Applying the Spencer-Oatey Model for Investigating the Politeness Strategies in EFL Teacher-Student Interactions

ABSTRACT

One of the main goals of learning any language is the ability to communicate, and politeness is considered an important aspect of communication in each language and culture. The main purpose of this study was to investigate politeness strategies that are used in EFL classroom interactions between teachers and students based on the framework of Spencer-Oatey (2008). To this end, students of five EFL classes (N =148) in two cities in Iraqi Kurdistan, Erbil and Sulaimani, were selected and their interactions with teachers (N = 5) were audio-recorded. Transcription of the recorded data revealed that teachers used all the politeness strategies of the Spencer-Oatey model in which equity rights was the most frequent strategy of politeness, while only three strategies of the Spencer-Oatey model were used by the students, which were Identity of Face, Quality of Face, and Equity Rights. Moreover, the results of this study revealed that classrooms in the context of the study are mostly teacher-oriented, teachers manage the classroom, and students mostly speak when they are asked to answer a question. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers attempt further to engage the students and provide situations for more communication.

Key Words: Politeness Strategies, Spencer-Oatey Model, Teacher-student Interaction

1. Introduction

People usually learn a language to communicate with each other. Communicative competence is not only competence in linguistics; it includes socio-cultural, strategic, and interactional competence, among other competences. Socio-cultural, strategic, and interactional competencies are considered pragmatic knowledge.

According to Kasper (1997), pragmatic is defined as awareness of communicative ability, its performance, and its appropriate application in various contexts. The classroom is both a linguistic and social situation, and the context in which participants use different forms of language to build systematic communication and interaction between students and their teacher will lead to students` linguistic improvement (Consolo, 2006). Therefore, for learners of the language to have successful

communication, it is necessary to have pragmatic knowledge and the ability to apply it in their conversations in different contexts (Bachman, 1990).

Based on Seken (2007), people usually find it difficult to express their ideas appropriately in a conversation. Therefore, they need knowledge and awareness of function, meaning, and form, and they have to apply this knowledge in their conversation in order for their intended meaning to be conveyed (Freeman, 2003). Members of a society use politeness to consolidate their relationships and prevent possible conflicts (Rash, 2004).

Politeness is a very significant strategy in classroom interaction and the process of teaching and learning, and it can be used as an instrument in the process of interaction. Politeness has different aspects and strategies. Brown and Levinson (1987) believed that politeness has a face-threatening function and that it can also be used to save the face of the interlocutor. Whereas others, such as Leech (1983), noted that politeness is a norm in communication to avoid offenses that may occur. As it can be seen, there are different politeness strategies in communication. Then learning these strategies is essential for language learners to be successful, specifically in their communication and generally in their language learning process. Moreover, it is crucial to investigate how students use politeness strategies in their interactions with their teachers. To achieve this end, this study is an attempt to investigate politeness strategies in teacher-student interaction in an EFL classroom context based on the Spencer-Oatey model.

This study is considered innovative in the sense that while politeness and politeness strategies have been investigated in previous studies based on different models in different academic settings, so far, to the best knowledge of the researcher, no study has explored politeness strategies in teacher-student interactions in an Iraqi Kurdistan EFL classroom context, based on the Spencer-Oatey model.

1.1. Definitions

Classroom interaction is a process which occurs between teachers and students while having conversations (Hassini, 2006). Classroom interactions should be polite and effective. When interactions in the classroom flows well, the knowledge that is delivered by the teachers will be received by learners well (Haryanto, Weda & Nashruddin, 2018).

Kummer (2005, p.325) regards politeness as 'a diplomatic strategy of communication'. Watts (2005) point out that "politeness itself is a neutral concept, which we use as the label for a scale ranging from plus – through zero – to minus politeness" (p.281). Brown and Levinson (1978) view

politeness as "a complex system for softening face-threatening acts" (as cited in Watts, 2003, p.50).

According to Yule (1996) politeness strategies are utilized by individuals in their social conversations and in the particular contexts, and it is defined as knowing what to say, how to say, when to say, when talking with others. Brown and Levinson (1987: 68-71) described the politeness strategies based how much the speakers and listener reduce the threat while they are speaking.

1.2. Spencer-Oatey's view of rapport management

Spencer-Oatey suggested her rapport management as a method for politeness research, based on previous models of politeness and inspiration in the conversational contract. According to Félix-Brasdefer (2008, p.24), rapport management is "the management of harmony-disharmony during social interaction." Spencer-Oatey (2000) describes two approaches to managing rapport: face management and sociality correct management; face management is divided into two categories: quality and identity of face. The quality of face, according to Félix-Brasdefer (2008), is "the desire for people to evaluate us positively (i.e., Brown and Levinson's positive face) according to our qualities (i.e., competence, appearance)" (p.24). Identity of face is "the desire for people to acknowledge our social identities and roles as, for example, a group leader or close friend" (ibid). Spencer-Oatey (2000) added that sociality rights consists of equity and association rights. The equity rights represent the belief that all people deserve fair behavior, and it is understood if the benefits and costs between the interlocutors are balanced. Sociality rights` second component, namely association rights, is someone's right to have a harmonious relationship with others both affectively and internationally. The theory of Spencer-Oatey based on Félix-Brasdefer (2008) is "an alternative for analyzing sociocultural behavior in social interaction". Rapport management view does not involve "Brown and Levinson's original notion of negative face in which the individual is seen as an independent member of society; instead, group identity captures the notion of an individual who desires to be perceived as a member of the group" (Spencer-Oatey, 2000, p.45). The model, on the other hand, is waiting for enough cross-cultural applicability.

There are few studies based on the Rapport Management Model of Spencer-Oatey (2008). In the one study, Culpeper et al. (2010) surveyed cross-cultural variation in students' impoliteness events. Their quantitative analysis showed that although there were some cross-cultural differences, quality face, equity rights, and association rights were the three most important strategies among

the five strategies of Spencer-Oatey. In another study, Sadri, Allami, and Rezai (2018) investigated the closing structures of telephone conversations in Persian. The results showed that the contextual variables of social distance and status had significant effects on the telephone conversation closing patterns and strategies taken by the participants. Also, the results explained some limitations of the previous politeness models to guide researchers in selecting more complete politeness models. However, there are several other studies that investigated this topics drawing on other theories related to the politeness strategies. For example, Rahayuningsih, Saleh and Fitriati (2020) examined the implementation of politeness strategies and sociological variables affecting the selection of politeness strategies in interactions of Indonesian EFL teacher-students. Classroom discourse analysis was employed in this study as a method of qualitative research. An EFL instructor and 30 learners in two EFL classes took part in the study. Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of politeness techniques was employed to create the study instruments. The data revealed that in classroom engagement, off-records, negative politeness, positive politeness, and bald-on-record were all seen. The instructor mostly employed positive politeness to express unity and establish a strong connection with the learners, bald on recordings to offer plain and unambiguous teaching, negative politeness for reducing coercion, and off record for giving hints. Furthermore, it was shown that sociocultural characteristics such as the degree of imposition, power, and distance impact politeness strategy selection.

In the same line, Fitriyani and Andriyanti (2020) looked at how politeness strategies are used in interactions in an EFL classroom. A descriptive qualitative research approach was employed in this research for investigating the instructor and student politeness strategies in their interactions. This study's data came in the form of utterances, including politeness tactics. The information was gathered via a video-recorded 90-minute English class. According to the results, there were a total of 13 extracts with three politeness strategies: bald-on-record method, negative politeness strategy, and positive politeness approach. In addition, various characteristics including social distance, power, institutional position, and age difference affected politeness strategies used in interactions. Moreover, Kamehkhosh and Larina (2020) in their research compared the views of Persian and British cultures on politeness and how their cultural values influence the way people interact in the family. They concentrated on a few speech acts that are often done in daily interactions, such as complimenting, thanking, asking for a request, and addressing, to examine the politeness and norms methods. A discourse completion test (DCT) and a socio-cultural questionnaire filled out

by 100 Persian and British participants, as well as ethnographic observations, provided the basis for the research. Using identity construction research, discourse and cross-cultural pragmatic analysis, speech act theory, (Im)politeness theory, and the influence of politeness on communication styles as sources of information, the data was examined. Their results show that power, age, and proximity are highly valued in Persian society, while in British culture, equality, distance, and privacy are strongly valued. Whereas the style of child-parent interactions in the British context is quite egalitarian, with children treating their parents as equal, the results reveal that there are important distinctions between communicative styles in bottom-up and top-down contexts in Persian culture, indicating a significant indication of power distance in the Persian context. This study demonstrates that cultural norms are flexible and changing, and that politeness strategies are anchored in behavior ideologies and cultural context.

Finally, Umayah, Putra and Suprianti (2018) explored the interactions of an eleventh grade classroom by teachers and students. Their main findings revealed that the most commonly used strategy of politeness was bald on record, and that students used positive politeness when the first time they met the teacher.

However, the politeness strategies applied by Kurdish teachers and students in their mutual interaction have not been investigated. The following research questions guide this research to reach the main aims of the study:

1. What politeness strategies are used by Kurdish students in teacher-student interactions based on the Spencer-Oatey model?
2. What politeness strategies are used by Kurdish teachers in teacher-student interactions based on the Spencer-Oatey model?
3. What are the most and least frequent politeness strategies used in teacher-student interactions in Iraqi Kurdistan based on the Spencer-Oatey model?

2. **Method**

2.2.Sampling

Because the unit of analysis in this study is the class scenario, sampling is not mainly concerned with individuals but with high schools and English classes. First, some high schools in Erbil and Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan, were chosen through availability (convenience) sampling. Then, five EFL classes in these high schools were selected through convenience sampling. Based on Farhady

(2008), in availability sampling, participants are selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in the research. The number of students was 148, and there were five teachers. Their interactions were audio-recorded for analysis with the consent of the authorities and participants. The classes were 90-minute classes, in which both the students and the English teachers were female.

2.3.Procedure

Each of selected classes was observed for two sessions (about three hours). In line with the objectives of this study, it benefited from the content/document analysis design within a qualitative approach. Content analysis has been defined as "a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding" (Krippendorff, 2018; Weber, 1990) As the name speaks for itself, usually, in this kind of design, the content of an event, scenario, documents, or other kinds of materials is qualitatively analyzed for the recurring themes and patterns to be specified. In the case of this research, the content of audio-recorded EFL classes was analyzed to identify politeness strategies in teacher-student interaction based on the Spencer-Oatey model. In the observations, after getting the consent of teachers and students, their interactions were audio-recorded. To analyze the collected data, content analysis of the transcribed version of the data was conducted. To be more specific, first the verbatim written data was subjected to coding to identify the politeness strategies in teacher-student interactions based on the Spencer-Oatey model. Then, the frequency and percentage of the identified politeness strategies were calculated to identify the most and least frequent politeness strategies used in teacher-student interactions based on the Spencer-Oatey model.

3. Findings

There are two sections in this part. The first section investigates the results for the kinds of politeness strategies employed by the teacher in English class and the second section describes the kinds of politeness strategies applied by students. According to the collected data, 325 statements have been identified. The data consists of 287 statements expressed by the teacher and 38 statements expressed by the students. As mentioned, since the method of data analysis was content analysis audio recorder was used to collect the data. The observations in this research conducted in five EFL classes, so the research findings were presented in several parts. The data, based on the Spencer-Oatey model, is classified into two dimensions of Rapport management: sociality right

management and face management. Face management itself consists of two dimensions, namely quality and identity, while sociality rights involve association rights and equity rights. Some of the examples at the same time can be regarded as more than one strategy of politeness according to the Spencer-Oatey model.

Due to the presence of the researcher in the classroom, a classroom-based research design was utilized. The detailed discussion is as below:

1) Quality of face: is the individuals` desire for evaluating us positively according to our qualities such as competence and appearance.
Examples:
Thank you, Good, Very well! Good job

The results showed that teachers mostly utilized this strategy, especially when the students answered the questions or participated in activities. In some other cases, students also used this strategy to appreciate their teachers for allowing them to do some actions.

2) Identity of face: is the individuals` desire for acknowledging our social roles and identities as, for instance, a close friend or group leader.
Examples:
Can I go out teacher? Here you are teacher (When the teacher enters the classroom), Stand up / sit down, I know that you are a good student….

This strategy is mostly used by students to call their teacher. When students wanted to do something in the classroom, they asked their teachers because they acknowledged the teacher`s role in the classroom. Also, teachers sometimes used this strategy to address students.

3) Equity rights: represents the belief that all people deserve fair behavior, and it is realized when the benefits and costs between the interlocutors are balanced.

Examples:

Volunteers, please. Do you understand me? Speak more slowly, be quiet, please. Are you ready?

Speak louder, please. I'm sorry I am late, Raise your hand to answer

The results showed that this strategy was the most commonly used strategy in the classrooms, especially by teachers. Teachers asked their students to do (or not do) some actions in the classroom to promote equity between all students. For example, teachers asked students to speak slowly when they were working in a group in order for other students to focus on activities, and when students wanted to answer something, teachers asked them to raise their hand. Teachers decided to choose the students who participated the least in activities.

4) Association right: is someone's right for having a harmonious association with others both internationally and effectively.

Examples:

Work in groups, Work in pairs

This strategy was less commonly used by both teachers and students. This strategy was employed by teachers when they wanted their students to have a harmonious relationship with each other. Teachers attempted to do this through group and pair work.

Based on the representation of the data, findings are tabulated for simple presentation of the frequencies of the various types of politeness strategy used in the observations.

Table 3.1

The Frequency of the Use of Politeness Strategy by Teacher

Strategy	Data Number	Percentage
Quality of face	85	29.6%
Identity of face	5	1.8%
Equity rights	180	62.7%
Association rights	17	5.9%

The data in Table 3.1 shows the collected utterances from teachers, which is 287 utterances from all the collected data. As the table shows, equity rights is the most commonly used strategy of politeness by teachers, accounting for more than 60% of all data. On the other hand, the identity of face constitutes less than 2% of collected data, which is the least strategy applied by teachers.

Moreover, the quality of face strategy is used by less than 30% and association rights by less than 6%.

Table 3.2

The Frequency of the Use of Politeness Strategy by students

Strategy	Data Number	Percentage
Quality of face	8	21%
Identity of face	24	63.2%
Equity rights	6	15.8%
Association rights	0	0%

Table 3.2 presents the results of the politeness strategies from 38 utterances by students. According to the table, identity of face is the most frequently used strategy by students, with more than 63% of utterances, while the strategy of association rights is not used by students at all. Other strategies, quality of face and equity rights, are used by students more than 21% and 15%, respectively.

The results of this study do not agree with the findings of Culpeper et al.`s (2010) study, in which the most frequently used strategies by students were quality face, equity rights, and association rights, while in this study, quality of face, identity of face, and equity rights were the most commonly used strategies by students. Moreover, there is a difference between the first strategy of students in this study and Umayah, Putra and Suprianti`s (2018) research, in which positive politeness (quality of face) was the most prevalent strategy. These differences could be interpreted as cultural differences between the participants in this study and those in the above studies.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The main aims of this study were: 1. Identifying politeness strategies utilized by students in teacher-student interactions according to the Spencer-Oatey model; 2. Identifying politeness strategies utilized by teachers in teacher-student interactions according the Spencer-Oatey model; and 3. Identifying the most and least frequent politeness strategies used in teacher-student interactions according to the Spencer-Oatey model.

It seems that both groups of teachers and students tended to be more polite than on other days of the classroom since they knew that they were being observed. However, the observations were typical samples of the real classrooms. As the findings of the current study showed, teachers used all the politeness strategies of the Spencer-Oatey model, and equity rights was the most frequent strategy of politeness by teachers, accounting for more than 60% of all the data, while the identity of face constitutes less than 2% of the collected data. Other strategies that teachers used were quality of face and association rights. On the other hand, students used three of the four strategies of the Spencer-Oatey model. Identity of face is the most used strategy by students, with more than 63% of utterances, while the strategy of association rights is not used by students at all. Quality of face and equity rights are other strategies that are used by students. There is a contradiction in the results of this part with the study of Culpeper et al. (2010), in which the first strategy used by students was quality of face.

The results of this study show that classrooms in the context of the study are mostly teacher-oriented, teachers manage the classroom, and students mostly speak when they are asked to answer a question. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers apply more student-centered approach, attempt further to engage the students, and provide situations for more communication. Finally, it should be mentioned that the results obtained from this study cannot be generalized to other EFL learners and teachers residing in different cities in Iraqi Kurdistan and studying at different levels.

This study considered only five EFL classes in the selected high schools in Erbil and Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan; other studies can work with participants from various contexts and different levels, especially at the tertiary level. Participants in this study were female students. However, the results of similar studies with male participants may have different results. By applying other politeness theories in the same context as well as other contexts, valuable results could be achieved. This research might inspire other researchers for conducting research on politeness strategies in other forms of literary works, including drama and poetry, with the aim of improving discourse studies.

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