Communication and Core Conditions in Rapport Building: A Case Study

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Abstract

The main aim of this article is to show how difficulties in communication across cultural boundaries can be addressed effectively by taking account of the complex interplay between individual, culture-specific and universal aspects of social interaction. The article considers an unconventional, creative and effective approach to dealing with a critical incident situation that arose in an intercultural EFL classroom. The description and analysis of the problem situation draw on Carl Rogers' (see Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1989) core conditions for facilitative educational practice and the key concepts of Relevance-theoretic pragmatics (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995), showing how the mechanisms of communication can be used in building positive rapport between the interactants as whole integrated individuals.

Keywords

core conditions – relevance – rapport – politeness – face

1   Introduction

In this article we make a case for the view that effective rapport management depends on the interactants' participation in social interaction as authentic fully integrated persons.[1] Our main aim is to show how difficulties in communication across cultural boundaries can be addressed effectively by taking account of the complex interplay between individual, culture-specific and universal aspects of social interaction. The first part of the article describes a naturally occurring critical incident situation of communication between the students and their teacher in an EFL classroom in the UK. The article has two broad aims: (a) to provide insight into creative, unconventional, ways of dealing effectively with rapport management in difficult circumstances and (b) to explore how the cognitive framework for explaining communication provided by Relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995) can be used to describe and explain some pertinent aspects of naturally occurring communication situations in which the rapport between the participants is at stake. The relevance of our analysis and conclusions is underscored by the responses from ten TEFL professionals whom we asked to comment on the problem situation. With one exception, these responses showed a strong preference for dealing with rapport management difficulties by resorting to formal institutional measures, showing little or no regard for the likely shortcomings of this approach. Our interpretation of the teacher's creative and successful intervention in the problem situation draws mainly on Carl Roger's views about the quality of the relationship between the participants in communication developed within his person-centred model of psychotherapy, whose implications for education Rogers (in Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1989) himself explored in some detail, and we make a case for the view that the ten TEFL professionals' suggestions about the best way to deal with the problem situation were less creative and almost certainly would have been less effective than the teacher's. The second part of the article provides a pragmatic Relevance-theoretic (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995) account of the critical incident, which looks at the effectiveness of the teacher's strategic decisions in dealing with the problem in the context of the cognitive mechanisms of communication. An implication of this discussion, considered briefly in the final part of the paper, is that politeness phenomena can be explained within the Relevance framework without invoking mitigation of positive and negative face-threats and without introducing any special norms or principles, as most approaches to politeness theory

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1   For an introduction to "integration" in defining personal identity see Glover (1988: 54–58).

in the Gricean tradition do (for Grice's approach to conversation see Grice, 1989; Eelen (2001) gives a useful overview and critique of politeness theories). Although many accounts of linguistic politeness that Mills (2011) describes as "discursive" or "postmodern" also reject the norms-flouting based explanations of politeness phenomena, our conclusion is theoretically important because, unlike these approaches, Relevance theory shares Grice's goal of providing a reasoned explicit account of the inferential reasoning process that takes the hearer from the linguistic meaning of the utterance to the speaker's message, providing for more explanatory insights into the dynamics of social interaction.

2   The Critical Incident

The situation described and analysed in this paper was reported by a member of our informal research group in of the group's periodic discussions of teaching experiences and practices. Three aspects of the situation are described: first, the emergence of the learners' behaviour which presents a challenge to the normal conduct of the lesson and to the positive rapport between the teacher and the learners.[2] Second, the teacher's consideration of the situation, of her priorities, options and decisions about the way she would deal with the problem, and finally, the emergence of positive rapport due to the teacher's creative, intervention. We initially explored each stage of the situation by comparing the teacher's perceptions with those of a group of ten TEFL professionals (teaching on presessional EFL courses in another provider, who did not know either the teacher or the students involved in the problem situation). Each respondent was given a brief description of one of three stages of the critical incident situation in writing and asked to answer one question about each stage. The data collection was carried out at the end of a staff seminar and the respondents were asked to give their answers without consulting each other.

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2 The word "rapport" is generally used to mean "positive rapport", but we prefer to use it as a term which refers to the quality (which may be positive or negative) of the relations between people in social contact. When people relate socially to each other in a way which is harmonious, when they show respect for each other and share a feeling of mutual closeness, they are said to have good or positive rapport. Positive rapport is characterized by mutual attention, mutual positivity and orientation towards coordination in joint communicative and other social actions (Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal, 1990). And conversely, we use the term "negative rapport" to describe social relations characterized by disharmony, lack of mutual attention and negativity of at least one participant towards one or more others.

The Situation:

> A British ᴇꜰʟ teacher (a woman in her mid to late twenties) working in an English language school in the ᴜᴋ encountered the following problem teaching a class of mainly male students from a country in the Middle East: one of the students who was something of a "leader" in the group would regularly initiate (in class, during the lesson) a chat in his native language (Arabic) with the other students who would start giggling and laughing. The teacher was under the impression that their talk and laughter were directed at her, but she did not understand what the students were saying.

2.1   *What Should the Teacher Do in This Situation?*

We posed this question to a group of ten ᴇꜰʟ teachers. They made a number of suggestions (listed here in order of the number of respondents who gave the answer, as indicated in square brackets following each answer):

1. Introduce the rule that English is the only language used in class (or, remind the group of this rule if it is already in place) [6]
2. Have a one to one chat with the student who initiates the disruptive behaviour [2]
3. Feel angry/embarrassed and not sure how to respond [2]
4. Point out in class that the behaviour is unacceptable [1]
5. Report the incident to her line manager/head of department [1]
6. Reorganize the class by changing the seating arrangements [1]
7. Introduce a code of conduct in class (or remind the students of it, if it is already in place) [1]
8. Take disciplinary action against the student who initiates the disruptive behaviour [1]
9. Try to find out what the student "leader" is actually saying [1]

These answers reflect the aspects of the situation which the respondents seemed to find most relevant. They fall into two broad categories: the actions that the teacher could take and emotions caused by the students' behaviour. The actions the teacher should take can be further categorized into those relating to (a) classroom management, (b) disciplinary and (c) investigative (finding out what exactly the group "leader" and the other students were saying). Two types of disciplinary actions were suggested: direct/informal (e.g. having a chat with the student) and indirect/formal (reporting the incident to the line manager/head of department). Only two respondents mention both emotional

reaction and action to be taken (use of English only in class [1], pointing out that the behaviour is unacceptable [1]). One respondent mentioned a classroom management action (only English allowed rule) in conjunction with an indirect disciplinary measure (reporting the situation to the manager/head of department) and one respondent suggested taking three actions (two relating to classroom management (1 and 7), and one relating to discipline (8). Overall, the most responses were related to classroom management and most respondents thought the best course of action was to insist on English as the only language allowed in the classroom.

These responses are significantly different from the teacher's. She reported feeling "a little uncomfortable" and "a bit daunted" while being aware of the difficulty she had controlling the amount of Arabic being spoken in class. She was under the impression that the comments were about her, especially those made by one male student who was the obvious "leader" of the group. She thought that with time the students' behaviour might improve and decided not to do anything about the problem for a while. However, the disruptive behaviour persisted and the teacher also noticed that a female student from the same cultural and linguistic background as the rest of the group was also manifestly feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed by the offenders' comments. She approached the female student and asked her why she seemed so embarrassed when the other students were joking.

The teacher's response to the presenting problem could be described as showing mindfulness in two important respects.[3] On the one hand, she decided

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3   Mindfulness has been described as a psychological disposition for actively seeking novel contexts for interpreting various inputs to cognitive processing. As Langer (1992: 289) observes: "Mindfulness is a state of conscious awareness in which the individual is implicitly aware of the *context and content of information. It is a state of openness to novelty* in which the individual actively constructs categories and distinctions" (italics added/italics in original). Sternberg (2000: 12) identifies five key features of mindfulness: "(a) openness to novelty; (b) alertness to distinction; (c) sensitivity to different contexts; (d) *implicit, if not explicit*, awareness of multiple perspectives; and (e) orientation in the present" (italics added/italics in original). In the same vein, Žegarac, Spencer-Oatey and Ushioda (2014) argue that mindfulness is best defined as active attention, a controlled heightened level of sensory awareness to potentially relevant information which informs and guides our actions. In their view, mindfulness may but need not be conscious and it varies from situation to situation (as well as with physiological states of the person; e.g., tiredness tends to cause lower levels of mindfulness, as does the consumption of alcohol and other drugs). It follows from this that people are mindful to some extent in all situations of communication, as it is not possible to communicate without some degree of active attention, awareness of the context and openness to novel informa-

not to react immediately. She was aware that her intervention might lead to social friction, damaging her rapport with the students further and she knew from experience that students' behaviour in class sometimes improves without the teacher's direct intervention. On the other hand, she realized that she would be in a better position to decide on how to respond to the problem if she knew what exactly the students were saying. We believe that this is important, because if the teacher intervened without knowing what the perpetrators are saying, they would feel that they have the upper hand: the teacher would be challenging them without having adequate information about what is going on. She would not have a good basis for evaluating their response to her intervention and make sure that her response breaks through the psychological distance created by the linguistic barrier between the students' actions and her. For this reason it is unlikely that her intervention would have been successful. Moreover, the lack of understanding of the comments would also restrict the range of the teacher's options in deciding on the best course of action. For example, she could hardly use humour with any confidence to deal with the situation without knowing what exactly she is responding to.

It is worth noting that the teacher's emotional reaction to the situation was conducive to a mindful approach to finding a solution. She was not intensely angry, just somewhat daunted. Intense anger is likely to lead to less than optimal reflective assessment of the situation and to rushed, emotional reactions which might make the situation worse, or to disproportionately severe formal disciplinary measures which might solve the immediate problem but would almost inevitably damage the chances of establishing positive rapport between the teacher and the students, with adverse impact on teaching-learning outcomes.

2.2   *What the Students were Saying*

The female student initially replied that she was embarrassed, because the male student were making jokes at the teacher's expense and that this was generally initiated by the group "leader" describing the teacher to the others as a whore/prostitute, saying things like: "Here, you see how she's talking to us, she's got to be a whore/prostitute" and the others would start giggling and laughing and making similar comments.

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tion. However, it stands to reason that situations in which social interaction is at risk due to (potential or actual) miscommunication or emergence of negative rapport call for a higher level of mindfulness than those in which social interaction is not challenged. The critical incident situation described in section 3 is a case in point.

We asked the same group of ten TEFL professionals what they would do if they were in the teacher's place. There were seven suggestions in total (with some respondents giving more than one answer):

1. Have a one-to-one chat with the student who initiates the disruptive and offensive talk [3 respondents]
2. Introduce a code of conduct (insisting that students must observe it) [3 respondents]
3. Report the incident to the line manager/head of department [2 respondents]
4. Take formal disciplinary action against the "leader" [1 respondent]
5. Ignore the incident [1 respondent]
6. Be (manifestly) furious/very angry [2 respondents]
7. Use humour [1 respondent]

Most of these responses seem unlikely to be effective ways to deal with the problem. Responses (1) and (2) seem to presuppose that the offending students do not know that describing their teacher as a whore/prostitute is socially unacceptable.[4] By reporting the incident to her line manager/head of department (3), the teacher would implicitly admit that she is unable to deal with the situation without help, which might damage her authority in the eyes of the students (possibly also the school management). The teacher had already delayed dealing with the situation hoping that the students' behaviour would improve without any intervention on her part. If she decided to ignore the problem (5), it seems reasonable to assume that the offending behaviour would persist and, possibly, escalate. The teacher would be justified to feel furious

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4   It is interesting that none of the respondents raised the issue of whether the teacher had broken confidentiality and indirectly revealed the likely source of the information about what they had been saying. In fact this was not the case as the teacher herself was sufficiently familiar with the language to be able to repeat some of the offending words and find out what they mean by asking one of several colleagues who had a good command of Arabic (having taught in the Middle East for long periods of time) and the students knew this. The teacher reported that she was not upset when she learnt that the male students had been using the word whore/prostitute when talking about her. She assumed that due to their cultural background they might feel socially threatened to have to accept a woman in her mid-twenties as a figure of authority. She also assumed that the students were engaging in what they saw as in-group banter. She thought about how she would respond in a similar situation which involved in-group banter in English by a group of home students and concluded that she would most likely reply to what they were saying in a joking way, using a similarly inappropriate register, making clear that she disapproved of the students' behaviour while avoiding to make them feel that they had lost face.

and making the students aware of this might prompt the offending students to rethink their actions, but would do little to establish truly positive rapport between the teacher and the students. Moreover, strong expressions of intense anger are likely to elicit strong defensive or even more aggressive reactions, leading to very negative rapport. The use of humour, (7), seems potentially more promising, but it is risky as it might lead the students to assume that the teacher actually does not mind being talked about as a whore/prostitute. It is also important to bear in mind that the effectiveness of particular strategies for dealing with problem situations that arise in the EFL classroom will depend on the differences in the cultural assumptions held by the students and the teacher about student/teacher roles.

2.3   *What the Teacher Did*

After reflecting on the situation and weighing the pros and cons of various courses of action the teacher made a decision on how to intervene. She learnt the informal equivalent of the word "arse"/"back side" in Arabic (the students' first language) and waited until the male "group leader" made his initial comment again. She turned towards him and interrupted him saying: "Ahmed (not the student's real name), if you call me that again I'll kick your *makwa* (informal word for "back side" in Arabic). There was a moment when no one said anything, and then Ahmed started laughing and the class joined in. From that moment on, he became very respectful and friendly towards the teacher. The whole class become much easier to control and the atmosphere improved.

We asked our group of respondents for their opinions on the teacher's intervention. The following is a summary list of their responses:

1. The intervention was effective [6 respondents]
2. The teacher claimed authority and respect [2 respondents]
3. The teacher used humour effectively [1 respondent]
4. The teacher mismanaged the class and her intervention was ineffective [1 respondent]
5. The teacher should have reported the incident to her line manager/head of department [2 respondents]
6. The teacher should have taken disciplinary action against the student. [1 respondent]
7. The teacher's intervention was effective but she was lucky as it could have gone horribly wrong [1 respondent]

This is probably the most surprising of the three sets of responses. Why did four respondents describe the intervention as less than successful despite hav-

ing been given the information that it had led to establishing a very positive rapport between the teacher and the (male) students? Admittedly, the intervention was risky and the teacher knew this. She reported being anxious before carrying out her plan, because she was aware that her intervention could backfire on her and thought that in the worst case scenario it might lead to her being disciplined by her employer for the use of taboo language in class. She opted for the high risk strategy involving the use of humour because she believed that if the outcome was positive, it would have greater benefits than any other safer intervention she could think of. Her main concern was to establish an atmosphere conducive to effective teaching and learning. Measures such as disciplining students formally or taking the group leader to one side and giving him a dressing down might resolve the immediate problem, but would increase the social distance between the teacher and the students. Moreover, the student "leader" and other students who took part in the offending behaviour would be made to feel embarrassed, guilty and judged, and would find it difficult to explain why the teacher had been repeatedly referred to as a "whore/prostitute". Embarrassment and guilt, especially when associated with rejection (by the teacher or by the school as an institution), make it more difficult for a person to change their ways for the better. For these reasons, the safer interventions recommended by the literature (such as Harmer, 2012 and Scrivener, 2012 briefly reviewed below) would have been unlikely to lead to establishing positive rapport between the students and the teacher conducive to effective teaching-learning.

The teacher had a strong preference for responding to the problem situation in a way which maximizes the chances of achieving desirable long-term effects, while the ten TEFL professionals' suggestions seem to show an orientation towards dealing effectively with the immediate problem and (understandably) a strong preference for finding a "safe" solution. This could be explained by their lack of personal involvement with the situation. If they had had a relatively long-term commitment to that particular group of students, they might have been more mindful of the need to ensure the long-term success of the course. The significance of the influence that their lack of direct personal involvement with this teaching/learning situation may have had on their responses seems to be evidenced by the observation that their responses did not include any specific comments about why the teacher's intervention was as effective as it was. It is somewhat puzzling that four out of ten EFL teachers who responded to our questionnaire had serious reservations about the teacher's intervention and a fifth respondent described it as ineffective despite having been presented with evidence to the contrary. One reason for this might be that TEFL professionals are familiar with set ways of managing

the class and dealing with discipline issues. For example, Scrivener (2012) gives the following advice on classroom management:

1. Serious behaviour problems should be dealt with in a firm and clear way
2. Looking beyond the immediate apparent issue to factors that may influence or cause it to happen (students' insecurity or lack of self-awareness)
3. The teacher has overall responsibility for classroom management, so it may be right to give a clear, sharp order
4. The teacher has to feel that she or he has the right to intervene when this is needed (i.e. to have confidence in her/his authority)
5. Techniques:
   (a) Categorizing levels of behaviour: poor/unacceptable/serious offences
   (b) Breaking out of escalating cycles: avoid shouting, getting involved in escalating arguments; give student a chance to get out of the escalating cycle
   (c) Distinguishing between the presenting problem and the underlying problem: not making generalizations about the student's personality/character; following up later
   (d) Seeking support: not leaving it for too long; seek support from colleagues/line manager

These suggestions seem to favour dealing with discipline issues formally: the intervention should be firm and clear, the teacher may need "to give a clear, sharp order" and should seek support from colleagues or his/her line manager. A more mindful approach to the presenting problem is also advised, but it is more difficult to implement. For example, the teacher should take account of the causes of the offending behaviour, but will have limited time, evidence and few other resources to do this; making unwarranted generalizations would be easy if there was a procedure for deciding which generalizations are warranted and which ones are not; the underlying causes of poor behaviour in class may be impossible to establish and the gravity of offending behaviour may be difficult to describe in terms of clear cut categories, such as: poor, unacceptable, serious offence. For example, describing the teacher to other students during the class as a whore/prostitute is certainly unacceptable. It could also easily be perceived as a serious offence. In the critical incident situation we discuss, the teacher interpreted this as in-group banter, and she was able to do so because her reflective thinking about the situation made her aware of the possible explanations of the students' actions in the context of which their use of a derogatory word about the teacher did not seem intended to be taken as serious. The teacher's reflection on the situation was time consuming and

took some considerable mental effort, but the intervention that seemed to her most likely to be effective was also very risky, precisely because she could not be sure what the offending students' beliefs, attitudes and motives were and also because she used taboo language which in some professional contexts might put her job in jeopardy. On the other hand, had the teacher decided to rely on her institutional authority without also relating to them at a more personal level through the use of humour and their native language, had she opted to merely give clear sharp orders and threaten to (or actually) discipline the students formally, she would have saved time, effort and anxiety over making a risky intervention, but it could be argued that even the most positive short-term outcome would most likely have lastingly impaired the teacher's rapport with the class.

Our point is not that the teacher's approach was the only one likely to be effective or that it was the best. Rather, it was creative and imaginative and turned out to be effective, but was also associated with risks which the teacher was aware of. The TEFL professionals' responses about the teacher's intervention reflect their acceptance of the approach found in the literature. Harmer (2012) identifies poor self-esteem, poor motivation due to failure, following the "leader" in the peer group, perceived lack of teacher's respect, attitudes towards education from the students' (family) culture and students' personal issues as likely reasons for discipline problems and points out the importance of preventing them (e.g. by discussing with the students what is acceptable, introducing a code of conduct and dealing with discipline problems consistently). When a discipline problem does arise, Harmer advises teachers: (a) not to ignore the problem, (b) to show that the behaviour is wrong, (c) to change the seating, (d) to respond to the behaviour (not to the students' perceived character) and (d) to talk to the offender(s) in private.

So, both Scrivener (2012) and Harmer (2012) focus on formal professional interventions while also pointing out the importance of a mindful approach: reflecting on the presenting problem and assessing it in a careful and non-judgemental way, as well as responding to the offence rather than acting on assumptions which may not be warranted. However, although this seems reasonable, it is likely to bias EFL teachers towards opting for safe and prescribed solutions, in deciding on the best way to respond to the problem. Moreover, these authors do not address the conflict between the need for positive rapport and a formal patterns of relating which they recommend in dealing with discipline issues and classroom management in general. This conflict is evidenced by the pressure under which EFL teachers (and other teachers) are placed by their employers. On the one hand, they are expected to foster pos-

itive rapport with students. On the other hand, they are expected to manage the classroom and deal with discipline issues formally, as professionals with institutional power.

In assessing the problem situation and responding to it, the teacher seems to have intuitively observed the core conditions for a facilitative relationship between teachers and learners in educational settings developed by Carl Rogers initially as part of the person-centred model of psychotherapy. The core conditions have later been adopted by other frameworks and are often referred to in the literature on professional communication, where focus is on unconditional positive regard (informally, treating people with dignity), empathy (trying to understand the situation from the hearer's point of view) and congruence (being what you appear to be) (Wilkinson, 2013: 132). Rogers originally identified several conditions which he argued needed to be met to facilitate positive change.

The teacher's reflection on the problem situation and her intervention show that she observed the five core conditions (slightly adapted here):

1. *There must be psychological contact, a minimal relationship, between the participants in the situation.*

In the problem situation we describe the psychological contact between the students and the teacher did exist, but it was not satisfactory. The teacher was aware of the need for developing a more positive rapport with the students.

2. *In the teacher–student relationship the teacher must be congruent. A person is congruent if her or his own perceptions of herself/himself in a situation are shared by those who are in a position to observe them.*
   ROGERS, in KIRSCHENBAUM and HENDERSON, 1989: 224

In responding to the students' offending behaviour, the teacher was congruent in a very specific way: her intervention provided the students with evidence of her perception of their behaviour as unacceptable and offensive to her as a person who—at the personal level—accepts them and their culture and does not attribute to them as individuals or as members of a particular culture negative personal characteristics. The teacher's congruence (informally, authenticity) in this situation was reflected in her informal language and the direct. assertive use of language. The student's perception of the teacher as both congruent (i.e. authentic, integrated) person who is non-judgemental towards them as persons, probably led them to reflect on their own congruence. In Rogers' (see

Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1989: 221) terms, people who are feeling vulnerable and anxious are likely to be incongruent, as they are likely to be unaware of the discrepancy between their perceptions of themselves in the situation and the perceptions of others. In the critical incident described here, the teacher assumed that the male students may be feeling anxious because of the conflict between their cultural assumptions about the relation between gender (possibly also age) and authority implicit in particular professional roles. The teacher implicitly alerted the students to their incongruence. She invited/encouraged them to become congruent by showing congruence herself. She achieved this through her choice of genre (humour), register (informal) and code (English mixed with Arabic). In other words, the teacher's appeal to her identity as an integrated person with a professional role was aimed at influencing the students to accept as reasonable her expectation that they should integrate their role as learners in a language class in the UK with their personal and cultural identities.

3. *The teacher should have unconditional positive regard for the students.*

For the purposes of this paper, unconditional positive regard is probably best described as meaning that there are no conditions of acceptance, no feeling of "I like you only if you are thus and so." It means a "prizing" of the person, as Dewey used the term. It is at the opposite pole from a selective evaluative attitude—"You are bad in these ways, good in those" (Rogers, in Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1989: 225).

   Faced with a problem situation like the one we have described, the teacher should try to relate to each of the students "as a separate person, with permission to have his own feelings, his own experiences" (Rogers, in Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1989: 225). In the problem situation we have described the teacher clearly showed her disapproval of the students' actions, but she was careful, through the use of humour and code-mixing, to avoid showing negativity about their behaviour without communicating any negative assumptions about their individual characters, their beliefs or their values, thus showing that she accepts them as persons worthy of respect. In this way, she created for them the psychological space to reflect on themselves, on their beliefs, attitudes and values, and to take responsibility for adjusting the new socio-cultural environment. In taking this stance, the teacher showed unconditional positive regard for the offending students.

4. *The teacher should show an empathic understanding of the student's internal frame of reference*

The teacher did not know what the students' frame of reference was, but she knew that the students were from a culture with different views and values about women's professional roles, manners and dress-code from those of Western European societies, and she showed empathy by not being dismissive of the students at the personal level and appreciating the cultural challenges that they were faced with.

5. *The students should be aware, to at least some extent, of the teacher's unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding*

The teacher's intervention made the students aware of her positive regard for them and her empathic understanding, while at the same time conveying clearly and unambiguously her disapproval of their behaviour in class.

In sum, the teacher tackled the problem effectively by intuitively reflecting on the situation in a way which led her to observe the core conditions and to intervene in a way which combined:

(i)   assertiveness
(ii)   acceptance of the students as integrated whole persons
(iii) rejection of the students' offending behaviour

The teacher was assertive as she came across as confident, not only because of the manner in which she spoke, but also because she decided to use humour (i.e. adopt a light-hearted attitude) in dealing with inappropriate behaviour and offensive language, in a way which did not take anything away from the strength with which she conveyed her disapproval of the students' behaviour. The teacher's intervention was successful because the relevant information she communicated at the personal level was positive, while the relevant information she communicated at the professional level was negative. The students' awareness of the positive personal information made the negative professional part of the message easy for them to accept. One reason the TEFL professionals whose views we sought would tackle the problem in less creative and almost certainly less effective ways than the teacher is that teacher training materials and courses do not seem to promote creativity in dealing with problem situations as much as this would be desirable.

3   A Relevance-Theoretic Perspective on the Critical Incident

So far we have considered the teacher's strategic decisions in dealing with the problem situation, which she did successfully through direct face-to-face communication in class. In this section, we outline briefly why Relevance theory holds much promise for providing insights into rapport management by considering the teacher's intervention in the context of key Relevance-theoretic assumptions about communication and cognition. Although there is a growing body of research on the link between Relevance Theory and relational politeness, (see Escandell-Vidal, 1996; Jary, 1998; Locher, 2004; Christie, 2007) some implications of this framework for the relational work involved in rapport management, illustrated by the problem situation described in section 2, have not been explored in previous research.

Relevance theory is an approach to communication which builds on the view that people are predisposed to pay attention to phenomena in their environment when doing so is likely to bring about improvements in their belief system. In other words, we tend to pay attention to stimuli which we expect will turn out to be relevant to us. Some stimuli, which include pointing gestures and utterances, are designed to give rise—and to be recognized as designed to give rise—to an expectation that paying attention to them will yield significant cognitive rewards. In other words, they are designed to create expectations of their own relevance. This type of stimuli are called ostensive stimuli and the kind of communication which involves the production and the interpretation of ostensive stimuli is called ostensive-inferential communication. Clearly, the theoretical concept of "relevance" is the key to explaining ostensive-inferential communication:

> *Relevance*
> A phenomenon is relevant to an individual:
> (a)   to the extent that the cognitive effects achieved when it is processed in context are large, and
> (b)   to the extent that the processing effort required for achieving the effects is small.
> adapted from SPERBER and WILSON, 1986, 1995: 153

The concept of relevance is at the heart of two law-like generalizations about human cognition and communication, known as the cognitive and the communicative principles of relevance:

The Cognitive Principle of Relevance

Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance.

SPERBER and WILSON, 1995: 260

The Communicative Principle of Relevance

Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

SPERBER and WILSON, 1995: 260

Presumption of Optimal Relevance

(a) The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's while to process it.
(b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences.

SPERBER and WILSON, 1995: 270

The Relevance theory model of communication is inferential. In this model comprehension involves figuring out the message by pragmatic, non-demonstrative, inference with free access to evidence from various sources, including that presented by the linguistic meaning of the utterance. This point is illustrated by examples like (1):

(1)   She's had enough.

CARSTON, forthcoming

(1) may convey any number of conversational implicatures (where an implicature is defined informally, as an assumption which is evidently and intentionally conveyed indirectly), such as "she should not eat any more; she is going to leave her husband, she needs to get some rest", and so on. Of course, the utterance may also provide evidence of the speaker's intention to communicate various thoughts that are built on its linguistically encoded meaning. These are technically called "explicatures":

(2)   a. Mary has eaten enough of her dinner to satisfy her mother's wishes.
      b. Karen has drunk enough fruit juice to reach the limit of her daily sugar intake.
      c. Jane has endured enough bad treatment from her husband to the point of being unable to take any more.
      d. Rachel has worked hard enough (and long enough) to be ready now to retire.

CARSTON, forthcoming

As comprehension is an inferential/reasoning process about the communicator's intentions, the risk of communication failure is generally appreciable. There are two kinds of risks that are likely to be significant in most, if not all, communication situations:

(i)   the risk that the communicator will not convey all of the assumptions in that she intends to convey (i.e. it will convey only a part of the intended message);
(ii) the risk that some assumptions will be conveyed that the communicator would prefer not to convey.

In the critical incident situation described in section 2, the difficulty of the teacher's position is that she had a personal preference for communicating that the students' offending behavior is unacceptable and offensive to her, while also making it evident to them that she accepts them as persons. Communicating these assumptions simultaneously is difficult because people generally assume that strong disapproval of their actions also reflects the speaker's attribution of negative intentions to them and that the speaker probably also disapproves of them as persons.

Described in Relevance theory terms, the teacher's intervention seems to be a remarkably efficient communicative action. Relevance is a property of inputs to cognitive processing. It is a measure of cognitive efficiency: a positive function of cognitive effects (informally, informativeness) and a negative function of mental processing effort. The teacher's communicative act was very informative. She succeeded in simultaneously communicating to the students that she disapproved of their actions while accepting them as persons, thus also making them aware of the discrepancy between their behaviour and their true beliefs and values, which led them to change their behaviour and become more congruent. However, it is important to note that the teacher's intervention was successful, not only in virtue of the communicated information, but also—perhaps crucially so—because of its positive affective-emotional effects, which were an integral part of the improved rapport between the students and the teacher.

Social rapport may be positive or negative. Positive rapport is characterized by mutual attention, mutual affective-emotional positivity and orientation towards coordination in joint communicative and other social actions (Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal, 1990). In contrast, "negative rapport" is characterized by disharmony, lack of mutual attention and affective-emotional negativity of at least one participant towards one or more others. So, the teacher's intervention was successful due to its affective-emotional as well as cognitive effects.

However, it is far from clear what the cognitive pragmatic framework provided by Relevance theory should have to say about affective-emotional effects which are non-cognitive by definition. The most that we can do here is to give a sketch of an account which could be developed into a detailed model of the relation between cognition and affect in communication.

We follow Griffiths (1997) who defines emotions as "irruptive motivational states", roughly, dispositions for behaving in particular ways which do not result from means-to-ends reasoning. Although affective-emotional representations are not cognitive, they are among the effects and among the causes of cognitive (propositional mental) representations. As messages are sets of assumptions which are propositional mental representations, it stands to reason that the communicator can induce emotions in the audience by making the right choices in conveying the message. As we have seen, in the problem situation we have described, the teacher was aiming to communicate her negative attitude towards the students' behaviour in class and at the same time establish positive rapport: a social atmosphere characterised by mutual positive affective emotional disposition between the students and herself. This raises the question of how cognitive-effects are communicated. Central to addressing this question in Relevance theory terms are the concepts of "mutual cognitive environment" and the "strength" of communication.

One of the most important functions of communication is to make it possible for people to co-ordinate their efforts in performing complex tasks, from going hunting in groups to designing and building spacecraft. The success of their efforts depends to a large extent on their mutual cognitive environment, informally, the pool of presumed shared knowledge which they can freely and confidently draw on in deciding about what and how to communicate, as well as what actions to take and how to perform those actions. Clearly, a genuinely mutual cognitive environment will be fit for this purpose only provided it includes some assumptions about strong mutual trust, as this will save the effort (and the distraction from the joint endeavor) by avoiding the need for extensive checking of the communicator's benevolence and sincerity. In other words, there will be less need for epistemological caution (see Sperber et al., 2010). But it is trust an emotion that commits people to the absence of doubts about each other's benevolence and removes the perceived need for epistemological caution. This suggests that social interaction is more likely to be fruitful if supported by the right mutual affective-emotional environment between the participants, in addition to a genuine mutual cognitive environment.

Particularly important for an account of how communication is used to establish a mutual affective-emotional environment is the distinction between strongly and weakly communicated assumptions developed within Relevance

theory. An assumption is said to be communicated strongly to the extent that the communicative act provides conclusive evidence of the speaker's intention to communicate that assumption. Consider the following exchange:

(3)   Sheila: Are you going to Dubrovnik this summer?
       James: Yes. Just for one week at the beginning of July.

If it is mutually manifest to Sheila and to James that James has spent his summer holidays in Dubrovnik several times in the past, she can reliably conclude that James' answer implicates (i.e. evidently intentionally communicates indirectly) that he will be spending (at least a part of) his summer holiday in Dubrovnik. In this situation, this implicature will have been communicated comparatively strongly, because Sheila has fairly conclusive evidence of James' intention to communicate it. However, in a slightly different context, the same implicature may be communicated less strongly. If it is mutually manifest to Sheila and to James that he often travels to Croatia on business and that one or two of his business trips were to Dubrovnik, she may still be justified in assuming that he intends to travel to Dubrovnik on holiday, because her question was about the summer, and it is a matter of common knowledge that people's plans for the summer are usually related to holidays. So, in this situation too James' reply is likely to implicate that he is planning spend one week of his summer holiday in Dubrovnik. However, the evidence for this assumption is less conclusive than in the first scenario, because Sheila's context for interpreting James's reply will include the assumption that he sometimes travels to Dubrovnik on business, which lends some support to the conclusion that he will be travelling to Dubrovnik on business. So, in this scenario, Sheila may still opt for the same interpretation of James' utterance, but her evidence for accepting it will be less conclusive (due to the availability of a competing interpretation which she cannot confidently rule out). This is a simple example of the importance of "strength" in communication. The best known instances involve creative metaphorical uses of language, where the very weak increase in the salience of a great many assumptions gives rise to strong aesthetic, affective-emotional, effects. In our view, the non-cognitive aspect of social rapport is also best described in terms of affective-emotional representations, which are different from those given rise to by creative metaphors, in that they are about the social emotions of people towards each other, rather than aesthetic experiences. Let us explain.

The scale of the strength/weakness with which a message is communicated varies from the strongest form of communication where the evidence of the speaker's intention to communicate a particular assumption or larger set of

assumptions is conclusive, to those where the communicative act provides at least some very scant evidence of the speaker's intention to convey one or more assumptions. Poetic metaphor is a case in point. According to the Relevance-theoretic account of metaphor, a poetic metaphor communicates a vast array of assumptions whose salience (technically "manifestness") is increased very slightly, so they are not mentally represented. Intuitively, a metaphor conveys an impression, not a single idea or a clearly circumscribed set of ideas, which explains why poetic metaphors cannot be paraphrased without loss of meaning and poetic effect. In Relevance theory, an impression is described as "a notice-able change in one's cognitive environment, ... resulting from relatively small alterations in the manifestness of many assumptions, rather than from the fact that a single assumption or a few new assumptions have all of a sudden become very manifest" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 59). This sudden slight increase in the manifestness of a vast array of assumptions triggers some physico-chemical changes which cause a particular aesthetic affective-emotional experience. While communicative acts which involve comprehension are used to achieve cognitive mutuality, i.e. the speaker's and the hearer's awareness of having shared a particular set of assumptions, creative metaphors (and a number of other uses of language) give rise to "affective rather than cognitive mutuality" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 224). In the case of metaphor, the affective mutuality involves aesthetic effects. Our contention is that in communicative interaction aimed at managing rapport, such as the phatic use of language (see Žegarac, 1998; Žegarac and Clark, 1999), the affective mutuality is caused by assumptions about the positive social disposition of the participants towards each other. In other words, the function of this use of language is to communicate affective effects which are social. In the case of successful communication aimed at positive rapport management, the non-cognitive, affective-emotional effects induced are social (a more detailed argument in favour of this view is presented in Žegarac, forthcoming; for a different perspective on the place of emotions in the Relevance theory framework, see Moeschler, 2009).

A point which has not received much attention in the literature on pragmatics is that weakly communicated cognitive effects may give rise to comparatively strong affective-emotional effects. Emotions can be described as specialised mechanisms which are triggered in a reflex-like manner by appropriate type of stimuli. Just as the knee-jerk reflex can be triggered by a slight tap on the right part of the knee, (social) emotions can be triggered by relatively weak cognitive effects. In our critical incident situation, the teacher had a preference for bringing about a change, not just the students' thoughts about the situation, but also their affective-emotional perceptions of their interpersonal relationship with the teacher. Her rapport management skill was to convey a positive

social attitude towards the students weakly (at the cognitive level) in order to induce strong positive social effects (at the non-cognitive, affective-emotional level). A good example of how the teacher achieved this is her decision to show some degree of accommodation to the students' linguistic and cultural background by using a word in their native language. This evidence of a convergent attitude towards the students' cultural identity made them aware that the teacher was sensitive to their cultural background, possibly also to the culture shock they might be experiencing. In other words, her choice of a word in the students' native language ("makwa" [back side]) weakly communicated some assumptions about her positive attitude towards the students as persons. Of course, as her words were a direct response to the students' own use of derogatory references to the teacher as a "whore/prostitute", she also distanced herself from their behavior rather emphatically, as the word "makwa" is considered very pejorative in the form of Arabic used by the students. Moreover, the use of informal register (the expression "kick somebody's ass") the teacher provided some evidence of taking a low distance stance towards the students, while the meanings of her words and manner of delivery (pointing her index finger at the perpetrator) presented the class with conclusive evidence of her disapproval of their behaviour, which was, therefore, communicated strongly. Although disapproval was communicated strongly, the negative meaning of her words was somewhat tampered by her use of humour. In this instance, the humorous effect was achieved by manifestly intentionally making evident the mismatch between the punitive action threatened by the teacher and her ability to carry out the threat: the teacher was evidently a woman of average strength, while the student "group leader" was a very heavily built and strong man, known to everyone in the class, including the teacher, to be a professional martial arts expert. Therefore, it was evident to the students (and to the teacher) that her threat to use force was not credible, and was made with the intention of drawing to their attention her strong disapproval of their actions, rather than being a literal threat.

4   Discussion and Conclusion

The description and analysis of the critical incident situation resented in this paper is incomplete in at least two important respects. On the one hand, the account we propose could be more detailed. In particular, the relation between cognitive and affective-emotional effects should be spelled out. This is an omission which could not be addressed here. On the other hand, the problem situation we have considered presents issues which are typically described

and analysed in terms of the concepts of "positive face" and "negative face" within one of several politeness theory frameworks (see Eelen, 2001 for an overview of politeness theories). Politeness theories developed in the Gricean tradition (see Grice, 1975, 1989) explain linguistic politeness phenomena as motivated by the need to mitigate threats to the interactants' "face" (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987; Leech, 1983). In this section we make a case for the view that the Relevance-theoretic approach we have taken lends support to the assumption that many politeness phenomena are better explained in terms of the interactants' orientation towards affirming each other as persons, which, of course, does not rule out the possibility that face threat mitigation plays an important role in describing and explaining politeness phenomena in some situations.

The main tenet of Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) politeness theory is that communicative acts may be either inherently or contextually face threatening and that politeness phenomena in communication are best explained as attempts to mitigate face threats. Brown and Levinson define positive face as "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some other executors" (Brown and Levinson, 1978: 62), or alternately, "the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants" (Brown and Levinson, 1978: 61). In contrast to positive face, negative face is "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others", or "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction— i.e. the freedom of action and freedom from imposition". This view of politeness has been widely used and widely criticized. Our main reservation is this: while it is generally possible to impose an interpretation on polite linguistic behavior as driven by the orientation towards saving face, this analysis would need to be based on evidence which is independent from the theory. In many instances of communication, this evidence is lacking. Consider the following situation:

(4) Two people (Hasnaa and Vlad) who have known each other for a few months professionally and are only superficial acquaintances have been engaged in conversation. At the end of their informal meeting Vlad says goodbye and moves away, when he notices Hasnaa's extended arm towards him and realises she wanted to shake hands with him:

   Vlad: Sorry, I assumed as you're a Muslim you don't shake hands.
   Hasnaa: You are right. I don't shake hands. I shake your hand.

A plausible interpretation of Hasnaa's response to Vlad's utterance includes some assumptions about her positive view of him, as well as providing an explanation of her actions. Vlad's positive face could be assumed to be threatened because it is desirable to him to be seen as a person who behaves in a socially appropriate way and is ready to shake hands in the socially appropriate and expected way. Hasnaa's positive face too could be described as threatened, because it is desirable to her to be seen as a person who observes the norms of her religion. One could then hypothesize that by agreeing with Vlad's observation, she absolves him of responsibility for having made a faux pas, and that by describing her willingness to shake hands with him as an exception, she protects her positive face (as a good Muslim) while boosting his (as her utterance "I shake your hand" strongly implicates that Vlad is the kind of person with whom she can shake hands without violating the norm of her culture according to which a woman will shake hands with men who are closely related to her, e.g. father, brother, close relative). However, this analysis is a rational reconstruction informed by a particular theoretical perspective on linguistic politeness, rather than reflecting the psychological reality of the situation as perceived by the participants. Vlad's actual reason for explaining the initial manner of his leave-taking was that he was somewhat surprised by Hasnaa's offer of a handshake, not that he was concerned about how she would interpret his failure to accept it. Hasnaa did not perceive the situation as face-threatening either. She decided to satisfy Vlad's curiosity in a way which implicated something positive about her social attitude towards him and she achieved this by informing him that she indeed generally followed her religious cultural norms.

These observations support the view that at a descriptive level, politeness is generally an expression of the speaker's orientation towards a positive social goal. This is consistent with Foley's (1997: 270) definition of politeness as "a battery of social skills whose goal is to ensure everyone feels affirmed in a social interaction". According to this definition, the teacher's intervention would certainly count as polite. The teacher did not mitigate the threat that her use of taboo language presented to the students' positive face, but rather made them aware of their positive face by implicitly affirming her regard for them as individuals worthy of her respect, and therefore, of their own self-respect. Of course, it is possible to define politeness in terms of more or less conventionalized/standardized ways of mitigating face threats, but this would preclude from politeness phenomena various ways of managing social rapport in a rather arbitrary way. In our view, the distinction between positive and negative face does account for some politeness phenomena, but linguistic politeness is better defined in terms of a more general orientation of the partici-

pants in social interaction towards affirming each other as worthy individuals. This meshes well with the following observation by Sperber and Wilson (1986):

> ... communication could be described as an attempt to create a genuinely mutual cognitive environment [informally, a set of presumed shared beliefs] between social personae. When the communicator is sincere (and so is the audience in manifesting its acceptance of the information communicated), then the actual individuals and their social personae coincide, and otherwise they don't.
>
>   1986: 258, fn. 32

The term "person" is used to describe a human being regarded as an individual, and the term "persona" denotes the aspect of an individual presented to or perceived by others; that is to say, a "persona" is a person's "public image" or "public face". If politeness is defined as the expression of the orientation towards affirming each other as individuals, then the key to describing and understanding face issues in communication seems to be the tension between individuals (i.e. persons) and their public personae. In many social situations the mutual affirmation of the interactants is possible only at the cost of sincerity, but if sincerity is sacrificed, the affirmation itself is not genuine. This is important, because social relationships largely depend on trust, and insincerity undermines that trust. In light of these observations, it should be clear that the teacher's intervention was effective because she succeeded in creating positive and genuine mutual cognitive and affective environments which made for a favourable teaching learning atmosphere in the class.

We have argued that the teacher's creativity in dealing with a difficult situation owes much to her sensitivity to the cultural challenges the teaching/learning situations was likely to present for the students and to her intuitive observance of the core conditions for facilitative social relationships in deciding how to make her intervention both consistent with her goals and preferences and optimally relevant to the students.

Our approach differs in some important respects from both the norms-based post-Gricean and the discursive, post-modern, perspectives on linguistic politeness The vast body of work in the Gricean tradition builds on the assumption that a proper account of human communication—one which explains what it is, how it is achieved and how it can fail—can be given only provided the rationality of human communicative behaviour is described explicitly. There is also broad agreement that communicative behavior is co-operative, though in Relevance-theoretic pragmatics co-operation does not have a central place

that it has in Grice's model, where the Cooperative Principle is the overarching principle presumed to guide communicative behaviour:

> Cooperative Principle
> Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.
>   GRICE, 1975

Without much simplification, the Cooperative Principle could be paraphrased as: "Be relevant to the topic." Of course, if communicative behaviour is oriented towards relevance to the topic, then linguistic politeness phenomena will need to be described as deviations from the topic, so it stands to reason that rational accounts of those deviations will be explained in terms of additional norms of communicative behaviour. Consider the contrast between (5) and (6):

(5)   A: Are you cold?
      B: Yes. Close the window.

(6)   A: Are you cold?
      B: Yes, thanks for asking. Do you mind closing the window?

B's reply in (5) is relevant to the topic (it gives information requested by A, and is followed by a request to A to carry out an action which is desirable to B). However, B's reply in (6) shows (albeit in a fairly conventional way) consideration for A's preferences as well, as it communicates B's acknowledgement that her request may be an imposition on A.

   In Relevance theory communicative behavior is oriented towards relevance to individuals as persons. Communication is driven by the orientation towards relevance to the hearer, rather than by relevance to the topic. Communicators have their own goals and preferences. From this perspective, linguistic politeness phenomena are best described as reflecting the communicators' goals and preferences relating to the social relations between them and their audiences (see Locher, 2004: chapter 4). Our consideration of a problem situation in the EFL classroom lends support to this view, because it is more intuitive and seems more descriptively plausible than one on which the teacher's intervention might be explained in terms of special norms relating to facework. In fact, we do not see how an alternative account along these lines might begin to take shape.

The norms-based view of linguistic politeness has been called into question by various approaches which Mills (2011) describes as "post-modern" and "discursive" (e.g. Culpeper, 2008; Locher and Watts, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2005; Arundale, 2010; Locher, 2006; Geyer, 2008). These authors reject the premises of post-Gricean, norms based approaches, taking the view that the description and analysis of linguistic politeness should focus on the participants' perceptions and understandings of politeness within the dynamics of the social interaction. What these various approaches have in common is the view that linguistic politeness cannot be reduced to conversational norms and the binary distinction between positive and negative face. Particularly important for the description and analysis of the social aspects of communicative interaction is the observation that the communication situation can be seen as "an arena whereby power may be appropriated, rather than power relations being seen as frozen societal roles that are clearly mapped out for participants before an interaction takes place" (Mills, 2002: 74). Our consideration of the teacher's intervention in the problem situation, suggests that, although social interaction can be described as an arena, it is not one where everything is up for grabs, as it were, although the participants' understanding and acceptance of their more or less formally institutionalized social roles needs to be negotiated and mutually accepted.

The norms based frameworks and the discursive approaches to politeness have somewhat different aims. The former attempt to explain the rationality of communicative behaviour which makes it possible for people to communicate more than the linguistically encoded contents of their utterances. Their focus is mainly on identifying the principles and norms of communicative behaviour which provide the foundation for modelling the inferential reasoning process involved in the comprehension of communicative acts. The latter are concerned to a greater extent with the description of the intricacies of social interaction and on identifying the variables which systematically contribute to the production and the comprehension of communicative acts. In his paper we have attempted to show how a discursive perspective on relational work in rapport management can be integrated with a cognitive-inferential pragmatic framework without adopting a norms-based view of linguistic politeness.

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