

# *Politeness Principle and Its Application in Efl Speaking Class*

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**Abstract:** Politeness is an important symbol of human civilization, maintaining human social relations, coordinates people's communication behaviors, and playing a large part in avoiding conflicts in interpersonal communication. Politeness Principle is a basic rule in human communication, with the ultimate goal to achieve smooth communication. The application of Politeness Principle into EFL speaking class can improve students' speaking ability and intercultural communication competence which has certain practical significance.

## **1. Introduction**

College English teaching in China has been regarded as a knowledge subject for a long time. In College English class, the greater importance has always been attached to language form, such as grammar, vocabulary and so on. The ultimate goal of learning a foreign language which is to use it in real communication has been neglected by both teachers and students. In this globalized world, English, as a primary language in international activities such as business, trade, and cultural exchanges, have put forward higher requirements for college students' English listening and speaking skills. In China, however, English speaking class has been criticized for a long time due to its a single teaching mode and low efficiency. With the increasing demand for comprehensive English talents, it is universally acknowledged that the reform of English speaking class is desirable in China.

Politeness is not a natural phenomenon, but a result of interactions between people and culture. Politeness is a kind of tacit agreement, a rule people abide by subconsciously or subconsciously in human communication. As a common phenomenon of human civilization, politeness exists widely in the real life of human beings. It is an important symbol of human civilization, and a bond connecting various social activities conducted by human beings. From a broader perspective, politeness maintains human social relations, coordinates people's communication behaviors, and plays an important part in avoiding conflicts in interpersonal communication. To a great extent, the success of language communication depends on whether people can choose appropriate polite language. Therefore, integrating the Politeness Principle into EFL speaking class can improve students' speaking ability, and intercultural communication competence, which has certain practical significance.

## 2. Politeness Principle

In 1967, the American linguistic philosopher Grice gave three lectures at Harvard University. Some parts of the lectures were published in 1975. Grice stated that participants in a conversation do not use a success of disconnected remarks as they have a common purpose, that is, both sides can understand each other and cooperate together [1]. To achieve this common goal, people will abide by some basic principles claimed as “Cooperative Principle” (CP) by Grice (1975) in the article “Logic and Conversation”, which is the assumption that participants in a conversation normally attempted to be informative, truthful, relevant and clear. Gricean cooperative principle did not explain why the principles were necessary and why speakers often failed to follow the cooperative principle in communication, and how the listener inferred the implied meaning from the conversation. To further explain these phenomena, scholars such as Lakoff, Leech, Brown and Levinson put forward Politeness Principle (PP), a useful complement to Cooperation Principle.

The early research in politeness principle mainly took speech act as a theoretical basis, looking for politeness principles which could be universally applied. While examining how linguistic politeness worked in conversations, Lakoff proposed two basic rules of Politeness Principle: be clear (equivalent to Gricean Cooperative Principle) and be polite. He claimed that “where the two rules conflict, the second one overrides the first one: avoiding offense is a greater concern in conversation than the achievement of clarity” [2] (Lakoff, 1973). There are three sub-rules in Politeness Principle: don’t impose, give options, make the addressee feel good---be friendly[2] (Lakoff, 1973). According to Maricic, Lakoff’s rules of politeness is associated with the effects they produce, “don’t impose” is about distance, “give options” is about deference, “make the addressee feel good” is camaraderie [3] (2005). The first rule requires that speakers avoid intrusion upon others’ personal affairs or at least ask permission before doing so. The second rule is to empower the addressee. The third rule is to make the the addressee feel good by producing a feeling of humanity, and implying friendship.

Another scholar contributing a lot to politeness theory is a British scholar, Leech, who in 1983 published the book “Principles of Pragmatics”, in which he proposed six politeness maxims similar to the rules formulated by Grice, namely Tact Maxim, Generosity Maxim, Approbation Maxim, Modesty Maxim, Agreement Maxim and Sympathy Maxim. According to Leech, “the politeness principle is minimizing (other things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs, and there is a corresponding positive version (maximizing the expression of polite beliefs) which is somewhat important less important” [4] (1983). Politeness Principle explains how to produce and understand language based on politeness, aiming to establish feeling of community and social relationship.

Brown and Levinson (B & L) [5] [6] (1978, 1987) studied politeness theory based on Goffman’s (1955, 1967) “face” theory. Corresponding to the two kinds of faces, a positive face and a negative face, B & L claimed that “politeness can be positive and negative. Positive politeness is about what can be communicated to satisfy the needs of positive face, whereas negative politeness can be expressed to to save the interlocutor’s face negatively or positively and can be expressed by fulfilling the requirements of the negative face by the way of showing respect to the addressee and bearing in mind that his rights must be respected an not to be imposed on” [5] (1978). They further introduced a taxonomy of politeness strategies: bald on-record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and off-record strategy. For speakers, they should take account of the social factors to protect interlocutor’s face in social communication.

When it comes to the 1990s, the research into the politeness principle has been broadened and deepened. Fraser (1990) studied politeness from the perspective of social culture. He attached greater importance to social norms, the construction of participants. Fraser claimed that “briefly stated, the sociocultural view assumes that each society has a particular set of social norms

consisting of more or less explicit rules that prescribe a certain behavior, a state of affairs, or a way of thinking in context. A positive evaluation (politeness) arises when an action is in congruence with the norm, a negative evaluation (impoliteness) when action is to the contrary" [7] (1990: 220). From this point of view, politeness contains concepts such as "good manners", "social etiquette", "social graces", and so on. Politeness is a social etiquette, and impoliteness is against social etiquette.

The most important work on politeness theory in recent years is done by Richard Watts, who breaks away from the limitations of current models and claims that the politeness theory should be around commonsense notions of what politeness and impoliteness are. He considered that PP proposed by B&L were not revolved around politeness theory, but reducing face-threatening acts theory. Watts posited a taxonomy of politeness, first-order politeness and second-order politeness. First-order politeness similar to the social norm view of politeness connects with commonsense notions of politeness. Second-order politeness is a theoretical construct within a theory of social behavior and language usage. Watts's theory runs counter to the predictive and explanatory politeness B & L introduced. Its goal is to investigate why interlocutors consider some utterances polite and others impolite.

Since the disciplinary status of pragmatics was only recognized internationally in the 1970s, the politeness principle within the scope of pragmatics research has not attracted sufficient attention in China for a long time. The study of politeness principle by Chinese scholars mainly revolves around the discussion and revision of politeness theories proposed by Leech and B & L.

In China, scholars (Liu Runqing, 1987, 2006, 2014; He Ziran, 1988) [8] introduced in detail politeness principle, features of politeness principle, the relationship between politeness principle and cooperative principle. Based on the principle that the macroscopic phenomenon is the result of the integration of the relationships among its various subsystems, Xu Shengheng (1992) claimed that the use of polite language in verbal communication was associated with speakers, hearers, and the third party, none of whom could be neglected. Gu Nueguo (1992) discussed the relationship among politeness, pragmatics and culture. Based on Leech's politeness principle, taking into account of the characteristics of Chinese language and culture, he proposed the politeness principles in Chinese language: 1. Maxim of lowering oneself and respecting others; 2. Maxim of salutation; 3. Maxim of atticism; 4. Maxim of seek common ground; 5. Maxim of morality, language and action. It is worth noting that although the use of euphemism and atticism is a universal polite feature in any culture, it did not attract the attention of Western scholars at that time. The introduction of atticism into politeness principle contributes to the theory. Qian Guanlian (1997) stated in "Pragmatics in Chinese Culture" that the principle of politeness alone could not make up for the insufficiency of cooperative principle. He proposed eleven pragmatic strategies adaptable to Chinese culture. Suo Zhenyu (2001), in "A Coursebook in Pragmatics", put forward the concept of "the principle of appropriateness", a more universal concept which could make up for Cooperative Principle. It includes three maxims: the maxim of politeness, the maxim of humor, and the maxim of restraint. The relationship between the principle of appropriateness and CP is cooperative and complementary. CP applies to straightforward verbal communication whereas the principle of appropriateness applies to obscure verbal communication.

It can be seen from the research status of the politeness principle that theories proposed by Leech and Brown & Levinson are most influential. Many scholars from different countries used these two theories to investigate and describe the politeness in verbal communication in different cultures. But Leech's and Brown & Levinson's theories have their own shortcomings. For example, Leech's PP was an extension of three sub-rules of Lakoff's politeness principles, and it did not consider contextual factor. On the other hand, though Brown & Levinson's politeness theory was detailed and clear, it did not present a clear definition of politeness. Chinese scholar, Sun Ya, pointed out in the book "Introduction to Pragmatics and Cognition" that Leech and Brown & Levinson have

received more or less similar criticism, that is, they are proposed based on the English language and English culture, so it is difficult to fully explain the politeness phenomenon in different language contexts [9].

### 3. The Application of Politeness Principle in English Speaking Class

Politeness Principle is a basic rule in human communication, with the ultimate goal to achieve smooth communication. It contains the notion such as ‘good manner’, ‘social etiquette’ ‘social graces’ and so on. Therefore it requires that the participants of conversations should always adhere to the principle of reducing their own profit and maximizing the other’s profit in the communication [9]. How to properly use polite speech acts in foreign language environment largely determines whether cross-cultural communication can go smoothly. The purpose of speaking class is to cultivate language learners’ speaking ability in real communicative activities. The interpretation of the basic principles of politeness is to provide a theoretical basis for English speaking teaching and learning, with the focus of incorporating the important politeness rules into English speaking class, so as to improve EFL learners’ speaking ability and intercultural communication competence. In EFL context, learners are strongly influenced by their native language. In China, even among college students who have learned English for more than 9 years, there is a phenomenon of ‘Chinglish’ in their spoken language, which are unnatural in English language. Therefore, integrating politeness principle into English speaking class can help Chinese students improve their communication skills, enhance mutual trust, and improve their speaking ability. In EFL speaking class, two methods can be used to help learners learn polite speech acts, that is, a mixed approach combining static and dynamic teaching and lexical approach.

#### 3.1 A Mixed Approach Combining Static and Dynamic Teaching

The degree of politeness is a continuum ranging from impoliteness to politeness. According to ‘cost-benefit scale’ proposed by Leech (1983), this continuum is manifested as different levels of politeness based on minimizing the cost to interlocutors, and correspondingly maximizing the benefit to the interlocutor. There are multiple degrees of absolute politeness, which can be observed according to the directness/indirectness of the utterance.

Example 1:

- 1) Pass me the salt.
- 2) Will you pass me the salt?
- 3) Would you you pass me the salt?
- 4) Would you mind passing me the salt?
- 5) I wonder if you’d mind passing me the salt?

The degree of politeness of the five sentences in Example 1 is increasing from 1) to 5). It can be seen from this example that the level of politeness is in English, greater length and indirectness is usually associated with greater politeness. The reasons why sentence 5) is more polite than sentence 2) is that the speaker envisages the hearer’s objection to it (you’d mind), hence it stresses the expectation that the hearer will not oblige.

Although the universal application of Leech’s politeness model and the standard of determining politeness scale needs to be improved theoretically, it is not without significance for Chinese EFL learners. For example, Chinese EFL learners often say ‘‘What is your name, please’’, when they meet someone for the first time. As a matter of fact, this expression is very impolite, as it does not give the interlocutor enough choice whether to answer or not. In fact, this expression is used in very limited occasions, such as police interrogation of prisoners. Native English speakers more often than not say ‘‘Can I have you name, please?’’. They ask for others’ name in the form of request,

which will not impose speakers' will on the hearers. Therefore, some basic knowledge of politeness helps learners determine which sentences are polite and which are not, through which students learn how to choose appropriate expression and perform polite speech acts.

In English speaking class, a mixed approach combining static with dynamic teaching can be adopted to help students learn how to use polite expression in real communication. Firstly, teachers can adopt static method to teach knowledge of politeness at different scales. For instance, when teachers explain the above Example 1, making a request, students are told that the higher the indirectness, the higher the politeness. They can choose different expression in communication according to the relationship with the interlocutors. Then various teaching activities are conducted, where students are involved in what they are learning. In this way, students learn how to express themselves appropriately in more complex communication contexts. However, this is not the end of learning making request. It is necessary to tell students that the degree of politeness is relative in specific contexts. For example, when taking a taxi to the airport, students may say to the taxi driver, "Excuse me, could you take me to the airport?" after they learn the politeness knowledge of making a request. However, in fact, this expression is cumbersome and inappropriate. The more polite and accurate expression is "Airport, please.". Students will have a better understanding that the choice of the scale of politeness in real communication relies on real factor, age, social status, sex and so on. From this, students realize that politeness is highly dependent on context and communication breakdowns may happen if they do not consider contexts. Therefore, in English speaking class, static teaching can be conducted as the first step, and then teachers gradually introduce situational factors in depth, and conduct various activities in which students participate to practice what they have learned.

### 3.2 Lexical Approach in English Speaking Class

Besides adopting the scale of politeness into English speaking class, the lexical approach is also useful in improving students' speaking ability. In the lexical approach, teaching attaches greater importance to fixed often-used expressions in conversation, which plays an important role in discourse than unique phrases and sentences. Polite phrases can greatly promote the enhancement of learners' communicative competence. The advantage of lexical approach is that it can reduce the burden of learners' short-term memory, accelerate the decoding of input information, and help learners to overcome the negative transfer of the mother language in EFL context. For example, when students are learning how to borrow something from others, it is not necessary to make the metapragmatic analysis of the language form which may make learner entangled in whether to use "Can you lend me your ..." or "Can I borrow your ...?". Instead, teachers can directly tell students the appropriate expression, such as "Can/May I use your..., please?". Additionally, the use of polite idioms can greatly improve the fluency of learners' speaking. The fuzzy words, such as well, I mean, you know, kind of, and so on plays a large part.

It is worth noting that the function of politeness is embodied in speech acts, and different polite expression are corresponding to different speech acts. Specifically, speech acts include praise, invitation, thanks, request, refusal, apology, and so forth. Polite expressions should be categorized correspondingly. In addition, teachers should pay attention to the diversity of input learning material in lexical approach teaching, so that learners can pre-store a variety of chunks, which helps communication go smoothly and save learners' time and trouble in processing information in communication. For example, when teaching students how to make a request, teachers can provide various expressions, such as "Can/Could/May I ...?", "Would it be possible for me to ...?", "Would you be kind enough to ...?", "I was wondering if you can ...?" and so on, hence, students learn how to use these different expression through substitution drill in specific contexts.

## 4. Conclusion

Politeness has its own characteristics in different languages and cultures. A polite expression in one culture may be considered offensive in another culture. Due to the great differences between Chinese language and English language, between eastern culture and western culture, it is necessary for Chinese students to learn how to use polite and appropriate expression in English language communication. Enlightened by Politeness Principle, this research suggests two teaching methods, that is, mixed approach in teaching the scale of politeness and lexical approach, which might be of help in improving college students' speaking ability. However, how to make students use appropriate expression freely in real communication is still to be studied in the future.

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