

# Manifesting Politeness in Children Cross-Culturally

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## **Abstract**

This paper was originally written for Trevor Block's Linguistics 350 course, *First Language Acquisition*. The assignment asked students to write a literature review on any topic within first language acquisition with sections on background, relevant research, and a conclusion with implications for the field. The paper uses APA citation style.

Politeness manifests itself in many ways across different languages and cultures—whether it be non-verbal gestures such as bowing to show respect in Japanese, or verbal utterances of “please” and “thank you” in English. Yet, if politeness is more of a societal expectation than a fundamental necessity to communicate with others, then how do young children develop their language abilities and pragmatic knowledge to be polite? This literature review aims to provide a cross-cultural summary of politeness acquisition in children across a selection of first languages, namely English and Japanese. While the timeline of politeness acquisition is similar between English and Japanese, each language has its own intricacies in how politeness is learned among children.

## **Background**

When children want toys or food from others, how do they voice their desires? Children's actions may range from pointing at their desired object to plainly using the imperative, or perhaps stating their request with the occasional “please” and “thank you” as their language skills further develop. While politeness is not necessarily required to communicate with others on a fundamental level, using polite language is culturally and societally expected of others. In order to acquire politeness, children require the linguistic knowledge of forming polite language, followed by the hierarchical and social situations to use politeness, as well as the

concept of preserving “face” or self-image by avoiding face-threatening acts as proposed in Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Politeness Theory. Thus, studies on how children develop their language abilities alongside their pragmatic skill to make polite conversation—most commonly in the form of requests—would serve as an interesting avenue for further investigation because politeness is a learned skill rather than an innate ability (Watts, 2003). Yet, if politeness is a cultural concept, then how politeness manifests in children as they acquire language would differ between cultures as well, as politeness strategies in one language may not apply to others. This literature review aims to provide a cross-cultural summary of politeness acquisition in children across a selection of first languages, namely English and Japanese.

### English

In English, politely spoken requests are usually constructed in the form of an interrogative phrase with the word “please”, such as “could you please pass me the salt?”; the interrogative by itself, as in “could you pass me the salt?”; or an imperative with the word “please”, such as “please pass me the salt”. Read and Cherry (1978) further investigated this in a politeness elicitation task by comparing the requests of two-and-a-half- to four-and-a-half-year-old preschoolers. They found that the quality of requests improved with age, as older children were more likely to use verbal politeness to voice their desires rather than gestures or pointing as observed in younger children. However, even in the two-and-a-half-year-old preschoolers, utterances of “please” were recorded, which suggests that early signs of politeness may include the first utterances of “please” (Read & Cherry, 1978). Children in preschool are exposed to the linguistic function of politeness early on through everyday occurrences, as evidenced by the acquisition of polite expressions including “please”, “thank you”, and “may I be excused” through asking questions such as “what do you say?” or “what’s the magic word?” to elicit politer responses (Gleason et al., 1984).

Yoon and Frank (2019) corroborate the notion that politeness is learned in English-speaking children during their preschool years through a study on acquiring politeness markers in three- to four-year-old preschool children. Using stories as a medium with a variety of dialogues pertaining to different politeness structures—ranging from plain imperative phrases to interrogative phrases, with or without an additional “please”—children were asked whether the dialogue was polite, rude, nice, or mean. Additionally, the participants were also questioned about either which character they would rather play with based on the character’s

voiced requests, or which character would successfully have their own request fulfilled in the story. This seems to be an intriguing metric which correlates politeness to social implications. Yoon and Frank (2019) found that the children's accuracy in identifying and distinguishing between different levels of polite speech improved in the one-year span between three- and four-year-old children, and that politeness was most easily identifiable when utilized in the form of the interrogative with "please", as in "can you please...". An improvement was also observed in associating characters exhibiting polite behaviour with being desirable to play with or being granted requests. While three-year-old preschoolers were unable to consistently draw the connection between politeness and social implications, four-year-old children could most of the time. Based on these considerations, the results of Read and Cherry (1978) appear to confirm the results of Yoon and Frank (2019) because they both seem to indicate that English-speaking children first learn about the word "please" at two, almost three years of age, and further enhance their knowledge of politeness through recognizing and constructing polite forms to understand the social situations in which politeness is needed by the time they pass four years old. However, this also raises the question of whether politeness further develops in English beyond four years old in order to better comprehend the progression and application of polite language as children continue to age.

In a similar study, Nippold et al. (1982) compared the extent of politeness in three-, five-, and seven-year-old English-speaking children through a production and judgement task, with a widened scope of ages than what was presented in Yoon and Frank's (2019) research. The production task entailed politely making a request towards an older figure thrice in order to test whether the child could phrase their request any more politely than the previous attempt, and the judgement task entailed choosing the more polite option of pairs of requests with varying degrees of politeness through imperatives and interrogatives. This is comparable to the aforementioned study by Yoon and Frank (2019). Nippold et al. (1982) found that children possessed some knowledge of politeness as young as three years old in English but observed that there was a noticeable difference in understanding politeness between the three age groups as children learned more polite constructions over time. Notably, comparing the degree of politeness between the imperative with "please" and the plain interrogative was the most difficult combination across age groups in the judgement task. Surprisingly, seven-year-old children performed practically as well as adults in both the politeness production and judgement tasks with negligible

differences, which indicates that many politeness strategies are learned from ages two to seven among English-speaking children based on Read and Cherry (1978), Yoon and Frank (2019), and Nippold et al.'s (1982) findings.

### Japanese

In contrast to Germanic languages like English, there may be more nuance in exhibiting politeness in Asian languages for sociocultural reasons. For example, Kádár and Mills (2011) claimed that there is a prominent relationship between politeness and culture in East Asian languages. Notably, several Asian languages focus on the importance of honorifics and using the proper polite address when speaking to those of a higher status, and this observation may be enlightening as to how this is portrayed in children acquiring politeness and other social cues. Japanese is one such language with multiple layers of complexities when forming the linguistic utterances of polite speech.

Chang et al. (2021) explained that there are several subcategories of formal language (*keigo*, 敬語) in Japanese—such as the polite *teineigo* (丁寧語) used for speaking to strangers, the humble *kenjoogo* (謙讓語) for appearing more deferential towards someone else of a higher status, or the honorific *sonkeigo* (尊敬語) for speaking about the actions of those belonging to a higher status. Furthermore, the intricacy of politeness in Japanese is demonstrated in their numerous pronouns equivalent to “I” and “you” in English—such as *watashi/watakushi/atasbi* (私), *boku* (僕), or *ore* (俺); as well as *anata/anta* (貴方), *kimi* (君), or *omae* (お前) respectively (Chang et al., 2021). Hence, Japanese pronouns carry different implications to the listener due to the varying degrees of politeness and gender expectations in reserving certain manners of speech as more masculine or feminine in nature. This may seem like an abundance for children to learn at a young age, which would make for interesting comparisons to acquiring politeness in English.

Chang et al. (2021) studied the ability of three- to six-year-old Japanese children to form requests in varying casual or formal scenarios—such as voicing requests towards a sibling or a shopkeeper respectively. Regardless of whether the requests were spoken with the correct level of politeness, they found that younger three-year-old children made requests less than half of the time and often produced comments unrelated to asking for the item during the production task. However, the contextual understanding of Japanese children to make requests steadily improved with age, and especially so in situations involving politeness.

Six-year-old children learned to make requests in formal situations in almost 100% of the cases, compared to only around 75% of the time in casual scenarios. Meanwhile, in elicited responses containing requests, Japanese children across the age groups studied consistently understood that they should use informal speech most of the time in casual situations that did not necessitate the use of *teineigo*. On the other hand, requests appropriately formed with *teineigo* were made in only 60% of the time in formal scenarios among three-year-old children, and gradually increased to 90% among six-year-old children. Nakamura (2001) elaborated that *teineigo* and referent honorifics were among the first polite forms of language that Japanese children learn, and thus, Chang et al.'s (2021) findings further support the early acquisition of *teineigo*. Ultimately, Chang et al.'s study implies that, while Japanese children as young as three years old appeared to understand that polite forms of language exist, their acquisition of the appropriate social and hierarchical contexts to speak in either plain speech or *teineigo* may not have fully developed until around six years of age.

*Teineigo* aside, Nakamura (2001) had conducted a longitudinal roleplay and observation study on politeness form acquisition among one- to six-year-old Japanese children with equally intriguing results. The children in Nakamura's study were able to form the common, yet basic honorific *sonkeigo* suffixes to address those of a higher status—comparable to using “mister” or “miss” in English—but consistently using polite verb conjugations was less frequent as three- and four-year-old children still produced errors. Meanwhile, in terms of deferential *kenjoogo* speech, Nakamura noted that the children seemed to use humble language in a more memorized fashion as there were only specific *kenjoogo* phrases used in everyday life that were consistently uttered, such as *itadakimasu* (いただきます)—or “I will humbly receive this”—which must be said as a courtesy before meals. While the children attempted to utilize the appropriate humble language in roleplay scenarios as storekeepers and customers, more consistent and varied usage of different *kenjoogo* forms did not emerge until approximately five years old. Thus, the politeness acquisition within different types of *keigo* seems consistent across both Chang et al. (2021) and Nakamura's (2001) studies, as children began with rudimentary knowledge of politeness in ages three and below, and gradually gained a better and more extensive grasp of polite forms by the time they turned five or six years old.

Interestingly, the pragmatic notion of politeness may be deep-rooted in Japanese culture, as Nakamura (2001) also discovered that children as young as one year old had already learned non-verbal gestures of politeness through

bowing to show respect for greetings or to express gratitude before even understanding the linguistic forms of polite speech. Nakamura further theorized that the early acquisition of politeness in Japanese children was connected to the prominence of teaching children *keigo* expressions in preschools. According to the study, even early education in Japan included lessons on concepts such as *omoiyari* (思いやり) and *sasshi* (察し) for consideration and empathy for others, as well as *wakimae* (弁え) for following societal norms—likely because of Japan’s collectivist nature under Hofstede’s (2011) cultural dimensions, which suggests socially emphasizing the needs of a group over individuals. Despite the complexity of Japanese politeness, the timeline for politeness acquisition in Japanese children is comparable to those of other languages such as English. Therefore, the frequent exposure to *keigo* and other polite structures that Japanese children incessantly receive as input could be vital as children absorb information.

### Conclusion

Politeness manifests itself in somewhat similar, yet also fairly different ways across first languages, as shown by the progression of politeness acquisition among English and Japanese-speaking children. Although polite language in English is not as varied as Japanese *keigo*, both languages follow similar timelines in politeness acquisition. The first signs of politeness include the utterances of “please” at two years of age in English (Read & Cherry, 1978), as well as the non-verbal bows of respect or gratitude among one-year-old children in Japanese (Nakamura, 2001). By seven years old, English-speaking children perform nearly as well as adults in producing and judging polite utterances (Nippold et al., 1982), which is comparable to Japanese-speaking children correctly forming polite requests in formal situations in practically all cases by six years of age (Chang et al., 2021). In addition, the regular occurrence of politeness in daily routines for learning polite language in English (Gleason et al., 1984) is also present in Japanese (Nakamura, 2001), indicating that consistent exposure to politeness is conducive to better understanding the pragmatic and social functions of polite speech within first language acquisition.

Further extensions to this literature review may include broader analyses across more languages than the two summarized, or analyses on how multilingual children acquire polite language given the exposure to numerous cultures with potentially different stances on how politeness is conveyed. The latter is shown by Wardhana and Noermanzah’s (2021) research on politeness acquisition in Bengkulu, Indonesia with a plethora of ethnic groups including Bengkulu Malay,

Rejang, Javanese, and Chinese. Conducting a literature review on how politeness acquisition differs between other factors, such as gender or socioeconomic status as studied by Becker and Smenner (1986), would also serve as an intriguing possibility for future work.

English and Japanese may appear to be sharply contrasting languages at a cursory glance, but the progression of understanding politeness in each culture provides meaningful insights into how pragmatics is learned in first language acquisition.

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