

An Analysis of Saving Face in the Classroom

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Losing, saving and maintaining face in the ESL classroom can be a potential minefield for even the most experienced teachers. This presentation will examine the meaning of the word “face”, how face is threatened, and ways to reduce the threats and to maintain face.

Brown and Levinson (1987) define face as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (p. 61). Speakers of any language in any culture constantly try to defend and enhance this self-image during discourse, both their own and that of others (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Brown and Levinson (1987) divide face into two types which they call positive face and negative face. Every person has a certain “positive consistent self-image or ‘personality’”, and it is the desire for approval of this self-image that Brown and Levinson term “positive face” (1987, p. 61). For example, if a speaker (S) expresses interest or concurrence with a hearer’s (H) ideas, he/she is building the positive face of H. Conversely, refutation of those ideas may cause the loss of positive face. Positive face therefore involves expressing “involvement, friendliness, and solidarity” (Hatch, 1992, p. 69). In addition to the desire for approval, people have a desire to speak and act as they please without intrusion from others. “To maintain autonomy, we recognize distances between people, being deferential and considerate” (Hatch, 1992, p. 69). This constitutes a person’s negative face. Acts such as orders or threats, which can impose on H’s freedom, can thus challenge H’s negative face, while Ss may use hedges or apologies to reduce the impact and maintain H’s face (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

So how is this bridged to the classroom? The classroom is an ‘arena of face’ where students have to deal with an abundance of emotions, pressures, stresses, etc., on any given day. In my experience, perhaps the biggest stress for my Japanese students is that their academic ability is on display. Almost daily, their eyes will follow me intently around the room until the moment arrives when I ask a question and all eyes simultaneously fall to the floor. Brown and Levinson (1987) attribute the causes of losing face for students is showing unexpectedly high level of incompetence, criticism from the teacher, public criticism from their peers (laughter, sniggering – humiliation), and an inability to meet perceived teacher’s standards.

From my experience in teaching in Asian countries, the effects a loss of face in the classroom can be catastrophic. Initially, students fail to play the social role (what is that social role? to be composed?) that is expected and become embarrassed, ashamed, anxious, etc. As a result of this, they lose confidence in participating with others and retreat into a shell, and their contribution levels dropping significantly. In extreme cases, I have witnessed attendance issues with some students giving up either the class or, possibly, the language entirely. Teachers need to be cautious and attentive when approaching the issue of face. Brown and Levinson (1987) give two strategies, among others, that I have had great success with in the classroom: 1) Positive politeness and 2) Negative politeness.

A negative politeness strategy involves trying to maintain H’s negative face, by showing “self-effacement, formality and restraint ... centering on his right to be unimpeded”; it naturally follows, then, that a positive politeness strategy aims to enhance H’s positive face by showing a certain amount of approval of H’s wants (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 70). Examples of negative politeness strategies include apologizing or the softening of direct expression (“I’m sorry to...., I’d

like you to tell us a little bit about....), showing deference to the students, and giving H the option of refusal (“Would it be possible for you to...?”).

Positive politeness strategies, on the other hand, may involve showing agreement (“Yes, I see what you mean.”), approval (“Wow, that’s a really nice phone.”) or any utterance that identifies S and H as belonging to the same social group (which may involve choosing certain topics of discussion or using the same slang words). Exaggerating (interest, approval, sympathy with H) and seeking agreement by using safe topics (“It takes me one hour to get to school. –Oh my god, one hour????”) are approaches my Japanese students respond extremely well to. Negative politeness strategies often involve phrases that are traditionally taught as “polite” forms, such as “Sorry.”, “Excuse me.”, “Could you...?”, “Would you mind...?”, “May I please...?” and so on. Many positive politeness strategies, however, may not immediately seem “polite” in the traditional sense, since showing solidarity with others can involve somewhat pushier and less deferential language (Bayraktaroglu, 2001).

Face is, however, a far from simple issue. Daly et al. (2004, p. 961) note that “extensive understanding of the cultural norms and values” is essential for acting in an appropriate way, especially regarding expressions of solidarity and positive politeness strategies. It would be too much to expect such “extensive understanding” to be achievable through regular second language classes alone. Negative politeness strategies, which respect H’s negative face, can be taught somewhat successfully, and can be found in most language learning textbooks, such as New Headway Elementary (2000). Although positive politeness strategies and bold on-record strategies may be difficult to teach and even potentially offensive. Nonetheless, some effort should be made to at least give students an awareness of the issues, since they make up an important part of human interaction.

References:

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