

# Final Report

## Hong Kong students' perception and production of politeness to perform requests in English

Course name: Honours Project II

Course code: ENG4905

Tutor: Dr. Luk, Pei Sui Zoe

Group: 01E

Wang Mushan

Submission Date: 10/5/2019

## Hong Kong students' perception and production of politeness to perform requests in English

### Abstract

It is crucial for second language learners (SLL) to understand the politeness use of the target language so as to use it appropriately in different contexts. However, it may occur that the speaker knows she/he should be polite in a certain context but simply do not know how to convey the message in an appropriate polite way. This study investigates whether speakers use the same politeness strategies in both perception and in production to perform requests and also how social power and social distance affect the difference in perception and production. A questionnaire (See Appendix 1) consisting of a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) followed by a Politeness Rating Table (PRT) was distributed among 52 Hong Kong students who are enrolled in local tertiary institutes. The results indicate that as social power and social distance both increase, speakers tend to use higher level of superstrategies to be more polite, which provides partial support for Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). In contrast, speakers tend to be less polite when interacting with hearers of close relationship and high power as well as distant and equal relationship. This implies the speakers, who are ethnically Chinese, may likely to transfer the sociocultural norms of Chinese into English as an impact of L1 pragmatic transfer. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings call attention to the necessity of teaching the usages of various politeness expressions in different contexts in order to improve learners' pragmatic competence.

**Key words:** *pragmatic competence, politeness, second language acquisition*

### Introduction

Learning a second language involves not only knowing about the grammar and text structure, but also pragmatic knowledge of the target language. The lack of pragmatic competence can impede effective communication whereas the speaker may be misunderstood for his/her rudeness by the hearer, potentially causing negative impact on the interpersonal relationship (Thomas, 1983). This study primarily focuses on the aspect of politeness referring to performing requests, which is one particular strand of pragmatic competence. Based on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987), which is widely acknowledged by various disciplines (Harada, 1996), social power and social distance affect the speaker's choice of using a certain politeness strategy. In relation to second language learning, it is suggested that SLL's ability to judge politeness is not equivalent to their ability to use it appropriately in authentic communicative context (Tanaka & Kawade, 1982). This study aims to investigate whether the same politeness strategy is used in perception and production by Hong Kong students to make requests and also to examine how social power and social distance affect the difference between the perception and production of politeness. To this end, a questionnaire consisting of DCT and PRT was distributed to elicit Hong Kong students' production and perception of politeness strategies and a generalized linear model was used to analyse the data. To be specific, the present study addresses the following two main questions:

1. (a) Do Hong Kong students produce a polite request that is the same as what they perceive to be polite in congruent situations? (b) Which factors (social power and/or social distance) caused them to use different strategies in the perception and production of politeness?
2. How do social power and/or social distance affect the difference made between the perceived appropriateness and actual production of politeness in a request?

## Literature Review

Politeness is regarded as a universal phenomenon in human language (Harada, 1996). All languages share ways to realize politeness in order to enhance social relationships and avoid confrontations. The politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson is widely acknowledged by various discipline concerning politeness (Harada, 1996). According to Brown & Levinson's politeness theory, 'every competent speaker of a language has face – a public self-image she/he wants to maintain in communication with other people' (Brown & Levinson, 1987 as cited in Behm, 2008:10). Face is the fundamental assumption of the politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) where both the speaker and the hearer are assumed to have or care about his or her desired public image. Brown & Levinson (1987) claim that human universally possess a basic need for two types of faces which are 'positive face' and 'negative face'. Positive face is defined as the need to be approved of and to be appreciated as a social being such as being accepted by a social group (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 101). Negative face is defined as the need not to be imposed by others such as the freedom of action (Brown & Levinson, 1987:129). Nonetheless, the face of the speaker or the hearer can be easily 'lost' or 'threatened' if an act conflicting with their need is performed, which is called a face-threatening act (FTA) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Some acts are considered to be inherently face-threatening and thus require strategic redress (Harada, 1996). For example, making a request is an intrinsic FTA to the hearer's negative face because it impedes the hearer's freedom to decide on what to do in the next step (Harada, 1996). If the speaker raises a request, the hearer is forced to either do the act which he/she would not do or not to do the act which he/she would do. Therefore, speakers making a request should reduce the degree of imposition and thus lessen the threat in order to save the addressee's face as well as comply with his/her own desire at the same time (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

In Brown & Levinson's politeness theory (1987), they propose four superstrategies to redress the face threatening act, which can be arranged in order based on the extent to which they lessen the threat to the hearer's face. The more threatening the speaker perceives the FTA to be, the higher degree of politeness he/she would like to choose. The least polite strategy is to act bald-on-record (e.g., Turn down the music) while the most polite strategy is to perform off record (e.g., I am trying to study) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The second most polite is the negative politeness strategy (e.g., Could you turn down the music?). It redresses negative face by indicating that the speaker is not imposing on the hearer's freedom of action. Then it is followed by the positive politeness strategy (e.g. How about turning down the music for me?). It redresses positive face by indicating closeness with the hearer. Negative politeness strategies are regarded as more polite than positive politeness strategies because the speaker has assumed that the hearer agrees with his/her presupposition of their solidarity if he/she chooses to use the latter, which may not be agreed with from the hearer's point of view (Holtgraves & Joong-Nam, 1990). If other conditions are equal, Brown and Levinson's politeness superstrategies (1987: 73) form a taxonomy of politeness, ordering from the least polite to the most polite as follows: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off record. Each of the superstrategy consists of a number of subordinate politeness strategies, containing diverse degrees of politeness (Holtgraves & Joong-Nam, 1990).

Furthermore, Brown and Levinson (1987: 71) postulate three independent variables that affect the choice of using certain politeness strategy: the social power of the hearer over the speaker, the social distance between the hearer and the speaker, and the ranking of the imposition of the act itself. Each of the variable independently causes an effect on choosing a

certain politeness strategy (Yueng, 1997). According to the politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), these three variables can be quantified in an additive formula that sums up to a numerical value for the speaker to evaluate the FTA, in turn contributing the determination of the degree of politeness. More specifically, the speakers will be more polite when (a) the relative power of the hearer increases, (b) the social distance increases, and (c) the ranking of imposition on the hearer increases (Ambady, N., Koo, J., Lee, F., & Rosenthal, R. 1996).

Claiming that the politeness theory is of universal validity, Brown and Levinson reckon the theory is applicable “in many and perhaps all cultures” (1978: 79). Therefore, the taxonomy of politeness should be uniformly applicable in different cultures. Holtgrave and Joong-Nam support this argument as they found that the rankings of superstrategy were generally consistent with the politeness ordering for both American-English and Korean (1990). They further posit that politeness differences are generated among various culture because of choosing the appropriate subordinate strategies within a superstrategy (Holtgrave and Joong-Nam, 1990). However, the statement of universal validity is by no means free from doubts and criticisms. For instance, Matsumoto (1988) disagrees to view politeness only as a negative means of reducing imposition. Ide (1989) also argues that politeness is more than a strategic option as the Japanese polite expressions are more normative intrinsically. In practice, every language has its unique conventional devices for performing polite requests so as to avoid to conflicts (Tanaka, S., & Kawade, S. 1982). This paper attempts to examine the validity of Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory in association with the field of second language acquisition.

Studies of politeness in second language acquisition either investigate the perception of politeness degree by non-native speakers or explore their politeness productions in various situations (Suh, 1999). Suh (1999) studied English native speakers and Korean learners of English using politeness strategies and found that Korean learners of English did not apply similar politeness strategies to the native speakers. Tanaka (1988) examined the politeness strategies used by Australians and Japanese learners of English and revealed that the Japanese learners used politeness strategies drastically different from native speakers when interacting with hearers of various social statuses. Several studies also indicated that speakers of low power and distant relationship are more polite to the hearer in using politeness strategies (Holtgraves, T., & Joong-Nam, Y, 1990; Harada, 199; Suh, 1999).

However, as Tanaka & Kawade (1982) argue, SLL’s ability to perceive politeness may not amount to what they actually produce in authentic communicative situations. Hatch (1983) also suggest that learner’s competence of politeness perception will not be equivalent to their competence to actually say it appropriately for communicative purpose. Harada (1990) studied that Japanese ESL learners’ perception of politeness in some requests differed from that of the native speakers. Meanwhile, they seldom produced utterances such as conditional phrases that may not been acquired as a productive repertoire, which were common in the expressions of native speakers (Harada, 1990). Tanaka & Kawade (1982) acknowledges the significance to further examine the relation between the perception of politeness and the corresponding actual production by SLL. It is proposed that learners should be provided with chances to produce output in a given context rather than solely measuring their judgment of the appropriate politeness forms (Tanaka & Kawade, 1982). Suh (1999) suggests that further research studies using other methods such as discourse completion table and role-play, which allow learners to produce utterances in a given situation, can be conducted to understand learner’s pragmatic competence in the use of politeness strategies.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were fifty-two students studying Bachelor degree at one of the University Grant Committee (UGC)-funded universities in Hong Kong. They are all native speakers of Cantonese and acquired English as a second language in a non-English context for more than ten years. In order to ensure the consistent level of English proficiency, students who were enrolled in programmes using English as the medium of instruction were recruited. The age of all the participants were between 21 and 25 years old.

### *Instrument*

The questionnaire (See Appendix 1) designed for this study had two parts: Discourse Completion Test (DCT) adapted from Rose (1994) and Politeness Rating Table (PRT) adapted from Harada (1996). DCT was designed to elicit data for the actual production of politeness whereas PRT elicited data about the perception of politeness from the participants (Rose, 1994; Harada, 1996). By altering the independent variables of social power and social distance in the request situations of both DCT and PRT, it demonstrated whether social power and/or social distance affect the difference made between the perceived appropriateness and actual production of politeness in a request.

The DCT contained two settings, which were a request to borrow an umbrella and to borrow a pen. Forming two types of requests can keep the ranking of imposition constant as it included both a larger request size and a smaller request size. In each setting, four distinctive hearers were created based on the combination of the two independent variables: (equal/high) social power and (low/distant) social distance relationship. The hearers were differentiated as follows (Table 1):

Social Power	Social Distance	Close	Distant
Equal		friend for five years	a salesperson in store where you often go
High		grandparent	Professor

*Table 1: Four hearers representing the combination of social power and distance*

The DCT consisted of eight request situations for different combinations in total. Participants were asked to write down what they would say to borrow an umbrella and a pen to the distinctive hearers, placing their role as a student to make the request. The eight situations were randomly presented to participants. Their request response indicated participants' actual production of using a certain politeness strategy to make request in difference situations.

In order to make valid comparison, the situations in PRT were similar to those described in DCT. The speaker made requests of both a larger size (asking to turn down the music) and a smaller size (asking to pass down the salt) to the identical four hearers described in DCT. The PRT also contained eight corresponding request situations in total. Participants were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 4 to judge how polite a given request is used in a particular situation, placing their role as a student. Every given request was based on one of the politeness super strategies from Brown & Levinson's taxonomy of politeness and also representing its most prevalent subordinate types adapted from Holtgraves & Joong-Nam (1990). One request reflected a bald-on-record strategy (e.g. *Turn down the music.*) in the imperative form. Two requests reflected a positive politeness strategy, which are the 'Be optimistic' strategy (e.g.



*You'll turn down the music, won't you?*) and the 'Ask for reasons' strategy (e.g. *Why don't you turn down the music*). Three requests reflected a negative politeness strategy. One expressed the speaker's desire to get the action done (e.g. *I want you to turn down the music*), another questioned the hearer's ability to perform the action (e.g. *Could you turn down the music?*) and the other enquired whether the speaker is imposing on the hearer (e.g. *Would you mind turning down the music?*). Finally, one request was off record, presenting hints to raise the issue (e.g. *I'm trying to study*). The given requests were presented randomly to the participants in each situation.

Blum-kulka et al (1989) suggest that the research on politeness often examines into the appropriateness of speech acts in the investigation of request realization. By rating the given requests from '1' to be inappropriate at all to '4' to be the most appropriate use, participants indicated whether they were able to recognize how polite a person was trying be when different politeness strategies were carried out. Participants' ratings reflected their perception towards how appropriate a given politeness strategy was used in a particular situation to make requests.

### *Procedure*

The study was conducted through snowball sampling where a link of the questionnaire was distributed among peers and acquaintances. Of the fifty-two participants, only forty-six participants provided valid responses. Two responses were eliminated because the participants provided identical request forms for all situations in the DCT (e.g. *'Can I borrow it?'*). The mono-response lacks lexical variety, seemingly arising from the participants' inattentiveness or reluctance. The remaining four responses were eliminated because the participants did not rate a single '4' (most appropriate to use) in any given requests per situation. If participants disfavored all of given politeness strategies taken from Brown & Levinson's politeness theory, their notion of politeness deviated from the norm.

### **Data Analysis**

The present study data were analyzed using Brown & Levinson's politeness theory (1987). The taxonomy of politeness suggests that the four superstrategies can be ordered based on the extent of how they threaten the hearer's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). If other conditions are kept constant, the superstrategies are arranged from the least polite to the most as follows: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off record.

For DCT, participants' actual productions were categorized into super strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and their subordinate options (Holtgraves, T. & Joong-Nam, Y., 1990). Then all the responses were labelled as 1 for a bald-on-record strategy, 2 for a positive politeness strategy, 3 for a negative politeness strategy and 4 for an off-record strategy. Therefore, the actual productions were given a value between 1 to 4, indicating the order from the least polite to the most polite. For PRT, the given requests were rearranged in the order from the highest score to the lowest score ranked by the participants. As every given request already corresponds to one of the super strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and their subordinate options (Holtgraves, T. & Joong-Nam, Y., 1990), the highest ranking ones, which indicates the participants' perception of the most polite request, were labelled the value between 1 to 4 in accordance to which the super strategies it corresponds.

Next, the data from DCT and from PRT were compiled together to find out which politeness strategies were used consistently in both perception and production for the corresponding situations. If the participant rated the 'Enquiring whether imposing on hearer' strategy as most appropriate to use when interacting with a hearer of high power and distant relationship

in PRT, and then the participant actually produced the same ‘Enquiring whether imposing on hearer’ strategy in the same situation in DCT, it is considered that the participants’ perceived politeness strategy matched the strategy that is actually produced. The strategies matching in the perception and production indicated that the participant was able to produce a polite request that is the same as what they perceive to be polite in congruent situations.

However, if the politeness strategies were not identical in its subordinate types, the differences between perception value and production value were calculated. If politeness strategies were used consistently in both perception and production, the difference amounted to 0. If the strategies were inconsistent in perception and production, as it was in most cases, the difference ranged from -3 to 3. If participants ranked more than one option as 4, which is the highest value in PRT, then the average of the difference was calculated. The table below (Table 2) presents the inference of whether the participant is being more or less polite based on the differences between perception and production.

perception - production > 0	the production of politeness is smaller than the perception of politeness	the participants is actually being less polite
perception - production = 0	the level of production is as polite as the level of perception	the participant is consistent in what he says and thinks.
perception - production < 0	politeness production is greater than politeness perception	the participant is being more polite

Table 2: The participant is being more/less polite based on value of ‘perception - production’

After a preliminary consolidation, the study data was further analysis through a generalized linear model to examine whether the variables of social power and social distance have a significant effect on the difference between perception and production of politeness.

## Results and Discussions

### A. A Quantitative Overview

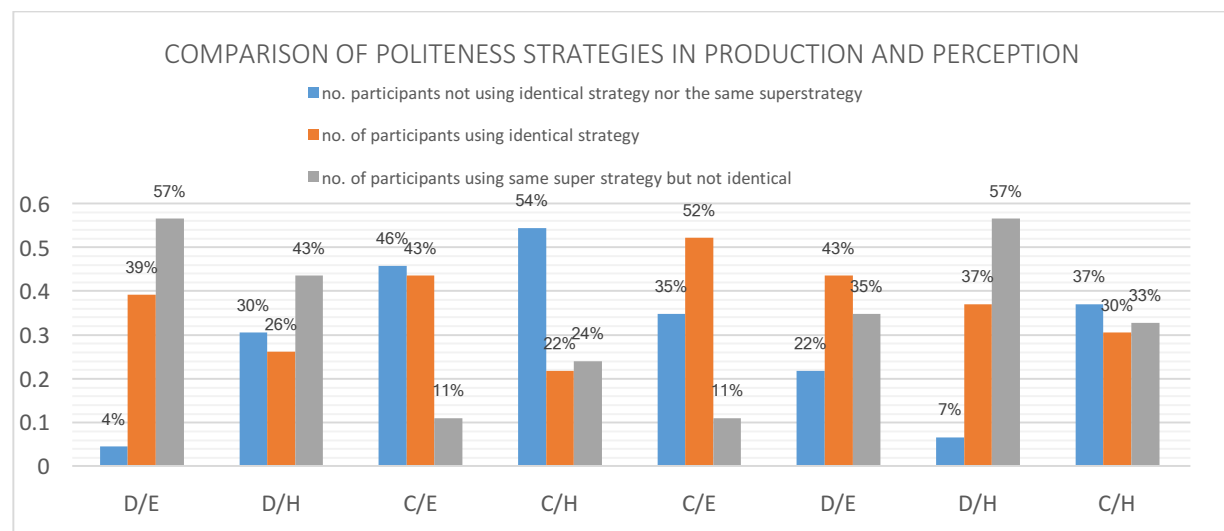


Figure 1: The comparison of politeness strategies in production and perception

The result (Figure 1) compares the number of participants using identical strategies, using the same superstrategy and using neither identical nor the same strategy in production and perception of politeness. Overall, it shows that more than half of the participants in most situations did not produce a politeness strategy that was identical to what they perceived to be the most polite. Participants considered a certain strategy to be polite in their perception but in congruent situations, they did not use the exact same strategy in the actual production. Instead, participants who were able to produce a strategy that lies in the same superstrategy as what they perceived account for the majority in most situations. It only occurred in a few situations where nearly half of the participants neither chose an identical strategy nor the same superstrategy.

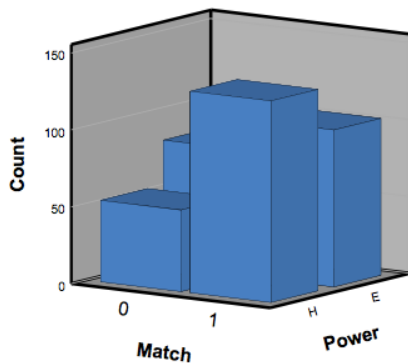


Figure 2: The effect of social power on using the exact same politeness strategy in perception and production.

Social power has an effect on whether the speaker uses the same strategy in both perception and production at a statistically significant level as the p-value is 0.02 ( $< 0.05$ ). The result (Figure 2) displays when the social power is equal (E), the number of politeness strategies (0) is greater than that of when the social power is high (H) in terms of the perceived strategy and the produced strategy being identical. This suggests when interacting with a hearer of equal social power, speakers are more likely to produce a polite strategy that is consistent with what they perceive in congruent situations. As for a hearer with high social power, it can be deduced that the speaker is less likely to use a consistent politeness strategy in the perception and actual production of congruent situations.

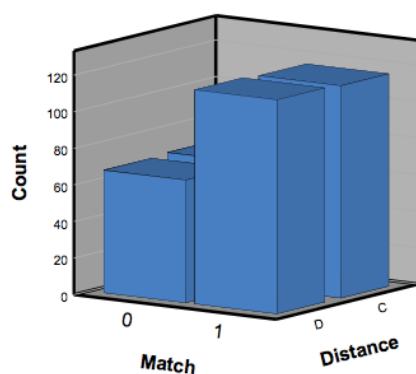


Figure 3: The effect of social distance on using the exact same politeness strategy in perception and production.

On the contrary, social distance does not affect whether the speaker uses the same strategy in both perception and production as the p-value is 0.998 ( $> 0.05$ ). The result (Figure 3) presents no matter if the speaker has a close or distant relationship with the hearer, the number remains constant in terms of the perceived strategy and the produced strategy being identical. It is inferred that speakers are most unlikely to change their politeness strategy just because the hearer is the socially distant or close to them.



Moreover, the interaction between the social distance and social power is also statistically insignificant ( $p\text{-value}=0.23$ ) and thus these two variables are independent from each other. The result proves that the main effect of the social power is at the same level as the main effect of social distance on the use of identical strategy. Consequently, the interaction between social distance and power will not affect whether the speaker uses the same strategy in both perception and production of politeness.

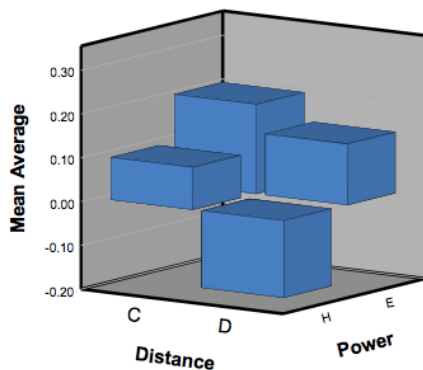


Figure 4: The effect of social power and social distance on how different politeness strategies are used in perception and production

In addition to the findings where participants used the same subordinate politeness strategy, the remaining findings focus on the responses of not using the same politeness strategy in both the perception and production, which include cases where the same superstrategy or even complete different strategies were used. The main difference between this finding and the previous ones lie in that this finding examines the politeness strategies at a less restrictive level. It examines strategies that are different or simply belong to the same superstrategy whereas in the previous ones, politeness strategies must be in the same subordinate category in order to be identical. In this finding, both the social power ( $p\text{-value}=0.002$ ) and social distance ( $p\text{-value}=0.12$ ) prove to significantly affect the difference made between the perception and production of politeness in performing requests.

The result (Figure 4) displays that in conditions of close-equal relationship, close-high relationship and distant-equal relationship, the differences between perception and production of politeness are all positive. To be more specific, although the speaker perceived a politeness strategy to be most appropriate, he/she did not reach the equal degree of politeness in his/her actual production of congruent situations. This means the speaker tends to produce a less polite strategy compared with what is perceived to be polite. The speaker hence is concluded to be less polite as his/her actual production is less polite. In brief, speakers become less polite when interacting a hearer of close relationship and equal power, close relationship and high power as well as distant relationship and equal power.

Most of all, when the hearer is of close relationship and equal power, the effect on the difference in perception and production turned out to be the greatest. A majority number of speakers did not reach the same degree of politeness in production compared with their own perception when interacting with the hearer of close and equal relationship (i.e. close friends). It indicates that speakers are more likely to be even less polite to a hearer whom he/she knows well and equal in power.

Only when the hearer is of distant relationship and high power do the differences between perception and production arrive at a negative result. In this case, the speaker actually produced a politeness strategy that was more polite than what he/she originally perceived resulting in the speaker being more polite. Therefore, speakers tend to be more polite in

actual production when making a request to a hearer of distant relationship and of high power.

Furthermore, the interaction between social distance and social power is also statistically insignificant ( $p\text{-value}=0.123$ ) and thus these two factors are independent from each other. The main effect of social power on the difference between perception and production is as the same level as the main effect of social distance. The interaction between social distance and social power will not affect the differences made between perception and production of politeness.

## B. Evaluations of the Research Questions

### 1. (a) Do Hong Kong students produce a polite request that is the same as what they perceive to be polite in congruent situations?

It only occurred occasionally when the speaker's actual produced politeness strategy was consistent with the perceived politeness in congruent situations. In most situations, they did not produce the exact same subordinate politeness strategy that was regarded as the most appropriate in the politeness perception. Therefore, there is a gap between the perception of politeness and production of politeness by Hong Kong students in performing requests.

Nonetheless, although a majority of speakers was not consistent in the perceived strategy and produced strategy, they were able to produce and perceive polite strategy that belonged to the same politeness superstrategy so that the politeness degree equates at a less restrictive level. This manifests that students are mainly able to maintain the same politeness degree in their actual production and in perception regardless of the various subordinate types in a single politeness superstrategy. In most situations, the students are capable of utilizing linguistic choices to produce a polite strategy that are different in forms of what they consider to be polite but remain in the same degree of politeness.

When comparing the 368 strategies in politeness perception and politeness production respectively, 279 strategy responses had the same politeness superstrategy in perception and production. In fact, negative politeness strategy is the most common superstrategy. 262 of the total are negative politeness strategies, which are preferred both in perception and its corresponding production though the subordinate types may vary. The table (Table 3) below presents all the subordinate types of negative politeness strategies collected from DCT.

Subordinate types of negative politeness strategies	Linguistic choices
<b>Hearer's ability</b>	<i>Can/Could you lend me an umbrella?</i> <i>Would you lend me an umbrella?</i>
<b>Imposing on hearer</b>	<i>Would you mind lending me an umbrella?</i> <i>Do you think ...</i> <i>Do you mind me/if ...</i>
<b>Speaker's desire</b>	<i>I want to borrow an umbrella.</i> <i>I would like to borrow an umbrella.</i>
<b>To be allowed</b>	<i>May I borrow an umbrella?</i>
<b>Existence</b>	<i>Do you have an umbrella?</i> <i>Is there any umbrella?</i>
<b>Others</b>	<i>Is it possible ...</i> <i>I am wondering ...</i> <i>Where can I get/find an umbrella?</i>

*Table 3: The subordinate types of negative politeness strategies consolidated from DCT*

One explanation for the dominance of negative politeness strategy may be that the speaker is trying to use the least threatening strategy while being on-record so as to show great respect to the hearer's freedom of action and to fulfill one's need explicitly at the same time.

Negative politeness strategy is considered to be the least threatening among the three on-record strategies (Holtgraves & Joong-Nam, 1990). The negative politeness strategy is more polite than the positive politeness strategy because the latter is established on the premise that the hearer have accepted the speaker's presupposition of their solidarity, which the hearer may not agree with from his/her own perspective (Holtgraves & Joong-Nam, 1990).

Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to note that the changes in linguistic choice are much more distinctive in perception of politeness than in production. In fact, if carefully examining the actual production of participants' politeness strategies, there is not much of lexical variety when the speaker is asked to elicit on their own. The largest number of subordinate politeness strategies produced by the participants is the 'Questioning the hearer's ability' strategy, which raises a request with 'Can you ...' or 'Could you ...' in all situations. Of the total 368 strategies in politeness production, 155 strategies start with 'Can you ...'/'Could you ...', being twice as much as the 'May I ...' strategy, which come in as the second largest number.

*1. (b) Which factors (social power and/or social distance) caused the speakers to use different strategies in the perception and production of politeness?*

Social power has an independent effect whereas social distance does not appear to have any effect on the speaker's choice of using the same politeness strategy. Extrapolating from the findings, it appears that speakers are more sensitive to social power and not sensitive enough to social distance so social power can be viewed as a predictor of linguistic politeness.

Speakers are more aware when the social power of the hearer increases and thus ponder over a particular politeness strategy that may be more proper in the actual production to raise the request. According to Morand (2000), politeness allows subordinates to show discernment and save face when causing potential threats to superiors. Students, as subordinates in terms of social power, are careful not to violate or threaten those whom they are dependent on so they are careful about the degree of politeness in the interaction with superior (Morand, 2000). Therefore, Hong Kong tertiary students pay greater attention to the use of politeness strategies when encountering people of high social power.

On the other hand, when the speaker perceive him/herself as distant or close with the hearer, it is less likely to influence the speaker's choice of politeness strategies. As mentioned before, it is examined at a restrictive level that the perceived politeness and produced politeness lie in the same subordinate type. It is not surprising that social distance does not have an effect on using the same politeness strategy in perception and production. A problem may lie in separating the effect of relationship distance as in closeness and psychological distance as in attraction (Slugoski & Turnbull, 1988). Slugoski and Turnbull (1988) argue that closeness and attraction are two different dimensions. They reveal speakers become more polite when they feel more attracted to the hearers (Slugoski & Turnbull, 1988). Speakers who like one another pay more attention and show more respect to the face of one another (Davis, 1982). It is possible that examining the impact of attraction on politeness may generate a more significant result and thus further observing both the social distance and psychological distance may resolve such issue.

*2. How do social power and/or social distance affect the difference made between the perceived appropriateness and actual production of politeness in a request?*

The results of the study provide partial support for Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). First of all, this study strengthens that social power and social distance are two independent variables, which have respective impact on the difference made between the production and perception of politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) illustrated that both social power and social distance have a main effect on redressing the threats of the request by the speaker. In this study, both the social power and social distance are statistically significant to affect the difference between the perception and production whereas the interaction between the two is insignificant. It indicates that the two variables are relevant and independent to cause impact on the difference between politeness perception and production. Secondly, this study proves that speakers tend to be more polite when making a request to a hearer of distant relationship and high power. Brown and Levinson (1987) propose that as power and distance increase, speakers use higher level of superstrategies to show more politeness in order to redress the FTA. Supporting this aspect of the politeness theory, this study evidences the speaker produces a strategy that is more polite than his/her own perception of politeness to a hearer who is distant and high in power.

In contrast, this study finds that when a hearer is close and high in power or is distant and equal in power, the speaker tends to produce less polite strategies compared with what they perceive in congruent situations. This finding is inconsistent with Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) as they argue the increase of either variable leads to the increased degree of politeness in the strategy to employ. It is hypothesized that satisfying either condition of high social power or distant relationship ought to urge the speaker to be more polite. However, the present finding indicates the speakers actually become less polite when interacting with a hearer of close relationship and high power as well as of distant relationship and equal power. If the speaker is being unintentionally less polite, drawn from the monotony of some responses, one possible explanation may be due to the lack of pragmatic knowledge and linguistic repertoire. It is likely that the speaker knows she/he should be polite but do not know how to convey this message in actual production. They may be aware of the diverse situations to make different polite requests but in practice, they merely are able to produce a single type of polite expression regardless of the wide variety in diverse situations. The choices are more rigid and limited for SLL in Hong Kong to signal politeness in social communications (Yeung, 1997). Considering the insufficient lexical variety and restrictive linguistic choices, it is fair to postulate they lack adequate pragmatic knowledge to produce abundant polite strategies in reality despite they understand they should use politeness in such condition. Consequently, they make requests that are less polite in the actual production than what they originally perceived, although they were supposed to be polite to the hearer of distant relationship and high power.

On the other hand, if the speaker deliberately chooses to be less polite rather than being unintentional, it is possible to take into consideration the impact of L1 pragmatic transfer. SLL tend to transfer their sociocultural norm of their native language into the second language (L2), producing unnatural linguistic behaviours (Kasper, 1992). Takahashi and Beebe (1987) argue that SLL with high L2 proficiency tend to transfer more native sociocultural norms into L2 production because they have more control of how to express themselves. All of the participants in this study are enrolled in Bachelor programmes using English as the medium of instruction in Hong Kong tertiary institutes and thus they are regarded as high proficiency learners of English. As a result, they have already comprehended the English language form and meaning so as to be capable of judging how appropriate the politeness strategies are used in different situations. Nevertheless, SLL's

advanced competence to exploit various L2 expressions further enables them to transfer the sociocultural norms of Chinese into English.

In the Chinese culture, a clear distinction is made between in-group and out-group members (Pan, 2000). The concept of ‘内’(in-group) and ‘外’(out-group) suggests that social distance is of chief significance in the Chinese society (Pan, 2000). As a collective culture society, Chinese lay emphasis on the claim of solidarity and interdependence among family members and friends. Raising a request to acquaintances in the Chinese culture implies bonding and solidarity as the hearer is intimate and trustworthy to fulfill the request (Su, 2003). The principle of reciprocity enables Chinese to view fulfilling a request as an obligation and responsibility of kinship (Yueng, 1997). The participants may consider it obligatory of their grandparents to lend them an umbrella or pass the salt and thus they produced less polite strategies to indicate intimate relationship. Su (2003) argues that the less polite the speaker is, the more closeness he/she shows to the hearer. Although grandparents are hearers of high power, they are also intimate family members who should share the responsibility and conduct the favour of their in-group member, as in this case is their grandchildren. Otherwise, if conventional politeness strategies are used in conversations with in-group members, it seems to intentionally create a distance between the interactants (Pan & Kadar, 2011). The speakers may want to avoid such distancing in daily interaction to establish solidarity and intimacy with the hearer of close relationship. On the contrary, being less polite to the hearer of distant relationship does not necessarily mean a message of closeness, but rather a sign of not giving consideration to the face (Pan, 2000). A service encounter with shop clerks, taxi drivers, waiters, etc. are reckoned as an outside relationship in the Chinese culture (Pan, 2000). The customer happens to come in contact with the server for a short time and thus the relationship is temporary and occasional (Pan, 2000). They may not consider the request as imposing because their main focus is to finish the task instead of establishing relationship (Pan, 2000). Consequently, the speaker does not need to concern much about face-saving as the relationship between the customer and the server is not likely to develop further than their business roles. Therefore, the lack of face concern results in the speaker using less polite strategies to the server in a distant relationship whereas the Chinese claim of solidarity and reciprocity causes the speaker to be less polite in a close relationship.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

This study proposes pedagogical implications for teaching and learning about politeness in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms in Hong Kong. Learners should know how to behave linguistically according to different social contexts (Yeung, 1997). While the lack of pragmatic competence may infringe on effective communication, the mistake can even be perceived poorly by hearers as an interpretation of the speakers’ personal quality (Thomas 1983: 97). Therefore, it is necessary to teach how to use language appropriately in different context in order to improve learners’ pragmatic competence.

As one way of improving learner’s pragmatic competence, teachers should promote their awareness of the cultural differences and socio-cultural rules (Suh, 1999). The finding in this study suggests when the hearer is of equal power and distant relationship, speakers produced a less polite strategy in reality. It may be caused by the cultural difference where imposing is not viewed as serious in the Chinese culture as it is in the Western culture (Yueng, 1997). To learn the appropriate language contextually, Rose (1994) suggests that showing videotapes of authentic interactions between English native speakers, followed by an analysis session and role plays allow learners to raise awareness of a variety of language use. As Kasper (1992: 9) points out, the awareness-raising English activities help learners to ‘make connection



between linguistic forms, pragmatic functions and their cultural meanings'. Learners will gradually be able to understand the language use in sociocultural context and develop pragmatic competence through analyzing natural occurring conversations.

To meet the learner's need of perceiving as well as producing appropriate politeness, they should be equipped with means to express politeness that is culturally appropriate (LoCastro, 1997). As the result in the study shows, the changes of linguistic choice are less distinctive in actual production when speakers are asked to elicit the utterance on their own. The single and rigid pattern of raising a request is due to speakers' lack of lexical variety and thus more authentic variety of politeness expressions can be taught in a communicative context.

Different categories of politeness strategies can be introduced according to various context so that learners are exposed to a wide range of choices to express politeness to different hearers. For instance, rather than the sentence formula 'Can I ...', which is often taught in English textbooks in Hong Kong, native speakers of English tend to use 'I was wondering if ...' and 'If you could, it would be ...' more often to professors than to close friends (Harada, 1996). A wider variety of utterances leads to more linguistic structures and more choices of politeness degrees (Harada, 1996). Learners should be provided with sufficient practice in using a variety of politeness strategies according to diverse contexts.

## Limitations

It should be noted that there are some limitations in this study. First, the rating given in the PRT features an ordinal scale, which does not imply the equivalence to the intervals between scores on the scale. It is not accurate to think of the difference of politeness between the bald on record strategy '1' and the negative politeness strategy '3' is the same as that of positive politeness strategy '2' and off record strategy '4'. For data on an ordinal scale, mathematical outcomes resulting from adding and subtracting are not accurate indicators of the property of such type of data (Harada, 1996:55). However, understanding this limitation, calculation is still conducted in this study because it can provide an overall idea of the distributions of the situations on the scale (Harada, 1996:55).

Second, the study is limited to a single cultural group of Cantonese native speakers acquiring English as a second language. As a part of the pragmatic competence, SLL's ability to use politeness in appropriate context should be coherent with the native speaker norms (LoCastro, 1999). In order to see how SLL are aware of and accommodate to the intercultural communication, cross-cultural comparison in politeness between English native speakers and ESL speakers can further be conducted. It would be very helpful to compare data collected from both native speakers and nonnative speakers to see the similarities and differences in their perception and production of politeness.

## Conclusion

This paper has studied whether the same polite strategy is used in perception and production to perform requests by Hong Kong students and also examined how social power and social distance affect the difference between the perception and production of politeness. The findings indicate that although a majority did not produce an exact same strategy, Hong Kong students were capable of utilizing linguistic choices to produce a polite strategy differing in forms of their perception but equated in the same degree of politeness. Nonetheless, when generating a difference between the politeness perception and production, speakers are more polite when making a request to a hearer of distant relationship and high power, which provide partial support for the politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In contrast,



speakers tend to be less polite when encountering hearer of close relationship and high power, which may due to the Chinese sociocultural norm of claiming solidarity and interdependence of kinship. Furthermore, being less polite to hearer of distant relationship and equal power results from the lack of face concern for the temporary relationship between the server and costumer. This study provides pedagogical implications for teachers to teach a variety of authentic politeness expressions in a communicative context and raise learners' awareness of cultural difference so as to improve their pragmatic competence.

Reference:

- Ambady, N., Koo, J., Lee, F., & Rosenthal, R. (1996). More than words: Linguistic and nonlinguistic politeness in two cultures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(5), 996.
- Behm, J. (2008). A contrastive analysis of politeness: Requests and refusals in German and English. Retrieved October 25, 2011.
- Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., & Kasper, G. (1989). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies* (Vol. 31). Ablex Pub.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage* (Vol. 4). Cambridge university press.
- Davis, D. (1982). Determinants of responsiveness in dyadic interaction. In *Personality, roles, and social behavior* (pp. 85-139). Springer, New York, NY.
- Harada, Y. (1996). Judgements of Politeness in L2 Acquisition. *Kansas Working Papers in Linguistics*, 21, 39-56.
- Hatch, E. M. (1983). *Psycholinguistics: A second language perspective*. Newbury House Publishers, Inc., Rowley, MA 01969, 113-130.
- Hill, B., Ide, S., Ikuta, S., Kawasaki, A., & Ogino, T. (1986). Universals of linguistic politeness: Quantitative evidence from Japanese and American English. *Journal of pragmatics*, 10(3), 347-371.
- Holtgraves, T., & Joong-Nam, Y. (1990). Politeness as universal: Cross-cultural perceptions of request strategies and inferences based on their use. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 59(4), 719.
- Ide, Sachiko, 1989. Formal forms and discernment: two neglected aspects of universals of linguistic politeness. *Multilingua* 8 (2/3), 223–248
- Kasper, G. (1992). Pragmatic transfer. *Interlanguage studies bulletin (Utrecht)*, 8(3), 203-231.
- LoCastro, V. (1997). Politeness and pragmatic competence in foreign language education. *Language Teaching Research*, 1(3), 239-267.
- Matsumoto, Yoshiko, 1988. Reexamination of the universality of face: politeness phenomena in Japanese. *Journal of Pragmatics* 12, 403–426
- Morand, D. A. (2000). Language and power: An empirical analysis of linguistic strategies used in superior–subordinate communication. *Journal of organizational behavior*, 21(3), 235-248.
- Pan, Y. (2000). Facework in Chinese service encounters. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 10(1), 25-61.
- Pan, Y., & Kadar, D. Z. (2011). Historical vs. contemporary Chinese linguistic

- politeness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43(6), 1525-1539.
- Rose, K. R. (1994). Pragmatic Consciousness-Raising in an EFL Context. *Pragmatics and Language Learning Monograph Series*, 5, 52-63.
- Slugoski, B. R., & Turnbull, W. (1988). Cruel to be kind and kind to be cruel: Sarcasm, banter and social relations. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 7(2), 101-121.
- Su, W. M. (2003). Cultural Values and Interactional Styles--A Comparative Study of English and Chinese Requests [J]. *Journal of Xi'an Foreign Languages University*, 1.
- Suh, J. S. (1999). Pragmatic perception of politeness in requests by Korean learners of English as a second language. *IRAL-International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 37(3), 195-214.
- Takahashi T., & L. Beebe. (1987). The development of pragmatic competence by Japanese learners of English. *JALT Journal*, 8
- Tanaka, S., & Kawade, S. (1982). Politeness strategies and second language acquisition. *Studies in second language acquisition*, 5(1), 18-33.
- Thomas J (1983) Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics* 4(2): 91-112.
- Yeung, L. N. (1997). Polite requests in English and Chinese business correspondence in Hong Kong. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 27(4), 505-522.

word count: 7717

Appendix 1 The questionnaire consisting of DCT and PRT

Age : \_\_\_\_\_ Gender : \_\_\_\_\_

Where did you attend for tertiary education?

- ☐ Hong Kong
- ☐ Mainland China
- ☐ Other Asian regions
- ☐ English-speaking countries
- ☐ Others

Where did you attend secondary school?

- ☐ Hong Kong
- ☐ Mainland China
- ☐ Other Asian regions
- ☐ English-speaking countries
- ☐ Others

***Part A: Discourse Completion Test***

*(1/8) Please read the following description and write down what you would say in that situation.*

You've finished consulting with your professor and it's raining heavily outside. You are going to ask the professor for an umbrella.

What will you say? \_\_\_\_\_

*(2/8) Please read the following description and write down what you would say in that situation.*

You're leaving from a friend's place and it's raining heavily outside. You are going to ask your friend whom you known for five years for an umbrella.

What will you say? \_\_\_\_\_

*(3/8) Please read the following description and write down what you would say in that situation.*

You're leaving from your grandparents' home and it's raining heavily outside. You are going to ask your grandparents for an umbrella.

What will you say? \_\_\_\_\_

*(4/8) Please read the following description and write down what you would say in that situation.*

You've finished shopping at a store you often go and it's raining heavily outside. You are going to ask the salesperson for an umbrella.

What will you say? \_\_\_\_\_

*(5/8) Please read the following description and write down what you would say in that situation.*

You are having class with your friend whom you've known for five years and you don't have a pen. You are going to ask the friend for a pen.

What will you say? \_\_\_\_\_

*(6/8) Please read the following description and write down what you would say in that situation.*

You are consulting with your professor and you don't have a pen. You are going to ask the professor for a pen.

What will you say? \_\_\_\_\_

*(7/8) Please read the following description and write down what you would say in that situation.*

You are shopping at a store you often go and you don't have a pen. You are going to ask the salesperson for a pen.

What will you say? \_\_\_\_\_

*(8/8) Please read the following description and write down what you would say in that situation.*

You are visiting your grandparents and you don't have a pen. You are going to ask your grandparents for a pen.

What will you say? \_\_\_\_\_

### ***Part B: Politeness Rating Table***

*Please read the descriptions of the situations and rate how appropriately the politeness is used in the following given requests. You may give the same rate more than once in a situation.*

1. You are studying in the library. You hear loud music on speaker coming from a librarian standing near you. You ask the librarian to turn down the music and if you say...

**Rate the appropriateness:**

*1= not appropriate at all, 2=not so appropriate, 3=appropriate, 4=very appropriate*

Turn down the music.	1	2	3	4
You'll turn down the music, won't you?	1	2	3	4
Why don't you turn down the music?	1	2	3	4
Could you turn down the music?	1	2	3	4
Would you mind turning down the music?	1	2	3	4
I want you to turn down the music.	1	2	3	4
I'm trying to study.	1	2	3	4
Turn down the music.	1	2	3	4
You'll turn down the music, won't you?	1	2	3	4

2. You are studying at your grandparents' home. You hear loud music on speaker coming from your grandparent in the living room. You ask your grandparent to turn down the music and if you say...

**Rate the appropriateness:**

*1= not appropriate at all, 2=not so appropriate, 3=appropriate, 4=very appropriate*

Why don't you turn down the music?	1	2	3	4
Could you turn down the music?	1	2	3	4
Would you mind turning down the music?	1	2	3	4
I want you to turn down the music.	1	2	3	4
I'm trying to study.	1	2	3	4
Turn down the music.	1	2	3	4
You'll turn down the music, won't you?	1	2	3	4
Why don't you turn down the music?	1	2	3	4
Could you turn down the music?	1	2	3	4

3. You are studying in the library. You hear loud music on speaker coming from a friend sitting in front of you, whom you have known for five years. You ask your friend to turn down the music and if you say...

**Rate the appropriateness:**

*1= not appropriate at all, 2=not so appropriate, 3=appropriate, 4=very appropriate*

Why don't you turn down the music?	1	2	3	4
Could you turn down the music?	1	2	3	4
Turn down the music.	1	2	3	4
You'll turn down the music, won't you?	1	2	3	4
Would you mind turning down the music?	1	2	3	4
I want you to turn down the music.	1	2	3	4
I'm trying to study.	1	2	3	4
Why don't you turn down the music?	1	2	3	4
Could you turn down the music?	1	2	3	4



4. You are studying in the library. You hear loud music on speaker coming from a distinguished professor sitting in front of you. You ask the professor to turn down the music and if you say...

**Rate the appropriateness:**

*1= not appropriate at all, 2=not so appropriate, 3=appropriate, 4=very appropriate*

Would you mind turning down the music?	1	2	3	4
I want you to turn down the music.	1	2	3	4
Turn down the music.	1	2	3	4
You'll turn down the music, won't you?	1	2	3	4
Why don't you turn down the music?	1	2	3	4
Could you turn down the music?	1	2	3	4
I'm trying to study.	1	2	3	4
Would you mind turning down the music?	1	2	3	4
I want you to turn down the music.	1	2	3	4

5. You are dining at a café with a friend whom you have known for five years. You are going to ask your friend to give you the salt and if you say...

**Rate the appropriateness:**

*1= not appropriate at all, 2=not so appropriate, 3=appropriate, 4=very appropriate*

Get me the salt.	1	2	3	4
You'll get me the salt, won't you?	1	2	3	4
Why don't you get me the salt?	1	2	3	4
Could you get me the salt?	1	2	3	4
Would you mind getting me the salt?	1	2	3	4
I want you to get me the salt.	1	2	3	4
I need to add flavor to this dish.	1	2	3	4
Get me the salt.	1	2	3	4
You'll get me the salt, won't you?	1	2	3	4

6. You are dining at a local restaurant. You are going to ask the waiter/waitress to give you the salt and if you say...

**Rate the appropriateness:**

*1= not appropriate at all, 2=not so appropriate, 3=appropriate, 4=very appropriate*

You'll get me the salt, won't you?	1	2	3	4
Why don't you get me the salt?	1	2	3	4
Get me the salt.	1	2	3	4
Could you get me the salt?	1	2	3	4
Would you mind getting me the salt?	1	2	3	4
I want you to get me the salt.	1	2	3	4
I need to add flavor to this dish.	1	2	3	4
You'll get me the salt, won't you?	1	2	3	4
Why don't you get me the salt?	1	2	3	4

7. You are dining at the university canteen. A distinguished professor is sitting next to you who happens to block the condiment holder. You are going to ask the professor to give you the salt and if you say...

**Rate the appropriateness:**

*1= not appropriate at all, 2=not so appropriate, 3=appropriate, 4=very appropriate*

Could you get me the salt?	1	2	3	4
----------------------------	---	---	---	---

Would you mind getting me the salt?	1	2	3	4
Get me the salt.	1	2	3	4
You'll get me the salt, won't you?	1	2	3	4
Why don't you get me the salt?	1	2	3	4
I want you to get me the salt.	1	2	3	4
I need to add flavor to this dish.	1	2	3	4
Could you get me the salt?	1	2	3	4
Would you mind getting me the salt?	1	2	3	4

8. You are having dinner with your grandparents at their home. You are going to ask your grandparent(s) to give you the salt and if you say...

**Rate the appropriateness:**

*1= not appropriate at all, 2=not so appropriate, 3=appropriate, 4=very appropriate*

I want you to get me the salt.	1	2	3	4
I need to add flavor to this dish.	1	2	3	4
Get me the salt.	1	2	3	4
You'll get me the salt, won't you?	1	2	3	4
Why don't you get me the salt?	1	2	3	4
Could you get me the salt?	1	2	3	4
Would you mind getting me the salt?	1	2	3	4
I want you to get me the salt.	1	2	3	4
I need to add flavor to this dish.	1	2	3	4