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Articles

**Wrongful Moves in Unfamiliar Meaning Spaces: Gesture Usage and Implications for
Cross-Cultural Gestural-Pragmatic Failure** 7

Bruce Miller

Narrative Similarities in Detective Fiction 19

Jeroen Bode

**A Tentative Classification of Rhetoric in Japanese Linguistic Expressions
in Advertising Contexts** 25

Tetsuji Tosa

A Journey to the American Dream: Okinawan Family Histories in the New World 30

Norman Fewell

Language Learning and Teaching

Explicit Politeness: Language Instructors' Attitudes in Comparative Perspectives 36

Kiyomi Fujii and Etsuko Inoguchi

**Capitalizing on the Strengths and Complementing the Weaknesses of Native and Non-Native English
Speaking Teachers** 46

Takaaki Hiratsuka

**Recent Innovations and Improvements to Feedback and Collaboration Options for English as a Foreign
Language Courses** 54

George Robert MacLean

Preparing Students for a Debate Festival 65

David Kluge

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Teaching Politeness: Language Instructors' Attitudes in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract: *This study reports on the differences between ESL/EFL teachers and JSL/JFL teachers' teaching of politeness and politeness expressions. The authors of the present study investigated how JSL/JFL and EFL/ESL teachers teach 'politeness,' and their respective attitudes toward teaching politeness. The data were collected through a questionnaire. The results indicate that JSL/JFL teachers exhibit a high awareness of politeness usage and explicitly incorporate cultural aspects when teaching linguistic structures. On the other hand, ESL/EFL teachers tend to focus more on content rather than explicit teaching of politeness expression, even though they are aware of its importance. Based on preliminary research, the authors conducted further research that included classroom observation and interviews with the participants. The results show that teachers' respective backgrounds affect the classroom instruction as well as expectations of student performance. Finally, questions of how language teachers can address the issue of politeness and enhance their pedagogic approach will be discussed.*

Note: This paper was presented at The 17th Conference of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics (PAAL), Wenjin Hotel, Beijing, China, August 23, 2012.

Introduction

Instruction in politeness was one of the things that caught the authors' attention about English pedagogy in Japan. To be specific, our own English study experiences and observation of English teaching in Japan since returning to Japan led us to believe that politeness instruction is not explicitly provided in textbooks. This raised the question of how English textbooks deal with politeness compared to Japanese language textbooks. In an analysis of English language textbooks, Arai (2005) found that although English (ESL/EFL) textbooks published in Japan have slightly more content than those published in the US or the UK, politeness strategies were not introduced as a textbook topic. Arai suggested that textbooks should pay more attention to politeness strategies and explicitly include politeness strategies as a topic. Oyama, Morikawa, and Johnson (2009) found that Japanese EFL/ESL learners, while conscious of the need to use politeness strategies, do not know how to express higher levels of politeness. However, the acquisition of politeness is quite difficult for JSL/JFL learners and

requires increasing sociocultural competence. For the above reasons, the present study will also discuss questions of how language teachers can address this issue and enhance their pedagogic approach.

Politeness

There are many ways to show politeness, including non-verbal behavior, such as bowing, and verbal behavior, such as tone of voice, pausing, speech rate, and language expressions. There is also the consideration of social customs. Each society and culture has a different way of showing politeness.

Brown and Levinson (1978) suggest that politeness revolves around the concept of *face*, which is "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (p. 61). Positive face is the desire to gain the approval of others and negative face is the desire to be unimpeded by others in one's actions. Brown and Levinson proposed that politeness is the addresser's strategy for minimizing or redressing "face threatening acts" (FTAs) in order to save the "face" of the addressee. Politeness strategies, then, consist of linguistic forms used in order to protect another's "face." Therefore, positive politeness leads to moves to achieve solidarity through offers of friendship, the use of compliments, and informal language use. Negative politeness leads to deference, apologizing, indirectness, and formality in lan-

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guage use.

Quantitative research by Hill, Ide, Ikuta, Kawasaki, and Ogino (1986), which investigated cross-cultural socio-linguistic rules of politeness indicates that longer sentences are considered more polite in both American English and Japanese. They also provided three measures in their study of Japanese and Americans students: information about linguistic rules of politeness, social rules of behavior based on “discernment, wakimae” (Hill et al., 1986, p. 347) and “the relative frequency with which specific request forms are used toward specific categories of addressee in typical situations” (Hill et al., 1986, p. 354). The results show that when Japanese people use polite forms to certain addressees, specific linguistic forms are used in strong agreement. In other words, discernment is obligatory and volition is optional for the Japanese. However, for American English, “the factors of addressee status and (typical) situation define a very broad range of politeness” (Hill et al., 1986, p. 362). Therefore, volition is obligatory, and discernment is obligatory as well, but it is not primary.

Japanese honorifics and politeness pose one of the greatest challenges for learners of Japanese. Because of this, much research has been conducted in the area of politeness in language teaching, especially featuring learners of Japanese and politeness expressions including honorifics and socio-cultural competences. A number of studies illustrate the difficulty of sociolinguistic and sociocultural feature acquisition in a classroom environment (Tateyama, 2001). JSL/JFL textbooks teach politeness strategies explicitly. Nevertheless, the acquisition of pragmatic competency has proved difficult even with explicit instruction (Cook, 2001).

Methodology

Participants

Ten English teachers who were born and raised in the US, and ten Japanese teachers who were born and raised in Japan participated in this study. All of the English teachers are native speakers of English, while Japanese teachers are native speakers of Japanese. The ages of the participants range from early thirties to early fifties, and the time they spent in English-speaking countries, or in Japan, varies from person to person. All the participants teach at the college level.

Table 1. *Participants Profile*

	ESL/EFL Teachers	JSL/JFL Teachers
# of participants	10	10
Age range	20's – 50's	30's – 40's
Years spent in Japan	1-20	20-31
Years spent abroad	22-30	4-25
Teaching affiliation	college level	college level

Note: Some teachers lived in other countries including the U.S.

Materials

The participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire (Appendix A). The questionnaire is based on a study that examined the concept of politeness in American and Japanese cultures (Kato, 1998), but tailored for our research. The questionnaire was used to collect three kinds of information: Section 1 asked for participants' background information, and sections 2 and 3 contained questions regarding teaching politeness, including a direct question of whether they explicitly teach ‘politeness’ in class. Furthermore, the participants were asked to write what kind of expressions they would teach in certain situations where negative or positive politeness was required. The participants were asked to list any linguistic or cultural information they would provide to the class in order to teach the expressions. Additionally, they were asked to participate in a follow-up interview.

Results

Positive and Negative Politeness

The questionnaires showed that both ESL teachers and JSL teachers hold similar views toward teaching cultural aspects of their target language. In the following examples, (1) indicates what expressions each teacher answered he or she would teach in the given situation, and (2) shows what linguistic and/or cultural instructions he or she would provide when teaching about these situations (Table 2).

Table 2. *Participant Answers*

Situation 1) What students should say 2) Instructions to provide students with

Question 1:

1. A student wants to borrow a book from a teacher (professor).

- EN: 1) 'May I borrow a book from you?'
 'Would you mind if I borrowed your book?'
 2) 'Use expressions such as would you mind..., Could I ..., or Can I...?'
 JP: 1) 'Sensee, sumimasen ga, hon o kashite itadakemasu ka.'
 'Hono wo karitemo ii deshoo ka.'
 2) 'It is better to add a reason for the request.'

2. A teacher invited the entire class to a concert, but one student cannot attend.

- EN: 1) 'I'm sorry, but I'm busy so I cannot attend.'
 'I apologize. I cannot go to the concert tonight because of ...'
 2) 'It would be worthwhile to stress that a reason why the student cannot attend is appropriate albeit a detailed reason is not needed.'

JP: 1) 'Sekkaku sasotte itadaita ndesu ga, konkai wa ikesoo ni arimasen.'

- 'Sumimasen ga, chotto yooji ga arimashite.'
 2) 'In Japanese, you leave the sentence ending vague when you have to say something not convenient for you.'
 'It is better to tell a reason and show willingness to come next time.'

3. A teacher compliments a student ('I love your dress!', or 'You speak English so well!') and the student needs to reply.

- EN: 1) 'Thank you!'
 'Thank you very much, Dr. Smith. I have been practicing my English conversation skills.'
 2) 'I will explain that it's OK to accept a compliment in western culture and one shouldn't be embarrassed or deny it. Instead, just say 'Thank you' and return a compliment if possible.'

- JP: 1) 'Ieie, madamada desu.'
 'E?' Hontoo desu ka. Arigatoo gozaimasu.'
 2) 'It is better to show hedges'

4. A student forgot to bring his or her homework and informs the teacher.

- EN: 1) I'm sorry, I forgot my homework.
 2) 'Explain it is highly irritating when students respond with nothing but silence. Tell them it's best just to speak up quickly and apologize if they are remiss.'
 JP: 1) 'Sumimasen ga, syukudai o wasurete shimaimashita.'
 Kondo kara ki o tsukemasu.
 2) 'You can demonstrate your feeling of regret by using the expression 'te shimau'.'

5. A student is 15 minutes late to class.

- EN: 1) 'I'm sorry I'm late'.
 2) 'Explain to all of the class, then remind students if necessary.'
 JP: 1) 'Sensee. Okurete sumimasen.'
 2) 'It is better to tell a reason'.

6. Students' morning greeting for the teacher as he or she enters the classroom

- EN: 1) 'Good morning'
 2) 'The point to make here is that it would be rude NOT to respond.'
 JP: 1) 'Sensee, ohayoo gozaimasu.'

7. A teacher says something that a student knows to be wrong (e.g., The teacher said that the Grand Canyon is in California).

- EN: 1). 'Excuse me, but I think the Grand Canyon is in Arizona.'
 Excuse me, but don't you mean Arizona?'
 2) 'It's OK to politely correct a teacher if they are flagrantly wrong about a factual point. Also teach rising intonation on point of error.'
 'It'd be important to work on tone of voice, and delivery so that they don't seem rude.'

JP: 1) ‘Sensee, Biwako wa tashika Shiga-ken ni aru to omou ndesu ga...

Sore wa Shiga-ken dewa arimaen ka.’

2) ‘You can express politeness by using expressions such as tashika, or to omoimasu ga.

8. A student wants to drop the class, but the teacher tries to convince the student to continue. How should the student reply to the teacher?

EN: 1) ‘Thank you for your concern. I will think about it.’

2) In this case, how to make an argument.

JP: 1) ‘Sensee no okotoba wa ureshii desu ga, ...shi, ...shi, ...node yappari tsudukeru no wa muzukashii desu.’

‘Dekireba sooshitai desu ga, yappari senmon no benkyoo ni sennen shitai to omoimasu.’

2) ‘It is better to keep a good relationship with your teacher by accepting the teacher’s opinion first and then state your own opinion.’

9. A student greeting when s/he sees a teacher outside of school (e.g., at a shopping mall).

EN: 1) ‘Hello!’

2) Outside of the classroom, any attempt to speak English is appreciated and may be more casual.

JP: 1) ‘Sensee, konnichiwa. Guuzen desu ne.’

When teaching a request form, JSL/JFL teachers answered that they would teach “te itadakemasen ka,” using a negative politeness strategy. On the other hand, ESL/EFL teachers suggested the use of “may/could I” or “would you mind if,” indicating that they distinguish the forms depending on the burden of the request itself. Japanese teachers exhibit more standardization with their use of “teitadakaku,” since the status difference (e.g., teacher-student) is the most important factor in making a request. This is in line with the findings of Hill et al. (1986), which posit that in the U.S. the burden of the request determines which form to use, whereas social relationship is the primary factor in Japan.

Certain situations, however, require positive politeness, such as students greeting a teacher, or establishing rapport with the teacher. When a student responds to a teacher’s compliment, such as, “your

dress is so nice,” or “you speak English/Japanese very well,” JSL/JFL teachers answered that the students should negate the compliment, whereas ESL/EFL teachers answered that it was acceptable to acknowledge it. Additionally, several ESL/EFL teachers commented that it was more polite to talk about the item that is complimented.

Responding to Students’ Greetings

JSL/JFL teachers focus on the rigid teacher-student relationship and believe that it is important to teach Japanese customs in order for students to adapt to Japanese culture, whereas ESL/EFL teachers’ answers varied. Some ESL/EFL teachers commented that they would make clear that even in the US a hierarchical teacher-student relationship does exist, along with the requisite rules. Some noted that use of the first name is acceptable in class, because it indicates that students take the initiative to communicate and want to create a better class atmosphere. The use of “konnichiwa” in an e-mail message did bother JSL/JFL teachers, but three participants said that they would not correct it, because the time lag makes such corrective feedback impractical. ESL/EFL teachers answered that due to the informal nature of the e-mail, with the delivery of the message being most important, they were not bothered by the use of “Hi!” These teachers stressed maintaining a good relationship with students rather than correcting them, which indicates ESL/EFL teachers’ wanting to save the students’ “face.”

Teaching Politeness in Class

Five out of 10 ESL/EFL teachers said that they do not teach politeness, since they teach content rather than etiquette (Table 3). One ESL/EFL teacher noted that if s/he were to teach business English, s/he would emphasize the importance of polite usage. JSL/JFL teachers answered unanimously that they teach politeness in all classes at all levels, but especially, at the advanced levels.

Table 3. *Teaching Politeness in Class*

Response	ESL/EFL Teachers	JSL/JFL Teachers
Agree	4	10
Disagree	5	0
Other	1	0

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that ESL/EFL teachers should explicitly incorporate ideas of politeness into their curriculum. Because politeness strategies are difficult to convey without explicit instruction, and because English teachers rarely teach politeness outside of business English, Japanese students lack the opportunity to talk politely with English speakers. It follows that they may encounter difficulties communicating in English-speaking countries. We submit that teaching politeness strategies—positive and negative—would prove effective for Japanese speakers, who are generally exposed to a limited amount of politeness instruction (usually of the positive variety) in the classroom.

Because this is a pilot study, the amount of data collected was relatively small, and focused only on native speakers of English and Japanese. For further research, the study should be expanded to include instructors who are non-native speakers of ESL/EFL and JSL/JFL.

Other factors also need to be considered when researching honorifics and politeness, for example, gender. Many studies have been conducted which show the differences between women's and men's speech (Ide, 1982, 1997, 1999; Ide & Yoshida, 1999; Shibamoto, 1985). Other studies likewise show that usage of honorific forms differs depending on the individuals, time, and context (Okamoto, 1997, 2004). It follows that individual differences also need to be considered. Cultural background and teaching philosophy are different for each teacher. Furthermore, how sensitive or aware teachers are to teaching politeness plays an important role in their approach.

There have been few studies done on how teachers introduce politeness in class in regards to ESL/EFL and JSL/JFL. More quantitative and qualitative research needs to be conducted, especially in the area of acquisition of pragmatic competence. We hope our study will prompt further research dealing with politeness, especially in ESL/EFL contexts.

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Part II: How will you respond in the following situations?

Suppose that you are at school. Your student comes up to you, calling you by your first name (e.g., Yumiko!/Ben!) How would you respond?

- I would not correct the student for using my first name.
- I would immediately correct the student for using my first name.
- I would correct the student for using my first name later.

2) Regarding the previous question (#1), please briefly explain the reason for your answer.

Your student sent you the following **e-mail**. How would you respond to the message?

Message:

Hi! Will you be in your office at 1pm today? Can I drop by?
Yoshi

- I would not correct the student for his usage of “Hi!”
- I would correct the student for his usage of “Hi!” either by reply message or in face-to-face encounter.

4) Regarding the previous question (#3), please briefly explain the reason for your answer.

Part III: Questions regarding how you teach in class

Suppose that you are teaching a conversation class. How would you approach teaching the following situations to your students? Please write what expressions you would introduce for the scenarios below, and how you would teach them. If you provide your students with some cultural explanations, please include those as well.

1-1) A student wants to borrow a book from a teacher (professor).

Expression: _____

How to teach: _____

1-2) A teacher invited the entire class to a concert, but one student cannot attend.

Expression: _____

How to teach: _____

1-3) A teacher complements a student ('I love your dress!', or 'You speak English so well!') and the student needs to reply.

Expression: _____

How to teach: _____

1-4) A student forgot to bring his or her homework and informs the teacher.

Expression: _____

How to teach: _____

1-5) A student is 15 minutes late to class.

Expression: _____

How to teach: _____

1-6) Students' morning greeting for the teacher as he or she enters the classroom

Expression: _____

How to teach: _____

1-7) A teacher says something that a student knows to be wrong (e.g., The teacher said that the Grand Canyon is in California).

Expression: _____

How to teach: _____

1-8) A student wants to drop the class, but the teacher tries to convince the student to continue. How should the student reply to the teacher?

Expression: _____

How to teach: _____

1-9) A student greet when s/he sees a teacher outside of school (e.g., at a shopping mall).

Expression: _____

How to teach: _____

Part IV: Questions on politeness

1) Do you explicitly teach how to 'speak politely' in English in your class?

Yes (Please skip #2 and #3 and continue to #4)

No (Please skip #4)

If Yes, why? (Select all that apply)

Because it is important.

Because it is taught in the textbook I use(d).

Other (Please explain):

3) If Yes, what do you think is the most important thing to speak polite English?

4) If No, why do you not teach it?

I do not think it is important.

I think it is important but I do not know how to teach it.

I do not think we need to teach how to 'speak politely' in English.

Other (Please explain):
