UNIVERSITAT JAUME·I

Jornades de Foment de la Investigació

POLITENESS AND TEXTBOOKS: how to approach the teaching of communicative competence in a second language

Autor
Soledad Moreno Pichastor
Filologia Anglesa

0. INTRODUCTION

This paper illustrates considerations that arose as a result of a research project exploring how the teaching of communicative competence and specially the teaching of politeness can be approached by teaching materials.

How the principle of politeness and the principle of relevance interrelate is also considered applying these considerations to the teaching. Politeness strategies are seen under a more general framework of communication strategies and are also considered to be culturally bound resulting in positive or negative politeness strategies.

As data textbooks of English and Spanish have been studied and particularly the speech acts of requests and apologies in the two languages have been focused on as an example of the complexity of politeness. What kind of strategies appear, how they are presented and whether they are effective or not is considered here.

1. THE POLITENESS PRINCIPLE

Several authors have made reference to the *principle of politeness* in a language (Grice 1975, Leech 1983, Brown and Levinson 1987 among others) and have provided us with different views of how politeness works stressing its complexity. It is essential then as a starting point to have a clear idea of what we mean by politeness and what place it has within communication.

A working definition of politeness in language study could be the following:

(a) how languages express the social distance between speakers and their different role relationships; (b) how face-work, that is, the attempt to establish, maintain and save face during conversation is carried out in a speech community. (Richards et al.:281 1992).

Politeness strategies set up a model that makes communication possible between potentially aggressive parties dealing with how people relate to one another in different societies.

It has also been stressed that politeness strategies may have different orientations in different cultures (Brown and Levinson 1987, Hickey 1991) distinguishing between *positive politeness strategies* (those which show closeness and intimacy between speaker and hearer) and *negative politeness strategies* (those which stress non-imposition upon the hearer and express deference).

Politeness then should not be confused with deference or being indirect since cross-cultural studies (Blum-Kulka 1989) have shown that certain cultures stress solidarity strategies and value communicative clarity in speech.

It is important to note that politeness strategies have to be considered in a context to see how they are intended. For example people within peer groups use more direct forms to perform requests but it would not be accurate to say that they are less polite. Different cultures may also favour a more direct or indirect style of communication but this does not mean that some languages are more or less polite than others.

Many types of contextual variables have to be taken into account (the speakers´ status, power, role, the nature of the circumstances etc.). Politeness then seems to become essentially a question of *appropriateness* as we enter a conversation and continue with it at every turn (Fraser 1990).

It is important to see how the politeness principle works within a more general framework of communication. Sperber and Wilson (1986) outline the *principle of relevance* on which we will base our understanding of communication. According to them the addressee's task is to select the most relevant interpretation that involves less processing effort in a given context.

As it has already been said the context of the situation is essential for the relevance of politeness strategies as well as any other communication strategies. The context will determine what strategies are used as well as the most relevant interpretation in each case. How politeness strategies work is then subordinated to a more general understanding of communication in terms of Sperber and Wilson´s relevance theory. For example when using hints to perform requests the context helps us to select the most relevant interpretation (Sperber and Wilson 1986).

2. POLITENESS STRATEGIES

Politeness strategies can also be understood as part of a more general framework of strategic behaviour. Three modes of general strategic behaviour in communication are proposed by Otal and Mendoza (1996):

a. *Information strategies*: production strategies having two options, an *explicit* and *implicit* information strategy. In terms of the principle of relevance the more explicit a message is, the greater the possibility of achieving the intended set of effects.

This is also applicable to politeness strategies. For example if we look at requests we can distinguish between direct requests (´Close the door, please´), Conventional-Indirect where the illocutionary force is conventionalized (´Could you close the door, please?´) and Hints (´It is cold in here´) where intentions and attitudes have to be inferred.

b. *Text-context strategies*: reception strategies with two processing options, *textual* and *contextual* strategies. In the first case minimun contextual information is supplied relying maximally on textual features whereas in *context* strategies, contextual information is essential.

For example *Direct and Conventional- Indirect requests* imply a great reliance on textual features whereas in *Hints* (eg. ´It is cold in here´) the context is more important to be able to infer an interpretation.

c. *Negotiation strategies* imply that meaning can be shaped through dialogue as is often the case with politeness strategies. They are constantly reformulated according to the concrete situation and contextual factors under consideration.

As far as the orientation towards *positive or negative politeness strategies* is concerned, this is the result of using strategies that are relevant and appropriate to a given culture and context of communication.

As far as requests are concerned indirect speech acts of the type ´Would you mind passing the salt?´ are significantly less common in Spanish . ´¿Me pasas la sal? ´ o ´pásame la sal´ often provide sufficient degree of politeness combined with intonation features. As to apologies, expressions such as ´Sorry´ or ´Excuse me´ are much more used in English (Hickey 1991). This makes Spanish tend towards ´positive politeness´.

In terms of the relevance theory these different cultural styles of communication form part of the assumed beliefs and cultural assumptions accessible by the members of a given culture who then will be able to select (and interpret) language appropriately.

Having a clear idea of how the *principle of politeness* and the *principle of relevance* interrelate sets a very important theoretical framework to start exploring how we can make language learners aware of different kinds of politeness strategies and help them to achieve native-like competence.

3. POLITENESS IN TEXTBOOKS

The question here is whether politeness strategies as they are presented to learners in language textbooks are helpful. Looking at some Spanish and English textbooks some interesting observations emerge:

(1) A first important observation concerns *whether politeness strategies are presented in a contextualised manner* making students aware of different pragmatic parameters or they are presented as decontextualized formulae.

In *Fastforward* (1988) for example we can find the following list of the requesting strategies ranging from the more direct to the more indirect ones:

Can you……..?
Could you………?
Would you…………?
Would you mind………?
Do you think you could…..?
I wonder if you could……..?
Would it be possible for you to……?

It is convenient that the learner knows about different strategies and different degrees of directness. But these scales should not be left without a suitable explanation. Otherwise the student may misinterpret them thinking for example that the more indirect the form is the more polite he is.

Forms are not ´polite´ or ´impolite´ in themselves and the determining factor is the context of the situation. We are all aware that utterances such as ´Would you mind keeping your mouth shut?´are not very ´polite´ although the form used is an indirect one.

On the other hand if the strategies presented do not appear appropriately contextualied the student may not know how to use them. If a context is provided the learner has a better idea of how and when to use them:

(a) **MAN:** Anita, will you come here a minute? *Could you* get me the file on sales in France? I just need to check on delivery arrangements. Oh and Anita *I´d love* a cup of coffee *if that´s at all possible*.

   WOMAN Oh yes, Mr James.

(b) **FATHER:** *Turn* that wretched music down, will you? Or better still turn it off.

   CHILD: Oh, all right.

(c) **MAN:** I´m awfully sorry to bother you. I´m sure people are always asking you this…..but *wouldn´t you have* change for a pound, *would you*?

   MAN: Here you are.

(*Headway Pre-Intermediate* 1985: 107)

Looking at these examples, we can see that lists of strategies often come short to provide the learner with all the information he needs. Example (a) shows that apart from conventionalized questions with ´could´, requestive force can also be expressed by statements such as ´I´d love a cup of coffe´.

In example (b) we see that the imperative form is used to order somebody to do something. This is not frequent in English unless there is a great deal of familiarity between the speakers as in this case between father and child. It would not be appropriate then to include the imperative form in a list without explaining how and when it is used. The context is essential to know what strategy is appropriate and how it should be interpreted.

In (c) we find that a request is preceded by an apology for having to impose upon the addressee. This shows how speech acts do not appear in isolation but are combined to articulate discourse.

It is interesting that the learners´ attention is directed towards different aspects of use to make them reflect about the different pragmatic parameters involved behind all these pragmatic choices:

On a separate piece of paper write down the answers to these questions:

 1 Where are the people?

 2 What is the relationship between them? (p.107)

There are also meanings that emerge from the discoursal context in which politeness strategies are used. For example if we take the following dialogue:

FATHER: What sort of time do you call this?

GIRL: I´m sorry.

FATHER: So you should be! It´s two a.m.!

GIRL: Oh Dad, do stop nagging. I´m over seventeen. It´s up to me what time I come in.

FATHER: Not while you are living here, it isn´t. Anyway, what on earth were you doing until two in the morning?

GIRL: We weren´t doing anything. We were just talking.

FATHER: I was worried stiff about you.

GIRL: Honestly, Dad, I really am sorry, but you don´t have to wait up for me, you know.

……… (*Blueprint Intermediate* 1989)

As we can see here as the dialogue develops there is some negotiation between the speakers that leads to a reformulation of the strategies employed. The learner´s attention is directed towards this fact:

´How often does the girl apologise? What does she say each time?´

When the girl says ´Dad I really am sorry´, is she saying she is very sorry or ´I have already told you I am sorry´ or both?. These are important considerations for the teaching.

It is also the case that the same form could be used in different ways. For example, ´I´m sorry´ can be an apology as we have just seen or it could be used in a slightly different way:

(a) **SAM:** How about coming out with me this evening?

  JILL: *I´m sorry*. I can´t . I´ve promised to meet a friend.

(b) **RECEPTIONIST:** I´m sorry, sir. The manager´s busy.

  DAVID: *I´m very sorry*. But I want to speak to the manager.   (*Encounters* 1979)

We can see that in (a) ´I´m sorry´ is a polite refusal to an invitation whereas in (b) ´I´m very sorry´ is used to introduce a complaint in both cases implying that what comes after it is not going to be liked by the addressee. The context then is essential for the understanding of communication. The learner has to be asked to identify what functions the different forms are fulfilling in varied communicative contexts.

In the same way when we ask the learner to produce language we have to provide an appropriate context. In *Fastforward* (1988) for example the learner finds some instructions:

Make requests in a variety of appropriate ways for these situations:

Neighbour to neighbour: look after cat while I´m away.

But depending on how close neighbours they are the request strategy may vary and more contextual information is needed to avoid ambiguities.

If we take the following example from *Entre bromas y veras: actividades comunicativas* (1991):

Eres Alejandro. Ayer tenias una cita con un amigo para entregarle unos documentos importantes que necesitaba con urgencia. Por no haberlo apuntado en la agenda te olvidaste de este compromiso.

Eres Tomás, amigo de Alejandro. Ayer no acudió a la cita que tenía contigo y hoy lo llamas para que te

dé una explicación y quejarte.

The fact that the documents were importand and were needed urgently is very important to be able to produced the right apology in relation to the damage that has been caused. These details are often left out in textbooks. They supply essential contextual information that should be provided for the learner.

(2) What strategies are presented in textbook materials is also of interest. The following table represents only the basic strategies that have been found in the textbooks studied (see textbooks bibliography):

	Spanish	English
Requests	Quiero…	Can you…?
	¿Me da…..?	Could you….?
	Quería…	Would you….?
	Quisiera….	Do you think you could…..?
	¿Me hace el favor de….?	I wonder if you could….?
		Would it be possible for you?

Apologies	Perdón	Sorry	Excuse me..
	Lo siento	I´m sorry	
	Perdóname	I´m very sorry..	
	Perdóneme	I´m afraid I…..	
	Discúlpame	I´m awfully sorry…	
	Discúlpeme	I do apologise	

Looking at this strategies we can see that they are mostly textual strategies, that is, to interpret them the hearer relies more on textual features than in any contextual information. A few examples of *implicit* strategies were also found but they are considerably less frequent. An interesting example is the following conversation taken from an Spanish textbook *Entre Nosotros* (1982):

MARIDO: Cenamos?

ESPOSA: Sí, cariño. En la nevera hay leche y fruta.

MARIDO: ¿Sólo leche y fruta?

ESPOSA: También hay huevos y…

MARIDO: Pero….¿Tú?

ESPOSA: Yo ahora estoy ocupada. Este programa es muy interesante.

MARIDO: ¿Y el aceite?

ESPOSA: En la botella.

MARIDO: ¿No hay pan?

ESPOSA: Sí, está sobre la nevera.

MARIDO: Oye, mira….Te invito a cenar a un restaurante.

ESPOSA: Estupendo! Vamos! En relidad este programa es muy aburrido…….

It is clear that both husband and wife say and imply different things. The question ´Cenamos?' is also a request on the husband´s part for his wife to prepare dinner. Sperber and Wilson (1986) point out that to decode a message is not enough to know what the speaker says separating between *what the speaker says* and *what the speaker means*. They talk about *implicature* and *explicature* to refer to covertly or overtly communicated assumptions.

By being indirect (´Cenamos?´) the speaker is giving the hearer a great amount of choice. The hearer could interpret that a request has been made or ignore it altogether. Why one interpretation is singled out instead of another is a complex question and it depends on the assumptions that the speaker and the hearer share.

In this case the wife is tired and decides to ignore the request on the part of the husband and takes it as if he had offered to cook something himself. When the husband realises that his wife has no intention of preparing anything he tries to negotiate requesting a second time: ´Pero….¿Tú?´ implying ´aren´t you going to do it?´ to which the wife answers: ´Estoy muy ocupada. Este programa es muy interesante´. But she is not really concerned about the programme and seems to be trying to make his husband take her to a restaurant.

We find another example in *México Vivo* (1990) where different people are asked what the they would do to avoid doing things. They provide the following excuses:

Me duele la cabeza

Tengo mucho trabajo

Tengo un compromiso

No tengo tiempo etc..

At the bottom of the page there is a note that makes the student think about the indirectness of the strategy employed:

´How many people actually say they don´t want to go out?´.

Students should be introduced to a wide variety of strategies. Implicit strategies should not be underrepresented in textbook materials since they are very often used in everyday conversations and their value must be exploited by learners.

(3) It is also important to see what notion of politeness textbooks have and whether it is comprehensive enough. Very often textbooks do not have a very clear notion of what *politeness* involves and they are very confusing for the learner.

In *Pasaporte al Español* (1985) we find the following instruction:

´**Be polite!**

Change the following orders into polite requests.

Eg:´Tráigame una cerveza. -¿Quiere traerme una cerveza?´(p.30).

What does this imply? Is the learner supposed to understand that the imperative is not ´polite´ enough in Spanish? However the imperative here is heard and is frequently used where the speaker is asking for a service where the hearer has the obligation to comply.

As Tannen (1984) points out direct imperatives often sound discourteous to English people but they may be perfectly acceptable in another language. These aspects should not be treated in a superficial way but they should be made explicit to the learner to avoid confusions.

In *Sueños* (1995) we can see that when presenting the learner with some dialogues where shoppers ask

for various items, they are asked to reflect about what phrases they use to make requests. Eg.

Here are some shoppers asking for various food items. What phrases do they use?

A. Hola, buenos dias.	**B.** Hola, buenos dias.
Buenos dias.	Hola
¿Me da una barra de pan?	*Quiero una barra de pan*
¿Algo más?	¿Grande, pequeña?
No, nada más.	Grande.

It would also be very useful to ask the students if those requests would be realised in a different manner in their language and why. In English for example more indirect forms would be appropriate such as ´Could I have…?´ or ´I´d like…..´. In this way we could show students that in Spanish a question form ´me da…..?´, an imperative ´Quiero……´ or even the more direct ´una barra´ are appropriate ways of asking for food items.

A very useful remark is made in *México Vivo* (1990) as far as positive and negative politeness is concerned: Notice that the Spanish is more direct than the English, though equally polite. ¿Quiere?-literally ´do you want…?´-can be used to mean ´would you like….?´; ¿puede……?-literally ´can you……?-can be used to mean ´could you……?

Politeness strategies are culturally bound and what is appropriate in one culture may not be appropriate in another. The student needs to be told about these aspects of the language.

True to Life (1995) has some very useful sections making students reflect on what strategies they use in their own language and the language they are learning. For example we find the following treatment of apologies:

1. In what situations do you apologize more often?
2. Listen to four English people. Match each apology with a situation…Would apologies in your first language be different from the ones on the recording? (p.141)

These questions are explicitly directing the learner´s attention about why certain apology strategies are used and how. Apologies are treated then as culturally bound speech acts.

The first question makes the student reflect upon the fact that in different cultures people apologize about different things or it could also be possible that a situation that requires an apology in one culture does not require it in another. For example people do not often apologize in Spanish society when bumping into somebody or being late to an informal meeting (Hickey 1994).

Question two focuses on the different strategies that native speakers employ. It would be interesting to transcribe the conversations the students are going to listen leaving blank the lines where the speech acts we want to focus on appear. We could ask the students to fill the gaps in before listening to the recording and in this way they could compare the strategies they would use with the ones that native speakers use and compare how they differ. They could also reflect on whether they are different from their first language.

A point should be made then for the explicit teaching of politeness strategies seen as bound to a given culture and situational context.

4. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion we can say that there is still a long way before pragmatics can be taught in an organised and principled way so that the learner is presented with a coherent functional syllabus instead of finding bits of politeness strategies scattered along the textbook units without any clear organising principle.

The teaching of politeness strategies has to go beyond presenting them as useful conventionalised formulae to attain a more complex and subtle knowledge that enables non-native speakers to communicate effectively in social situations.

Politeness strategies also have to be understood within a more general framework of communication to be able to explore them and gain insights that can help us in the teaching of pragmatics. Understanding pragmatics is complex but the prize for understanding it is to lessen the real damage that can be done through pragmatic misunderstanding.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

■ Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Norwood, NJ, Ablex Publishing Corporation.

■ Brown, P. and Levinson, S.C. (1987) *Politeness. Some Universals in Language Use.* Cambridge: C.U.P.

■ Fraser, B. (1990) ´Perspectives on politeness´. *Journal of Pragmatics* 14: 219-136.

■ Grice, H.P. (1975) ´Logic and conversation in Cole, P. and Morgan, J.L. (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics, Vol* 3: Speech Acts. New York Academic Press.

■ Hickey, L.(1994) ´Comparatively polite people in Spain and Britain´. *ACIS,* 4/2:2-6.

■ Richards, J. et al. (1992) *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics.* Essex:Longman.

■ Leech, J.N. (1983) *Principles of Pragmatics*: London. Longman.

■ Otal, J.L.and Mendoza, L. (1996) ´Communication strategies and realization procedures´. Unpublished article .University of La Rioja- University Jaume I.

■ Sperber, D. and Wilson, D. (1986) *Relevance.* Communication and Cognition. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 2nd. ed 1995.

■ Tannen, D. (19984) ´The pragmatics of cross-cultural communication´. *Applied Linguistics*, 5/3: 189-195.

Textbooks:

■ Abbs, B. and Freebairn, I. (1979) *Building Strategies 2.* London: Longman.

(1989) *Blueprint Intermediate*. London: Longman.

■ Black, V. et al. (1988) *Fastforward.* Oxford: O.U.P.

■ Clarke, R. (1985) *Pasaporte al Español 1.* London: Mac Millan Education Ltd.

■ Collie, J. (1995) *True to Life.* Cambridge: C.U.P

■ Dominguez, P. et al. (1991) *Entre bromas y veras: actividades comunicativas*. Madrid: Edelsa.

■ Gonzalez, M. et al. (1995) *Sueños*. London: BBC Ltd.

■ Jupp, T.C. et al. (1979) *Encounters*. London : Heinemann Educational Books.

■ Soars, J. (1985) *Headway Pre-Intermediate*. Oxford: O.U.P.

■ Sanchez, A. et al. (1982) *Entre Nosotros 1*. Madrid: Sociedad Española de Librería. Madrid.

■ Wilson, D. (1990) *México Vivo*. London: BBC.