfortable talking with our professors.

There seem to be many Japanese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students who have quite a large vocabulary and know the structure of English, but who cannot use English communicatively. If we are to teach second-language use successfully, we should teach not only vocabulary and structure but also how to use them, "for the purpose of transmitting and receiving thoughts, ideas, and feelings between speaker and hearer or writer and reader" (Brown, 1980:189). This is because "the culmination of language learning is not simply in the mastery of the forms of language, but the mastery of forms in order to accomplish the communicative functions of language" (Brown, 1980:189). We also believe that the final goal of language teaching lies in having students acquire communicative competence. Expressing politeness is one area of communicative competence. Politeness plays a very important role in communication and if one cannot use polite expressions appropriately, one may offend others' feelings. Therefore, the authors investigated the use of polite forms in English by Japanese EFL students at the advanced level. In this study we deal with politeness expressed by linguistic forms, without concerning ourselves with prosodic features of nonverbal behavior. The study was conducted using only female subjects and did not attempt to investigate sex differences in use of polite expressions.

Subjects

The subjects consisted of ten female students of advanced level attending an English language school in Tokyo. The authors selected them according to their scores on the CELT (Comprehensive English Language Test for Speakers of English as a Second Language published by McGraw-Hill Book Com-

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pany). The CELT consists of structure, vocabulary and listening comprehension items. The average score of the advanced students was 216.9 out of 300. There was a native control group consisting of six female native speakers of English.

Procedure

The experiment was intended to test the production of politeness features. In particular it was designed to test how well Japanese advanced students could produce polite expressions according to status differences between speaker and hearer, i.e.: to test the notion that speech differs according to the person we speak to. Instructions were designed so that subjects would produce both "positive" and "negative" politeness features.¹ We asked the subjects to make the same request of their female teacher and their classmates and gave them the following instructions:

Invite your teacher to a formal dinner party at seven p.m.
next Friday.

Ask her to come on time.

Ask her not to wear jeans.

In the second set of instructions, the word "teacher" was replaced by "friend". During the experiment the teacher and friends responded only with minimal utterances which would not affect the results, such as, "Yes," or "Uh-huh". All the utterances were tape-recorded, transcribed and analyzed. The transcribed data are summarized in the following table:

Table 1*
Subjects' requests to a teacher

	A. Production by Japanese students	B. Production by Native Speakers of English
1. Come to a party.	<p>Would you come to a party at seven p.m. next Friday? (6)</p> <p>I'd like to invite you. (1)</p> <p>Please come to our dinner party at seven p.m. next Friday. (1)</p>	<p>I'm having a dinner party next Friday. I wonder if you would like to come if you have time.</p> <p>I am having a formal dinner party next Friday. So I was wondering if you would be free at that time. We'd very much like you to come.</p>
2. Come on time.	<p>Please come on time. (4)</p> <p>Please make sure to come on time. (1)</p> <p>Please don't be late. (1)</p> <p>Do you come on time? (1)</p>	<p>We are going to try and start pretty close to seven o'clock, because we are going to have it catered. So we don't want food to get cold. The caterers are coming right about 6:55.</p> <p>I'm asking people to come at seven o'clock sharp.</p>
3. Don't wear jeans.	<p>Please don't wear jeans. (6)</p> <p>You can't wear jeans. (1)</p> <p>Please wear a formal wear. (1)</p> <p>It's a formal party, so please come with a formal clothes. (1)</p>	<p>None of the other guests will be coming in jeans or anything like that. We're thinking of wearing long dresses maybe.</p> <p>Most of us are going to be wearing pretty nice dresses and all.</p> <p>We are really getting dressed up. I told all my friends.</p> <p>It's going to be a little bit formal and so, I think probably we'll dress up.</p>

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Table 2
Subjects' requests to a friend

	A. Production by Japanese students	B. Production by Native Speakers of English
4. Come to a party.	Please come to my party at seven p.m. next Friday. (3) Why don't you come to my party? (3) How about coming to my party? (1)	I'm having a party next Friday night. Can you come? I'm having a party on Friday at seven o'clock. It's a dinner party. Would you like to come?
6. Don't wear jeans.	Don't wear jeans. (8) I don't want you to wear jeans. (1)	I told her (the teacher) we are all going to wear long dresses. It's a formal dinner party, so obviously jeans are out. Could you get dressed up? Oh, there is one thing, though. It's going to be formal. So, no jeans. In fact, well, I invited Miss H. She's going to wear a long dress.

*The numbers in the parentheses in Tables 1 and 2 indicate the number of students out of the total of ten who produced the same utterance. As for the production by the native speakers, we selected the expressions which are characteristic of native speech. Since the expressions by the native speakers differed from person to person, we did not indicate the number.

Results and Discussion

Most of the Japanese students used "Would you ---?" to a teacher when they invited her to a party. They used more

casual expressions such as "Please ----." or "Why don't you ----?" to a friend, as shown in 1-A and 4-A in Tables 1 and 2. In other words, the Japanese EFL students tried to adjust the level of politeness according to the hearer's status. However, they could not use polite expressions very expertly compared with the native speakers.

When the Japanese students requested that the person come on time and not wear jeans, they could not use polite expressions very well either with their teacher or a friend. They used "please" very frequently; in fact "please" is almost the only polite expression they could use. In addition, they could not make the distinction between language appropriate to making a request to their teacher and to a friend. They used almost the same expressions both with their teacher and with their friend, except for the addition of "please." This is illustrated in 3-A and 6-A in Tables 1 and 2. They used "Please don't wear jeans," to their teacher and "Don't wear jeans," to their friend. It can be seen that the Japanese students were trying to be polite to their teacher, but the addition of "please" was their only way of realizing this intent.

The native speakers used both negative and positive politeness strategies. As for negative politeness, they used strategies such as "hedging," being indirect, and impersonalization of speaker and hearer.

Negative politeness used by native speakers

1. Hedging²

When the native speakers made requests not to wear jeans or to come on time, they used "kind of" and "pretty close," and softened the statement.

e.g. Jeans are *kind of* out.

We are going to try and start *pretty close* to seven o'clock.

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2. Being indirect³

The sentence, using “wonder if,” loses its original meaning which expresses curiosity. In the context of this experiment, the declarative sentence is used as an invitation. The use of the past tense helps to make the sentence indirect and polite. The progressive form also makes the sentence indirect, by implying uncertainty or indicating tentativeness.

e.g. *I was wondering if* you would be free at that time.

3. Impersonalization of speaker and hearer⁴

This strategy avoids referring to “I” or “you” directly. By impersonalizing the hearer, the statement can be made more indirect or polite. This strategy appears to shift the forms of the statement – and its implications – away from the hearer.

e.g. *We’re thinking of* wearing long dresses.

I’m asking people to come at seven o’clock sharp.

As for the strategies in positive politeness, the native speakers used devices such as seeking agreement, avoiding disagreement, giving reasons, and noticing and/or attending to the hearer.

Positive politeness used by the native speakers

1. Seeking agreement⁵

The speaker seeks agreement from the hearer by using “okay?”, etc. This strategy is used to satisfy the hearer’s face.

e.g. At seven on Friday. *Okay?*

2. Avoiding disagreement

This strategy also satisfied the hearer’s face, by indicating that both the speaker and hearer have arrived at a shared

conclusion.

e.g. So, you'll be able to come *then*.

The use of *then* as a conclusory marker indicates that "the speaker is drawing a conclusion to a line of reasoning carried out cooperatively with the addressee" (Brown & Levinson, 1978:120). In other words, "*then* points to a conclusion of an actual agreement between the speaker and the hearer" (Brown & Levinson, 1978:120).

3. Giving reasons⁶

The native speakers give varying reasons why the hearer should come on time or wear a nice dress. Giving reasons leads the hearer to agree, and avoids an unreasonable imposition on the hearer by the speaker. The sample sentences listed in 5-B in Table 2 give reasons why the hearer should come on time. For example, the speaker used "the teacher" as the reason why the hearer should come on time. These sample sentences show how native speakers used another agency to evade the responsibility, thus giving an impression of politeness.

4. Noticing and/or attending to the hearer⁷

It is impolite to make a request abruptly. The native speakers began their conversation with greetings or a statement such as, "Do you have a minute to talk?", and then made the requests nicely.

We want to emphasize that we were seeking to compare the production of Japanese students with that of the native speakers. Most of the Japanese students used "Would you come to a party?" when they invited a teacher. The Japanese students could use the polite expressions in a way that did not threaten the hearer's face. However, when the Japanese students made requests which might threaten the hearer's face, they could not use the various politeness strategies that the native speak-

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ers did. The only exception was when one Japanese subject said, "It's a formal party," to justify the request that the guests should not wear jeans. The number of reasons is not as many as in the case of the native speakers.

As mentioned above, the result of the experiment showed that Japanese students are not good at making requests politely. Why are polite expressions in English so difficult for Japanese students? In order to answer this question, we investigated the differences between Japanese and English polite expressions.

Ide (1979) defines use of polite expressions as a linguistic method to control social and psychological distance between the speaker and the addressee. Polite expressions can be expressed through either linguistic forms or contexts. In other words, polite expressions consist of formal expressions and considerate expressions. "Formal expressions are sets of fixed expressions expressing politeness. They are fixed formal expressions which change according to the status and familiarity of the speaker and the addressee and formality of the context" (Ide, 1974b:126). Considerate expressions are the expressions which are considered to be polite as used in the context of the situation. They do not have any fixed forms; they are implied polite expressions.

Formal expressions and considerate expressions have quite different characteristics; however both are found in Japanese and in English. In Japanese, speakers can freely express their polite attitudes or feelings toward a hearer by using honorifics and particles. But Japanese EFL students are at a loss when they want to express those attitudes and feelings in English, because English has neither honorifics nor particles. Moreover, most Japanese students of English seem to believe that English has no polite expressions. Many speakers of Japanese have said, "English sounds 'harsh' or 'impolite' to them" (Lakoff, 1972:908).

In fact, English has relatively few formal expressions analogous to the Japanese ones. As we already know, Japanese polite expressions rely heavily on formal expressions, especially honorifics and an extensive vocabulary of humbleness, respect, and in general, polite words. "The status difference between the speaker and the addressee and the person spoken of decides the choice of words" (Ide, 1974b:127). On the contrary, no analogous structure of polite words can be found in English polite expressions.

Though English does have some formal expressions, English formal polite expressions are mainly address forms. The title plus last name constitutes a formal expression, while the first name alone is considered informal. Other polite forms of address are: Sir, Ma'am and Your Majesty. Besides address forms, English formal expressions consist of *greetings* such as "How do you do?", "Good morning", and "Hello" and *fixed expressions* such as "Thank you", "Please make yourself at home", and "Can I help you?" (Ide, 1974b & 1979). However, the total amount of formal expressions in English is minimal compared with that of Japanese. Thus, Japanese students tend to think that English has no polite expressions.

Since English has few formal expressions, politeness in English depends heavily on considerate expressions. Ide offers a few examples of considerate expressions in English (Ide, 1974:62):

e.g. *Would* you come to a party?

Besides *would*, there are a variety of expressions which are considered polite in certain situations.

e.g. You *must* come and have tea with us.

If one wants to invite a neighbor, who has just moved in, to tea, the sample sentence with *must* (ordinarily a strong imperative form) is much more considerate than a sentence such as "Would you come and have tea with us?"

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- e.g. A. Enjoy your drink. (Ide, 1982:141)
B. Don't drink more than you like. (Ide, 1982:141)
e.g. A. Would you sit down?
B. *Do* sit down. (Ide, 1974:62)

In certain contexts, sentence B is more polite than sentence A. "Don't drink more than you like," would be more considerate if it is said to a guest who doesn't drink much. "Do sit down." would be more appropriate if it is said to a person who hesitates to sit down.

As mentioned above, polite expressions in English consist mostly of considerate expressions. Since considerate expressions are not fixed expressions, Japanese students cannot depend on the use of ceremonial formulae in speaking English as they do in using Japanese. Instead of the formulae, they need to learn to express politeness with devices used for other purposes such as the use of modals, tenses, etc. They should give up using one set phrase in many situations and learn to manipulate words personally to create the impression of themselves and their feelings.

Conclusions

Although the number of subjects was limited, this study led us to several findings. First, the Japanese advanced students could not use polite expressions very well either with a teacher or with a friend. They could not use polite expressions, with the exception of "please", especially when they made requests to a hearer which might threaten the hearer's face.

Second, Japanese EFL students could not make distinctions between their teacher and their friend. Even though they added "please" to utterances directed to their teacher, on the whole, they used almost the same expressions both with their

teacher and with their friends. The Japanese students tried to use polite expressions according to the status difference. However, their English did not meet their need to express this consciousness.

Polite expressions play a very important role in Japanese and Japanese students are conscious of the language used according to status differences. If they cannot express their feelings in English, especially the desire to communicate politely, they cannot get their true meaning across to their listeners. Therefore, specific areas of politeness deserve greater emphasis in the EFL class in Japan. A better understanding of politeness features in English will help EFL students to communicate more effectively as competent speakers.

Notes

¹In 1967 E. Goffman described politeness or deference in the context of a general theory of action or behavior, not restricted to linguistic communication. He defined the concept of deference as "the appreciation an individual shows to another through avoidance or presentation rituals" (Goffman, 1967:77). In an elaborate extension of Goffman's ideas, Brown and Levinson present a model in an attempt to account for politeness phenomena. Their model assumes that politeness is motivated by a speaker's desire to save face, his/her own face, or the hearer's face. "Face" is defined as "a set of wants satisfiable only by the actions (including expressions of wants) of others" (Brown & Levinson, 1978:65). "Face" consists of two related aspects: negative and positive face. Negative face is defined as wanting one's actions to be unimpeded by others. Positive face is defined as seeking to be acceptable to (at least) some others (Brown & Levinson, 1978:67). Positive politeness is oriented toward the positive face of the hearer, the positive self-image that he claims for himself. Negative politeness, on the other hand, is oriented mainly toward partially satisfying the hearer's negative face, his basic need to maintain claims of territory and self-determination.

²Hedges have a variety of surface manifestations. Among the most common are *just*, *maybe*, *kind of*, and *sort of*; expressions such as *I wonder if*, *the thing is*, *something like that*, and verbs such as *think* and modals such as *could*. They modify the force of a speech act (Brown & Levinson, 1978:150). For example, "I *kind of* have to talk it over with you" (Scarcella, 1980:281) is much softer than, "I have to talk it over with you." Another example: "We *were wondering if* you wanted to come along" (Scarcella, 1980:282).

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³In this strategy, a speaker is faced with opposing tensions: the desire not to impose on the hearer's face at the same time as making the request clear. In this case, the compromise of conventional indirectness solves the problem. Conventional indirectness is "the use of phrases and sentences that have contextually unambiguous meanings which are different from their literal meanings" (Brown & Levinson, 1978:137). In this strategy, the utterance goes on record, and the speaker conveys his desire indirectly. "Conventional indirectness encodes the clash of wants, and so partially achieves them both" (Brown & Levinson, 1978:137).

e.g. I need a comb. (Brown & Levinson, 1978:139)

I'm looking for a comb. (Brown & Levinson, 1978:139)

If they are said to a shopkeeper, they are requests even without any final *please*.

⁴By avoiding the pronouns, "I" and "you", the speaker can indicate his desire not to impinge on the hearer. There are a variety of ways to impersonalize the speaker and the hearer. One is replacement of the pronouns "I" and "you" by indefinites. For example, "One shouldn't do things like that." is preferred to "You shouldn't do things like that." Another is the exclusive "we" for the avoidance of "I" and "you." It functions to distance the speaker and the hearer. The passive without agent is also used to remove direct reference to the speaker.

⁵Seeking agreement by using such question tags as *right?*, *okay?* and *alright?* is one of the positive politeness strategies.

⁶Another aspect of including the hearer in the activity is for the speaker to give reasons why the speaker wants the hearer to do something. In other words, giving reasons is a way of showing what help is needed.

e.g. I know it's an awful thing to ask you, but would you be so kind as to meet me in my hotel, because I don't know this city? (Ide, 1974:43)

⁷Another means of expressing positive politeness is by showing interest in and noticing the hearer. This can be done through greetings (Brown & Levinson, 1978:108).

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