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Changes in the Classroom Discourse: Negative Politeness and Impoliteness

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Abstract. The paper focuses on changes identified in the classroom discourse in terms of the teacher–student relations. While traditional classroom relations relied on teacher's authority and control in the classroom, the current situation indicates a shift in the power relations existing in the class. The paper aims to analyse some of these changes by studying politeness and ways of expressing negative politeness and impoliteness. It starts by defining politeness as conflict-free communication, and then moves to negative politeness and impoliteness, applying these two concepts in the interpretation of the classroom discourse. The data used for the analysis were collected during English and history classes in a high school in Romania.
The paper draws on Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's (1987 [1978]) concept of negative politeness and on Derek Bousfield's (2008) impoliteness theory. The data reveal that the most common negative politeness strategies in the classroom discourse use indirect speech acts, questions and hedges, minimizing the imposition and impersonalizing. I argue that while teachers use mainly politeness strategies, students use impoliteness strategies as a way of claiming power. Thus, they can be disruptive and show lack of interest; they interrupt or take the floor at a wrong time; they sometimes dismiss, contest, or refuse the teacher's indications and often challenge the teacher's authority; at times, they are also rude towards their own peers in trying to demonstrate their superiority.

Keywords: classroom discourse, negative politeness, impoliteness, power relations

1. Introduction

Politeness is a very complex concept, which can be defined in different ways. It can refer to polite behaviour or to polite language. Being polite represents the key to good communication in society. The origin of the word *politeness* comes from the Latin word *politus*, which meant *polished*; hence the association of politeness

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with civilized, "polished" behaviour. The present paper deals with linguistic politeness, which can be defined, in broad terms, as conflict-free communication.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Politeness theory

One of the most well-known and influential theories of politeness belongs to Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987 [1978]). Their theory is often referred to as "the face-saving theory of politeness", as it builds on Erving Goffman's (1955) notion of *face*. They define the concept of face as "the public self-image somebody claims [adding that it] is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Brown–Levinson 1987: 61).

People can be expected to defend their faces if threatened in interaction, and, in defending their own, they might threaten others' faces. Normally, it is in every participant's best interest to maintain each other's face. While the content of face varies according to different cultures, Brown and Levinson assume that the mutual knowledge of members' public self-image – or face – is universal. The aspects of face have been treated in terms of basic wants – every member knowing what every other member desires. More explicitly, "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his action be unimpeded by others [has been defined as negative face and] the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others [has been defined as positive face]" (Brown–Levinson 1987: 62). "Positive politeness is redress directed to the addressee's positive face, […] his desire that his wants […] should be thought of as desirable" (Brown–Levinson 1987: 101). Redress consists in communicating that one's own wants are somehow similar to the addressee's wants, which is the normal behaviour between intimates. Positive politeness utterances are used to imply common ground even between strangers. Brown and Levinson state that positive politeness involves a degree of exaggeration and represents a kind of "social accelerator" (1987: 103). The strategies of positive politeness involve three main mechanisms: claim common ground with the hearer, convey that the speaker and the hearer are co-operators, and fulfil the hearer's want.

> Negative politeness is redressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face: his want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded. It is the heart of respect behaviour, just as positive politeness is 'the kernel' of familiar and joking behaviour […] Where positive politeness is free-ranging, negative politeness is specific and focused. (Brown–Levinson 1987: 129)

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Whereas the desire to go on record points towards directness, the need for negative face redress points towards indirectness. These two conflicting desires led Brown and Levinson to find ten negative politeness strategies: be conventionally indirect, question and hedge, be pessimistic, minimize the imposition, give deference, apologize, impersonalize the speaker and the hearer, state the face-threatening act (FTA) as a general rule, nominalize – using nouns instead of verbs, go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting the hearer. Some of these strategies are identified in the data analysis section.

While positive politeness strategies intend to minimize social distance, negative politeness strategies tend to maximize it. Thus, politeness has the power to reveal the quality of social relationships. "The linguistic realizations of positive- and negative-politeness strategies may operate as a social accelerator and a social brake, respectively, to modify the direction of the interaction at any point in time. Interactants […] move the interaction in the desired direction towards greater closeness or greater distance" (Brown–Levinson 1987: 231).

Brown and Levinson's theory has had a great impact on researching politeness, but it has also received many critiques throughout the years. One of these critiques is the theory's overreliance on the Speech Act Theory. Some speech acts can be misleading; they may appear polite on the surface, but they can have impolite implications at a deeper level. Context is extremely important in interpreting politeness, and Brown and Levinson seem to neglect this aspect; they analyse politeness at the utterance level. Furthermore, their model of communication is debatable because communication between the speaker and the hearer is not perfect; in real-life communication, there could be misunderstandings. Speakers and their utterances receive greater attention than hearers do. Other critics sustain that even the definition of politeness and the understanding of the role and function of its variables are biased towards the Western culture. Politeness phenomena are more complex than simply avoiding threatening the other's face. Brown and Levinson do not take impolite phenomena into consideration. Their assumption about the universal nature of politeness poses some problems, as well. Linguists believe that, within different cultures, politeness operates in different ways and the concept of face varies across cultures (Mills 2011: 20–26). The post-modern/discursive approaches to politeness that have emerged afterwards try either to modify or to build on Brown and Levinson's theory.

2.2. Impoliteness theory

Derek Bousfield (2008) provides a descriptive, data-driven model concerning impoliteness, in which "face is mutually constructed" – externally constituted in interaction and internally expected. When the internal face expectations do not match the reality face ones, then impoliteness may arise (Bousfield 2008:

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40–41). Successful impoliteness occurs when the speaker's intention to offend is understood by the hearer. Bousfield defines impoliteness as:

> the communication of intentionally gratuitous and conflictive verbal face-threatening acts (FTAs) which are purposefully delivered:
> i. Unmitigated, in contexts where mitigation is required, and/or
> ii. With deliberate *aggression*, that is, with the face threat exacerbated, "boosted", or maximised in some way to heighten the face damage inflicted. (2008: 72; emphasis in the original)

Starting from Jonathan Culpeper's (1996) model of impoliteness, Bousfield suggests his own new model of analysing impoliteness. He proposes two "overarching tactics", namely on-record impoliteness and off-record impoliteness (including sarcasm and withholding politeness) (Bousfield 2008: 94). On-record impoliteness involves:

> [t]he use of strategies designed to *explicitly* (a) attack the face of an interactant, (b) construct the face of the interactant in a non-harmonious or outright conflictive way, (c) deny the expected face wants, needs, or rights of the interactant, or some combination thereof. The attack is made in an unambiguous way given the context in which it occurs. [Whereas off-record impoliteness involves] [t]he use of strategies where the threat or damage to an interactant's face is conveyed indirectly by way of an implicature […] and can be cancelled […], given the context in which it occurs. (Bousfield 2008: 95; emphasis in the original)

Bousfield exemplifies several types of impolite strategies: snub – showing disapproval; disassociate from the other; be uninterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic; use inappropriate identity markers; seek disagreement; use taboo words; threaten/frighten; condescend, scorn, or ridicule; explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect; criticize; hinder/block (interrupting, turn denial); enforce role shift; challenges (rhetorical questions used as a defence) (2008: 101–118). Some of these strategies are identified in the data analysis section.

Bousfield states that impoliteness does not appear "out of the blue", it must have been previously invoked, and the impolite participant must have been sufficiently provoked before resorting to an impolite strategy (2008: 183). Once faced with an offending event, the interlocutor has the possibility to respond or to remain silent. Interpretation of silence can be problematic because it may denote different things: it can be a way of defending one's face, accepting the offence, it can show lack of understanding or even need of thinking time. If, on the contrary,

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the interlocutor chooses to respond, he/she can accept the face attack or counter it using offensive or defensive strategies.

2.3. Politeness and impoliteness in classroom interaction

There are many studies that focus on the politeness strategies used in classroom interaction. Peng et al. (2014) observe that the use of politeness strategies minimizes the social distance between the teacher and the students and also creates a relaxing learning environment. They identify two main positive politeness strategies used by the teacher: the address and the compliment. The teacher addresses the students using honorifics (such as *miss* or *gentleman*) in order to "establish an equal teacher–student status" and compliments or praises (such as *well done*, *excellent*) in order to increase students' confidence (Peng et al. 2014: 113). Teachers also use hedges and questions – as negative politeness strategies – to minimize the imposition and give students more freedom of choice. Peng et al. (2014) conclude that teachers use more positive than negative politeness strategies, demonstrating their intention to reduce the face-threatening acts and shorten the social distance (p. 114). Senowarsito (2013) focuses on students' politeness strategies, among which he mentions the use of interpersonal function markers. He sustains that teachers and students use positive (group identity markers, code-switching, joking), negative (hedging), but also bald on-record politeness strategies (direct speech acts) and that the linguistic expressions of politeness in classroom interaction are addressing, thanking, apologizing, encouraging, and leave-taking (Senowarsito 2013: 94). According to him, politeness represents "an important aspect of student character building" (Senowarsito 2013: 95). In recent years, the interest in analysing impoliteness has also increased. Among the impoliteness strategies identified in classroom interaction, we mention asking to be quiet, criticizing, using taboo words, and being silent (Maulana et al. 2019).

3. Research design

3.1. Research questions

The research was guided by two main questions:

What negative politeness strategies are employed in classroom discourse?

What impoliteness strategies are employed in classroom discourse?

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3.2. Data collection

This research is based on the analysis of the recordings of three 50-minute lessons in a Romanian school. There is one history lesson taught to the 5th grade about the beginning of the Roman Empire and two English lessons to the 11th grade, which are my own. The English classes are two consecutive ones: the first one starts with consolidation regarding colour metaphors, and then it continues with a speaking activity about how to make joint decisions when choosing the colour and the furniture in a student common room; the second lesson deals with teaching new grammar (*needs doing/have something done* structure) and practising it.

The classes were audio recorded using a mobile phone connected to a high-quality microphone. I was present at the history lesson (in my researcher capacity) at the request of the teacher who thought she would not manage the equipment. To prevent distraction, curiosity, or even nervousness among the students, I sat at the back of the classroom lest the students should see me or the microphone. Being an observer allowed me to write down some remarks and other significant details for the future transcription. I also talked to the history teacher after the lesson, and she provided me with further insights into her teaching. These recordings are the data that provided the basis of my analysis.

3.3. Transcription conventions

After recording it, the material was transcribed and translated from Romanian into English (in the case of the history class and also in the English classes when Romanian was used). The conventions used in the transcription (see the *Appendix*) are based on several sources from the literature (Eggins–Slade 1997, qtd. in Coposescu–Chefneux 2008: 17).

3.4. Participants

Being a researcher and a teacher involved in the research represents an advantage because I can analyse and interpret my own linguistic performance from a first-order politeness perspective. I have been teaching English for nine years at all levels – primary, secondary, and high school. To provide validity and reliability to my study, I have asked another female history teacher to record her class. She is in her forties, and she has a teaching experience of more than ten years. The students who participated are: 19 students from the fifth grade (11–12 years old) and 22 students from the eleventh grade (16–17 years old). All the students and the teachers are Romanian. In the English class, the students' level of English varies from lower intermediate to advanced.

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3.5. Ethical considerations

The research had to meet a number of stringent ethical requirements, among which the approval of *The Committee for Ethics in Social and Human Research of Transilvania University of Braşov*. I also obtained all the participants' written consent. I explained to the headmaster and the teacher the purpose of my study, and I guaranteed confidentiality. The parents' consent was also asked for because the students were under the age of eighteen. There were three students from the 11th grade whose parents did not want their children involved in the study. I deliberately omitted transcribing these students' replies. To protect the other students' identities, their real names were not used in the transcriptions. All participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research whenever they wanted and that their participation was not conditioned by any kind of benefits and/or costs.

4. Data analysis

The main purpose of this research is to identify strategies of negative politeness and impoliteness occurring in classroom interaction. I have analysed the data based on Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's (1987 [1978]) and Derek Bousfield's (2008) approaches because their works provide two of the most thorough models of linguistic politeness and impoliteness. I have adapted their theories to the data. I start by presenting some negative politeness strategies identified in classroom interaction, followed by the impoliteness strategies.

4.1. Negative politeness strategies

4.1.1. Being conventionally indirect

Indirectness appears more frequently in the EFL class and less often in the history class. The history teacher addresses the students more directly, in a more authoritative manner. She controls the students, keeps them alert all the time by asking them questions. During the English class, the teacher tries to make students feel they are in charge of their own learning. An important factor in adopting this attitude is the students' age; they are teenagers, and it is important for them to develop learning autonomy. The teacher tries to be polite so that students perceive no threat to their face, to their self-esteem, as in the following examples:

(1) Can you translate this?
(2) Can you come to the board (.) PLEASE?
(3) You can write this down as well.

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Examples (1) and (2) illustrate indirect requests, not just simple questions regarding the students' abilities. The modal verb "can" and the insertion of the polite marker "please" are used to soften the request and not to damage the student's face. In example (3), we can see how the teacher avoids being too direct and instead of using an imperative (Write this down!) she resorts to a declarative sentence containing the same modal verb. It leaves students the impression that writing down certain information is a matter of choice.

4.1.2. Using questions and hedges

The teacher avoids being direct or appearing too authoritative by asking questions and/or using hedges in her speech. For instance, questioning instead of ordering seems less imposing on the students. In the following two examples, the teacher prefers to give students the opportunity to affirm themselves, to let them take control instead of directly nominating them.

(4) Who can help him?
(5) WHO would like to read the task?

The question in example (4) is asked when a student does not know the answer. Instead of criticizing the student for his lack of knowledge and thus making him lose face in front of his classmates, the teacher tries to be supportive and encourages the other students to help him. The teacher does not name a certain student to help him but lets the students decide who is willing to do that. Example (5) is similar to the previous one in the sense that the teacher, once again, avoids straightforward nomination by resorting to a question addressed to the whole class, allowing the students to decide whether they are willing to read the task or not.

Hedging, on the other hand, is achieved in various ways – using discourse markers (such as "well", "so" and their Romanian equivalents *bun*, *aşa*, *deci*), modal verbs (such as "can"), adverbs ("maybe"/*probabil*, "not necessarily"), if-clauses, etc. Example (6) illustrates how the teacher answers when a student volunteers to clean the blackboard. In order not to sound too demanding, the teacher hedges her request with the modal verb 'can' and with the if-clause.

(6) Yes (.) you can clean it (.) if you want.

Example (7) begins with another indirect request: the teacher asks the student to construct a sentence (with a certain word or phrase). The student hesitates because he is not sure if he can use the same word – "hair" – as in the example in the coursebook. The teacher's second reply represents an alternative way of correcting the student without being too intrusive. She uses hedges ("not

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necessarily", "maybe"), provides other options (see the enumeration "shirt, trousers, shoes"), and allows the student to decide ("anything you like") in order not to damage his face.

(7) T: can you build another sentence?
S: a:: with hair or with (.) something else?
T: not necessarily with hair (.) maybe with shirt. trousers. shoes (.) anything you like.

4.1.3. Minimizing the imposition

This is one of the most frequently used negative politeness strategies in the classroom. Teachers resort to this strategy lest the students should feel threatened. Diminutives (such as "a little", "a bit", "a few", "a couple", etc.) are used in order to diminish the imposition. See the following examples:

(8) *Haideți să recapitulăm puțin.*
'Let's revise a little.'[1]
(9) *Hai să scriem câteva idei.*
'Let's write down a few ideas.'

(10) Let's write a couple of things.
(11) Ok. so (.) these are a few words about this kind of constructions.

The above examples show how the instructions for these two classroom activities – revising and writing – are given in a mitigated manner. A short revision and some note taking convey the idea that the lesson is not a difficult one. In other words, the students do not feel threatened with a lot of hard work. When minimizing the imposition, teachers take into consideration the students' needs and wants.

4.1.4. Giving deference

This is a strategy mostly employed by students to show respect to the teacher. When addressing the teacher, students use terms such as 'madam' *doamna* or "teacher". These forms of address also reveal the legitimate power teachers are endowed with. According to the data, when students speak in English they use the appellative 'teacher' pointing to the professional status (example 12), whereas in Romanian they use the word *doamna* 'madam' probably considering the age difference (example 13).

1 Translations from Romanian to English are my own throughout the text.

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(12) Teacher, mend means to repair?
(13) *Doamna, ce scrie acolo?*
'Madam, what have you written there?'

In example (13), a student in the English class asks the teacher for clarification about what she did not understand from the blackboard. Although the student resorts to code-switching and interrupts the teacher while she is explaining new information, her action is not perceived as an impolite one. A possible explanation could be the student's respectful intervention, which includes the polite addressing term "madam".

4.1.5. Impersonalizing

This strategy is mainly used by the teacher in order to avoid being too direct and personal. According to the data, there are two ways of impersonalizing, namely using imperatives and indefinites.

(14) Write there. please.
(15) Now. Please write the following.

The commands in examples (14) and (15) are addressed by the teacher to the whole class, not directed towards a certain student. They are further softened by the use of the politeness marker 'please', which diminishes the force of the directive and makes the students not feel threatened. In examples (16) and (17), we can see the replacement of the personal pronouns "I" and "you" with the indefinite pronoun "anyone". The teacher is inviting the students to take the floor, but she does so in a polite manner, not threatening their face. Avoiding the use of the second person personal pronouns and replacing them with third person pronouns deepens the social distance between the teacher – the powerful participant – and the students – the less powerful ones.

(16) Is there ANYONE who would like to speak?
(17) Is there anyone else who:: would like to discuss about this?

4.1.6. Go on record as implicating a debt

There are some instances in the data that refer to giving thanks. When thanking someone you imply that you are in debt to that person, suggesting that somehow you will remember what the other person did for you.

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(18) Ok. thank you (2) good. another example.
(19) *Mulțumim, X.*
'We thank you, X.'

Example (18) presents the teacher thanking the student who has just provided a good answer. The teacher is thankful to the student because the student volunteered to answer when the other ones did not. Moreover, the teacher may appreciate more a good answer after a series of wrong answers. Example (19) is a similar one, but this time the teacher gives thanks in the name of the whole class. The teachers' thanks are interpreted as denoting gratitude for students' cooperating in the learning process but also as maintaining social distance.

4.2. Impoliteness strategies

Impoliteness does not appear as frequently as politeness in classroom interaction. This could be a proof that classroom discourse follows some unwritten rules of mutual respect between teachers and students. It is common sense that teachers and students should be polite to each other as all of them have the same goal – improving students' knowledge and skills. However, isolated cases of impolite behaviour may be encountered in the classroom. From the data analysis, teachers tend to avoid being impolite, and when they are, this behaviour appears to be triggered by the students' disruptive/impolite behaviour. Teachers are not gratuitously impolite and their face-threatening acts are usually a reaction to students' impoliteness. On the other hand, students tend to behave more impolitely towards their teachers probably because they need to assert their identities, to gain power, and to show off in front of their peers. In the following section, I provide some examples of what I interpret as impoliteness in the data.

4.2.1. Interrupting and speaking simultaneously

The history class is a traditional lesson that provides new information; it starts with a brief revision of previous knowledge, then introduces the new information and ends with a feedback session aiming at consolidating the recently taught notions. Throughout the lesson, the teacher asks students questions following the typical IRF pattern (initiation–response–feedback). The teacher does most of the talking, and some students interrupt very often so that they can draw attention, show off in front of their peers, and challenge the teacher. These are 12 years-old students, and they usually do not stay quiet and focused for a longer period of time; they do not have enough patience to let the teacher finish an idea, so simultaneous speaking also appears.

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(20) T: *şi hai să le aşezăm aşa frumos ca să aveți loc şi în paranteze să a: /scriem/ câteva completări, da? (3) imperator. IM-PE-RA-TOR.*
S1: */scriem?/*
S2: *şi în paranteză?*
T: ***imediat. STAI că ți le zic.***

T: 'and let's put them nicely for you to have space and in brackets to a: /write/ further information, ok? (3) imperator. IM-PE-RA-TOR.'
S1: '/do we write?/'
S2: 'and in brackets?'
T: '**WAIT. I'll tell you right away.**'

(21) T: *la Roma au început să se construiască foarte multe temple. închinate zeilor. temple închinate zeilor (5) băi publice. băi publice.*
S: *adică cum?*
T: ***explic imediat.*** *biblioteci. etc (3) am înțeles ideea da? şi acum le luăm pe rând.*

T: 'in Rome there were built a lot of temples. dedicated to gods. temples dedicated to gods (5) public baths. public baths.'
S: 'meaning?'
T: '**I'll explain right away.** libraries. etc. (3) we have understood the idea right? and now we take them one by one.'

The above extracts are examples of students' interrupting the teacher's presentation. Students appear to have no patience for the teacher to finish her idea. These examples are similar in the sense that after the interruption the teacher promises to explain later (see the replies in bold). Although the students seem involved in the lesson and their questions seek further explanations, their interventions in taking the floor are inappropriate and are sanctioned by the teacher. When a speaker does not wait for his/her turn at a transition relevance place (TPR), he/she interrupts or speaks simultaneously with the current speaker. Such conversational behaviour is considered impolite, especially in formal contexts such as the classroom. Apart from interruptions, the students in the history lesson also produce overlapping speech – either with the teacher or with other students. There is one particular student who has developed his own way of interrupting, i.e. by repeating keywords the teacher says or sometimes only the last syllables of those words.

(22) T: *supranumele de AU-GUS-/TUS/*
S1: */tus/*

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T: *şi hai să vedem ce înseamnă? PREAmăritul (4) a:: să ştiți că acest supranume de Augustus face trimitere la luna au/gust/ (.) luna în care Octavian era născut* /(2)/
S1: */gust/*
S2: */şi eu/*
T: *şi: vorbeam (.) a:: când am pus în discuție calendarul lui? Iulius /Cezar./*
S1: /Cezar./
T: *şi vă spuneam. CÂND începea anul la romani? odată cu luna martie.*
S2: *da?*
T: *DA. şi fiecare lună era închinată câte unui zeu (3) o să învățăm şi exemple de zeități pentru că romanii au fost politeişti. adică au crezut în mai mulți zei.*

T: 'the name of AU-GUS-/TUS/'
S1: '/tus/'
T: 'and let's see what does it mean? the VENErated (4) a:: you have to know this title of Augustus refers to Au/gust/ (.) the month in which Octavian was born /(2)/'
S1: '/gust/'
S2: '/me too/'
T: 'a:nd we were discussing about this (.) a:: when we mentioned the calendar of? Julius /Caesar./'
S1: '/Caesar./'
T: 'and I told you. WHEN did the year begin for the Romans? starting with March.'
S2: 'really?'
T: 'YES. and each month was dedicated to a god (3) and we shall learn examples of deities because the Romans were polytheists. meaning they believed in many gods.'

We can see in example (22) how the teacher is constantly interrupted by the two students. The overlapping speech, even though brief (repetition of some syllables or single words), should have not occurred at all. The teacher is not allowed to finish her ideas; thus, the flow of the presentation is discontinued, and it is hard to resume, as indicated by the teacher's pauses and hesitations. These kind of interruptions and overlaps are not only impolite linguistic behaviour, but they are also strategies students employ in order to make their voice heard, to draw teacher's attention and to challenge her. These are the students' methods of claiming power under the guise of paying attention to what the teacher is saying. S1, for example, is attentive, and when he finds the possibility to infer the next

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word the teacher is about to say, he does not hesitate to utter it; in this way, he tries to demonstrate that he already knows what the teacher has to say.

4.2.2. Being uninterested

Example (23) shows lack of interest in school matters, at the same time questioning the role of the school as an institution.

(23) T: do you think this kind of colour inspires you when you have to study? /(.)/ when you have to focus (.) on something else?
S: **/I don't study./** no.
T: maybe: you've got a project to do or something (.) I don't know (.)
S: **I don't really care about projects.** when I do projects or something like that I mostly listen to music. [unclear] **I don't really care about school.**

The student's interventions – the ones written in bold – are perceived as being abrupt and categorical, threatening the teacher's face. The teacher tries to make the student reconsider his position, providing some alternatives ("projects"), using hedges ("maybe", "I don't know") to counter the student's negative attitude. From example (24),[2] we can infer the student's lack of interest in the school subject, as he bluntly admits he has no coursebook and no notebook.

(24) S: *n-am ce-mi trebuie.*
'I don't have what I need.'
T: why not?
S: *am uitat cartea acasă.*
'I forgot my book at home.'

4.2.3. Challenging

Students use challenging questions to contest the teacher's authority or to test the teacher's patience. In example (25), the teacher is asking students to express their opinions on what items of furniture they would include in a students' common room. She randomly calls on students to express their ideas and motivate their choices.

(25) T: **what about you X?**
S1: **what about me?**
T: what are the items?

2 This is an example in which the student uses Romanian instead of English. See the translation below each line.

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S1: (silent)
T: you don't have the BOOK. /what items would you prefer/ for a common students' room?
S1: /yeah. I don't have the book./
(a few minutes later)
T: **what about you Y?**
S2: **what about me?**
T: how would you imagine this common room that you share with other students?

When nominating a student, the teacher uses the question 'What about you?' followed by the student's first name (which is not included in the transcription due to ethical considerations). The teacher's intention is clearly perceived by the students as they understand that the teacher is asking for their opinion. Instead of providing an answer, the two students respond to the teacher's question with another question (see the symmetric patterns written in bold). The reason why they resort to these challenging questions is the fact that they were not paying attention to the activity; S1 even admits to not having the coursebook. In order not to lose face by remaining silent when asked a question by the teacher and to stall for more thinking time, the students prefer to challenge her. The teacher reacts by reformulating her question and including the details the students were supposed to know, and the activity progresses.

4.2.4. Being sarcastic

Example (26)[3] is characterized by sarcasm as it reveals a student's remark that appears quite neutral on the surface but that actually has some impolite implications. This is an example from the English class illustrating how a student with better knowledge of English can be impolite to a student whose English is not as good.

(26) T: X.
S1: (silent)
Ss: *ieşi la tablă.* (more students addressing to S1)
'go to the board.'
S1: (silent)
T: come on.
S2: *IEŞI la tablă.* (another student addressing to S1)
'GO to the board.'

3 This is another example in which the students in the English class use Romanian in their conversation. See the translation below each line.

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S3: ***vezi că tre să scrii, bă.***
'be careful, you have to write, dude.'
Ss: (laughing)

When the teacher asks S1 to come to the blackboard, he does not comply at the beginning. This behaviour triggers the reaction of his classmates, who explicitly tell him what he is supposed to do. But S1 still hesitates, so the teacher reformulates her request ("come on"), and S2 translates the request into their mother tongue. S1 is a student with a lower level of English, so the fact that his classmates use their mother tongue to explain what the teacher expects of him can be a sign of solidarity. Both the teacher and the other students use imperatives not necessarily to attack S1's face but rather to urge him. In this context, S3's utterance seems sarcastic, even if said in a quiet voice and not heard by everyone. The fact that S1 has to write once he comes to the blackboard is obvious, but what S3 suggests is that S1 does not know how to write in English. S3's intention is to make a joke, which is why those who have heard him laugh. For S1, though, it is an offensive joke.

5. Conclusions

The classroom represents a unique context with a hierarchical relationship – the teacher is the one who possesses more knowledge, and thus, the one who can exercise power over the students. The teacher also has institutional power. This state of things could make someone think that politeness is suspended in the classroom, but the evidence from the data proves this is not the case. The starting point of this research was the idea that teachers mitigate their legitimate power in order to reduce the social distance, while students tend to claim power in order to assert their identities. This power negotiation definitely involves polite and/or impolite behaviour.

According to the data, there were more negative politeness strategies used in the classroom interaction than impoliteness strategies. Furthermore, negative politeness strategies were mainly employed by teachers, whereas impoliteness strategies were used more by students. This proves that teachers are generally more concerned about building a relationship based on respect with the students, while students tend to challenge that formality imposed by the teacher. The negative politeness strategy resorted to most frequently is minimizing the imposition so that students should not feel threatened or pressured. Teachers also resort to indirect speech acts to reduce the force of their directives and, at the same time, to give students the possibility to decide, to take responsibility for their own learning. According to the data, the teacher of English appears to

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be more indirect than the history teacher, who is balder on record. A possible explanation may be the difference in age.

All in all, teachers use a lot of mitigation forms showing they are oriented towards face relations and politeness. Hedges, questions, and indefinites are extensively used to diminish the imposition and maintain students' face. Teachers resort to negative politeness strategies for classroom instructions when motivating or evaluating students or for classroom management. Students also use negative politeness strategies when giving deference to their teachers. But students also use impoliteness strategies: they interrupt or speak simultaneously with the teacher; they are dismissive, uninterested and contest the teacher's indications/suggestions and often challenge her authority; sometimes they are sarcastic towards their own peers in order to demonstrate their superiority.

Politeness is widely employed to achieve tactful and effective communication in the classroom. By using negative politeness strategies, teachers create an environment where students feel respected and unthreatened when they make mistakes. Overall, while politeness is used to dissipate power, impoliteness is used to assert power.

6. Limitations of the present study

There are a number of limitations of the present study that have to be taken into consideration. First of all, the research is not a large-scale one. The validity of the data would be higher if more teachers were involved in the research. Second of all, the research is based only on audio recordings, so politeness and impoliteness phenomena are only analysed from a linguistic point of view. A more comprehensive approach to politeness and impoliteness in terms of non-verbal behaviour could be the starting point for future research. Last but not least, the students' own interpretation of the polite and impolite sequences was not included. The analysis is the researcher's interpretation of the data, and, as such, other researchers may bring a different perspective on the data.

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions

Symbol	***Significance***
.	clause final falling intonation
?	clause final rising intonation
(.)	short hesitation within a turn (less than 2 seconds)
(2)	inter-turn pause longer than 1 second, the number indicating the seconds
//	the onset of overlapping talk
: :	lengthened syllables or vowels
[unclear]	non-transcribable segments of talk
‘’	translation
(words in brackets)	further explanations
CAPITAL LETTERS	word stressed
T	teacher
S	student
Ss	all students speaking at the same time

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