Inteoduction: Why Politeness Matters

Humans, unlike animals, use language to communicate with each other. Through language, humans make their demands known to others, express their feelings, articulate their opinions on various issues, and negotiate with opponents to avoid confrontation in case of conflict. The process of communication is a crucially important part of human life because human society requires personal interactions. In the communication process, both speaking and understanding play a significant role in avoiding miscommunication. Thus, for smooth communication, speakers need to have both a good grasp of the grammatical rules of the language they are using and an understanding of the culture that language grows out of – on the grounds that cultural norms influence language conventions.1 Language acquisition requires the learner to have both organizational and contextual knowledge of the language being studied to become a good speaker of that language.

Organizational knowledge refers to the formal structure and rules of the language; it is grammatical and textual knowledge. It signifies ‘the particular resources that a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions’ (Leech, 1983, p. 11). In other words, it describes the technical rules of the language, known as pragmalinguistics, employed to properly express what the speaker wants to communicate to the hearer (Yu, 2006). Without this organizational knowledge communication in the language becomes extremely difficult.

Contextual knowledge, on the other hand, involves using a language in various situations and circumstances. It defines the way in which pragmatic performance is subject to specific socio-cultural conventions and values, such as traditions, customs, and social norms (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993). Every society has its own ethnocentric and/or linguistic norms describing society’s implicit agreement that a certain
type of language should be used in certain circumstances, having to
do with choice of words, verbal conjugation, the use of certain expres-
sions, and so on. Thus, contextual knowledge, known as socioprag-
matics, is based on lexical and functional knowledge of the language
(Yu, 2006). Sociopragmatics facilitate smooth communication, reduc-
ing the chance for misunderstanding or miscommunication.

Communication, however, involves at least two people (or parties)
because it is a product of exchanging speech acts, and thus involves both
speaking and comprehending. According to Blum-Kulka and Olstein
(1984), there are three types of variability that affect the realization
of the speech act in communication: (1) intra-cultural, situational vari-
ability, which refers to the understanding of cultural norms in various
situations, because different situations require different customs and/or
conventions even within the same culture; (2) cross-cultural variability,
which describes the differences among various cultures resulting from
distinctions in cultural norms; and (3) individual variability, the unique
communication behavior of each individual. Individual variability may
be handled by getting to know the person better.

However, the first two types of variability (intra-cultural situational
and cross-cultural) are hard to manage without an understanding of
the culture. This is why Hymes (1974) contends that to have communi-
cative competence in a language, speakers must have knowledge of the
cultural rules for speaking as well as the technical linguistic features of
the language. In other words, good communication is obtained when
both the speaker and the hearer are on the same page with respect
to the rules and conventions of the language in use and the culture
behind it.

For this reason, Canale and Swain (1980) and later Canale (1983)
argue that there are four competences for attaining communicative
competence: grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic.
Grammatical competence means knowing the language rules, such as
sentence order. Discourse competence refers to knowledge of the conven-
tions that direct the relationship among sentences to form a meaning.
Sociolinguistic competence is the ability to understand the pragmatic,
socio-cultural elements that determine language use. Finally, strategic
competence is how well the speaker manipulates language to achieve
communication goals. To reach a desirable level of communicative com-
petence in a foreign language, all four components are necessary.

As discussed above, the importance of contextual knowledge (socio-
cultural understanding) for smooth communication in a second lan-
guage has been repeatedly emphasized in the literature and is one of