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Politeness Strategies in Higher Education: A Student Approach to the Sense of Humour

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Abstract: *The issue of pragmatic politeness has a growing impact in all sustainable communities. The positive politeness strategies enhance the community spirit due to their benefits regarding the close relationships among its members. The marks of positive politeness are some specific communicative behaviours identified at verbal interactional level. One of these stands in ludic or playful behaviour that might be expressed as humour. The playful attitude towards the message fulfils functions that overlaps the communication situation, showing the transmitter's care, the empathetic attitude towards the receiver's problems and needs. In this manner, reducing the distance between interlocutors outlines the group identity. On the other hand, the humour represents in educational field a mean to strengthen the referential power of teachers. Therefore, our research interest to investigate the students' perception about the values and attitudes related to the sense of humour identified in their teachers' behaviour becomes legitimate.*
The questionnaire-based inquiry was developed in the first semester of the academic year 2019-2020, among the students from Transilvania University enrolled in senior years of Bachelor degree. Our results are in line with some findings of a previous research regarding the communicative styles of primary school teachers. The playful behaviour differentiate the profiles of effective teachers. The specific of educational relationships has its own background in higher education. The students' perception about their professors' sense of humour confirm that sense of humour is seen like an artifice to reduce the distance and increase the effectiveness.

Keywords: *Politeness strategies; educational relationships; academic communities; higher education; teaching behavior.*

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1. Introduction

The politeness strategies become more and more relevant in the context of mobility and intercultural exchange promoted in the 21st century. The politeness strategies overlap the limits of pragmatics, the domain of social sciences that hosts the functions of verbal interactions. From educational perspective, the politeness strategies redefine the interpersonal educational relationships from social hierarchy to the hierarchy of roles, according the social dramaturgy (Goffman, 2007). The most coherent theory of pragmatic politeness divide the politeness to positive and negative, according to Brown & Levinson, 1978 (Săftoiu, 2012). The benefits of positive politeness lay in strengthening the community spirit. Politeness strategies may be identified by analyzing the communicative behaviors a person uses to verbally interact. The ludic behavior or the sense of humour is one of these communicative behaviors. According to some specialist, the playful or ludic behavior has the following characteristics:

- The speaker asks for an answer accompanied by aspects beside the words (laugh) or instead of words (smile);
- The speaker shows the positive intension of collaboration;
- The speaker has the control in interpersonal relations, keeps up the audience' interest, fill in the communicative gaps;
- The speaker marks group identity;
- The speaker reduces anxiety;
- The speaker fixes the cognitive patterns (Şerbănescu, 2009).

The opportunity to use handiest instruments like the sense of humour in order to increase our students' interest for school activities and, nevertheless, our students' possibilities to developed sustainable competencies requires an in depth analysis of interpersonal interactions in higher education.

2. Research questions and objectives

The research question that guided our study was *How do the students perceive the sense of humour in the teaching behavior?*. In order to find answers to the leading question, we set the following research objectives:

1. To identify students' perception about the sense of humour in the professors' behavior;

2. To identify students' desires regarding the sense of humour as promoted value in the professors' behavior.

3. Methods

3.1. Procedure

The research was carried out at the beginning of the academic year 2019-2020, in October and November 2019. The aim was to identify the means of developing the strategies of politeness in higher education area. The investigation about the perceived and desired sense of humour in professors' behavior offers some preliminary results about the values that guide teaching behavior in higher education.

3.2. Participants

The target population of the study consists in in 154 students enrolled in The Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, in the senior years of Bachelor degree. They are preparing to become preschool and primary school teachers, in frequency education (105) and long distance education (22) or support teachers (27) (N=154; M=1.49: SD=0.77). The students are aged between 19 and 52 years (N=154; M=23.48; SD=6.87). Among the respondents are 153 females and only 1 male (N=154; M=1.99; SD=0.08). 58.2% of the students are enrolled in the second and 41.8 in the third year (N=154; M=2.42; SD=0.49).

3.3. Measures

In order to provide valid answers to our research questions regarding the manner students interpret the sense of humour as a value in teaching behavior, we used a mixed methodological approach (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, we used a questionnaire-based inquiry related to the competencies required in contemporary higher education and we extracted for a deeper analysis only the items concerning the values identified in the professors behavior. The self-administered questionnaire contains items with responses on a Likert scale (from 1 – least important to 5 – most important). Assuming there are differences in student's responses given by their specialization, we selected the future teacher cases in an in depth case study (Swanborn, 2010).

4. Findings and discussions

The participants chose *the sense of humour* among 5 values out of a number totalizing 12 values (*cooperation, critical thinking, creativity, entrepreneurship, respect for different, empathy, prosocial behavior, rightness, self-determination, life long learning, sense of humour, flexibility*). Regarding the existing

values identified in their professors behavior, 80 students indicated *the sense of humour* present, according to the result presented in Table 1 (N=80; M=2.03; SD=1.35; Mode=1).

Table 1. Existing values: Sense of humour

	Frequencies	Valid percentages
Least important	42	52.5
Less important	17	21.3
Important	5	6.3
More important	9	11.3
Most important	7	8.8

Regarding the desired values willing to be identified in their professors behavior, 71 students indicated *the sense of humour*, according to the result sintetically presented in Table 2 (N=71; M=2.68; SD=1.38; Mode=4).

Table 2. Desired values: Sense of humour

	Frequencies	Valid percentages
Least important	20	28.2
Less important	16	22.5
Important	8	11.3
More important	21	29.6
Most important	6	8.5

The statistical analysis using *Paired Sample t Test* provided for 46 pair cases identified that there are statistically significant differences between the variables *existing values in professors behavior* and *desired values in professors behavior* ($t(45)=3.67$; $p<0.001$). In these conditions, we may assume there is a significant difference between the ways the professors present themselves and are perceived by their students and the ways the students would like their professors to perform their professional roles.

The students had the opportunity to choose five values from a list of 12 values very familiar in postmodern education and in initial and continuous teacher training: cooperation, critical thinking, creativity,

entrepreneurships, respect for different, empathy, prosocial behavior, rightness, self-determination, lifelong learning, sense of humour, flexibility. They find the sense of humour as a mean to transform a student-teacher interaction in a learning situation suitable for the 21st century and its demands. Thus, the students selected *the sense of humour* before other well-promoted values. In Romanian public discourse, the humor has been previously investigated in parliamentary debates (Săftoiu & Popescu, 2014). The predictors of the authentic learning enhance the importance of encourageing students to verbalize their knowledge and thinking (Iucu & Marin, 2014). Even though, the structure or verbal interactions in classrooms poorly represents a topic of interest in educational research.

The reality of the educational field faces unprecedented challenges. The intelligent behavior of educators will have to adapt to students needs in order to provide opportunities to develop sustainable competencies. The construction of professional identity of teacher (Iucu, 2008) has parameters structurally and functionally modified by unpredictable evolution of the education and skills in the following years. The responsible educators face their challenges too: the traits, interest and needs of newly generations are consistently different compared to those of past generations. The intelligent response of educators will reconsider the power relations in education according to the referential power (Pânișoară, 2014). The response of intelligent educators will take into account the benefits of pragmatic politeness and the sense of humour in every educational interaction, considering that the ludic behaviour differentiate the communicative styles of the teahers (Turculeț, 2018). Nevertheles, there is a need of a cultural adjustment according to the cultural dimensions and differences (Hofstede, 2012; David, 2015), in order to provide patterns of effective educational interactions. Even though students' preferences for values could not be connected to their learning styles, there are studies that enhance the impact of different instructional strategies according to the learning styles on academic performances (Tulbure, 2011). Therefore, the gap between present teachers' educational practices and the challenges of contemporary education (Voinea, 2018) might be covered through a reappraisal of interpersonal relationships in the entire educational landscape.

One of the limits of our study is the gender representativity: the respondents are 153 females and 1 male, a consequence of the feminization of teaching career in preschool and primary school education. Therefore, we intend to extend our research to a larger number of students, from different faculties from technical field. Regarding the research ethics, the participants were not exposed to a different stress and they were informed they

participated to a research regarding the teaching practices. The participation in the questionnaire-based inquiry was anonymous and voluntary.

5. Conclusions

The students consider that *the sense of humour* is an important value in the academic interactions. The results regarding the difference between the shape of existing teaching practices and the projection of the desired teaching behavior related to *the sense of humour* confirm there is a need of reinterpretation of educational relationships according to the 21st century challenges. The first debate will be to the semantic meaning of *humor* vs. *humour*. The second will face the Romanian mentality concerning the pragmatic politeness strategies in education. Nevertheless, the benefits of positive politeness in learning communities will justify future research interests for the subject and new foundations for initial and continuous teacher training, including higher education area.

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