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## ***EXPLICIT TEACHING OF THE PRAGMATIC CONCEPT OF FACE***

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### **Abstract**

*Is the concept of face worth mentioning to our students? Do they realize the power words carry? Is politeness something that still needs to be taught? It is the purpose of my paper to look at ways in which such pragmatic concepts as face and politeness are crucial to our students' awareness concerning these issues.*

**Key-words:** face, politeness strategies, positive politeness, negative politeness

### **Introduction**

This is the second article of the series devoted to the development of our students' (business) pragmatic competence. In my previous article I accounted for the importance of explicit teaching of pragmatic concepts in the English classroom with a view to developing oral business communication skills.

Some of the first concepts that students should be explicitly taught about are those of **face** and **politeness**. Why we should raise their awareness as to the existence and importance of these concepts, how they will actually benefit from it, and how we should go about explaining them is what I intend to show in the present article.

As a matter of fact, the concept of face caught my attention a few times in the course of the years as I came across it in some business English textbooks. For example, when teaching meetings I asked students to answer the following questions “How can you avoid upsetting people you disagree with? How important is it in your culture for people to “**save face**”. Out of roughly 300 students not more than 20 students had a vague idea and associated, intuitively, face with self-image, saving/losing face with saving/losing your image, but when it came to actually explaining how and why you can lose it, save it or threaten it, they were, predictably, not able to answer. They also had no idea as to the relevance of the concept in Romanian culture or for their own social interactions. The fact that business students have not heard of the concept of “face” is something to be expected, as this is a pragmatic concept and only language students study it as part of the curriculum.

Politeness, on the other hand, is a concept that we have been raised with in our culture and everybody uses, to a greater or lesser extent, politeness strategies in their lives. However, as far as applying these in English, I think that students either underuse or overuse them, without finding the right balance a native speaker would possess. And this is primarily “due to lack of pragmatic awareness towards the specific norms of a particular cultural and institutional context.” (Romina Ariana Marazita, p3)<sup>1</sup> but also because how politeness is actually linguistically achieved is not sufficiently and consistently dealt with and built in the material and the activities used in the classroom. Relying on their first language knowledge leads to, as far as I have noticed, the phenomenon mentioned above.

### **Introducing the concepts of face and politeness**

I would like to draw attention to the fact that language is often taken for granted, especially our first language but also, as far as I am concerned, the second language, which, in this case is English. Students are not aware of how powerful language is, in fact, its powers are left unexamined except where serious problems with it arise – misunderstandings, misuse. Successful business people, however, do not take language for granted in the difficult and complex world of (business) human interaction. Thus, our goal as teachers of business English

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<sup>1</sup> Romina Ariana Marazita “*The role of negative politeness in requests: the strategies that non-native speakers apply and fail to apply when performing requests*”

should be to guide our students to discover how language functions in business contexts, what they can achieve through language. Moreover, we need to make our students understand that “language is not used exclusively to convey information and achieve concrete goals and objectives relating to the transactional dimension of communication. Language is also used to attain interpersonal goals that relate to the interactional (or relational) dimension of communication”<sup>2</sup>.

When teaching business English, I consider that teachers mostly dwell on the transactional dimension of communication, we learn and we teach that language is used for a purpose, and we give less attention to the “interactional speech” that is aimed specifically at building rapport in order to promote “an agreeable and positive relationship”<sup>3</sup>.

One more aspect should be emphasized here, the fact that we prepare our students for an international setting in which English is the lingua franca and, “particularly in intercultural settings, interactional speech can act as a facilitator for transactional speech as it puts into operation the benevolence principle whereby eventual understanding failures are more likely to be interpreted as errors rather than offenses. Creating satisfactory interpersonal rapport would therefore seem to be particularly important in non-native speakers’ communication event”(Aston 1993:229, cited by Planken, p.14)

And here is where the concepts of face and politeness fit in. Face and politeness are universal communication phenomena, evident in every culture. They can make or break a relationship in social life or a deal in business, because they help build the rapport mentioned above, which is all the more important when it comes to business contexts. Thus by teaching our students explicitly about such concepts as face and politeness, we (could) sensitize them to the deeper levels of language, we develop their critical thinking, we make them more responsible when choosing the words they use, both in their native language and English, we help them to make the appropriate choices when faced with the complex situations of their (future) professional lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Brown and Yule 1983 as cited in Brigitte Planken – “*Face and Identity management in Negotiation*”, 2002

<sup>3</sup> Scollon and Scollon, 2001, idem.

The relation between face and politeness has been greatly researched and heavily debated, some having equated the two (Brown and Levinson), some having concluded that the two should not be equated (Watts, 2003). It is beyond the limits and scope of this paper to give an overview of face and politeness-related literature. I argue, nonetheless, that if we, as teachers of a foreign language, want to develop our students' pragmatic competence, we need to keep ourselves up-to-date with the developments in the field of pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Further on, we need to operate a selection of the concepts and ideas that would benefit our students and also find ways of translating them so that we do not burden them with too much information.

Students do not need to know about Ervin Goffman, Brown and Levinson, Watts, Matsumoto, Ting Toomey, Yule, and many others, nor do they need to be told that face is a fundamental concept in the fields of sociology, sociolinguistics, semantics, politeness theory, psychology, political science, and Face Negotiation Theory and that it has received a myriad of different definitions during the last decades, nor that there has been a much heated debate as to its universality. Nevertheless, they will enjoy hearing that face has been in use as a metaphor in different cultures for a long time, that it is an originally Chinese concept and one of the pillars of Confucianism, a moral, ethical and practical teaching, which is based on the belief in the moral base of human population and is basically a set of instructions telling how to be a good and an honorable person.

They need to find out that it can be associated with the public self-image of a person, that it metaphorically refers to individual qualities and/or abstract entities such as honor, respect, esteem and the self. Face is a universal phenomenon as everyone would like to be respected; everyone needs a sense of self-respect and anyone who does not wish to declare his/her social bankruptcy must show a regard for face: he/she must claim for himself/herself, and must extend to others, some degree of compliance, respect, and deference in order to maintain a minimum level of effective social functioning.

Students will understand even better the association between face and a mask that changes depending on the audience and the variety of social interactions. People strive to maintain the face they have created in social situations. All students can relate to these general ideas. And they should be encouraged to think of situations in their everyday life in which, on

the one hand they change “face” (Is their face the same when dealing with friends/parents/teachers?) and on the other hand, situations in which their “face” is challenged, to think how they can lose, save, maintain and enhance their face or how their face can be threatened when interacting with their colleagues and friends, with their parents, with their teachers. Further on they need to be told that there have been identified two kinds of face: positive and negative. **Positive face** relates to an individual’s desire to be liked and approved by others, to have one’s view heard, and to some extent accepted by others, or at least to have others accept one’s right to hold them. **Negative face** concerns a person’s need to be free from imposition, or to act autonomously, that is to have some degree of freedom of action, within the established constraints of social laws and conventions. As a corollary to these needs, we must draw our students’ attention to the fact that others have the same needs, and therefore, where possible, provide ego-support for others (on the do-as-you-would-be-done-by principle, that we also share in our culture).

Another concept that students should be acquainted with is that of **face threatening act - FTA**, as face is usually at risk in most human interactions, and it is in general in every participant's best interest to maintain each other's face. These FTAs need to be “counterbalanced by appropriate doses of politeness” (Kasper, 1994, p. as cited by Ivo Strecker)<sup>4</sup>. Thus face has been linked to politeness phenomena. The best way to go about explaining this association is through examples, both from everyday life and from business contexts.

There are acts like *promises, apologies, expressing thanks*, even non-verbal acts such as *stumbling, falling down*, which are considered to threaten primarily the speaker’s face, whereas *warnings, criticisms, orders, requests*, etc. are viewed to threaten primarily the hearer’s face.

There are **positive face threats**, in which a speaker threatens the hearer’s positive face by appearing to pay little heed to the hearer’s right to self-esteem:

- (a) acts like *accuse, criticise, disapprove, insult* or *reprimand*;
- (b) acts like *challenge, disagree* or *reject*;

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<sup>4</sup> Strecker, Ivo – “Cultural variations in the concept of face”, <http://www.uni-mainz.de>, accessed 19<sup>th</sup> June 2011

- (c) interruption of a turn, and not giving signs of active listening;
- (d) forgetting the hearer's name, opinions, and so on;
- (e) raising subjects, or speaking in a manner, that would embarrass or annoy the hearer;
- (f) raising subjects, or speaking in a manner, that would divide the others from the hearer, perhaps even isolating him or her from the rest;
- (g) creating an unfriendly, uncooperative atmosphere while the hearer is speaking, or while the hearer is responsible for some part of the event.

There are **negative face threats** in which the hearer's *negative* face is threatened when the speaker intrudes upon his or her freedom of action, restricting it in some way, and thus treating it with disrespect. Negative face-threatening acts include:

- (a) acts like *request* (probably the most face-threatening in its various forms, which can be as severe as *command* or *order*), and *require*, which put pressure on the hearer to do something he or she may not want to do;
- (b) acts like *advise* or *suggest*, which are less strong than *request*, but which nonetheless put pressure on the hearer to take the advice or follow the suggestion;
- (c) acts like *remind*, when they imply that the hearer has forgotten something and is therefore at some degree of (mild) fault, and when they are meant as an indication that the hearer should do something;
- (d) acts like *warn* which, in one sense, imply that the speaker will take action in the future to inhibit the hearer's freedom, as in 'I'm warning...

Since it is seen of mutual interest to save, maintain, or support each other's face, FTAs are either avoided (if possible) or different strategies can be employed to counteract or soften the FTAs.

**Positive politeness strategies**, oriented towards the **positive face** of the hearer, are intended to avoid giving offense by highlighting friendliness. These strategies include juxtaposing criticism with compliments, establishing common ground, and using jokes,

nicknames, honorifics, tag questions, special discourse markers (*please*), and in-group jargon and slang.

- strategies seeking common ground or co-operation, such as in jokes or offers: ‘*Wash your hands, honey*’, ‘*Goodness you cut your hair! By the way I came to borrow...*’, ‘*You are a fantastic host, the party was absolutely great*’, ‘*How about lending me this old heap of junk*’ (hearer’s new car)

- stressing common membership in a group or category ‘*How about a drink?*’, ‘*Hey brother, what’s up?*’ ‘*Honey, can you give me..?*’

**Negative Politeness:** FTA performed with redressive action. Strategies oriented towards negative face of the hearer.

- indirect formulation: ‘*Would you mind washing your hands?*’,

- being pessimistic: ‘*I don’t imagine there’d be any chance of...*’, ‘*You couldn’t give me ... Could you?*’

- ‘*You’re quite right*’, ‘*I’m pretty sure*’, ‘*I rather think you shouldn’t do that*’ (hedging – use of certain words or phrases to soften or weaken the force of what one is saying)

As Culpeper notes (1994: 165, as cited in Layla Marti) 5 “positive facework attempts to provide the pill with a sugar coating; negative facework attempts to soften the blow.”

The strategies mentioned above are employed according to the degree of face threat that a person might encounter or estimate for an act. Students should be challenged to think about the variables that determine the assessment of the amount of face threat:

- relative **power** of the speaker - the greater the (perceived) relative power of hearer over speaker, the more politeness is recommended (relationship student-teacher, employee-boss).
- **social distance** (between the interlocutors) - the greater the social distance between the interlocutors (e.g., if they know each other very little as opposed to being friends or relatives), the more politeness is generally expected.

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5 <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/18143636/POLITENESS-AND-INDIRECTNESS>,

- **rank** (degree of imposition) - the heavier the imposition made on the hearer (the more of their time required, or the greater the favour requested), the more politeness will generally have to be used.

At this stage, students should be given the task to pay attention to the use of words within various situations in their lives and to write down examples that seem to support their observations, in Romanian, and also in English, while observing movies, shows, as they need to see the practical relevance of the concept of face, not just as a theoretical construct.

Having raised students' awareness as to the existence and relevance of the concepts of face and politeness, teachers should apply them to all the business communication contexts that will be studied in class and that students will certainly come across in their professional life and even before graduation: job interviews, oral business presentations, meetings and negotiations.

To discuss extensively how the concepts we have introduced can be applied to all these business contexts is beyond the scope of the present article, however I will just briefly point out some of the ways in which face and politeness can be exploited in relation to the above mentioned situations.

All the guidelines that we provide when teaching oral business communication skills can be more deeply discussed with a view to facework and politeness strategies. Thus, with **oral business presentations**, we can elicit from students how being prepared, how body language and eye-contact with the audience, how adapting content to the audience, explaining the policy on questions in the introductory part or how dealing with interruptions or interrupting are all challenging and relate to the presenter's face and also to the listeners' face.

As far as **job interviews** are concerned, we can discuss how the application file can enhance or threaten the applicant's professional face, how the questions that the interviewee might be asked can challenge his/her face and how to react to face-threatening acts. When teaching **meetings**, we have to show our students how facework strategies are at play at every phase, starting from the chairperson's opening lines to him/her drawing the conclusions. When introducing (through the various activities and tasks that are available in our textbooks) the functions necessary to engage in the meeting (asking for and giving opinions, agreeing and disagreeing, interrupting, balancing an argument, making suggestions, accepting and rejecting



suggestions, etc) we could discuss how face-threatening they are and why, how to redress face threats, how to save face, and eventually how to develop relationships within the constraints of office, company life. As for **negotiations**, they represent a social activity which ranges from such examples as discussion of the daily distribution of work within an office, through an inter-firm disagreement over an ambiguous contractual detail, to organising a massive sales campaign aimed at an overseas market. Every negotiation is constituted of language and is a set of social behaviours enacted within the domain of language. Every utterance made and every text written within a negotiation is an act with repercussions on the outcome. Therefore it is important for students to realize that to recognise the power of language and to understand its potentialities as a negotiating instrument is of utmost importance for negotiators. How to achieve a win-win situation and to reach a satisfactory settlement through the various stages of a negotiation, and to be able to bargain, and make concessions by using the appropriate face-saving and face-giving strategies is what we need to sensitise our students to.

### **Conclusion**

A fuller awareness of how language functions in communication can lead to several useful outcomes: in general terms it allows for greater creativity at both personal and institutional levels, and in specific terms it improves the quality of a participant's contributions to a business encounter. Competence in business communication skills cannot be achieved just by following a list of rules and guidelines, but rather it comes about when people acquire sensitivity to the factors in language that affect those communication encounters, among which face, face work and politeness play an immense role, and also when they develop a personal repertoire of skills based on this sensitivity, and can adapt those skills in a flexible manner to suit the needs of a business encounter. The process to be undergone begins in acquiring cognitive awareness and continues by self-monitoring, and skilled practice. (adapted from Mullholland "The Language of negotiation")

I hope I have managed to bring sufficient arguments in favour of the explicit teaching of the pragmatic concepts of face and politeness. I am well aware that there are many other aspects that I have left aside, such as the importance of culture and the cultural variations of the concepts introduced, or the explicit linguistic realization of politeness.

However, how these concepts can shape our approach to teaching oral business communication skills will be dealt with extensively in further articles. I also intend to apply the guidelines suggested in the present article with my students and then carry out research to see how much they actually understand and apply through various role-plays and simulations.

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