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A CROSS-COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN TWO
TEXTBOOK SERIES IN TERMS OF THE PRESENTATION OF
POLITENESS

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts in TEFL

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to find out if there is any difference between two textbook series in terms of the presentation of politeness and cultural load. Four raters from among EFL teachers holding an MA in TEFL participated in this study. They read the books and enumerated the expressions they believed carried a speech act with politeness in it. The results that the raters came up with were utilized in statistical parts of the study. The outcome led to confirming the hypothesis that there was a significant difference between the True to Life (TTL) and locally-developed High School Textbooks (referred to as HSB in this study, standing for "High School Books" developed by the Iranian Ministry of Education) regarding the presentation of politeness. The results also demonstrated the existence of a difference between the two textbooks in terms of cultural load.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

Teaching pragmatic knowledge is a very important issue in any teaching context involving a second or foreign language (Hadley, 2003). As part of this knowledge, awareness of politeness has a very crucial role in becoming a communicatively competent speaker in an L2 situation. Therefore, it remains an essential task for the syllabus designers and materials developers to raise the learners' awareness of this issue. A theoretical foundation is needed to deal with the politeness presentation in different course books. Pragmatically handling the issue leaves us with the speech act outlook. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness and its concomitant concepts have found their way into almost every recent study of speech acts (e.g. requests, apologies, complaints).

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; and (b) how face-work, that is , the attempt to establish, maintain, and save face during conversation, is carried out in a speech community” (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 12).

Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness rests on three basic notions: face, face threatening acts (FTAs), and politeness strategies. An individual’s face consists of two wants: the freedom to act without being impeded by others, termed *negative face*, and the desire that others approve of, or value one’s wants, termed *positive face*.

Either or both of these face aspects can be threatened by certain inherently face-threatening acts (FTAs), which are defined both in terms of whose face (speaker’s or hearer’s) is at stake and which face want is threatened.

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 and/or realizations in different cultures (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Hickey, 1991) which could be categorized as *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 given 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 favor a more direct or indirect style of communication but this does not mean that some languages are more or less polite than others.

Many contextual variables have to be taken into account such as 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*. According to them, the addressee's task is to select the most relevant interpretation that involves less processing effort in a given context.

As mentioned above, the context of the situation is essential for the relevance of politeness strategies as well as any other communication strategy. 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).

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

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 minimum

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* (e.g. 'It is cold in here') the context is more important to enable the interlocutor 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.

For example, in the case of requests, indirect speech acts of the type 'Would you mind passing the salt?' are significantly less common in Spanish. '¿Me pasas la sal?' or 'pásame la sal' (pass me the salt) 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'.

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 works sets a very important theoretical framework to start exploring how students can achieve native-like competence by making them aware of politeness strategies.

Bearing this in mind would let us take into perspective yet another aspect of politeness strategy learning benefits, in the day to day life of people, namely politeness strategy awareness. Politeness strategy awareness does not necessarily increase people's politeness, but leads to a more rational interpretation of the statements they hear (Meier, 1995). The effectiveness of textbooks in raising the students' awareness of what is going on around them

is beyond the shadow of a doubt (Finney, 1998). Research is needed in investigating the fundamental problems of current academic course books to eliminate their unidimensionality in treating various phenomena.

1.2. Statement of the Problem and purpose of the study

In an attempt to investigate the cultural impact of EFL textbooks on Iranian language learners, Meshkat (2002) made a survey of three textbook series used to teach English to Iranian language learners, namely the “Headway” series, the “New Interchange” series and the Iranian high school textbooks. Through the analyses carried out on the questionnaires filled out by students using the above-mentioned textbooks in private institutes and those using textbooks designed by the Iranian Ministry of Education in high schools, she found that using the Headway series and the New Interchange series does not bring about a significant difference in these two groups of students’ understanding and awareness of their own cultural values as Persian native speakers, as well as the cultural differences between the two languages.

Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos (2003), after discussing approaches to teaching pragmatic knowledge in general and politeness strategies in particular, argue that “a direct approach to teaching pragmatic knowledge should be taken as a starting point, and then combined afterwards with indirect practice of specific skills and strategies” (p. 16). They also state that “linguistic politeness constitutes the most suitable tool with which to approach the teaching of L2 sociopragmatics in the classroom context” (p. 19).

This much having been said about the research on various EFL textbooks, none has been carried out to investigate the potential difference between the presentation of politeness in the two textbook series under investigation in the present study. This study, therefore, aims at finding out what degree of politeness, as one aspect of pragmatic knowledge, is presented in two English textbook series, the “True to Life” series and textbooks published by the Iranian Ministry of Education to teach English to

Iranian high school students; and comparing these two series. Therefore, the following research question and hypothesis are posed.

1.3. Research Question

RQ: Is there any significant difference between locally-developed EFL textbooks for Iranian high school students and True to Life Intermediate coursebooks in terms of the presentation of politeness?

1.4. Research Hypothesis

Based on the above research question, the following null hypothesis was stated:

Null hypothesis: There is not any significant difference between locally-developed EFL textbooks for Iranian high school students and True to Life Intermediate course books in terms of the presentation of politeness.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

In order to clarify the researcher's stance and avoid any possible misconceptions, the key technical terms appearing frequently in this study are defined here at the very onset.

1.5.1. Pragmatics

It is the general study of how context influences the way sentences convey information. It has to do with people's use of language in contexts. In other words, pragmatics is the study of how the meaning of discourse is created in particular contexts for particular senders and receivers, and/or is the study of the ability of the language users to pair sentences with the context in which govern language in use, as opposed to the abstract, idealized rules of, for instance, grammar, and of the relationships between the abstract systems of language on the one hand, and language in use on the other. It is the study of interpretation from the perspective of psychology, the study of general cognitive principles involved in the retrieval of information from an uttered sequence of words. Its goal is to explain how from an uttered sequence of words, a hearer can succeed in retrieving some interpretation intended by the speaker, and then from that construal derive yet further information constituting the full import of the utterance (Kempson, 1975, p.562; Levinson, 1983, p.24, Fromkin and Rodman, 1988, p. 227).

1.5.2. Style

The varieties of language usage associated with different situations are commonly called style. The appropriateness of a style for a situation is

determined largely by social convention. Speakers of a language expect to encounter certain styles in certain situations (Falk, 1978, p. 69).

1.5.3. Utterance

It is a stretch of talk that is an independent clause, a term of address, or a tag. In other words, it is a short, intuitively defined unit of discourse which may or may not be formally interpretable as a sentence (Cook, 1989; Gramley and Patzold, 1992).

1.5.4. Politeness

The means employed to show awareness of another person's face. (Cook, 1989) Holmes (1992) believes it is taking into account the feelings of others. It also refers to the idea of appropriate language use associated with smooth communication. It is believed that the most useful working definition of politeness for second/foreign language pedagogy is that of appropriateness. Meier (1995) states politeness has two types: 1) Positive Politeness: it is solidarity oriented and emphasizes shared attitudes and values; and 2) Negative Politeness: It pays people respect, and avoids intruding on them. It involves expressing oneself appropriately in terms of social distance and respecting status differences.