An Investigation of Students' Face Wants in Chinese English Teachers' Classroom Feedback[*]

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Abstract—In order to create a new teacher-student relationship and raise students' politeness awareness and pragmatic competence in cross-cultural communication, this paper investigated and analyzed students' face wants and English teachers' awareness of students' face want in their classroom feedback. The main data-gathering instruments are MP3-recording, non-participant observation, follow-up structured-interviews and closed- questionnaires. The results reveal that 60.6% of the teacher participants are frequently aware of their students' face wants, and 27.2% of them are sometimes, while the other teachers seldom or never consider the students' face want. Because of being influenced by the Chinese traditional culture in which teachers are superiors, not thoroughly understanding *English Curriculum Standard* which calls for human concern, and knowing a little about pragmatic theories, some Chinese English teachers ignore students' face want. Suggestions on how to save students' face want are put forward.

Index Terms—face wants, classroom feedback, students

I. INTRODUCTION

With development of Pragmatics in China, it is quite significant to study Face Theory in Chinese English classroom teaching. In recent years, more and more scholars begin to concern face and politeness of Pragmatics (Gao, 1996: 9; Xu, 2003: 62; etc.). In the field of applied linguistics, teacher talk (TT) has drawn increasing attention. This trend makes clear the fact that the role of the teacher in English class has become an essential issue in the classroom observation research. This study aims at making English language teachers realize the importance of Face Theory in EFL classroom, the use of which is helpful to create harmonious teacher-student relationship and improve students' interest in learning English and consciousness of politeness. Gradually, students will raise their pragmatic competence and avoid pragmatic failure in communication. Apart from this, the paper is to help language teachers be aware that it is essential to strengthen their pragmatics knowledge in their classroom feedback so as to guide English classroom teaching effectively.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

An influential theory on face is the Face Theory put forward by Brown and Levinson in 1978 which includes three basic notions: face, face-threatening acts and politeness strategies.

The notion of face was first raised by Goffman from the sociology angle as early as in the 1950's. According to Goffman, "face" is a sacred thing for every human being, an essential factor communicators all have to pay attention to; face wants are reciprocal. (Goffman, 1959) Face is the positive social value which people effectively win for themselves and therefore, represents individual's self realization. The general notion of 'face' of Goffman became much more specific in Brown and Levinson's theory. They define 'face' as the public self--image that every member wants to claim for himself (Brown & Levinson, 1987). People treat the aspects of face as basic wants, which every member knows every other member desires, and which in general it is in the interests of every member to partially satisfy (ibid). Brown and Levinson further distinguish two kinds of face: positive face and negative face. Yule (2000) also holds that face means the public self-image of a person. It refers to the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. While the content of face will differ in different cultures, it is assumed that the mutual knowledge of members' public self-image or face and the social necessity to orient oneself to it in interaction are universal. (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

Within people's everyday social interactions, people generally behave as if their expectations concerning their public self-image, or their face wants, will be respected. If a speaker says something that represents a threat to another individual's expectations regarding self-image, it is described as a face threatening act. Given the possibility that some action might be interpreted as a threat to another's face, the speaker can say something to lessen the possible threat. This is called a face saving act. (Yule, 2000) Brown and Levinson (1987) hold the view that nearly all speech acts are face-threatening acts. Face-threatening acts (FTAs) vary in terms of the kind of threat involved. Some threaten the

hearer's negative face by imposing on the hearer (e.g. requests, orders, offers, expressions of anger). Other FTAs threaten the hearer's positive face (desire to be respected) by indicating the speaker's lack of concern for the hearer's self-image.

Brown and Levinson (1978) suggest that politeness refers to expressions that can soften the face-threatening intentions that some international activities bring about on face. In other words, politeness is the attempt for the face wants of the speaker and the hearer; so Brown and Levinson call politeness "strategies". According to the face-threatening degree of speech acts, polite linguistic devices, from the least polite to the most polite, are divided into: 1) bald on record without redressive actions; 2) positive politeness; 3) negative politeness; 4) off record; 5) Don't do the FTA, among which positive politeness; negative politeness; off record are widely applied in speech acts. (Brown and Levinson , 1987)

In the past few decades, there have been numerous researches into the Face Theory. However, few scholars have ever stepped into the investigation of students' face wants in Chinese English teachers' classroom feedback. This paper attempts to apply Face Thery to one aspect of teacher talk, teachers' feedback to investigate students' face wants. Based on the investigation of students' face wants, some advice on applying pragmatic theory to teachers' feedback is offered, which is helpful to create harmonious relationship between teachers and students and improve students' interest in learning English and consciousness of politeness.

III.   METHODOLOGY

A.   Subjects

Participants of this study are thirty-one English teachers from Xianyang Normal College and the other two English teachers from Shaanxi Normal University as well as their seventy-five students. There are major students from one class and non-major students from the other class. One of the teachers is an experienced teacher with more than ten years' teaching experience, the other is a young teacher with only three years' teaching experience.

B.   Instruments

In order to build data of authentic conversations and enhance the credibility of the results, the main data-gathering instruments are MP3-recording, non-participant observation, follow-up structured-interviews and closed-questionnaires.

C.   Procedures

The data-collection processes were mainly a classroom observation, follow-up interviews as well as questionnaires. The whole procedure of the present study is summarized as follows:

The first step was designing the questions of questionnaires and structured-interviews according to the research questions and purpose of the present study, then was contacting subjects and telling them the purpose of the research.

The second step was observing the classrooms after the subjects permitting, and making a note by non-participant observation. Teacher feedback and interaction between teachers and students were recorded in detail.

The third step was that subjects were asked to complete questionnaires after the first English class of each teacher and handed them in on the spot, so the response rate was 100%.

The fourth step was the interviews of teachers and the students. After the end of the second English class of each teacher, the teacher was interviewed on teachers' feedback according to the prepared questions. And there was a private talk with six students about their preferable teachers' feedback according to the prepared questions. The answers of the teachers and students were also noted.

The fifth step was that questionnaires were handed out to thirty-one teachers in an activity of teaching and research, and then were handed in on the spot after they finished them.

IV.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A.   Data Analysis

A.1 Analysis of Teachers' questionnaire

The data was collected through a 14-item questionnaire, revised from Lei (2004). Presented here are the results for Item 3 and 4.

TABLE 4-1
TEACHERS' AWARENESS OF STUDENTS' FACE IN THEIR CLASSROOM FEEDBACK

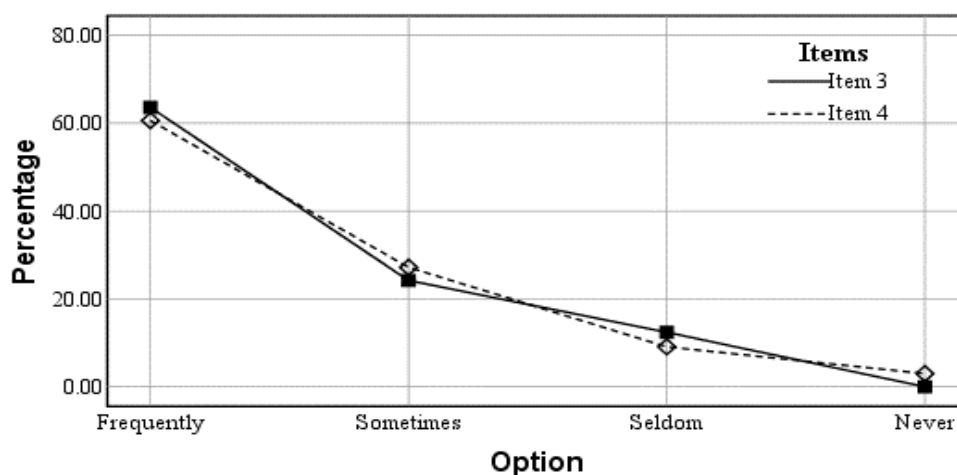| Item 3 and 4	Options			
	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Item 3: Are you aware of students' hope for face-saving?	63.6%	24.2%	12.1%	
Item 4: Are you frequently aware of students' face wants?	60.6%	27.2%	9.1%	3%

Fig. 4-1 Teachers' Awareness of Students' Face in Their Classroom Feedback

Item 3 and 4 focus on teachers' awareness of students' face. In item 3, 63.6% of teacher participants indicate that they are frequently aware of students' hope for face-saving; 24.2% sometimes and only 12% seldom. In item 4, 60.6% of the participants are frequently aware of students' face wants. 27.2% sometimes, 9.1% seldom, and only 3% never consider the students' face. If teachers concern themselves with the students' pride, face, and credibility, they are likely to do something to satisfy their students' needs.

A.2 Analysis of Students' questionnaire

The Participants are 75 sophomores from Shaanxi Normal University, 52 of whom are female accounting for 69.3%, and 23 of whom are male accounting for 30.7%. Presented here are the data results for Item2 and 5.

TABLE 4-2
STUDENTS' FACE WANTS

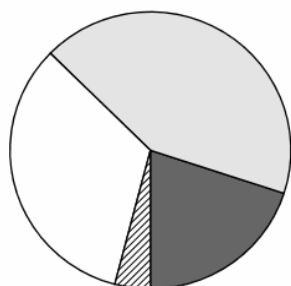| Item 2 and 5	Options			
	A	B	C	D
Item 2: What do you hope your teacher will do with your mistakes in class?	2.6%	16%	50.6%	30.1%
Item 5: When your teacher fails to satisfy your face-wants in class, your will:	20%	42.7%	33.3%	4.1%
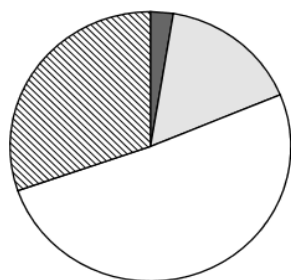
Item 2:

A. To pay no attention.

B. To point them out immediately.

C. To guide us to solve the problem patiently.

D. To point them out indirectly in class.

Fig. 4-2(a)

Item 5:

A. Not care.

B. Be in low spirits.

C. Have a negative impression on him /her.

D. Express my disapproval in class.

Fig. 4-2 (b)

Fig. 4-2. Students' Face Wants

As is shown in Table 4-2 and Fig. 4-2(a), when the participants are asked what they hope their teacher will do when they make mistakes in class, 2.6% of them hope that their teachers pay no attention to them, 16% hope that the teachers point out the mistakes directly in class, 50.6% hope that the teachers guide them to solve the problems patiently, and 30.1% hope that the mistakes are pointed out individually after class. Results of Item 5 in Table 4-2 and Fig. 4-2(b) indicate that 20% of them don't care for whether their teachers satisfy their face-wants or not, 42.7% point out that they will in low spirits, 33.3% will have a negative impression upon their teachers, and 4.1% will express their disapproval in class when their teachers fail to maintain their face.

A.3 Analysis of Interviews

Interviews are composed of two parts: one is six non-major students in Class 1 and their English teacher, and the other is six major students in Class 2 and their English teacher.

The first interview is only a private talk with the teacher, who thought that teachers' feedback played an important role in the class. If some students volunteered to answer the question, she did make feedback, like simple praise. If the student made a wrong response, she usually asked some other students to correct it, and also she would provide some necessary information to the student and arouse student to think out the right answer. The five students interviewed had almost the same opinion. They said they preferred to the positive teacher feedback rather than the negative one. They said if the teacher criticized them when they made mistakes, they would never brave enough to answer any question again. During the students' description, it is found that they all look forward to teacher's notice and encouragement, whether they are the top students or the underachieving ones.

The teacher interviewed in Class2 expressed her idea that asking questions and making feedback played an essential part in her English class. She said asking questions aimed at stimulating students' thoughts, while making feedback is the key to encourage students to open their mouths and promote the teacher-student interaction. The interview on the students was very interesting because they all appeared active and talkative. One of them said he liked seeing the smile on the teacher's face. Now he found a lot of interest in English class because the teacher was always friendly. During these six students' description, it is found that most of the students prefer to achieve the positive feedback from their teacher rather than the criticism. They expected to get praise and encouragement from the teacher, especially in front of the whole class.

B.   Results

Through the analysis of data from teachers' questionnaires, Table 4-1 shows that 60.6%, the highest percentage, of the teacher participants are frequently aware of their students' face wants, and 27.2% of them are sometimes, while the other teachers seldom or never consider the students' face. Through teachers' interviews, although some teachers' attitudes towards their feedback are active, they should only make a feedback towards students' response and don't choose the proper positive feedback to help save students' face at the suitable moment, while others recognize students' face wants and sometimes give a positive and effective feedback, like the teacher in Class 2. As long as teachers are

aware of students' face wants, they will use intensified supportive verbal feedback like praise, elicitation, etc. to encourage students to be interested in English and learn English very well. The higher percentage (42.7%) from students' questionnaires shows that they will in low spirits and another higher percentage (33.3%) also shows that they will have a negative impression upon their teachers if their teachers fail to satisfy their face wants in class.

V. SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings from the study, several suggestions for applying Face Theory to teachers' feedback in English classroom teaching are put forward.

A. Develop Teachers' Theory Knowledge on Pragmatics

It is considered that English teachers not only master the rich linguistic knowledge but also grasp pragmatic knowledge, and especially apply the pragmatic theories to English teaching to make students understand language correctly and use language tactfully. It is well concluded from the analysis of the experiment data that rightly applying politeness theory in teachers' feedback helps to enhance students' learning motivation. Furthermore, influenced by their teachers, students tend to use politeness strategies in English communication. It is clear that teachers should develop themselves and follow politeness theory in their classroom feedback, and on the other hand, they may indirectly guide and influence students by their politeness strategies in classroom teaching. Only in this way, can the final goal of raising communicative abilities be reached, and students can avoid pragmatic failure in the cross-cultural communication.

B. Strength the Effectiveness of Teachers' Feedback

It has been proved that supportive verbal feedback not only offers information that helps students confirm their existing language knowledge but also increases students' learning motivation and benefits positive affection, and meanwhile it is much more effective than non-supportive verbal feedback in changing learner behavior (Nunan, 1991:104). But praise that is general and mechanical, like "good, very good" can't produce a good efficacy (Brophy, 1981, Nunan, 1991). To the students' classroom performance, teachers should give an immediate supportive feedback to satisfy students' face wants, but it is not a wide praise. It should be appropriate according to different students and situations.

C. Focus on the Use of Appropriate Politeness Strategies

Teachers' feedback should concern the students' face wants. The teacher should choose appropriate PS to satisfy students' face needs.

Positive politeness is oriented toward the positive face of the hearer, the positive self-image that he claims for himself. Positive PS minimizes the differences and maximizes the commonalities between the teacher and the student. Thus, this strategy tends to use informal or intimate language, and emphasize the necessity to cooperate, similarity, shared fate, and mutual trust.

Negative politeness is characterized by self-effacement, formality and restraint, with attention to restrict aspect of the hearer' self-image, centering on his want to be unimpeded. Negative PS maximizes the freedom of action of the learners and minimizes the impositions that restrict their freedom of action. Thus, this strategy often asks for suggestions and directions, avoids explicit directives, and uses pleas and conventional indirectness.

Off-record PS is characterized by the effort to avoid making explicit or unequivocal imposition on students. Its indirectness is accomplished by way of giving hints and using rhetorical questions and so on.

Strategic uses of politeness in personal interactions are prominent. They are more effective in diminishing misunderstanding, thus leading to an explicit recognition of one's responsibility in the communication. So it is essential for the teacher to use distinct PS in their classroom feedback accordingly to maintain the face of the students and achieve effective teaching.

D. Pay Attention to the Social Values of English

English learners will have a good linguistic competence of the target language through learning English. From the point of view of cross-cultural communication, however, having a good knowledge of English language does not mean that one has acquired pragmatic competence of English. Therefore, the teaching of English social values is very important. Social values include people's perception about what is right or wrong, or the ideas about what is important in life. To native speakers, a grammatical error appears to be superficial and the hearer is quick to realize an utterance with errors and has no difficulty in making allowance for it, and thus the communication is likely to continue, but the hearer has not any reason to put up with pragmatic failure made by a person who has a good command of the English language.

The social values and politeness of a culture are complicated and their interference in the language manifests in various ways. As an English teacher, one has to study English and Chinese politeness and their social values and tries to find out their differences and similarities. Correlation of social values and language in ELT will give us a deeper insight into how people communicate in English culture.

The Chinese have a higher frequency in using supportive verbal feedback to maintain their face and keep harmony, while the English are more inclined to use intensified ones. These speech act distinctions reflect their different views,

and can be explicated from the perspective of politeness and culture. In teachers' classroom feedback, they should use intensified supportive verbal feedback, which is more suitable for the westerns' concept of face, so as to raise students' pragmatic competence in communication.

VI. CONCLUSION

Face want is a universal phenomenon in speech communication, which is what people of different cultural backgrounds all try to observe and maintain. Within the framework of Face Theory, this paper tries to make a study of students' face want in college English classroom teaching by means of analyzing teachers' awareness of students' face and students' face want. The major findings are that 60.6% of the teachers, the highest percentage, are aware of students' face wants, so they could use supportive verbal feedback to protect students' face. However, they lack the systematical theories of pragmatics and teacher talk. Based on the findings, several suggestions for applying Face Theory to teachers' feedback are put forward.

This paper has at least provided a pragmatic perspective for the further study of teacher talk. Through Face Theory and its application in teachers' feedback in English classroom teaching, it is the author' sincere hope that teachers can achieve a more effective teaching and improve students' pragmatic competence. It is better for the further study to have a wide range of subjects and include non-verbal teachers' feedback.

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