

# A Commentary on Teaching (Im)Politeness in the Second Language Classroom<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the model of politeness developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), which has had a huge impact on the field up to the present day—it provides a universal(istic) model to capture politeness across languages and cultures. In addition, this study provides some details of the attested weaknesses of the model and highlights its merits in relation to research on second language (L2) teaching and learning and the practical needs of the L2 classroom. The aim of this paper is to enrich a dialogue between (im)politeness theorists, L2 teaching and learning researchers, and language teachers. It is argued that an eclectic approach to politeness can provide realistic guidelines for language practitioners, thus catering for the differing needs of teachers and learners in the L2 classroom.

## Resumen

Este documento se centra en el modelo de cortesía desarrollado por Brown y Levinson (1987), que ha tenido un gran impacto en el campo hasta el día de hoy: proporciona un modelo universal(ístico) para capturar la cortesía en todos los idiomas y culturas. Proporciona algunos detalles de las debilidades comprobadas del modelo y destaca sus méritos en relación con la investigación sobre la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de un segundo idioma (L2) y las necesidades prácticas del aula de L2. El objetivo de este artículo es enriquecer el diálogo entre los teóricos de (des) cortesía, los investigadores de enseñanza y aprendizaje de L2 y los profesores de idiomas. Se argumenta que un enfoque ecléctico para estudiar la cortesía puede proporcionar pautas realistas para los profesionales del lenguaje, atendiendo así a las diferentes necesidades de los maestros y alumnos en el aula L2.

## Introduction

“It is of crucial importance to be aware that, function to different cultures, the meaning that people give to certain activities could be different from your own” (Constantin et al., 2015, p. 696). Second language (L2) learners’ communicative competence can be seen as inadequate without an awareness of the cultural dimension of interacting in L2 (Alptekin 2002; Byram, 1997; Byram et al, 2002; Holliday et al., 2010; Hyde, 1998). In its terms, intercultural awareness envisages: (a) the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other; (b) cultural sensitivity; the capacity to fulfil the role of cultural intermediary between one’s own culture and the foreign culture; the ability to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding, conflict situations; and (c) stereotyped relationships (Council of Europe, 2001).

As intercultural awareness has achieved ascendancy in the goals of L2 teaching, attention to some functional aspects of language identified as speech acts performed by people from different ethno-linguistic backgrounds has increased. These speech acts also often fall under the rubric of “politeness phenomena” (e.g., greetings, compliments, apologies, invitations, complaints), an awareness of which enriches general understanding not only of our own culture, but also of the other culture.

Issues of politeness can also be classified as pragmatic competence (García-Pastor, 2012). Pragmatic competence is “the speaker’s knowledge and use of rules of appropriateness and politeness which dictate the way the speaker will understand and formulate speech acts” (Koike, 1989, p. 279). According to Blum-Kulka & Sheffer (1993), pragmatic competence is “the most difficult aspect of language to master in learning a second language” (p. 219). At the same time, pragmatics is a very difficult subject for teachers to teach, as they may not know what to teach nor to teach it. As Schmidt (1993) acknowledges, there is no guarantee that even those teachers who are native speakers of the target language will be able to provide accurate information that is not based on faulty native speakers’ intuitions, which, according to Wolfson (1986), do not necessarily reflect observed speech behaviour.

The important supposition of this paper is that politeness has to be taught in the L2 classroom to build learners’ confidence in a sheltered environment. The need to teach politeness holds particularly true in the L2 classroom as L2 learners will have to learn how to behave politely. The paper regards teaching (im)politeness as a means of promoting L2 learners’ pragmatic competence and intercultural awareness. It further engenders a useful dialogue between politeness theorists, L2 teaching and learning

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researchers, and language teachers and suggests an eclectic approach to the phenomena, catering for the differing needs of teachers and learners.

### Some Universals in Language Usage or When Rudeness Means “You Are Welcome”

We will start with a brief consideration of issues related to the traditional and current approaches to politeness theory, and we will go into some key concepts of the model of politeness as developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), which has been termed “traditional” or “classic”. We will highlight some details of the attested weaknesses of the model, which are discussed in some of these publications (Meier, 1997; Sifianou, 2010, 2013; Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

The universals of politeness, as described by Brown and Levinson (1987), have been considered to have a wide descriptive power in respect of language use, to be major determinants of linguistic behaviour, and to have universal status and linguistic manifestation (Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos, 2003; Rieger, 2015; Spyridoula et al. (2015). As Kadar (2017) acknowledges, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) framework has had an unprecedented impact on the field up to the present day—it provides a universal(istic) model to capture politeness across languages and cultures. In all ways, it is one of the theories which: (a) bends towards the polite end of the polite/impolite distinction; (b) favours the speaker and neglect the hearer; (c) considers the production rather than its evaluation (Eelen, 2001).

Brown and Levinson’s (1987) framework for politeness is based on the concept of “face”, a term borrowed from and associated with Goffman (1967). Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that face is equal to the self-image. Furthermore, Brown and Levinson (1987) highlight the two aspects related to the concept of face—positive face and negative face, which can be damaged in so-called face threatening acts. Positive face is the need for a person to maintain a favourable self-image; negative face is the expectation that one will be free of imposition or obligations in pursuing one’s goals. Negative face—a person’s claim to freedom of action and freedom of imposition—might be threatened by an interlocutor’s request, for example, whereas positive face—a person’s claim to a consistent positive self-image—might be threatened by criticism or insults.

Though model personalities are generally conscious of their language choices and recognise the need and importance of maintaining the face wants, face threatening acts, which infringe on the interlocutor’s need to maintain self-esteem and be respected, are routinely committed. Politeness strategies allow individuals to deal with face threatening acts or enhance the positive face of others. Each politeness strategy may be realised by particular linguistic strategies: being vague or sarcastic, pluralizing the person responsible, dropping hints, giving commands, making requests, etc. Brown and Levinson (1987) acknowledge there are four types of politeness strategies. First, *bald on record* strategies do not minimise the threat to the hearer’s face. As there exists a direct possibility that the audience will be embarrassed or even shocked, *the bald on record* strategies are most frequently used by the speakers who know each other very well. For instance, if you saw several sheets of paper on your classmate’s desk and you wanted to use one of them, a *bald on record* strategy might be the request “I want to use one of them!” Positive politeness strategies minimise the threat to the hearer’s face. For instance, a positive politeness strategy might be the request “So, is it OK if I use one of those sheets of paper on your table?” In this situation, the speaker recognizes that the other person has a desire to be respected and confirms that the relationship is friendly. Brown and Levinson (1987) also highlight negative politeness strategies. They are similar to positive politeness strategies in that the speaker recognizes that the interlocutor wants to be respected, however, the speaker also assumes that he/she in some way will be imposing on the interlocutor. The fourth type of politeness strategies are *off-the-record strategies*. *Off-the-record strategies* enable a speaker to avoid responsibility for performing a face threatening act by either employing certain conversational formulas or by being deliberately vague or ambitious. For instance, a speaker using the *off-the-record strategy* might merely say, “Hmm, I sure could use a sheet of paper right now.”

Since Brown and Levinson’s (1987) work *Politeness. Some universals in language usage* was published, there have been numerous attacks on its lack of completeness. The influential framework for politeness has been heavily criticised. Following Meier (1997), one of the problems with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) framework concerns the definition of politeness, namely, it is not actually defined. Politeness, as described by Brown and Levinson (1987), is an admixture of both formal and functional features which accompany a face-threatening speech act, such as requesting or interrupting, in order to lessen its threat. Formal features, however, have not received the same value across languages. Functional features (for instance, *giving deference*) are likewise problematic in that they are relative concepts, making an objective definition difficult.

Another problem concerns Brown and Levinson’s (1987) claim regarding the universality of two face wants (Meier, 1997). One face want is a desire not to have one’s territory encroached upon; the other

face want is to accrue others' approval. However, according to Meier (1997), what constitutes face wants can vary across cultures. Individual territorial rights as described by Brown and Levinson (1987) cannot be applied, for instance, to Japanese (Matsumoto, 1988).

One more problem lies in Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim for universality of the principles governing the realisation of indirect speech acts and the claim for a linear relationship between indirectness and politeness. As a matter of fact, certain clear-cut rules and strategies of politeness are not solid; there is no linear relationship between indirectness and politeness. In addition, certain formal features, which are identified markers of directness, and are thus less polite (imperatives, for instance) may be appropriate in a particular context in one speech community, but not in another. Holmes (1992) writes, "Although we can say that in general the interrogatives and declaratives are more polite than the imperatives, a great deal depends on intonation, tone of voice and context" (p. 290). Even "please" could be regarded as impolite because it increases the directness of requests by making their force more obvious (House, 1989). Directness can also be an appropriate or polite way to make a request, and particular cultures value directness. Following Meier (1997), the last problem concerns the taxonomies for data analysis in speech act studies, which often make a basis in Brown and Levinson's (1987) model. The taxonomies for data analysis in speech act studies have found little consistent guidance from Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness, and a basis for classification of speech act strategies are at best hazy.

Finally, gender has not been distinguished within Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework for politeness, though Meier (1997) does not highlight this problem. Women and men communicate differently, and, consequently, women and men will also perform politeness differently (Holmes, 1995; Mills, 2003, 2005). Holmes (1995), for instance, using a range of evidence and a corpus of data collected largely from New Zealand, examines the distribution and functions of a range of specific verbal politeness strategies in women's and men's speech, and discusses the possible reasons for gender differences in this area. Data provided on interactional strategies, (*hedges* and *boosters*, or *compliments* and *apologies*) demonstrate ways in which women's politeness patterns differ from men's, with the implications of these different patterns explored, for women in particular, in the areas of education and professional careers.

As is seen from the discussion above, the challenging line of criticism concerning Brown and Levinson's (1987) model is that the politeness usage they describe is not universal. Meier (1995) states that "politeness can be said to be universal only in the sense that every society has some sort of norms for appropriate behavior" (p. 338), but each speech community has particular ways of expressing deference, mitigation, directness, and indirectness, etc. It is ethnocentric to presume that politeness is enacted similarly in all cultures. Greek notions of politeness, for instance, stress warmth and notions of intimacy, whereas the American use of politeness quite often means consideration for the individual, and many Russians believe that politeness can be summed up with not using coarse or vulgar language (Sifianou, 1999). Politeness should not automatically be equated with feelings of kindness, regard, or respect for others. Sometimes what we see is strictly a mechanical role that has nothing to do with the personal feelings of the individuals involved (De Mente, 2004).

Szakos (2001) provides one intriguing example at a symposium presentation *When rudeness means "You are welcome:" Politeness in Tsou and other aboriginal languages in Taiwan*. According to the presenter, when the relatives of a young man go to the potential bride's house, the father of the bride must demonstrate anger and should scold the guests, be rude to them if he agrees to the marriage. At the same time, the guests are supposed to tolerate the worst scolding and are forbidden to talk back. If the guests are treated politely, this is a sign of refusal. There are even some instances when it is considered rude to answer, "You're welcome". If someone is helping you and they thank you for your patience, it is considered rude to answer, "You're welcome." In that circumstance, the polite response is "No problem", even if there was a big problem. "You're welcome" acknowledges your willingness to inconvenience yourself as if you were making a real sacrifice. Convention calls for a denial that your actions were actually a sacrifice. Hence, "No problem" dismisses your effort and reduces the other person's belief that he/she has imposed on you.

#### Teaching (I)m)Politeness in the L2 Classroom in Light of Different Theoretical Frameworks for (I)m)Politeness

Despite the shortcomings of Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, research on interlanguage pragmatics and L2 teaching and learning appears to have relied heavily on the model. Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness has definitely found its way into L2 teaching materials. Now, we will concentrate on its pitfalls and, most importantly, its merits or alleged merits in relation to research on L2 teaching and learning and the practical needs of the L2 classroom.

One problem which we would like to distinguish is related to the concept of politeness itself. It has already been singled out that this concept is not actually defined (Meier, 1997). As Mills (2013) acknowledges, politeness can be seen as a set of varying stereotypes and resources that can be drawn on by interactants to construct particular positions of authority or submission, affiliation or disaffiliation for themselves and others. Because these stereotypes and resources are hypothesised rather than real, it is difficult to teach about, for instance, English politeness. What we are teaching are the hypothesised norms and the stereotypes of a particular class usage; it is important that we draw attention to the narrow class/elite nature of politeness norms when we teach L2 learners about politeness.

In addition to the problems involved with the concept of politeness, there is an additional problem for the L2 classroom. Politeness is frequently perceived as referring to the use of relatively formal and deferential language (Sifianou, 2013; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). For Brown and Levinson (1987), it is formal politeness that runs through one's mind when one thinks of politeness. Such a deep-rooted link is evident in the L2 classroom where L2 learners tend to associate politeness with formality and fail to produce appropriate discourse in cases where there is limited or no social distance.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness provides a set of clear-cut rules and strategies of politeness. These strategies are often presented in textbooks as fixed expressions or politeness formulas used in different societies for such purposes as greeting, leave taking, congratulating, thanking, apologising, and expressing various kinds of wishes. L2 learners are expected to memorise these expressions and grade them on simple scales, such as impolite-polite.

As a matter of fact, "a pair of similar politeness formulas in different languages rarely turn out to be completely equivalent in all respects. Unfortunately, very few courses provide detailed specifications of how, when, and where to use formulas introduced" (Davies, 1987, p. 76). Furthermore, Meier (1997) argues that research invoking Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness in order to determine "rules of politeness" should not constitute the basis of the teaching of politeness phenomena in the L2 classroom. Meier (1997) also argues that politeness is to be characterised as appropriateness and highlights the awareness-raising of context-dependent expectations. Consciousness-raising envisages "an understanding that different evaluations of appropriateness may exist across cultures" (Meier, 1997, p. 24) and concentrating on contextual factors, so that L2 learners will be able to make appropriate decisions in interaction and present the appropriate image. Meier (1997) moves forward and argues that it is of crucial importance to secure an understanding of the cultural assumptions which underlie the perception of contextual and situational factors as they apprise linguistic behaviour. She proposes three groups of activities, which address causes of pragmatic failure and negative transfer: (a) A discussion of judgements of appropriateness in context in both cultures; (b) The avoidance of prescriptivism and use, instead, the use of learner observation, discussions, and comparison of unsuccessful/successful dialogues to increase understanding of linguistic behaviour; (c) A modification of textbook dialogues and participation in role plays to raise students' awareness of the social and cultural factors that determine pragmalinguistic choices.

Holmes (1992) writes, "Clearly getting what we want from someone else requires knowledge of the rules for expressing yourself appropriately in the relevant socio-cultural context" (p. 294). Choosing the appropriate linguistic form for directives to family, friends, and foreigners involves the dimensions of solidarity (social distance) and social status (power). These dimensions are at the heart of politeness behaviour and differ quite markedly in different cultures. Because appropriateness is highly situation-dependent, contextual factors gain of fundamental importance. Contextual factors are often ascribed different values and interpretations across cultures. In reality, what is thought of as a formal context in one culture may be seen as informal in another. A treatment of potential differences definitely needs to find a place in the L2 classroom, according to Meier (1997).

Meier's (1997) stance on politeness-as-appropriateness approach seems generally correct, but, at the same time, Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos (2003) acknowledge that "the notion of appropriateness is too vague to constitute a useful pedagogical guideline" (p. 11). Just like politeness, appropriateness is an elusive concept since different participants in an interaction might evaluate differently the same behaviour in exactly the same situation (Mills, 2003; Schneider, 2012). In fact, appropriateness seems to be a broader concept than politeness, as there is behaviour which could be perceived as inappropriate but not necessarily as polite (Culpeper, 2011).

As Spyridoula et al. (2015) admit, another serious problem that teachers should be aware of when employing the term "appropriateness" as a pedagogical tool is that appropriateness seems to be related solely to the avoidance of inappropriateness. Avoiding such a failure would be a first step, but the authors argue that the teaching of politeness should aspire to help L2 learners to use language in ways that go beyond just "not failing to use it appropriately".

Undeniably, recent approaches to pragmatic instruction base the teaching of (im)politeness on Brown and Levinson's (1987) model. Some of its key concepts are provided in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages under the rubric of politeness conventions: (1) *positive politeness* (e.g., showing interest in a person's well-being; sharing experiences and concerns, *troubles talk*; expressing admiration, affection, gratitude; offering gifts, promising future favours, hospitality); (2) *negative politeness* (e.g., avoiding face-threatening behaviour (e.g., dogmatism, direct orders); *expressing regret, apologizing for face-threatening behaviour* (e.g., correction, contradiction, prohibitions; using hedges); (3) *appropriate use of 'please', 'thank you', etc.*; (4) *impoliteness* (e.g., deliberate flouting of politeness conventions—bluntness, frankness; expressing contempt, dislike; strong complaint and reprimand; venting anger, impatience; asserting superiority) (Council of Europe, 2001). It is stated that the politeness conventions vary amongst cultures and provoke inter-ethnic misunderstanding, especially when polite expressions are interpreted verbatim (Council of Europe, 2001).

Brown and Levinson's (1987) model itself could be taught to L2 learners; it is a tool to shed light on what constitutes linguistic behaviour in contrasting genres and cultures (see, for instance, Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos, 2003; Spyridoula et al., 2015). L2 learners as bearers of a different lingual-cultural system need to make themselves learn the basics before they proceed with the particularities of the target language, with the help of their teachers. At the same time, while Spyridoula et al. (2015) identify the merit of the "traditional" framework (Brown & Levinson, 1987) with its descriptive convenience, they view the more recent approaches to politeness (Mills, 2011; Locher, 2012), which are discourse based, as equally valuable. As a matter of fact, different theoretical frameworks for (im)politeness pedagogy have a role to play in the L2 classroom.

If we want to enable L2 learners to make unbiased judgements and perform politely, we have to provide them with some linguistic tools to do so. In other words, to make effective selection and informed assessment, it is significant that L2 learners are equipped with the background knowledge against which they can evaluate what occurs around them, whether in the classroom or real-life occasions (O'Driscoll, 2007). Teaching has to aim at a good, elaborate use of pragmatic markers that will help L2 learners not just to survive in the target community, but to be able to operate as well-integrated social beings. Teachers have to provide L2 learners with the means to achieve this (Culpeper, 2011). L2 instructors are urged to employ awareness-raising techniques for the teaching of (im)politeness through a "focus on grammatical/pragmalinguistic devices that attain politeness values according to specific situational and contextual factors" (Bella et al., 2015, p. 35).

Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos (2003) put forward an awareness-raising task that has the following objectives: (a) To raise L2 learners' awareness of the uses of linguistic devices; (b) To sensitise learners' to the differences and similarities between two cultures; (c) To facilitate means of comparison; (d) To promote discussion and reach conclusions; in-class discussions and conclusions should be teacher-guided or, at least, contrasted with—and always supplemented by—information provided by the teacher; (e) To promote autonomous learning by encouraging learners to observe situations and to become ethnographers when they have to engage in real encounters. Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos (2003) also suggest the methodological steps of L2 learners' awareness-raising. Among them would be to define politeness and to introduce Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework and Scollon and Scollon's (1995) politeness systems. Also, short excerpts of texts can be analysed in the L2 classroom (Bou-Franch, 2001).

## Conclusion

"Politeness phenomena" have to be taught in the L2 classroom to promote L2 learners' pragmatic competence and intercultural awareness. Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness may serve as the basis for a useful framework for teaching and learning. Despite the shortcomings of the model itself and of some of its applications in L2 teaching and learning, Brown and Levinson have provided a useful framework for "cross-cultural analysis, for which no alternative has been offered so far" (Ogiermann, 2009, p. 210). Undoubtedly, there are reasonable grounds for strong criticism of Brown and Levinson's (1987) model. For example, politeness itself has not been defined and the gender dimension has not been distinguished. However, the strongest criticism is that the politeness usage that has been described is not universal. The universality of both *two face wants* and those principles governing the realisation of indirect speech acts is truly questionable.

At the same time, we advocate that although studying the factors that contribute to the effects of politeness strategies will result in L2 learners' developing a deeper sensitivity for language-in-situation, it does leave them with a large task with no clearly defined routes. Therefore, particularly at the earlier

stages of L2 learning, some simple principles and scales are useful props as they offer some order in such a complex sphere as speech acts.

Evidently, politeness is a complex concept and must not be viewed merely as “appropriateness” and/or “formality”, but something that an informed teacher is supposed to explain and expand upon, as they sensitise L2 learners to the issues of (im)politeness. In order to do that, L2 teachers may adopt an eclectic approach in the L2 classroom, thus catering for the differing needs of L2 learners. Teachers have to be eclectic as to what will be useful to their respective audiences. Ultimately, L2 teachers may become politeness researchers to obtain the knowledge of norms of polite behaviour in specific genres against which classroom discussion can take place.

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