Chapter 3
Politeness, Intercultural Communication, E-Mails:
Principles and Practices

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the focus shifts from oral communication to written communication, considering the sometimes controversial issue of politeness in written intercultural communication. Firstly, a definition of politeness is discussed; secondly, some key issues related to the topic of intercultural communication are considered; and finally, intercultural e-mail communication is introduced. The aim is to understand how intercultural communication, mediated by the internet, can create compelling and sometime challenging conditions for additional language learning. For example, university students use e-mails a lot. Nonetheless, some issues, amongst which the level of formality when they address university staff, may vary, depending on their own national culture and on the training they receive on the use of this medium. As a result, intercultural clashes may occur. To facilitate foreign language teaching and communication, an instrument to assess politeness in intercultural e-mail communication in an intercultural context will be presented.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign language (FL) teaching and learning theories have been extremely active and productive in recent decades, and issues related to intercultural communication and foreign language teaching have been widely discussed. Key strands of Applied Linguistics research are flourishing and developing, and a multitude of theoretical...
positions are being taken into account when dealing with FL teaching, even though FL teaching has mostly been referred to as communication and, as such, to the sending of messages and exchange of information, which fosters communicative language learning. Consequently, when intercultural communication (IC) is concerned, discussions have focused mostly on oral, and face to face, communication. In this chapter the focus has been shifted from oral communication to written communication, considering the, sometimes controversial, issue of politeness in written intercultural communication. Firstly, a definition of politeness is discussed, secondly some key issues related to the topic of intercultural communication are considered and, lastly, intercultural e-mail communication is introduced. The aim is to understand how intercultural communication, mediated by the Internet, can create compelling and sometimes challenging conditions for additional language learning. For example, although university students frequently use emails, some issues, amongst which is the level of formality that they use when they address university staff, may vary, depending on their own national culture and on any training they may have received regarding the use of this medium: as a result, intercultural clashes may occur. To facilitate foreign language teaching and communication, a tool to assess politeness in intercultural e-mail communication in an intercultural context will be presented.

**POLITENESS, A STARTING POINT**

Politeness is fundamental to all of our relationships and plays an essential role, not only in the way we communicate with each other, but also in the way we define ourselves. It is not limited to conventional aspects of linguistic etiquette; it encompasses all types of interpersonal behaviour through which we explore and maintain our relationships (Kadar & Haugh, 2013). Consequently, it is important to consider politeness as one of the key issues in FL pedagogy. It is a complex phenomenon, and there are many definitions of it in the literature, notwithstanding the fact that some authors offer paraphrases rather than new definitions. In the Seventies a form of Politeness Theory was developed, the perspective of which was pragmalinguistics, but later a new perspective was developed, taking into account sociolinguistic issues too (Mazzotta, 2007). The first approach promotes a more universalistic idea of politeness, while the second recognizes, within different language expressions, different ways to conceptualise politeness (Haugh, 2004; Mazzotta, 2007).

There are many definitions of politeness in the literature: for example, among others, politeness is defined by Simmons (1999) as “acting so as to take account of the feelings of others” (p. 515), and by Lakoff (1990), as “a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict
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