THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Significance of Linguistic Politeness Strategies Employed in Teacher-Student Question-and-Answer Sessions in Schools within Magadi Township, Kenya

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Abstract:
Linguistic politeness is an aspect that has been used in classroom interaction, although little knowledge is available on politeness expressions during question-and-answer sessions. Therefore, in this paper, the researcher investigates linguistic politeness during question-and-answer sessions to add knowledge to the existing literature on linguistic politeness during question-and-answer sessions. This study aimed to find out the strategies of politeness used by teachers during question and answer sessions in the classroom and the respective payoffs. The target population consists of six primary and secondary school teachers in a classroom engaging learners through oral questions. The study employs a descriptive design and techniques such as questionnaires, interviews and participant observation to collect authentic data. The data are analysed by coding and categorizing the politeness strategies used by the teacher. Data are explained using the principles of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987). The findings indicate that teachers used positive politeness, negative politeness and bald-on-record strategies to facilitate the learning process during question-and-answer interactions in the classroom. Further data indicate that the choice of a politeness strategy was influenced by the rank, power and social status of the teacher.

Keywords: Politeness theory, politeness strategies in teaching and students' cooperation

1. Introduction

Politeness involves using etiquette while engaging with other interlocutors in a conversation to avoid hurting them and keep the discourse alive. This paper explores the significance of using politeness strategies in the classroom to gain a better understanding of the implications of politeness on the teaching and learning process. The paper also discusses the benefits or payoffs of politeness strategies. The notion of politeness is conceived as a cultural aspect that is determined by people engaged in a conversation. Additionally, three social variables determine how politeness is used in particular situations. These factors include social power, rank and social distance (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The study was conducted in schools within Magadi Township in a classroom set up during question-and-answer sessions when the teacher asked questions while the learners responded. Of concern in this study are the strategies employed by teachers to mitigate the threats to the students' wants of being liked or approved and the advantages of employing etiquette in the classroom.

2. Politeness

Politeness is the ability to speak or behave in a way that is correct for the social situation you are in and shows that you are careful to consider other people's needs and feelings. Politeness is generally understood as respect and consideration for other people, ease and gracefulness of manners, and desire to please others by anticipating their wants and wishes. Being linguistically polite is guided by a set of rules or strategies that are culturally determined to avoid conflicts. Selgas (2022) defines politeness as a courteous social practice or etiquette within a society. It entails the speaker's intentions not to offend the listener during interaction. Holmes (2001: 268) observes that 'being linguistically polite involves speaking to people appropriately in the light of the relationship.' Thus, the level of 'politeness' to Holmes depends on the level of the social relationship existing between the interlocutors. The relationship can be formal, informal and determined by factors such as social class, age or rank and it determines how interlocutors communicate. Thomas (1995: 150) defines 'politeness' as 'a genuine desire to be pleasant to others, or as the underlying motivation for an individual's linguistic behavior,' a hearer can only hear what the speakers say but have no access to the speaker's motivation. Inaccessibility to what others think of us is an aspect of nature, and human beings have no control over it.

3. Literature Review

Selgas (2022) identified 4 types of politeness strategies utilized by students of Bukidnon State University while responding to online announcements made by their teacher in Google Classroom. The strategies include positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on record and off-record. Positive politeness was used more often, followed by

negative politeness, while bald-on-record and off-record were least employed. Selgas (ibid) notes that positive politeness is used more because of the relationship of the higher status of the teacher, so the students respected the teacher, and thus the use of friendly responses. The current study sought to find out which politeness strategies are used in Magadi secondary school and how effectively teachers employ them.

Wangia & Otonde (2020), in their study on student-teacher interactions in Ndigwa Secondary School, note that students employ negative politeness strategies to show respect in the staffroom, which is a formal setting. They used forms such as 'May I,' especially when they needed permission to interrupt the teacher. This strategy avoids coercion of the hearer, hence minimizes the threat. In the present study, the researcher strives to establish whether teachers use negative politeness strategies while addressing students, the particular types used, and why teachers use them.

Widiadnya et al. (2018), while conducting a study on the implications of politeness strategies among teachers and students in the classroom, observe that there are implications of using politeness in the teaching and learning process.

- First, the Bald-on-record strategy enhances efficient communication interaction.
- Second, bald on record is employed to fulfill respect behavior in the classroom.
- Third, positive politeness enhances cooperation in learning through a common understanding that the faces of both the speaker and hearer are vulnerable.
- Fourth, using a negative politeness strategy minimizes imposition in the teaching and learning process. Negative politeness words minimize seriousness on the part of the students and make them relaxed in reading without feeling forced or imposed to do it.

4. Politeness Theory

Politeness theory was first formulated in 1987 by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is conflict avoidance. The politeness theory is centered on the notion that interlocutors have faces that they consciously protect and maintain in interactions. Within this framework, 'Face' is defined as the public self-image every interlocutor wants to claim as an individual. The concept of face relates to the idea of being embarrassed or humiliated. 'Face' is divided into two:

4.1. Negative Face

This is the claim to territories, personal preserves and the right to non-distraction. It relates to freedom of action and from imposition, that is, interlocutors who wish to have the freedom to act as the one who is unimpeded (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

4.2. Positive face

This is the desire to be liked, approved of, respected and appreciated by others. Brown & Levinson (1987:66) state that a positive face is 'the positive and consistent image people have of themselves and their desires for approval.' Proponents of politeness theory hold that people generally cooperate in maintaining face-to-face interaction since everyone's face is vulnerable. Politeness is employed in interactions to show awareness of another person's face.

4.2.1. Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs)

These are instances when an interlocutor's statement represents a threat to another interlocutor's expectation and thus threatens his/her face. Face-threatening acts run contrary to the face wants. For example, acts may threaten a positive face if they make one feel undesirable, unappreciated and unapproved. On the other hand, those threatening negative faces make an interlocutor feel imposed on, impeded, or hindered from contributing freely to discourse.

4.2.2. Strategies for Minimizing Face-Threatening Acts

During conversations, speakers use strategies to minimize the threat. These strategies are employed to maintain the hearer's face to any degree (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The strategies are presented below:

4.2.2.1. Bald-On-Record

This strategy is used when the speaker and hearer know each other, so there is no need to maintain face and the speaker has an unambiguous intention to communicate. For example, bald-on-the-record is used to warn someone in danger or ask a child to dress up. However, this strategy can be threatening if it is out of context.

4.2.2.2. Off-Record

This strategy is more indirect. The speaker does not impose something on the listeners, so the face is not directly threatened. It is done when there is more than one unambiguous attributable intention. The hearer needs to interpret what the speaker is saying. For example, asking for a favor indirectly, e.g., *I have an exam and I left my pen at home.* This may have more than one interpretation, like the speaker is asking for a pen from the hearer, or the speaker does not want to sit for that exam or is seeking permission to go get a pen.

4.2.2.3. Positive Politeness

Positive politeness is oriented towards the positive face of the hearer. This strategy anoints the face of the addressee by indicating that, in some respects, the speaker appreciates the hearer's wants by treating the hearer as a

member of an in-group, a friend and a person whose personality traits are known and liked. Positive politeness is done by attending to the audience's feelings of belonging to the group.

4.2.2.4. Negative Politeness

This strategy tries to minimize the threat to the interlocutor's negative face. The speaker recognizes and respects the addressee's negative face wants. Therefore, the speaker strives to restrain from impeding the hearer and to minimally interfere with the hearer's freedom of action.

The Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) are redressed with apologies, softening mechanisms that give the addressee a face-saving line of escape, thus permitting the hearers to feel that their response is not coerced. For example, a teacher says, *"Please rephrase your answer* to a student whose answer to a question is wrong to avoid telling the student blatantly that their answer is incorrect as it will embarrass the learner and make him avoid answering a question next time."* Therefore, the teacher uses negative politeness to save the learner from embarrassment.

Brown and Levinson discussed that each of the strategies has payoffs or advantages when used in a speech event. They also proposed some of the relevant circumstances for using the strategies. The speaker uses bald-on-record to receive credit for being tactful, non-coercive and avoiding responsibility for face-damaging interpretation. Positive politeness is done to assure the addressee that they like them and care about their face. Negative politeness strategy pays respect and deference to the addressee, avoids future debts, helps the speaker maintain social distance from the hearer and helps the speaker avoid the threat of advancing familiarity towards the addressee.

The choice of strategies for minimizing Face-Threatening Acts is predetermined by three factors (Brown & Levinson, 1989) as follows:
- The social distance between the speaker and the hearer,
- The relative power of the speaker and the hearer,
- The absolute ranking of impositions in a particular culture.

5. Statement of the Problem

Question-and-answer is a teaching method employed almost at all levels of learning. While using this method, the teachers use particular expressions either to appreciate the correct answer or to denounce the incorrect responses directly or indirectly deny the incorrect responses. In denying wrong answers, they use hedges and polite expressions that are meant to encourage learning. Linguistic politeness is an aspect that has been used in classroom interaction, although little knowledge is available on politeness expressions during question-and-answer sessions. Therefore, in this paper, the researcher investigates linguistic politeness during question-and-answer sessions to add knowledge to the existing literature on linguistic politeness during question-and-answer sessions. This will go a long way in forming a basis for other future research on the area of linguistic politeness.

5.1. Objectives
The study sought:
- To identify the linguistic politeness strategies employed by teachers during question-and-answer sessions in the classroom.
- To explain the payoffs for each of the politeness strategies used by teachers to the teacher and the learner.

6. Research Design and Methodology

The study employed a descriptive research design. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations. The data collected in qualitative data are in the form of words and linguistic politeness expressions formed the data of this paper.

The data was collected systematically through questionnaires and participant observation. The questions were listed down and given to both teachers and learners. They were filled and finally collected for analysis. The researcher attended 6 classes during question and answer sessions and recorded the linguistic politeness words and expressions used by the teachers. The expressions were compiled for later analysis.

The researcher interviewed 5 teachers and 10 students on their views about the linguistic politeness expressions used in class and the implications of those expressions. Their feedback was recorded on paper for analysis.

6.1. Target Population

The study was conducted in Magadi Township. The target population consisted of one primary school and one secondary school classroom setting consisting of teachers and students. The main focus was on the question-and-answer sessions.

6.2. Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to identify the interviewees, questionnaire respondents and classes to attend. Classes 5, 2, 3 and 4 were attended to listen and record the linguistic politeness expressions.

6.3. Data Analysis

The data collected from interviews, questionnaires and observation were compared. Similar information was grouped together, assigned themes and coded. It was then analyzed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness theory.

7. Findings and Discussion

The study sought to identify the linguistic politeness strategies employed by teachers during question and answer sessions in the classrooms and to explain the payoffs for each of the politeness strategies used by teachers to the teacher and the learner. Findings show that there are three politeness strategies employed by teachers during evaluation sessions: positive politeness, negative politeness and bald-on-record strategies. The results are discussed below, starting with a presentation and discussion thereafter.

7.1. Positive Politeness Strategies

Positive politeness is generally directed towards the positive face of the hearer to minimize the potential threat to the positive face of the hearer by ensuring that the speaker likes and respects the hearer and would not wish to give the hearer a negative evaluation. Positive face strategies noted in the data are classified into three categories, namely:

7.1.1. Approval

The following terminologies were used by teachers to approve, appreciate and indicate to the learners that they are liked:
- Good
- Yes
- Bravo
- Correct
- Congratulations
- Keep it up good trial
- Thumbs up
- You are right

Most of the approvals were used once questions were answered correctly and students understood the concepts that were taught. In some instances, the teacher used the expressions to show that he/she was happy with the students' response. For example, expressions such as *'good, kudos, good trial and you are right'* mean the teacher agrees to the students' answer. Thus, the positive politeness strategy indicates that the teacher recognizes the positive face wants of the students to be appreciated and approved of.

7.1.2. Exaggerated Interest

This is the second positive politeness strategy employed by teachers during question-and-answer sessions in the classroom. The teacher exaggerates interest in the learner and uses the following words:
- Kudos
- Marvelous
- Brilliant
- Excellent
- Perfect
- Very good
- Excellent

The terms *very good, marvelous* and *excellent* mean the student has given exceptionally or extremely good answers. The word *perfec*t means as good as possible. The teacher uses *brilliantly* to imply the student is exceptionally clever and *kudos* to display admiration for the students' responses. While appreciating the answers of the learners, the teacher exaggerates the interest in the learner in order to encourage the learner to keep up the good work and foster a sense of pride in the learner.

7.1.3. Avoid Disagreement

Polite disagreement is used to avoid disagreement and threats to students' positive faces, especially when students give incorrect responses to questions. The most common expressions under this category are:
- Good trial
- Good attempt
- Not really
- You can do better
- Fair

The teacher uses the word *'good*' before *trial* and *attempt*s to soften the teacher's denial of the wrong answer. Similarly, the auxiliary verb *can* is used in *you can do better* to indicate that the teacher cares about the student's positive wants to be liked. The word *'fair'* is also used as a compliment to evaluate inaccurate responses. The word 'fair' is used to mean that the response is tolerable or reasonable, though not adequate in the present circumstances.

7.1.4. Significance of Positive Politeness Strategies

Positive politeness strategies play a very important role in the process of teaching and learning.
- First, they minimize the potential positive face threats to the hearer (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

- Second, they are used by teachers to appreciate the correct responses used by learners as they act as rewards that encourage the learners. The learners get emotional appeal when praised; they feel happy and thus motivated to keep answering questions.
- Third, positive politeness strategies used by teachers to approve learners' answers indicate that learners have understood the concepts teachers taught them and in turn, this makes them feel confident about the teacher, the approach used and the subject matter.

Teachers use positive politeness strategies since they have the power to dispense approval to students, have better mastery of the subject at hand, and are socially ranked higher than the students who simply learn from teachers (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In this paper, the findings show that the teacher uses positive politeness strategies to avoid being offensive, highlighting friendliness. Also, the teacher wants the students to enthusiastically participate in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, the findings of this study are in line with the assertions of Sulu (2015), Zaenul (2016) and Syting & Gildore (2022), who state that positive politeness strategies give students an edge to participate in class, feel appreciated, to gain better knowledge and better experiences of the learning process. This implies that positive politeness makes classroom interaction effective and friendly.

7.2. Negative Politeness Strategies

These strategies rule out the possibility that the learner may feel coerced. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), negative politeness strategies are intended to avoid giving offences by showing deference. Deference refers to polite submission and respect. Some of the sub-strategies under negative politeness strategies are hedging, questioning and disagreements as opinions. Generally, these strategies reduce interference with the hearer's freedom of expression. The following negative politeness sentences were extracted from the data that were collected:

- Thank you, but that is not the answer I was looking for.
- You have tried, but I am sorry that is not the correct response.
- You are right, but that is an answer to a different question.
- You have really tried, but I wish to put it differently.
- Excuse me, can you rephrase your answer?

The teachers politely disagree to the wrong answers by using expressions *such as 'thank you,' 'sorry,' and 'you are right, but I wish I can'* and *'excuse me'* to soften the potential threat to the negative face of the students. For example, *'sorry'* softens the order*: 'That is not the correct response,'* while the auxiliary '*can'* changes the command*: 'rephrase your* answer,' to more of a polite question*, 'Can you rephrase your answer?'*

7.2.1. Significance of Negative Politeness Strategies

The teacher does not deny the wrong answers directly, as this will make the students feel coerced, impeded and denied freedom of action. By softening the response, the teacher pays respect and deference to the students (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Blatantly refusing an answer acts as a threat to students' faces and kills the students' morale. Additionally, negative politeness strategies increase the students' cooperation with the teacher in class since the teacher hardly demoralizes them. The findings of this study agree to the results of Zaenul (2016), Fitriyani & Andriyanti (2020) and Brown & Levinson (1987), who assert that negative politeness lessens the imposition on the students, avoids offense by showing deference, and indicates respect to the learner.

7.2.2. Bald-on-Record

According to Brown & Levinson (1987), bald-on-record is a direct way of saying things without any minimization to the imposition in a direct, clear and concise way. The data collected indicate that teachers use the strategy particularly when students give incorrect answers during evaluation. Words, phrases and sentences used include:

- Incorrect
- Poor
- No
- You are wrong
- That is wrong
- Pull up your socks.

The direct remarks used to evaluate wrong responses draw the students' attention to the fact that they have not understood the topic and need to work more towards gaining a better understanding of the correct concept. The circumstances surrounding the use of the above expressions are treated as an emergency where immediate remedy must be provided. Hence, the student must quickly refrain from the line of argument he is taking and get the correct information. Teachers use bald-on-record strategy because they have a better command of the subject matter and also, the teacher is powerful in the classroom relative to the student. Similar to the foregoing claims, Fitriyani and Andriyant (2020) observe that bald-on-record is used in class because the teacher has the authority to control students because of the power bestowed upon them in the class.

8. Conclusion

Politeness strategies are used during evaluation to facilitate the process of teaching and learning. The paper establishes that teachers use three strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness and bald-on-record. Positive politeness strategy is employed to approve of the students' positive responses, disagree politely, and indicate to the

learners that they are liked. Negative politeness strategy is used to avoid offence by showing deference. Bald on-record is used by teachers to directly warn learners against learning false concepts. The study concludes that politeness is a pre-requisite for learning as it encourages learners and motivates them to pursue their educational interests.

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