

A Study on Politeness Strategies in the Conversational Activities of a Course Book used in a Vietnamese University

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Abstract

In spite of the plethora of literature examining the language features, not many studies were conducted on the relationship between the language and its culture, especially the hidden part of target culture including politeness strategies used commonly in daily social interaction. Drawing on politeness techniques in communication theory, this paper reports on the findings of a descriptive research which was designed to investigate the positive and negative politeness strategies in conversational activities of the course book New English File (Intermediate) by Clive Oxenden and Christina Latham-Koeing with a view to improving the teaching and learning of politeness strategies at Posts and Telecommunications Institute of Technology. A total of 85 utterances appearing in conversations in the book are selected, then grouped into 7 categories to be analysed. It is revealed from the findings that almost negative and positive politeness strategies are employed in conversational activities in the course book. However, positive politeness strategies are more frequently used than negative politeness strategies. Future studies can be carried out with other aspects of politeness strategies, as well as the other books in this series.

Keywords

Politeness Strategies, Communication, Course Book

I. Introduction

At the great speed of developing and expanding, English has now become the most powerful language over the world and has been considered as “a golden key to every door”. Therefore, using English to communicate is a must for everybody. As a matter of fact, to help learners attain the good command of communication, culture plays an indispensable role. Reference [11] states that, “One cannot master a language without profound awareness of its cultural background and in both verbal and non-verbal communication, culture makes itself strongly felt” or author [4] noted that, “To know another language and not his culture is a very good way to make a fluent fool of oneself”. Learners will truly succeed in using English when they must be aware of the relationship between language and culture, especially the hidden part of target culture including politeness strategies used commonly in daily social interaction.

For these reasons, the authors would like to carry out a small-scale study on investigating the positive and negative politeness strategies in conversational activities of the course book New English File (Intermediate) by reference [5] to improve the teaching and learning of politeness strategies in this course book.

The three following questions are going to be addressed:

1. What types of positive politeness strategies are used in conversational activities of the course book “New English File- Intermediate”?
2. What types of negative politeness strategies are used in conversational activities of the course book “New English File- Intermediate”?
3. What are the possible suggestions for effective teaching of politeness strategies?

II. Literature Review

1. Culture and Communication

The term “culture” has been so far defined by many scholars and linguists. In its simplest meaning, culture refers to a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviorism and material objects that members of a society use to cope with their world and with one

another and is transmitted from generation to generation through learning. Culture, in its broad sense, covers all aspects of human life. However, it must be noted that “the essence of culture is not its artifacts, tools or other tangible culture elements but how the members of the group interpret, use and perceive.”, as in [3]. Therefore, Ferrando (cited in Lecture notes of [1]) defined that “Culture is everything that people have, think or do as a member of a society.”

Like culture, there are many definitions of communication with various emphases on different factors. As defined by reference [8] communication is “any process in which people share information, ideals, and feelings that involve not only the spoken and written words but also language, personal mannerism and style, the surrounding and things that add meaning to a message.” It is understood that communication is a process by which we assign and convey meaning in an attempt to create shared understanding.

As the two terms “culture” and “communication” have been cracked thoroughly, another issue that comes to light is the relationship between them. Scholar [12] insightfully notes: “Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed or interpreted. Culture is the foundation of communication”. It is understood that the principles of communication are culturally affected or communication practices are largely created, shaped and transmitted by culture. In contrast, without communication, it would be impossible to preserve and pass along cultural characteristics from one place and time to another. Needless to say, there is an intimate and complex relationship between culture and communication.

Hence, to communicate well in one new language, learners ought to assist with learning a new culture.

2. Politeness

Linguistically, politeness is defined as “the interactional balance achieved between two needs: the need for pragmatic clarity and

the need to avoid coerciveness”, as in [2]. Meanwhile, in terms of cultural aspect, politeness is viewed as “a fixed concept, as in the idea of “polite social behavior” or “etiquette, within a culture”, as in [1]. In another way, it is also possible to specify a number of different general principles for being polite in social interaction within a particular culture.

Cross-culturally, politeness in communication is seen as “a system of interpersonal relation designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange”. As all linguistic actions involve a potential face threat of some kind, it particularly requires the speaker to choose a proper politeness means so that the other’s face is respected. As there are negative face and positive face, there are Negative Politeness (NP) and Positive Politeness (PP), respectively.

3. Positive Politeness and Positive Politeness Strategies

Positive politeness is used to satisfy the positive face of the hearer by approving on including him as a friend or as a member of an in-group. In term of definition of positive politeness, [11] states that “positive politeness is any communicative act (verbal and/ or non-verbal) which is intentionally and appropriately meant to show the speaker’s concern to the hearer, thus enhancing the sense of solidarity between them”

According to [13], a positive politeness strategy “leads the requester to inquire for a common goal, and even friendship”. The tendency to use positive politeness is to emphasize closeness between speaker and hearer. It can be seen as a “solidarity strategy”. This strategy is usually used by people who have known one another in order to indicate common ground and solidarity in which speaker shares hearer’s wants. Thus, the usage of positive politeness is not only to redress the FTA, but also to indicate that speaker wants to come closer to hearer.

According to [11] there are seventeen positive politeness strategies, they are as follows:

- Strategy 1: -Notice, attend to H (her/his interest, wants, needs, goods, etc...)
- Strategy 2: - Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)
- Strategy 3:- Intensify interest to H
- Strategy 4:- Use in- group identify markers
- Strategy 5:- Seek agreement
- Strategy 6:- Avoid disagreement
- Strategy 7:- Presuppose/ Raise/ Assert common ground
- Strategy 8: -Joke to put H at ease
- Strategy 9: -Assert or presuppose S’s knowledge of or concern for H’s wants
- Strategy 10: - Offer/ promise
- Strategy 11: -Be optimistic
- Strategy 12: - Include both S and H in the activity
- Strategy 13: -Give (or ask for) reasons
- Strategy 14: -Assume or assert reciprocity
- Strategy 15: -Give gifts to H
- Strategy 16: -Comfort and encourage
- Strategy 17: -Ask personal questions

4. Negative Politeness and Negative Politeness Strategies

Negative politeness is “redressive action addressed to the

addressee’s negative face: his want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded”, as in [1]. The tendency to use negative politeness forms emphasizing the hearers’ right to freedom. That is why negative politeness strategies are called deference strategies. While positive politeness narrows the distance between interlocutors, negative politeness keeps a distance between them or avoids interfering with other’s personal affairs.

The main focus for using this strategy is to assume that speaker may be imposing by the hearer, and intruding on their space. Therefore, these automatically assume that there might be some social distance or awkwardness in the situation.

According to [11] there are eleven negative politeness strategies, of which the initial ten ones are adopted originally by reference [1], they are as follows:

- Strategy 1: -Be conventionally indirect
- Strategy 2: - Question/ hedge
- Strategy 3: -Be pessimistic
- Strategy 4: - Minimize the imposition
- Strategy 5: -Give deference
- Strategy 6: -Apologize
- Strategy 7: -Impersonalize S and H
- Strategy 8: - State the FTA as a general rule
- Strategy 9: -Nominalize
- Strategy 10: - Go on record as incurring a debt or as not indebted a hearer.
- Strategy 11: -Avoid asking personal questions

5. Previous studies

Reference [7] conducted a study in order to find out what politeness and negative strategies are used by the interviewers in the light of theoretical framework put forward by [1]. The findings show that the interviewers use more positive politeness than negative politeness. He also discussed the tendency or the reasons why the interviewers used certain expressions showing the certain strategies.

In terms of written discourse, author [10] in her research which dealt with the conversations in the novel, entitled Love Match, by Barbara Steiner, indicates that the politeness expressions that are mostly used are the ones that follow Maxim of Quality and Agreement Maxim.

These researches truly contribute to the awareness of communicators in using politeness strategies, especially positive politeness strategies in conversations to achieve communicative purposes.

In Vietnam, to the researchers’ knowledge, there have been considerable researches concerning about finding out politeness strategies in different kinds of course book.

The author [6], in her research, focused on four politeness strategies proposed by [1], [9] and [13] with reference to both English and Vietnamese. The results indicate that the politeness strategies employed in the course book “Interchange” fall into three main types: Positive, Negative and Off-record politeness strategies.

III. Methodology

The research uses descriptive method because this research describes the way politeness strategies are used by someone and provides the answers to the questions of what types of something happened, not why something happened or why someone was involved (explanatory research).

This study has one primary data source which is the course book

“New English File-Intermediate”. The course book was written by [5] and published by Oxford University Press in 1997. The book was designed to develop the communicative ability in real life contexts for learners. This is a general English text which is designed for group classes but which can be effectively adapted for one-to-one teaching. The data of the research are all utterances in conversations appearing in every unit, especially in listening tasks. In total, 85 utterances have been selected. Then all statistics needed for this study are calculated and grouped into 7 categories to be analysed.

There are five steps for data analysis:

1. Examining the course book carefully. The researcher examined the course book only three times. All utterances appearing in the units, especially in the listening tasks, are picked up.
2. Setting up the contexts, and discussing with colleagues, the supervisor to find out whether these statements are “natural” and “polite”.
3. Classifying the politeness strategies based on the framework proposed by [1] and [11]
4. Consulting with supervisor, discussing with colleagues
5. Interpreting the data.

IV. Findings and Discussions

1. Occurrence frequency of positive, negative and mixed politeness strategies in “New English File, intermediate”

For analysing the data and for answering the first research question, the researcher used the theory about politeness strategies from Brown and Levinson [1] and [1], saying that politeness strategies are the strategies that are used to minimize or avoid the face threatening acts that a speaker makes.

The frequency of politeness strategies used in the course book is presented in the table below.

Table 1: The statistics of positive and negative and mixed politeness strategies

Positive politeness strategies		Negative politeness strategies		Mixed politeness strategies	
Sum	Percentage	Sum	Percentage	Sum	Percentage
52	55.9	39	41.9	2	2.2

The statistics are converted into Pie chart 1 as follow:

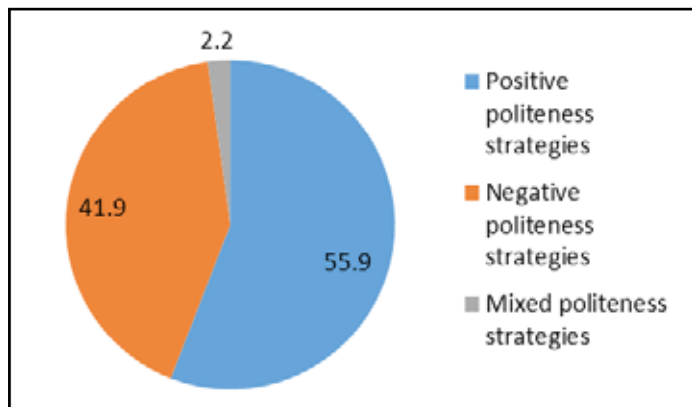


Fig.1: Frequency of positive, negative and mixed politeness strategies

It can be seen from the chart that the percentage of positive politeness strategies employed in this book is very high, in contrast to the low frequency of mixed politeness strategies with only 2.2 percent.

It can infer one significant thing from this figure that the course is structured and designed with more positive politeness strategies expressed implicitly through utterances in conversation than negative or mixed politeness strategies. This seems to suggest that in social interaction or daily conversations people tend to show their attention or concerns or interest to others to narrow the distance between S and H to attain social harmony.

Positive politeness strategies in conversational activities in seven units of the course book “New English File, intermediate”

In order to see the positive politeness strategy used in the course book, table 2 is presented.

Table 2: The statistics of positive politeness strategies

The statistics are converted into Figure 2 as follows:

No	Positive politeness strategies	Number of occurrence	Percentage
1	Notice, attend to hearer (his interest, wants, needs, goods)	1	1.9%
2	Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)	0	0%
3	Intensify H’s interest	0	0%
4	Use in-group identity markers	5	9.6%
5	Seek agreement	18	34.6%
6	Avoid disagreement	5	9.6%
7	Presuppose/raise/assert common ground	10	19.2%
8	Joke	3	5.8%
9	Assert speaker’s knowledge of and concern for hearer’s wants	3	5.8%
10	Offer, promise	1	1.9%
11	Be optimistic	0	0%
12	Include both S & H in the activity	1	1.9%
13	Give or ask for reasons	2	3.8%
14	Assume or assert reciprocity	1	1.9%
15	Give gifts	0	0%
16	Encourage	1	1.9%
17	Ask personal questions	1	1.9%

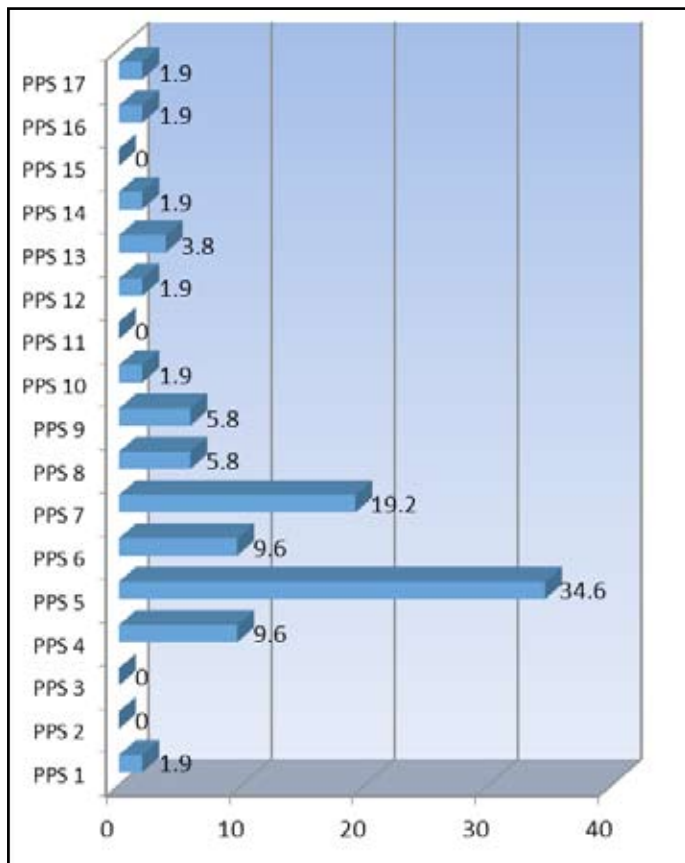


Fig. 2: The frequency of positive politeness strategies

It can be seen that the most preferable positive politeness strategy is strategy 5 (Seek agreement) with 34.6 percent. The S uses this strategy in conversations to claim the common ground with H to seek agreement by mentioning to “safe topics”, repetition or employing minimal encouragers as: “Yeah”, “quite”, “definitely”, “absolutely”, “wow”, “can’t be better”, “oh, no”, “that’s surprise”, “I can’t believe it”, “thanks God”, etc.

Let’s take the following as examples:

E.g: A: Anyway, it’s best to get to know Paris first.

B: Yeah! It’s a big city.

(New English File, intermediate, unit 2, Track 2.18/p.32)

3. Negative politeness strategies in conversational activities in seven units of the course book “New English File, intermediate”

In order to see the negative politeness strategy used in the book, Table 3 is presented.

Table 3: The statistics of negative politeness strategies

The statistics are converted into Figure 3 as follows:

No	Negative Politeness Strategies	Number of occurrence	Percentage
1	Be conventionally indirect	11	28.2%
2	Question, hedge	18	46.2%
3	Be pessimistic	1	2.6%
4	Minimize the imposition	1	2.6%
5	Give deference	3	7.7%
6	Apologize	4	10.3%
7	Impersonalize S & H	1	2.6%

8	State the FTA as the general rule	0	0%
9	Nominalize	0	0%
10	Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H	0	0%
11	Avoid asking personal questions	0	0%

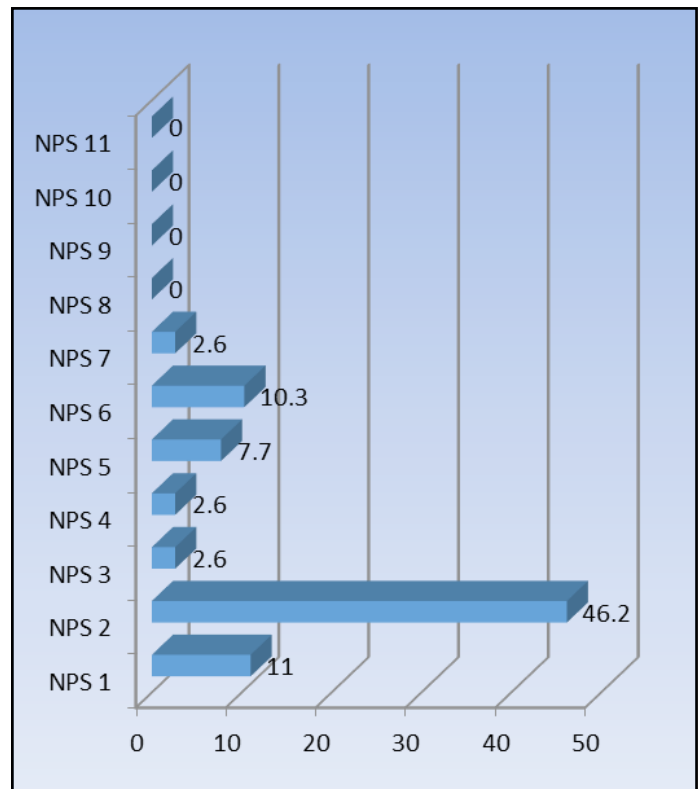


Fig 3: The frequency of negative politeness strategies

According to the chart, negative politeness strategy 2 (question, hedge) is by far the most widely used strategy, with 46.2 percent. This is more than twice the percentage of other strategies. This strategy enjoins the speaker to question or hedge such assumptions. It is commonly used to make a hearer less threatened, more polite. This strategy derives from the want not to presume and force oneself on a hearer. A hedge can be a word, phrase such as: “sort of”, “kind of”, “rather”, “think”. Let’s take some examples into consideration.

E.g: - Well, as you probably know, a lot film Schindler’s List was shot in Krakow.

(New English File, intermediate, unit 6, track 6.6/p.91)

- I think there’s something more important to talk about right now.

Generally, the findings show that positive politeness strategies are preferred to negative politeness strategies with 55.9 % and 41.9 % respectively. Notably, positive politeness strategies 2, 3, 11, 15 and three negative politeness strategies: 2, 1 and 6 do not appear in the conversations in the course book. It seems that in English speaking countries when communicating communicators tend to use positive politeness strategies to narrow the distance between S and H with the aim of making harmonious atmosphere.

V. Conclusion

The study is an attempt to describe and systematize politeness

strategies in the light of theoretical framework proposed by [1] and [11]. Besides, the author tries to provide readers with a thorough and brief overview of theory to find out the types of politeness strategies employed in this course book. In addition, after the illustration of the methodology used to collect and analyse data, reasonable discussions are to be offered to each of the politeness strategies established. The findings show that almost negative and politeness strategies are employed in conversational activities in the course book. However, positive politeness strategies are more frequently used than negatives politeness strategies.

Although the study has offered some insightful findings, like many other studies, there are some limitations. The research only deals with negative and positive politeness strategies. Moreover, the study only focuses on one book in its series of four books. Therefore, all utterances picked out are restricted; this clearly affects the validity of the research results.

It is hereby suggested that a further study be carried out in relation to the other aspects of politeness strategies, such as bald on record, off record in this book as well as the other books in this series.

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