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Politeness and Requests via Email

Juan David Rodriguez Rios
National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies

Abstract: *This paper studies communication patterns, with a focus on the dynamics of making requests. The author approaches the study from the perspective of cultural dimensions (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) while using his own experience as a postgraduate student in an international setting. The relationship between politeness and directness is analyzed in communications with counterparts from different regions (Latin American countries and Japan) whose status is higher than that of the author.*

Introduction

Making requests is an everyday practice, yet it is one of the most complex social interactions. As social beings with limitations proper of the human condition, persons find it necessary to require either the active (i.e., asking the other to do something for you) or passive (i.e., asking for approval or permission) help of others. As well, the advancement of technology and the every time more extensive use of electronic means to perform both personal and professional activities have derived in the fact that nowadays communication via email is one of the most common means of interaction among people.

This paper intends to synthesize the issues of politeness in requests and communication via email. In the following section the analytical framework is presented, which is composed of studies on the relationship between politeness and requests, as well as technologically mediated communication. Afterwards, the author provides some examples of emails he has exchanged in the development of its post-graduate research with persons from three different cultures. The objective is to analyze how politeness is expressed in each different case and which cultural factors have incidence in those differences.

Analytical Framework

Much has been written regarding age and SLA (Birdsong, 1999; Marinova-Todd, Marshall, & Snow, 2000; Scovel, 2000; Singleton, 2001) with many researchers making a strong case for critical or sensitive periods for L2 acquisition. With these theories in mind, it is reasonable to ask if university

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-age students in Japan with the aforementioned deficits in English proficiency can be expected to function in an EMI environment.

The issue of politeness in requests has traditionally been associated to the non-directness of the formulation of the demand. Requests are intrinsically threats to the face of the individuals involved: for the person who is being requested it is a threat for his/her *negative face* (i.e. his or her freedom of action), whereas for the requestor the situation might turn out to be a threat for his/her positive face because of a potentially diminished image as a self-sufficient individual, or simply because of the fact of having caused trouble to the counterpart. The utilization of indirect or vague language allows some leeway to the requested person, therefore it is considered to be a strategy for the formulation of politer requests. Leech (as cited in Blum-Kulka, p. 131) indicates that indirectness relates in two ways to politeness: one by giving an opt-out to the requested, and two by diminishing the force or enhancing the tentativeness of the demand. The degree of directness/indirectness of a request can be categorized as proposed by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper in 1989 (as cited in Félix-Brasdefer, 2005, p. 77):

Direct strategies:

Mood derivable: *you, pay the bill*

Performative: *I ask you to pay the bill*

Need/want statement: *I need/want you to pay the bill*

Conventional indirectness

Suggestory formulae: *How about you paying the bill this time?*

Query preparatory: *Could you play the bill this time?*

Non-conventional indirectness

Hints: *I did not bring my wallet today and maybe you have enough money.*

Blum-Kulka (1987) in her study about politeness and request among native speakers of English and Hebrew found that the level of indirectness used or preferred for making request is culturally sensitive and might vary from one language to another. The study results show that the speakers of both languages agree that the most polite strategy is *query preparatory* and the least polite one is *mood derivable*, however the intermediate rankings vary considerably between the languages.

Félix-Brasdefer (2005) analysed the case of indirectness and politeness among Mexican Spanish-language speakers. As for indirectness, Felix-Brasdefer used the scale proposed by Blum-Kulka, whereas for politeness he referred to Scollon and Scollon (2001, cited in Felix-Brasdefer, 2005, p. 68) presented as follows:

Hierarchical politeness system (+Power, +Distance)

A subaltern ask his superior permission to go home early.

Deferential politeness system (-Power, +Distance)

You ask to borrow a pen from an unknown person in a public office.

Solidarity politeness system (-Power, -Distance)

A guy asking his younger brother to arrange the mess in the house's living room.

The findings of the study show that regarding *deferential politeness* situations, the majority of respondents used conventional indirectness strategy, sometimes non-conventional indirectness (particularly when addressing unknown people), and never recurred to non-conventional indirectness. In the case of *hierarchical politeness* the most preferred strategy was conventional indirectness, second was direct strategy, and last was non-conventional indirectness. Last, in the case of *solidarity politeness*, direct strategy is the most fre-

quent, being followed by conventional indirectness and non-conventional indirectness respectively.

The study by Duthler (2006) about politeness through technology-mediated communication compares the cases of messages made via voicemail and email. This study concluded that email allows for the formulation of politer requests as this mean of communication provides greater control over preparation, conformation, edition, and execution of a message.

Cultural Traits

In this section various efforts at EMI will be explored with a view to identifying some of the pitfalls and issues that institutions around the world have faced. The following is a transcript of an exchange between a science teacher and a class taken from Arden-Close (1993) that illustrates some of the frustrations associated with EMI instruction:

For the present study some communications of the author with counterparts from Colombia, Mexico, and Japan were analyzed, therefore it is convenient to take a look to the cultural traits of each country. Figure 1 shows the scores for the three countries in the six cultural dimensions of Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010).

In terms of *power distance*, the highest score is Mexico's with 81, being followed by Colombia with 67, and in third place Japan with 54. In terms of *individualism*, Japan is relatively more individualist that the two Latin American countries among which Colombia has a more marked tendency towards collectivism (scoring only 13 points out of 100 in individualism). Regarding *uncertainty avoidance*, all three countries score high, close to the maximum score of 100. In terms of *pragmatism*, Japan scores considerably high at 88, while Mexico and Colombia score low respectively at 24 and 13. Finally, in terms of *indulgence* Mexicans and Colombians show high marks whereas the Japanese score rather close to the opposite extreme which is *restrain*.

Having made this brief review on cultural traits, the following section will analyze some examples of communications via email with counterparts from Colombia, Mexico, and Japan. These are all messages sent in the development of a research project, and the author attempted to configure the messages in a fashion that would be proper regarding both the culture and the (higher) rank of the receivers. The messages sent to the Colombian and Mexican counterparts were originally written in Spanish, therefore

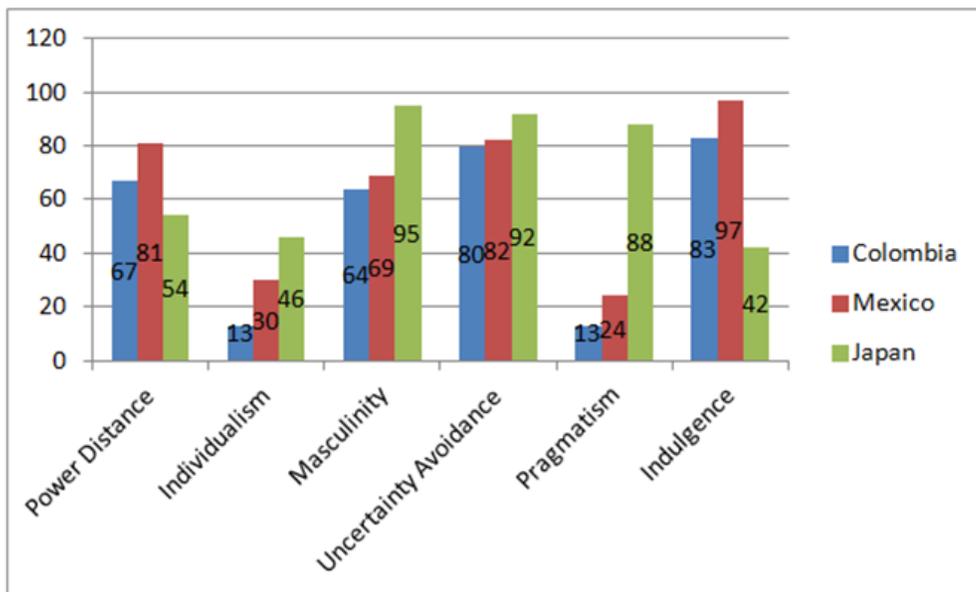


Figure 1. Cultural dimensions: Colombia, Mexico, and Japan. The information for the graph is taken from Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010).

open question such as “how are you?” so that the message can be configured as an actual two-way conversation. At the same time, the closing remark “please take care and let’s keep in touch” denotes politeness, as it shows that the sender of the message has an interest in the receiver’s welfare, and tries to show that the purpose of the message goes beyond the mere fact of making the request. The author relates the characteristics of the message with the cultural traits of (low) pragmatism and (high) indulgence proper of the Colombian culture.

a translation in English language is provided for this paper.

Cultural Traits

Writing an email to a Colombian counterpart

The following message was directed to a Colombian professor (female) requesting advice and materials for a research project:

16/04/2014

Hello [given name], How have you been? I hope everything goes well.

I want to tell you that since early April I have been assigned to an advisor, and so I am already carrying out research for my thesis.

Kindly, I would like to ask your advice regarding academic literature on free trade agreements of Colombia, as I know that you have been working on that topic and I appreciate your guidance on what sources I can review.

I appreciate your help. Please take care and let’s keep in touch.

Juan David.

This message was configured in a manner that is both polite and warm. Even though the author is addressing a superior, it is ok to greet her with an

Writing an email to a Mexican counterpart

04/06/2014

Dear [given name]:

How are you? I hope everything goes well at work.

Kindly, I write to you in order to ask the contact details of the Director of “Company X”, who you mentioned in our previous conversation.

Once again, I thank you for your kind attention.

Cordially,

Juan David Rodriguez Rios

The analysis of this message is similar to the one of the message directed to a Colombian counterpart. The greeting includes an open question and has a friendly tone. However the message is shorter as the distance (i.e. familiarity) between the sender and the recipient is not so close to enter into many niceties. The request strategy used in this case is *directness*, which allows the message to be clear and short.

Writing an email to a Japanese counterpart

04/07/2014

Dear Professor [family name]:

I hope you are doing fine during this week.

Attentively, I would like to ask your time availability for next week, for consultations on my research and paper for the IR concentration.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Cordially,

Juan David Rodriguez Rios

In this case the message is plain and short. It does not include an open question as it does not intend to sound conversational to the receiver. The politeness is added to the message in the formulation of the request by *conventional indirect* strategy and by thanking the receiver at the closing.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explore the issues surrounding English as a medium of instruction in higher education institution contexts. As much as possible the ideas in this paper have been based on actual research and case studies from tertiary institutions around the world. There is still very little research in the area of EMI in HEI contexts, and, therefore, any institution considering adopting this approach should consider carefully its reasons for doing so, its goals, and its available resources.

The issues of politeness and directness in re-

quests made via email are addressed in this brief study. The author compared the cultural traits of the culture to which his counterparts in communications belong, and exposes some examples of communications via email which were tailored to fit those cultural features. The author found that in communications with Spanish-speaking Latino American counterparts the communication tends to be more conversational and show elements of closeness, in spite of the power distance that might exist between the interlocutors. With the Japanese counterpart, the communications was polite though rather restrained and direct.

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About the author: Juan David Rodriguez-Rios is currently a PhD student in International Relations (Security and International Studies Program) at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies–GRIPS. He holds an M.A. degree in Public Policy from GRIPS and a B.A. in International Business from Universidad EAFIT (Colombia). His research interests have revolved around the areas of international relations, international business, and inter-cultural management. Currently his study focuses on the dynamics of economic integration between Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region.