

TEACHER TALK AND MANAGING SOCIAL RELATIONS IN PHILIPPINE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOMS

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1. Introduction

Language is at the “centre of what happens in the classroom” (Manke, 1997: xvi). Indeed, it can be said that the classroom is a “universe of language” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1994: 19) where what is taught and learnt is done through spoken or written discourse. Within the classroom context, teachers have discursive rights, and are traditionally seen to hold the seat of power. They introduce lesson content, check for understanding, distribute speaking turns, nominate speakers, decide who can have the floor, and evaluate students’ answers. They are institutionally sanctioned to give or withhold praise, commend or criticize, and express approval or disapproval.

The findings of the current investigation can add to our understanding of how social relationships are established, maintained and shaped through talk. Given the importance that language plays in teaching and learning, significant insights can be gained from an awareness of how specific linguistic devices can be used strategically to create a supportive, non-threatening classroom environment. The main aim of this article is to provide insights into how the Filipino university lecturers in the study used language to mitigate face threatening acts (e.g. correcting students’ mistakes, issuing a challenge or disagreement and giving orders) thus preserving students’ self-esteem and making the classroom a safe place for learning.

1.2 Theoretical inspiration

Language can be said to perform two very general and overlapping functions: one is the *transactional* function which is used to give information, facts or content; and the other one is the *interactional* function which is to express feelings and attitudes as well as social relations (Brown & Yule, 1983: 1). The centre piece of the analysis here is to look at the *interactional* use of language by three Filipino university lecturers. To achieve this, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of politeness is used as a descriptive framework.

Brown and Levinson’s (1987) approach centres on the notion of “face” and face-threatening acts. It is claimed that everybody has face (roughly equivalent to self-esteem) and face needs, which can be positive or negative. A *positive face* need is the desire to be well thought of, liked and admired by others; a *negative face* need is the desire to act freely, unimpeded and not to be imposed upon by others. It follows therefore that a *face-threatening act* is any speech act that might cause the addressee to feel disliked, rejected, humiliated or restricted in terms of freedom to choose what he or she would like to do. It should be noted that Brown and Levinson’s model has been criticised for various reasons such as its cross-cultural applicability, focus on conflict-avoidance and its very notion of face (see: Lakoff & Ide 2005; Watts 2003; Eelen 2001). However, it is argued that Brown and Levinson’s core concepts are operationally valid (Ermida, 2006: 814) and is a useful descriptive tool to sharpen the analytic gaze.

In Brown and Levinson’s approach, to use positive politeness strategies means to use language that invokes belonging and solidarity; negative politeness means to use language that orients to the addressee’s wants to be left alone and to be free from imposition (see: Appendix 1 for a list of Brown and Levinson’s Positive and Negative Politeness Strategies). Linguistic politeness, then, is used here to refer to linguistic devices that speakers use to soften acts that might threaten the positive face and/or the negative face needs of the hearer.

To illustrate, a teacher who considers that a blatant correction of a student’s answer is too face-threatening, has several options: give partial agreement (yeah, but...), repeat the student’s answer with a rising intonation to indicate an indirect challenge, or perhaps not say anything at all (but instead call on other students until the correct answer is given).

To soften a directive with positive politeness lecturers might say:

A: “Guys, we gotta work harder this term,” instead of

B: “You have to work harder this term, otherwise...”

In A above, the lecturer uses positive politeness strategies which are signalled by the use of informal language (*guys, gotta*) and the inclusive pronoun ‘we’ when referring to “you.” Although the utterance might have been intended as reprimand, the addressee’s face is maintained with the use of mitigated language. The use of “you” in utterance B indicates a distancing stance and a direct order which can make the addressee feel belittled.

To cushion the act of disagreeing or correcting with negative politeness, a lecturer might use A instead of B as below:

A: “Well, yes, but I think that might not be what the author is trying to say.”

B: “No, that is not what the author is trying to say.”

The negative politeness strategies used in A are partial agreement (*yes, but*), a softening hedge phrase (*I think*) and modal verb in the subjunctive form (*might*) to soften the disagreement or correction. Even the initial “*well*”, a hesitation marker, signals a less direct challenge. A’s utterance above indicates that the speaker does not impose his or her opinion on the addressee.

2. Data collection and analysis

2.1 Research site

The Philippines, a multicultural and multilingual South East Asian archipelago, was used as the research site for this broadly ethnographic study. English and Filipino (also known as *Tagalog*) are the country’s two official languages, with English used as the principal medium of instruction. It is of pragmatic interest to study language in a culture where indirect communication tends to be favoured. As Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino (2000: 56) suggest, Filipinos tend to have an indirect style of communication which can sometimes be mistaken for dishonesty by people from other discourse communities. In these days of globalization where communication across cultures could easily lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding, there is value in shedding some light on how the principles of social interaction in this particular culture are embodied in teacher discourse.

2.2 Methods of data collection

The corpus consists of 25 hours of audiorecordings of naturally occurring classroom interactions (12 hours from MA classes and 13 from undergraduate classes) from four educational institutions in the Philippines. To collect the data, I adopted a fly-on-the wall, non-participant observer approach. I used two inconspicuous digital recorders placed at the front of the room near the teacher, and the other one near where I was seated. I took notes during the sessions and engaged in brief informal chats with the teachers and students outside the classroom when time and opportunity allowed. Although a total of nine lecturers were observed, this paper focuses on only three.

2.3 Data analysis and discussion of results

In this section, illustrative examples from data are analysed to show how Filipino university lecturers in the study use linguistic politeness in the classroom. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants and to maintain confidentiality, all references that might identify the name of the university or the research participants have been omitted. Lecturers will be identified as P1, P2 and so on, and the students are identified as S1, S2 or Ss (more than one speaker in unison) in the transcription.

Example 1: Correcting a mistake/ giving feedback

The example below illustrates how P1, a male professor, typically corrects a student’s “wrong” answer or error in his class. P1 was asking a student (S1), a male, about his interpretation of a poem. The transcription conventions can be found in Appendix 2.

- | | | |
|----|----|---|
| 1 | S1 | erm, I think it’s the sunset |
| 2 | P1 | sunset? |
| 3 | S | because erm the stars that shine on Milky Way it symbolises the sun rise or sun = |
| 4 | P1 | =sun? |
| 5 | S | it says ‘ along the margin of a bay’ so it’s setting = |
| 6 | P1 | =what’s setting |
| 7 | S | =the sun |
| 8 | P1 | the sun is setting, |
| 9 | S1 | ‘they stretched in never-ending line’ means the rays of the sun? |
| 10 | P1 | wait, so would you say they stretched, the sun’s rays? What is ‘they?’ |

- 11 S2 flowers?
 12 P1 huh?
 13 S2 flowers?
 14 P1 the FLOWERS! "they" is the
 flowers right? 'stretched in never-
 15 ending line' what what is
 'continuous as the stars' literally what?
 16 S2 the daffodils
 17 P1 the flowers again! Ok?

P1's utterance in line 2 "*sunset*" is an implied challenge to S1's interpretation using "lexical repetition" which according to Brown and Levinson (1987: 112) can be used to stress interest and to show that one has heard correctly. It can also be P1's way of giving S1 a chance to re-think his answer. It can be inferred from S1's, justification in line 3 that he took P1's repetition as a challenge. In lines 4, 6 and 8, P1 continues without giving the correct answer. In lines 11 and 16, S2 gives out the correct interpretation and P1 confirms that indeed, the correct answer is "*flowers*." P1's tag questions "*right*" in line 14 and "*ok?*" in line 17 can be interpreted as a linguistic device to seek agreement.

Continuing the discussion of the same poem, P1 asks the students to interpret the figurative use of "*wealth*", but as can be seen below; he did not offer a correction but instead revoiced S3's answer in line 2. He added the question word "*why*" to scaffold the student to the more correct answer, but was just met with silence in line 3.

- 1 S3 pleasure?
 2 P1 pleasure? why?
 3 S3 (silence) (.3)
 4 P1 ok when you see something nice,
 sure, pleasure
 5 but it's more than just that,

In the extract above, P1 saves the face of S3, who was silent for three seconds (line 3) by partially agreeing (*ok when you see something nice, sure*). It is worth pointing out that throughout the rather lengthy discussion (parts of the extract have been omitted in the interest of space), P1 often used informal language (*It's kinda like, you gotta, just goofing around*) and Tagalog tag questions. The effect seems to be that the students felt freer to participate because of the friendly, non-threatening classroom environment where the threat to loss of face was minimised. His use of slang and contractions promotes an intimate social relationship with the

students. As Morand (1996; 2000) notes, phonological slurring (*gonna* instead of *going to*, *tell 'em* instead of *tell them*, etc.) in particular contexts makes the speaker appear less remote and indeed more approachable.

Example 2: Giving homework using mitigated language

Below are excerpts taken from an undergraduate writing class taught by a female lecturer (P2). It can be inferred from her use of mitigated language that she considered giving homework threatening to the students' negative face (the need to be left alone and be freed from imposition). The extract below is adapted from Victoria (2012: 60).

- 7 P2 I want you to write MA::YBE
 between a three to five page essay,
 8 depends on how heavy
 your topic was. some people have very
 9 difficult topics, some
 people have easier ones ok? erm so we will
 start
 10 doing the writing next
 week so I want you to start getting getting the
 11 books so that Monday I
want you to have the books with you. the only
 12 way to write at all is for
 you to have the books first ok? so tomorrow
 13 read pages 158 to 160
that's what we will discuss. I hope
 14 we'll end a little bit
 earlier cuz it's any way a Friday erm ok?

In line 7, P2's speech act of giving a command is hedged with *maybe* and *I want* which she also used for lines 10 and 11. In line 13, she gave a direct order (*read pages 158 to 160*) which she redresses in 13 and 14 (*I hope we'll end...Friday*) by indicating that she wishes to minimise the imposition. It can also be argued that P2 is trying to anoint her students' positive face want by giving them gifts of sympathy, understanding and cooperation (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Example 3: Using shared native language as a face-saving resource

Below, a female lecturer, P3 was giving a lecture using an overhead projector. She wanted to make sure that the students understood the content.

- 1 P3 are you able to differentiate the
 error as well as correct it?
 2 Ss (silence)
 3 P3 Mr. _____ if you are involved
 how would you react?

- 4 S1 (silence)
 5 P3 THIS, is how you will react!
 (while pointing to the answer on the
 6 board). *Mahirap talaga.* ((It's
 really difficult)) Anxiety is normal.
 7 Your anxiety fires you up to
 study *di ba?*((don't you think?))

P3's question in line 1 is met with silence so she nominates a male student who failed to give a response. P3 gives the correct answer written on the overhead transparency. It can be inferred that line 5 is face-threatening because of the positive politeness redress in lines 6 and 7. By saying "*This is how you will react!*" P3 was giving the whole class a severely face-threatening reproach. The implication is that the students should know the answer because it had just been explained to them (the overhead transparency was still displayed on the whiteboard). To heal the damaged faces, P3 suddenly code-switches to the vernacular "*mahirap talaga*", meaning "it's really difficult" which is a positive politeness strategy "give sympathy to hearer" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 102). It is noteworthy that while P3 asked the question in English, she tried to save the students from discomfort and embarrassment using the in-group dialect, Tagalog, (*mahirap talaga*). Her tag question (*di ba?* in line 7) was also in Tagalog, which was probably intended to make the utterance sound more sincere and sympathetic. Indeed, displaying consideration for the addressee can help maintain social equilibrium (Locher, 2004). It can also be argued that using the shared native language as a communicative resource has enabled P3 to maintain common ground in spite of an awkward, potentially face-threatening situation.

2.4 Other relevant findings from data

An analysis of the entire corpus of audiorecorded interactions shows that the lecturers frequently used illustrative narratives in the form of fairy tales, movie plots, and personal anecdotes to involve the students and encourage them to speak up more. Through these narratives, they were able to make the floor available and accessible to the students - where contributions are not assessed according to right or wrong. They also interspersed formal lesson content with current news events (the price increase on rice and gasoline, environmental problems, politics, etc.) and other relevant "small talk" topics. And since small talk does not necessarily reflect expertise or specialist

knowledge, it tends to mitigate hierarchical differences (Holmes, 1995).

Making the lesson come alive with the telling of related human interest stories can also be viewed as the speakers' effort to spend time with the addressee, thus indicating a mark of friendship. The important thing is that the interaction frame created by the anecdotes and stories changes the institutional roles from expert-novice or questioner-answerer to that of storyteller-listener. The change in the participation structure tends to make the interaction de-institutionalised and therefore more social and intimate.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), other forms of narratives such as gossip and small talk are positive politeness strategies often used to cushion the act of requesting. For example, if X wants to borrow £100.00 from Y, X would not just blurt out "Could you lend me £100?" Instead, X might start by asking Y about his or her job, family or recent trip before bringing up the issue of money. Findings in the current study, however, indicate that stories, personal anecdotes and small talk do not necessarily occur around face-threatening acts. This suggests that they have been used by the lecturers not just to mitigate face-threatening speech acts (e.g. requesting, giving orders, criticising, correcting an error, expressing disapproval); they have been used "interactionally" (in the sense of Brown & Yule, 1983) to enhance social relations.

Another relevant finding is that lecturers in the study tended to use positive politeness more than negative politeness strategies when correcting mistakes, expressing disapproval and giving orders. This is consistent with what Scollon and Scollon (1995: 56) refer to as a "hierarchical politeness system" where "the person in the superordinate upper position uses involvement strategies in speaking *down*" (positive politeness) and "the person in the subordinate or lower position uses independence strategies (negative politeness) in speaking *up*." Indeed, it is usually the privilege of the more powerful interlocutor to come closer to the less powerful and not the other way around (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

3. Conclusion

To sum up, the current study has drawn on Brown and Levinson's (1987) lexico-grammatical model of linguistic politeness to explore how three Filipino university lecturers deployed

interactional language to attend to social relations in the classroom. The examples show how the three lecturers maintain a delicate balance between their pedagogical goals and harmonious relations in the classroom.

It has been claimed that the professor's words are "not made to be believed but to be obeyed and to compel obedience" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 76); that because of their status, age, expertise and institutional authority (Rees-Miller, 2000), they are sanctioned by the institution to present and insist on a particular way of thinking and acting and then demand a display of this particular way of thinking and acting (Victoria, 2009: 17). But as the data excerpts show, teacher talk is not just about clear, unambiguous speech and the efficient transmission of information. Communication, according to Kingwell (1993: 401), is also about "not hurting other people's feelings, not having mine hurt, not saying all we could say, oiling the wheels of mundane social interaction, and strengthening the ties that bind us together."

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APPENDIX 1 Brown and Levinson's (1987) Positive and Negative Politeness Strategies

Negative (Deference) Politeness	Positive (Solidarity) Politeness
<p>Be direct 1: Be conventionally indirect.</p> <p>Don't presume/assume 2: Question, hedge.</p> <p>Don't coerce Hearer (H) 3: Be pessimistic. 4: Minimize the imposition 5: Give deference.</p> <p>Communicate Speaker's (S) want not to impinge on Hearer 6: Apologize. 7: Impersonalize S and H. 8: State the FTA (face-threatening act) as a general rule. 9: Nominalize.</p> <p>Redress other wants of H's 10: Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H.</p>	<p>Claim Common Ground 1: Notice, attend to H (his/her interests, wants, needs, goods). 2: Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with). 3: Intensify interest to H. 4: Use in-group identity markers 5: Seek agreement. 6: Avoid disagreement. 7: Presuppose/raise/assert common ground. 8: Joke.</p> <p>Convey that S and H are co-operators 9: Assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants. 10: Offer, promise. 11: Be optimistic. 12: Include both S and H in the activity. 13: Give (or ask for) reasons. 14: Assume or assert reciprocity</p> <p>Fulfil H's wants 15: Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation).</p>

Brown & Levinson's taxonomy of Positive and Negative Politeness Strategies where **S=Speaker**, **H=Hearer**

APPENDIX 2 TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

.	falling intonation at end of tone unit
?	high rising intonation at end of tone unit
,	slightly rising intonation at end of tone unit
!	animated intonation
::	noticeable lengthening of a vowel
-	unfinished utterance, e.g., false start
(.2)	length of pause in seconds
WORD	Words written in capitals to indicate emphatic stress: e.g. VERY
[words]	
[words]	simultaneous speech indicated in brackets: e.g.
	A: mm// Did you [read the report]
	B: [didn't have] the time
=	latching, no perceptible pause after a turn
(laughs)	single brackets describe current action, transcriber's comments
(())	double brackets contain English translation of Filipino words: e.g.
	A: <i>Isulat mo ito.</i>
	((Write this down.))