Face and Politeness in the Chinese English Language Classroom Teaching

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Abstract: The paper first objectively reviews the current situation of the Chinese English teachers’ face and politeness unconsciousness. At the same time the paper analyzes the shortcomings because of face unconsciousness in the English language teaching. On this basis, it probes into the relationship between students and teachers. Several suggestions on how to give students face and respect in the English language teaching are raised.

Key words: Face, Politeness, Teachers, Students, Respect

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1. Introduction

1.1 Setting of writing

1.1.1 Chinese English language teachers’ face and politeness unconsciousness

English language education in a major concern for China’s policy—makers, teachers, parents, and students. They focuses on the important issue of what constitutes subject knowledge for second language teaching, especially parents and students who need teachers to have high qualities almost in all kinds of aspects of education, a critical area for consideration in the current English language education. Some students are not interested in English or they are poor in active study. One of the important reasons is that, in class, they lack or lose confidence. This has much connection with English language teachers. That is because some or most of the Chinese English language teachers don’t realize the face of the students, namely their face unconsciousness. However, it is essential to students in English language classroom teaching.

1.1.2 Human concern in English language teaching

New Curriculum Standard calls for human concern that teachers should give students a complete respect. Emotional education is an essential project in curriculum reform. It pays close attention to students’ emotion, attitude and values. Virtue and wisdom, feeling experience and perfect personality have a close connection with the development of emotion. It can make students develop from natural person to social person better. Students can treat kindly, understand and tolerate others; they are full of confidence and bravely overcome difficulties; they love nature, life and human being. So, it’s said that emotional education is happiness education, pleasure education. This is true essence of education in the 21st century. Mc Neil’s humanistic curriculum lays stress on students’ thought, emotion and action. The quality of sharing of control, negotiation and joint responsibility is cultivated in the classroom teaching. However, in some Chinese English language teaching, students get little education concern that is badly needed. They and teachers don’t equal in many speech acts. There is no democratic relationship between them but there is strongly submissive and oppressed feeling in class, so they can’t get enough respect and politeness.

1.2 Face and politeness principles in linguist

In the study of politeness, the most relevant concept is ‘Face’. Your face, in pragmatics, is your public self—image. This is the emotional and social sense of
self that every person has and expects everyone else to recognize. Politeness is showing awareness of another person’s face. Face is used in much the same way as in the expressions to lose face and to save face, meaning something like ‘self—respect’ or ‘dignity’. The theory was developed by Erving Goffman, an American sociologist.

The basic idea of the theory is this: we lead unavoidably social lives, since we depend on each other, but as far as possible we try to lead our lives without losing our own face. However, our face is a very fragile thing which other people can very easily change, so we lead our social lives according to the Golden Rule(‘ Do to others as you would like them to do to you!’) by looking after other people’s faces in the hope that they will look after ours. Face is something that other people give to us, which is why we have to be so careful to give it to them( unless we consciously choose to insult them, which is exceptional behaviour.) In conversation, we will be involed in what Goffman has called face—work, the work of presenting faces to each other, protecting our own face, and protecting the other’s face.

2. Studies

2.1 Material collection

In the Chinese English language teaching, we can seldom see the use of face and politeness principles. Here are some dialogues between Chinese teachers and students and they often happen in the English class.

Extract 1.

T: Silence! Order! The lesson will begin.
S: May I come in?
T: Come in! ( Bob comes in out of breath) Oh, Bob! You are late.
S: (His face turns red.) I’m sorry. I was caught in the traffic jam on my way to school.
T: (strictly) Come earlier next time! Do you finish your homework?
S: I’m sorry but there is only one left. I spent enough time doing it but I can’t, it is difficult for me to do.
T: Really? Never speak to me like that again. You must hand in your homework today. Don’t late next time! Go to your seat.

Extract 2.

T: (After having a dictation) Mary, give me your paper.
S: Yes, Sir.
T: Six words are wrong. So many! ( In all, 20 words are given to students.)
S: ( The rest students look at Mary. Mary’s tears fall down her cheeks.) Sorry!
T: You must remember new words every day. Do exactly as I say. Linda has got one hundred. You should learn English like Linda. I believe all of you will get a very good result.

S: But Sir, this time Mary is better than last time. She’s got 70.

T: Be quiet! Boys and girls, that’s not enough.

Extract 3

T: I want you to listen carefully to what I’m going to say. Please make a sentence by using the phrase ‘call on’.

S1: I called on my aunt last week.

T: Good!

S2: He calls on my father tomorrow and I am…

T: Stop! you are wrong. You shouldn’t say so. You should say: He will call on my father tomorrow, anyone else?

S3: We are going to call on Mr Zhang on Saturday.

T: Good! (Point to another student who is handing up.) You go ahead.

S4: Sir, I recently read a story. There is a phrase ‘drop in on’, I looked up it in my dictionary. It has the same meaning as ‘call on’. Can I say: I dropped in on my grandpa yesterday?

T: Right! But today what we learn is the phrase ‘call on’. You can use the phrase ‘call on’ to make a sentence. That’s OK.

2.2 Material analysis

In the three extracts, we can find teachers frequently use the Imperative Sentence, direct sentences, more sentences in which ‘must’, ‘should’ are used and also encouragement lack as well as euphemism lack.

If you say something that represents a threat to another person’s self—image; that is called a face—threatening act. For example, in the extracts above, teachers uses direct speech acts to order students to do something or not to do something. “Come earlier next time.” “Never speak to me like that again.” “Give me your paper.” “You must remember new words every day.” “Do exactly as I say.” “I want you to listen carefully to what I’m going to say.” Teachers are acting as if they have more social power than students. But, in fact, they don’t actually have that social power, so they are performing a face—threatening act. An indirect speech act, in the form of a question( Could you pass me that paper, please?) , removes the assumption of social power. This makes teachers request less threatening to the students’ sense of self. Whenever you say something that lessens the possible threat to another’s face, it’s called a face—saving act.

For sociolinguists the most relevant discussion of face is by Brown and Levinson, who distinguish two kinds of face. They call them ‘positive’ and ‘negative’. Positive face is the desire to gain the approval of others while negative
face is the desire to be unimpeded by others in one’s action, but these terms can be misleading because both kinds of face are valuable; they are called ‘solidarity—face’ and ‘power—face’. Both kinds could be described as ‘respect’ but this word has a different sense in each case. Solidarity—face is respect as in I respect you for….i.e. the appreciation and approval that others show for the kind of person we are, for our behaviour, for our values and so on. If something threatens our solidarity—face we feel embarrassment or shame. Power—face is respect as in I respect your right to…, which is a ‘negative’ agreement not to interfere. When our power—face is threatened, we feel offended. Each kind of face is the basis for a different kind of ‘politeness’. Solidarity—face shows respect for the person, whereas power—politeness respects their rights. In extracts above, it’s obvious that teachers threaten students’ solidarity—face and power—face. For solidarity—face we have a wide range of ways of showing intimacy and affection—-words used for addressing the other person and others used to show solidarity—politeness towards the person referred to. For showing power—politeness there are different ‘address’ words and all the euphemisms that protect the other person from being offended. We need to save our own face by saving the face of everyone we talk to, so we need to manage our behaviour, both verbal and non-verbal, very carefully. If we see speech and interaction, as skilled work, we may see that failure like teachers in extracts are due to lack of either skill or motivation. As a matter of a fact, a lot of speech acts are face—threatening acts. We, however, can lighten or eliminate the threat. When we interact with others, we must be aware of both kinds of face and therefore have a choice of two kinds of politeness, especially in our English language teaching.

2.3 Reasons for the lack of face and politeness

In the Chinese English language classroom, why does this phenomena exist that teachers violate the face and politeness principles? In the Chinese traditional culture, students were looked down upon. People regarded students as either adults who narrowed or small people who didn’t know at all in the Chinese long feudal society and meanwhile drew the relationship between the monarch and his subjects of the feudalism into teacher—student relation. The teacher—student relation even evolved into ‘clan relations’. The stretch of social estate system makes teachers the embodiment of truth, the model of action and absolute authority. In reality we often see teachers oppress and enslave students by using all kinds of sacred and excuses. Students who have different ideas are regarded lack of respect for teachers and they are always not right when the conflict between students and teachers happens. Right is also wrong. In the classroom teaching, teachers are the center and do the high—handed control to students. This unequal relation of lack of humanity naturally contains the factors of power, autocracy and commandism. In the teacher—student relation of adult ‘supremacy’, students’ freedom is deprived; body and mind are fettered; interests
are stifled. The originality of life can’t be respected and there is not creativity at all. Stepping out of traditional boundaries in the development of English language teaching is an urgent need.

3. Instruction

New Curriculum Standard advocates that adult ‘supremacy’ should be broken and change teacher—student relationship. Its education model is certainly inspiration, motivation and encouragement and students’ statue and role are taken seriously. It’s especially important in our classroom teaching. We should adopt the student—centered classroom teaching model in which teachers are no longer the sage on the stage and at the same time students are no longer negative accepters of language knowledge. Students and teachers are equal in interaction, transmitting information, getting knowledge, experiencing language and acquiring the feel of language.

In the Chinese English language teaching, with New Curriculum Standard promulgated, it is necessary to talk about how to correctly use the face and politeness principles in our English classroom in order to protect students’ self—respect and encourage their autonomy. The paper provides several suggestions.

It is a common belief that teacher effectively reinforces students’ good conduct and enhances their academic learning. Effort praise has positive effects on students’ learning and motivation. Evaluation emotion is mentioned in New Curriculum Evaluation Reform. Evaluation plays a regulatory in the students’ learning emotion. Students need teachers’ evaluation because the younger people are, the stronger desire they have in order to make others notice them. The evaluation from teachers can make them feel that teachers respect and care about him, so evaluation must be valued in the classroom teaching. But teachers’ evaluation must be correct and suitable, especially after students answer questions in class. Teachers should use words that are encouraging to do evaluation. For instance, if students answer correctly, teachers had better give a positive definite response, “Good/ Very good/ Excellent, Thank you”; if students can’t give a clear answer, teachers also have a positive response and encourage him, “That’s almost correct./ Better than last time./ The first part of your answer is right, but…”; if students give a answer that is not right, don’t negate their answer completely or scold, satirize students but dig their good qualities if at all possible: “Your answer is not right, but your pronunciation is very good./ No, it’s not the right answer to this question, but it’s also very important. Thank you.” Teachers not only cultivate their interests but also pay more attention to protect students’ self—respect and confidence. Besides, teachers can accept students’ evaluation, bravely admit and correct their mistakes and do self—reflective for themselves. If so, teachers’ prestige and deep feelings between students and teachers can be built.

There has been a growing worldwide concern about not only the subject matter competence of teachers but also their personal quality. It is essential for teachers
to treat students sincerely and respect them. There is a kind of education that is called 'smile'. Criticizing and punishing students badly make teacher—student relationship lose good feelings in class, so that teaching effort is bad. Teachers should tolerate students because the toleration can satisfy their psychology that they are eager to respect and reduce their contradictory feeling during the teaching. Toleration is a kind of virtue that teachers should have, and also it is a kind of education art. Teachers need do a encouraging education to students, develop a successful feel for the language and cultivate students a whole person. The quality of teaching art is not impartation but encouragement, awakening and inspiration. Teachers, never regard yourselves sculptors, let’s understand the diversity of students and respect uniqueness of each life, so in our English language teaching, you will get enjoyment based on equality, understanding and respect.

4. Conclusion

New Curriculum Standard puts forward high qualities in all kinds of aspects, especially teacher—student relationship of classroom teaching. Emotional education has a very important significance. Stepping out of traditional boundaries of classroom teaching, Teachers must give students face and respect them and they are equal. It will take advantage of classroom teaching and students can grasp knowledge very well, meanwhile teachers can get great pleasure from teaching. It presents human concern in New Curriculum Standard.

Reference