A study on politeness teaching to English learners in China

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Introduction

Language is a reflect ion of culture and accepted cultural norms, polite conducted and interaction is inseparable to culture. Polite interaction takes on many forms in the way people interact, not only by the spoken word but also by the unspoken messages portrayed by behaviour, body language, eye contact and facial expressions. People from the same country speaking the same language and same cultural background have a basic common shared ideology and value system defining general accepted norms and rules of conduct to be followed. Accepted norms of behaviour and linguistic appropriateness in one culture are not necessarily acceptable in another culture. What is considered polite in one cultural society may be considered impolite in another. When learning a second language such as English and wishing not only to achieve linguistic competence but also communicative competence necessitates the function of cultural awareness in teaching and learning. With the wide spread of English in China more and more people are acquiring linguistic competence however teaching communicative competence is lacking in politeness. This paper intends to study politeness teaching to English learners in China in order to discus the reason for the impolite use of English in China.

Language a reflection of Culture - Politeness a fundamental part of Culture

Politeness in any given society is conducted within a system of acceptable social behaviour and social linguistic cultural norms that govern the way in which citizens interact. Interacting and communicating is a fundamental part of life - from catching a bus, greeting a neighbour to business transactions - and is conducted by following social and sociolinguistic accepted norms. 'Language is the principle means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways' (Kramsch, 1998). The complexities that govern general social conduct and communication within a society are not only due to a shared language but also from shared beliefs and value system derived from a common historical and traditional background echoed in upbringing, educational and surrounding society. According to Duranti (1997) 'One should think of language *in* culture and not just of language *and* culture. The linguistic system interpenetrates all other systems of culture'. Accepted behaviour and politeness within a society and sharing the same value system and cultural understanding is part of the fibre of society. Rules within a language community guide behaviour and communication within the society; (not only guiding what people do or say but, equally important what people do not do or say). As to the question 'What is politeness in the context of TESOL', from past decades to recent times on going research and development in English teaching has evolved and recognises the complexities surrounding culture, context, communicative appropriateness and politeness in language teaching and learning. 'Applied linguistics and language teachers have become increasingly aware that a second or foreign language can rarely be learned or taught without addressing the culture of the community in which it is used' (Hinkel, 1999). China is a case in point where previous teaching ideology and methodology dictated language learning and teaching priority was to build vocabulary and master correct grammar rules.

The importance of politeness in China

Politeness is a fundamental part of culture which shapes human behaviour within a society. Goode et al. (2000) explains this politeness and behaviour as an 'integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviours of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations.' This view illustrates the importance of politeness in language teaching, culture and politeness is mirrored and represented in all the above human interactions, as a result politeness can not be considered a separate isolated component of language learning. The spectrum of politeness affects all human behaviour and interactions, therefore 'linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language' (Krasner, 1999). Language learners need to understand culture, context and politeness to be able to function and communicate appropriately in the target language.

In an examination oriented teaching and learning environment such as in China where examination results are paramount; appropriate language use is often sacrificed for high marks. Examination results is only a minor factor that has led to impolite use of English in China, a major factor is that teachers and learners do not realise language is a part of culture they think learning a language is just learning language systems. In recent years the realisation that mastering language rules do not representing communicative competence has come to the forefront in English learning and teaching in China. As a result, language teaching in China is beginning to adopt a more communicative approach to language learning and teaching. Brumfit and Johnson (1979) 'Knowledge of the elements of a language in fact counts for nothing unless the user is able to combine them in new and appropriate ways to meet the linguistic demands of the situation in which he wishes to use the language'. The shift toward communicative competence in English language learning and teaching has highlighted the significance of culture and context awareness in language acquisition to be able to produce appropriate polite intercourse. Though polite communication is much more than saying 'please' and 'thank you' a crucial point in the context of Chinese learners in relation to their own linguistic norms these simple words reflect a distance in a relationship. 'Please' and 'thank you' is not used within the Chinese community to show closeness in a relationship however in English 'please' and 'thank you' are used constantly such as with family members, friends, employers, employees and strangers, no matter the relationship close or distant. Therefore linguistic cultural polite use of language has to be a fundamental part of English teaching in China.

Examples of common inappropriate language use

Propriety in one language community can be deemed improper in another language community. The following examples are general observations of senior high school students' at a middle school in the Peoples Republic of China. Most of the students have been studying English for a minimum of 6 years. The few examples are common occurrences drawing attention to the importance of culture and context awareness in language teaching enabling polite intercourse.

Example 1

Greeting

a. Hey, where are you going?

b. Hey, where have you been?

c. Hey, what are you doing?

d. Hey what are you up to?

a, b, c, and d are direct transfers from Chinese and are often used by English learners as greetings.

Example 2

Comments frequently directed to native English speakers especially on initial contact with language learners.

a. Your English is good.

b. We like you and know you are a good teacher, do you like us?

c. I like you, you are easy going.

d. You are handsome/ beautiful.

a, is a direct translation from Chinese, which in context probably meant the language learner understood the teacher's English as apposed to not understanding a native speaker. b, Flattery is an integral part of Chinese culture especially to a figure of authority, a way of bringing a closeness to a relationship. c and d. again flattery is part of Chinese culture.

Example 3

Advice and suggestions

a. you have to

b. you must.

c. you should

Despite being taught more appropriate ways of making suggestions language learners often use "you have to", "you should" and "you must" when making suggestions.
Unfortunately this can be misunderstood sounding autocratic delivering an order rather than a friendly suggestion.

Example 4

Personal information

a. How old are you?

b. How much do you earn?

c. How much did that cost?

d. How many children do you have?

Example 4 – There has been a significant change to the appropriateness of these questions within China itself. In more social and economic developed towns and cities in China these questions are now considered inappropriate.

Example 5

Countless opportunities to access information from the outside world - especially the World Wide Web, English films and popular music has brought with it many linguistic and cultural misunderstanding.

a. Students often make the sign of the cross or clasp their hands and look skyward as if in prayer.

a. These gestures are frequently used by professional sportsmen and women from around the world. Such as in the recently televised coverage of the FIFA 2006 Football World Cup where many of the footballers made the sign of the cross when entering and leaving the playing field and during the game.

b. God, oh my God, Jesus also other milder and stronger expletives.

b. Language learners frequently use these words as an exclamation - swear words which have been picked up from computer games, watching English movies and listening to certain sections of popular English music.

Analysis of Examples

Language learners should have a clear understanding of the possible ramifications of impropriety being misunderstood as disrespectful, rude, offensive or even vulgar in the target language. As you can see from examples 1-5 the way in which people greet one another, give compliments, casual (small talk) interaction, gestures and body language are inappropriate ways to communicate in English. Communicative competence is having 'the knowledge of linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers must have to create and sustain conversational cooperation' (Gumperz 1982, p. 209). Language learners should understand that appropriate polite communicative competence is an inseparable and integral part of social linguistic convention.

On the one hand the examples above underline the emphasis associated with examination results rather than communicative language acquisition in China. As long as students' were able to reproduce grammatical competence 'knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology' (Canale & Swain 1980) in examination situations polite appropriate communicative competence is over looked in daily language use. Example 5 illustrates the common misunderstanding that behaviour, fashionable street jargon and slang acquired from various sources outside the classroom is perceived as speaking and behaving like a 'native' English speaker. On the other hand the examples clearly stress the need for cultural and context awareness in acquiring polite appropriate communicative competence.

It is worth noting; English films broadcast on Chinese television or bought for home viewing (DVD) are either dubbed into Chinese or have Chinese subtitles. Common practice is not to translate offensive slang, jargon or swearing into the actual Chinese equivalent. Milder forms of insults are used in Chinese translation. Parental warning labels or age restriction guidance which appears on book, film and music covers in western countries are not in use in China. Students are often oblivious to the real meaning of many words and gestures they copy and are deeply embarrassed when they discover the impropriety of them.

Introducing politeness into the classroom

Politeness is often presented to language learners implicitly, basically as things they should or should not say and do when interacting in English. Generally presenting politeness as do's and don'ts according to language structure being taught. Appropriate polite interaction is conspicuously reflected in speech acts therefore teachers' could help students understand appropriate polite communication by presenting the do's and don'ts more explicitly in the form of discussion or debate in relationship to target language structure. Should the communicative language structure be related to greetings, the teacher could introduce social context and have the students explore the various forms of greetings in their own cultural and context. Through exploring socially appropriate greetings and communicative variables within the context of their own culture the teacher can then help the students understand appropriate communication in the target language. For example "Hey where are you going?" may be linguistically correct, but not an appropriate polite greeting in English. Understanding polite intercourse and how significantly politeness affects all aspects of day to day social interaction within students own society can lead to furthering a deeper understanding and awareness of politeness in the target language.

Whose politeness

There are many forms and levels of politeness within every country depending on age, education, social statues and employment, the complexities are numerous. When it comes to teaching politeness in the context of TESOL, whose politeness does a teacher present to the language learners. If the teacher happens to be British, politeness will generally be introduced from the teachers own British social cultural background. Should the home country of the teacher be Canada, United States, Australia or New Zealand, like wise politeness will mainly be conveyed from the teachers own perspective. The complexities multiply even more with TESOL teachers from around the world. Harper (2001) 'English, much like other languages such as Spanish, Portuguese or Arabic, for example, can take many forms. Depending on who speaks or writes it and where they do this, there can be great differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar'. English has become the lingua franca – a language extensively adopted by speaker of different languages to communicate- and is used with many variations. Taking Harpers comment to the next step acceptable appropriate polite communication will also appear in many forms. It is important for English learners to be aware that they will not always be communicating with native speakers. Therefore clear polite use of the English language will play an important role in communicative understanding with other language learners also help to avoid communicative misunderstanding.

Effect on learners

Important as it is to help students understand politeness is bound by culture, context and socially accepted norms within their own language community as well as in English. It is equally important for a teacher not to alienate students by presenting politeness in such a way that implies criticism or in any way that devalues accepted norms of the students' native culture. '…one of our primary tenets should

be the highest respect for the languages and cultures of our students' Brown (2000). With this in mind teachers' should introduce politeness in a non-judgemental manner, in a way that does not judge or put value one culture's socially accepted norms above the other. Creating a positive none threatening environment in the classroom for students to discuss politeness in their own culture and in English which Kramsch (1993) describes as a "third culture" of the language classroom—'a neutral space that learners can create and use to explore and reflect on their own and the target culture and language'.

As students explore polite norms within their own culture, awareness of variances become evident as shown in example 4 personal information, "how old are you", "how much do you earn", "how much did that cost" and "how many children do you have", were considered norms of interaction in China. In recent years there has been a shift in Chinese society, with certain social sectors perceiving these questions as inappropriate. The emergence of conflicting ideas of appropriateness' within students' own cultural norms can be a positive learning curve for the students. Opening the door of cultural awareness, understanding and acceptance of not all people are the same even within their own culture. This can generate a new approach to the target culture viewing it more explicitly.

Raising teachers and students awareness

When teachers raise students awareness of their own culture norms teachers should also be mindful of their own cultural awareness. Not only is this a challenge for the students but also for the teacher. Cultivating openness to new and challenging ideas in the language classroom the teacher has a prime platform to demonstrate respect, understanding and acceptance of different cultural points of view. This can be further exhibited by introducing information from various countries around the world not just the target languages. For instance when talking about meeting and greeting people, inform the students of etiquettes from other countries - such as Japan where it is custom for people to bow to each other or France where people kiss both cheeks. Ask the students if they know of any other country's greeting customs. Viewing the world from a language classroom and embarking on not only a linguistic journey but also on a global awareness journey. Students learning English in many countries will in the future use English with other second language learners, perhaps someone from China will be communicating with someone from Brazil or someone from Costa Rica will be communicating with someone from Poland. Guiding the students to recognise behaviour and 'speech acts are not comparable across cultures' (Richards and Schmidt, 1980). Awareness and openness to differences in culture and understanding that communicating with another English language learner may be different from communicating with a native English speaker.

Conclusion

Given the enormity and complexity that surrounds cultural politeness in language teaching and learning, this paper has only touched the tip of the iceberg. Politeness cannot be separated from culture and appropriate norms, this is a clear indication of the importance of cultural and context awareness in teaching and learning English. If the aim of language learning is communicative competence - the language learner can function effectively and appropriately in the target language- then culture and context awareness must play a main role in language teaching. Teaching culture in China, maybe in other countries, has generally aimed at a few lessons on western holidays such as Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas, food, hobbies and the like, but it is not enough. Though these maybe interesting for students, but polite appropriate communicative language means more than eating turkey at Christmas and remembering to say thank you for a gift. It means understanding appropriate behaviour in a given situation, and knowing what is appropriate to say to whom. Day-to-day appropriate communicative norms must be understood by the learners. Therefore language teaching must implement a holistic approach to culture, context and propriety. Every aspect of language interaction that is taught must incorporate culture, context and polite appropriate language awareness in a none-intrusive manner. Language teachers training must address and include the necessity of culture, context and appropriate language awareness in the acquisition of communicative competence. Instead of the idea of culture as a separate entity to language competence, culture should be an integrated and a consistent part of language teaching and learning. Polite communication will not be obtained until and unless linguistic theory which plays an important role in teaching ideology and methodology emphasise the role of culture and context in English language learning and teaching. Teacher ability and understanding of language teaching and learning must be raised to a higher level of competence in China for communicative competence to be realised.

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