Teacher Request Politeness: Effects on Student Positive Emotions and Compliance Intention

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of teacher request politeness on student positive emotions and compliance intention. Teachers’ high politeness requests are found to be more likely to elicit positive emotions, such as happiness, than low politeness requests. The findings also indicate that positive emotions mediate the effects of teacher request politeness on student compliance intention. Teachers request politeness first elicits positive emotions from students, which then affect their compliance intention.

Keywords: Request Politeness; Positive Emotions; Compliance
Requesting is an inevitable and ubiquitous social phenomenon. People make requests for a variety of reasons, such as asking a favor, getting permission, fulfilling an obligation, and soliciting agreement (Kim & Wilson, 1994). In the classroom, instructors make requests to gain compliance from students (e.g., being on time, reading chapters). Requesting has also obtained substantial scholarly attention in communication over the past three decades. Scholars have examined requesting from politeness perspective (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Holtgraves & Yang, 1990, 1992), conceptualized implicit theories of requesting (Kim & Wilson, 1994), and investigated request strategies and contextual influences (Holtgraves & Yang, 1990, 1992; Meyer, 2001, 2002). By definition, requests refer to the speech acts to get hearers to perform a desired action that they otherwise would not have performed (Kim & Wilson, 1994; Wilson, Aleman, & Leatham, 1998). According to politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987), requests are inherently imposing and face-threatening because they threaten and intrude hearers’ freedom of actions and impinge on their autonomy boundaries (Holtgraves & Yang, 1990; Kim & Wilson, 1994).

However, existent research on requests predominantly focuses on message choices, request strategies, and contextual influences (e.g., power, relationship closeness, and imposition) on message selections in interpersonal relationships (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holtgraves & Yang, 1992). Relatively scant attention has been given to message effects on receivers, particularly their reactions and responses (Grant, King, & Behnke, 1994). This study is designed to examine the message effects on hearers in instructional contexts, specifically the effects of teacher request politeness on students’ positive emotions and compliance intention.

Teacher Request Politeness

Politeness is a universal concern across cultures and professions (Holtgraves & Yang, 1990; O’Sullivan, 2007). Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) politeness theory provides an important theoretical framework examining politeness, face threats, and language use. Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) distinguished between two types of face: positive and negative face. Positive face refers to the need for approval and appreciation while the negative face the want for autonomy and freedom from imposition. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), many speech acts are inherently face-threatening. Negative face can be threatened by requests, favor asking, suggestions, and threats, whereas positive face can be threatened by criticism, disapproval, and disagreements (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Brown and Levinson (1987) identified five politeness strategies speakers can choose in performing face-threatening acts (FTA), listed in increasing order of politeness: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and no FTA. Bald-on-record strategies are direct without redressive actions (e.g., say it again). Positive politeness strategies are oriented toward the positive face of the hearer, thus emphasizing affinity with the hearer (e.g., let’s say it again). Negative politeness strategies refer to the use of conventional indirectness or pleas to maximize the hearer’s freedom of actions (e.g., could you please say it again). Off-record strategies involve the use of hints (e.g., sorry I did not get you). No FTA indicates performing no face-threatening acts.

The weightiness of a FTA and the selection of politeness strategies are a function of power, distance, and imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Increases in hearer’s power, relationship distance, and the magnitude of act imposition will result in the corresponding increase in politeness. Politeness strategies are more likely to be used when a speaker of relatively lower power makes a larger request in a more distant relationship than when a speaker

Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987) offers a useful framework for examining teacher requests and student reactions in the asymmetrical teacher-student relationship. Teachers’ professional role endows them with rights to evaluate students’ behaviors, constrain their freedom of actions, control resources, and give critical feedback, which unavoidably poses threats to students’ positive and negative face (Bills, 2000; Cazden, 1979; Kerssen-Griep, Hess, & Trees, 2003). Given their legitimate power over students, teachers might not have to be very polite to students in their compliance-gaining requests.

However, research has demonstrated a widespread use of politeness strategies in teacher-student interactions and revealed the power of politeness or the politeness effect in the classroom (Bills, 2000; Wang, Johnson, Mayer, Rizzo, Shaw, & Collins, 2008; White, 1989). Although teaching inevitably involves some potentially face-threatening acts, teachers employ a variety of politeness strategies in the classroom to manage the class (White, 1989), motivate students to learn (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2003; White, 1989), and reduce face threat (Bills, 2000).

Emotions as a Mediator

Since requests are inherently imposing, they often trigger emotional reactions (Hunter & Boster, 1987). Emotions differ from moods in that emotions tend to occur in response to specific causes or stimuli and are relatively short-lived and more intense, whereas moods are more diffuse, longer lasting, and less connected to triggering events (Barsade & Gibson, 2007; Frijda, 1986, 1987). Emotions can be valenced positively (e.g., happiness, joy) or negatively (e.g., anger, disappointment) (Guerrero & La Valley, 2006). For example, depending on the request strategies employed, a hearer could feel excited, flattered, surprised, disappointed, angry, resentful, or other emotions (Hunter & Boster, 1987).

The emotional responses, in turn, prompt behavioral reactions or actions from the hearer, with different emotions eliciting different action tendencies (Frijda, 1986, 1987; Guerrero & La Valley, 2006; Hunter & Boster, 1987; Lazarus, 1991). For example, anger tends to arouse attack while guilt tends to evoke making amends (Lazarus, 1991). An emotional experience can be characterized as a sequence of reactions occurring over time, comprised of an antecedent or stimulus, a physiological or emotional reaction, an expression or regulation, and a behavioral reaction or outcome (Gibson, Schweitzer, Callister, & Gray, 2009; Lazarus, 1991). Thus, emotions potentially mediate the effects of the external stimulus on one’s behavioral tendencies.

Student Compliance Intention

Students could comply with or resist teachers’ requests. Student compliance refers to students’ going along with teachers’ compliance-gaining attempts, whereas student resistance refers to students’ opposition to teachers’ requests (Burroughs, 2007; Burroughs, Kearney, & Plax, 1989; Kearney, Plax, & McPherson, 2006). Given the asymmetrical teacher-student relationships, students are more likely to comply or partially comply with teachers’ requests even if they feel resistant (Burroughs, 2007). Most of the active resistance techniques found in hypothetical scenarios (e.g., teacher advice and blame, disruption, and hostile defensive etc.) were not used in actual classrooms (Burroughs, 2007).

A compliance-gaining request is inherently an emotion-eliciting act. Different request strategies could evoke different emotional responses, which, in turn, could engender different behavioral reactions. Low politeness requests are found to be more likely to provoke reactance and resistance than high politeness requests (manuscript under review, identity is concealed for anonymity). Conversely, we assume that a high politeness request will be more likely to mitigate...
reactance and elicit positive emotions (e.g., happiness) from hearers, who would then be more likely to comply with the request. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Teachers’ high politeness requests will be more likely to elicit positive emotions than low politeness requests.

H2: Teachers’ request politeness will first elicit positive emotions from students, which then affect their compliance intention.

Method

Participants

Participants were 151 college students (54 male, 96 female, and 1 unidentified) recruited from a variety of communication and English classes at a private university in the Northeast. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 28 ($M = 20.46$, $SD = 1.52$). About 86% of them were White, 3% Black, 5% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 1% other. The participants received extra credit for their participation.

Design and Procedure

Request politeness was manipulated using high and low conditions (See Appendix for scenarios). The request scenario involves a professor asking a student to temporarily suspend some extracurricular activities to improve academic performance. Request politeness was manipulated by using different politeness strategies. Bald-on-record was selected for the low-politeness request condition and negative politeness was chosen for the high-politeness request condition. Specifically, the direct imperative “must” was used as a low-politeness request and indirect questions (“Do you think you could please…?” and “Could you please…?”) were adopted as the high-politeness requests.

Participants were assigned randomly to one of two scenarios manipulating the levels of teacher request politeness (high or low). After reading the scenario, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire for measuring relevant variables, such as perceived request politeness, positive emotions, compliance intention, as well as demographic questions. The questionnaire took approximately 5 minutes to complete. Extra credit was given to the participants. Participation was confidential and anonymous.

Manipulation Check

Manipulation check was conducted for teacher request politeness. Students reported a higher level of teacher request politeness in the high politeness condition ($M = 3.33$, $SD = .99$) than in the low politeness condition ($M = 1.75$, $SD = .83$), $t (149) = 10.60$, $p < .001$. The result indicated that the manipulation of request politeness was effective in the experiment.

Measures

Positive emotion. Emotions can be valenced positively (e.g., happiness) or negatively (e.g., anger) (Guerrero & La Valley, 2006). For positive emotions, this study focuses on happiness only. Consistent with previous studies, happiness was measured with three 5-point Likert-type items ($5 = a$ great deal of this feeling, $1 = none$ of this feeling) (Dillard & Peck, 2001; Shen & Bigsby, 2010). The scale asked participants to rate how happy, content, and cheerful they felt toward the request. The Cronbach’s alpha for this study was .95.

Compliance intention. Compliance intention was measured with three 5-point Likert-type items ($5 = very$ likely, $1 = very$ unlikely). The scale assessed student likelihood to comply with the professor’s request. The three items were “I intend to comply with his request,” “I plan to act in ways that are consistent with his request,” and “I will make an effort to do what he asked me to do.” The alpha reliability for this study was .90.
Results

H1 predicted that teachers’ high politeness requests will be more likely to elicit positive emotions than low politeness requests. The results of independent-samples t-test indicated that teachers’ high politeness requests \( (M = 2.15, SD = .93) \) are more likely to elicit positive emotions than low politeness requests \( (M = 1.71, SD = .84) \), \( t(148) = 3.03, p < .01 \). H1 was supported.

H2 proposed that teachers’ request politeness will first elicit positive emotions from students, which then affect their compliance intention. Structural equation modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation using AMOS 6 was conducted to test the proposed structural model. The variables in the model can be correlated with each other to improve the overall fit of the models. SEM results indicated that the proposed model had a good fit to the data, \( \chi^2 (df = 1) = 2.28, p = .13 \), CFI = .99, TLI = .97, SRMR = .04. Thus, H2 was supported. Positive emotions mediate the effects of teachers’ request politeness on student compliance intention. Figure 1 presents the path coefficients for the model.

Figure 1: Positive Emotion as a Mediator Model

**\( p < .01 \)

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of teacher request politeness on student positive emotions and compliance intention. The findings indicate that teachers’ high politeness requests are more likely to elicit positive emotions than low politeness requests. Since requests are inherently imposing, they often trigger emotional reactions (Hunter & Boster, 1987), which can be valenced positively or negatively (Guerrero & La Valley, 2006). Consistent with the previous findings that suggest low politeness requests, due to its use of forceful, face-threatening, and controlling language, often provoke negative emotions, such as anger (under review), this study shows that the increase in teacher request politeness triggers positive emotions from students, such as happiness.

The study also indicates that positive emotions mediate the effects of teacher request politeness on student compliance intention. In other words, teachers’ request politeness first elicits positive emotions from students, which then affect their compliance intention. The finding is in line with prior suggestions that emotions, which are triggered by external stimulus or antecedents (Gibson et al., 2009), in turn, prompt behavioral reactions from the hearer (Frijda, 1986, 1987; Guerrero & La Valley, 2006; Lazarus, 1991). Strong and impolite languages are found to evoke negative emotions (e.g., anger), which then cause resistance (under review); likewise, this study suggests that polite requests arouse positive emotions (e.g., happiness), which then lead to compliance.
The findings offer practical implications for educators. By and large, teachers favor student compliance over resistance in learning contexts because student resistance can substantially alter a classroom environment or even disrupt a whole class (Burroughs, 2007; Burroughs, Kearney, & Plax, 1989; Kearney, Plax, & McPherson, 2006). But compliance-gaining requests are inherently face-threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holtgraves & Yang, 1990; Kim & Wilson, 1994), so they are resistance-eliciting, but the use of appropriate politeness strategies appears to mitigate resistance (under review). To promote student compliance in classrooms, it is advisable for teachers, in spite of their role-related legitimate power over students, to be very polite in their compliance-gaining requests and to avoid the use of forceful, controlling, and face-threatening language. Such politeness in request can arouse positive emotions, such as happiness, from students, which lead to compliance and other desired outcomes.

Two limitations of this study should be noted. First, this study addresses student compliance intentions rather than actual compliance behaviors. We should be careful not to equate hypothetical intentions with real compliance behaviors. Second, although the manipulation check found the manipulation of request politeness was effective, the use of hypothetical teacher requests might not perfectly reflect actual teacher requests in a naturalistic environment, and the presentation of two extreme poles (i.e., high and low conditions) might not fully capture the complex on-going nature of teacher-student interactions.

To conclude, this study examines the effects of teacher request politeness on students’ positive emotions and compliance intention. The findings show that teacher request politeness has an indirect effect on student compliance intention, mediated via positive emotions. Given that positive emotions play an important role in prompting behaviors and reactions (Frijda, 1986, 1987; Guerrero & La Valley, 2006; Lazarus, 1991), future research could consider exploring more linguistic and contextual factors that trigger positive emotions so as to enhance desired outcomes in the classroom.
Appendix

Request Politeness Conditions

High: You failed the mid-term exam because you were so overwhelmed with extracurricular activities that you did not have time to study. Your professor asked: “Do you think you could please quit some of your extracurricular activities for the rest of the semester and focus more on your studies? Could you please try it?”

Low: You failed the mid-term exam because you were so overwhelmed with extracurricular activities that you did not have time to study. Your professor said: “You must quit some of your extracurricular activities and focus more on your studies. You must do it!”
References


