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RUNNER UP

Teaching L2 assertiveness: The personal cost of being polite

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1. Introduction

As an advocate of second language (L2) pragmatics teaching and a keen pragmatics researcher, my attention has frequently been drawn to my own language use and that around me. However, living in an L2 context has made me even more conscious of the pragmatic differences between my L1 (English) and my L2 (Spanish), on almost a daily basis. Raising a young child in this environment has increased my awareness even more so, as I watch with fascination the pragmatics my daughter is steadily acquiring. She is bilingual (Spanish and English), but her pragmatic choices thus far appear to be culturally English. For example, the other children in the playground tend to use direct requests and physically push themselves forward to achieve their goals, whilst she indirectly signals that she wants something and edges forward hesitantly.

Inspiration for this essay came from an experience I had collecting my daughter from nursery. Another parent accidentally knocked her over in the rush to greet their child, without apologising. I desperately wanted to speak out but my lack of L2 knowledge left me unable to be assertive without stepping into rudeness. This is one example of many experiences I have had, where my indirect cultural norms alongside my reduced L2 skill set, have left me feeling less adequate as a parent. My knowledge of language and pragmatics acquisition means I recognise the importance of modelling language to aid my daughter's development; however, evidently I have a 'gap' in my own L2 skills. The reaction I had to that 'impolite' experience reveals the fine line between impoliteness and assertiveness, and highlights how personal these issues are.

Research shows that judgements of impoliteness can be based on various factors, many of which are psychological in nature, such as morality, personality, identity, and perhaps even mood (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich & Kádár, 2021; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich & Sifianou, 2017). Language learners are not exempt from experiencing impoliteness events at some point, especially those living in the L2 setting who in some cases are left more vulnerable to impolite and negative comments due to the politicised immigration context. However, language teaching often focuses on politeness and other positive communication strategies (Mugford, 2008) and may not recognise the need for L2 learners to access more challenging language. Additionally, previous research has shown that some politeness strategies, such as hedging, can create miscommunications (Bonnefon et al., 2011), and that politeness over assertiveness may be dangerous, such as when refusing unwanted sexual advances or requesting personal space within the Covid-19 pandemic (Sifianou, 2023). It therefore appears that L2 learners need tools to respond in infelicitous language situations, and the inclusion of language for

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assertiveness could empower learners who (like me) feel linguistically trapped in some situations. I also suggest that greater awareness of the personal and psychological nature of this aspect of language can benefit L2 learners and the L2 learning process. I will begin by outlining the psychological aspects of impoliteness deemed important for L2 learners, before discussing the implications for teaching and learning. Assertiveness and its teaching will also be discussed in relation to its value for L2 learners.

2. Impoliteness: Morality, identity, and emotion

Whilst previously focusing on socio-cultural models, the study of impoliteness has recently been approached from a socio-cognitive angle, with Watts (2008, p. 292) stating 'social knowledge is part of human cognition', and the concepts we have of impolite behaviour are cognitively mapped and stored as schema. Culpeper (2011a) and Pavaresh & Tayebi (2021) have also highlighted that perceptions of impoliteness often stem from deviations to our cognitively held expectations of linguistic behaviour. Expectations of appropriate communication may be closely connected to notions of morality and comprise of judgements formed through language as we express our evaluations of behaviour (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich & Kádár, 2021). Whether morality is socially (Luckmann, 2002), culturally (see for example, Kyriakou & Mavrou, 2023) or innately present within an individual (Haidt, 2012) is debatable; however, in considering perceptions of impoliteness, the extent offence is felt is often based on individual moral expectations (Pavaresh, 2022). Judgements of inappropriate behaviour or impoliteness therefore seem to be formed internally and confirm the psychological element of impoliteness. For example, my own moral outrage at seeing a small child (my daughter) knocked over without apology was acute.

As I previously mentioned, evaluations of impoliteness are attributed by individual interactants, and thus impoliteness can be said to be subjective and resting in the 'eyes and ears of the beholder' (Culpeper, 2011b, p. 2). Individual differences such as aspects of personality and momentary moods could also influence these subjective opinions on language. Furthermore, perceptions and reactions to impoliteness tend to be connected to identity, with considerable impoliteness research focused on this area (see Garcés-Conejos Blitvich & Sifianou, 2017, for an overview). As identity is developed and formed through language and interaction (Norton, 2013), it cannot be ignored as an important aspect of pragmatics. Studies evaluating the role of identity and impoliteness found clear connections between not having our identity fully recognised, having authenticity threatened, having one's self-worth questioned, and the subsequent impoliteness perceived (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2009). Moreover, individuals may have varying identity orientations, in which numerous identity attributes are valued to a different extent by the individual (Cheek & Cheek, 2018). Identity therefore plays a key role in our perceptions of impoliteness. This resonates strongly with my experience. It was my identity as a parent which felt undermined or threatened, and as a first-time mother I was particularly sensitised to this identity not being recognised.

Moreover, a discussion of the psychological factors affecting individual reactions to impoliteness is incomplete without including the influence of emotion. It may appear axiomatic to state that impoliteness triggers negative emotions. However, intentional impoliteness, in particular, aims to 'embarrass, shame and discomfort the individual', perhaps having a 'lasting effect on the hearer's psyche and consciousness' (Nuessel, 2022, p. 266). Psycholinguists have highlighted the strong connection between language and emotion, with emotions allowing us to perform communicative goals (Wilutzky, 2015). For example, when taking offence, we may then perform speech acts such as complaining and criticising (Haugh et al., 2022). Theories on emotion are complex (and therefore out of the scope of this essay), however, all approaches to emotion show 'the fundamental role for emotions in the architecture of human psychology and behaviour' (Langlotz & Locher, 2017, p. 291). With emotion affecting cognitive processes, there is little doubt that they play a part in how we perceive the world, behave, and react. The triggering of emotional reactions may also be due to perceived moral transgressions (Dewaele et al., 2024) or attacks on our identity, thereby showing the intertwining of all the

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psychological factors mentioned here. However, whilst these aspects of impoliteness are gaining traction in the literature, L2 learners may not have the language knowledge to fully express themselves and may therefore be left somewhat powerless. It is also debatable where assertive responses fit on the impoliteness spectrum and to what extent these aspects of language can be explored in L2 teaching and learning. I will return to this later and argue that assertiveness language training has a place in teaching and would certainly have empowered me in the situation I have described above.

3. Implications for L2 teaching

Whilst psycholinguistic approaches to SLA have had some influence on L2 teaching, it is suggested here that psychological aspects, such as affective responses and morality, have to date been largely omitted from L2 pragmatics teaching. Impoliteness is generally taught from three perspectives. Traditional politeness theories, such as Brown and Levinson (1987), tend to promote a conformity to certain social norms which is often the approach taken by textbooks and syllabi. However, some researchers believe these theories promote an Anglocentric view of politeness (Terkourafi, 2005) and may restrict learners by only promoting language which is cooperative, with individuals sometimes needing to be uncooperative. Discursive approaches focus on maintaining relationships through interaction, allowing for the negotiation of speech acts and variability of context and relational differences such as power (Félix-Brasdefer & Mugford, 2017), providing learners with linguistic and pragmatic choices rather than prescribed norms. Advocated by Mugford (2008), who believes in specifically teaching rudeness and impoliteness, this allows learners more freedom of expression. Face management approaches to teaching impoliteness also support the role of the individual focusing on the construction of identities whilst developing pragmatic competence in what is deemed appropriate by a culture or community of practice. However, there may be cases where learners need to overstep some of these perceived rules of appropriacy in order to assert themselves, without being aggressive or impolite, and maintaining their identity.

Whilst the individual is recognised as a key actor within communication and the role that their identity plays on perceptions of pragmatic language choices, current approaches to teaching L2 impoliteness appear to lack a specific focus on the individual's cognition and psychology. I will now present some suggestions for the inclusion of these elements within impoliteness teaching.

4. Teaching impoliteness with a focus on introspection

Instructed pragmatics places great importance on raising pragmatic awareness and providing L2 learners with opportunities for 'noticing' their pragmatic language use as well as pragmatic differences (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Increasing learners' metapragmatic knowledge has been found to have a positive effect on pragmatic acquisition. In relation to impoliteness, Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford (2017) suggest discussing what (im)politeness means for learners, as well as initiating discussions and recalling past impoliteness events, focusing on the sociocultural variables and contexts. Whilst these social aspects are important, I argue that a reflection on learners as individuals, with their own unique personalities, cognition, and view of the world is also necessary. Topics which are not taboo within a certain society may be for an individual learner due to their identity, personality, or even morality. In these cases, metapragmatic awareness is insufficient and L2 learners need access to assertive language which allows them to state their boundaries. Recalling past impoliteness events can further be exploited, promoting learner introspection on themselves as communicators alongside gaining awareness of the psychological factors which contribute to our perceptions, language choices, and learning. As impoliteness is closely connected to morality, identity, and emotion, L2 learners could be asked to reflect on how these impoliteness events made them feel and why. This may require greater emphasis on teaching learners the emotional vocabulary required to express themselves (Dewaele, 2005). MacIntyre (2002) highlighted that emotions often trigger action, such

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as embarrassment, perhaps causing social withdrawal. Therefore, I suggest that a focus on emotional reactions to impoliteness can enable L2 learners to gain greater awareness of the impoliteness event and the language they used or did not use in response. These events may also serve as examples of situations requiring a more assertive stance. Additionally, with learner diaries being used within linguistic research, and recommended as a resource for L2 learning (Donato & McCormick, 1994; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010), asking L2 learners to diarise infelicitous language events could support raising their awareness and help develop metacognition. Of course, raising awareness and developing introspection regarding impoliteness needs to happen alongside the provision of language input. In the case of my personal anecdote, I was very aware that the social norms from my L1 hindered me from directly commenting. I was also extremely aware of the emotions triggered in the moment. But in all the language classes I experienced, I had never received input on how to stand my ground in Spanish or express those emotions appropriately. I therefore suggest learners need access to language that is more assertive in nature, which I will now discuss further.

5. Assertiveness training

As I stated earlier, language teaching generally focuses on positive communication and strategies for conforming to standards viewed as polite within a society. However, situations occur where the risk of being judged impolite is outweighed by the need to be assertive. Definitions of assertiveness range between 'the communication of strong opinions and feelings' (Duckworth & Mercer, 2006, p. 80), to the defending of individual rights in ways which are appropriate and do not infringe on another's rights (Lange & Jakubowski, 1976). As can be seen in the latter definition, assertiveness involves some consideration of the hearer. Learners may find themselves in situations which require assertive communicative responses; for example, asking people to keep their distance during the Covid-19 pandemic (Sifianou, 2023). Therefore, assertiveness is an important tool for personal safety. In this regard, whilst notions of assertiveness may be culturally variable, when presented with a threatening situation, assertiveness is hugely important regardless of the L2 in use. Moreover, being assertive may be viewed negatively within some cultures, and viewed as pushy or impolite, but in the case of defending oneself, individual needs should arguably go before social perceptions. The fine line between impoliteness and assertiveness has been investigated within a health setting, with Bonnefon et al. (2011) finding the desire to be polite, and thus hedging, can cause confusion between medical professionals and patients. Assertiveness has also been linked to personality aspects and is a feature of trait emotional intelligence (Petrides & Furnham, 2003); therefore, assertiveness may not come naturally to everyone regardless of their language or culture. However, as assertive speech tends to be more stylistically complex and often contains more 'feeling verbs' (Gervasio et al., 1983, p. 554), it is argued here that when assertiveness is required, L2 users are at a disadvantage lacking the necessary language resources. Whilst reduced linguistic competence may lead to overtly direct language, the complexity of assertiveness means it is distinct from simply 'being direct'. In contrast, assertive communication is rational and a decoding of situational factors is required as well as quick decision-making skills (Rakos, 1991). With L2 users at times being especially vulnerable to rudeness or racism, Mugford (2008) has called for a teaching of impoliteness particularly to enable L2 learners to respond in such situations. However, whilst assertiveness could be construed as similar to impoliteness by some, it has been labelled 'the behavioural middle ground between passive and aggressive responses' by Duckworth and Mercer (2006, p. 80), suggesting assertiveness operates in a distinct category to impoliteness and requires a specific focus.

Assertiveness training is a specialism within psychology, often given to victims of domestic abuse, those within a vulnerable situation, or those suffering from communicative anxiety. Whilst L2 teachers cannot be expected to cover the issue with the same expertise as psychologists, there are some basic tenets of assertiveness mentioned in the psychology literature which can be practised within L2 learning settings. For example, assertive communication aims to enable individuals to carry

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out the speech acts of requesting, refusing, and expressing feelings, which are frequently covered within L2 curricula. However, within Anglo-Saxon contexts, requests are commonly taught as indirect (following politeness theories), and refusals often include an apology. In contrast, assertiveness training views assertive communication as direct, without hints or indirect statements, and refusals are instructed to omit apologies (Gervasio, 1987). Intercultural pragmatics research has placed significant emphasis on the teaching and learning of speech acts such as requests and refusals, and an array of resources is available to L2 teachers (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Tatsuki & Houck, 2010, among others). Pragmatics instruction and input on speech acts is hugely beneficial to L2 learners; however, recognition that assertive responses may require a reformulation of these speech acts would, I believe, be advantageous.

Assertiveness training aims to reduce communicative anxiety, provide communicative skills, or sometimes a cognitive reframing (Gervasio, 1987). Gervasio lists 13 techniques used in assertiveness training, although some are labelled controversial and are not accepted by all psychologists. I will confine my discussion to four techniques which could be easily transferred to the language classroom. One of these is 'time out', and involves being direct about delaying a decision, such as 'I'm not sure right now but I'll get back to you'. Another technique, 'repeat-back', requires speakers to repeat their original message whilst remaining unthreatening, for example, 'Maybe I am not being clear. What do you understand I am asking for?' Whilst being an expression of assertiveness, this phrase also develops strategic competence in confirming that messages are understood. In the technique named 'offensive negative assertion', speakers use mitigation before requests such as 'This might sound strange but …' Within English teaching, this technique is often used for requests; however, to achieve assertiveness, it should be stated without any apology. The 'minimal effective response' technique is usually suggested when requests are repeatedly ignored. It requires speakers to escalate their requests. For example, 'Could you move away, please?' could be extended to 'Please move away or I will call security'. In my case, using the 'offensive negative assertion' technique ('This might seem unimportant to you, but you have knocked my child over.'), may have been useful, although the complex form would have required input or practice. As assertiveness has been largely absent from language teaching to date, more investigation is needed to identify effective methods of including it within syllabi. I suggest that those methods proposed for other aspects of pragmatics teaching can be applied, such as raising awareness through discussions, providing input, and opportunities for practice with role-play and task-based learning. In order to assess assertiveness, self-evaluations and reflections would be beneficial, alongside teacher feedback on the clarity of the learner's message, the level of aggressiveness or appropriacy, and other paralinguistic features such as body language and eye contact. In regard to age, further research is needed on assertiveness for young learners. However, there have been some attempts to incorporate assertiveness training (in L1) within schools, as a way of preventing bullying (Darjan et al., 2020), suggesting benefits for adults and adolescents alike.

Research relating to assertiveness and L2 acquisition views assertiveness as an aspect of extraversion (Ockey, 2011) or focuses on communicative anxiety (Dewaele et al., 2008). Communicative anxiety is mentioned as a hinderance to L2 acquisition and production (Dewaele et al., 2008), therefore demonstrating additional advantages to developing assertiveness. Additionally, with motivation a well-established factor affecting L2 acquisition, it is suggested that providing learners with assertiveness instruction could reduce communicative anxiety, empower learners who struggle to find the right words, and consequentially, increase motivation and the dopamine release viewed as valuable to L2 acquisition (Schumann, 2001).

6. Conclusion

To conclude, impoliteness is experienced by everyone at some point, regardless of the language being spoken. Our judgements of what is deemed impolite are often based on psychological aspects, such as our morality, identity, or preconceived cognitive notions of appropriate behaviour, and are partly

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individually led. The emotions triggered by these negative communicative events play a large role in shaping the way we react. However, whilst research has highlighted the psychological side to impoliteness, it has been argued that within L2 teaching, politeness is prioritised over impoliteness (Mugford, 2008), and more could be done to place the individual learner at the heart of the issue, aiming 'to get rid of the monolithic view of the faceless learner, whose identity often disappears in gross group averages' (Dewaele, 2005, p. 368). Moreover, whilst impoliteness should be included within language teaching, language for assertiveness is also extremely important. More research is needed into the boundary between impoliteness and assertiveness, as well as how it should be covered in the language classroom. Developing assertiveness in an L2 could empower learners both professionally and personally (perhaps even helping the parents of bilingual children such as myself). The power of hindsight often leaves us reflecting on what we wish we had said in impolite situations, regardless of the language. However, having the linguistic armoury to respond is important. Parenting a bilingual child has shone a light on my personal difficulties in being assertive in my L2 and with this essay inspires me to help my child develop these skills. I now delight at hearing my child state boundaries and say '¡No más!'/ 'No more!'

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