THE POWER OF POLITENESS IN THE CLASSROOM: CULTURAL CODES THAT CREATE AND CONSTRAIN KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION

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Mrs. Bedford: Oh my,
what a nice-looking group of kindergartners. Oh,
it makes Mrs. Bedford so happy
to see such smiling faces.
Now,
are we all sitting comfortably?
[Pause]
Let's see who is here.
Looks like everybody's here.
Our line leader for today is Mark W
[Students talking among themselves]

Mrs. Bedford: Oh,
I like the way
Tammy and Barbara are sitting down.
They're so ready for first grade.
Oh,
and Corrie and Heather, how nice . . .
and Colleen and Sherrie,
you look terrific.
Joey,
could you turn around so I can see your face?
Steven T.,
would you come sit up here by me?
Bobby, find yourself a place there
Stephen S.,
right there is a good place for you.
Is everybody comfortable?
Are we ready?
[Students talking among themselves]

Mrs. Bedford: Would you like to sing one song before we get to work?

I have always been taken aback by the relentless cheerfulness of primary classrooms. When I first began to observe in an elementary school to find out
how teachers and children construct knowledge about culturally different people, I dismissed this kind of talk as a mere preliminary for the social studies lesson that was to follow. If queried at all about the meaning of these initial interactions, I probably would have described them as illustrating what a "nice" personality the teacher has or as demonstrating how a teacher can get young children "ready" for a lesson. However, after several years of observation, I became aware that the politeness was unrelenting, an institutionalized presence that systematically skewed the generation of every lesson. While it enabled teachers to establish what they perceived as a necessary set of social relationships, it also constrained scholarly ways of knowing.

In this article, I analyze how a kindergarten teacher and her students use speech as they actively engage in the formation of knowledge in a social studies lesson. At the heart of the analysis is the claim that the form of communication used in the classroom affects the content of the knowledge that the teacher and students mutually construct. The purpose of this article is to describe how the polite discourse used by a primary teacher in an elementary school forms a context in which the students learn to focus on certain types of concepts and questions about the world to the exclusion of others.

The data were gathered during a four-year ethnographic study in which I observed and audiotaped 36 social studies lessons in kindergarten through 6th grade. Transcripts of 89 interviews that kindergarten, 3rd-, and 6th-grade students held with foreign-exchange students were also analyzed. All the observations and interviews took place in a single elementary school located in a working-class, suburban neighborhood not far from the steel mill and docks of a large eastern city.

ANALYZING THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTIONS

We frequently assume that what is said by teachers is what is learned by students. Yet the development of the constructivist paradigm in the last two decades has challenged the belief in this automatic transmission of knowledge. A group of sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and linguists studied interactions previously thought to be simple and straightforward as though they were complex events: these researchers have analyzed the face-to-face interactions of individuals as if they were purposively constructing highly

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2Ibid
sophisticated and organized social products. According to Magoon, these researchers assume individuals act in intelligent and purposeful ways because the locus of control "resides in the individuals themselves." They also assume, however, that individuals act in various elaborate social roles and that the "capacity for autonomous action is often severely constrained, for example, by either explicit or tacit recognition of social norms." Magoon argues, therefore, that "much important complex behavior like teaching and learning might be best understood as being constructed purposively by the subjects (both teachers and pupils) themselves, and cannot adequately be studied without accounting for meaning and purpose."

Thus, rather than teachers directly transmitting knowledge to the students, constructivist theorists assume that the teacher and students are each constructing their own knowledge in face-to-face interactions. The knowledge that is the social product of these interactions encompasses much more than a set of discrete skills and concepts. Through tone of voice, toss of the head, rapid-fire speech, and all the other ways we have of communicating, students and teacher send and receive many overt and implicit social and academic messages during each lesson. Individual participants emerge from a lesson having constructed some shared, as well as some differing, knowledge about what was happening.

THE ENACTED CURRICULUM

In a parallel development, curriculum theorists are redefining the boundaries of their field. Rather than assuming that the construction of curriculum takes place only before instruction and is done only by adults, researchers such as Barnes and Eisner argue that curriculum includes what emerges from the face-to-face interactions of teachers and students—the "lived" or "enacted curriculum." As Barnes argues:

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5 Ibid.

When people talk about "the school curriculum" they often mean "what teachers plan in advance for their pupils to learn." But a curriculum made only of teachers' intentions would be an insubstantial thing from which nobody would learn much. To become meaningful a curriculum has to be enacted by pupils as well as teachers. . . . By "enact" I mean come together in a meaningful communication—talk, write, read books, collaborate, become angry with one another, learn what to say and do and how to interpret what others say and do. In this sense curriculum is a form of communication.7

What is taught and what is learned depends on more than what the teacher has prepared. It depends largely on the patterns of communication that the teacher has set up in the classroom.

HOW POLITENESS IS USED TO INVITE STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE

Mrs. Bedford. Oh my,
what a nice-looking group of kindergartners.
Oh,
it makes Mrs. Bedford so happy
to see such smiling faces.

Why does Mrs. Bedford begin her lesson by being so cheerful and polite? Given her superior status as adult and teacher, why doesn't she (and so many other primary teachers) just simply and efficiently tell the students to pay attention?

The Limited Availability of Discourse Options

Individuals do not have innumerable ways of accomplishing their interactional goals. Goody has found that people use constrained, highly restricted forms of discourse to accomplish their objectives with each other. Each of these discourse forms is not equally available to each person. Access is directly related to the occupation and roles people play in society.8

When Goody studied the interrogative mode among the Gonja in Africa, she found that participants with equal status, for example, can ask for and are more likely to receive pure information, can make casual requests of loans or favors, and can use joking-challenging questions to establish camaraderie. However, members of the Gonja who have superior status because of their age, political rank, wealth, or sex must use different forms of discourse if they are to succeed in their interactions with others. Because of their ability to interrogate their subordinates, evaluate actions, and affix blame, even queries seeking pure information are treated as commands. Even though those higher in rank often intend to interact with warmth and camaraderie or merely to seek information without affixing blame, Gonja subordinates consistently treat

all questions from superiors as interrogations to be responded to with great
deference.9 According to Goody:

Interestingly enough, those in a superior status often also use the deference mode
This is apparent in the questioning of young children by adults as an expression of
interest, a sort of flattery. And it is a good description of the elaborate questioning
with which a chief or elder responds to a greeting by a subordinate. In both these
cases the deference mode is employed to mask the power of the superior in order, as
it were, to allow the subordinate to approach close enough to interact effectively.10

Thus, persons higher in status often treat persons lower in status with defer
ence to ease the constraints of their inequity and to encourage a more free
flowing interaction and exchange of ideas.

Mrs. Bedford has a dilemma similar to that of the Gonja elders. Although
she is superior in status, she needs to establish a context in which the students
answer questions and explore pure information. Mrs. Bedford adapts to the
constraints of her role much as the Gonja elders do. To accomplish her
objectives, she uses deference to mask her power and to reduce the social
distance between herself and her students. For example, Mrs. Bedford initiates
the social studies lesson by complimenting the students. She gets their atten-
tion with the greeting, "Oh my, what a nice-looking group of kindergartners." 
Establishing the social fiction that she and the children are conversational
equals by using the strategies of a gracious hostess, Mrs. Bedford flatters them
and assures them that they are welcome guests and that she is glad to see each
and every one of them. Although she may not be overtly aware of it, Mrs.
Bedford is using a variety of well-known politeness strategies to obtain the
students' cooperation and to try to create a social context in which they will
interact with her.

The Use of Positive Politeness

In the episode that begins the lesson, Mrs. Bedford masks her bids for
control by using both positive and negative politeness strategies. External
observers, such as anthropologists and linguists, can account for her actions
as typical examples of a speaker using various indirect strategies to gain
cooperation from her hearers. According to linguists, Mrs. Bedford's constant
avoidance of face-threatening acts is consistent with politeness strategies that
are institutionalized and perhaps universal across diverse languages and
cultures.

Mrs. Bedford initiates the lesson by using what Brown and Levinson
describe as positive politeness.11

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9Esther Goody, "Towards a Theory of Questions," in Questions and Politeness: Strategies in
pp 27-40.
10Ibid., p 37
11Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, "Universals in Language Usage Politeness Phe-
nomena," in Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction, ed Esther Goody (Cam-
Mrs Bedford: Oh my, what a nice-looking group of kindergartners.

This initial move can be categorized in Brown and Levinson’s terms as “Strategy 1. Notice, attend to [hearers] ([their] interests, wants, needs, and goods).”

Oh, it makes Mrs. Bedford so happy to see such smiling faces.

She then uses exaggerated intonation to assert that their happiness, as evidenced by their smiling faces, makes her happy. Brown and Levinson’s second strategy—“Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with hearer)—is often accomplished with “exaggerated intonation, stress, and other aspects of prosodics as well as with intensifying modifiers.”

After she has admired what the students are doing, Mrs. Bedford subtly asserts that she and the students are cooperators by using the pronoun we.

Now, are we all sitting comfortably? Let’s see who is here.

Instead of saying, “I want you to get comfortable,” Mrs. Bedford masks her social distance and power by using the first-person plural—we and us—to assert that they are all part of the same big, happy group. Brown and Levinson describe this technique as “Strategy 12: Include both [speaker] and [hearer] in the activity.” They note that when the speaker uses “an inclusive we form, when [the speaker] really means you or me, he can call upon the cooperative assumptions.”

Then, when she has not obtained one of her goals—having all the children pay attention—Mrs. Bedford describes the behaviors she desires:

Oh, I like the way Tammy and Barbara are sitting down. They’re so ready for first grade.

Mrs. Bedford praises two specific students who are sitting the way she wants others to sit and then gives a compliment valued by kindergartners. She publicly says that the girls are as grown-up as the students in the next grade. Thus, she uses both Strategy 6: “Avoid disagreement” and Strategy 7: “Assert common ground” by saying that she values what Tammy and Barbara are doing (i.e., sitting in a certain way). When other students respond by imitating Tammy and Barbara, Mrs. Bedford also rewards them with positive remarks, again with exaggerated intonation:

12Ibid., p. 108.
13Ibid., p. 109
14Ibid., p. 132
15Ibid., pp 118, 122–129.
The Power of Politeness in the Classroom

Oh,
Corrine and Heather, how nice .
and Colleen and Sherrie,
you look terrific.

The Use of Negative Politeness

Mrs. Bedford switches from positive to negative politeness when she needs to get the attention of several specific children who are still talking, wiggling, and playing with small objects.16 She uses negative politeness only with specific individuals. Rather than “blasting” the offending individuals, Mrs Bedford continues her position of deference and respect. To maintain “face,” she does not tell a supposed equal what to do or in any way presume to threaten or coerce him publicly. Rather than giving outright commands, Mrs. Bedford uses a polite question to give Joey the option of turning around or not, to give Steven the option of sitting near her or not:

Joey,
could you turn around so I can see your face?
Steven T.,
would you come sit up here by me?

Her sweet, mild tone implies that she is only saying these things because she is trying to help them achieve goals that they themselves desire.

Mrs. Bedford then makes two more requests of specific students. Again she hedges. She dissociates herself and the boys from the knowledge that they have not been paying attention and acts as if she is just making a minor, nonthreatening suggestion rather than giving them a direct order:

Bobby, find yourself a place there.
Stephen S.,
right there is a good place for you.

The Return to Positive Politeness

Mrs. Bedford brings closure to the opening scene when she switches back to positive-politeness strategies to point out to the entire group desirable and cooperative behavior.

Is everybody comfortable?
Are we ready?

Again she asserts that she cares about the students’ needs (Strategy 1 “Attend to hearers’ needs”) as she solicitously queries the students about their comfort. Also, her use of the pronoun we in the question “Are we ready?” asserts

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16Ibid., p 75. Readers interested in the socialization of gender roles should note, as Deborah Tannen at Georgetown University pointed out, that all the children Mrs. Bedford praises are girls and that all those she chides are boys.

17Ibid., p. 198.
that she is in the same group as the students (Strategy 12: Include both speaker and hearer in the activity)

The final question ("Are we ready?") and indeed all her other questions are deliberately indirect. Again Mrs. Bedford chooses to phrase her final question so that it can be interpreted as a request for information without loss of face. The students, however, can interpret all these questions simultaneously as hidden directives. "Joey, could you turn around so I can see your face?" also means "Joey, turn around so I can see your face!" "Is everybody comfortable?" signals the children, "Get comfortable now." "Are we ready?" means "Get ready if you are not ready." By institutionalizing the use of politeness strategies, Mrs. Bedford has found a way to maintain control while avoiding the use of obvious, bald-faced, from-higher-to-lower-status commands.

The Insider Perspective

As an outside analyst, I was able to use Brown and Levinson's linguistic model to account for Mrs. Bedford's use of polite discourse. When I asked the insiders, the primary teachers, why they interact the way they do with their students, the kindergarten, 1st-, and 2nd-grade teachers were all aware and proud of their "politeness" with the students. Their explanation, however, for how and why the politeness works differed from mine.

The primary teachers claimed that a teacher of young children should always be polite because a teacher must constantly model the behaviors that they want their young charges to imitate and assimilate. Using theoretical models from educational psychology rather than from linguistics, they described the nonconfrontations, the compliments, and the praising strategies as positive reinforcement. The primary teachers strongly believed that positive reinforcement works with younger children, and yelling or making negative comments does not.

The primary teachers elaborated on their favorite strategy: "catching the children when they are good." When the teachers are faced with several children who are behaving inappropriately, they seek out nearby students who are behaving appropriately, describe the desired behavior, and praise the nearby students by name. They continue the praise, as well as the description of the appropriate behavior, until the target students also adopt the desired behavior. These students then receive public praise by name. The primary teachers argued that positive reinforcement has the additional benefit of helping children develop positive self-concepts. They compared this strat-

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18Ibid., p. 132.
egy to focusing public attention on the students when they are bad, which they said reinforces negative behavior and results in negative self-concepts.

Although the insiders' and my outsider's rationales are not congruent, both sides agree how teacher talk is being used—the primary teachers are purposefully and intentionally avoiding reprimands and using polite discourse in their interactions with their young students. From either perspective, politeness strategies work to maintain control and make both teachers and students look and feel good. Teachers avoid situations in which they may be seen as threatening children or making a student feel badly.

POLITENESS CODES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE

Politeness strategies appear so benign that they become almost invisible in day-to-day classroom operations. However, they contain cultural codes that create and constrain curriculum practice. Mrs. Bedford continues to use politeness strategies to manage the class as she introduces subject-matter knowledge. Using these strategies allows her to maintain control and to invite students to explore pure knowledge. Yet the same strategies also limit what types of knowledge can be constructed in the classroom. Politeness begins as an appeal to younger children's preference for interacting positively and personally with the teacher, but it concludes with children only interacting positively with academic knowledge. The polite questions begin as an invitation to participate but result in all knowledge coming to have a "nice" orientation. The norm of politeness constrains students from exploring their own real reactions to what they are shown and does not encourage them to ask questions or see knowledge as problematic.

After singing two short songs with the students about Indians, Mrs. Bedford leads a short discussion in which she establishes with the children that the Indians and the Pilgrims were at the first Thanksgiving dinner. Then seven episodes follow in which Mrs. Bedford lifts up large photographs of different Indians of North America and asks the children, "What do you see?" I include two episodes for analysis—the discussion of who was at the first Thanksgiving dinner and the discussion of the first Indian picture—because they succinctly display interactions that characterize the entire lesson.

**Episode 1: Who Was at the First Thanksgiving Dinner?**

One of the benefits of Mrs. Bedford using politeness strategies is that students accept her invitation to participate in an academic discussion.

*Mrs. Bedford:* Thanksgiving.

Who was at the first Thanksgiving dinner?

*Student:* Me.
Mrs. Bedford. John, I liked that.
   You raised your hand.
   Who was at the first Thanksgiving dinner?

Student: Me.

Student: Ah ha ha.

Mrs. Bedford. John

Student: Me, too.

Mrs. Bedford: Sshh. John...
   You want someone to help you?
   Who was at the first Thanksgiving dinner?

Student. I know.

Mrs. Bedford: No. . . . He just wants to think
   Give him a second.

Student: I had that.

John: The Indians.

Mrs. Bedford. The Indians
   Who besides the Indians, do you know?

Student: Pilgrims.

Student: Pilgrims.

Mrs. Bedford: Very good.
   Now we’re going to

Student. Cowboys came later.

Mrs. Bedford: Right.

When Mrs. Bedford initiates an academic discussion with the question
“Who was at the first Thanksgiving dinner?” she does not receive a prompt
correct response. Rather, she receives a variety of responses and must make
many choices almost instantly as she tries to manage a complex situation.
Some of the problems she faces include students who persist in calling out
an incorrect answer, “me” and later “me” and “me, too”, another student who
laughs at the student calling out the wrong answer, a student who after he is
called on cannot quickly produce a response, and a fourth student who is
claiming that he knows the correct answer while the student who has the
floor has not produced his answer.

The use of politeness strategies for class management and generation of
academic knowledge. Mrs. Bedford continues to use politeness strategies for
the class-management tasks. She avoids overt disagreement with the students
who incorrectly answer “me,” and “me, too” by politely ignoring them because
they did not raise their hands. In contrast, Mrs. Bedford warmly praises John
for producing the correct social response—raising his hand. When John does
not immediately produce a response, she solicitously asks if he would like
someone to help him and then defers to his wish to figure it out by himself.
Mrs. Bedford fends off other students’ bids to answer and helps John not to
lose face in front of the other students by explaining, "No, he just wants to think. Give him a second." John then does produce the answer, "the Indians," which Mrs. Bedford validates as correct by repeating. (Finally! the answer slot has been filled!) She then is able to move to her next question, "Who besides the Indians, do you know?" This time the desired answer is given much more quickly, "the Pilgrims." Continuing her policy of positive politeness, Mrs. Bedford again repeats the correct response and warmly praises both responses with an animated "Very good."

One of the benefits of Mrs. Bedford using politeness strategies to mask her power and to act as if she and the students are equals in their conversational interaction is that students and teacher are free to initiate topics for discussion. As Mrs. Bedford begins to signal a switch to another topic, "Now we're going to...," a boy initiates a statement showing he is trying to accommodate this new information into a framework that he had already created. Since he had probably previously associated Indians with cowboys, he now processes the new information in which a temporal relationship between Indians and Pilgrims at the first Thanksgiving is presented to him. He thinks of a possible reordering of the data that would accommodate both items of information and tests the new relationship by initiating the statement, "Cowboys came later." He thus establishes that Indians existed before the Pilgrims as well as later with the cowboys. The teacher allows his initiative and confirms the accuracy of his statement. Therefore, one of the benefits of the teacher's use of politeness strategies is that a social context is available within which an active student can successfully initiate and test an academic claim. In this instance, the meaning-making is truly mutual.

Types of knowledge acquired by the students. The patterns of communication in a lesson do not just structure the social relationships but are a part of what the students learn. As Barnes says, "We cannot make a clear distinction between the content and the form of the curriculum or treat the subject-matter as the end and the communication as no more than a means."\(^2\) A pattern of teacher-student communication is established in this first academic episode that characterizes the entire lesson and that constitutes an important process the students are learning about the construction of knowledge.

Mrs. Bradford uses the cycle of "teacher solicits—pupil responds—teacher reacts" that is typical of more than 85 percent of the teacher-student interactions in American classrooms from kindergarten through college.\(^2\) Of particular interest are what types of questions she asks in the "questioning" slot to


initiate the construction of knowledge and how she uses the "reaction" slot. Does she react to a student answer by rating it positively or negatively so that the class will know whether the response was correct or not? Or does Mrs. Bedford react by adding additional academic information by clarifying, synthesizing, or expanding a student response?

In episode 1, Mrs. Bedford generates academic knowledge by asking questions that seek short, specific, factual answers. "Who was at the first Thanksgiving dinner?" and "Who besides the Indians, do you know?" are questions that Heath calls "Q-I," or "Questions in which the questioner knows the answer, indeed often has a specific answer in mind." The students learn that their role is to be that of information-giver about the world.

What is important in this interaction is that the children are being asked about events that they have not personally experienced. They are being asked about events long ago and far away from where they live. Students learn that they are expected to know discrete, decontextualized names of people important in the early chronology of our country's history. The teacher is also expecting them to display academic information that she has not previously presented to them. Mrs. Bedford's response confirms the expectation that the students are the information givers about the world. She reacts by repeating a student answer, "the Indians," to show that it is correct, she then praises the next answer, "Very good." Mrs. Bedford does not use her reaction slot as an opportunity to elaborate and add more academic information to the student answers that have been given. Sometimes caretakers of young children react by extending and expanding brief responses.

**Episode 2: Who Can Tell Me About This Picture?**

After establishing that the Indians and the Pilgrims were at the first Thanksgiving dinner, Mrs. Bedford shows large photographs with members of different contemporary Indian groups in North America engaged in various activities, such as sewing moccasins and baking bread. As she begins to lift up the first picture, Mrs. Bedford dramatically lowers her voice to a stage whisper and says in tones of exaggerated enthusiasm:

> Mrs Bedford: Now [whispering] I have brought in some very special pictures for you all to see.

[Dramatically raises picture]

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Students: [In unison] OOOOOOOoooooooh.

Mrs. Bedford: I want you to look at the picture.
   Don't say anything for a minute
   [Pause]
   Who can tell me about this picture?
   Raise your hand when you're ready.
   Janie Taylor.
   What do you see there?

Janie: . . . Indian wheel.

   What else do you see?
   What does this tell you about Indians?

Student: That blue thing . . .

Mrs. Bedford: Oh, and what is that thing?

Janie: Chief's hat.

Mrs. Bedford: What is another name for a chief's hat?
   Michael.
   What is another name?

Michael: Feathers.

Mrs. Bedford: Feathers
   I like that.
   What else?

Student: Hat.

Student: King's hat?

Mrs. Bedford: King's hat?

Student: Uh huh.

Student: King's ha ha ha.

Mrs. Bedford: Sure, could be.
   Their chiefs were kings
   Teena? What do you see?
   Lucille, I did not call on you. Okay?
   That? What is that?

Student: [Inaudible]

Mrs. Bedford: It's kind of a wall hanging, isn't it?
   [Pause]
   I'm sorry, we can't go on
   because enough people aren't paying attention.
   [Softly to one student] Would you come back here
   for a second?
   Now,
   were the Indians all over the country or just in one
   little part of it?

Student: One little part of it.

Mrs. Bedford: One little part of it?
   What makes you say that?

Student: All over the country
Student: All over the place.

Mrs. Bedford: Why do you think all over the place? Any special reason? John, do you think they’re all over the place?

John: 'Cause.

Mrs. Bedford. 'Cause why?

John: 'Cause we buy New York City.

Mrs. Bedford: That’s right, they went all over the country. Very good.

Student. That’s, that’s [inaudible].

Mrs. Bedford. Sssh. Okay, I’m sorry.

Student: [To another student] I’ll get you

Mrs. Bedford: Did you hear what Teena said?

Student: No

Mrs. Bedford: Sssh. I know.

That’s because too many people aren’t listening. Okay, Teena, tell them what you said. Turn toward them, would you please?

Teena. That is a hunting pack.

Mrs. Bedford. What is a hunting pack? They made it pretty, didn’t they? Why did they hunt?

Student: For food.

Student: Food.

Mrs. Bedford: And what else?

Student: Animals.

Mrs. Bedford: Glen, I want you at a table over there. Animals? What kind of animals? Do you know?

Student. Rabbits?

Student: Bears.

Mrs. Bedford: Rabbits. What else?

Student. Bears

Student: Chickens.

Mrs. Bedford: Chickens? Well, maybe some kind of birds

Student: Turkeys.

Mrs. Bedford: Turkeys. Yes. Any other ideas?

Student: Alligator.
The use of politeness strategies for class management and generation of academic knowledge. To launch the discussion of the picture, Mrs. Bedford uses a full battery of positive politeness strategies to build up the students’ enthusiasm for participating in the discussion. Mrs. Bedford dramatically lowers her voice to a whisper to convey a sense of in-group intimacy, and she uses exaggerated intonation and facial expressions to indicate that something special is about to happen. Contrary to her past injunctions about the inappropriateness of calling out, her body gestures signal to the students that they may chorally respond to her presentation with loud sounds of appreciation. The students enthusiastically yell “OOOOOOooh” as she dramatically holds up the first picture showing an Indian woman sewing on a moccasin amid much hanging beadwork of the Northwest Coast Indians.

Mrs. Bedford then sets the task for constructing academic knowledge. She tells the students to look at the picture and tell her what they see. This task is potentially different from the one assigned in the first episode. She is asking a more open-ended question that only the informant (or addressee) can answer (an A-I question). As we look at the four responses from the students—“Indian wheel,” “that blue thing,” “wall hanging,” and “hunting pack”—we find that the students respond with terse, two-word answers that are vague and inexplicit. The students act as if the purpose of the discussion is to attach the correct label to the correct item. Thus, although the teacher asks a potentially more open question, the students (based on experience with this teacher) construe the purpose of the discussion, as Heath describes it, “to label, to search out pieces of pictures, to name parts of the whole, and to talk about these out of context.”

Mrs. Bedford reacts to these superficial and simple responses with repetition and with polite praise. “A wheel. Very good.” When a student responds with a particularly vague answer, “that blue thing,” Mrs. Bedford does follow up by asking for clarification and additional names. The students respond with

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25 The remaining six pictures were announced in the same way in what is clearly a favored classroom ritual. For example, Mrs. Bedford also said, “I know you’re tired, but let’s look at another picture... It’s really terrific.” The students responded enthusiastically, “OOOOooh. OOOOooh,” as an expression of appreciation at being shown such “exciting” pictures. In fact, the children’s “oooh” greeting behavior had become so routine as the appropriate form of response that later in the lesson when Mrs. Bedford bent at the waist to pick up another picture but then stopped in midair to respond to a messenger at the door, the students, cued by her first movement, chorally responded with a loud “ooooooh,” although the picture was not presented.


27 Ibid., p. 113
"chief's hat," "feathers," "hat," and "king's hat." Mrs. Bedford does not react by giving the students more sophisticated names such as headdress or feathered war bonnet. Mrs. Bedford continues to ask *what* questions ("What else do you see?") and does not follow up by asking the students to relate anything in the picture to something from their own experience or to explore how the Indians might have used objects in the picture.

When the students' attention begins to drift, Mrs. Bedford asks another Q-I question complete with two possible answers for the students to choose between "Now, were the Indians all over the country or just in one little part of it?" Again, students are being cast in the role of information-givers about the world. When Mrs. Bedford asks one student *why* he answered, "One little part of it," he is cued by her *why* that he has chosen the incorrect answer. He then quickly switches to the other possible response, "All over the country." John is able to come up with an explanation for this response, "'Cause we buy New York City," which shows that he is making connections from knowledge that has been told to him by adults at another time and place (possibly hearing the story about the Dutch purchasing Manhattan Island from the Indians) Mrs. Bedford does not elaborate, refine, or explain John's response to the entire class.\(^\text{28}\)

The lesson changes and becomes more coherent when Mrs. Bedford follows up Teena's identification of a hunting pack with a *why* question. "Why did they hunt?" When she asks for elaboration, the students identify six animals they think Indians hunted for food: rabbits, bears, chickens, turkeys, and alligators.

Mrs. Bedford has to solve many problems in this sequence of knowledge construction. Although they are put in the role of information-givers, the kindergarten students do not know much about Indians. When they quickly begin to lose interest and not pay attention, Mrs. Bradford relies on politeness strategies for class management. She uses the reaction slot to give praise to almost any answer (Brown and Levinson's Strategies 2 and 3. Exaggerate approval, and intensify interest\(^\text{29}\)). "A wheel. Very good." "Feathers. I like that." She uses negative politeness when *she* apologizes for disrupting the lesson to have to attend to some students: "I'm sorry, the lesson can't go on because enough people aren't paying attention," and "Sssh. Okay, I'm sorry."

**Types of knowledge acquired by the students** Mrs. Bedford's students are learning to make meaning out of a picture by naming discrete items. But how

\(^{28}\)For example, Mrs. Bedford did not elaborate by discussing how New York City today is different from how Manhattan Island was when the Indians sold it. Also, she did not point out that the Northwest Coast Indians in the picture lived far away from and at a different time than the Indians that the Pilgrims met, a connection that would elaborate John's claim.

does talking about this picture help the students to see it differently? Except for the discussion about what the Indians hunted for food, Mrs. Bedford's *what* questions and the student's responses do not visibly result in the students adding to or reorganizing their thoughts about Indians. Since Mrs. Bedford does not directly tell the students anything about Indians either at the beginning of the lesson or while they are looking at the pictures and since the children do not contribute much, the children do not have much data for constructing notions of how the Indians lived.

However, the children witness a masterful performance in the use of politeness strategies. Twice during this episode, Mrs. Bedford is confronted with incorrect answers. She faces a double bind. Should she attend to the students' needs to look and feel good by sacrificing academic accuracy? Or should she support strict academic accuracy but sacrifice the students' face? Mrs. Bedford escapes from these potential double binds both times by repeating the inaccurate student answer and then expanding it or placing it in a larger context where it is not incorrect: "Chickens? Well, maybe some kind of birds." She is visibly delighted when another student elaborates with the more accurate response of turkeys. When Mrs. Bedford hears "alligators," she thinks quickly on her feet. She reacts by placing it in a geographical context where it could be a correct answer. "Probably Indians in the South hunted alligators."

Mrs. Bedford ignores other answers that may not be correct. For example, she does not acknowledge the "me" response to "Who was at the first Thanksgiving dinner?" or the "bears" response to "What kind of animals (did Indians hunt for food)?" although it was called out several times. From these types of dilemmas, the students learn that maintaining face is valued over academic accuracy and that academic knowledge can be used to maintain face.

A second politeness pattern the students learn is "niceness," how to handle perhaps troublesome differences with easy praise. Mrs. Bedford maintains a running commentary in which she frequently proclaims how lovely everything the Indians made is. For example, in episode 2 she notes: "What is a hunting pack? They made it pretty, didn't they?" Then, as she and the children continue to label objects as they look at other pictures in other episodes, her comments include "Oh, isn't that wonderful?" "This is an exciting one!" and "Oh, hey, isn't that nice?" In a discussion of a picture of the Iroquois, a student asks if one of the artifacts is a tomahawk, Mrs. Bedford characteristically responds, "Yes, isn't it lovely?"

At this point, the form of speech Mrs. Bedford is using—her unrelenting reliance on positive politeness—has clearly compromised the academic content of the message. Many things can be said about a tomahawk: its use as a weapon, its use as a tool, that the hatchet head is made of thin, sharp stone, but it seems singularly inappropriate to have a teacher proclaim its loveliness while omitting all other information. Children in this classroom are learning clearly that one should never emphasize differences or say anything negative that might cause loss of face when talking about culturally different peoples.
Mrs. Bedford Talks About the Lesson

In an informal discussion immediately after the lesson, Mrs. Bedford told me that she had two objectives for this Indian lesson, which she teaches every year in November a few weeks before Thanksgiving. She said that she wanted to establish with the kindergarten children that the Indians and Pilgrims were at the first Thanksgiving dinner. She also wanted to use the pictures to get the children to talk about how the Indians lived. Mrs. Bedford did not think that the lesson had gone badly, but she was mildly embarrassed that the children had been so “wiggly.” During a later episode in the lesson when the students were not paying attention, Mrs. Bedford had reacted by telling the students, “I know you’re all tired.” During our discussion, Mrs. Bedford noted that the last period in the morning, from 11:25 to 12:00, was a difficult time for the morning kindergartners to concentrate. She also noted that it was a beautiful fall day and that the children needed to get outside to play.

Differing Perceptions

Mrs. Bedford thought that the lesson was fine. She met her objectives. She established that the Indians and Pilgrims were at the first Thanksgiving, and the children talked about Indians. I did not think the lesson was fine. Although the lesson bustled with activities—songs were sung, enriching materials were brought in for the children, and questions were cheerfully asked and answered—I did not think that much teaching or learning had occurred. I was troubled by how the polite forms of discourse masked the lack of construction of substantial knowledge.

In the informal conversation after the lesson, I politely thanked Mrs. Bedford for letting me observe and audiotape yet another lesson to find out what happened in kindergarten social studies lessons. When she apologized for the children’s restlessness, I reassured her that the lesson was well managed. Since I was an observing researcher and not in a supervisory or collaborative relationship with her, I did not think that discussing my questions with her was appropriate. But my vague sense of being troubled about this lesson has pursued me, ultimately compelling me to write this article.

Teachers must make many decisions in planning and executing a lesson. The county social studies curriculum guide suggests a holiday unit during the fall semester. But how much should kindergartners be expected to learn about Indians and Pilgrims and how should they be expected to learn it? Should kindergartners be expected to do more than give short answers identifying and labeling objects in pictures? Some educators question kindergartners’ ability to enter into or sustain academic discussions, and many educators do not expect that kindergartners will be able to exhibit higher levels of thinking or to demonstrate problem solving in a class discussion. Other researchers might advance Bernstein’s notion of the restricted code.
Should these children be expected to elaborate ideas? After all, they come from a working-class community.\(^3\)

I believe that Mrs. Bedford did not use opportunities during the lesson to construct substantial scholarly knowledge with the students. I believe that the group of children as a whole did not possess much knowledge about the first Thanksgiving or Indians and that Mrs. Bedford needed to go beyond relying on their fairly weak responses to provide the academic information for the lesson. She needed to directly tell the children more about the first Thanksgiving dinner, perhaps reading them a story about it. Mrs. Bedford needed to give the students more background information about the Indians in the pictures before she assessed their mastery of the names of items. Or, if Mrs. Bedford was going to lead a guided-discovery lesson, she needed to ask more than *what* questions. For example, Mrs. Bedford could have asked the students to figure out how the Indians lived. She could have asked a series of contrast questions that could draw on the students’ own experiences and compare them to the Indians’ way of life. What do you wear? What are the Indians in this picture wearing? How is your clothing different from the Indians? How is your clothing similar? What do you eat? What do the Indians in this picture eat?\(^3\)

But Mrs. Bedford had other concerns and objectives that took precedence over constructing academic knowledge. First, she needed to be able to control the class, not always an easy task with wiggly, distractible students. She also wanted the students to feel good and look good as they engaged in class discussion, perhaps a fairly new skill for them. But how did this polite discourse, which began as an appeal to younger children’s preference for interacting positively and personally with the teacher, conclude by constructing narrow academic knowledge?

**The Pros and Cons of Using Politeness Strategies**

The use of positive politeness allowed Mrs. Bedford to establish and maintain control over the children. Her enthusiasm, the exaggerated intonation and stress placed on certain words, “it makes Mrs. Bedford so happy,” worked to command the kindergartners’ attention and participation. By masking her higher status, Mrs. Bedford encouraged at least two students to explore pure information. One boy elaborated on the information presented when he noted, “Cowboys came later” than Indians and Pilgrims. Another example of mutual meaning-making occurred when John added that the Indians lived all over because they had sold New York City to us. The use of praise in the


\(^3\)See, for example, Mary Durkin and Patricia Hardy, “Interpretation of Similarities and Differences,” in *Teaching Strategies for Developing Children’s Thinking. The TABA Inservice Education Program* (Menlo Park, CA. Institute for Staff Development, 1969).
teacher's reaction slot allowed the students to feel secure and accepted when they responded with answers. Negative politeness, the precedence of face over academic concerns, also allowed the students not to feel embarrassed or threatened when they responded with answers that might not be correct.

But this constant cheerfulness and the creation of a "safe" environment have long-term hidden costs. The use or perhaps overuse of positive politeness, in which almost every answer, no matter how limited or mediocre, is praised does not create a challenging context for children. The overuse of compliments does not invite students to go beyond the obvious to create a connected, coherent account.

The more serious cost of politeness strategies, however, is the use of negative politeness, the constant avoidance of face-threatening acts. While providing excuses, "I know you're all tired," when the students are getting out of control is probably an acceptable social fiction for most in maintaining classroom management, we must ask where to draw the line between social niceties for management purposes and the deterioration of academic rigor. Although it may be acceptable to be nice, upbeat, and cheerful in management because it works, it is not acceptable to be nice, upbeat, and cheerful in terms of academic rigor.

Teachers and students avoiding interactions or confrontations with ideas and people that are not positive cannot construct academic knowledge. In the second episode, Mrs. Bedford enthusiastically noted how "pretty" the Indians had made the hunting pack. Later, she described a tomahawk as "lovely." The 2nd-grade unit evaluation in the county social studies curriculum guide stresses only the Indians' positive attributes. One question in this curriculum guide asks the teacher, "Do students admire the ability and skill of the Indians in using the things at hand for food, clothing, shelter, tools, and fuel?" No questions ask about any problems that the Indians had, or any behaviors that could be seen as not totally admirable. If children learn only about a world where other cultures make "contributions" but do not have or cause problems, where people and their deeds are to be admired but not questioned, then all of human history that is not positive is not available for study.

In this kindergarten lesson, the students' need to feel good about themselves and to look good while "performing" for a visiting professor masked their need to question and confront the lack of substantial knowledge being produced. The 6th-grade curriculum guide disassociates and avoids ideas about distasteful Inca practices. In the playscript provided, one student is to assume the role of the archaeologist Bingham while another reads the part of a reporter interviewing him:

_Bingham_: Here we have examples of some ceremonial knives. You know the Incas practiced human sacrifice to their Sun God. Frequently they would cut out the heart of the person to be sacrificed.

_Reporter_: Yes. Their religious practices would seem quite brutal today but they were part of their religion, so it's kind of hard to condemn them for it, I guess.
The Power of Politeness in the Classroom

Bingham: Yes, it was, and the people who were sacrificed thought that they were doing something for their fellow man. In fact, these people, for one year, lived a life of luxury.

Politeness involves hedging, disassociation, and facile explanations and excuses. Learning not to confront, challenge, or even ask a question about something as unusual as human sacrifice is being modeled for students. Strategies of being cheerful, polite, and positive, growing out of legitimate concerns and initially producing beneficial forms of control, if not checked, end by constraining the conditions that they were used to elicit—active engagement, provocative questions, and the freedom and support to explore the status quo.

SO WHAT? OR MOVING BEYOND A SINGLE LESSON

But what difference can this sociolinguistic explanation of classroom communication make? Can notions about how forms of speech are used in the enacted curriculum be as useful as some of the more traditional deficit explanations that locate the problems in this lesson firmly in the teacher’s or student’s ignorance, developmental level, teaching style, or working-class membership? I believe sociolinguistic explanations are useful precisely because they locate the knowledge being constructed in public transactions that are taking place among the participants. There is no need to go inside the head of a person to discover what is and is not being learned. There is no need to focus solely on innate traits, large socioeconomic realities, or the weather, all of which are not readily amenable to change. If nothing else, viewing this lesson as having communication problems makes the problems more available for study and possibly more amenable to change. As Barnes says: “The importance of language . . . is that it makes knowledge and thought processes readily available to introspection and revision. If we know what we know, then we can change it.”

What Do We Know That We Know?

We know that positive and negative politeness strategies, relentless cheerfulness, and indirect forms of control are rampant in primary classrooms—down the hall in the 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-grade classrooms of this school, in the wider community, in other schools and communities as well. We know that the primary teachers in this study are aware and proud of their models of “positive” student control, of “catching the students when they are good,” of praising and complimenting the students so that they develop positive self images. We know that the teachers value modeling polite behavior and that they prefer not to publicly notice (and reinforce) negative or inappropriate behaviors.

These politeness behaviors in speech can be seen as core values and traditions in the wider community of students, teachers, and parents in this school. In the same year that I was taping kindergarten social studies lessons, I was also taping interviews in which kindergarten, 3rd-grade, and 6th-grade students were given the task of “acting like detectives” as they interviewed foreign-exchange students from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Turkey. Each elementary student was asked to find out about the foreign-exchange student’s way of life. They were encouraged to ask as many questions as they could think of. Many 6th-grade students, using exaggerated intonation and intensifying modifiers, initiated the conversations like gracious hostesses or hosts: “Oh, welcome to our country. You must have come such a long way to visit us. How are you enjoying your stay here?” Praising the artifacts, clothing, food, and pictures that the foreign students had brought as “pretty,” they often asked for the names of the objects and commented on each item of information by proclaiming, “That’s so interesting!” and “Oh, this is fascinating!”

What conclusions can we draw from examples of students acquiring politeness strategies? What possible recommendations can we make? Obviously, politeness strategies cannot and should not be abandoned. They help speakers accomplish varied interactional objectives. I used them after observing Mrs. Bedford’s lesson when I did not want Mrs. Bedford to lose face and when I needed to buy time to sort out what I thought of her lesson. Many primary teachers at this school use politeness strategies to mask their higher status as a way of inviting young students to participate in constructing academic knowledge. Speakers need ways of complimenting, claiming common bonds, hedging, and being indirect to help them cope with various situations. We have also seen, however, how overusing politeness strategies generates inappropriate and, at times, insincere and ludicrous academic knowledge.

**How Can We Change It?**

Declaring war on a valued explicit and implicit tradition such as politeness would be most ineffective: we would not want to seek academic rigor by insisting that teachers and students learn how to be impolite! Curriculum specialists and educational researchers can try to improve curriculum and instruction in other ways. Teachers need to learn how to reflect on their use

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33For example, Kathryn Au describes how a form of reading lesson, the talk-story, was constructed to promote the academic achievement of young Hawaiian students by using patterns of speech consistent with the children’s culture. Cathie Jordan’s analysis of the importance of collaboration between researchers and school faculty and the insistence on principles of “least change” and “careful selection of instruction strategies” is invaluable in thinking through any kind of change effort. See Kathryn Hu-pei Au, “Participation Structures in a Reading Lesson With Hawaiian Children. Analysis of a Culturally Appropriate Instructional Event,” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 11 (Summer 1980), 91–115, Cathie Jordan, “Translating Culture: From Ethnographic Information to Education Program,” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 16 (Summer 1985): 105–123.
of politeness strategies and to decide where, how, and when to limit politeness strategies. An article like this one with actual examples of classroom transcripts could be used in an inservice or teacher-as-researcher seminar to first raise the issue for discussion. If teachers decided to study the problem, they could audiotape and transcribe class discussions of their own in which they are concerned about the transmission and acquisition of academic knowledge. Groups of teachers could compare their transcribed lessons with the transcripts in the article to establish reasonable and prudent boundaries for using politeness strategies. They could ask, for example, Where am I using polite forms of discourse? What purposes am I accomplishing by using politeness strategies? Where is my use of politeness strategies most effective? Where do I accomplish what I want to accomplish? Where does the use of politeness strategies seem excessive or to be closing off potential avenues of productive exploratory thought?

In a group of teachers, often a large repertoire of ways of speaking in the classroom exist. Curriculum specialists and educational researchers could work with a community of teachers to identify patterns of communication that are comfortable, easy to use, and that help construct academic knowledge with their students. Teachers could compare their transcribed lessons with each other to locate practices that make a difference.

As part of this process, teachers might also compare their discourse strategies with strategies discussed in other research studies. For example, the Gonja study found another way of asserting co-equal status for the purposes of eliciting pure information: establishing a joking-challenging relationship. Where could jokes and challenges more productively replace overused politeness strategies? According to Shuy's study of how language was used for instructional purposes in 36 language arts lessons, talk that comes closest to using a natural conversational style in the classroom helps students to acquire knowledge. If teachers occasionally made a provocative statement instead of using the traditional teacher-questions, student-responds, teacher-reacts cycle, would the statement trigger an animated exchange about an issue?

Teachers might want to collaborate in designing and testing more effective practices. For example, they might decide to try more as-if hypothetical inquiries: "If you were an Indian living in the northeastern woods when the Pilgrims arrived..." Or they might decide to investigate the use of children's literature and story telling as a way to transmit knowledge in a elaborate but coherent, cohesive form.

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Researchers and teachers can work together to locate, record, and analyze naturally occurring situations in which teachers and their students have generated powerful and exciting discussions. How did a teacher set the task that enabled, for example, the students to ask probing questions? We know that teachers have days when they deftly conduct substantial intelligent discussions. Without being rude or disrespectful, they encourage students to construct authentic, accurate, and in-depth knowledge about culturally different people. The supervisors' and researchers' task is to help teachers develop a pool of transcribed, locally taught exemplary lessons. Professional education needs teachers to describe and analyze successful forms of communication. We need to begin to construct alternate strategies to the numbing constraints that an unimaginative overreliance on politeness strategies engenders.

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This book traces the development of general education in the United States during the last century, explaining in detail how general education differs from liberal education. Miller contends that liberal education developed from classical humanism and emphasizes training the minds of students by exposing them to the best of culture. General education, according to Miller, developed from pragmatism, and progressive education emphasizes inquiry, problem solving, individual growth, and democratic social change. The book points out how early experiments in general education coalesced into a movement in the 1930s and the different forms general education has taken in recent decades.

—George Willis