How rude! Teaching impoliteness in the second-language classroom

Gerrard Mugford

English language teaching tends to deal with the pleasanter side of second-language interaction such as making friends, relating experiences, and expressing likes/dislikes while ignoring such everyday communicative realities as rudeness, disrespect, and impoliteness. While neglected in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, impoliteness is likely to be experienced by second-language (L2) users in the target-language context or when interacting with other L2 users. By drawing on the experiences of 84 L2 users in Mexico, I identify impolite situations encountered in second-language interaction and discuss how L2 users can be prepared for such everyday communicative realities. In this paper, I argue that L2 users need to be given choices when confronted with rudeness so that they decide how they want to react.

Introduction

Even mere talk about impoliteness as a possible topic in EFL classrooms often causes surprise and consternation among teachers. Typical responses are: ‘I don’t think we should teach impoliteness!’ and ‘Students already know how to be rude’—in itself perhaps quite a rude thing to say. Teachers envisage their role as helping to build and cement relationships, create common understanding, and encourage intercultural tolerance. Within this framework, impoliteness can have no possible place in the EFL context and teachers cannot be party to a scheme which aims to promote impoliteness among their students.

However, I argue that impoliteness is part of everyday language use and L2 users need to be prepared to interact in impolite situations. Furthermore I argue that students have the communicative right to be rude if they want to, as long as they are aware of the consequences of their actions. Teachers need to take the lead by preparing learners to communicate in pleasant, not so pleasant, and even abusive interactional and transactional situations. Preparation involves helping learners identify potentially impolite practices and offering ways of dealing with impoliteness. The alternative is to continue to ignore such issues and promote a Pollyanna EFL world.

Defining impoliteness

Any attempt to define impoliteness in the EFL context is fraught with problems. First of all, impoliteness can be seen in terms of either breaking social norms or being deliberately offensive and disrespectful towards an interactant. This distinction is highlighted in Watts’ (2003: 21) identification of politic (‘that behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the
participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction') and politeness ('polite behaviour . . . behaviour beyond what is perceived to be appropriate to the ongoing social interaction . . .'). Impolite behaviour, therefore, may be seen in terms of non-politic inappropriate behaviour or non-polite behaviour which goes well beyond merely breaking socially-established norms and practices. In this paper, I shall be examining examples of non-polite behaviour as opposed to non-politic behaviour, which can be studied within a framework of normative L2 practices.

Secondly, interpretation and perceived seriousness of face-threatening acts (FTAs) (Brown and Levinson 1987) may differ between L1 and L2 interactants. For instance, an immigration officer saying ‘Give me all your papers . . . I said give me all your papers’ (example 13 below) may be interpreted as officious and overbearing or efficient and expeditious.

A third and related problem is that what constitutes impoliteness is ultimately a hearer perception and judgement and L2 users may perceive utterances to be impolite when there is no such intention on the part of the target-language (TL) user. For instance, one respondent in the study found ‘I have to tell you that I am very, very sceptical’ to be impolite.

The study of L2 impoliteness, therefore, involves identifying different understandings of FTAs, distinguishing degrees of impoliteness, and examining L2 hearer perceptions. In dealing with these issues, I adopt Culpeper’s definition:

\[
\text{Impoliteness comes about when (1): the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behaviour as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2). (2005: 38)}
\]

Such a definition embraces both speaker construction and hearer perceptions of impoliteness and allows EFL teachers to discuss intentionality and L1 vs. L2 judgements regarding impoliteness.

Impoliteness and ELT

While studies on teaching politeness in the EFL context (e.g. Takahashi 2005) have steadily grown in recent years, impoliteness appears to be largely ignored. However, outside EFL, impoliteness has become a major topic of inquiry (e.g. Culpeper op. cit. and Watts op. cit.).

Research objectives and methodology

In this paper, I ask two questions regarding impoliteness and L2 learning and use:

1. What kind of impolite situations are L2 users exposed to?
2. Do language teachers prepare learners to react in impolite situations?

Conducting a needs or wants analysis in order to answer the first question suggests, perhaps wrongly, that L2 users need to know how to be impolite. However, an emic approach—looking at impoliteness from the viewpoint of L2 users—provides instances of L2 impoliteness that may be more relevant for EFL classrooms. Therefore, I distributed 110 questionnaires (written in Spanish) to L2 users in Guadalajara, Mexico. Participants were asked to recall and reconstruct target-language encounters involving impoliteness. The recall-and-reconstruct approach is open to the charge that interviewees...
may be prone to mis-remembering. I tried to anticipate this problem by asking the interviewees, firstly, if they remembered the incident and secondly if they remembered the details. (See Appendix.) I received 50 replies. All the L2 users—20 men and 30 women—are Mexican with a proficient level of English. They are either undergraduate students or working professionals between 18 and 60 years old. I subsequently conducted follow-up interviews in order to gain more contextual information from the informants.

To answer the second question and examine approaches to teaching impoliteness and rudeness, I also distributed 34 questionnaires to teachers and received 34 replies. The teachers—all Mexicans—teach in the language departments at one of three universities in Guadalajara: one public and two private. They are all qualified, mostly with BAs and have a proficient level of English. The teachers—11 men and 23 women—are between 20 years and 60 years old.

To provide a framework for trying to understand L2 perceptions of impoliteness, I will use the following categories based on the work of Culpeper (op. cit.) and Spencer-Oatey (2000):

- **Individual impoliteness**—impoliteness which the hearer perceives as a personal attack.
- **Social impoliteness**—impoliteness which the hearer perceives as an attack on her/his social role.
- **Cultural impoliteness**—impoliteness which the hearer perceives as an attack on her/his ethnic group.
- **Banter**—impoliteness which reflects the playful use of impolite language.

These categories allow me to differentiate between impoliteness at a personal level (i.e. *individual impoliteness*) which may be unique and opportunistic to a given occasion and *social and cultural impoliteness* which may be more systematic and recurring. The inclusion of banter offers a light-hearted way of dealing with impoliteness and offers a linguistic resource which L2 speakers can employ to try to tone down perceived impoliteness. However, banter is a cooperative activity between speaker and hearer and, if not appreciated for what it is, it can be perceived as aggressive.

**Data analysis: L2 perceptions of impoliteness**

Both L2 users and teachers were asked to recall incidents of impoliteness and explain why they considered them to be impolite; they were not asked to categorize impoliteness. Teachers were asked additional questions regarding their own ability to be impolite, whether they considered impoliteness should be ‘taught’ in the EFL classroom and finally whether they themselves actually ‘taught’ impoliteness. (See Appendix.)

**Exposure to impoliteness**

Respondents did not seem to have much difficulty in recalling instances of impoliteness: 28 L2 users and 31 teachers said that they had experienced impoliteness in L2 contexts. While 22 L2 users and three teachers said that they had not experienced impoliteness, there is also the possibility that these respondents may not have been aware of the use of impoliteness.
Individual impoliteness
There were 13 examples of individual impoliteness which often reflect social interaction between strangers, acquaintances, or friends:

1. **Stranger** Move, move. (*L2 user in the way when walking along the pavement*)
2. **Acquaintance** I also have things to do and besides you have 24 hours in which to do them.
3. **Friend** ‘That was a stupid remark.’ (*boyfriend/girlfriend conversation*)

L2 users reported that the unexpected contextual spontaneity of the remarks left them unable to reply. While these examples of impoliteness at an individual level seem to reflect the use of pre-existing language patterns e.g. ‘I have ____ to do’ (‘a lot’, ‘things’, ‘work’, etc.) and ‘That was a _____ remark’ (‘clever’, ‘stupid’, ‘strange’, etc.), context plays an important role in identifying impolite language use. Examples 1, 2, and 3 may not have been considered impolite in a friendly non-face-threatening environment e.g. intimate talk between siblings. Furthermore, L2 users’ proficiency plays an important role in determining perceptions of impoliteness. For instance, ‘That was a stupid remark’ (example 3) may appear to be extremely impolite to a Mexican EFL user because the Spanish ‘estúpido’ has a much stronger connotation than the English ‘stupid’.

Situational examples of impoliteness were also found in the data where L2 users did not respond:

4. **Teacher** Shut up. (*teacher trying to control students*)
5. **Colleague** Stop bothering me I have to get back to work. (*small talk*)
6. **Classmate** It’s not your business. (*small talk*)

These utterances demonstrate directive speech acts i.e. commanding and instructing. The use of imperative in examples 4 and 5 and the declarative in example 6 indicate that the L1 speaker has a high expectation that the L2 addressee will not respond but rather adhere to the directive. Furthermore, a lack of response to these remarks may reflect the L2 user’s self-perceived powerlessness in transactional situations e.g. dealing with teachers and work colleagues.

In the data, individual impoliteness is marked by a lack of response. The L2 users said that they felt confused, shocked, and at a loss for words even though 32 second-language users and 22 teachers felt that they knew how to be rude in English. Such a finding supports arguments that students and teachers need help in extending their functional competence in order to cope with L2 impoliteness.

Social impoliteness
Students and teachers offered 17 examples in this category. With social rudeness, L2 users perceive TL speakers as rejecting their social identity or treating them as an incompetent member of society.

7. **Passer-by** (*L1 user to charity worker—L2 user*) I only donate to the US. So don’t bother Americans.
8. **Shop assistant** (*L1 user*) Can’t you see it is right behind you?
   **Customer** (*L2 user*) Thank you so much for your help, sir.
Shop assistant (to L2 user buying a Gameboy) In that case you just say machine not game.

Bus driver You have to pay attention.
Passenger (L2 user) Oh I didn’t think it was my bus.

In example 7, the passer-by denies the L2 user the right to collect for charity even though he was collecting for an ‘American’ cause. In examples 8, 9, and 10, L2 users are treated as incompetent members of society who cannot identify / find the goods they are looking for or find the right bus. At the same time, L2 users trying to make a purchase and grappling with the L2 may be overstretched in also trying to respond to impoliteness from a shop assistant (examples 8 and 9).

The likelihood of the occurrence of impoliteness varies according to context; the shops and public transport may not be considered to be especially impolite environments. However, the data did reveal Immigration to be especially face-threatening:

Immigration official Wait! You can’t do that? Where’s your letter?

Immigration official Either get inside or go to the next line.
L2 user I’m looking for something.

Immigration official Lady move. Go the next line. Lady I’m telling you for the last time.

Immigration official Give me all your papers . . . I said give me all your papers.

To visit the TL country, L2 users need to go through Customs and Immigration and experience potentially face-threatening questions and commands. While immigration officials may see themselves as only carrying out their duty as they deal with thousands of tourists and immigrants a day, their instructions may appear to be snappy and abrupt to L2 users. Such issues and perceptions of impoliteness need to be dealt with in the EFL classroom.

In contrast to incidents reflecting individual impoliteness, L2 users often responded to FTAs. Strategies for dealing for social impoliteness include excessive politeness (example 8: ‘Thank you so much for your help, sir’) and justification (example 10: ‘Oh I didn’t think it was my bus’, and example 12: ‘I’m looking for something’).

Cultural impoliteness
While there were only six examples of cultural impoliteness, its significance lies in the extreme aggressiveness demonstrated towards the L2 user. Cultural impoliteness attacks the L2 user by accusing her of being backward and inferior and often through uttering racist remarks:

L1 user Do you have electricity in Mexico? (underdevelopment)
L2 user We are behind but not that much.

Only trash comes from Mexico. (inferiority)

I don’t want my son eating tortillas and beans. (racism)

Stupid black Mexican. (racism)

Confronted by such blatant FTAs, the L2 users said that they were usually at a loss for words with only one respondent trying to counteract the allegation

How rude! Teaching impoliteness 379
of Mexico being underdeveloped: ‘We are behind but not that much’. Examples 15, 16, and 17 can be seen as examples of aggravated impoliteness (Rudanko 2006) where impoliteness is overtly hostile, one-sided, and the insulter does not even expect the insulted party to take action to possibly rectify the situation. The motivation behind impoliteness is to insult. There is little that the L2 user can do to redress the issue.

Banter

While there were only three examples, banter reflects an amusing way of dealing with impoliteness.

18 Matching lexical stems  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>L1 user</th>
<th>L2 user</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where’s the hat?</td>
<td>Where are the horns?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19 Request for clarification  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>L1 user</th>
<th>L2 user</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Get a life!</td>
<td>So tell me, how’s yours?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20 Matching labels  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>L1 user</th>
<th>L2 user</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>beaner</td>
<td>gringo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Banter involves L2 users matching an impolite remark with a retort. Example 18 deals with stereotypical notions as the L2 user was asked by a Dane where his hat was—a reference to the large, wide brimmed Mexican sombrero. In reply, the L2 user asked the Dane where his horns were—a reference to the Viking helmet. In example 19, the L2 user plays with language after being told to ‘get a life’ and asks the other interactant how is his own. Example 20 reflects the trading of racist insults with the L2 user responding to ‘beaner’—a reference to Mexicans supposedly eating a lot of beans—with ‘gringo’.

Teachers and impoliteness

Regarding their own ability to be impolite, 23 teachers felt that they knew how to be impolite in the target language, 10 respondents said that they did not and one teacher said that she was not sure.

As to whether impoliteness should be taught in the EFL classroom, 20 teachers said yes, 13 said no and again one was not sure. Among those in favour of teaching impoliteness, seven teachers said that learners needed to be able to defend themselves, another seven said that impoliteness reflected appropriate language use, and four teachers said that learners needed to be able to actively identify the use of impoliteness.

Among those arguing against teaching impoliteness, four teachers said that L2 users should not engage in impolite practices although they conceded that learners needed to identify such practices. Other teachers said that it was not their job to teach impoliteness, it was too difficult, or teaching impoliteness promotes conflict.

When it actually comes to teaching impoliteness, only five teachers said they taught impoliteness in their classroom. They approached the teaching of impoliteness through helping learners confront potentially impolite situations and comparing Spanish-language and English-language impolite practices.

Discussion

These examples of impoliteness show that world of L2 is not always a polite and respectful one. L2 users must be prepared to be involved in impolite
and rude, as well as congenial and social interaction. While the learners’
language level will be of paramount importance, L2 students, at the very
least, should be aware of impoliteness in the target language. In the
classroom, teachers can discuss perceptions of impoliteness in terms of
intentionality, speaker purpose, and level of aggressiveness.

The data provide a framework through which to examine different types
of impoliteness and the ways through which interactants dealt with or
failed to respond to impoliteness. In the majority of cases, there was no
response as L2 users felt they were often in powerless positions to reply e.g.
in teacher-student or immigration officer-tourist relationships. While
assessment of powerlessness is an individual one, EFL teachers may at least
be able to give L2 users choices with regard to how they want to react under
such circumstances. Such choices include answering back with excess
politeness (example 8), trying to offer an explanation (examples 10 and 12),
and engaging in banter (examples 18, 19, and 20).

Secondly, the categories offer a focused way to examine impoliteness in
order to encourage L2 users not to label members of a whole society as
impolite. For example, it is all too easy to categorize Americans as ‘offensive’
or the British as ‘standoffish’. An impoliteness framework allows learners
to examine specific cases of impoliteness and study critical incidents
where impoliteness is perceived to occur. Although I have argued that
impoliteness is a hearer perception, this does not mean that the speaker,
as perhaps in the case of the immigration officers in examples 11, 12, and
13, intended to be impolite. Therefore, learners need to be given the
opportunity of studying target-language perceptions of impoliteness.

Thirdly, impoliteness data allow learners to examine what is and what is
not possible to achieve or rectify in an impolite situation. For instance,
examples 15, 16, and 17 of aggravated impoliteness may indicate that there
is little L2 users can do to counteract the impolite remarks. However, in
social impoliteness, L2 users may want to react to impoliteness as seen in
examples 8, 10, and 12, i.e. through excess politeness or justifying one’s
behaviour.

Such data allow the L2 learner to consider how other L2 users have reacted
on previous occasions to impoliteness. The L2 learner can consider how
she might want to respond in such a context. Furthermore, analysing the
experiences of other L2 users allows L2 learners to think about impoliteness
in the non-threatening environment of the EFL classroom rather than
having to make spontaneous and impulsive decisions as they confront
impoliteness in TL contexts.

The data reveal that teachers are just as exposed to rudeness as their
students: 31 teachers had experienced rudeness. However, only five teachers
tackled the problem of rudeness in the classroom. By ignoring rudeness,
teachers may be seen as preparing their students only for ‘positive’ L2
encounters. On the other hand, the fact that 20 teachers think that
impoliteness should be taught (but only five teach it) gives credibility to the
argument that it is extremely difficult to deal with this area in the L2
classroom.

How rude! Teaching impoliteness
EFL teachers can help L2 students identify the ‘content’ of impolite remarks. The data revealed that in 20 cases L2 users knew that the target-language speaker was being impolite but did not understand the content of the impolite comment. This finding further reinforces the argument that students need help in extending their functional competence in order to deal with L2 impoliteness. However, first of all, teachers need to be able to be impolite themselves: ten teachers felt that they did not know how to be impolite in the TL. Therefore, there may be a role for teacher training programmes in both developing an awareness of FTAs and offering strategies for dealing with L2 impoliteness.

Secondly, teachers need to reconsider whether they should ‘teach’ impoliteness: the questionnaire results revealed that 13 teachers did not think impoliteness should be taught compared to 20 teachers who did. The reasons for not teaching impoliteness (e.g. there is only a ‘passive’ requirement to identify it or it is not the teacher’s job to teach it) need to be examined in the light of the actual examples offered in this paper since pedagogical intervention may have better prepared the L2 users to have dealt with impolite situations.

The five teachers who said that they dealt with impoliteness in the classroom employ situational and comparative (Spanish-language/English-language) approaches. However, to prepare L2 users for unexpected situations, teachers can consider what impoliteness involves in terms of declarative knowledge and/or procedural knowledge. Declarative knowledge gives the language learner a ‘database’ of language use and a ‘programme’ for applying the data in terms of procedures and practices (Johnson 1996). Procedural knowledge involves the ability to activate the knowledge of interactional patterns, practices, and procedures in instances of actual use. For instance, declaratively, L2 users need to be able to identify when an interlocutor is being impolite or being impolite in a playful way and, procedurally, they need to avoid being inadvertently impolite, perhaps through lack of politeness.

Thirdly, impoliteness reflects social judgements; teachers need to discuss such judgements with students within Watts’ politic and polite framework, i.e. impoliteness which reflects inappropriate behaviour and impoliteness which goes beyond inappropriate behaviour. Furthermore, by examining affective and contextual factors that contribute to perceptions of impoliteness, learners can contrast their own and TL attitudes, values, and experiences.

Finally, teachers can modify existing textbook exercises that reflect polite interaction and demonstrate how impoliteness can sometimes surface (e.g. in Immigration or at Customs) and discuss possible ways of dealing with impoliteness.

Conclusions

I argue that L2 users have the right to be impolite if they want to: they should be able to express themselves in the way they want to while understanding the consequences of their actions. If teaching truly aims to promote L2 communication, L2 users must have all the communicative resources at their command and that includes the knowledge and ability to be impolite.
If teachers do not teach impoliteness, L2 users may not be able to develop their own resources and this may lead to a sense of overall frustration with the L2 as L2 users are not able to express themselves appropriately in difficult situations (personal communication: Norberto Ramirez).

Furthermore, by not teaching impoliteness, teachers are potentially allowing learners to be dominated by TL users. Language teachers are playing a part in that domination. They should at least help learners recognize instances of impoliteness and offer choices when dealing with impoliteness. Teachers should not limit a student’s communicative ability just because they, the teachers, think that L2 use is all about conforming, being ‘nice’ and convivial all of the time.

This study can be criticized for drawing conclusions from limited data. However, I am not presenting a quantitative study. Rather, I am trying to detect a problem (i.e. impoliteness in L2) and offering a possible solution (i.e. the need to raise both teacher and student awareness). Given that 59 of the 84 respondents said that they had experienced some form of impoliteness, I would argue that this is a problem that deserves much more attention.

Final revised version received May 2007

References

The author
Gerrard Mugford has been involved in language teaching and teacher education in Mexico for 17 years. He has published mainly in the areas of interpersonal language use, second-language politeness, and critical discourse analysis. He is currently working at the Modern Languages Department, Universidad de Guadalajara, Mexico. He holds a PhD from the Institute of Education, University of London.
Email: g_mugford@yahoo.com

Appendix
This is an English-language translation of the questions in the student survey:

1. Can you remember an occasion when you were talking in English and you were spoken to in a rude manner? (Yes/No? Do you remember exactly what was said?)
2. Why do you consider that the phrases or words used on that occasion were rude?
3. Do you think that rudeness is the same in English and Spanish?
4. Do you think that there are differences in how rudeness is expressed in English and Spanish?
5. Do you think that you are able to speak rudely in English? (Yes/No)
6 If you answered no to question No 5, would you like to be able to have the ability to be rude in English? Explain your answer.

7 Do you have any comment to make about any aspect of English that has not been covered in the previous questions?

Additional questions for teachers

1 Do you think that as an English-language teacher you should give your students the linguistic resources so that they can be rude in English? (Yes/No. Give reasons for your answer.)

2 Do you teach your students to be rude in English? (Yes/No. Give reasons for your answer.)

3 Which of the following statements do you identify more with:
   a (Im)politeness should be taught in terms of grammar structures, vocabulary, and communicative functions.
   b L2 students should study (im)politeness in a second language by identifying similarities, differences, and contrasts with his/her L1.
   c Teachers should provide students with a range of resources so that he/she has the option of expressing him/herself politely or impolitely in the second language.