

Impoliteness in Administrative Staff - Student interaction in Delta State Polytechnics, Nigeria.

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Abstract

Impoliteness is a pervasive issue in many social contexts: understanding its dynamics and consequences can inform strategies for improvement in various settings hence, this study examined impoliteness in Face-to-Face interaction of administrative staff and students in Delta State polytechnics. Data for the study was collected through direct observation and interviews. The research investigated cases of impolite interaction between administrative staff and students of Delta state Polytechnics. Grounded on Spencer-Oatey's (2008) Rapport Management Theory, the study employs the content analysis method to qualitative research. The finding reveals significant differences in impoliteness perceptions between staff and students, with students experiencing more impoliteness in academic contexts. The study recommended strategies for promoting politeness and respect in interaction in the polytechnics.

Keywords: Impoliteness, Rapport management, academic, polytechnic, pervasive

Introduction

Impoliteness constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon characterized by a variety of verbal (e.g., insults, sarcasm) and nonverbal (e.g., tone, body language) strategies. These strategies which often defy social expectations wield considerable effect over broader learning environment hence it becomes imperative to understand how the actors precisely, the administrative staff and student, in the educational field projects the kinds of linguistic resources used in (mis)managing interpersonal relations. that occur between them in different context and language situation.

In academic settings, impoliteness can impact student satisfaction, motivation, and learning outcomes (Hirst, 2009). Udo and Ugochukwu (2024) notes that the immediate consequence of impoliteness on classroom dynamics are profound and multifaceted as they act as impediment to effective communication. Damage face, violation of social expectation and misalignment are forms of impoliteness which may deteriorate interpersonal relations. Kecskes (2017) points that sarcasm coupled with negative non-verbal cues contributes to the creation of a toxic atmosphere that erodes the trust and respect pivotal for fostering a positive learning environment.

It is observed that several research explored the role of power dynamics in impoliteness, with those in positions of authority often engaging in impolite behavior (Thompson, 2008). Power relations are observed in every social life. These are most times expressed through language. Gunther (1990) put in these words "language is entwined with social power in a number of ways: it indexes power: expresses power" and, language is involved whenever there is contention over and challenge to power". Power reflects the perceived social distance between interlocutors. In educational discourse, administrative staff are likely to be more impolite in Face-Face interaction with students because of the institutional power within their control. However, students may also exhibit impoliteness towards staff, often as a form of resistance or protest (Watts, 2003). It is believed that the study of impoliteness is necessary because it is an important social phenomenon, and "it is highly salient in public life" (Culpeper 2013: 2). Therefore, our current study is primarily an attempt to examine this aspect of language in Delta state polytechnics.

Delta State is located in the South-South region of Nigeria, is known for its strong emphasis on technical and vocational education. Polytechnics in the state play a vital role in providing students with practical and professional skills needed for employment and entrepreneurship. These institutions focus on applied sciences, engineering, technology, business studies, and other technical disciplines to support industrial and economic development. Delta State is home to several polytechnics, including state-owned and private institutions. Some of the notable ones include: Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku, Delta State Polytechnic, Otefe-Oghara, Delta State Polytechnic, Ozoro (Now Delta State University of Science and Technology, Ozoro), Petroleum Training Institute (PTI), Effurun, Grace Polytechnic, Oghara (Private), All of these polytechnics in Delta State play a crucial role in providing Technical and Vocational Education: Training students in practical and industry-relevant skills. Enhancing Employment Opportunities: Equipping graduates with the skills needed to secure jobs or start their own businesses. Supporting Economic Growth: Producing skilled manpower for industries such as oil and gas, construction, manufacturing, and technology. Bridging the Skills Gap: Addressing the shortage of technical expertise in various fields. Polytechnics is an academic area that needs adequate attention.

Impoliteness in academic settings has received increasing attention in recent years (Bousfield, 2008; Locher & Watts, 2005). Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987). These studies provides a framework for understanding impoliteness as a violation of social norms and expectations. Culpeper whose works have greatly influenced impoliteness studies contends that impoliteness is far beyond violation of social norm. Rather, it is a strategic communicative act that is used to attack interlocutors face .Spencers- Oatey (2008) identifies three kinds of face: quality face, relational face and social identity. Quality face is concerned with individual self- esteem arising from her/her claim to be possessor of positive qualities (competence, abilities, appearance etc). on whose basis he or she is favorably evaluated by others. Relational face has to do with the self in relationship with others. The individual statues as a participant in a given interaction, including “role rights and obligations”. Social identity relates to self as a member of a group , such as: family, ethnic religion, institution, religion or national. Social identity face attack threatens a person’s social identity/ roles or his/her sense of public worth. Spencer-Oatey (2011) holds that rapport management strategies are significant in managing discourse and interpersonal relations. Ultimately, the present research through its’ aim to examine the manifestation of impoliteness in interaction between administrative staff and students in Delta State polytechnics highlight the need of prioritizing respect, empathy, and effective communication in educational institutional interaction. The dynamics of impoliteness in administrative staff -student interaction in Delta State polytechnics requires an in-dept examination to understand how impoliteness maintain, promote and impede social relations. The paucity of focus on rapport management strategies in Face-to Face Interaction between administrative staff and students in Delta state polytechnics is the drive for this study.

Research Question

1. What are the most common forms of impoliteness among administrative staff and students in Delta State polytechnics?
2. How does impoliteness affect student satisfaction and academic performance?
3. What strategies can polytechnics implement to reduce impoliteness and promote a positive learning environment?

Literature Review

Educational discourse has sparked off quite a number of scholarly works. These studies have focused on different aspects of language use by undergraduate students in Nigeria tertiary institutions. These aspects include: use of Pidgin, slang, error analysis and politeness. Some selected studies on these aspects will be reviewed.

Abdullahi-Idiagbon (2007) undertakes a sociolinguistics study of the use of Nigeria Pidgin on Nigeria federal campuses, namely: Bayero University, Kano (BUK) and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaira (ABU), in the North, University of Lagos, Lagos (UNILAG) and University of Ibadan, Ibadan (UI) in the West; Imo State University, Owerri (IMSU) and University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) in the south East. The study is carried out with a view to establish the popularity of Pidgin among the Nigerian students of the selected schools. A finding from the study showed that speaking of variety of Pidgin in the institutions is a veritable way of demonstrating comradeship and solidarity among students of the Nigerian higher institutions of learning. The study found that in Nigeria campuses Pidgin expressions are commonly used to perform four functions which are: to herald musical concert of interest within or outside campuses; to talk about ladies or ladies discussing their male friends; to express basic domestic needs like eating, clothing and inter personal private discussion. It concludes that the process of forming Pidgin is code mixing and borrowing from indigenous languages.

Babatunde and Adedimeji (2008) examined the dynamics of politeness as a pragmatic concept and highlights how it operates in Nigeria universities in Ilorin community. Since politeness determines and influences the nature of effectiveness of conversations in universities, the study deemed it necessary to investigate its deployment to students. Unlike Babatunde and Adedimeji (2008) who studied only students’ conversation in one university in Northern Nigeria. The present study analyzed impoliteness in Fae-to-Face interaction between administrative staff and students in three state-owned polytechnics in Delta state as ‘Face’ is a very important aspect of impoliteness studies. Spencer-Oatey (2000) porports that attacks targeting quality face are typically directed against the opponent’s intelligence or mental capacity while those that target relational face focus on a denial of their social rights (personal/social expectations).

Udoh and Ugochukwu (2024) examined the manifestation of impoliteness in classroom discourse. They draw data from natural occurring speech situation of lecturer speech encounter. Although, the present study uses natural occurring speech but not that of lecturers but of administrative staff. In various administrative units but not in the classroom. The duo study was grounded on Culpeper’s Impoliteness framework and found that lecturers utilize bald on record and negative impoliteness. This differs from the present study which is anchored on rapport

management strategy. No doubt, impoliteness strategies and how the addressees respond to such impoliteness have highlighted the importance of respectful communication in academic settings. To further enrich the body of literature available in educational impoliteness, the study attempted an examination of impoliteness in the three state-owned polytechnics in Delta state as context contributes to our understanding of impoliteness

2. Theoretical insights

The study is anchored on Spencer-Oatey's (2008) Rapport Management Model. She purports that rapport refers to the relative harmony and smoothness of relations between people and introduces the term rapport management which refers to the management (or mismanagement) of relations between people.

Spencer-Oatey (2008: 14) opines that sociality rights and obligations deal with "social expectancies and reflect peoples concerns over fairness, consideration and behavioural appropriateness. Interactional goals focus on the "specific tasks and/or relational goals that people may have when they interact with each other. The implication is that there are three main ways in which rapport can be threatened and these include face-threatening behaviour, rights-threatening/obligation-omission behaviour and goal-threatening behaviour. A face-threatening behaviour is an act which makes the addressee lose 'face' or credibility such as criticisms or oppositions (Spencer-Oatey 2008). A rights-threatening behaviour is an act that infringes on a person's sense of social entitlements which could lead to annoyance or anger. An example could be a case of a student who feels offended when s/he feels angry that his/ her project work has not been read by the supervisor. A goal-threatening behaviour is an act performed by another person which impedes the actions that another participant wants to achieve such as a situation in which a security man may stop a protester from entering a particular building. Thus, Spencer-Oatey (2011:3567) states that rapport management deals with the interlocutors' assessments of the "affective quality they experience in their relations with others.

Spencer-Oatey (2008) suggests that there are four types of rapport orientation which may influence interactants use of rapport management strategies. These include rapport enhancement, rapport maintenance, rapport neglect and rapport challenge orientations. Spencer-Oatey (2008:32) states that rapport enhancement orientation is "a desire to strengthen or boost harmonious relations" between interactants while rapport maintenance orientation is "a desire to maintain or protect harmonious relations between interlocutors." She equally adds that rapport neglect orientation indicates "a lack of interests in the quality of relations" between interactants while rapport challenge orientation signifies "a desire to challenge or impair harmonious relations" between the interlocutors. Spencer-Oatey's Rapport Management Model (2008) is appropriate for its treatment of face mis(management)

Methodology and Design

The study involved 200 participants, comprising 150 students and 50 administrative staff in Delta state Polytechnic, Ogwashi-uku, Delta state Polytechnic, Ozoro (Now Delta State University of Science and Technology, Ozoro), Delta state Polytechnic, Ofoefe-Oghara, Nigeria in 2022 and 2023. Data was gathered through interviews and direct observation. Through direct observations the researcher took field notes on verbal impoliteness of staff interaction with students at selected administrative offices. The departments include: finance departments, registration units, examination and records departments of the three polytechnics examined. The selection of area is intended for a more focused academic outing.

The data was read several times to identify the instances of impoliteness. The ones with greater impolite UTTERANCES were isolated for further examination. Data was anonymized and kept confidential to protect participants' identities. The data were compiled and were examined for the linguistic impoliteness. The analysis was based on Spencer Oatey (2008) rapport management theory.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Impoliteness in Face-to-Face Interaction between Administrative Staff and Students

Presented and analysed below are 20 cases of impoliteness, categorized under these three aspects:

Category 1: Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) – Damage to a Student's Social Image

Blunt Dismissal:

Case: A student asks for clarification about a deadline, and the staff member replies, "I already told you. Do you not listen?"

Analysis: This threatens the student's positive face (self-worth) by implying they are inattentive.

Sarcastic Response:

Case: A student expresses confusion about a requirement, and the administrator replies, "Wow, you're the only one who doesn't get it!"

Analysis: Undermines the student's self-esteem (face attack) through mock politeness.

Public Humiliation:

Case: A student asks about a missing document, and the administrator loudly says, "Didn't you read the instructions? It's all there!" in front of others.

Analysis: These damages face needs by embarrassing the student.

Aggressive Tone:

Case: A student politely asks for assistance, and the staff member replies in a harsh tone, "I don't have time for this!"

Analysis: The rudeness and tone create face-threatening behavior, making the student feel devalued.

Ignoring a Greeting:

Case: A student enters an office and says, "Good morning," but the administrator doesn't respond and instead stares at their screen.

Analysis: Withholding politeness damages face rapport and signals social rejection.

Patronizing Language:

Case: A student asks about financial aid, and the administrator responds, "Oh sweetie, you should have planned better."

Analysis: The use of patronizing terms infantilizes the student, threatening their face autonomy.

Unnecessary Personal Comment:

Case: A staff member tells a student, "Maybe if you dressed more professionally, people would take you seriously."

Analysis: Unwarranted judgment damages the student's identity and social rapport.

Category 2: Sociality Rights & Obligations – Violations of Expected Respect & Fairness

Refusing to Make Eye Contact:

Case: A student asks a question, but the administrator keeps looking at their phone and barely acknowledges them.

Analysis: Signals disrespect and violates social interactional norms.

Speaking Over the Student:

Case: A student tries to explain their issue, but the administrator repeatedly interrupts with, "I know, I know."

Analysis: This disrupts the student's right to be heard, undermining their social entitlement.

Making a Student Wait Without Explanation:

Case: A student waits in line, and when they reach the desk, the administrator walks away without acknowledgment.

Analysis: Creates a sense of institutional impoliteness by disregarding the student's time.

Blaming the Student Without Investigation:

Case: A student claims their file is missing, and the staff member responds, "That's your fault, not ours."

Analysis: Violates fairness expectations by assuming the student is at fault.

Ignoring a Direct Question:

Case: A student asks, "Where do I submit this form?" but the administrator changes the topic without answering.

Analysis: Fails to uphold the basic social obligation of providing help.

Lack of Empathy for Personal Issues:

Case: A student explains they missed a deadline due to illness, and the administrator replies, "That's not my problem."

Analysis: Shows zero concern for social relationships, damaging rapport.

Inconsistent Treatment of Students:

Case: One student receives friendly assistance, while another with the same issue is dismissed with "Figure it out yourself."

Analysis: Violates expectations of fairness and social equity.

Category 3: Interactional Goal Incongruence – Misalignment of Expectations

Refusing to Clarify a Procedure:

Case: A student asks how to apply for a scholarship, and the administrator replies, "Go check the website," without further explanation.

Analysis: Dismisses the student's interactional goal of seeking guidance.

Deliberate Vagueness:

Case: A student asks when their appeal will be reviewed, and the administrator vaguely replies, "Eventually."

Analysis: Creates frustration and uncertainty, leading to a breakdown in rapport.

Withholding Essential Information:

Case: A student asks if a document is necessary, and the administrator says, "You'll find out," instead of answering.

Analysis: Creates deliberate confusion, frustrating the student's goal of clarity.

Abruptly Ending a Conversation:

Case: A student is mid-sentence when the administrator says, "We're done here," and walks away.

Analysis: Signals interactional power imbalance, damaging rapport.

Refusing to Escalate a Complaint:

Case: A student asks to speak to a higher official, and the administrator says, "No one else will help you, so don't bother."

Analysis: Blocks the student's right to pursue resolution, violating their expectations.

Unclear and Confusing Instructions:

Case: A student follows staff instructions, only to be told later they did it wrong. The administrator says, "Not my problem if you misunderstood."

Analysis: Creates interactional misalignment by failing to provide clarity.

Moreso, from the interview data gathered at the registration and financial unit majority of the student complained that staff do not offer quick response. To their enquiry, these delays further results in students frustration. Staff on their part, complained of student impatient, claiming that everyone cannot get attention at same time. Here is institutional barriers. Spencer-Oatey's social rights and obligations

From the foregoing one identify forms of impoliteness such as: damages face (students feel belittled, ignored, or humiliated). Violation of social expectations (students expect fairness and respect). interactional misalignment (staff and students have different communication goals).

Discussion

The findings of this study have significant implications for our understanding of impoliteness in academic settings. The prevalence of impoliteness in interactions between administrative staff and students at Delta State Polytechnics which manifest in form of showing zero concern for social relationship, unclear and confusing instruction, vagueness, delayed responses can create tension, reduce efficiency, and negatively impact the student experience. The power dynamics at play in these interactions, with staff often holding positions of authority, can exacerbate the impact of impoliteness on students. Furthermore, the study's results suggest that impoliteness can have far-reaching consequences, affecting not only individual relationships but also the broader institutional culture. The emotional impact of impoliteness on students, including feelings of disrespect and frustration, can lead to decreased motivation, engagement, and overall well-being.

The results of this study have significant implications for academic institutions, highlighting the need for institutions to address this issue. By addressing impoliteness and promoting positive interactions, civility and respect institutions can enhance student experiences, academic success, and overall well-being. Furthermore, this research has demonstrated the importance of considering the perspectives of both staff and students in understanding impoliteness in academic settings.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on impoliteness in academic settings, providing valuable insights into the Nigerian context.

Recommendations

To address the issues highlighted in this study, institutions should establish training programs for staff on effective communication and conflict resolution. Additionally, student support services should be enhanced to address the emotional impact of impoliteness. Policies promoting respectful communication should be developed and enforced, with clear consequences for non-compliance.

By implementing these recommendations, institutions can foster a more positive and supportive environment, promoting academic success and overall well-being. Moreover, this research highlights the importance of prioritizing respectful communication and empathy in all interactions, extending beyond academic settings to promote a more civil and inclusive society.

Future research should continue to explore the complexities of impoliteness, examining its impact on different stakeholders and contexts. By prioritizing research into impoliteness, we can work towards creating a more respectful and inclusive environment for all.

Conclusion

This research has provided a comprehensive examination of the manifestation of impoliteness in interactions between administrative staff and students in Delta State polytechnics. The findings have revealed a significant prevalence of impoliteness with students experiencing more frequent and severe instances than staff. The study has identified power dynamics, communication breakdown, and emotional impact as key themes in these interactions and have suggested ways in which the institutions can address the issue of impoliteness. The findings and recommendations can inform strategies for improvement in various social contexts, promoting a more civil and inclusive society. The study's results also underscore the need for ongoing research into the complexities of impoliteness, examining its impact on different stakeholders and context

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