EVERYDAY SITUATIONS: SOUNDING POLITE

Developing Polite Communication Skills in English

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ABSTRACT

Politeness is an essential component of successful communication in everyday life. It helps people express requests, opinions, apologies, gratitude, and disagreement in a respectful and appropriate manner. Although English learners may have sufficient grammatical knowledge, they sometimes experience difficulties choosing suitable expressions for different social situations. This article examines the role of politeness in everyday English communication and discusses its importance in developing communicative competence. Particular attention is given to polite requests, apologies, expressions of gratitude, and respectful disagreement. The article also presents practical examples of everyday conversations, common learner difficulties, and classroom activities that can help students improve their speaking skills. It emphasizes that teaching politeness through meaningful situations and communicative practice can support learners in becoming more confident and effective English speakers.

Keywords: politeness, communication, everyday situations, English language teaching, speaking skills, communicative competence, pragmatic competence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is an important part of human life. People communicate to exchange information, express feelings, ask questions, share opinions, and maintain relationships. However, successful communication does not depend only on grammatical accuracy or vocabulary. The way people express their thoughts also plays an important role in creating positive relationships and avoiding misunderstandings.

Politeness is one of the fundamental elements of effective communication. It allows speakers to show respect, consideration, and awareness of other people's feelings. In everyday situations, people frequently use polite expressions when asking for help, requesting information, apologizing for mistakes, thanking others, or expressing disagreement.

Learning English requires students to understand not only what to say but also how and when to say it. For example, “Give me your pen” is grammatically correct, but it may sound too direct in certain situations. A more polite alternative is “Could you lend me your pen, please?” The second expression demonstrates how language can be used to communicate the same intention in a more considerate way.

Brown and Levinson (1987) connect politeness with social relationships and speakers’ awareness of others’ feelings. Therefore, learners need to consider the context, the relationship between participants, and the purpose of communication.

Aim and objectives

The main purpose of this article is to examine the importance of politeness in everyday English communication and identify practical ways of developing polite speaking skills among learners. The objectives are to explain the meaning and importance of politeness; introduce common polite expressions; examine how politeness changes according to social context; identify common learner difficulties; and suggest classroom activities for developing polite communication skills.

The article focuses on practical language use and demonstrates how politeness can be taught through everyday conversations and communicative activities.

2. THE CONCEPT AND IMPORTANCE OF POLITENESS

Politeness can be understood as the use of language that demonstrates respect, consideration, and appropriate behavior toward other people. It helps speakers communicate their intentions without creating unnecessary discomfort or conflict.

In English, politeness is expressed through different linguistic forms, including modal verbs, indirect questions, respectful expressions, apologies, and appropriate intonation. For example, “Open the window” is a direct instruction, while “Could you open the window, please?” is a more considerate request. Both sentences communicate a similar intention, but the second is often more appropriate when the speaker wants to show respect.

Politeness is especially important when communicating with unfamiliar people, teachers, university staff, customers, and individuals in professional situations. In such contexts, speakers often choose more formal or indirect expressions. However, politeness does not always mean using formal language. Friends and family members may communicate politely through informal expressions, friendly tone, and appropriate behavior.

2.1. Factors influencing politeness

The choice of language depends on several factors. The relationship between speakers influences whether an expression should be formal or informal. The situation also matters: a university classroom, workplace, and casual conversation require different communication styles. The purpose of communication is another factor, because asking for information, requesting assistance, or expressing disagreement may require different strategies. Finally, tone of voice can affect how a sentence is understood.

2.2. Politeness and communicative competence

Communicative competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately in different situations. It includes grammatical knowledge, vocabulary, pronunciation, and understanding of social conventions. A learner may know many words and grammatical structures but still experience difficulties in real communication when they do not understand which expressions are suitable for a particular context.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages highlights communicative language use and interaction in language learning (Council of Europe, 2020). Consequently, English lessons should provide opportunities to practise language in meaningful social contexts.

3. POLITE EXPRESSIONS IN EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION

3.1. Making polite requests

Requests are used when speakers want someone to do something, provide information, or offer assistance. In English, requests can be expressed through different structures, and the choice depends on the situation and the relationship between speakers.

Common expressions include: “Can you help me, please?”, “Could you explain this question?”, “Would you mind opening the door?”, “Could I borrow your notebook?”, and “May I ask you a question?”

“Can you…?” is common in everyday conversations. “Could you…?” often sounds more polite and is suitable for many social situations. “Would you mind…?” is frequently used when making a considerate request. For example: “Excuse me, could you help me with this exercise, please?”

3.2. Apologizing

Apologies help people recognize mistakes and maintain positive relationships. Common expressions include “I'm sorry,” “I'm really sorry,” “I apologize for being late,” “Sorry for the misunderstanding,” and “Please forgive me.”

"I'm sorry" is widely used in everyday communication. More formal situations may require "I apologize" or "I sincerely apologize." The appropriate expression depends on the seriousness of the situation. An apology should be sincere and suitable for the situation.

3.3. Expressions of gratitude

Gratitude allows speakers to show appreciation for assistance, kindness, information, or support. Common expressions are "Thank you," "Thanks a lot," "Thank you very much," "I really appreciate your help," and "That's very kind of you." Responses include "You're welcome," "No problem," "My pleasure," and "Don't mention it."

For example: "Thank you for explaining the topic." "You're welcome. I'm glad I could help."

3.4. Expressing opinions politely

Expressing opinions is an important part of everyday communication. People may have different ideas, preferences, and experiences. Polite expressions allow speakers to communicate their opinions without unnecessarily offending others.

Useful expressions include "I think…," "In my opinion…," "I believe…," "From my point of view…," "I understand your point, but…," and "I see what you mean." For example, "I understand your point, but I think we should consider another idea." This expression recognizes another person's opinion while introducing a different perspective.

4. POLITENESS IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS

4.1. At the university

University students communicate with teachers, classmates, administrative staff, and other students. When speaking to teachers or university staff, learners should generally use respectful expressions such as "Excuse me, may I ask a question?", "Could you explain this part again, please?", "Would it be possible to submit the assignment tomorrow?" and "Thank you for your explanation."

Students can use more informal expressions with close classmates. For example, “Could you send me your notes, please?” is polite and appropriate when asking a classmate for assistance.

4.2. In a café or restaurant

Ordering food and asking for assistance are common situations in which polite English is necessary. Useful expressions include “Could I have a cup of tea, please?”, “Can I see the menu?”, “Could we have the bill, please?” and “Excuse me, is this table available?”

The expression “I would like…” is frequently used when ordering. “I would like a sandwich and a glass of water, please” sounds more polite than “I want a sandwich.”

4.3. Asking for directions

When asking strangers for information, speakers often begin with an expression that attracts attention politely. Examples include “Excuse me, could you tell me the way to the library?”, “Could you help me find this address?” and “Is there a bus stop near here?” Using “Excuse me” before asking a question helps establish a respectful interaction.

4.4. Everyday social interaction

People also use polite expressions when meeting others, starting conversations, or responding to invitations. Examples include “Nice to meet you,” “How are you?”, “Would you like to join us?”, “Thank you for inviting me,” and “It was nice talking to you.” These expressions help speakers maintain friendly relationships and make conversations more comfortable.

5. PRACTICAL DIALOGUES

The following dialogues demonstrate how polite expressions can be used in realistic everyday situations.

Dialogue 1: At the university

Student: Excuse me, could I ask you a question?

Teacher: Of course. What is it?

Student: Could you explain the homework again, please?

Teacher: Certainly. You need to complete exercises one and two.

Student: Thank you very much.

Teacher: You're welcome.

This dialogue demonstrates how a student can ask for clarification respectfully. The expressions “Excuse me,” “could you,” and “thank you” make the interaction polite and appropriate for an academic setting.

Dialogue 2: At a café

Customer: Hello. Could I have a cup of coffee, please?

Waiter: Certainly. Would you like anything else?

Customer: No, thank you. That's all.

Waiter: Of course. I'll bring it shortly.

Customer: Thank you.

This conversation illustrates polite ordering and responding. The customer uses “Could I have…?” while the waiter offers assistance in a friendly manner.

Dialogue 3: Asking for directions

Student: Excuse me, could you tell me where the library is?

Passer-by: Certainly. Go straight and turn left.

Student: Is it far from here?

Passer-by: No, it's about five minutes away.

Student: Thank you for your help.

Passer-by: You're welcome.

These dialogues provide practical examples of polite communication. They can be used for pronunciation practice, role-play, and speaking activities.

6. TEACHING POLITENESS IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Teaching politeness should involve more than memorizing expressions. Students need to understand how language changes according to the situation and practise using it in real communication. Harmer (2007) emphasizes meaningful language practice, while Thornbury (2005) discusses the role of speaking activities in developing fluency and confidence.

6.1. Role-play activity

Role-play allows students to practise everyday communication by acting out different situations. Students work in pairs and receive simple situations such as asking a teacher for clarification, ordering food in a café, asking a stranger for directions, apologizing for being late, or asking a classmate for help. Each pair prepares a short conversation using at least three polite expressions and performs it in front of the class.

6.2. Make it polite

In this activity, students transform direct sentences into more polite expressions. Examples: Direct — “Give me your book.” Polite — “Could you lend me your book, please?” Direct — “Explain this question.” Polite — “Could you explain this question, please?” Direct — “I want some water.” Polite — “Could I have some water, please?” This activity helps learners recognize the difference between direct and polite communication.

6.3. Situation-based speaking

The teacher presents different everyday situations and asks students to choose appropriate expressions. When a student arrives late to class, the expected response may be “I'm sorry I'm late.” When a learner needs help, they may say “Could you help me with this exercise, please?” When a classmate explains something, the learner can respond “Thank you. I really appreciate your help.” The activity develops students' ability to connect expressions with real communication purposes.

7. COMMON DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING POLITE ENGLISH

7.1. Using direct expressions

Some learners translate expressions directly from their native language. For example, “Give me your pen” is grammatically correct but may sound too direct in certain contexts. Students should learn alternatives such as “Could I borrow your pen, please?”

7.2. Confusing formal and informal language

Learners sometimes use formal expressions in casual conversations or informal expressions in professional situations. For example, “Hey, give me the information” may be inappropriate when speaking to a university administrator. A more suitable expression is “Could you please provide me with the information?”

7.3. Forgetting please and thank you

Some learners focus mainly on grammatical structures and forget expressions that demonstrate consideration. Words such as “please,” “thank you,” and “excuse me” are important in many everyday situations. However, politeness does not depend only on these words. Tone, context, and sentence structure also contribute to appropriate communication.

7.4. Lack of speaking practice

Students may understand polite expressions when reading but find it difficult to use them spontaneously. This problem can be reduced through regular speaking activities,

short dialogues, pair work, and role-play. Teachers should create a supportive classroom environment where learners can practise without being afraid of making mistakes.

8. DISCUSSION

The examples presented in this article demonstrate that politeness is an important part of everyday English communication. Polite expressions help learners communicate requests, apologies, gratitude, and opinions more appropriately. They also support positive relationships and reduce the possibility of misunderstandings.

The use of polite language depends on the social context, the relationship between speakers, and the purpose of communication. Therefore, learners should not simply memorize expressions but understand when and how to use them.

Classroom activities such as role-play, sentence transformation, and situation-based speaking provide opportunities to practise these skills. The practical dialogues demonstrate that even simple expressions can make communication more respectful and natural.

The discussion supports the idea that politeness should be included in communicative English teaching. Students need opportunities to practise language in situations that reflect their everyday experiences.

9. CONCLUSION

Politeness is an essential element of effective communication in English. It enables speakers to express their intentions respectfully and maintain positive relationships in different social situations.

This article has examined the meaning of politeness, common polite expressions, and their use in everyday contexts. It has also presented practical dialogues, classroom activities, and common difficulties experienced by English learners.

The discussion demonstrates that learners need both grammatical knowledge and the ability to use language appropriately. Understanding polite requests, apologies, gratitude, and disagreement can improve students' communicative competence and confidence.

Teachers can support this development by introducing meaningful situations, encouraging pair work, and providing regular speaking practice. Teaching politeness through everyday communication helps learners develop practical English skills that can be used at university, in public places, and in their future professional lives.

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