Book Review


Gerrard Mugford’s book is a pioneering attempt to examine FL (Foreign Language) politeness teaching and learning from the lens of lay speakers’ perspectives. The aim of this book is to understand how foreign learners interact in the TL (Target Language) context and how pedagogic intervention can help them practice FL politeness and achieve successful TL interactions. Taking an emic approach, Mugford innovatively identifies key issues which learners inevitably encounter in terms of TL politeness based on data consisting of FL users’ experiences, histories and realities. With the aid of Halliday’s (1995, p. 273) framework of “ideational,” “interpersonal” and “textual” functions, this book explores the ways FL users approach TL prosocial, interpersonal and contested politeness. With a special emphasis on increasing learners’ (critical) language awareness in understanding dynamic FL interactions and politeness, Mugford provides pedagogic hints to prepare FL users for more successful TL politeness practice. Thus, this book casts light on a number of key issues that surround the current research on politeness teaching and learning.

Chapter 1 presents an introduction to this book, in which Mugford clarifies the research objectives and explains the methodology and data. The aim of this book is not to ‘teach’ politeness but to identify the challenges in practising TL politeness so as to offer a practicable reference to bilingual speakers, language teachers, students and researchers. Mugford first identifies the problems in current FL politeness teaching – the neglect of TL communicative realities and the privilege of the decontextualised politeness knowledge, which leads to the learners’ indiscriminate and uncritical adoption and implementation of pre-determined politeness patterns in actual TL interactions – and then generate application problems. Mugford thus calls for paying close attention to how FL users develop their own way of understanding and practising TL politeness.
This study takes a combined etic-emic approach. On the one hand, Mugford adopts Halliday’s (see e.g., 1995, p. 273) framework of three-fold functions – “ideational”, “interpersonal” and “textual” functions to interpret his typology of prosocial politeness (context-driven), interpersonal politeness (interactant-driven) and contested politeness (power-driven). On the other hand, Mugford takes lay speakers’ perspectives into account, examining 52 Mexican English-language users’ perceptions and understandings of politeness through interviews, questionnaires and their narratives. Based on the collected data, important insights into how FL users approach prosocial, interpersonal and contested politeness are presented in Chapters 3 to 5 respectively, which is followed by the pedagogic implications in Chapter 6.

Chapter 2 provides a theoretical background of this research project, discussing the importance of understanding FL politeness and culture in preparing FL users for successful TL interactions. When engaging in TL communications, FL interactants need to continuously decide to what degree they would like to express politeness in diverse contexts for various communicative purposes. They might choose to conduct normative politeness by imitating TL social norms and ‘appropriate’ ways of doing politeness, or take risks to express politeness in their own way, or even decide to do nonpoliteness. As politeness and culture are closely interrelated (see e.g., Kadar, 2017), Mugford adopts Grenfell’s (2011, p. 31) interpretation of “cultural capital”, arguing that students’ L1 cultural capital can become a powerful assistant in learning TL politeness. However, students need to develop critical language awareness to determine the transferability of their L1 cultural capital to TL.

In Chapter 3, the author investigates how bilingual communicators utilise prosocial politeness assets to engage in TL politeness in an “expected and conventional” way. Mugford structures prosocial politeness based on Halliday’s (1995) ideational function, explaining that prosocial politeness is realised by interacting in socially expected ways, being considerate to others and acting as a ‘polite person’. To investigate how FL interactants perceive and practice prosocial politeness, Mugford asked 52 Mexican FL users to respond to five prosocial-politeness-related questions. The results show that 1) a polite person is perceived to be someone who is considerable and conforms to specific social rules and moral norms; 2) the relatedness of politeness and culture is obvious to the participants and the differences between L1 and TL politeness were specially recognised; 3) the participants’ motivations on doing politeness are closely related to their upbringing, socialisation and self-interest; 4) the participants can easily perceive established patterns of politeness, which heavily influenced their way of doing politeness; 5) most of the participants believed that being polite in English is easier than in their L1. Such results imply that
prosocial politeness significantly influences FL users’ TL politeness practice. FL teachers and learners can also examine TL speakers’ colloquial use of everyday idiomatic expressions or their metapragmatic interpretation of politeness to obtain their perceptions of TL politeness.

Chapter 4 examines interpersonal politeness, considering how FL users relate, engage and position themselves in relation to others. Interpersonal politeness reflects how interactants construct, maintain and develop interpersonal relationships. It is a dynamic and unpredictable aspect of politeness. Relating to Halliday’s (1995) interpersonal function, the two-fold social-personal goal of interpersonal politeness is emphasised: interactants’ need to be related to others and their need to express their individuality. Based on the same 52 Mexican English-language users’ reflection on five interpersonal-politeness-related questions, Mugford finds that 1) most of the participants recognised interpersonal politeness as the evolvement of prosocial politeness and an index of relationship development; 2) the participants’ TL politeness practice is influenced by the TL patterns, their L1 behavioural patterns and other interactants’ practices, feelings and attitudes; 3) some participants believed Mexican Spanish and English express politeness in the same way while the others insisted they are completely different; 4) the participants widely transfer their L1 patterns to TL politeness practice; 5) FL users face challenges in identifying whether others are polite or not in TL. These results indicate that teachers can start by presenting expected ways of expressing TL politeness and explaining TL social norms and conventions to students, then lead them to compare L1 politeness and TL politeness, identifying the transferability of L1 patterns to TL.

Chapter 5 focuses on power-driven contested politeness, which shows how interactants reflect on, question and challenge the established TL behavioural patterns of politeness based on their own attitudes, experiences and understanding of the contexts. Mugford views contested politeness from the lens of Holliday’s (1995) textual function and the notion of genres in terms of how FL users organise and structure interactions and how power and dominance are practised in daily communications, affecting interactional and transactional relationships. The research conducted on Mexican English users reveals that 1) self-generated pressure is commonly found among FL users; 2) most of the native speakers are tolerant of FL users’ politeness mistakes; 3) cultural clashes widely appeared in the participants’ experience of interacting with English native speakers; 4) the participants perceived English politeness to be superficial and lacking sincerity; 5) although very few participants resisted TL politeness, most of them struggled with the mismatch of TL politeness and L1 politeness. These findings indicate that teachers need to help students build
confidence and avoid being over-cautious in TL interactions, guide students to analyse and understand the motivations and values behind TL politeness, help students develop their critical language awareness and build their own TL capital.

Based on the research results, Mugford discusses pedagogic implications for teaching FL politeness in Chapter 6. Instead of offering students a list of polite phrases and structures, this book advocates a more productive pedagogic approach, starting with students’ own understanding and perceptions of politeness. Such an approach aims at relating TL politeness to students’ L1 experience and knowledge, raising students’ critical language awareness, leading students to use productive politeness assets and resources to develop their own way of conducting politeness, deciding how to practice prosocial politeness, interpersonal politeness and contested politeness to achieve social, interpersonal and personal goals. Mugford suggests to use the i + i + i approach (illustration–interaction–induction) (Cater and McCarthy, 1995) to include students in examining illustrative events, cultural capsules, culture clusters and critical incidents. For prosocial politeness, learners can be provided with pragmalinguistic resources like what are expected behaviours and cultural actions, how to present self-image and do compliant conduct, etc. For interpersonal politeness, teachers can lead students to examine how relating, engagement and positionality are accomplished in interactions. For contested politeness, teachers can present how opposition, resistance and appropriation are used to express contested politeness. At the end of this chapter, Mugford emphasises that notwithstanding the importance of verbal politeness, nonverbal politeness also plays an essential role in interpersonal communications and deserves a place in FL politeness teaching.

Mugford’s book serves as an eye-opening study into FL politeness teaching and offers high potential for more substantial breakthroughs in this area. The following are the major strengths of this book:

First, by relating his typology of prosocial, interpersonal and contested politeness to Holliday’s (1995, p. 273) three “metafunctions”, Mugford positions politeness as the basic need and concern of communicators in social interactions. The metafunctions serve as a powerful framework in this book in interpreting Mugford’s three-fold typology of politeness, guiding the design and structure of the research. Second, Mugford stands on the student-centred side and considers what the FL users really need rather than taking the teacher-centred perspective and discussing what should be taught. Such standpoint is especially reflected in his collection of lay speakers’ perspectives, understanding and experience on FL politeness. Third, instead of requiring students to
passively accept and conform to the pre-determined TL patterns, Mugford underlines that students should develop critical language awareness and their own way of doing TL politeness. He perceives students’ L1 knowledge and experience as an important basis for TL politeness development, which contributes to the generation of students’ own joint way of TL practice. Finally, this book offers practicable teaching suggestions. Mugford lists useful ways of deciding what kinds of resources and materials can be provided in class and in which way teachers can guide students to analyse the context of using politeness.

On the other hand, however, some teaching suggestions in this book might have applicational limitations in terms of, for example, the scale of the class and the age of the students. For instance, Mugford particularly highlights that teachers should consider students’ individual wants of learning and practising politeness and help them to develop their own way of practising politeness (see e.g., Mugford, 2023, p. 145). Yet, when facing a large class involving 40–60 students, teachers need plenty of time to get to know how students perceive politeness and their individual wants. If the students’ perceptions of politeness and their wants require diverse or even conflicting teaching practices, it may put the teacher into a dilemma in deciding what and how to teach. Thus, such advice might be more applicable to the one-on-one or a small-scale class than a large-scale class. In addition, such suggestions might be unsuitable for young learners who still have no clear thoughts about their wants of practising politeness.

In conclusion, this book is a pioneering and insightful study of teaching FL politeness and offers a diverse range of politeness- and teaching-pragmatics-related research possibilities. Although some suggestions in this book might have certain limitations in application, they provide important hints for future politeness teaching and learning. This book has been written specifically for language teachers, foreign language learners, bilingual speakers, and researchers in the fields of politeness and pragmatics teaching. It has been structured in an easy-to-read way that each chapter deals with a specific aspect of FL politeness. I believe readers will enjoy reading this book and gain insights into the extensive research that has been conducted to date.

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References


