

Abstract:

The Didactic Aspects of Politeness Strategies in Online Written Interactions of E-Learning

Abderrazak BEDDIAF^{1,*}, Abdelkader BEDDIAF²

¹ University of Khenchela, (Algeria)beddiaf.abderrazak@univ-khenchela.dz

² University of Khenchela, (Algeria)abdelkader.beddiaf@univ-khenchela.dz

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Virtual education provides space for interaction. Accordingly, the characteristics of the correspondences must respond to certain didactic considerations and correspond to given pedagogical communication constraints, whose politeness strategies make it possible to boost group interaction in a collaborative context. Indeed, our aim is to analyze the use and value of politeness strategies, in didactics regards, through their frequency and manifestation that are supposed to guarantee dynamicity and harmony of the e-learning situations in terms of interaction and collaboration.

Key words: *Online teaching (e-learning), didactics, interaction, politeness strategies, speech acts, ICTs.*

1. Introduction

A key feature of communication, as indicated by Ünsar, is the exchange that always happens between two people, a sender and a receiver. This exchange plays a decisive role in the interaction and group or individual harmony in both the social and academic life (2014), in order to achieve the objectives set from the outset and which affect language use in terms of anchoring politeness strategies, i.e., opening and closing greetings.

The teaching-learning process takes place in various forms and ways. Teaching methodologies and methods vary considerably based on human, environmental and technological factors as well as the nature of the discipline in question; and so do indeed differ the learning modalities and modes. Education as a process involving at least two parties (teachers and learners) is of different types/modes. Besides the traditional face-to-face type of instruction we have its counterpart lying on the opposite pole of the scale: distance learning. Somewhere in between exists blended learning/teaching as yet another mode of education which combines both computerized/virtual learning and in-person teaching. Online teaching (e-Learning), which has forged a dimension of remarkable dynamics as from the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak—or more precisely as of the first lockdown—has become an integral part of the institutional framework for the development and in pursuit of sustainable education; and this obviously includes and applies to foreign language teaching as well.

* Corresponding author.

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In fact, Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (2006) emphasize that the pragmatic dimension of language requires considering certain forms, including forms of politeness in the process of interacting in a specific environment, such as the professional and academic environments. In view of the foregoing, we were thus led to pose the following three questions, to which answers are sought throughout this paper:

1. How does the expression of politeness guide the quality of learning and frame the relationship between the different categories of interlocutors (teachers and learners) in the speech act?
2. What types of politeness strategies do the interactants (teachers and learners) use more?
3. What is the effect of distancing on the use of politeness strategies in interaction during a web-based teaching/learning class?

To answer these queries, we will focus on a corpus of distance courses held on the Zoom platform with EFL Master 2 students. However, it is necessary to take into account the status of the teacher and his learners in order to detect the impact of power relations on the language used in online education, and where the relevance of the expressions turns out to be a contextual ideology (Fairclough, 1995).

2. Interaction in E-Learning, Politeness Strategies and Rules

In her 2013 Communication Computer Mediation (CCM) study, Bou-Franch examined a collection of 30 emails of her Spanish students. Her study encompassed relational types of deference and solidarity in opening and closing expressions of the e-mails. A posteriori, she found that the levels of social and interpersonal communication were high.

Also, much has been said about the use of politeness formulas in electronic technology through messages. Bou-Franch (2011) carried out an exhaustive study in order to investigate the question in which the institutional power of the interactants involved in the emails throughout the interaction showed an effect on empirical opening and closing expressions of emails. She reviewed short emails in Spanish, focusing on opening and closing email greetings. The results indicated that discursive functions are designed on the basis of social and interactive considerations regardless of technologies, highlighting the notion of “contextual variability”. Moreover, Bou-Franch (2013) tried to examine the stylistic aspect which tends towards informality, and which takes into account the politeness orientations of speakers of different cultures. By analyzing a corpus of 140 emails written in Spanish, sent by undergraduate students to their teachers, the results underlined the complex character of formality and informality inherent in pragmatic constraints. Besides, it was admitted, following the same line of analyses, that the e-mails of the senders displayed high rates of formality as well as an indirect and conventional character of politeness strategy (Bou-Franch, 2013).

In light of such insights, the e-learning model is manifesting itself more and more in the mainstream academic context over the recent years as a regular teaching/learning mode, and has accordingly been introduced and adopted in many institutions. This mode of teaching has lately had a major impact on all aspects of academic contexts, especially on our perception of the relationships in the academic environment and what affects it. As a result, the new technological implementations and the means adopted in education (such as Moodle, Zoom, Google Meet, and other systems and videoconferencing platforms) have marked their manifest influence on communication settings in teacher-learner relationships. This type of CCM has already become, in the view of Herring (1996), an essential mode of communication having modified the notion of time and space; CCM is of two

forms, it can be either synchronous (in real time, i.e., happening at the same time), or asynchronous (in deferred time, i.e., not happening at the same time).

Having become the style of interpersonal and academic interaction, web-based learning is the form of CCM that demands adherence to the rules of politeness and good manners. According to the speech acts theory, it appears that the main function of virtual speech acts is to grant meaning to interactions specific to each speech situation. An act of enunciation during a social encounter—being institutional in our case here— between the teacher and the learners allows to ensure flexible and successful relationships between the interactants (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1990), but also to optimize performance in terms of teaching and learning. Knowing this, the expression of politeness would offer the possibility of learning in harmony and would facilitate learning.

3. Didactic Constraints of Good Manners

The relations of distance in the statutory influence that this study explores categorize the interlocutors into three types in the teaching/learning process:

- from teacher to learner (ascendant)
- from learner to teacher (descendant)
- from learner to learner (horizontal)

It should be noted that virtual interactions fulfill well-defined functions, especially within an institutionalized context. Such collective and collaborative exchanges are peppered with a particular use of politeness formulas as a communication code that ensures reinforced social cohesion. Indeed, Lakoff (1975) asserts that politeness was developed and sponsored by societies in order to reduce friction in interpersonal interactions. Similarly, Leech (2014) clarifies that the same variable, i.e. politeness, is an observed constraint in human communicative behavior that influences people, thus reducing communication conflicts and maintaining a semblance of communicational normality. What is more, polite behavior, in the belief of Watts (2003) who sees politeness as a considerably controversial subject in pragmatics, sociolinguistics and communication ethnography, is not innate, just like etiquettes and appropriate behavior. Individuals need to acquire this virtue by means of socialization.

Actors/Internet users immersed in a teaching/learning context, and who rub shoulders during situations of online interaction and collaboration, show that politeness is virtually translated by usual and recurring expressions including greetings, thanks, apologies, wishes, encouragement, request, whose strategies vary between valorization, recognition, avoidance, and repair.

Many researchers have shown that e-learning has become one of the main recognized means of teaching/learning and has an effect on acquisitional performance (Gimenez 2000; Waldvogel, 2007; Rogers, 2003).

4. Methodology

As previously stated, e-learning has emerged as a recognized mode of education, significantly more especially after the 2020 world pandemic crisis. According to Herring (1996), this wide field of information exchange consists of transmitting messages that can be received immediately (synchronous CCM), or consulted at a later time (asynchronous CCM).

Conducted using a corpus of online sessions held via Zoom with EFL Master 2 students at the university of Khenchela, the present study led to conclusive results by identifying the use and value of politeness strategies through their frequency and their manifestation in online learning. Concerned with chats, the study included a corpus of 168 internal online messages via Zoom (n =

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168). The interlocutors provided a homogeneous corpus linked to their collected and transcribed interactions. The corpus of exchanges collected was then analyzed on the basis of speech acts, politeness strategies and the expressions of openings and closings in the teaching/learning acts. Naturally, these factors are defined accordingly by aspects such as the academic context characterized by the officiality of the exchange, placing each interactant in a precise status on the chessboard. These variables seem imposing and affect, a priori, the expression of the linguistic politeness of the interlocutors involved, together with other variables such as the level reached, the distance and the institutional context.

A wide range of this total of written traces represents the exchanges between the teacher and his learners. It is to note that some messages have been overlooked/deleted due to the fact that they were of a private and confidential nature, or otherwise irrelevant. All other messages related to didactic interactions were taken into consideration.

A social-pragmatic approach was adopted to carry out the study, using speech acts (Searle, 1969) and theories of politeness or strategy of universal politeness according to the research of Brown and Levinson (1987), and also by virtue of their communication functions, alongside fundamental needs such as acceptance and freedom (Sifianou, 1999), or the notion of face as recognized by specialists in conversation analysis.

The initial message analysis (n=168) was performed in two stages. Initially, for classification and categorization aims, we engaged in a general operation of diagonal reading. This qualitative insight made it possible to code the content of the messages in terms of their communication and speech act functions. The use of universal politeness strategies was classified in terms of positive and negative politeness strategies according to the receiver's perception, and the interlocutors' type of requests (interrogatives, negatives, questions direct, declarative). Subsequently, the messages were coded according to the types of greetings and closing expressions. Our method of analysis allowed us to define a taxonomy of pragmatic data, which led to the apprehension of language use between the different categories of participants on the platform employed (ascending, descending, horizontal).

5. Data Analysis and Findings Discussion

To begin with, while directives as the most popular feature used by the interactants amounted to 45%, the main communication function identified in the corpus of 168 messages sent by the participants providing information represented more than half (55%) of the functions of the act of language (Table 01). These two types of communication functions represented the two dominant orientations in the interactants' messages as it is derived from the analysis of the corpus.

Table 01:

Communication function in messages

Type	Form	Number (N)	Rate (%)
Provide specific information		47	55%
Looking for information		25	30%
Request for information	ex. Could you/Tell me about	25	
Directives		52	45%

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Request for action	Polite imperative	30	
suggestion	Declarative	17	
advice	Imperative	10	
Commissives		7	7%
promises		7	
Expressives		12	14%
excuses		7	
acknowledgement		5	
Invitations	For online sessions (formulated as questions)	6	5%

In addition, it was necessary to distinguish, in terms of status, communicative events. Interestingly, it was found that the main communication function, namely providing information in a horizontal interaction, scored a percentage of 47% (Table 02).

Table 02:

Communication function in messages sent in the chat box by pair

Speech acts	Student-Student (N)	Student-Student (%)	Student-Teacher (N)	Student-Teacher (%)	Teacher-Student (N)	Teacher-Student (%)
Providing information	27	47%	17	32%	15	30%
Request for information	9	14%	19	34%	7	12%
Directives	13	22%	11	21%	19	38%
Commissives	7	12%	0	0%	0	0%
Expressives	3	2%	7	11%	9	16%
Invitations	5	4%	3	2%	3	4%
Sum	64		57		53	

It is remarkable that the *information function* used mainly by learners when requesting information from their teacher is at the rate of 34%. The teacher, being the superior in the academic virtual meeting, had used more directives than the other participants (learners), this runs to 38% of the acts. A final unexpected result dictated by the conclusions of speech acts is related to expressive acts, where the teacher holds the highest percentage: a rate of 16%.

Furthermore, the results indicated that the learners mainly used the formula “the imperative + please” (Table 03).

Table 03:

Distribution of frequencies of the Imperative in the messages

	Number (N)	Rate (%)
Imperative	30	23%
Imperative + please	45	50%
Imperative + cordial expression	3	4%
Imperative + I’d like	9	12%
Imperative + please if you	7	10%
Sum	129	

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Male and female learners consistently used the bare minimum in half (50%) of their messages, they used *please* and the “imperative” in the majority of their messages (Table 3).

Table 04:

Synoptic of the distribution of requests made according to power distance relationships in number and percentage

Forms	Student-Student (N)	Student-Student (%)	Student-Teacher (N)	Student-Teacher (%)	Teacher-Student (N)	Teacher-Student (%)
Imperative	40	51%	35	45%	50	60%
Interrogative	36	41%	50	58%	30	33%
Declarative	20	12%	12	7%	28	17%
Other forms	1	3%	2	4%	0	0%
Sum	97		99		108	

In general, the teacher mainly used imperatives in his electronic messages to the students (Table 04). A high rate (58%) of interrogative requests were identified in student-teacher chat correspondences. Looking at the results on positive politeness strategies in terms of gender, in the feminine, they are used more in the messages retained compared to boys. They used 58% of occurrences against 43% used by their male counterparts (Table 05). In fact, between the politeness strategies of the learners (male and female), it should be noted that we recorded a slight variation. Negative politeness strategies, in general, were the most used compared to positive politeness strategies.

Table 05:

Gender-hierarchy and the use of positive politeness strategies in emails

	Female fellow 'Ff'	Male fellow 'Mf'	Teacher 'T'
Submit a notification	3	3	3
Show interest in interlocutors	0	1	0
Promise, offer	1	2	1
Request or provide reasons	2	1	3
Messages (N)	9	7	5
Rate (%)	50%	47%	78%

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Considering the effect of social distance in view of status, striking results have revealed that it plays quite a significant role in these interpersonal written-mode interactions between teachers and learners. The teacher had in the main used indirect (negative) strategies of politeness when addressing the learners whose presence is not systematic (those students whose passivity is noticeable or whose absences are frequent), and used direct strategies of politeness considerably more positive with the more interactive students (Table 06).

Table 06:

Impact of social distance and status on the use of politeness

		Positive	Negative
Male fellow 'Mf'	CFm (N=3)	9	7
	DFm (N=3)	6	10
Female fellow 'Ff'	CFf (N=3)	5	4
	DFf (N=2)	4	5
Teacher 'T'	CS (N=3)	9	7
	DS (N=2)	5	9

As shown in the table above (Table 06), male learners frequently made use of politeness strategies with their close fellows (CF), while the positive politeness strategies that appear in their written records towards their peers demonstrate the nature of social ties (distant fellow) and the divisions that translate the supposed distance in their interactional exchanges. Furthermore, female fellows used negative politeness nine (09) times in nine (09) messages, while in the case of a close fellow, positive politeness appeared in five (05) occurrences for each strategy. Likewise, disproportionate numbers were recorded for the teacher. Such figures in certain messages of the interactants draw the relational contours whether distant or close. This brings out the intrinsic borders and a linguistic zone characterized by slightly familiar etiquettes, but has the merit of being practiced with frankness.

Furthermore, these findings imply a certain degree of caution, and highlight the social distance that weaves its way between interactants, and which conspicuously affects the type of politeness strategy observable in electronic exchanges during the process of e-learning. Politeness being a code of balanced exchanges and mutual respect marks a social valuation of the interactants during specific enunciation situations (Maingueneau, 1979).

Considering the status function, the teacher mainly used negative politeness strategies in all the messages sent.

A close examination of the results pertaining to closing greetings between the different categories revealed a frequent use of a greeting plus the title (hi, hello + sir) on the side of the learners. It is even more common to employ abbreviations, like 'Mr'. In addition, the teacher follows the civility with a first or last name of the learner (a greeting + a first/last name). This correspondence was the main trend in almost all the messages considered (Table 07).

Table 07:

Use of greetings in correlation with statutory levels

Salutations	Student-Student	Student-Teacher	Teacher-Student
Greeting (without mentioning the names)	1	1	0

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Greetings + name	15	15	12
Title + name	2	2	5
Names	2	0	1
Sum	20	18	18

As far as closing expressions of exchanges are concerned, it was again found that for approximately all participants, informal closing plus title (sir) for learners and informal closing plus first or last name concerning teacher (goodbye, see you tomorrow, see you next, thank you, etc.) was the main trend (Table 08).

Table 08:

Using Status-Based Closing expressions

The goodbyes	Student-Student (N)	Student-Teacher (N)	Teacher-Student (N)
Formal closing + name	11	13	10
Informal closing + name	2	0	1
Acknowledgement + name	3	3	3
Without closing	0	0	0
Sum	16	16	14

The figures recorded emphasize a conditional politeness in the electronic correspondences among/with the rest of the interactants. This highlights the big influence exerted through status and its weight in the process, both directly and indirectly. It goes without saying that the learners were well aware of their teacher's *superior status*, and were as such rather cautious and discreet in messaging. Therefore, for most learners, it is a question of expressing sympathy towards the teacher through an imposed barrier linked to linguistic zone and distance.

This explains the students' efforts during didactic activities, so as not to show deliberate intimacy, or inappropriate behavior, which is not acceptable or formally appropriate in the institutional academic spirit. However, in the course of learning, a certain degree of contact proximity, or mutual familiarity, happens to be established anyway during the electronic communications. It should be remembered that, with regard to the teaching/learning of foreign languages in particular, the action-oriented approach recommends a relational centralization on the learners.

Subsequently, on the whole, our results and conclusions are consistent with previous research and what the cited studies in this paper have found and reported; following from this as such is that e-learning is essentially based on a manifest trend of politeness strategies. We found that learners used more indirect negative politeness and interrogative requests in their interactions with their teacher than the reverse.

Similarly, the effect of status power was also an influential and decisive factor alongside the formal and institutional contextual factor.

6. Conclusion

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Our study on the crystallization of politeness in the verbal interactions of a written mode in e-learning seems capable of providing facilitation in terms of fluidity of the online interaction. The collaboration space in the ICT environment gives the possibility of didactic substitution, allowing the accomplishment of collaborative tasks in a virtual group. Communication in a virtual group with a didactic vocation has become an easy task due to the relevance of technological innovations; e-learning has changed tremendously.

This study was thus concerned with the examination of teacher-students' online written exchanges by means of scrutinizing the use of politeness expressions and strategies in distance courses' interactions and their role of pragmatism in achieving the desired didactic outcomes, in order to help identify the most salient factors likely to shed light on the topic in question. Politeness proved a healthy framework used to explore the didactic and pragmatic functions of communicative genres realized through chat and embedded in an online teaching/learning process.

At the end of our study conducted on politeness strategies in e-learning, we have drawn a conclusion which states that e-learning is likely to generate illusions, whether physical or emotional, thus making it possible to grant a form of freedom to learners compared to the face-to-face mode, i.e., face to face with their teachers. Such a conclusion does not mean that teachers are to be held responsible for the differentials created between online and offline classes, especially considering that their mission lies with the provision of didactic sequences in accordance with an hourly distribution. It is more about the role of the learners to be more autonomous by doing further research and being more actively involved in e-learning interactions. And this, of course, in a spirit of cooperation and appreciation of the other, that is to say, the manifestation of politeness in the teachers-learners relationships far from the divisions imposed by the status of the interactants.

To close with, the domain of e-learning is expanding considerably and this requires increasingly more research on communication in academia and on the factors that affect the use of language in relation to its teaching/learning context/situation. With that in mind, considering narrowed-down terms of reference as regards the present study's scope, it would be preferable for future research to take into account the years spent at university for each participant, in order to decide with more precision and relevance on the degree of influence of the duration that the same participants have on e-learning.

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