

# Respecting and Saving Face in EFL Classroom Discourse

Siti Humaero

Program Study Magister Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris  
Universitas Mataram  
Mataram, Indonesia  
sitihumaero1994@gmail.com

**Abstract**—This study was intended to explore the effect of politeness strategies focusing on the effect of face-saving act in students' learning motivation in EFL classroom. Thus, this study attempted to investigate: (1) Whether polite strategies of saving and respecting face influence students' motivation in study, (2) How they influence the students' motivation, and (3) How teachers should exploit the theory to help students in study. The participants of this study were 30 eleventh grades High School students and 1 teacher involved. The data was obtained by doing observation, recording, and semi-structured interview. The data analysis method used was qualitative descriptive design. The result shows that all of the students prefer to choose situation when teacher used face-saving utterances and most of students showed positive impression during the teaching and learning process. Students think that when teacher used face-saving utterances, they feel free from any pressure. In term of maintaining the positive atmosphere in classroom, the most effective ways that teachers need to do are encouraging students, avoid discouraging them when giving false answer, giving them freedom to ask and answer questions as well as giving any opinions and critics in classroom.

**Keywords**—*politeness strategies; face-saving; face-threatening; motivation*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Politeness* is no doubt for years a notion that many researchers have tried to raise as a topic in their research. Some of them are well-known are Brown and Levinson who describe their own concept about *face* [1] and also Goffman's concept of *face* itself which is definitely being an inspiration of Brown and Levinson's *face concept* [2]. Many researchers have their own ideas about *face*, for example, Goffman who defines face as "an image of self - delineated in terms of approved social attributes- albeit an image that others may share" [2]. This definition concentrate on how people express their selves in front of other interlocutors while speaking which means "face is the public self-image of persons" [2]. Since every participant in certain conversation has faces, everyone must try to save her face, as face also can be a threat in specific situations, while at the same time respecting other faces. When Goffman's concept of face claims that one person has one face, Brown and Levinson divide face into two different dimensions i.e. positive and negative face which drives us to initial assumption that

there is a possibility of face being useful (saving-face) while on other situation can be threaten (threaten-face) [1].

In teaching and learning process, saving face proven to be helpful for students to motivate them in learning since by using positive face itself, the students feel like they are precious to the teacher. Šubertová in his study claims that mastering pragmatic knowledge such as politeness to be applied in teaching learning process is important for teacher of English as a second language in order to create comfortable atmosphere during the study time [2].

The positive implication of saving face has also been proven by Purandina, Seken, and Budasi in which they prove that the strategy of politeness has very great implication on efficient teaching and learning, respect communication, togetherness, cooperating interaction, and the use of less imposition and indirectness expression [3]. Since aspects of politeness found during some investigations clearly can improve students' motivation in teaching and learning process, this study aims at providing proper guidelines in applying politeness strategies, particularly respecting and saving face in EFL classroom. It also tries to make teacher realize how important theory of face may be applied in EFL classroom in which it is very helpful to create harmonious relationship between teacher and students in classroom as well as outside the classroom. In relation to that, the following questions are formulated.

- Do polite strategies of saving and respecting face influence students' motivation in study?
- How do they influence the students' motivation in learning process?
- How should teachers exploit the theory to help students in their study?

## II. RELATED THEORIES

Notion of "face" is considered as a crucial term for many linguists in the field of politeness. Many linguists believe, based on the etymology, that the basic concept of face is derived from Asia at the first place, more specifically from the ancient China. Watts states that characteristics such as "honour, respect, esteem, the self, etc." were used a long time ago indicated persons' characteristic qualities [4]. In short, face can

be considered as abstract items which can be used to measure one's quality.

People are doing some actions to get what they want from others, either respect or appreciation. This phenomenon what Yule called *face wants* [5]. In relation to this, face relating to the action did by individuals have two sub categorizations i.e. *face-threatening act* (FTA) and *a face-saving act* (FSA). Yule described FTA as an utterance that is uttered by certain speaker in which it contains a possible threat to other's face wants. FTA is also considered as "any act, verbal or non-verbal, which threatens the way in which an individual sees her/himself or would like to be seen by others" [4].

In addition to FTA, there is other face relating act called *face-saving act* (FSA). According to Yule, FSA relates to any action did by individuals in effort to decrease any possible threat to other's face [5]. Consequently, when there is a possibility of certain action will create a threat to one's face, it is necessary to do face-work in order to lessen that threat.

Ones may think that the concepts of face are more likely applicable in everyday conversation. However, this concept can also be applied on classroom interaction since in the classroom itself communication is the most important tool in teaching and learning process [2,3]. In teaching and learning process, the act of saving face helps students to motivate them in learning since by using positive face itself, the students feel like they are precious to the teacher. It can also further make students feel more confident to express their feelings, especially their thoughts about the lesson since using face-saving utterance means that the teacher tries to minimize face-threatening acts.

In EFL classroom, teachers should not talk too much because the students are the ones who should. Teacher just needs to talk when it is necessary to talk and it must be in proper way. Teacher talk (TT) undoubtedly has taken a very crucial role in the EFL classroom. This fact shows that in the classroom observation research the teachers are the centre of teaching learning process in English since they are who rule the classroom by giving instructions to the students. Giving instructions by improving the awareness of pragmatics in social interaction can be very helpful for learners. However, this duty is not that simple since the true challenge in teaching for foreign language teachers is to find the way to develop their pragmatic competence to help students in learning. This fact shows how important the role of politeness in foreign language classroom.

### III. METHOD

This study was conducted by analysing the result of classroom observation in which teacher observes the interaction between teacher and students during teaching and learning process. This study concentrates on the face-threatening and face-saving utterances generated by the teacher and then correlating them to the students feeling and motivation to the teaching and learning process. The design of this study was qualitative concentration on describing the data obtained. Qualitative research is "a research which investigates the quality of relationships, activities, situations, or materials" [3]. Qualitative descriptive approach was used in this study

since the data obtained were in form of utterances. This study was conducted at SMAN 4 Praya, Central Lombok, Indonesia. The subjects of this study were 30 eleventh grade students and one English teacher.

#### A. Procedures

In this study, observation was done to get involve in factual classroom situation. So, the researcher participated in the teaching and learning process. Before conducting the observation, the researcher gave simple briefing to the teacher in which the teacher was asked to generate face saving utterances in two meetings and face threatening ones in another two meetings. During the observation, the researcher also records every conversation during interaction between teachers and students. After that, the recorded data was transcribed to help the researcher easily investigate the data.

In addition to observation, semi-structured interview also conducted to get additional data about students' perception about the atmosphere during the teaching learning process. In this interview, several questions were asked to the students, such as, whether or not they get motivated by the teacher teaching them on the first two meetings who frequently used face-saving utterances, why they like the way that teacher teaching or why not, and how they think about the way that teacher teaching.

#### B. Data Analysis

The process of analysing data involved identification, description and explanation. The researcher firstly identified which conversation that show the teacher applying politeness strategies, particularly face saving and face threatening utterances. It tried to identify whether those strategies used by the teacher has impact to the students learning process. After that, the possible reason that motivated students in learning was provided. In this case, the results of the interview take important role to help the researcher discovers the answer. In explanation, every finding was elaborated as complete as possible and as clear as possible to make reader easily understand.

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the questions, the researcher firstly provided some utterances, either face saving or face threatening ones, to get better understanding of the kinds of utterances the teacher generated.

#### A. Face-saving Utterances

In face saving act, teacher tends to show consideration through polite utterances when talking to the students. In English, the use of words such as; *please, could, would, etc.* are considerate as way to show politeness. Avoiding direct imperative when asking something, in addition, can also be said as other alternative way to show politeness.

The following are three excerpts that show the use of *face-saving* utterances by teacher.

- Please, open your book and look at page 22!!

- That's good answer, but if you could be more specific that will be very good answer
- “determain”? Maybe what you mean is “determin”?

On the excerpt (1), instead of generating direct imperative “*open your book and look at page 22!*”, she tends to put the word “*please*” first in purpose of showing “a humble request”. The teacher generates polite expression regardless the distance of social role they possess. This is a sign of neglecting the social distance in order to strengthen the relationship between teacher and students. According to the interview result, students prefer to be taught by teachers who generating their intension politely and in good manner. In that way, they feel loved and respected by the teacher.

For the excerpt (2) and (3), the teacher shows consideration and awareness by avoiding saying something that make student feel like being “scolded” for their wrong answer. The teacher prefers to choose saying “good answer” rather than directly said “that’s wrong”, in this case the teacher tends to “avoid disagreement [1]”. Furthermore, the teacher gives suggestion to the students to correct their answer by asking them making it more specific. In addition, on the third except, the teacher also acts carefully to correct the students’ pronunciation. The teacher said “...*what you mean is...*” to make students feel like as if they do that mistake unintentionally to prevent them from being shy.

In regard to this action, the students said that they feel like studying in atmosphere with less pressure. They said they do not feel afraid when they making wrong answer since the teacher will politely asking them to correct in and even giving them suggestion. This kind of situation prevents them from feeling demotivated in learning.

### B. Face-threatening Utterances

Face-threatening is the opposite of face-saving. In face threatening act, the teacher tends to use direct and less polite expression to the students. In this case, social distance between teacher and students are very obvious.

The following are three excerpts that show the use of *face-threatening* utterances by teacher.

- Hey you, sit down!!
- That's wrong, correct it!!

Different from face saving act which emphasize on making people feel assured by giving more polite and good words even in bad situation, in face threatening act the speaker tends to directly express their intention regardless the situation. As can be seen on the excerpt (4), instead of putting the word “*please*” on the first sentence, the teacher tends to said “*hey you.*” which indicate that the teacher wants to show that s/he has more power in that class and the students who was asked to sit down is powerless. The students in the interview said that the do not really like the act of teacher who obviously shows his/her power in classroom. This kind of situation in which the teacher tends to act impolite, means, acting aggressively, rudely, offensively, and even abusively will makes the students feel less assured when study [6].

In addition, when correcting the students’ answer shows in excerpt (5), the teacher directly said “*that’s wrong...*” This kind of expression will put great pressure to the students. The students said that they sometimes feel afraid to show their answer because they are afraid of making mistake. This kind of situation will demotivate the students to improve their skill in study.

### C. Exploiting the Theory to Maintain Students’ Motivation

In common society, politeness has shown its power since it takes an important role. However, politeness is not only considered important for everyday interaction in society. It also undoubtedly takes another crucial role in classroom discourse. There are two main reasons why it is considered that way. Firstly, using politeness can be very useful to create and maintain good atmosphere in classroom. Secondly, through politeness strategy, establishing respectful relationship between teachers and students will be much easier. Establishing the essential circumstances to promote pragmatic competence of learners is suggested in second language environments [7]. Thus, by creating such a good atmosphere where there is not such bad thing, like a high pressure, will make the learner feels like they are being respected and trusted. Consequently, the students will have very low possibility of feeling threatened or embarrassed to the mistakes they are doing. This sort of atmosphere will obviously facilitate the students to get involve in every classroom activity without worrying about anything.

Maintaining good environment can only be achieved by acting politely. Thus, the politeness strategies knowledge that the teachers apply, in this case face-saving act, can give a significant impact to the students’ language achievement and their success as well. Furthermore, the politeness used by teachers, either explicitly or implicitly, is expected to be able to adopt by students since effective classroom is not only measured by the scores the get in learning but also by looking at the behaviour and attitude of the students in class. It is very crucial as in the future they will join the society and make interaction and communication which means that the knowledge about the way they should behave in society must be taught.

In relation to this, Al-Fattah claims that “learning a foreign language involves not only knowing how to speak and write, but also how to behave linguistically; therefore, the speakers and users of the language must be equipped with politeness formulas in speaking and must be aware of how to use politeness in different communicative acts in their daily life [8].”

Thus, it is very obvious that teachers need to improve their knowledge about pragmatic politeness, in addition to improve their knowledge about language they teach, to give their students provisions to be used in the future real-life interaction. The importance of politeness in classroom, Lakoff believes that “classroom discourse is an example of informative discourse, and in this type of discourse politeness is given little importance [2]”.

On one hand, the Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory is far better to be applied in place where people tend to apply western culture in their everyday life [9]. It occurs since this

theory was made based on the western culture which is individualism [10]. This claim seems like he believes that this theory will not be suitable for those who engage with eastern culture. However, he further suggests that if the theory of Brown and Levinson want to be applied in eastern culture, it will be better to make a modification to match it with the local culture instead of using the original concept. In relation to advantages of this theory in classroom application, “even for communication in English in the EFL or EFL classroom, the theory can be used as the model of task in order to teach students various ways of expressing speech act politely” [9].

Thus, the teachers in Indonesia whose culture is the eastern one need to modify the use of politeness theory, especially generating face-saving utterances, in order that the theory can be applicable for the cultural condition.

#### V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, using *face-saving act* is proven to be very important to maintain students’ motivation in learning. By generating face-saving utterances is very important in classroom where the students are still young. It is to increase their motivation since at the age of senior high-school they are still immature and more likely to feel demotivated to do something because they are treating in wrong way. Feeling assured and less pressured in learning will bring enjoyment in class which will produce a very conducive class.

To maintain that enjoyable atmosphere, the teacher needs to do some actions such as ensuring every student in EFL classroom is free to give questions, answers, and opinions. Teacher should also not give too much pressure to make students relax. The teacher should make as if in that classroom

there is no such a pressing atmosphere when learning. The teacher, however, must make clear rule to prevent students from doing anything out of the classroom context. The last but not least, improving knowledge about pragmatic politeness will also ensure the application of face-saving act will be appropriate.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] P. Brown and S.C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- [2] A. Šubertová, *Aspects of Politeness in a Classroom of English as a Second Language*. Unpublished thesis at Charles University, Prague, 2013.
- [3] I.P.Y. Purandina, I.K. Seken and I.G. Budasi, “Politeness In EFL Classroom Interactions and Its Implications Toward EFL Teaching Learning In SMP Negeri 2 Tabanan in Academic Year 2013/2014,” e-Journal Program Pascasarjana Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, vol. 2, 2014.
- [4] R.J. Watts, *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- [5] G. Yule, *Pragmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- [6] J. Culpeper, *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence: Full Research Report*. Swindon: ESRC, 2009.
- [7] K.H. Tan and A. Farashaiyan, “The Effectiveness of Teaching Formulaic Politeness Strategies in Making Request to Undergraduates in an EFL Classroom,” *Asian Social Science*, vol. 8, no. 15, 2012.
- [8] M.H.A. Al-Fattah, “Pragmatic Analysis of Politeness Theory,” *Language in India*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 183-207, 2010.
- [9] R. Yusny, “Appropriatizing Politeness Theory for Intercultural Communication in ELT,” *Jurnal Ilmiah DIDAKTIKA Agustus 2013 vol. XIV*, no. 1, pp. 176-189, 2013.
- [10] C. Takezawa, *Politeness and The Speech Act of Requesting in Japanese as Second Language*. Unpublished thesis at the university of britishcolumbia, 1995.