

Politeness is More than “Please”

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Level

Intermediate

Time

Two one-hour lessons (for a class of fifty students)

Resources

Business letters in English and the students' native language, authentic if possible

Goal

To learn some politeness strategies in English

Description of the Activity

These activities were designed for a class of Japanese students. As a schema building task, I began by asking the students why people want to be polite, how people use words to be polite, and when and to whom people should be polite. Each group thought of an answer and I put these answers on the board. This helped the students remember concepts of politeness that they had learned in high school, such as the use of modals. The students also were able to find some new vocabulary words (“respect,” “deference,” “honorific”) which were helpful in the discussion. When we looked at the answers, I was able to point out some cultural differences, particularly with the answers to the question of when and to whom we should be polite. For example, most groups said that we should be polite to older people, and I told them that this was true only for a significant age difference, not one of one or two years as is true in Japan. I introduced the ideas of “friendliness” and “formality.” Sometimes people are polite by being respectful of others and formal, and sometimes people are polite by being friendly and making someone feel like part of the group.

After this I passed out business letters, two in English and one in Japanese, and asked the class to compare them. (Two are in English so that students can see the common elements). The students were first asked to find all the differences in the letter, then to list the polite phrases in

all three letters, and finally to state the differences they found in politeness in the two letters.

When they looked over the two English letters, the students were able to find polite phrases such as, “Please feel free to contact me,” which occurred in both letters. When they were asked about differences in politeness, the students observed that Japanese letters use many fixed phrases that would not be used in ordinary conversation, but English letters used everyday language. They also saw that the English letter uses polite phrases only when making a request, whereas the Japanese letter uses them in every sentence. One group also found that the Japanese letter apologizes many times, where the English letter has many expressions of thanks. I called their attention again to the ideas of friendliness and formality and asked them find the friendly and formal elements of the letters. They found no examples of friendliness in the Japanese letter, but in the English letter they thought that the use of everyday language and the inclusion of my name (as the addressee) were friendly, whereas the use of modals when making a request was formal.

For the next lesson, we studied how and when to use indirect expressions. I gave them a list of two columns. One consisted of indirect expressions like these: I don’t think that dress flatters you; The end of the line is behind me; I think I’m going to be busy that day. The other list was of their more direct equivalents: You look fat; Don’t push in front of me; I don’t want to go to your house for dinner. The students were asked to match each list and then give a situation in which they would use each expression. Many students quickly wrote that the indirect expressions should be in used in more formal situations, and the direct expressions would be used with people one knows, so I asked them to give a little more thought to their answers--e.g., would you really tell a close friend that you didn’t want to visit them? They finally decided that there were some expressions that were so direct that they could be used only when joking with a close friend, or when the situation was dangerous (“don’t push in front of me”) or when they were very angry at someone. I then asked them to make their own direct and indirect statements.

Procedure

1. Write these questions on the board and ask students to answer them, alone or in groups:

Why should we be polite?

How should we be polite?

When and to whom should we be polite?

Write the answers on the board and discuss which answers would be the same if given by a native speaker of English.

2. Give the students three business letters, one in their native language and two in English. If possible, the letters should all have the same content. Request letters are a good choice. Ask the students to note general differences in the two letters (placement of the address, etc.), to write down polite expressions in both letters, and to think about the difference between the two sets of polite expressions. Discuss answers or write them on the board.
3. Give the students a page with six direct and six indirect expressions to match.
4. Ask the students to guess the situation and the speakers for each situation.
5. Give students a direct expression and a situation, and have them write an indirect equivalent.

Rationale

This lesson was designed for students who know some polite expressions, but whose concept of politeness differs a great deal from the North American English concept. Most students learn in high school that modals are used for politeness, but the concept of what situations to use them in is not addressed. When I first had students write business letters in my class, they were able to use the polite expressions I taught them, but they also showed evidence of pragmatic transfer in their letters, as when they began, “It is very rude of me to write to you this way.”

This lesson is designed to make students aware of some important aspects of North American politeness. First, they learn that politeness cannot be conveyed by simply translating polite phrases into another language. Second, they learn a very simplified version of Brown and Levinson’s positive and negative politeness, here called “formality” and “friendliness.” (Brown and Levinson, 1987). I frequently hear from my students that, “You don’t have to be polite in

English.” It is important for them to understand that sometimes being friendly or informal IS a way of being polite. At the same time, they should not get the impression that positive politeness or friendliness is the only way to be polite in English, since both positive and negative politeness exist in all languages. All three of the letters I used made requests. My students were able to see that there were some elements of the letter that made it more personal and friendly, such as using my name. At the same time, they noted that polite language that they had learned in high school was used when making the request.

Many Japanese have been taught that one sociolinguistic difference between Japan and the United States is that Japanese are indirect and Americans are direct. I wanted to let them know that being more direct does not necessarily mean that one blurts out one’s opinion regardless of the feelings involved. I did this lesson directly after the politeness lesson so that levels of politeness were still in the students’ minds. The students are guided away from thinking that a direct opinion is automatically all right for friends, and they realize that they really have to think carefully and consider what they feel comfortable saying and hearing.

Alternatives and Caveats

If students are in a class with multiple L1s, the students could look at two business letters in English, and identify the differences between the letters in English and letters in their native languages. Students could also bring in their own letters in their L1. This might take some time to prepare, but some students might have letters from employers, funding agencies, or universities.

I first did the productive part of the indirectness lesson by simply telling students to write a pair of direct and indirect sentences. This doesn’t give an intermediate student enough information, and many of the sentences I was given were either not really indirect or so indirect that I had trouble understanding what the student was trying to say. An advanced student or an ESL student who has been exposed to more natural English might be able to do this. For an intermediate EFL student it works better to give the student a direct expression and a situation, and ask them to “translate” into indirect English.

Reference

Brown, P. and S. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.