Abstract

This work takes its starting point in the importance of appropriately incorporating politeness into the teaching of any foreign language so as to educate speakers to be capable of maintaining an effective interaction with its native speakers. With this aim, we examine the treatment of communicative politeness in SFL teaching manuals and in particular in two key documents from this teaching field: the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the Cervantes Institute Curriculum. In the second part, methodological guidance is offered for teaching politeness in a reflexive way in the SFL classroom.

Keywords: Politeness; Spanish as a foreign language; communicative competence; sociocultural content; didactic transposition.

1. Introduction

Communicative politeness is a subject that is being dealt with more and more in foreign language teaching but, despite the existing literature, the focus given to it and its treatment in Spanish-teaching textbooks is still scarce and, in many cases, stereotyped. This article gets closer to politeness from the teaching point of view, showing the difficulties of teaching it in the classroom and the importance of handling it with authentic material within the sociocultural contents of SFL.

In the studies related to foreign language teaching, orality is a fundamental element for delimiting a student’s degree of competence and, within this, authors such as Nikleva (2011) or Núñez & Hernández (2011) include politeness as acquired behaviour in the socialization process and therefore susceptible to being incorporated into the teaching process in the SFL classroom, as part of the sequences dedicated to oral interaction and communicative
competence, given that the lack of knowledge of its rules can provoke difficult situations even between native speakers, for example, as happens with the rules of conversation. Guil, Pernas & Borreguero (2010) likewise stress the benefit of including the largest possible number of oral interactions in order to favour student acquisition of conversational and sociopragmatic rules. Along the same lines is Hidalgo & Cabedo’s work (2012) on the phono-polite component in intonation in SFL for sociocultural exchange situations. These are samples of the concern some scholars show to include politeness in language teaching.

2. Politeness in SFL textbooks

The form of politeness expression can vary between different cultures and languages, thus to be a competent speaker of a language means also knowing how to express and interpret politeness according to the behaviour patterns of its native speakers. But politeness in the SFL textbooks tends to be avoided or treated superficially, which results in certain errors in its teaching:
- Restricting it to forms of address.
- Neglecting the variety of realities created by the more than 300 million Spanish speakers.
- The materials employed for its teaching lack authenticity.
- It is not given direct treatment but is included among cultural and literary topics appended to the teaching units.
- Politeness strategies have more of a pragmalinguistic than sociopragmatic focus, and the forms (formal resources) predominate over the use of language (interlocutors, context…).
- Cultural behaviour is not made explicit for the student and is left tacitly in the hands of the teacher, thus students are taught a correct use of SFL but without sufficient pragmatics adaptation.
- The stereotypes and topics of “different Spain” are still being abused, skipping the appropriate planning of content.

In spite of these textbook shortfalls, the development of an intercultural consciousness is gradually being taught, in which the phenomenon of politeness can be included.

3. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the Cervantes Institute Curriculum

Without going into descriptive detail about the well-known Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment [CEFR] (Council of Europe, 2001) and Cervantes Institute Curriculum, Reference Levels for Spanish [CIC] (Instituto Cervantes, 2006), it suffices to say that they are considered works of reference for the teaching of SFL. What interests us is to know what treatment they give politeness in their programmes.

Both documents employ a methodological focus centred on communicative competence and its sub-competences. Different researchers have stated the importance of including politeness as an element of communicative competence because they have proved, for example, that students with an advanced grammatical command did not develop the social sensibility necessary for handling a polite rejection through mitigation that softens the interaction (Félix-Brasdefer, 2004).

Within communicative competence, the sub-competences most related to politeness are the sociocultural, the sociolinguistic and the strategic.

The sociocultural sub-competence refers to the capacity a person has to relate the communicative linguistic activity with particular frameworks of knowledge belonging to a speaking community, which may or may not coincide with those of other communities.

It is recognised by the CEFR within the general competence of Declarative Knowledge (Savoir): Sociocultural knowledge, in which seven social areas are established, some particularly related to politeness: interpersonal relations, values, social conventions and ritual behaviour.

The CIC includes the cultural as one of the five components of its content and distinguishes three separate inventories related to politeness: cultural references, sociocultural knowledge and behaviour, and intercultural skills and attitudes.
This sub-competence is closely linked with the intercultural and uses the negotiation of meanings as a tool for communicative success, in which politeness comes into play in the appropriateness of language and actions in the context of the speech act. An example of this is the case of Anglophone students of Spanish who avoid the discourse marker “oye” to take their turn to speak and attract the attention of the listener because they associate it with its use in their mother tongue and consider it impolite due to a transfer from the L1 (Rodríguez & Amador, 2010). Another is the conventional use of the language in daily ritual behaviour: the different forms of inviting, or of accepting or declining invitations.

The sociolinguistic sub-competence refers to the capacity of a person to produce and adequately understand linguistic expressions in different contexts of use, in those that variable factors are given (participant interrelation, communicative intentions, communicative act and interaction conventions).

For the CEFR, the sociolinguistic competence is one of the communicative competences of language and includes the command of the following areas:

• **The linguistic markers of social relations** (greetings and forms of address, conventions for turn-taking, interjections and interjectional phrases).

• **The rules of politeness.** They vary from one culture to another, and are a habitual source of interethnic misunderstandings. They can be interpreted as:
  - **Positive politeness:** showing positive impressions toward a person (admiration, affection…).
  - **Negative politeness:** avoiding threatening behaviour, apologising…
  - **Deliberate impoliteness:** rudeness, unfriendliness…
  - **Expressions of popular wisdom** (proverbs, idioms, etc.).
  - **Differences of register, dialects and accents** in their manifestations in the lexicon, grammar, phonology, vocal characteristics, paralinguistics or body language.

The strategic sub-competence refers to the capacity to make use of verbal and non-verbal resources to favour effective communication or to compensate for mistakes that may be produced in it.

The CEFR makes no mention of the strategic component. However, the CIC updates the CEFR and presents a largely adequate treatment of verbal politeness, framing it within a strategically more dynamic discursive plan, given that it is fundamental that the SFL student knows certain mechanisms and acquires the capacity to make the most of linguistic or cultural resources in order to develop effective communication.

In fact, in colloquial Spanish, on certain occasions politeness is omitted without any of the interlocutors being offended, as they know that the other is not being attacked, but that it is implicit. However, this could surprise the foreign student if he does not know of these tools. For this reason, the teacher should give the necessary resources so that the student can interpret these situations correctly or at least dispose of the appropriate tools to adapt to the situation, and thus strategic competence is taught.

In the informal tone, amongst Spanish people, free rein is given to direct evaluation and the use of hedges is restricted to specific situations, such as, for example, problematicity, certain subjects..., that is to say, where the social rule is less interpretable, for which it is necessary to help the SFL student to know how to behave and interpret politeness appropriately, utilizing hedging strategies as a sociopragmatic resource when required (Briz, 2014). Moreover, the student should recognise that many of the indirect formulations prove to be polite variations of direct formulations and that the appropriate interpretation of these speech acts is obtained by inference.

4. The phenomenon of politeness in the SFL classroom

4.1. The subjectivity of politeness and didactic transposition in the educational process

To deal with the teaching of politeness in the SFL classroom one must begin with the fact that it is conditioned by the subjectivity that the phenomenon of politeness itself entails. For this reason it is fundamental to resort to didactic transposition as a process that enables the observation, analysis, formulation and correction of hypotheses, and the evaluation of the path taken between theory and practice. This step taken from theory (academic knowledge)
to practice in educational intervention should become habitual in the work of the teacher, as should also be the case using methodological innovation in the teacher’s professional labour.

It is necessary that the effort this didactic transposition and methodological innovation imply is even more intensive in the teaching of politeness, because the majority of studies that focus on it are very theoretical and not particularly appropriate to daily teaching in the classroom.

On the other hand, didactic transposition requires a series of operations in the field of knowledge that should also be considered for politeness: desyncretization (practical activities adapted to the specific teaching context), depersonalization (separation of the knowledge and the person who produced it), programming (progression-scheduling of knowledge acquisition), decontextualization and recontextualization (the knowledge proposed as general or specific to an era or methodological vision adapted to the specific educational context), the student’s demand to be surprised (motivation) and for renewal (to be up-to-date).

Furthermore, the teacher must fight against the perverse effects of transposition such as syncretization (tendency to reduce the didactic contents) and denaturalization (reducing classroom work to a DIY of activities without relation to the educational project due to the lack of theoretical knowledge). In this case, not knowing the theoretical framework or the latest studies on politeness, and even how to bring it into the classroom, can cause the teacher to deal with politeness with too much superficiality.

Aside from this question, the subjectivity inherent in the phenomenon of politeness occasions some problems when it comes to tackling it in class, considering that two types of politeness coexist: the conventional or institutional and the spontaneous or strategic. Landone (2009) indicates some of these difficulties:

- Both types of politeness form a continuum and it is the student who must select which of its elements to utilize: traditional methodology resorts to prefabricated and routine forms, while strategic politeness employs more lists of language functions.
- It is difficult to identify model patterns of verbal politeness because it depends on the personal characteristics of each student.
- The simplification of the concept of culture to the point that nationalities are spoken about in the classroom.

4.2. Patterns for the teaching of politeness in the intercultural classroom

The relation between culture and politeness is obvious, remembering the social character of the latter. In fact, the phenomenon is based on the sociocultural hypothesis, on the expectations and knowledge shared by a society about how interpersonal interaction should be carried out.

An example of this narrow relation is how culture comes to condition the expression and interpretation of everyday politeness, for instance, in the case of Spanish, less stereotyped or ritualized formulas are preferred because conventions tend to denote insincerity and pretence.

Among others, Briz (2014) mentions positive politeness as a particular feature of Spanish culture, characterized by solidarity, camaraderie and social acceptance. In this way, the Spanish are generous with signs of empathy through questions, compliments, gifts…, which make them more tolerant toward speech interruption.

Different research on the cultural contrast of Spanish society with others has shown the importance of knowing and interpreting the culture of the other in order to overcome intercultural communication breakdown:

- It has been compared with Mexican culture to study tolerance toward interruption (Fant, 1996).
- With Swedish culture, to analyse the opinion of agreement/disagreement and hedging in colloquial conversations (Henning, 2012).
- With Polish culture regarding the use of formulas of address (Adamska & Waluch-de la Torre, 2005).

Despite these comparisons culture should not be identified with nation, as we would slip into preconceptions or stereotypes, thus in the classroom the cultural phenomenon should be dealt with through knowledge and social contact. Trujillo (2006) proposes two concepts associated with language teaching:

- Cultural awareness of plurality as a fundamental feature of society in which the identity of the individual is the result of multiple experiences in interaction situations managed by means of cultural conventions. Hence the
presence of sociocultural diversity and access to varied communicative experiences become a methodological principle.

- **Rich socialization**, or the presence of the student in different intercultural contexts of socialization where the teacher intervenes as mediator between the student, languages and cultures (Rico-Martín, 2009).

Here group work in the classroom can produce satisfactory results: what the students know or believe they know about the others is reviewed and reflected upon, which helps reduce intolerance, remove prejudice and to accept that there are features inherent to a culture that are not necessarily negative, just as the Spanish have other types of behaviour that could perhaps be misinterpreted in another culture.

With respect to the language, the student should be adapting his/her models and principles independently. In this context, the teacher, instead of providing certainties when it comes to dealing with intercultural politeness, should suggest uncertainties so that the student can observe, question and interpret, thus making it possible to contrast the cognitive categories that he/she tries to impose spontaneously onto foreign reality (Landone, 2009).

5. Conclusion

This study sets out how sensitivity to sociocultural knowledge of SFL is necessary in any communication activity, in which politeness should be included as a phenomenon linked to its content. It is therefore stressed in these pages that this sociocultural knowledge must be developed through practice in the classroom. With politeness as an excuse, using real interculturality, at the same time as improving communicative competence in Spanish as a foreign language, it helps to fight against the xenophobic reflexes of ignorance of the other.

References


