

**In the thick of it: EFL users confronting rudeness /
impoliteness**

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Review

In the thick of it: EFL users confronting rudeness / impoliteness

Abstract:

EFL users often face potentially rude or impolite situations in the target language and consequently have to quickly formulate appropriate responses. How can EFL teachers prepare their students to react to such spontaneous and unexpected incidents? Current teaching approaches often try to give students a range of linguistic resources such as communicative functions so that they can respond appropriately to positive situations. Nevertheless, pre-fabricated communicative structures may not help under-pressure EFL users negotiate rudeness where decisions have to be taken quickly, unrehearsed and on the spur-of-the-moment. Through the examination of students' classroom reactions and responses to a real-life incident, this study argues that it is more beneficial to help students focus on achieving transactional and interpersonal objectives rather than on practising language structures and patterns. This article underlines the importance of helping EFL users to react in the way they want to and achieve their own individual and interactional objectives.

Key words: negative experiences, impoliteness, rudeness, interpersonal

Introduction

Whilst often being well-rehearsed in dealing with positive and relationship-building encounters in the target language, foreign-language students are less well-equipped to handle potentially rude situations. To negotiate negative incidents, FL users need to be able to recognize, react to and employ communicative functions (such as the speech acts of questioning, challenging and arguing). However, just as importantly, they need to decide what they want to achieve. It should not be merely to vent their anger. There should be a more constructive objective which may be described in terms of transactional and interpersonal goals. Whilst hardly teaching students to be rude, teachers do need to give FL users choices regarding how they want to respond to and counter negative incidents in a way that allows them to come across in the way that they want to.

One way to help students negotiate potentially rude incidents in the target language is to give them a range of linguistic options as proposed by Beebe and Waring (2005) who examined pragmatic strategies for dealing with rudeness. They asked higher- and lower-level proficiency ESL students to

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react to six specific incidents and subsequently categorised the responses in terms of acquiescing, persisting and aggressing strategies (Beebe and Waring 2005: 71). Acquiescing strategies signal a submissive approach as respondents apologise, thank and say nothing when confronting rudeness. Persisting strategies reflect disagreement as interactants argue, justify and seek clarification. Aggressing strategies which include insulting, threatening and challenging communicate an assertive approach. Amongst other findings, Beebe and Waring observed that lower-level proficiency students often adopted acquiescing strategies whilst higher level students pursued more aggressive strategies reflecting native speaker practices. They also emphasise the ‘off-record’ abilities of more advanced learners who often use directness / indirectness and explicitness/implicitness when dealing with rudeness. Beebe and Waring’s categories are extremely useful in helping FL users to go beyond using mere speech acts and in identifying the type of strategy they want to use. However, this paper questions whether individual language users would all feel comfortable coming across in these ways especially if it is not part of their character. Being aggressive, for instance, is not part of everyone’s way of interacting. Furthermore, language users need to be aware of the communicative implications of adopting a given strategy especially in terms of whether it helps them achieve their communicative objective. For example, an aggressing strategy is unlikely to be successful when trying to obtain a birth certificate from a rude public servant or when querying charges on a utility bill with an obstreperous employee.

A more finely-tuned and interactant-sensitive approach goes beyond employing speech acts of different intensities or the adoption of acquiescing, persisting and aggressing strategies and examines what FL users want to achieve in transactional and interactional terms. Transactional objectives mean that ‘the speakers have a practical goal to achieve, and the success of the exchange depends on the achievement of that goal’ (Thornbury & Slade 2006: 19). Being equally rude back may not help an interactant achieve their goal no matter how rude the other interactant might have been, especially if the other interactant has considerable power. When faced with rudeness, an interactional objective would mean focusing on how one wants the relationship to proceed. Thornbury and Slade argue that in interactional language ‘the talk is primarily directed at the establishing and servicing of social relationships’ (2006: 20). The transactional /interactional distinction has a strong association with Halliday’s (1997) ideational, interpersonal and textual functions.

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3 The ideational function is especially concerned with one's experience of the
4 world and how one relates to the world. Therefore, with regard to rude
5 behaviour, the function helps describe and interpret rude incidents and their
6 outcomes. Halliday subdivides the interpersonal function into the personal and
7 interactional subcomponents since language 'may be understood by the
8 expression of our own personalities and personal feelings on the one hand, and
9 forms of interaction and social interplay with other participants in the
10 communication situation on the other hand' (1973: 36). The interactional
11 'language is used to define and consolidate the group, to include and to
12 exclude, showing who is "one of us" and who is not....' (1969: 30). Therefore,
13 rude language may be used to label and exclude which may be the case with
14 the FL user who is seen as a 'foreigner'. Meanwhile, with personal language,
15 an interactant aims '... to make public his [sic] own individuality; and this in
16 turn reinforces and creates this individuality' (1969: 30). Therefore the FL
17 user may want to react to rude language in his/her own way. The textual
18 function is concerned with 'creating text' and 'enables the speaker to organize
19 what he is saying in such a way that it makes sense in the context and fulfils
20 its function as a message' (Halliday 1973: 36). In terms of negotiating
21 rudeness, FL users need to consider how they want to react to a given
22 situation, express their personalities and interact with others. Everyday
23 communication does not normally involve a choice between transactional and
24 interactional language but rather a balance between the two. Nevertheless, in a
25 negative situation the FL user may decide which takes overall preference.
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36 Research Methodology

37 Participants

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39 In order to understand how FL users react to potentially rude situations, 66
40 undergraduate in Guadalajara, Mexico, were asked to react to three negative
41 contexts. The students are all Mexican, between 18 and 24 years old, and are
42 preparing to take the TOEFL exam in the very near future.
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47 Procedure

48 In the first stage of the research, the students were asked to react to the
49 following three situations in a written discourse completion task (DCT). (A
50 DCT elicits a communicative reaction from a respondent.)
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- 53 • You cover a shift for a co-worker from the United States who only
54 speaks English. When he/she is going to pay you, he/she pays slightly
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3 less than the right amount. You try to negotiate with him/her but you
4 are not successful. Now, he makes rude comments about you regarding
5 your cheapness. How would you react?
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9 • You are about to travel from New York to London with a friend on a
10 U.S. airline but you arrived late at the airport and missed the flight.
11 When you ask for another flight, they tell you that you have to pay
12 \$200. You question this. The salesperson replies: "It is \$200, don't you
13 understand English". How would you react?
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17 • You go to a fast food restaurant in the United States. When you are
18 about to order, you see that the clerk has a name tag with a Latino
19 name. You think he/she may speak Spanish. You start ordering in
20 Spanish. The clerk tells you that he/she does not speak Spanish and that
21 he/she does not understand you. Therefore you start speaking in English
22 but the clerk says that he/she does not understand what you are saying.
23 How would you feel about it?
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28 In a second stage, the 40 of the 63 students were asked to employ Beebe and
29 Waring's strategies when responding to the same three incidents in the DCTs.
30 Fewer participants were chosen due to problems of accessibility. Finally, the
31 same 40 participants were asked to use Halliday's ideational, interpersonal
32 and textual functions to react to the negative incidents. These three dimensions
33 offer FL users choices regarding what they want to concentrate on: the
34 message (ideational), relationships (interpersonal) or (ideational).
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39 Data analysis

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42 In the data analysis, the results from the three stages are presented: 1) pre-test
43 results; ii) the DCT answers using Beebe and Waring's strategies for dealing
44 with rudeness; and iii) the DCT answers employing Halliday's ideational,
45 interpersonal and textual functions. For reasons of space, only the airline
46 incident will be examined here.
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50 Discussion

51 Pre-test Stage

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54 In the pre-test stage, participants were free to choose their own responses to
55 the negative situations. When asked to pay \$200 more for a ticket after
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missing a flight accompanied by “don’t you understand English”, most respondents either questioned the additional payment or immediately asked to see a supervisor. The results were the following:

| Strategy | Number of replies |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Question the decision | 16 |
| Ask to speak to a supervisor | 16 |
| Accept the situation | 11 |
| Attack the salesperson verbally | 9 |
| Argue with the salesperson | 8 |
| Pretend to not understand the request | 3 |
| Sarcasm | 1 |
| Avoidance of the request | 1 |
| No answer | 1 |
| Total | 66 |

Table 1. Responses to a request for an extra payment on a flight and criticism of English

Questioning the request (with 16 answers) would appear to be a sensible option as one might want to seek clarification in such a situation. However, a more detailed analysis of the 16 answers revealed that seven questions could be classified as blunt (e.g. *I do understand English but I need you to repeat what you said, and explain it, can you do that?*) and seven could be seen as demanding (e.g. *Of course I understand and speak English but I think you don’t understand my question, so I ask again “Why do I have to pay \$200?”*). Only one reflected a degree of tentativeness (*I understand English, but I would like to know why I should pay \$200.*). One answer did not seem to be relevant to the context. Whilst being blunt and demanding allows one to express how one feels, these approaches may not help the participants achieve their communicative objective i.e. to get on another flight without having to pay extra. Asking to speak to a supervisor (also with 16 answers) was a popular answer but it was not clear how asking to talk to a supervisor might resolve the problem if one assumes that the salesperson was following company policy.

In the next stage, participants practised Beebe and Waring’s acquiescing, persisting and aggressing strategies. When asked to engage in acquiescing, the participants used the following strategies:

| Strategy | Number of replies |
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| Openly accept the situation | 12 |
| Not acquiesce, try to negotiate an alternative | 12 |
| Reluctantly concede the salesperson's argument | 7 |
| Completely cave in / offer little argument | 3 |
| Provide a non-verbal reaction e.g. walk away | 3 |
| Reluctantly accept with a degree of arguing | 2 |
| Express thanks sarcastically | 1 |
| Total | 40 |

Table 2. *Acquiescing responses to a request for an extra payment on a flight and criticism of English*

Employing an acquiescing strategy (12 answers), participants accepted the situation. However, further analysis reveals perhaps overly submissive attitudes such as *Well, I'm so sorry for this situation. I'll pay for that* and *Oh, it doesn't matter I'll pay* and *Thank you for helping me*. It is one thing not to argue but another to completely accept rude behaviour. Not acquiescing but still trying to find an alternative (12 answers) seemed to be a more productive response with answers such as *Yes I do understand but I don't have money to pay my next flight, isn't there an agreement we can come too* and *Oh, sorry, but I think it's too much to pay for a ticket if you could do something to low the fee, please*.

With a persisting strategy, participants used the following sub-strategies:

| Sub-strategy | Approach | No. Replies |
|--------------|----------|-------------|
| Arguing | Direct | 19 |
| | Indirect | 8 |
| Justify | Direct | 5 |
| | Indirect | 2 |
| Request | Direct | 3 |
| | Indirect | 3 |
| Total | | 40 |

Table 3. *Persisting strategies in dealing with request to pay extra for a missed flight*

As can be seen in the table, direct argument was the preferred sub-strategy with comments such *You know you shouldn't be so aggressive to your clients because it will cause you a lot of problems*, *Of course I know English! I was just asking why you charge me that amount* and *Could you be a little more*

respectful and avoid comments of that kind? The question is whether the participants would achieve their objectives through such direct language, potentially attacking the *face* of the airline employee rather than resolving the problem. Indirect arguing might have been more successful as seen in the following examples: *Look I had a problem when I was on my way and I do not have money with me, so I really have to take another flight and I arrived late because I had an accident.* However, these answers sound like explanations rather than arguments.

With an aggressing strategy, participants used to following sub-strategies:

| Sub-strategy | Approach | No. Replies |
|--------------------------------|----------|-------------|
| Threatening the salesperson | Direct | 11 |
| Insulting the salesperson | Direct | 8 |
| Challenging the salesperson | Direct | 6 |
| Threatening the salesperson | Indirect | 4 |
| Insulting the salesperson | Indirect | 3 |
| Accepting situation and paying | Failed | 6 |
| No answer | | 2 |
| Total | | 40 |

Table 4. Insulting strategies in dealing with request to pay extra for a missed flight

Direct approaches reflected most attempts to be insulting. Threatening the salesperson by warning him/her that they will be reported to their supervisor was a popular course of action as in *Are you telling me I don't know English? You wanna see I know English? Call your supervisor and Wow perhaps you could understand this, bring me your manager.* Insulting was another popular strategy e.g. *Oh! We have a comedian over here, well you are not funny quit it. I think you are the one not understanding that you didn't answer my initial question: Why do I have to pay \$200 dollars? Is that so complex ... for you that your tiny brain is not even bothering to try to process?* and *Of course I understand English you idiot, how else could I have this conversation with you.* However, there were six responses where the interactants failed to provide an insult and just accepted the situation. Still the question remains what would the FL users gain from employing direct insulting sub-strategies.

Ideational and Interpersonal

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5 In order to consider what they wanted to achieve i.e. getting on another flight
6 without paying extra, participants were invited to consider possible ideational,
7 interpersonal and textual dimensions to dealing with rude situations. Ideational
8 language directs interactants to focus on the transaction in order to achieve
9 their objective. Meanwhile, interpersonal language is focused on the
10 relationships and how one wants to deal with others when trying to resolve the
11 problem. Finally, textual language examines how sense is achieved and
12 interaction is created.

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15 The results show that when practicing the ideational function, respondents
16 were able to avoid reference to their alleged lack of linguistic ability to speak
17 English i.e. don't you understand English and focus on achieving the practical
18 result i.e. negotiating to be booked on another flight. Respondents produced
19 sentences such as *I do understand you, what I don't understand is why do I*
20 *have to pay that amount of money and I do speak English. I was just*
21 *wondering why do I have to pay \$200 dollars? It is too expensive and I*
22 *already pay a lot for my ticket.* The first response focuses on what is not
23 understood, the cost of the ticket and puts to one side alleged lack of language
24 skills. In the second example, the interactant quickly refutes any lack of
25 language ability and immediately focuses on receiving an answer to her
26 question about the cost of the ticket. A focus on the ideational function
27 encourages interactants not to get drawn into paying back an insult with
28 another insult. These sentences are much more conciliatory in trying to
29 achieve a result than the sentences produced in the pre-test or using Beebe and
30 Waring strategies.

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Meanwhile, the interpersonal function allowed respondents to focus on the
relationship between service provider and paying customer and use that as a
way of responding to rudeness e.g. *I have a problem and you are my solution,*
so, can you help me please? and *I know it must be a bother to deal with people*
all the time, But I'm not trying to annoy you. I just want to know why I have to
pay \$200. It would be very kind of you to answer my question. I'm sorry if I
offended you in anyway. The first example tries to establish a sense of
interdependence – whether it is successful or not is another matter. This
strategy aims to defuse the situation rather than exasperate it. In the second
example, the respondent is trying to identify with the airline representative and
show concern for his/her situation. The interpersonal function encourages
interactants to explore whether relational work is one way to resolve rude
incidents.

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3 A focus on the textual function meant that interactants had thought about their
4 English and tried to respond in a considered and measured way: *Is there*
5 *someone else I can talk to? It is clear that I need to express myself in a better*
6 *way I need help please, Can you get your manager? and Of course, I do*
7 *understand English. Language is not the problem, the problem is that you*
8 *haven't explained anything to me.* The first response uses the alleged lack of
9 English as a reason to call for a supervisor. The second response denies that
10 there is a language problem and implies that the other interactant suffers from
11 a lack of communication skills. Therefore the textual function, in this case,
12 allows interactants to respond to criticisms about their English.
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18 Conclusions & implications

21 Responding to rudeness in kind is a futile practice when there is a
22 transactional objective to be achieved, as is the case in this situation. The
23 practice and use of ideational, interpersonal and textual functions does not
24 mean that interactants do not respond to perceived incidents of rudeness.
25 Rather it allows them to focus on the aspect of the negative incident they want
26 to respond to whilst keeping in mind their communicative objective i.e.
27 resolving the problem of having to pay more for their ticket.
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30 The results show that students can be encouraged and given opportunities to
31 consider communicative goals rather than purely responding to rudeness/
32 impoliteness for the sake of it. Secondly, it is possible to sensitise learners to
33 the appropriate use of pragmatic strategies which take into account the
34 message, the addressee and the way one wants to express oneself.
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Table 3. Persisting strategies in dealing with request to pay extra for a missed flight

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|--------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
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| Challenging the salesperson | Direct | 6 |
| Threatening the salesperson | Indirect | 4 |
| Insulting the salesperson | Indirect | 3 |
| Accepting situation and paying | Failed | 6 |
| No answer | | 2 |
| Total | | 40 |

Table 4. Insulting strategies in dealing with request to pay extra for a missed flight