

Politeness Strategies in the Workplace: Which Experiences Help Japanese Businessmen Acquire American English Native-like Strategies?

Yuko Nakajima

*University of Pennsylvania
Graduate School of Education*

Discourse completion tests (DCT) and questionnaire were answered by 22 male speakers of American English and Japanese in order to answer the questions of 1) which experiences help Japanese business people acquire target-like politeness strategies and 2) how Japanese business people perceive the relationship between degrees of indirectness and politeness in Japanese and in English. Although many research studies show the pragmatic differences between languages, this study shows that in business settings, interestingly, male speakers of American English and Japanese perceive politeness strategies in a similar way. Furthermore, the results show that if learners are exposed to specific experience, they have more chances to acquire target-like politeness expressions rather than transferring their native pragmatics.

Acquiring pragmatic competence, especially politeness expressions in the target language, is very challenging for non-native speakers. Researchers have studied politeness strategies and have shown a number of reasons why cross-cultural misunderstandings may occur: for example, pragmatic transfer of one's native language into a foreign language (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Welts 1990), social norms (Chen 1993), and relationships between indirectness and politeness (Blum-Kulka 1987). However, according to Ellis (1994), it is not well known how learners acquire the "rules of pragmatics." To address this view, the first question in this study was; which experiences help Japanese businessmen with high levels of ESL proficiency to acquire target like politeness expressions? In other words, when do Japanese businessmen with high levels of ESL proficiency develop the ability to use target-like politeness expressions instead of transferring them from their first language?

In Japanese, indirect speech is characteristic of polite interaction (Clancy 1990). Therefore, it is important to study the relationship between degrees of indirectness and politeness when we study Japanese. The second question was: how do native speakers of Japanese perceive the relationship

between degrees of indirectness and politeness in Japanese and in English? I hoped that the answers to these questions would lead me to a new approach for teaching politeness expressions.

Pragmatics sociolinguistic competence and politeness

It is difficult to teach second language learners sociolinguistic competence. Sociolinguistic competence is viewed by Olshtain (1993) as the ability to interact in culturally as well as pragmatically appropriate ways. If non-native speakers transfer their native language pragmatics and/or cultural norms into the target language, their utterances may not achieve their goals due to sociolinguistic inappropriateness.

According to Thomas (1983), although we can judge the grammatical competence of a speaker by prescriptive rules, such as knowledge of intonation and phonology, pragmatic competence cannot be clearly judged as correct or incorrect according to prescriptive rules. "Pragmatic failure" is a situation in which a speaker cannot express himself/herself in a socioculturally appropriate manner; this is not a situation in which a speaker constructs a grammatically incorrect sentence (Thomas 1983: 94). Thomas further explains that a cross-cultural "pragmatic failure" resulting from sociolinguistic transfer, such as social norms, is a more complicated matter than that resulting from linguistic transfer, such as semantics.

Politeness expressions have been studied by second language researchers in order to describe how native speakers talk (Beebe 1988). Native speakers have been not only exposed to particular situations where politeness is expressed, but also have been told what forms to use in those situations (Schmidt 1993). But non-native speakers may have difficulty in expressing politeness appropriately without any instruction, especially if politeness in the target language is not expressed in the same way as in the native language.

Why are politeness expressions difficult to learn?

The early study by Brown and Levinson (1978) demonstrated the universality of politeness expressions, but state that, there were two difficulties in expressing politeness 1) the degree of expressing clear meanings (on record), and 2) the degree of expressing no coerciveness (off record). One compromise for the above two difficulties is the "conventionalized indirectness." Indirect sentences whose meanings are conventionally understood, such as "can you pass the salt?" can satisfy the above two degrees.

Responding to Brown and Levinson (1978), Blum-Kulka (1987) makes a different argument about conventional indirectness. She argues that conventional indirectness is derived from a balanced relationship between "pragmatic clarity" and "apparent noncoerciveness." Pragmatic clarity involves the need for clear expressions, and apparent noncoerciveness is the need to avoid forcing actions. Conventional indirectness may seem impolite if needs for pragmatic clarity and apparent noncoerciveness are

not satisfied at the same time. For example, if the degree of pragmatic clarity is stronger in conventional indirectness, the sentence will sound impolite because of its directness. On the other hand, if the degree of apparent noncoerciveness is stronger in conventional indirectness, the sentence also will seem impolite because the speaker's intention will not be clear.

Results of studies of politeness between native speakers and non-native speakers

Pragmatic transfer of one's native language into a foreign language can be one of the reasons for cross-cultural misunderstandings. Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Welz (1990) study how expressions of refusal differ between native speakers of American English and Japanese speakers of English. The study clearly shows that Japanese speakers of English transfer their native pragmatics into the order, frequency, and content of refusal in English. The followings are typical components of refusals in the study.

Components of refusal made by American English speakers:

- 1) a statement of positive feeling
- 2) regret
- 3) specific excuses

Components of refusal made by Japanese speakers of English

—To higher status:

- 1) regret
- 2) vague excuses

—To lower status:

- 1) empathy
- 2) vague excuses

(Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz 1990)

Beebe, et al. conclude that these differences are pragmatic transfer from Japanese into English. For example, the order of refusal is not the same between American speakers and Japanese speakers in English. American speakers of English tend to express positive opinions at the beginning of their sentences; however, Japanese speakers of English seldom do so. Secondly, the authors find that Japanese speakers of English tend to make vague excuses to the speaker, but American English speakers tend to make more specific excuses to the speaker.

It is very difficult to analyze the degree of politeness or impoliteness in indirect expressions; as they can be perceived differently according to different cultures. The use of hints plays an important role in determining politeness or impoliteness of sentences. Indirect expressions, such as hints, may be perceived as impolite because of their lack of clarity (Blum-Kulka 1987). Beebe and Takahashi (1989a, b) studied polite expressions of "giving embarrassing information" and "disagreement" in English made by Japanese ESL learners. In the case of a higher status speaker talking to lower status interlocutor, Japanese tend to give a hint or a suggestion related to the embarrassing information rather than reporting the embarrassing information. In the case of a lower status speaker talking to a higher status interlocutor, Japanese ESL learners sometimes ask questions as a hint of

disagreement because Japanese perceive direct disagreement as impolite. While, on the other hand, they found that Americans also ask questions, which clearly indicate disagreement.

Social norms could be one of the reasons for cross-cultural misunderstandings. Chen (1993) shows responses to compliments are different according to social norms and self-image. She studied how American English speakers and Chinese speakers respond to compliments in their native languages. According to this study, American English speakers tend to respond in English to compliments with strategies of acceptance, returning, deflection, and rejecting. On the other hand, Chinese speakers tend to respond in Chinese to compliments with strategies of rejection, thanks + denigration, and acceptance (Chen 1993: 56). The study concludes that the social norms of America and China reflect on the responses to compliments. In American culture, the norm in this situation is to meet the complimenter's positive face needs and to think positively about oneself. But, in Chinese culture, the norm in this situation is to appear humble, although this does not mean Chinese speakers do not think positively of themselves.

Some pragmatic difficulties in polite expressions for Japanese speakers of English

Politeness expressions are deeply related to cultural norms, so it can be difficult to understand them cross culturally. In Japanese, indirect speech is one of characteristics of polite interactions. Clancy (1990) illustrates how communicative styles are acquired in Japanese. In conversations between Japanese mothers and their children, the mothers try to teach their children to read behind the polite statements of other people. For example, in hostess-guest routines, when a guest says "Oh, I have had enough," with the meaning "I do not want to eat any more," the mother explains to her child, who had persisted in offering food, that "She says she does not want to eat any more" (Clancy 1990: 29-30). By explaining the underlying meaning of the utterance, the mother teaches her child to understand indirect speech as polite expressions of strong feeling or wishes with which the child needs to comply. Through this kind of conversation practice, Japanese children gradually acquire the intended meanings of indirect speech.

In Japanese, indirect speech and polite expressions are strongly related. However, a study by Blum-Kulka (1987) shows that the degree of "directness and indirectness" does not correlate with the degree of "politeness and indirectness." Blum-Kulka (1987) explains that in English, the most indirect expressions, hints, are considered a polite way of making a request, but less polite than conventional indirect expressions. While in Hebrew, the most indirect expressions, hints, are not very polite expressions. Thus, it is important to study how Japanese perceive degrees of indirectness and politeness in Japanese and in English.

Beebe et al. (1990), Beebe and Takahashi (1989a, b) and Takahashi and Beebe (1993) focus their studies on the notion of status playing an important role in Japanese polite expressions. They found that Japanese change

politeness strategies according to status differences. On the other hand, Americans tend not to make distinction based on status.

How do non-native speakers acquire politeness expressions?

It is difficult to find how non-native speakers acquire target-like pragmatic expressions. Language proficiency can affect process of acquiring pragmatic expressions. Takahashi and Beebe (1993), Beebe and Takahashi (1989 a, b) point out that 1) lower-proficiency students are not fluent enough to transfer their native pragmatics into the target language, 2) if learners acquire highly proficient levels of the target language, they have enough control over English to express the norms of Japanese politeness. However, I assume there must be one more stage, that is, the stage at which learners acquire the ability to utter target-like politeness expressions.

Schmidt (1993) emphasizes that conscious learning of pragmatics is more effective than learning without consciousness pragmatic awareness. Pragmatics in the target language is not fully acquired by simple exposure to sociolinguistically appropriate input because learners may not notice pragmatic functions correctly. Thus, learners must pay attention to pragmatic features in order to master them.

Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) also conclude through their study of expressing gratitude in the target language that one of the reasons for poor performance in using politeness expressions is a lack of social interaction. The more exposure a learner has to conversations that contain pragmatic features, the easier it is for him or her to use them properly. The more social interaction learners experience, the more they acquire social appropriateness.

The learning period is also one of the factors in acquiring sociolinguistic elements. Swain and Lapkin (1990) also show in their study that early immersion students who start learning French at younger age acquire more target-like sociolinguistic behavior than the late immersion students, who start learning French at older age.

Having reviewed these points of several studies, now I now return to the two questions posed earlier. The first question, "Which experiences help Japanese businessmen with high levels of proficiency in ESL develop their ability to use target like polite expressions instead of transferring them from their native language?" tries to find answers by contrasting different experiences of Japanese business people using English in business settings. In order to study the acquisition of pragmatic competence, I especially focused on pragmatic transfer, indirect expressions, social norms and status differences. The second question is "How do native speakers of Japanese perceive the relationship between degrees of indirectness and politeness in Japanese and in English?"

Methodology

Following Cohen and Olshtain (1981), desired data are obtained if one's

Table 1. Groups of Respondents, English Experiences, and Languages in Questionnaire.

Group Name	n=	Native L	Firm	Rresidency	L used in questionnaire
JJJ	5	Japanese	Japan	Japan	Japanese
JJE	5	Japanese	Japan	Japan	English
JAE	5	Japanese	Japan	US	English
AAE	2	Japanese	US/UK	US	English
AE	5	English	US	US	English
Total	22	-	-	-	-

backgrounds are socioculturally comparable, so the respondents' age, socioeconomic level and academic background were controlled for. Thus, Japanese respondents were chosen who were young and had working experience in large business companies in which they spoke English. In order to see which experiences help Japanese business people to acquire native-like pragmatics, I made three groups according to the location of the firms and current residency: Japanese who are working for big business firms in Japan (JJE), Japanese who work/worked for big business firms in Japan, and currently are living in the US (JAE), and Japanese who work/worked for big business firms in English speaking countries, and currently are living in English speaking countries (AAE). By dividing the respondents in this way, it is possible to focus on the affects of the period of exposure to English, social interaction with native speakers of English, and language proficiency.

Furthermore, in order to study pragmatic transfer into the target language, social norms, and the degree of directness and indirectness, it was necessary to ask native speakers of English and Japanese to answer the questionnaire in their native languages. Therefore, I distributed the same questionnaires to native speakers of American English who work for one of the big American production firms (AE), and asked Japanese who work for one of the big Japanese trading firms (JJJ) to answer the questionnaires in Japanese. In the latter case, I translated the questionnaire into Japanese.

I distributed questionnaires to respondents by fax or e-mail from Philadelphia to offices or houses in Japan or in the US. Twenty two responses were received (Table 1).

I made the topic and settings related to office environments because it was necessary to select incidents that carry the same weight across cultures (Cohen and Olshtain 1981). The questionnaire consisted of three parts. In part one, the questions were related to work experiences and the period of exposure in English speaking countries (respondents' Background). In part two, I utilized the discourse completion test (DCT) that many researchers have used (see e.g. Beebe & Takahashi, 1989, Chen 1993). There were eight questions in this part. DT situations were categorized into 1) refusals to invitations, 2) responses to compliments, 3) giving embarrassing infor-

Table 2. Six Sentences in the study of Degrees of directness and politeness

Degree of directness: categories and examples

—1—

The most direct

- 1) Mood derivable
ex) Clean up your desk.
- 2) Want statements
ex) I want you to clean up your desk.

—2—

In Between

- 3) Hedged performative
ex) I would like to ask you to clean up your desk.
- 4) Query preparatory
ex) Could you clean up your desk?

—3—

The least direct

- 5) Strong hints
ex) Your desk looks full of papers.
- 6) Mild hints
ex) We can not concentrate working in a messy office.

mation and 4) disagreement. Each category had two questions: one was to a higher status colleague and the other to a lower status colleague. It is important to mention here one traditional DCT disadvantage; the respondents may not respond in the same way that they actually speak (Beebe and Takahashi 1989b, Eisenstein and Bodman 1986). In order to compensate for this disadvantage, I added blanks for respondents to comment why they answer accordingly, but this comment was optional. In part three, the relationship between degrees of directness and politeness was studied (degrees of directness and politeness). In this part, six sentences in English or five sentences in Japanese which express a need to clean one's desk were given. Respondents were asked to rank sentences according to the degree of politeness and indirectness. I borrowed the categories from by Blum-Kulka (1987: 136-137) (Table 2).

These sentences were placed randomly in the questionnaire. In the Japanese language questionnaire, sentence 2 was omitted because Japanese does not have a similar expression to the "want statement" in conversation.

Results and Discussion

Table 3 shows the respondents' background. There were 22 answers, 17 were Japanese and 5 were native speakers of American English. All of the respondents were male. The average working experience was 6.5 years. Most of the respondents started working right after they had graduated from college. Among JJE's, JAE's and AAEs (who answered in English) 74% of them spoke English in the office. Furthermore, 67% received English language training during or before working, and 75% of them practiced

Table 3. Respondents' background

Questions for all respondents (n=22)

QuestionsAnswers

Sex Male: 22 Female: 0

Nationality Japanese: 17 American: 5

Working experience (years) 6.5 years (on average)

Questions only for JJE's, JAE's and AAE's (n=12)

QuestionsAnswers

How often do you speak English in the office?

Always (0%), Most of the time (33%),

Some of the time (41%), Not at all (26%)

Did you receive business English training?

Yes (67%) 3 years (8%), 6 months (25%), 3 months (34%) No (33%)

What did you study during the business English training? Business conversation (75%),
Others (25%); (writing, vocabulary, discussion)

How long did you stay in English speaking countries? JJE (4 months), JAE (1.8 years),
AAE (4 years) (on average)

business conversation during the training. The JJE's had lived in English speaking countries for four months on average, JAE's 1.8 years on average, and AAE's four years on average. Almost 70% of Japanese who answered the questionnaire in English had studied business conversation and actually experienced business English in their offices on a regular basis. Please see Table 2 for further details.

Refusals

In this section, I will examine the DCT. First, I will compare answers by AEs and JJE's, then attempt to answer the first question: which experiences help Japanese business ESL speakers to acquire target-like politeness expressions.

Refusals were studied in DCT situations 1 and 5 (see appendix). In both situations, all the respondents, Japanese as well as American business people, refused the invitation similarly.

Lower status speaker talking to higher status colleague

In this situation, the respondents were asked to refuse their boss's invitation to a private party. Table 4 shows patterns of refusals according to groups.

Americans (AEs) refused the invitation with unclear excuses, such as "Unfortunately, I have a previous appointment. So, I will miss your party, but I do appreciate the gesture." This is in contrast to the study conducted by Beebe et al. (1990) in which the typical refusal made by American English speakers tends to consist of 1) positive opinions, 2) regret and 3) specific excuses. I found that all the AEs made vague excuses in order to refuse the invitation. This difference may exist only in business settings, in which American business people may not say specific excuses in office settings.

All JJJs (who answered in Japanese) made refusals in the same ways, that is, regret/apology, unclear excuses and refusals, such as "Excuse me, but I can't come because I have a previous appointment," (written in Japanese). However, there were no positive opinions which AEs added. In terms of excuses, most JJJs respondents used "Senyaku" (previous appointments) which is a fixed term in Japanese for refusals. Comparing JJJs and AEs, both of them answered with unclear excuses in their responses. Interestingly, both Americans and Japanese business people regard vague excuses as appropriate to use in refusing the invitation.

The refusals made by JJEs (who live in Japan) resembled answers made by JJJs. For example JJEs answered, "Thanks, but I have another appointment," which is shorter than answers by Japanese who live in the US (JAEs and AAEs). JAEs and AAEs tended to add comments in refusing the invitation such as, "I'm sorry, but I have a prior appointment. I will miss your party, but thank you," which seemed similar to answers by AEs. In this case, we could say that Japanese who lived in the target culture longer acquired more native-like pragmatics.

In terms of excuses, all the respondents except one (JAE) gave vague excuses, such as "a previous appointment" rather than specific excuses, such as "a funeral." It is not clear why almost all the respondents in this study answered with vague excuses. Once again, this may be because it was a business setting and people try not to have too much personal conversation in the office across cultures.

Higher status speaker talking to lower status colleague

In this situation, the respondents had to refuse an invitation to play golf from a vendor. According to Beebe et al. (1990), higher status Japanese tend to reject lower status interlocutors in Japanese and English with 1) empathy and 2) vague excuses. However, actual answers in this study did not display empathy. Rather, Japanese who responded in Japanese (JJJs) rejected the offer with the excuse that it was against the company's rules to play golf with vendors. Americans (AEs) rejected by mentioning the fact that accepting a gift of this kind is against the law. These were skillful ways of making a rejection in this situation. By giving excuses in these ways, the respondents were able to reject the offer reasonably rather than by giving vague excuses. On the other hand, some respondents, both Americans and Japanese, commented in the questionnaire that they should refuse this suggestion clearly because this situation may affect business. In this situation, business people may think that telling the fact directly is a polite way in refusing the invitation posed by the vendor.

Generally, Japanese and American respondents used similar refusal expressions in DCT situations 1 and 5. It is possible that in business settings, business people may share the same notions of politeness irregardless of the country. Therefore, it is difficult to categorize typical refusal expressions according to language.

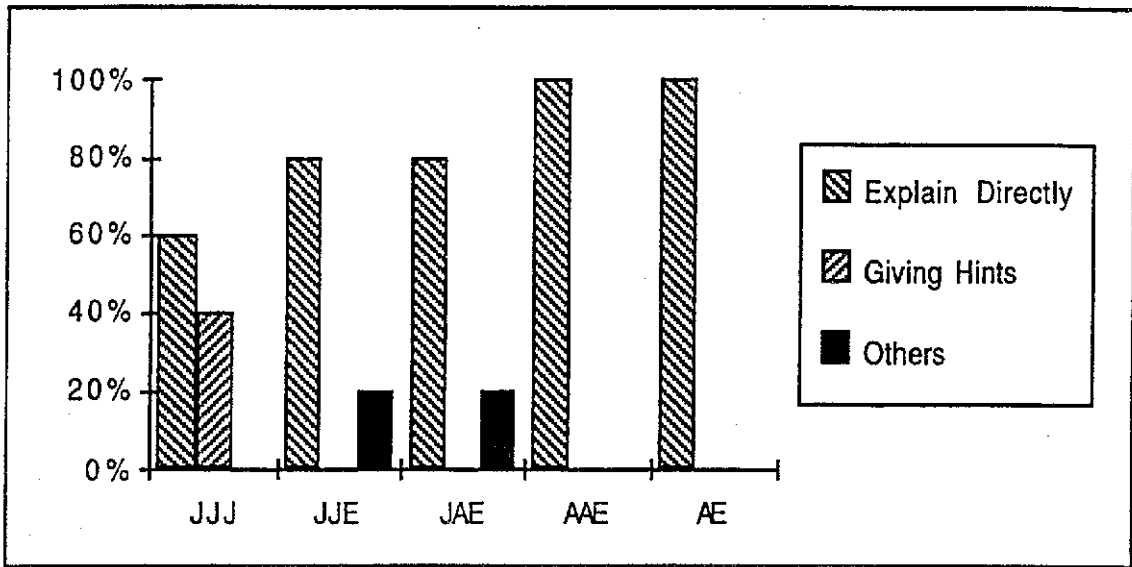


Figure 1. Contents of responses to compliments) n=22
 * Tkg + Cs = Thanking plus Comments (N =22)

Responses to compliments

Responses to compliments were studied in situations 2 and 3. In these situations, respondents were asked to respond to each compliment given by their assistant and boss. Most of the responses were almost the same. About 90% of the answers contained an expression of gratitude and/or comments about the compliments. However, the content of comments were not the same between Americans and Japanese as we will see below.

Lower status speaker talking to higher status colleague.

The respondents were asked to reply to the following compliment from their boss: "Your presentation was very good." One of the Americans (AEs) answered, "Thank you, I respect your opinion so your praise means a lot to me." One of the JJJs (who answered in Japanese) answered, "Thank you very much. I spent a lot of time preparing for my presentation." Although the type of responses were similar among Japanese and Americans, the content of the comments was not similar. Four AEs out of five added comments which showed positive opinions. On the other hand, 10 out of 12 comments answered by JJJs, JJE, JAEs and AAEs expressed humbleness in their comments. For example, one Japanese who answered in English (JJE) answered, "Thank you. Actually, the profit sharing this year worked out better than last year, so luckily, I was able to make a good presentation." Also, another Japanese who answered in Japanese (JJJ) gave a comment that it is better not to be too proud. In the Japanese norm, humble expressions are accepted as responses to compliments rather than positive replies such as "Thank you, maybe we can discuss it further over lunch," which was one of the responses by AEs.

Humbleness and positive comments in this study can be related to the results discussed by Chen (1993). The American norm is to be positive to speakers, which is termed as the "Agreement Maxim," and the Japanese norm treats humbleness as an important part of self-image, which is called the "Modesty Maxim" (Chen 1993: 66-68). This result shows that business people tend to show norms in their native language, that is Japanese business people express humbleness in their replies to their boss's compliments, and American business people comment positively in their replies to their boss's compliments. Furthermore, it is possible to say that Japanese ESL business people tended to express the Japanese norm in this situation rather than the American norm.

Higher status speaker talking to lower status colleague

The respondents were asked to reply to the compliment made by an assistant: "You look nice, I like your shirt," (situation 3). In this situation, all respondents answered in a similar pattern as in the situation from lower to higher status, however, the answers were shorter and simpler. In business settings, people may distinguish status when they respond to compliments. Although Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz (1990), Wolfson (1989) state that Americans tend not to change polite utterances according to different status, American business people in this study made simpler responses to their assistant than to their boss.

Giving embarrassing information

Giving embarrassing information was the focus of situations 4 and 7. Respondents were asked to tell their boss that he had ketchup on his cheek or to tell their assistant he/she had spinach in his/her teeth. I constructed situations similar to those in Beebe and Takahashi (1989a: 114-118) because I wanted to see if young Japanese business people in this study use "hints", such as, "did you have lunch with Popeye?" (Beebe and Takahashi 1989: 115) in expressing embarrassing information. On the contrary, most of the respondents answered with the same pattern, that is 1) I am sorry/Excuse me, and 2) you have ketchup/spinach/something on your cheek. However, the respondents changed their answers according to status.

In the situation lower status speaker talking to higher status colleague, all the respondents, except one JJE, specifically reported the fact that their boss had ketchup on his cheek. Fifteen out of 22 respondents said "ketchup." According to the comments in the questionnaire, they worried that their boss would be embarrassed later if they did not tell him about the ketchup on cheek.

In the situation higher status speaker talking to lower status colleague, all AEs and ten out of 16 Japanese respondents mentioned about the spinach on their assistant's teeth. However, six Japanese respondents did not say anything about the embarrassing situation. Some respondents commented that spinach was too small a matter to tell their assistant. There was only one "hint" in this study saying, "did you have spinach for lunch?"