Politeness and University Student Online Communication

Chris HARWOOD

Introduction

Modern university students are expected to participate in online discussions as part of their course work as well as write emails to professors requesting meetings and explaining late paper submissions. These online written interactions require students to demonstrate advanced written pragmatic competence in English to effectively manage their relationships and studies at English medium of instruction (EMI) universities. It is therefore important for undergraduate English as second language (L2) learners to understand how politeness is expressed in online communication. However, politeness is a facet of language use which is often difficult to master because it is dependent on the relationship between the interactants and is culturally and contextually bound (Haugh, 2007). This paper discusses politeness theory and research and considers how politeness is expressed and interpreted in computer-mediated communication (CMC) in EMI university contexts.

Politeness Theory

Politeness theory is derived from the concept of dramaturgy, a term Erving Goffman adapted from the theatre to explain his observations about human interaction. Goffman's key observation was the concept of *face*, which he defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). Brown and Levinson (1987) introduced a 'universal' theory of politeness and defined *face* as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself", they argue that this includes, "the desire that

this self-image be appreciated and approved of” (p. 61). According to Brown and Levinson, self-image has both a *positive* and a *negative face*. Positive face is the need to be desirable to others (approval). Negative face is the need to be unimpeded by others (autonomy). Brown and Levinson propose that in human interaction some communicative acts can threaten the hearer’s positive face, negative face, or both. These communicative acts are referred to as face threatening acts (FTAs).

Offers and requests are often face threatening acts, for example if a teacher says to a student, “You have not finished your homework! Please finish it now.” The criticism of the student’s action is a threat to her positive face (approval) and the request to please finish it now, is a threat to her negative face (autonomy). For Brown and Levinson (1987), the evaluation of the significance of an FTA is dependent on three interpersonal variables. The first relates to the degree of imposition of the FTA, for example, asking someone for the time interrupts the hearer and imposes on their time. The second variable is the relative power balance between the listener and speaker. In the teacher-student example mentioned earlier, the teacher has more power than the student and is therefore able to use a weaker politeness strategy with her request for the student to finish her homework. The third variable is the social-psychological distance between the interactants; as people get to know each other over time their social distance reduces as does what is perceived to constitute an FTA. In politeness theory these interpersonal variables underpin all *face-work*, and interactants use them to discern what is appropriate in a given interaction.

Cross-cultural Politeness

A key problem with Brown and Levinson’s theory is universality. Despite advanced language proficiency, second language speakers often have pragmatic issues connected to the transfer of ‘rules of use’ related to contextual appropriateness of their first language (L1). In order to establish a cross-cultural framework for the analysis of politeness Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), devised and developed the Cross-Cultural Speech Act

Realization Project (CCSARP) coding framework. The CCSARP framework can be used to analyze direct and indirect request strategies within particular linguistic structures. For example, "imperatives are direct while *would/could you* constructions are indirect" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007, p. 63). The CCSARP project classifies the directness of request strategies on a nine-point scale with *mood derivables* such as imperatives being the most direct and mild hints being the most indirect. Internal modifiers termed *downgraders*, for example, "Could you *possibly* open the window?" and *upgraders* such as, "Open the window, *for goodness sake*!" were found to mitigate or enhance request acts. In addition, external modifiers, called *disarmers* and *grounders*, were coded to demonstrate how external supportive moves can be attached to request acts to mitigate or aggravate requests. Blum-Kulka et al., (1987) define *grounders* as when: "The speaker gives reasons, explanations, or justifications for his or her requests, which may either precede or follow it" (p. 287). When the CCSARP is used the coding scheme data is analyzed by comparing the frequency of use of different request strategies among different participants. This enables researchers to establish the "general cultural preferences along a direct/indirect continuum" (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984, p. 201) of different speakers and hearers.

Discursive Politeness

Locher and Watts (2005) attempt to shift the approach taken when investigating politeness arguing that polite behavior is an element of *relational work*, which they describe as "the 'work' individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others" (p. 10). They challenge the concept of face and FTAs as too narrow and argue that polite behavior is more complex than the mitigation of FTAs. Furthermore, they suggest relational work exists in all human social interaction and includes rudeness and impoliteness. Locher and Watts (2005) also argue that all relational work is relative to previously constructed appropriate behavior and that what is considered (im)polite is related to "interactants assessments of social norms of appropriateness that have been previously acquired" (Locher, 2006, p.

250). In her work on *rapport*, Spencer-Oatey (2005) acknowledges Locher and Watts ideas and draws on ideas from social psychology to interpret (im) politeness as,

> an umbrella term that covers all kinds of evaluative meanings (e.g., warm, friendly, considerate, respectful, deferential, insolent, aggressive, rude). These meanings can have positive, negative or neutral connotations, and the judgments can impact upon people's perceptions of their social relations and the rapport or (dis)harmony that exists between them (p. 97).

In short, (im)politeness involves the subjective judgments interactants make regarding the appropriateness of verbal and non-verbal behavior. Haugh (2007) refers to this postmodern interpretation of politeness as the *discursive approach* and adds that politeness behavior is evaluative and that politeness research needs to focus on the variability of interactants perceptions of politeness.

University Student Online Politeness

Morand and Ocker (2002, p. 4) interpreted Brown and Levinson's politeness theory for computer-mediated communication (CMC) and noted that it is a useful tool for CMC research because FTAs "occur with considerable frequency" in CMC contexts. They argue that two central aspects of communicative competence, making oneself clear and being polite, are often in opposition as politeness usually entails ambiguity, whilst clarity can sometimes be too direct. Morand and Ocker (2002) also suggest that in face-to-face communication nonverbal cues play a crucial role in the contextualization of politeness and that the absence of such cues in CMC contexts could lead to more miscommunication than in face-to-face contexts.

Schallert, Chiang, Park, Jordan, H. Lee, Cheng, Chu, S. Lee, Kim & Song (2009) use Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to investigate the computer-mediated discussions (CMD) of a teacher and 24 graduate students

at a large American University. They found synchronous discussions were characterized by more information seeking and sharing and more social comments. The asynchronous discussions were more ‘serious’ and showed more discussion generating, experience sharing and idea explanation. More politeness strategies were used in messages with positive evaluation functions and group conversation management and fewer with social, discussion generation, negative evaluation functions. Negative politeness strategies rose when writers engaged in experience sharing, idea explaining, giving alternative views, previewing one’s message and negative evaluating. Schallert et al, (2009) suggest that these functions may be considered as face threatening because “they imply a request that the hearer/reader, accept what is being stated” (p. 720). In short, the writers were attending to the hearer’s negative face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Across CMC modes asynchronous messages were more likely to use hedging moves when sharing experience but more hedging moves were more likely in synchronous messages when disagreeing with another’s message. Schallert et al, (2009) conclude that politeness strategy is more influenced by the messages discourse function than whether it is asynchronous or synchronous.

Li (2012) draws on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory to investigate the wiki-mediated written English of Chinese undergraduates studying English at a university China. Li argues that clarity and politeness are often in contradiction in CMC contexts, since politeness is often ambiguous and indirect and often needs to be subordinated to clarity. Li also notes that her findings did not support Brown and Levinson’s (1987) suggestion that people use negative politeness when they are distant in social relations. She also claims that positive face strategies are regularly used more often in CMC in order to foster, reciprocity and community.

Vinagre (2008) argues that successful computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) is determined by the social interaction that takes place amongst participants because social interaction shapes the cognitive and socio-emotional processes that occur during learning. Vinagre suggests a reason for this is that in CMC the ambiguity of negative politeness is often subordinated to the need for clarity. She proposes that mutual friendship is a

priority in collaborative CMC and strategies linked with claiming common ground; showing interest and attending to others, exaggerating approval or sympathy, using in-group markers and avoiding disagreements in CMC contexts. Vinagre suggests that the high use of positive politeness as a strategy in CMC fosters solidarity and promotes friendship and co-operation and that these attributes contribute to the success in CSCL communication.

Cross-cultural Online Politeness

Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) examined the pragmatic appropriateness of Greek-Cypriot university students English email requests to their professors in an EMI university. The results indicate that many more requests were made using direct strategies and hints than customary indirect strategies commonly found in comparative face-to-face speech act research. The study also showed that native speakers (NS) and non native speakers (NNS) have an awareness of situational factors such as perceived imposition and that they used the same politeness strategies. However, qualitative analysis revealed "a mix of lack of linguistic flexibility and idiomatic expressions, unawareness of letter conventions transferable to email and inability to select appropriate lexical modification among NNSs" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007, p. 74). NNSs used impersonal forms with low imposition requests; *please* was the preferred NNS lexical modifier whilst NSs preferred subjectivizers such as, *I was wondering* and *I'm hoping*. The students used more politeness strategies with direct appointment and feedback requests. Economidou-Kogetsidis concludes that NS speakers have a developing awareness of e-politeness whereas many NNS speakers could often be perceived as impolite in institutional CMC contexts.

Chen's (2006) case study of the evolution of a Taiwanese graduate student's (Ling) email literacy over two and a half years at a US university shows that Ling's appropriate use of formality matured over time as her relationship with her professors developed. During Ling's studies she used unmitigated want statements such as *I need your suggestion/help* to emphasize the importance of her professor's help to her. Chen notes that this is a pragmatic

problem because these statements could convey helplessness rather than the independence expected of graduate students. The statements also "suggest a coercive tone, thus failing to show status-appropriate politeness in student-professor communication" (Chen, 2006, p. 44). Chen believes this was a cultural issue because from a Chinese perspective using *want statements* with higher-ups does not connote impoliteness in the way it might in English. Chen explains that Ling initially had insufficient pragmatic knowledge, particularly for status unequal emails, and that she struggled to communicate appropriately as a graduate student. Chen claims that Ling's acquisition of email literacy was delayed due to the fact she had no explicit rules to follow and insufficient feedback from her interlocutors.

Discursive Online Politeness

Guiller & Durndell (2006) examined gender and language in the asynchronous CMD of undergraduates at a Scottish university over four semesters. Explicit markers of agreement and disagreement were analyzed by looking at the positive and negative socioemotional content of the gender interactions. Males expressed explicit disagreement more than females who explicitly agreed more than males. When socioemotional content was considered, it was found that more female-to-female interactions were more positive than negative, whilst male-to-male interaction was more negative than positive. Female-to-male interactions were more positive than negative, whilst male-to-female interactions were more negative than positive. Furthermore, females were found to be more likely than males to construct attenuated messages using phrases such as *I think* or *it's maybe* and males were more likely to use authoritative language such as, *it is a fact* or *I am sure that*. The contrasting gender CMC styles have implications for politeness. If a male disagrees with a female in an authoritative manner using negative unattenuated language he is more likely to be perceived as impolite.

Clarke (2009) investigated how Emerati undergraduates studying in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) interact online. He found that a typical discursive feature at the start of messages was the strategy of using an

introductory statement of agreement in reply to a previous student post. Clarke notes this type of strategy is related to a mutual need to maintain face between interactants and suggests this type of affirmative communication is an essential generic aspect of community building in CMC contexts and reports only 12 expressions of disagreement were registered. Other less direct strategies observed were the use of personal pronouns and hedges such as *I think* and the frequent use of inclusive pronouns such as *us*, *we* and *our*. According to Clarke, these phrases indicate that students were attending to and maintaining the online community, and underline the important role politeness has in the maintenance of online communities.

Adel (2011) examined the rapport building in the CMDs of a five week online course conducted in English in a small Swedish university. The key observations related to the large amount of phatic communication in face-to-face rapport discourse, which included a lot of negative communication (gossip) about group members not present. The offline interaction also showed a large number of comprehension checks, which contrasts with a high frequency of compliments and encouragement in the online data. Adel argues these differences between the off and online data suggest that online rapport work is orientated more towards consensus building while offline rapport work seems more concerned with comprehension and understanding. Another interesting observation was the use of 'on task' phatic communication identified in some of the online communication. Phrases such as; "it's really hard to learn all grammatical words" and "I almost gave up when I first took a look inside the grammar book" (Adel, 2011, p. 2941) show commiseration, empathy and agreement in a face-to-face phatic conversational style. Adel suggests that this is a new form of online written communication that fuses chat and more traditional written academic styles in order to build and maintain rapport.

Conclusion

The research suggests university students struggle with pragmatic appropriateness in status unequal email communication with academics.

There is a tendency for students, particularly NNS students, to be too direct when making requests; as a consequence, in many cases, they appear to leave recipients of these direct messages little choice as to how to respond to impositions. Furthermore, status unequal emails have been shown to be either too informal or too formal. There is evidence to suggest that NS are developing an awareness of appropriateness in status unequal emails but that NNS are not and that this is, in part, due to the lack of feedback NNS receive about how they construct email messages. The authors of the email related studies suggest that teaching intervention could help speed up the prolonged implicit acquisition process many students currently take to acquire appropriate pragmatic politeness. I think this would be a useful addition to university writing/bridging courses, particularly for NNSs. Models of appropriate email etiquette and discussions and feedback about English medium academic CMC would, I believe, help NNSs acquire pragmatic competency more quickly.

CMC politeness between student peers in CMDs does not seem to be as problematic. However, there is some evidence of the development of an academic discussion forum genre. Positive face strategies have been shown to dominate CMDs because they foster reciprocity and community. Moreover, mutual friendship is often seen as a priority in collaborative CMD and discourse strategies often aim to seek common ground or at consensus building. This is exemplified by Clarke's (2009) observation that posts typically begin with introductory statements of agreement in reply to a previous student posts. Different strategies have been shown to relate to different discourse functions in CMD; for instance, negative politeness strategies have been shown to be used more in experience sharing.

Cultural differences have been discussed in both email and discussion forums with mixed results. However, there do seem to be cultural behavioral norms that translate from NNS first language to their use of English as a second language. Chen's (2006) study illustrates this by revealing the expectations Asian students often have about their relationships with lecturers. Significant differences between male and female CMC were identified (Guiller & Durndell, 2006) and the more attenuated, positive CMC

displayed by females compared to the more direct and authoritative language displayed by males do have implications for perceptions of politeness and interaction in CMD contexts.

Although much of the current theory and research about politeness has focused on how status, culture, sex, context and associated moral norms determine its variability (Haugh, 2010), I believe that EMI academic contexts across the world share enough ground to establish guidelines of appropriate CMD; for the increasing number of NS and NNS CMD interactants. I think our developing understanding of appropriate discussion forum conventions and behavior should be shared and taught to native and non-native speakers in English in educational contexts. Written CMD skills are essential for university students to master because CMD use is increasing rapidly in EMI university contexts. An increased understanding of and competency in this developing academic genre will enable students to present a more positive self- image of themselves to others. This would lead, I think, to improved learning experiences and possibly better learning outcomes.

References

Adel, A. (2011). Rapport building in student group work. *Journal of Pragmatics 43*, 2932–2947.

Biesenbach-Lucas, S. (2007). Students writing e-mails to faculty: an examination of e-politeness among native and non-native speakers of English. *Language Learning and Technology* (2), 59–81.

Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., & Kasper, G. (1989). *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Alblex.

Blum-Kulka, S, Olshtain, E. (1984). Requests and apologies: a cross cultural study of speech act realization patterns. *Applied Linguistics 5*, 196–213.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Chen, E. (2006). The development of e-mail literacy: From writing to peers to writing to authority figures. *Language Learning & Technology 10 (2)*, 35–55.

Clarke, M. (2009). The discursive construction of interpersonal relations in an online community of practice. *Journal of Pragmatics 41*, 2333–2344.

Economidou-Kogetsidis, M. (2011). “Please answer me as soon as possible”: Pragmatic

failure in non-native speakers' e-mail requests to faculty. *Journal of Pragmatics (43)*, 3193–3215.

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interactional ritual: Essays on face-to-face behaviors*. Garden city, New York: Anchor Books.

Guiller, J & Durndell, A. (2006). 'I totally agree with you': gender interactions in educational online discussion groups. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning 22*, 368–381.

Haugh, M. (2007). The discursive challenge to politeness theory: An interactional alternative. *Journal of Politeness Research 3 (2)*, 295–317.

Haugh, M. (2010). When is an email really offensive? Argumentativity and variability in evaluations of impoliteness. *Journal of Politeness Research 6*, 7–31.

Li, M. (2012). Politeness strategies in wiki-mediated communication of EFL collaborative writing tasks. *International Association for Language Learning Technology Journal 42 (2)*, 1–26.

Locher, M (2006). Polite behaviour within relational work: the discursive approach to politeness. *Multilingua 25 (3)*, 249–267.

Locher, M and Watts, R (2005). Politeness theory and relational work. *Journal of Politeness Research 1 (1)*, 9–34.

Morand, D. A., & Ocker, R. J. (2003). *Politeness theory and computer-mediated communication: A sociolinguistic approach to analyzing relational messages*. Proceedings of the 36th Hawaii international conference on system sciences (HICSS-36). vol. 42 (2).

Schallert, D. L., Chiang, Y. V., Park, Y., Jordan, M., Lee, H., Cheng, A. J., Chu, H. R., Lee, S., Kim, T., Song, K. (2009). Being polite while fulfilling different discourse functions in onilne classroom discussions. *Computers and Education 53 (3)*, 713–725.

Spencer-Oatey, H. (2005). (Im)Politeness, face and perceptions of rapport: Unpackaging their bases and interrelationships. *Journal of Politeness Research 1 (1)*, 95–120.

Vinagre, M. (2008). Politeness strategies in collaborative e-mail exchanges. *Computers & Education 50*, 1022–1036.