Authority Relations and Pragmatic Strategies in Disagreement between ESL Learners

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Abstract

The disagreement in speech act is a pertinent aspect of pragmatics; however it has not been allocated distinction. The primary aim of this article is to investigate how power influences the strategy of politeness in a disagreement scenario. Twenty ESL learners were tested along these lines. They were asked to take a ‘Discourse Completion Test’ and after that they were grouped in accordance with their level of proficiency. The test was based on four commonly prevalent scenarios in which the participants of the research were supposed to disagree with their two colleagues and support entirely differing viewpoints. The research findings revealed the proficiency level and choice of vocabulary in different politeness strategies with different power positions. After a thorough analysis, the researcher reached the conclusion that students should be aware of SL pragmatic rules and they should be well versed in the socio-cultural constraints of speech acts. Simultaneously, they should be fully well equipped with the rules of grammar as it is the basic element for developing good communication skills.

Keywords: Disagreement, Communicative Competence Rules, Strategy, Pragmatics, Discourse.
1. Introduction

“Communicative competence” has attained a unique and prominent position in second language learning. Hymes (1972) emphasizes that while speaking learners should focus not only on accuracy but also appropriateness as it helps them to achieve their communicative goals in the right manner. We use language in different ways while communicating with different people, as Liu (2004) suggests that diversity of speech functions can be used to convey the same meanings. He suggests that the usage of language is thoroughly influenced and constrained by sociological and cultural factors, but at the same time the person’s communicative strategies and discourse styles play a pivotal role in managing and displaying power. For that reason to get hold of politeness in dealings one ought to have a good understanding of these social situations. Showing disagreement is also a very common style, it indicates their dissatisfaction towards their interlocutor. Showing disagreement cannot be avoided, and sometimes it cannot be avoided in daily interaction. It can only be avoided by using politeness strategies.

2. Literature Review

Knowledge of the stratagem of politeness as a part of ESL pragmatics has gained importance in the realm of language acquisition. A vital factor for ESL learners is to attain competency in the field of pragmatics. It is not necessary that fluent speakers, due to their firm grasp of grammar, may also be capable of speaking culturally and socially appropriate language. In fact, it is quite possible that they might lack competency in terms of pragmatics. In every culture politeness is considered as good manners and behavior. The universal assumption of the, ‘politeness theory’ is that several actions of speaking such as criticism, disagreement and requests are inherently intimidating to face. Some actions of speaking are threatening to some extent since they do not regard the wants of ‘saving face’, of the interlocutors. Brown and Levinson’ s study classifies various face-threatening acts into two fundamental levels: (a) Whose dignity is being negatively affected (the addressee’s); secondly (b) Which kind of face is being negatively impacted (positive or negative face). Actions such as, interrupting, criticizing, accusing and complaining usually affect the addressee’s positive face. Similarly, actions like offers, undertakings, oaths etc affect the addressee’s negative face. Following Brown and Levinson’s (1987) work on the speaking actions involved in disagreement, it becomes evident that such speaking acts seem intimidating to the listener’s positive face. This is because of the fact that the speaker enforces his/her opinions or beliefs on the addressee. “Brown and Levinson (1987) propose that when faced with the task to execute an action leading towards face threatening, the addressee should adopt an efficient approach so as to lessen the effect of face threatening. The tactic that a person opts for relies wholly on the weight or intensity of the face threatening situation. In order to gauge the weight, the speaker weighs three variables: the extent of imposition, the authority that the hearer can exercise over the speaker and the social distance.
between them. The aim of positive politeness is to support or enhance the positive face of the listener/addressee. On the contrary, the goal of negative politeness is to exhibit controlled or weaker aggression in response to the listener’s rebuttal. Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that ‘power’ is actually a skewed societal aspect of relative authority in spite of the differing power amongst the interlocutors. They recommend that despite power differences between interlocutors, the speakers of higher status usually try to engage in ‘polite’ tactics as compared to the speakers who belong to a lower status level. It is believed that power is closely correlated to negative politeness, which involves not imposing your will on others and to provide others with freedom/liberty of action or speech. Liu (2005) thinks of power as an acclaimed position, wherein rulers, heads of organizations, managers, professors and even students are adjusted on a scale from powerful to powerless as well as effective to ineffective. The appropriate performance of speech act requires a speaker to have both pragmatic and linguistic knowledge competence of language use. When a person chooses to ignore the societal and cultural norms of speech, it is a face threatening action by him. It has also been observed that the competence deficiency in pragmatics leads towards failure of non-native speakers to communicate successfully. Appropriate usage of language recognized by the relative social status of the addressee, power relations and familiarity level between the participants. Kreutel (2007) shows the analysis of devices employed by ESL learners to execute the speaking action of disagreement. He found that non-native speakers make less use of long winded explanations than native speakers and they usually employ less desirable components. Another investigation was carried out by Honda (2002). He selected three talk shows of Japan in order to study the patterns of conflict conversation, face-to-face. He investigated the expression of disputes and their handling by the communicators. Based on that, this study shows the systematic occurrence of moderator and mitigating action in every episode throughout the program. Takahashi and Beebe (1993) suggest that in a comparative study of Japanese and Americans speaking, Japanese were found to be more direct than Americans whereas Americans used more positive and polite statements particularly during interactions with people of higher status. In contrast, Japanese were more explicit and direct in their disagreement with people of higher status. Nguyen (2009), worked on the Vietnamese and American undergraduate students and she drew out comparisons among the performance exhibited by these two categories. As the research included only undergrads, the behaviors and performance was quite similar. It was observed that both categories preferred to use non conflicting disagreement tactics and avoided conflicting tactics. They mostly expressed their conflict in an indirect way so that the group’s relation would not be affected due to their disagreement. The data also revealed that males of both groups were more direct than the females. The comparison of the two groups revealed that American male and female participants used more politeness tactics than Vietnamese respondents of both genders. Thus it was found that the American students tend to be less aggressive and more indirect than Vietnamese. A contrasting study by Guodong and Jing (2005) compared American English with Mandarin Chinese in terms of strategies of disagreement for politeness. Five situations of disagreement were formulated and the sample chosen for the study were college students based in USA and
china’s mainland. The results of the study showed that, Chinese students are more polite while disagreeing with their superiors as compared to Americans; however, when it comes to the case of peers, both Americans and Chinese use less politeness tactics. The results showed a positive correlation between the alteration of social distance and disagreement rates for Chinese students and there was a negative correlation in the case of American students. Despite the useful data provided by these studies in various cultures, a restricted number of research projects have been carried out in Persian/Iranian context related to the topic under discussion. Rees-Miller (2000) studied university courses and academic debates in the U.S to investigate disagreement patterns. According to the study, professors use more positive politeness devices in their disagreement with their colleagues, who belong to the same profession.

3. Research Questions

The research questions that guided the study were:

1. What is the role of exhibiting authority and politeness strategies of disagreement in Pakistani ESL environment? 2. Which common strategies of disagreement are utilized by ESL learners in the two levels (Certificate and Diploma learners)? 3. How are learners of Certificate level different from those of Diploma level in showing disagreement?

4. Methodology
4.1 Instrument

It is argued that relations of power impact strategies of politeness in performing different speaking acts. To explore Pakistani ESL learners’ use of Politeness Strategies and maintaining Power Relations by them when engaging in ‘disagreement’, a Discourse Completion Test was assigned to the learners of both levels. They were asked to list their immediate responses to four different situations signifying the assigned speaking acts. This test was borrowed from the research of Guodong and Jing (2005) and Takahashi and Beebe. To generate data for this study, two major instruments were incorporated in the study: “Demographic Survey” and a "Discourse Completion Test" The purpose of demographic survey was to gather necessary information about gender, age, marital status, social status, education and ethnicity.

4.2 Participants

This research was conducted in NUML, Pakistan. This university was selected for the project, because this kind of study has not been done earlier in this field. 20 students were selected from the department of English Functional courses, who took the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The participants’ age range was from 18 to 30 years and they belonged to different provinces of Pakistan.
4.3 Design

A survey based approach was used in this study. As elaborated earlier, to discover the relationship between politeness and power, the students in the study were asked to engage in a test. It consisted of four commonly prevalent yet differing situations. After identifying the levels of disagreement between the addresser and addressee the taxonomy from Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) were employed. All the responses were analyzed and compared to Brown and Levinson’s politeness strategies.

5. Data Analysis

The Data was analyzed by using Muntigl and Tumbull’s (1995) taxonomy which discusses the four type’s disagreement: Irrelevancy claim (IC), Challenge (CH), Counter claim (CC), Contradiction and Counterclaim. Aforementioned taxonomy was employed to ascertain the rate of recurrence and sort various disagreement strategies utilized by the Iranian EFL scholars at two different levels of proficiency. It ranks the disagreement types in descending order from most threatening to least with Irrelevancy claim deemed most face threatening, in which the addresser objects the relevancy of previous claim to discussion. It is followed by Challenge (CH), where the claimant is asked to provide evidence supporting his claim. Contradiction (C) is explained as open disagreement to claim but considered comparatively less aggressive since the competency of the addressee is not questioned. Lowest down in the taxonomy is Counterclaim (CC), which works by providing counter arguments. Peter Muntigl (1995). My study involves response to four situations where each response underwent independent quantitative and qualitative analysis. Both Diploma and certificate participants were careful about politeness; however some differences were revealed in their use of contradictory statements and politeness strategies. Results revealed Diploma level as more concerned about power and position of their friends and were thus more apt in using politeness strategies and hence more successful in reducing the undesirable effects of a disagreement. However, certificate level learners are more aggressive and direct in comparison. The two situations discussed previously were similar in the sense that in both settings, the speaker had to disagree with a person of higher standing, with consequential frequent use of counter claims in both scenarios. Elaborating further on the Counter claims, these are the indirect disagreements to the speaker with the situation comprising a higher and lower level speaker. The Diploma group preferred partial agreement and positive remarks i.e. indirect face threatening strategies also known as “Off-record Politeness strategy” discussed by Brown and Levinson in 1987 which removes the speaker from an imposing scenario by making use of indirect language. Brown and Levinson describe disagreement as a threat to the addresser or addressee’s self image, and that rephrasing and minimizing threatening acts constitute politeness. The same was also described by Pearson in 1986, Beebe and Akashi in 1989. The intermediate group employed direct and explicit statements without realizing the needs.
of the situation and the face wants of interlocutors. The certificate level students used politeness strategies several times in an attempt to prevent the addressees from losing their face in front of addresses. Thus Positivity is threatened when the speaker shows disregard for the feelings of the interlocutor. This result is in accordance with the published study by Dogancay-Aktuna and Kamisili in 1996, which was based on Turkish and American-English speakers. It revealed that lower status speakers used address terms more than the higher status speakers. In My study as well, the use of address terms was observed mostly in the first and second situation where a higher and a lower level status was introduced and the lower level speakers had to address the higher level speakers. However the intermediate level students used address terms more frequently than the diploma students.

6. Findings

My findings were confirmed by the study carried out by Guodong and Jing in 2005 which was based on Chinese students’ dialogue with their American peers, where the former used address forms more frequently? It was found to be against the “maxim manner of grace” Published, 1975. It states that every speaker should speak directly without any ambiguity. In 1993, Leech objected that this principle may not always answer the question and that in a conversation participants use the indirect approach more frequently for conveying their meaning. He also stated the importance of politeness and its role in the society. My findings revealed that the diploma learners were more concerned with face saving of their peers when they had to disagree with a friend in the third scenario. The speakers were mostly reluctant in expressing disagreements in friendly scenarios. This finding is similar to the conclusion derived by Umar (2006) about Sudanese learners being more reluctant to disagree with their friends. He also suggested that they mostly engage in formal ways of complaining to their friends; however, my study contradicted these findings. In analyzing the responses of the Diploma level students, they preferred to disagree implicitly on the assumption that the interlocutors would understand the meaning, and the certificate level students used upfront and direct ways of disagreeing. This finding confirms that the direct way of disagreement is simpler than the indirect one, as it does not create further misunderstandings. Moreover, the structures of direct disagreements are shorter, as certificate level students do not have sufficient vocabulary. This result also seems to deviate from Brown and Levinson's model of strategies. According to them, speakers engage in more direct ways of disagreement when there lies a lesser social distance between them and the listener, or when the speaker possesses a more influential status than the addressee, and when there is a minimal degree of imposition on the listener.
Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore the intricacies involved in politeness strategies in terms of power relations in disagreement scenarios, across two language proficiency levels: Diploma and Certificate learners. It was found out that, despite having different proficiency levels, a strong relationship between the uses of particular kinds of strategies of politeness in disagreement displays to people holding different power statuses exists. The analysis showed that all learners respond to politeness strategies while being in disagreement with higher level (in terms of status) people as compared to lower level people. It was also observed that ESL learners possess a large range of speaking actions and they are also pragmatically competent; conversely, they still cannot apply it due to the lower degree of linguistic competency, which may be attributed to their limited vocabulary. The study clearly leads towards the proposition that ESL learners should be well versed in the rules of grammar to communicate successfully. Although, it has been noted that most of the ESL learners are highly sensitive to choosing pragmatic strategies in their own language, yet they tend to ignore such variables as status quo -distance and status quo -power in Second Language learning. For future studies, another implication must be noted regarding status quo- distance, authority relationships, and degree of obligation. These variables, universally, rein-in communicative action and slow it down to a greater extent but value of these factors differs and we cannot generalize it to all situations. In order to engage in perfect and accurate communication dialogues, it is pertinent to mention that every institution/society must impart accurate knowledge to its students/people regarding these politeness tactics. Lastly, as a researcher, I believe that this study proposes a useful implication for future studies as this research in second language promotes the ideology of informed yet free communication/communication without barriers by employing the usage of politeness strategies. This study will also enable teachers to strengthen their teaching methodologies by including politeness strategies in their curriculum of ESL. At the same time the ESL learners would enjoy learning when it is aimed towards enhancement of their daily interactions with others.
References


Appendix:

Discourse Completion Test

**First Situation:**
Your teacher asks about the journal writing on regular basis, and you have not done it. The teacher says to you, “I’m afraid, you will not be allowed to sit in your exams because this journal writing is accredited. In response, what will you say?-----------------------------
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**Second Situation:**
You work in an architectural firm. Your boss presents you with a plan for renovation of a building, but you don’t accept the plan In response, what will you say?-----------------------------
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**Third Situation:**
Your class fellows provide feedback regarding your research project, "I believe you need to include additional material in support of your arguments. In response, what will you say?--------
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**Fourth Situation:**
In a workshop on the Role of media, one of your peers says, "Media plays a negative role as it creates considerable harm to our young generations ". But you don’t share his/her viewpoint. You think that these are not permanent issues and can be resolved in time. So, In response, you will say:----- -----------------------------
